



**Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre**

PUBLICATION NO.18

'A' LEVELS; CORRECTIVE COMPARISONS

C.T. FITZ-GIBBON

Managing Schools Today  
1991





# corrective comparisons

**T**O MANAGE a school you need to monitor to know what is going on, what trends are developing, where there are strengths, where problems may arise. You need information. But, with a little help from computers, you can drown in information.

The most detailed breakdown of the last five years' examination results can still leave you wondering if they were good, poor or indifferent. Suppose the results were uniformly improving. Were they improving as fast as results elsewhere? Was the intake of pupils changing? Were the results really as good as they should have been if the students entering the school were more able or better prepared? Were the examinations becoming easier or were students choosing easier subjects? What was happening in the department in which results were lower than elsewhere?

Examination results aren't everything. You also need information about students' attitudes. You may receive many positive comments but would you hear the negative comments? The feedback you get by informally keeping your ear to the ground will contain bias. It could make you unnecessarily alarmed or unjustifiably confident.

What you need is high quality informa-

**Performance indicators continue to dominate the headlines.**

**Dr Carol Fitz-Gibbon describes how the A' Level Information System is already running successfully in the North East.**

tion, carefully collected and analysed to assess outcomes; not just examination outcomes but also students' attitudes and the quality of life in the school. Furthermore the information must be 'disaggregated'. 'Whole school' indicators, such as a sum of all examination results, will not tell you where there are strengths and weaknesses within the school.

However, and here's the rub, the information needs also to be set in the context of other schools. Data on your own school

alone is exceedingly difficult to interpret.

Examination data, for example, needs to be seen against any gradually changing standards. The best way of looking at the results from one of your departments is to compare them with results from departments in other schools working with similar students. In the same way if you found that 70% of sixth formers stated that they would recommend the school to others, you might be alarmed. 70% implies that almost a third would not. But the general pattern in local schools would be relevant. If 70% was the highest reported percentage across a consortium of, say, 25 schools then you would interpret the figure differently than if it were the lowest reported percentage of positive attitudes. And you would certainly be interested in the year-by-year trend at your own school considered against the general trend in the consortium.

So what is needed is an analysis of the A' Level results, subject by subject, which takes account of the different kinds of students with which each department is working. Since 1983 the School of Education, Newcastle University, has provided this kind of information.

The A' Level Information System (ALIS) is an up-and-running 'indicator system' which

provides disaggregated data each year to participating schools and colleges. It began as a response to a question from a school governor: "How good are these maths results?" The question led the author to develop a small scale research project into school effects at A' Level. The project grew until it embraced almost every school and college in the North East. This year, 1990-91, schools and colleges outside the North East are participating (e.g. in Cambridge, Richmond, Staffordshire). The development was made possible by grants over two years from the Department of Education and Science and then by the foresight of key people in seven Local Education Authorities.

They saw that the information was useful not only for the LEA as the kind of monitoring for which the LEA is responsible (DES Circular 7/88), but also for the schools.

The information which schools find useful are general findings such as:

- how to predict likely grades for each A' Level subject given a student's GCSE results;
- what kind of teaching activities were used in classes which got better than expected examination results;
- what kind of teaching activities were associated with positive student attitudes.

## Comparative data

In the ALIS project, the attitudes of A' Level candidates to the school, and to the subjects they are studying are compared to those of students in other schools and colleges. Comparative data on other topics, such as participation rates in extra curricular activities, percentages applying to universities and polytechnics and the amount of homework reported, are also included as useful kinds of information in planning and evaluating the A' Level programme. In addition to looking at diverse outcomes, the ALIS project also provides a report each year which shows how these same classroom activities related to students' attitudes to the subject. This report generates extensive discussion of teaching strategies in INSET related to ALIS.

Demand on schools and colleges which participate are kept to a minimum. The data are collected by University personnel, by a visit to each site. In reports for each department, each school or college is referred to only by a code name. This makes the data available to all participants but keeps the identity of the participants confidential. It is a procedure which has proved to be very acceptable and allows each department to compare itself with other departments working with similar students.

