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The Death of Meritocracy: exams and university admissions in crisis

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ABSTRACT The author argues that the debate on declining social mobility has neglected the role of the examination and testing system. At all levels of education working class children are failing and middle class children achieving whatever ability levels are involved. The article focusses on the A-Level examination and the controversy over the way the expansion of higher education has benefited the middle classes. The author argues the expansion of higher education in the 1980s and changes to examinations benefited the middle class. Further, new Labour reforms of A-Level, and 16-plus examinations to include vocational subjects, paradoxically undermined their own desire for meritocracy. Coupled with wider changes, notably tuition fees and the power of elite universities to control their admissions policies to favour the privileged, A-Level reform threatens to turn higher education back to the *Brideshead Revisited* state of affairs of the 1930s.

Exams, Testing and Declining Social Mobility

Over the last three decades, political intervention has fundamentally changed the exams and testing regime in English schools. The introduction of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATS) in state schools has altered their character. Children in English state schools are seen as the most tested in the world. Testing and examination are always of course an integral part of education, but in English state schools they have become its *raison de'tre*. However, for all schools, including independent schools, the changes to existing GCSE and 18 plus exams makes the public exam regime quite different to that before the Thatcher premiership. A virtual permanent revolution in exams and testing has led to great controversy and a teachers' boycott of SATS in state schools. However, there has been less discussion of the role of the exams and testing regime in reducing social mobility in the UK.

With the current exam reforms, the public exam system threatens a century of moderate social egalitarianism. It is conceivable that these reforms as they impact on university entrance, together with other changes, notably tuition fees, will effectively end the claim that education is meritocratic. Top research-oriented universities risk becoming closed to all but the children of the wealthy, in a return to the *Brideshead Revisited* system of the 1930s. The decline of social mobility in an increasingly class-divided society is now widely accepted, but there has been little focus on how exams are a factor in producing levels of inequality not seen for generations, through giving inequality a pseudo-scientific basis.

This article will focus on the role of exams in university entrance and social mobility. The key issue is the A Level exam which is still the gatekeeper for university admission despite rivals such as the International Baccalaureate. Controversies swirl around A Level, with two major reforms in less than a decade – Curriculum 2000 and the 2008-10 reforms – indicating that this is a system under stress. However, the manner in which the A Level exam as a factor in university entrance has changed in recent decades and the effects on social mobility has not been fully appreciated.

The decline of social mobility is increasingly newsworthy. Observers identify a key problem of modern education as the failure of poorer children to achieve, particularly white working-class children. Dim middle-class children outperform bright working-class children, in many cases as early as the primary school. This puzzles observers, for whom it appears counterfactual, especially in the light of substantial amounts of money spent on tackling poor achievement, but the facts are undeniable. Keith Bartley, Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council, commented in summer 2008 that

> It is a baffling conundrum that schooling seems to widen rather than narrow social inequality. However you cut or recast the figures, the statistics are stark and challenge us all. The achievement gap between rich and poor widens as the child passes through school.[1]

This phenomenon has very deep roots and is certainly not simply a feature of the exam and testing regime. But that regime must play a major part in erecting barriers to and alienating poorer children, aiding the alarming growth of NEETs – the near million strong army of the dispossessed outside Education, Employment and Training. These wider aspects are outside the scope of this article, but in the major issue dealt with here, A Level reform, it will be argued that exam reform is playing a key role in damaging social mobility. This is clearly so where the most successful exam factories in the country, the top public schools, are concerned. These now can almost guarantee to secure elite university entrance for their pupils. The other side of the coin is disadvantaging the pupils of other schools and creating the alarming disparities in university entrance analysed in detail by the Sutton Trust.

The decline in social mobility was exploited by the Cameron Conservatives as a central plank in their 2010 election strategy. In the run up to

the general election the Conservatives published figures showing that the numbers of Oxbridge entrants who had had free school meals is derisory. Just 45 such students were successful, the same number as a single private school, St Paul's Girls' school in London. The figures shocked Labour and put Labour on the back foot on social mobility during the election campaign. At the same moment, a major study showed that New Deal initiatives to boost performance of disadvantaged school students had failed.[2] These revelations dramatised long-run changes in British society. After a period of relative meritocracy in the post-war period, class inequalities have both deepened and become embedded via university education, principally from the early Thatcher period onward in the 1980s. The rest of this article will focus on the role of A Level as a factor in the paradox that as university participation has increased, it has been the wealthiest classes who have benefited.

