

The exam pressure on young people today, whilst at an all time high, isn't the greatest worry. Much more concerning is the pressure applied on schools and colleges to achieve ever higher performance.

At the heart of the problem is that the government has become heavily reliant on the nation's exam results as a measure of the success of government policy. For this reason, where politics *not* pupils is central to the equation, it is especially annoying to hear DCSF retorts about the slander to young people by those who question standards.

The ultimate problem is that government has not only the incentive but also the power to influence the exam system for its own purposes. And maximizing learning has not necessarily been top of the list. This 'influence' includes how exams are marked and graded but, most significantly extends to the curriculum students study – and even the subjects which they take.

This 'influence' takes place in a context where young people are working very hard towards goals that they have been told will improve their life chances. So challenges are often shamelessly deflected under the auspices of protecting the feelings of pupils and teachers. The classic example is the A-level. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, argued in relation to the A-level results of 2007 that: 'It is an annual ritual for some education commentators to claim that our exam results are evidence of grade inflation and "dumbing down". This is demoralising for teachers and insulting for students who have worked hard all year.'

There is no question that the A-level system itself has seen significant changes. Changes which do, at face value, make comparisons between the linear and modular spurious. This means that it is illegitimate for critics to simply say that A-levels are 'easier'. But crucially, it also means very clearly that government cannot extol an 'improvement' in A-level grades – as like is not being compared with like.

Nevertheless, the question mark stands firmly against whether those changes to A-levels which have made them 'achievement' more 'accessible' have been beneficial in terms of *learning*. Some changes to the A-level have been for the better – getting rid of what is justifiably described as potentially "elitist" norm-referencing, for example. However, other theoretically democratising aspects have mistakenly been lumped in with scrapping norm-referencing – being able to repeat modules until a satisfactory grade is achieved, for example. Allowing re-takes is a positive but a deliberate system of 'cram and exam' for bulking up national averages is wholly undesirable. Most important is whether this greater 'accessibility', as it has been described, is actually advantageous for students. Ultimately, the answer is no: not least because as a consequence students are now faced with their A-levels being *completely* devalued as universities discard them as valuable indicators, and set their own tests.

The bottom line is that the debate on standards needs to be had: quashing question marks against ever-increasing performance by equating them with question marks against whether pupils deserve their grades, is of greatest disservice to young people themselves.

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