

POLICY WATCH

2006/80

2 October 2006

A level: glass half full or empty?

There were a record number of entries for A level this summer, 805,698, so as the A level hits its 55th year is it really facing a mid life crisis?

Last week, by all accounts Tony Blair was inches away from announcing support in his conference speech for the International Bac (IB) and this week the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) met, with their chairman calling for independent schools not to abandon exams that carry "national currency." Behind the scenes the 14 - 19 reform programme goes on with the A level a preset, even if at times dominating, fixture within it. It can surely only be irony that has Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, with its clash of beliefs about the purpose of exams, transferred to the big screen at the same time.

Clearly things have moved on since A levels were first introduced in 1951 but it is now, rather like middle age itself caught between inexplicable mood swings of optimism and pessimism.

The pessimists, largely concentrated in the independent sector, feel that the A level no longer serves their purpose. This may be for a number of reasons; it doesn't provide a fine enough selection device for entry to university; it doesn't provide a sound enough preparation for higher level study; a diet of 3 similar A levels appears too narrow, A levels have become too mechanistic or simply that they've lost their golden allure.

Much of this is hard to prove and arguably tinged with nostalgia but as Andrew Boggis, chairman of the HMC said last week, if it leads to many of our top schools abandoning traditional exams, it could be very damaging indeed for the school sector. John Bangs of the NUT was more blunt, "it's a separatist move which could be costly for the vast majority of kids."

At the moment the numbers 'deserting' A level are not great, 87 UK schools now offer the IB for instance, but there are three new factors to consider. Firstly, the possibility of any fall out from the 14 - 19 reform programme in that any change can be unsettling, especially of this magnitude, and lead to schools reviewing their options. Secondly, the fact that the IB now attracts full UCAS points and thirdly the fact that a new qualification is under development targeted directly at entry to university.

According to its publicity blurb, this Pre U qualification "aims to prepare students with the skills and knowledge they need to make a success of their subsequent studies at university." The aim is to trial the Pre U next year and launch it for first teaching from Sept 2008. Its draft format of three main subjects + one subsidiary subject + one global perspectives component and an extended essay, places it squarely between the current 3 A level package and the IB. "If they get it right" said Nigel Richardson, chair elect of the HMC, "it's an instant dream package."

Chary of the elitist charge, the Pre U developers claim that it is not just for those seeking university entry but also for those who feel the A level has become too narrow, too mechanistic and in the words of Charles Bush head of Oundle school 'too boring.' But is it right to abandon a qualification that is offered across the school sector, for which more students are registering and which is still regarded, for all its imperfections, as a gold standard. Even Anthony Seldon, master at Wellington school, sees the Pre U as "forward to the past." Would it be better to reform from within?

The case for reform is best seen in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* earlier this year by Mike Tomlinson. There he argued that he had not intended to abandon the A level, rather improve the whole 14 - 19 curriculum offer and for three reasons.

Firstly, that "the mechanistic and atomistic approach to assessment was strangling scholarship," if it couldn't be measured it wasn't valued; thus an assessment issue. Secondly, that A levels fail to develop generic higher order skills such as research and how to present a cogent argument; a design issue. And thirdly that 'the study of separate, free standing A levels with no requirement to take other subjects' left students lacking in basic skills and wider enrichment; a breadth issue.

OCA's recent consultation on the qualification and subject criteria for AS/A levels which received over 3200 responses, was completed in May this year and for which the details have recently been published, tackles many of these issues.

The consultation set out to consider four aspects; the necessity of coursework and the case for lessening the burden of assessment; clarification of synoptic assessment and the introduction of AEA style assessments. Collectively therefore a range of assessment and design issues.

Responses were generally supportive. There was general support for the subject content in each case. In response to the question, 'is it current and up to date?' responses varied from a 75.8% thumbs up in English Lit, to 88.2% for History, 87.6% for Chemistry and 66.7% for Science. Mixed views prevailed about a further issue, where best to place the harder AEA type questions; 'additional, optional and separate from the A2' being the general consensus. There were also differences about volumes of internal and external assessment. 67.7% in Chemistry and 63% in Geography for example arguing that there were "aspects of their subject that cannot best be assessed through external examination."

There is no doubt that considerable change is going on around the A level. Reductions in coursework and assessment modules in some subjects, the introduction of AEA type questions and an Extended Project, faster release of results and possible post qualification application, all add up to potentially a very different A level in the future.

Two questions, however, remain. Will the 2008 review, signalled in para 6.20 of the Feb 2005 14 - 19 White Paper but subsequently downplayed, lead as the IPPR have proposed to a re appraisal of the British Bac model? And more fundamentally, as Mike Tomlinson has said, are we able to "agree on the purpose of A levels."

To the maverick Hector in *The History Boys*, exams were the enemy of education. Some may agree but then they shouldn't become the enemy that divides schools either.

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.