It is not being argued here that A Level is the sole problem. The introduction of tuition fees by New Labour underlined that the ability to pay is a major determinant of university education. However, even before this it was clear that the major factor in university entrance had become parental wealth. This was clearly the case with the fee-paying independent sector, as parents came to see high fees as justified because the investment could virtually guarantee top grades and the privileged university entry that goes with them. Paradoxically, the Conservative Thatcher and Major governments through their attempts to create a mass higher education system played the decisive role in this scenario. However, it is important to understand how the two major reforms of the A Level system were driven through by New Labour in ways which counteracted their own objective of meritocracy. The Office for Fair Access reported on 18 May 2010 that the children of the wealthiest classes were seven times more likely to go to Russell Group universities than the poorest, and that this has not changed since the 1990s.[3] OFFA is a New Labour creation unable to do more than highlight the problem. Ironically, New Labour has undermined its own meritocratic policies.

Politics and Examinations: the role of the Thatcher premiership

At all times and in all countries, an exam/testing system mirrors the wider assumptions governing education. Politicians follow the paradigm which dominates public life in their era. The history of exams and testing from the 1944 Education Act demonstrates this principle in action. In Britain A Level was created in a post-war world in which university education was the province of a tiny minority and was heavily selective and exclusive, the operating principle of the paradigm being selection. The first stage in the process for state education was the 11-plus exam at age 11 to transfer from primary to secondary school, with those students going to secondary moderns – assumed to be some 75% of the cohort – not requiring end of course exams. The 25% of pupils

selected for grammar school pupils were assumed to be aiming at clerical jobs or university, and needing an academic exam system.

A Level and O Level GCE – first examined in 1951 – followed the logic of the post-war settlement in being meritocratic but exclusive. Able students were to be allowed the chance to rise socially – Labour welcomed this – but standards were high to exclude all but a small number from university education. The 1944 Act had raised the school leaving age to 15, but secondary modern pupils did not have an end of school exam until the Certificate of Secondary Education was created at a standard lower than O Level.

From the start, the 18 plus exam system embodied specialist entrance exams for Oxbridge known as Common Entrance. Although common only to Oxford and Cambridge they at least applied to both these universities, which today go in totally separate directions. This system was the dramatic focus of Alan Bennett's highly successful play *The History Boys*, set in a provincial grammar school in 1983.[4] This is the most popular work ever staged at the National Theatre, enormously popular on both sides of the Atlantic and as a film. At its heart was a seventh-term exam, set at a higher standard than A Level, exclusively for students with high grades at A Level – high being A and B. There was also the Special Paper, not tied to Oxbridge but also set at a higher standard than A Level. This survived till 2009 as the Advanced Extension Award (AEA). The exam boards were run mainly by universities as matriculation bodies.

By the 1980s the comprehensive era was in full swing and the government moved to create a mass higher education system. This was the era of the Thatcher premiership, and Thatcherism initially conformed to a version of the comprehensive paradigm dominant from the sixties to the eighties – Thatcher as Education Secretary had abolished more grammar schools than any other Secretary of State – and was committed to removing the selective and exclusive features of the post-1944 settlement. In this climate Oxbridge, always in control of its own admissions system, responded by abolishing the seventh-term Common Entrance exam – a fully-justified decision to remove the bias in favour of wealthier families who could afford to keep children at school till age 19. This meant that A Level and associated procedures embedded in a two-year sixth form course would be the gatekeepers of university admission. Few saw that this would benefit the public schools, with their ability to programme and coach for university entrance.

Along with these changes, Thatcher's Education Secretary, Keith Joseph, on advice from his civil servants, merged O Level and CSE to create GCSE. This was clearly designed to end university entrance as a selective elite activity and reinforce the drive to a mass higher education system. Bekrhradnia & Bailey rightly argue [5] that the first exams at GCSE in 1988 – the year of Baker's Education Reform Act – were the crucial step to this. But while 16+ exams could be radically changed, even the authoritarian Thatcher government dared not reform A Level. That would come later, but the major change had already happened by creating a mass higher education system. A Level would

respond to these developments but the formal reforms of the first decade of the twentieth century only underlined the fact that the exam system was no longer a selective mechanism for university entrance, with a 30% failure rate at A Level, but a transmission belt for university entrance with fewer and fewer fail devices. Higher education admission demands were the key to the later changes, and the Thatcher governments made the decisive moves.

