

# Westminster Education Forum: A vision for the future of A levels



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

**Simon Lebus**  
**Group Chief Executive**  
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“ In 2010 the British Examination system is like the Austro-Hungarian empire 100 years ago: crumbling apart, incoherent and unfit for purpose” (*Anthony Seldon: An end to Factory schools – CPS 2010*)

# A good comparison?

- Austro-Hungarian empire: lasted only 51 years from 1867-1918
- A levels: highly successful evolutionary organism - have already survived 59 years

# Why?

- Successfully responded to major changes in education and society
- Function has evolved from competitive ranking to mass certification of specialist secondary education

# A changing environment

- School leavers taking A levels:
  - 1951 approx 7%
  - Mid 1960s, approx 15%
  - Mid 1980s, approx 20%
  - Today, over 40%

# A changing environment

- HE progression
  - Capacity: 30,000 places in 1960s to approx 500,000 by 2010
  - School leavers with A levels going to HE
    - Mid 1980s, less than 50%
    - Today, between 74 and 78%

# A changing environment

- Subject coverage
  - 32 subjects offered in 1951
  - Increased to 84 by 2001 (introduction of C2K)
  - reflects changes in knowledge domains and various social and economic factors

# A changing environment

- Changes in subject coverage: some losses
  - British Constitution
  - Geometrical and machine drawing
  - Woodwork
  - Handicraft



