

POLICY WATCH

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GCSE 2006: results postscript

Four themes seemed to dominate reactions to the GCSE results this year.

As with the A level results a week earlier, media stories were fairly low key. No great headlines about a collapse of standards, a system in crisis or an exam in decline. Even *The Daily Mail* had a story on success rates though couldn't resist a familiar dig, "did the class of 2006 chose soft subjects to secure best ever grades?"

Perhaps it was the trialling of a new way of releasing results that helped to change the atmosphere, for under a pilot from this Board, some candidates were able to log on at home, get to see their maths results and even their marked scripts. "I'd much rather be sat at home in my pyjamas looking at results than sat at school" commented one candidate taking a pragmatic view on having to get up early and go in to collect her results.

But there were plenty of other good news stories as well. The overall A* - C pass rate was up 1.2% to 62.4%, there was a slight increase in the English and maths A* - C pass rates, up 0.7% to 61.6% for English and up 0.9% to 54.3% in maths and boys continued to close the gap on girls, by 0.5% on higher grades.

So what were the issues that attracted debate this year?

The first, if only because of the extravagant language used, was what was happening to modern foreign languages. "Number of language students in free fall" blazed *The Financial Times* cogitating on the 14.2% drop in the number taking German and the 13.2% drop in the number taking French.

This year's candidates are the first to be affected the Government's decision to make foreign languages voluntary, a decision it may be regretting. At the end of last year, the then Schools Minister wrote to all secondary schools encouraging them to set a target of 50% of their pupils taking a foreign language at GCSE. Clearly things would not have changed drastically in six months but with business leaders urging young people not to give up languages, Reviews calling for a reinstatement of foreign languages and specialised Diplomas making space for a foreign language under additional learning, there may well be a turn around in this state of affairs. There has been some increase in take up at primary level, with more than 1 in 4 primary schools offering it, the A* - C pass rate for foreign languages was up 3.8% and there is considerable curriculum innovation going on so there is cause for hope. It would be disturbing if foreign languages became the preserve of the independent sector only although of course there are now over 300 specialist schools offering a language specialism.

A second issue was whether there had been any great shift in the sorts of subjects that candidates were taking. This remains an important issue with employers

calling for a certain set of skills on the one hand and revisions to the 14 - 19 curriculum under development on the other.

The core subjects of English, maths and science continue to form the basic diet for youngsters but there was a welcome increase in entries for Physics, up 6.6%, Chemistry, up 6.2% and Biology, up 6.3%, along with an increase in single science although against a background of a 3% fall in entries for double science. The biggest increase in entries this year were for statistics, media studies, business and communication studies and religious studies. Some of these subjects have attracted comment in the past and as *The Mail* hinted some of the shift is down to the coruscating effect of performance tables. More concerning perhaps, as Steve Sinnott of the NUT pointed out is that far too many youngsters are following a narrow curriculum with global perspectives from languages and geography being dropped in favour of perceived better points options.

An interesting dimension to this discussion is the interest in IGCSEs, developed for the international market but now taken by some 100 English independent schools. Their argument is that it is a more 'challenging' exam but as it is not accredited and thus funded, it is restricted at present to independent schools. With 1 in 20 youngsters leaving school with no GCSE, this does seem a perverse development.

Those youngsters who leave school with no qualifications in fact constituted the third theme. This issue which has been around for some time has crept steadily up the political agenda. Reducing disengagement at 16/17 is one of the key objectives of the current 14 - 19 reforms and Alan Johnson has made the education of children in care one of his primary objectives. "30,000 youngsters will leave school this summer with no qualifications to show for it" argued The Prince's Trust as it announced a new Certificate in Personal Teamwork and Community Skills particularly aimed at 16 - 25 year olds with few, if any, qualifications. Research from the LSC published just before the GCSE results indicated that 22% of employers would not recruit someone without the 5 good GCSEs or vocational equivalent so this qualification may just prove the lifeline needed.

And it was employer concerns about basic skills that constituted the fourth theme this year. "Nothing is more important than the 3 Rs and no Government has done more to improve attainment in basic skills" asserted the Education Secretary this week but last year only 44.9% of young people achieved 5 or more A* - C GCSEs or equivalent that included English and maths and rises this year appear modest. Employer's concerns while not new remain high. Indeed, in the week of GCSE results, 22% of parents reported in a 'Get On' survey that they had problems with helping in their children's homework, the British Chambers of Commerce argued that "too many young people are still leaving school without having mastered the basics" and the CBI produced a hefty Report concluding that "British business sees concerted action on functional skills as a key priority." It thus remains a concern.

How far the education system is equipping young people with the basic skills employers say they need remains a source of debate but the Government is making two important moves. Firstly, from this year, 14 - 16 performance tables will report on the percentage of youngsters gaining English and maths as part of their 5 good GCSEs. Secondly, work is under way to ensure that from 2009 onwards, functional skills will be incorporated into English and maths GCSEs. "What on earth is going on if you have to put this in place as a bolt on to cover basic skills?" snorted Professor Smithers. Plus ça change perhaps, if your French is still up to it.

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