GCSE and A Level: coping with greater numbers post-Joseph

For entrance to A Level courses, 'good' GCSE results at 16 plus were essential, and this led to a legacy of O Level in the dividing line at grade C GCSE. In the merged system O Level grades represented initially grades A, B and C at GCSE – later supplemented by an A* grade. It remains an unsolved mystery how an exam created for 25% of the ability range now is supposed to be achieved by upwards of 60% of students. The concept of grade inflation is hotly denied by politicians, all of whom for the last 30 years have denied this was happening. The issue of grade inflation is the spectre at the feast of English education, casting a shadow over the year on year increases in pass rates. While the rise in pass rate for GCSE is controversial, however, the main debate is over A Level, an examination experiencing unprecedented upward achievement.

A Level absorbed the university expansion of the 1960s, following the Robbins Report, without obvious stress. However, the Thatcher expansion of the 1980s, underfunded at both university and school/college level, was a different matter. Whether the system could maintain standards previously only attained by roughly one in ten of the age cohort in an increasingly mass higher education system was imponderable in the early years. But as the A Level pass rate rose as the numbers admitted to university rose – and rose much faster than the GCSE pass rate – A level became increasingly controversial.

The crude figures in the key period 1965 to 2005 provide a clear pattern. As Table I shows [6], in 1965, when the Robbins new universities were only just coming on stream, A Level pass rate and percentage gaining A Grade remained relatively low. Failure for nearly a third of candidates proved that this was still a system designed to exclude and make high achievement difficult to achieve. This could be criticised, but from *c.*1985 it ceased to be the case.

	A Level pass rate (%)	Proportion achieving grade A (%)
1965	68.8	8.5
1975	68.4	8.9
1985	70.5	9.5
1990	77.0	12.0
1995	84.2	15.8
2000	89.5	18.1
2005	96.2	22.8

Table I. The Curriculum 2000 changes first examined, controversially, in 2002, do not seem to have altered the overall trend. Despite controversies, the pattern of pass rates that year was not out of line with the overall trend:

2002	94.3	20.7

By 2009, with over 98% achieving pass grades, 10% achieving the three A grades formerly the hallmark of exceptional ability, and 25% achieving at least one A grade, A Level became an exam which it is almost impossible to fail. Professor Tymms of the ALISS Unit at Durham University, the leading expert in the field, told the Select Committee investigation into exams and testing, 'If you went back you would find that 30% used to fail A Level. Now the number is down to a few percent ... There has been a dramatic shift'.[7] This statement, made in December 2007, was self-evidently true.

The GCSE pass rate also rose, but less sharply than A Level, as Table II shows. The rate of increase for five GCSE passes was faster under Conservative governments than under New Labour.

1965	-20%
1975	-23% (+3%)
1985	-27% (+4%)
1990	-33% (+6%)
1995	-44% (+11%)
2000	-49% (+5%)
2005	-56% (+7%)

Table II. Pupils scoring 5 GCSE pass rates above C. (A* was not initially a feature of the GCSE exam; to 1985 the figure is for O Level passes plus Grade 1 passes at CSE which were counted as an O Level pass at Grade C).

From 1997, New Labour's first year, GNVQ was included. From 2004 other allegedly 'equivalent' qualifications were included. This is controversial. Were these other exams of equivalent difficulty? The five GCSE passes at A/A*-C was inherited from O Level. Five O Level passes were needed for sixth form entry. Why this remains so in the era of mass sixth form entry is unclear.

It is the five years after 1985, the final five years of the Thatcher government, which are decisive, for both A Level and GCSE. GCSE, first examined in 1988, merged O Level and CSE. For GCSE, the increase in the crucial late Thatcher period was greater than in the two 10-year periods before 1985, and remarkably nearly doubled in the next five-year period, under John Major, before slowing under New Labour – but to a rate per quinquennium still much faster than the 10-year periods up to 1985.