Throughout the country, as computer technology advances, more and more data will be collected and, inevitably analysed

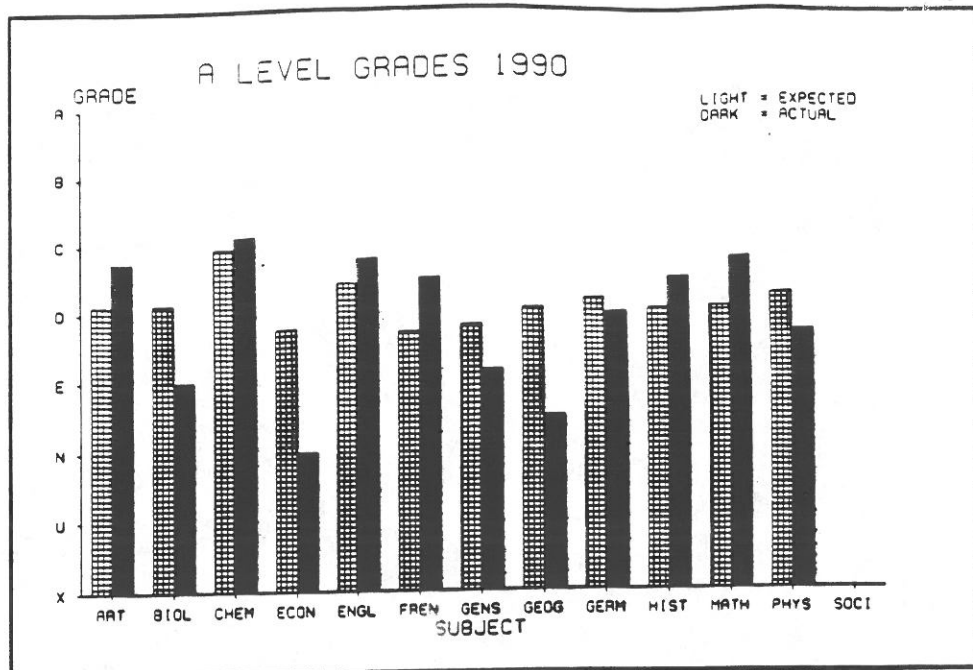


Figure 1

for 'performance indicators'. The concern of the researchers from the School of Education is to develop information systems which are useful, efficient and, above all, fair.

In addition to these general findings schools obtain the detailed statistical breakdown from each department, showing the intake to that particular department in terms of GCSE grades, parental occupations and a score on a high-level ability test. These intake characteristics are used singly or in combination to 'predict' A' Level grades in the department, for each pupil, using the general pattern of results in the region. If departments obtain, on average, grades as good or better than predicted they deserve commendation. (Sometimes headteachers know which departments are 'effective' but on some occasions headteachers have been failing to recognise very effective teaching and may even have been 'berating the wrong chaps', as one head remarked.) Figure 1 is sent to headteachers each year to provide a very quick summary. Heads of each department get three detailed booklets of data, one on examination results, one on attitudes and one on 'processes': class size, teaching activities and time allocated.

## Student attitudes

The attitudes students express are reported as an average score on an attitude scale for each department. Consistently low scores combined with some negative comments on the open-ended item on the questionnaire prompted one school, for example, to rethink its sixth form provision.

Although the project keeps a very low profile, the results have sometimes been

used to defend an institution against exaggerated, misleading press reports.

Looking back over the development of ALIS the key factors underpinning its success might be:

- being very little trouble to schools - participation does not waste staff time filling in forms or guessing targets or reading lengthy glossy documents.
- having people at the end of a telephone - statistics needs a human face.
- using the expertise of quantitative researchers to develop fair indicators.
- developing an atmosphere in which monitoring is recognised as providing information and quality assurance in every department, not as a means to promote competition between schools. The data do not show strong whole school effects. There are departments showing better than predicted and worse than predicted results in almost every school. There do not appear to be wholly 'good' or wholly 'bad' schools.
- keeping code names secret. Schools choose a code name and can change it each year. They see all the data but know only their own code name.

In summary, schools need good management and management needs good information. If you can't measure outcomes, you can't detect the effects of resource changes or any other changes that may be considered. Therefore monitor!

*Dr Carol Fitz-Gibbon is Director of the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at Newcastle University. More information about ALIS can be obtained from the Centre at the School of Education, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU.*