

The value of A levels

Some time ago after giving a talk I was asked by a student at one of our top universities if I thought the A levels I had were of the same value and difficulty as the ones he had most recently obtained. I was both pleased to have a question out of the ordinary, and worried about how to answer it.

I decided to answer it factually. I said that every year A level marking is moderated and assessed by the Examiners, with a view to being fair between the years. In theory if a paper has been more difficult than past papers the required marks are lower, and vice versa. I had no evidence or analysis to question that thesis that standards have been approximated year by year.

Duty done, I then asked him a question. I asked if he was implying that standards had risen and my A level was inferior. He laughed and told me he thought his A level had not been to the same high standard or difficulty as mine. I thought it sad that a clever and probably hard working student felt like that about his recent qualifications. He of course had the luxury of knowing he was going on to get a more prestigious qualification, a degree from a great university. To those leaving education at A level similar thoughts would be more upsetting.

Mr Gove decided that creating advanced qualifications with a high proportion of course work rather than exams might lead to less rigour. Whilst most people would work hard and make an honest account of themselves, and most teachers will lead, teach and mark professionally, there is more danger of abuse in course work. You could cheat by getting others to help you too much with the course work or even dictate it to you. You could benefit from favouritism in marking – or suffer from bad relations with your teacher assessors for reasons unconnected with the standard of your coursework. You could benefit from being asked to do the work again before formally submitting, if it was not good enough the first time. Mr Gove therefore decided to move A levels back to reliance on final exams.

I remember the A levels I took well. They depended entirely on the final exam performance. It meant you needed to both understand and remember the course material. It was also a flexible exam based system in the subjects I took. If you had reached a higher level than that required you could be awarded a high mark even if you had not answered covering the basics in the way the marking system was designed to capture. There were no single right answers, as the examiners recognised the complexity of the questions and the range of answers that could be interesting.

The two years of the sixth form to pass those exams were the best and most formative of all my years in formal education. I just hope today's A levels are a similar challenge and spur to students. I still use the techniques of economic analysis I first studied then, and still can place what I am currently doing in an historical context from the History course. I remember the material because I needed to learn and understand to pass the exam. A few years ago I took an A level equivalent professional exam. That

was reliant on rote learning with the doctrine of the right answer. Where the problem was mathematical requiring you to memorise a formula and apply it to data that made sense. Where it was multiple choice between arguable answers it was more hazardous and less sensible. It was not nearly such a worthwhile educational experience.