

A Levels and GCSEs

A few years ago I gave a talk to students in Cambridge. There followed one of those rare conference events when I was asked an unusual and difficult question that was not drawn from the spin and media commentary of the week. "Mr Redwood, do you think the A levels I gained were of the same quality as the ones you gained?"

I had never expressed a public view on exam standards. A series of traps flashed into my mind of how certain answers could in true BBC fashion be spun or misinterpreted against me. I decided on a safe answer. "I have no reason to think that the Advanced levels I got were of a lower standard than the ones you must have got. Do you think otherwise?" As I feared but had decided to dodge, he was sure his A levels were of a lower standard and he was worried about what he saw as the downwards drift. I tried to rally him and others in the audience by saying I understood that the Exam Boards were very conscious of the need to guarantee comparable standards between years, and reflected that in the chosen mixture of the complexity of the papers, the severity of the marking scheme and the choice of grade boundary year by year.

This year some newspapers and commentators are asking the student's question again. How can it be, they ask, that 2021 has seen by far and away the best results in both A levels and GCSEs ever, when we are also told that the education of young people was harmed by school closures, a shortage of face to face teaching and by the imitations of the on line alternative. We are told that there can be no proper comparison and that this year's assessment is fair for the students involved given the difficulties lockdown created. It is also a year when some schools decided to teach the full curriculum for the exams and used new technology well to do so, whilst others felt more constrained by technology limitations or were delayed by slow deliveries of personal equipment to pupils in need. We are told the gap got bigger between different regions and income groups which is not a desirable outcome.

Next year will be a crucial year. Assuming that the remaining measures against CV 19 can be dropped as the vaccines work their magic the Exam Boards and teaching profession have to decide how to get back to public exams and how to calibrate the difficulty of papers, the breadth of the syllabus, the severity of the marking scheme and the grade boundaries anew. I do think exams are the least bad way to assess learning and achievement, and it should be easier to be fair between every student cohort if each year is examined to a similar standard on a similarly difficult and wide course. If too many get Grade A Advanced levels then elite universities will simply invent sterner tests to differentiate between the good and the very good. There are signs that some universities are inventing tests to do just that. I would be interested in thoughts about how the system should be re-established or reformed next year. There will doubtless be more arguments about the role of any of course work assessed by teachers, and the desirability or otherwise of students being able to take aids like dictionaries and smart calculators into exams.