A similar pattern is seen in the A Level pass rate – increasing by roughly 7% in 1985-90 and 1990-1995, both quinquennia constituting Conservative periods of government, then slowing to *c.*5% for the next five-year period under New Labour before achieving the second highest five-year increase, at 6.7%, in

2000-05. Throughout the period after 1988 GCSE pass rates, like A Level rates, continued to increase more rapidly than in the 10-year periods up to 1985. The decisive changes in public examining clearly happened in the five-year period 1985-90.

These developments might not have become publicly controversial without the growing A grade pass rate at A Level. This followed the same pattern as overall pass rates – more or less stable till 1985, rising rapidly thereafter. Unlike many who complained, however, including employers, elite universities were in a position to do something about it. They controlled their admissions procedures, and were increasingly vocal in stating they could no longer tell the difference between the very bright and the merely hardworking. Both were getting A grades. What they did was to impose extra admissions tests, leading to over-examining problems in the sixth form, and resulting in the development of the A* grade, to which we will return. But firstly, what happened to the exam system between 1985 and 1990, the crucial years for public exams in English schools?

It is not a question which has received much attention. However, three factors may be identified as triggering the problems we see today. First is the growth in universities under Thatcher and Major, which became a mass phenomenon, with middle-class children for the first time expecting as of right to go to university. If the old system had been maintained, many of these would have failed A Level and not matriculated. Despite claims that standards had not fallen, it is illogical to argue that a system designed to exclude 93% of the age cohort by virtue of its difficulty when first designed would be the same when 20%, 30%, 40% participation was achieved. New Labour aimed at 50% participation. Successive governments have, however, claimed that this is exactly what has happened. It is a critical debate, either measuring great success or failure. If standards have been maintained, then some 35% of the age cohort is now achieving standards achieved by less than 10% when A Level was introduced. (There are other routes into university not available in the 1950s, which accounts for the discrepancy of actual participation figures – now some 43% of the age cohort.) If, however, the increased numbers achieving A Level passes is not the result of maintained standards, and standards have fallen, then the consequences are serious.

Secondly, the exams were taken away from university control. Matriculation boards became independent bodies, processing increasing number of students as vast but efficient exam processing machines. For example, the old JMB run by the Northern Universities for O Level and A Level absorbed the CSE board for Northern England to become the NEAB to run GCSE. It later became the AQA when a further stage of mergers took on vocational exams, accorded parity of status with academic exams, in this case absorbing the AEB.[8] There are currently three mega boards for England, AQA, plus OCR – a merger of the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA boards, and EDEXCEL, formed from the old London board and the only one run commercially, in this case by Pearson International. It is clear these boards were able to handle the increasing

numbers of certification processes involved. It has been argued that teachers shop around for easy exams, thus lowering standards while boosting pass rates and thus grade inflation.[9] The government set up the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to police the system to avoid this: but its success has been questioned.

The third factor was the shift from norm referencing to criterion referencing. Under the old university-run system, a norm referencing system was operated by which fixed proportions of students would gain each grade. The JMB board, highly critical of the system, noted that norm referencing from the 1960s operated 'in terms of the proportions of candidates expected to achieve the various grades'. These were set at 10% for A grades and 10% for C grade, 15% each for D and B grades, and 20% for E grade. Thirty per cent of candidates were doomed to failure on this system, irrespective of how well or badly they did. An A was normally gained at 70% of the marks and the pass mark was 40% in most cases. However, the grade boundaries would be adjusted according to the proportions required to pass. Ten per cent of the entry was always going to gain A grade, irrespective of the marks awarded by the examiners.

It is often asked whether A Level standards have risen or fallen. It is a relevant question, but taken literally there were no fixed standards. As the JMB commented in its 1983 report, 'Definitions of the Advanced Level grades do not exist in terms of the mastery of skill and knowledge required to be demonstrated by a candidate'.[10] The actual marks varied from year to year depending on the quality of the cohort. The same mark scores could give different grades every year, and there was no way to check whether standards were better or worse over time. The JMB was worried that very few marks determined C grade – and hence D, C and B grades, crucial for university entry in the early 1980s (the report coincidentally came out in the same year Alan Bennett chose to set *The History Boys*). However, with 10% of candidates always getting A grade, the elite universities were happy. When the proportion and the absolute number gaining A grades rose inexorably under the alleged system of criterion referencing, they flexed their muscles. They imposed more and more extra tests to discriminate, leading to complaints that sixth formers were over examined. But this took two decades to develop.