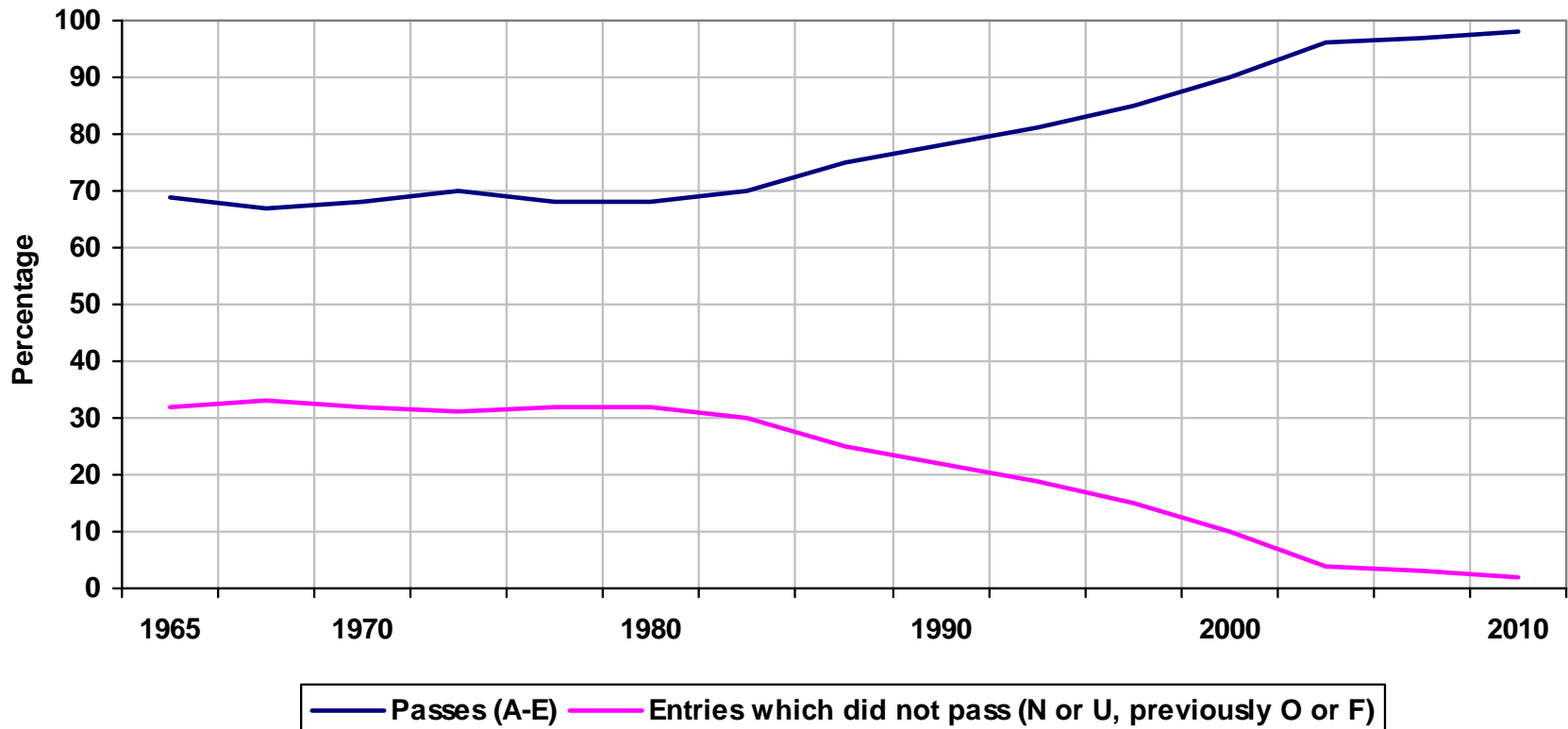
# A changing environment

- Changes in subject coverage: some gains
  - Chinese, Japanese and various community languages
  - Computing
  - Environmental science
  - Music technology
  - Sociology

