

A difficult summer for 18-year-olds

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It's been a difficult summer for thousands of 18-year-olds completing their post-16 education in either school sixth-forms or colleges. Arguably, this cohort has had to endure more stress and uncertainty than the previous 'Covid generation' - when exams were cancelled and work was teacher-assessed.

A-levels . . . when they were down they were down

After record results last year, when almost one in five (19.1 per cent) grades alone were awarded A*, the proportion of candidates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland receiving A or A* fell from 44.8 per cent to 36.4 per cent. The number of 'high-flyers' who got three A*s also went down, from 12, 865 last year to 8,570, while the figure for overall passes (A* to E) slipped by 1.1 per cent. Pass rates for Scottish pupils also fell significantly - this year's results showed the overall pass rate for Highers, heavily used for students aiming for university, were down from 89.3 per cent in 2020 to 78.9 per cent.

Wanting to be seen as providing stability and maintaining public confidence in the exam system, the exam regulators tried to prepare students for an inevitable disappointment, explaining their actions as 'fair', a necessary post-Covid measure to help education 'get back to normal'. But regulators plan for grades to return to pre-pandemic levels by 2023 - in other words next time around they will fall further.

Yet the reality is a continuation of an assessment system driven by numbers, rather than based on how students actually perform. Though exam authorities will claim to the contrary, the current assessment system is not greatly different from the old 'O' level (and A-level) exams where a fixed percentage of grades were allocated in advance - only now, grade boundaries are decided after scripts have been marked. This has traditionally been referred to as 'normative' assessment, where performance levels are predetermined in line with what standards 'should be'.

By way of comparison, when GCSEs were originally introduced they were designed to be

criterion-referenced - in other words, grades served as benchmarks against what students really knew, could do, and that they understood. They were designed to encourage greater levels of participation, indicate personal progress and develop individual confidence. Regular assessment by teachers, which is now seen as a drag on the system (and the main cause of grade inflation), was considered integral.

The emphasis given to teacher assessment during the Covid period is also being blamed for a widening of the performance gap between the private and state sectors. Private schools have been accused of 'milking the system' and having improper influence over awarding bodies. But this summer, the reintroduction of exams saw reductions in achievement gaps, leading to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) advising members not to publish full results to avoid 'unhelpful comparisons' with state schools!

Of course, exams and tests have always played some kind of role in ranking and selecting students. Even the Finnish education system, for example, which is often considered as something to emulate, has a part norm-referenced final exam. But now, ranking students against each other has become the main function of assessment.

Out with BTECs, in with the Ts

Since 2010, vocational qualifications have increasingly resembled academic ones, external assessment has been introduced with a new emphasis on grade differentiations. This is a major reason for the replacement of BTECs with T-levels. Most BTECs are due to lose their funding in the coming months, as government clears the way for rolling out the Ts. For those who have campaigned in defence of the BTECs, the negative publicity couldn't have happened at a worse time. Tory ministers didn't exactly leap to resolve the problems, while Pearson, the awarding body, secured lucrative contracts to provide several Ts.

In some respects, T-levels reflect a continuation of the vocational tradition. Some practitioners might

welcome the extended (45 day) mandatory work placement, and point to the fact that the Ts are the responsibility of the Institute for Apprenticeships rather than Ofqual - the body that polices academic qualifications, It is true that overall T-level grades are recorded using the Pass/Merit/Distinction formula, but the core components are now graded using A-level criteria, based on external assessment. T-level's hybrid nature is probably one reason for elite universities giving it the cold shoulder. Although in the future they may be persuaded to give the core components separate standing.

Blair wades in

A few days after young people received results, Tony Blair, the instigator of the performance-based exam culture (remember 'education, education, education'?) before the Tories took it to a new level, waded in to argue that A-levels (and GCSEs) should be abolished and replaced by a new 'low stakes' system of continued assessment. Blair told the *Telegraph* that current qualifications only measure certain skills, and invite narrow teaching styles aimed at passing tests rather than developing other key aptitudes. He should know! But if the architect is now trying to demolish his own building, the Tories, or Starmer's Labour for that matter, are unlikely to take any notice of Blair's U-turn.

Education can damage your health?

Whereas education has generally been considered to be what orthodox economists term a 'merit' good, something largely beneficial to society as a whole, in recent times, arguably, its extra 'value' has become 'zero-sum'. Rather than concentrating on developing real learning skills, teachers now spend increasing amounts of time coaching students in exam technique, to compete more effectively against other students in other schools and colleges, producing a private return rather than a public benefit. One individual can only benefit at the expense of another. The examination system will continue to have negative implications for the welfare of society, with huge levels of anxiety for young people, but also their teachers and families, as they worry about which grades they will attain, then which university will accept them. Warning: education can damage your health!

PSE: where we stand

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.