After the publication of the JMB report in 1983, norm referencing was under the spotlight. The problem was simple: it was impossible to tell whether standards were rising or falling. Marks might rise or fall – and it was not clear what that meant in the absence of mark criteria – but 10% would always get A, 20% would always get E, whatever the actual performance. The Thatcher government justifiably accepted this was untenable, and moved to replace norm referencing by grade-related criteria – in theory. According to this, a grade represented a fixed standard and thus achieving it meant a standard comparable to previous entries was being demonstrated. The shift from norm-related examining took place in 1987.[11]

The claim that criterion referencing is in operation is the key to the political claim that the rising percentage of pass rates represents real improvements in achievement. The key question is whether grade criteria were established. If criterion referencing did not become established, the way was open to grade inflation. It is outside the scope of this article to assess this point. Suprisingly, the issue of the operation of criterion referencing is under-researched. Did it work? If criterion referencing has failed, then the explanation of increasing pass rates is that standards are falling. Politicians claim that increasing pass rates demonstrate standards are rising. This issue is thus at the very heart of political and educational controversy in England.

These were esoteric questions, and only a few specialists were able to discuss them – notably the ALISS Department at Durham University. What made the issues practical politics were elite university complaints, which made the growth of A grade awards a political issue, though under the Major and Blair governments this issue was subsumed in a wider debate.

The Curriculum 2000 Reforms and the Scandal of 2002

The complaints of the elite universities initially merged into wider discussions over broadening the curriculum at 16-18. John Major responded by commissioning Sir Ron Dearing to investigate, and he produced the Dearing report of 1996. Dearing was under pressure to adjudicate between those who wanted a five-subject diet like the International Baccalaureate and the traditionalists who wanted three subjects, as had existed since A Level was introduced. He compromised. Students would normally take four subjects in year one, sit an intermediate exam called the Advanced Subsidiary [12] and then proceed to do three subjects to A Level. Subjects would be modularised into six sections, three at AS level and three at A2 level, with all marks counting to the final A Level grade. The fragmentation of knowledge and understanding was controversial, but the compromise solution was to make the sixth module synoptic in all subjects, to tie together the bits. This was later recognised to be problematic, and after a critical QCA report in 2003 synopticity in the revised A Level syllabuses from 2008 was to be designed across all papers, not specific units.[13] Despite opposition from traditionalists both major political parties endorsed the Dearing report and after considerable preparation it was implemented, as Curriculum 2000, in September 2000 for first examination in 2002.

The decision to use the AS marks as half the A Level final mark was bizarre, since it meant half the marks were at a lower standard than A Level, thus diluting the difficulty of the exam. But this has not become a major item of debate. This was not so with repeat modules, for students were initially allowed to repeat modules only once, but later could repeat as often as they wished. The highest mark would always be the final one contributing to the overall grade. Thus students could, and did, take modules repeatedly in a two-year course, which with six modules per subject and three or four subjects worried many.

There was growing concern about over-examining in the sixth form. It may be overstated to argue there emerged a culture of permanent examining, but pressure to maximise marks and hence grades became massive in a league table culture in which compiling large mark totals and raising grades overshadows other considerations – and this did become controversial.

However, this concern was initially overshadowed by a national scandal in 2002. The first examination of Curriculum 2000 at A Level produced a tidal wave of complaints, largely appearing to be caused by one exam board being out of line with the others, thus producing bizarre grading decisions. It did not alter the overall upward trend, but the fallout is held to have led to the resignation of the then Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, and the chair of QCA. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was discredited and the setting up of the OFQUAL organisation in 2007 to establish a nominally independent regulator was one consequence. The political aspects of regulation are outside the scope of a short article, but for the key immediate issue, A Level reform and university entrance, the political pressures shaping the reform programme are inescapable.

The Second Reform of A Level, 2008-2010

Following the 2002 scandal, former Chief Inspector Mike Tomlinson was asked to report on the future of the exams system. Hopes of a Baccalaureate system with a wider diet than three A Levels revived as Tomlinson reported in favour of merging academic and vocational subjects in a common diploma. This was rejected by Tony Blair in 2004, presumably as the traditional A Level lobby, especially among middle-class voters, was too strong. This left critics dissatisfied, especially the IB (International Baccalaureate) lobby which continued to gain strength. While a diploma did emerge, it was to be grafted on to the existing exam system, and was highly controversial because it was seen as broadly vocational. Meanwhile, the government embarked on a further round of reforms of 14-19 qualifications.

