



Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre

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OUR A LEVELS SET THE STANDARD

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Andrew Barkley — complete with textbooks and a sample bag of mushroom compost

"grand plan" is to work for a firm for 15 years, build up a reputation and some knowledge, then leave to set up on his own. He is not worried about which area of business it should be.

"It does not really matter what you are selling. As long as you sound enthusiastic, concerned and seem to have the situation under control, you will be all right," he says.

Throwing himself in at the deep end was the best and quickest, if hardest, way to learn. "But I did it, and I think I swam pretty well. Actually now, I can hardly believe how easy it was."

at colleges throughout the UK. The RSA also runs more than 200 courses in subjects from administration and customer services to arts and entertainment. The General National Vocational Qualifications are designed for the school-leaving age group and can be taken at foundation, intermediate or advanced level in health and social care, engineering, hospitality and catering, and science, and many other subjects. To equip yourself with skills demanded by the modern office, which are useful for temporary work or essay writing later, the RSA also offers its own computer literacy and type-writing courses.

Mastering the art of using a

one of 50 countries is usu- tough. Candidates have to strate physical and ment an ability to get on with p staying power to win a schemes such as carr fieldwork surveys in Si scientific exploration in t Barrier Reef. But there are no rules c tions on how you spend With a bit of forethou planning, it is quite possib combination of everything holiday, complete a cour- job, do some voluntary w final piece of advice in t Year Guidebook says: re it is supposed to be fun, endurance test.

Our A levels set the standard

Carol Fitz-Gibbon believes that constant monitoring should be built into the A-level system to prevent 'special inquiry' syndrome

ment, students are staying in school beyond the age of 16 in far greater numbers. What are they to do? A levels are sometimes the only courses available and they often seem to provide the only well-recognised and highly regarded qualifications. Vocational courses such as those provided by the Business and Technical Education Council (BTec) were steadily gaining some recognition, and are now joined by the Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications (Advanced GNVQs). These appear to be on a par with the easier A levels as far as a student's chance of success is concerned. But neither the pass rate nor the grades awarded can tell us if standards have changed. If high grades are being awarded for poorer work than previously, then standards have dropped. Whether or not this is the case requires careful collection of specially designed

data and a broad range of evidence. The Assessment of Performance Unit used to undertake this vitally important monitoring of national standards. It was able to show, for example, using nationally representative samples, that whereas students achieved less on mathematics items involving percentages over the years, they had improved in their handling of probability items. Presumably the curriculum emphasis had changed and with it the achievement levels.

Alas, the Assessment of Performance Unit was closed a few years ago. Now, when questions of standards arise, there is little evidence available. Quite rightly the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority is now calling for a detailed inquiry. However, the occasional panic (the special inquiry) is no way to run a system. What is needed is to build into the

system the procedures needed for the kind of careful and ongoing monitoring that the APU was conducting. Some organisation, such as SCAA, should be provided with the funds necessary to reinstate this national monitoring. If standards are falling, or changing, this needs to be reported. It is not necessarily bad to recognise a wider range of achievements but many people, such as university entrance officers and employers, need to know how to interpret the grades.

One source of change in A-level grading appears to arise from the introduction of modular courses with different marking procedures. These courses are very popular, encourage students to work hard consistently, and urgently need to be monitored, evaluated, and compared with traditionally graded A levels. One reason for grade inflation (if it exists) could be the

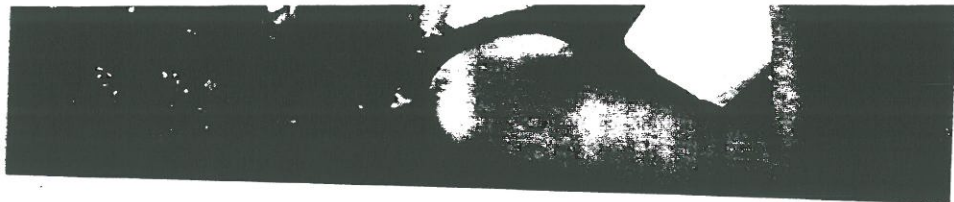
pressure to reach "national training targets". To meet these politically set, arbitrary targets, students would need to become mentally gifted if there were no change in standards or in teaching effectiveness. Since changes of the required magnitude have never been known to occur on a national basis, the only solution is to lower standards.

However, these little local difficulties should not lead us to lose sight of the outstanding role which our widely admired examination system has played. It provides fair, blind assessment for pupils, accountability for the public and clarity of purpose for teachers. It probably enhances teacher-pupil relationships by removing from teachers the onus of being both the coach and the umpire. Teachers accept the strong element of accountability inherent in the independent and external assessment of their students. Is any other

profession so accountable? Are the achievements of the system recognised?

Some of the results of the examination system have been remarkable. As far as is known from international studies, the A-level standards in the sciences and mathematics are "world class standards" which appear to be exceeded by only a couple of other nations. A-level teachers are teaching at a level which is usually found in universities in other countries. Indeed an A-level pass in a subject can earn a student two years' credits in that subject in top American universities. Surely one way forward is to try to create the same structure for a wider range of students and to create similarly high standards for technical and vocational courses? If it isn't broken, don't fix it... copy it.

● The author is professor of education and director of the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre, Newcastle University. The CEM Centre runs the A-level Information System (ALIS) which has monitored A levels since 1983.



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