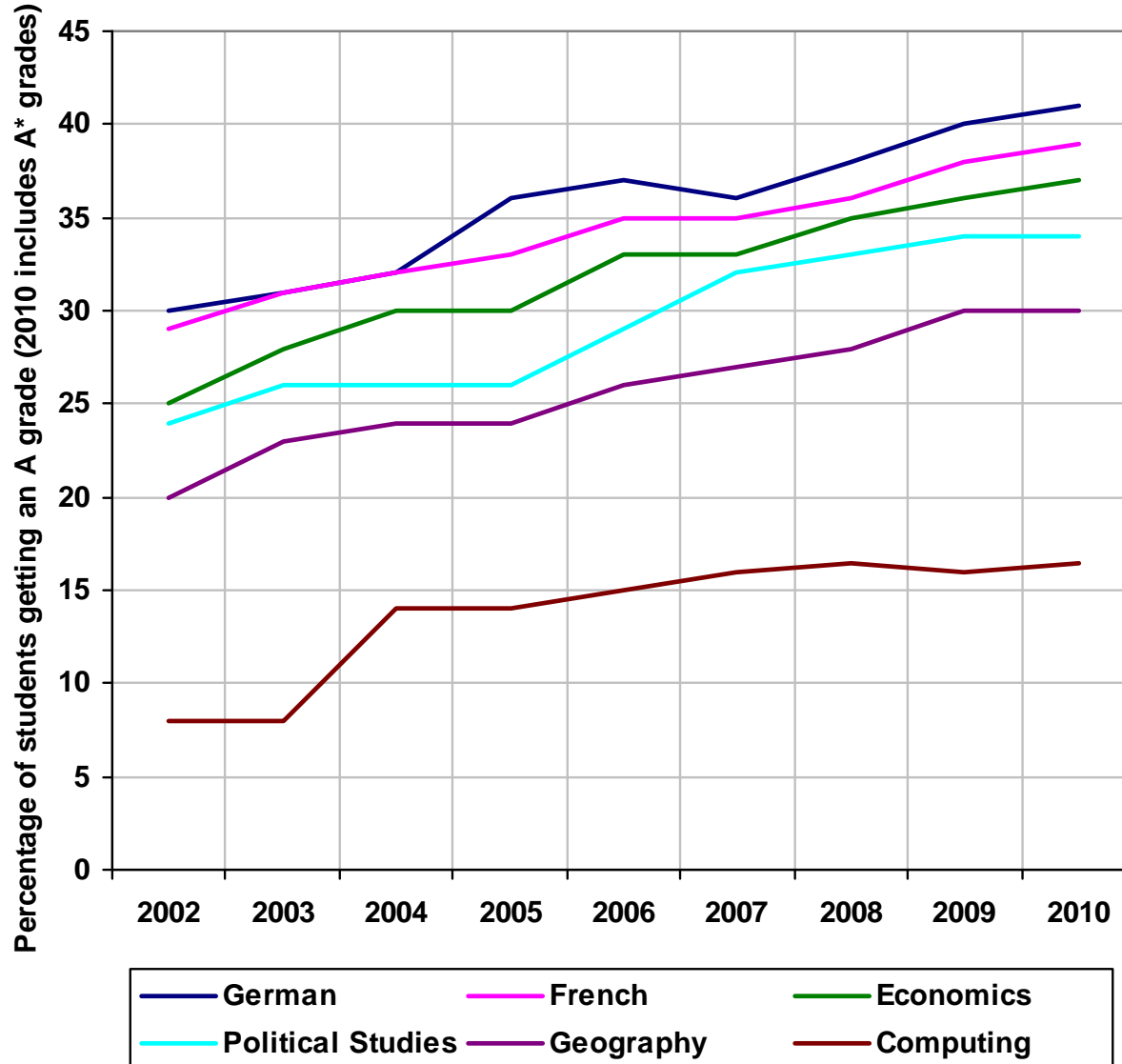
# A changing environment

- Attainment levels

# Changes in A level passes

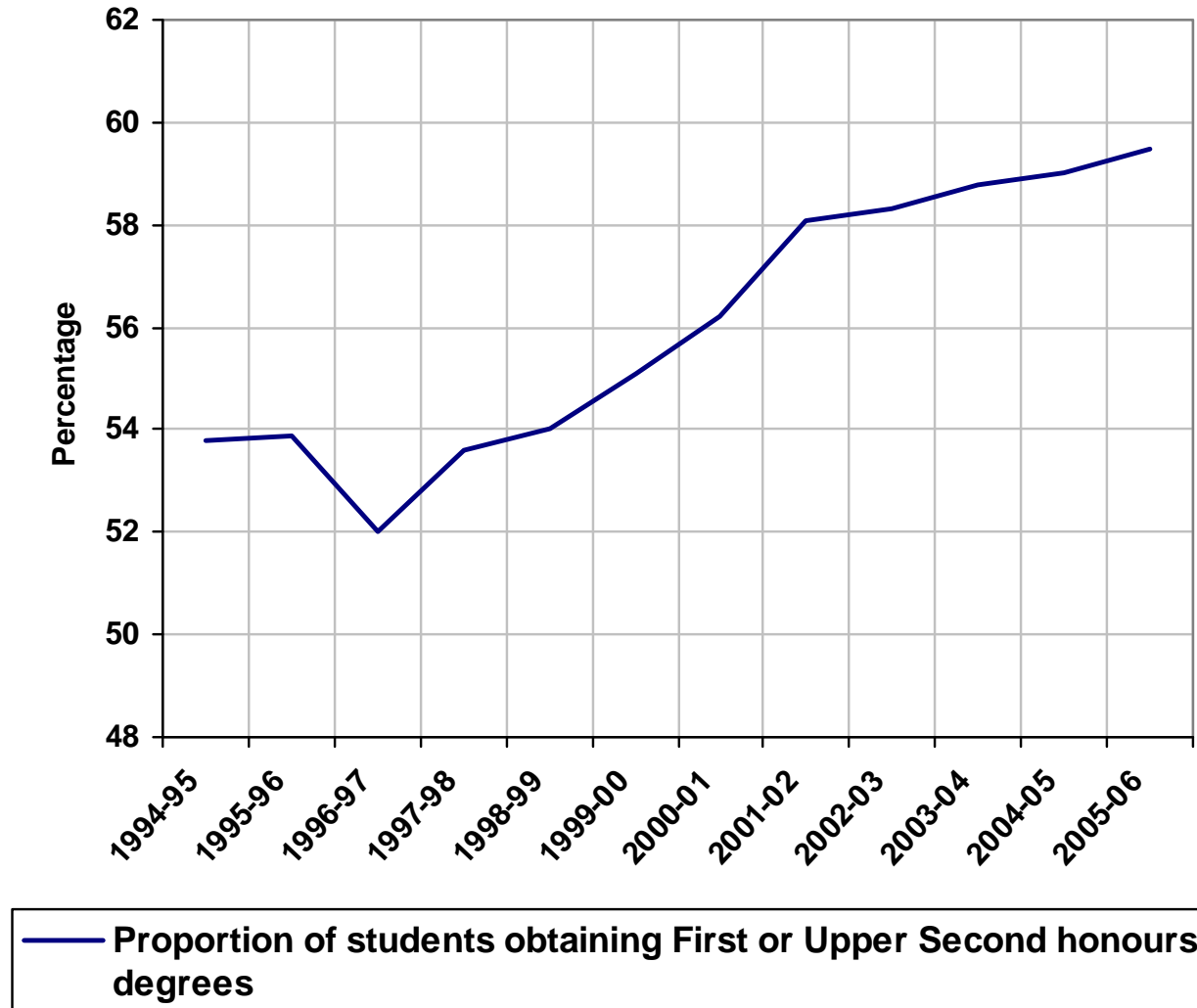


