

University entrance

The emergence of many more higher grades in this year's A level results has produced problems for universities used to a higher failure rate to achieve required grades. Some courses at some universities are as a result oversubscribed and the Universities are having to make offers for the following year or encourage some other switching to try to resolve the difficulty.

I was a product of a different system for Oxford and Cambridge. Before or after A level Oxford and Cambridge set entrance and scholarship exams which they used rather than A level results.

The advantage of this system was twofold. The Universities were in full control of how many places they allocated and who would get them. The student if successful could press on to prepare more thoroughly for higher level study. The Colleges made their own judgements. Later as a young Oxford university teacher I became involved in the marking process for the entrance exams. I was impressed by the system. We blind double marked the papers, held conversations about all the ones where we disagreed, and used interviews to expose the issues where we did disagree about the achievement and potential of the candidate. We also sought to redress any unfair imbalance between students who had been well prepared by expensive schools for the ordeal and those who had not.

It looks as if some top universities are tiptoeing back to relying more on their own assessment of students. They need to be sure that the people they take can cope with the rigours and the independence of undergraduate study and are the best of the many who now achieve a grade A.