OUR A LEVELS SET THE STANDARD

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Certainly grades are creeping upwards year by year. Some years ago, the general pattern was that the highly selected and well-motivated students who took A levels were taught in small, expensive classes by carefully chosen teachers - and then 30 per cent failed. The modal grade was a fail.

Most teachers felt that the high failure rate was usually inappropriate... students had learnt a great deal in two years of concentrated A-level work, and the system was failing to accredit this learning. Whereas 30 per cent of students used to be failures, that figure now stands at about 17 per cent. Which is the more reasonable?

At the higher end of the scale, the proportion of top grades (A+) has risen from 1 per cent to about 15 or 16 per cent. Is this reason? A difficult question.

We need to take into account the fact that the intake of students to A levels is now less selective. With the lack of jobs for school leavers, and with strong national encouragement, students are staying in school beyond the age of 16 in far greater numbers. What are the chances of A levels being as successful when they are taught in a much larger group?

Carol Fitz-Gibbon believes that constant monitoring should be built into the A-level system to prevent 'special inquiry' syndrome. She believes that the grading system is flawed and needs to be reformed.

The system should include a broader range of evidence to ensure that students are not just being graded on their best performance. The Assessment Performance Unit used to undertake this vital monitoring of national standards. It was able to show, for example, that nationally representative samples of students achieved higher grades in examinations than in previous years. This was due to improvements in the handling of probability items, presumably the curriculum had changed and with it the achievement levels.

The Assessment of Performance Unit was closed down years ago. Now, when questions of national 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. The whole organisation, such as SCAA, should be provided with the funds necessary to restate 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 by many more 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, encouraging students to work hard and consistently, and urgently need to be monitored, assessed, 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 be excused their grades 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 scale, 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 special element of accountability inherent in the independent external assessment of their students.

Are the assessments of the system recognised?

Some of the results of the examination system have been remarkable. As far as is shown from international studies, the A-level standards in the sciences and mathematics are "world class standards" which appear to be exceeded only by 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, University of York. The CEM Centre produces the A-level Information System (AIS) which has monitored A levels since 1983.