# Changing A grades by subject



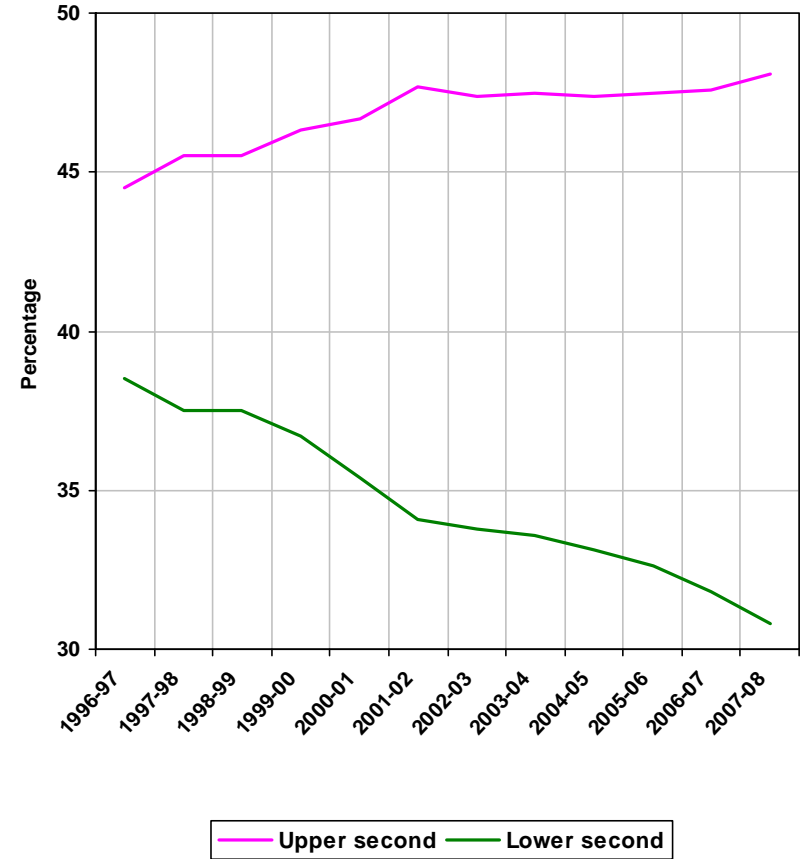
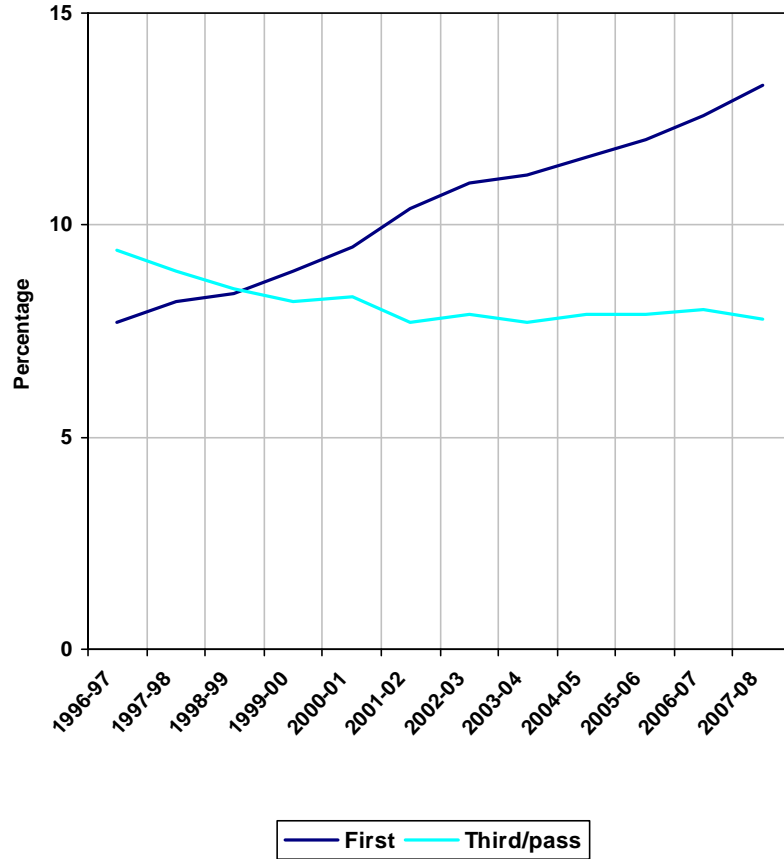
Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

# Changes in degree classification: Firsts/Upper Seconds



Source: 'Beyond the Honours Degree' Burgess Group Final Report – Universities UK

# Changes in degree classification



# What has driven the rise in attainment levels?

- Emphasis on improved accessibility and transparency
- Modularisation and retakes
- Shift from knowledge to skills based pedagogy and atomisation of syllabus and assessment content
- Benefit of the doubt
- Difficulty of ‘internalising a standard’ during a period of rapid change
- Climate of expectation: institutional assumption of continually rising standards

# What is the impact?

- Less information available to discriminate between candidates
- Complaints about lack of student readiness for higher study/employment
- Loss of confidence



# Other issues

- Risk averse focus on exam results
- “Burden of Assessment” and lack of curriculum space
  - But mean number of A levels has only increased from 2.5 in 1974 to 3.1 in 2009
  - Approx 21 hours, compared to approx 22 hours for IB, 24 hours in Finnish system

## Other issues

- Lack of advice and clarity about HE/ employer needs and requirements

# How should we respond?

- Recognise and protect positive A level features:
  - Flexibility
    - Approx 22,000 combinations
    - Most popular (maths, physics, chemistry) taken by approx 4%
  - Specialisation, providing good preparation for 3 year HE courses

# How should we respond?

Positive A level features (continued):

- Support for wide ability range
- Well-recognised international currency, can support multiple curriculum overlays
- Good predictive capability

# Areas for reform

- Syllabus ownership and design
  - Greater role for HE
    - Soft matriculation
    - Quality assurance
    - Subject input
  - Structured incentives for institutional engagement
    - QAA, HEFCE, REF recognition?

# Areas for reform

- Standards
  - Regulation to “community of practice”
  - Less emphasis on comparability
  - More informative certification

## A Level Candidate Grading Information

This information accompanies the candidate's certificate and shows score in relation to grades in the subject(s) shown.  
The distribution on the graph relates to all candidates aggregating in the session June 2010.

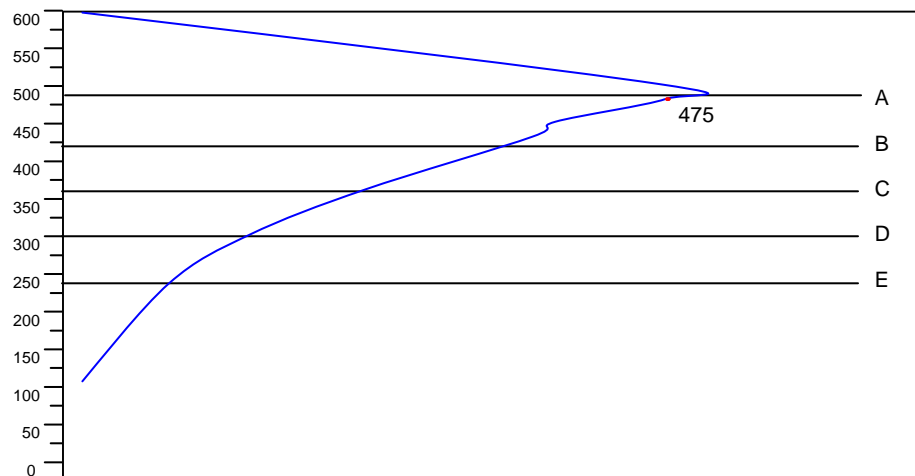
JUNE 2010

A.N. EXAMINEE

Date of Birth: 14 October 1994

GCE A-LEVEL CHEMISTRY

GRADE B



Grade	Percentage
A	32%
B	25%
C	18%
D	13%
E	9%
U	3%

The percentages show the proportion of candidates gaining a particular grade

Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations is recognised by the regulators of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to offer accredited qualifications

Candidate number: 12345/1234  
UCI: 12345678987B

*(Explanatory notes are printed overleaf)*

Date of Issue: 15/10/10  
Certificate Number: 00987654321

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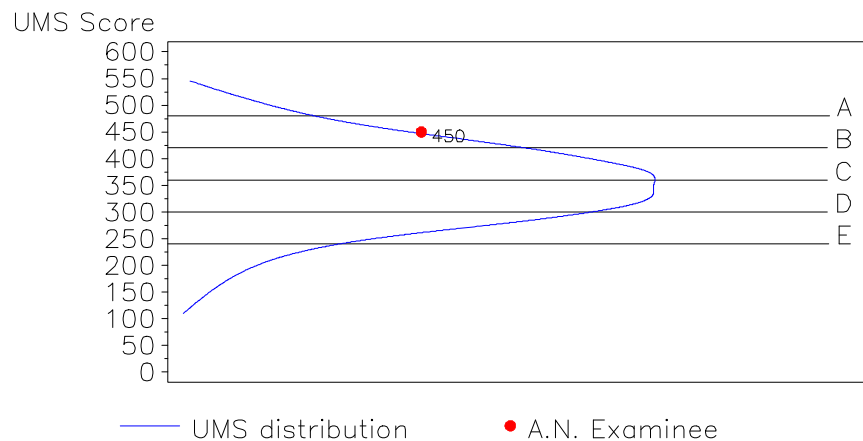
JUNE 2010

A.N. EXAMINEE

Date of Birth: 14 October 1994

GCE A-LEVEL APPLIED ICT

GRADE B



Grade	Percentage
A	6.4%
B	13.1%
C	26.6%
D	28.1%
E	18.6%
U	7.2%

The percentages show the proportion of candidates gaining a particular grade

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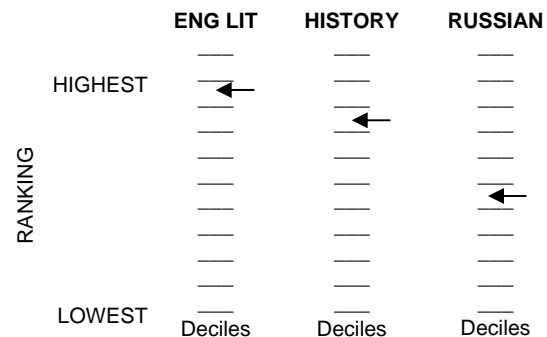
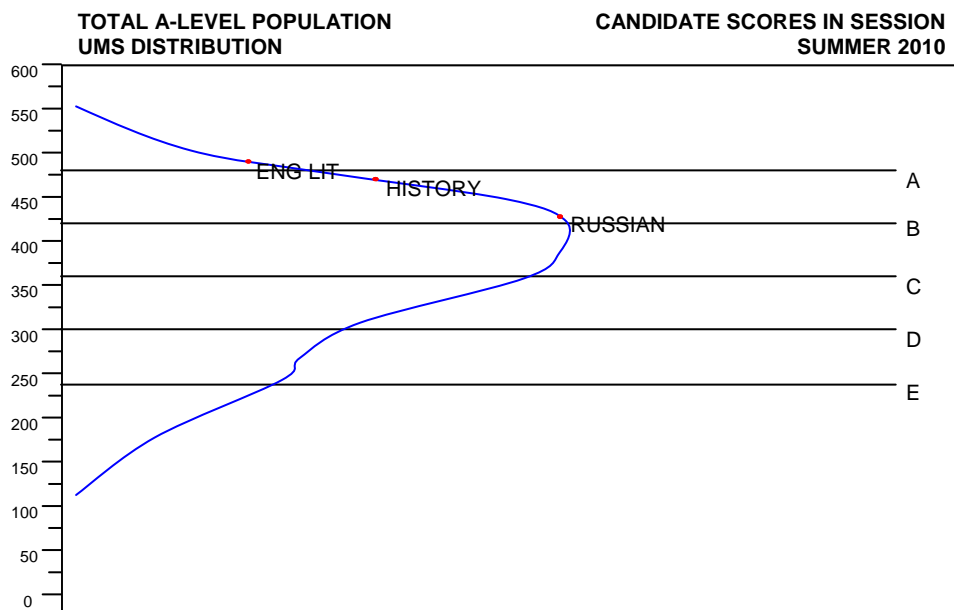
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## Grades: what do they *really* tell us?

### Grade **A**

Candidate 1 (grade A) 480 marks  
----- AB boundary  
Candidate 2 (grade B) 479 marks

### Grade **B**

Candidate 3 (grade B) 420 marks  
----- BC boundary

Candidates 1 and 2 (who have contrasting grades, A and B respectively) have far more in common than candidates 2 and 3 (who both have grade B)