The principles underpinning the new reforms were laid down in the White Paper of 2005. Three main issues emerged for reform of the academic strand at A Level. The principal concern was the issue of stretch at A Level, to be applied to all candidates. Second in importance was the issue of differentiation of able candidates. The White Paper did recognise some problems at the higher end of the ability range and it was proposed to inject AEA-style questions – open-ended and philosophical in nature – into the new A Levels. Thirdly, and much more tentatively, the paper touched on the breadth debate, seen as the clash between traditional A Levels and the IB.

The White Paper [14], prepared by Education Secretary Ruth Kelly with the backing of Prime Minister Tony Blair, dealt with these three issues separately. Stretch was the key concern, the Paper stating (para. 8.14):

> First, we want more stretch within A Levels. … We will seek the introduction of a new section in A Level material covering AEA

> material. We will ask QCA to consider the best means of doing this across all A Levels so that increased stretch and challenge is available to all students in all types of institution.

The problem of injecting AEA material into exams available for all students was never clearly addressed. It is not clear that AEA was understood by the reformers, specifically that AEA, like the Special Paper on which it was based, was set at a level *above* that of A Level. But differentiation of able candidates had become a major second priority. The White Paper accepted differentiation was a problem (para. 8.21):

> Differentiation is an issue now for some Higher Education Institutions, who find their most popular courses over subscribed by students predicted straight As at A Level. A rapid solution to this problem ahead of implementation of the new stretching options is simply to make available to universities more information about students' performance.

Module grades, and if needed module (UMS) marks, would be made available. But this could only happen in the application cycle when exam results had been reported in late August. The government looked forward to Post Qualification Application (PQA), though this was 'unlikely to be fully in place before 2010'. Given that this meant students could not apply for their chosen courses till the late summer, putting admissions back into the autumn, it was a bold proposal – and indeed, it was not in place by 2010.

Thirdly, the White Paper tiptoed round the breadth/depth issue. It noted:

> There are those who argue that we should challenge our A Level students further by demanding breadth in the curriculum as well as stretch … but there is no clear consensus amongst pupils, parents, employers or universities on whether or how it should be done … (para 6.18) … In the short term, we will be piloting new ways of stretching students at advanced level. We will also examine the positive experience of schools which are offering … the IB as a means of increasing the breadth of study … (para. 6.19) … We will discuss with employers and universities whether their needs are being met and the case for introducing greater challenge and breadth alongside A Levels. We will review progress in 2008. (para 6.20)

The latter sentence was crucial. While the compromises were unsatisfactory, in 2005 critics could feel a door was being left open on a debate over A Level. Those not in the target group of employers and universities could feel they could force open this door to explore wider issues. Although the next Education Secretary, Alan Johnson, was to make clear the review would not reopen the Tomlinson report, an A Level review was promising. Things were even more interesting when in November 2006 Tony Blair promised that the IB was to be

granted money for at least one institution in each LEA to teach the exam. This suggested a serious comparison of A Level with the IB and perhaps the AEA. Following this decision UCAS (University and College Admissions Service) increased the number of points awarded to the IB, which was now regarded as harder than A Level, and allowed a limited number of points to be awarded for the AEA; thus AEA would at last gain points for university entrance.

Critics looked forward to the review of A Level in 2008, but the agenda was now dominated by the elite universities. The plethora of A grades was critical, with discussion on reforms taking place behind closed doors as the key decisions for new courses starting in autumn 2008 were formulated. Unlike Dearing and Tomlinson there was no central report, and an opaque consultation process. What emerged, however, was a structure dominated by a new A Level 'supergrade' at a cut-off point of 90% of UMS marks to give an A*. The existing grade A cut off point at 80% of UMS marks remains in place. These decisions triggered very deep and openly expressed concerns they would have a serious effect on social mobility.

The Genesis of the A Star 'Supergrade'

By 2005 the plethora of A grades had become a major issue, as the White Paper noted. The elite universities – the Russell Group – brought in more and more supplementary tests to put discrimination back into the system. Alongside LNAT for law (not taught in most schools) and BMAT for medicine (well oversubscribed), which were not overtly controversial, a massive range of extra hurdles was set up. This was Common Entrance revisited, but crammed into the two-year A Level time frame and leading to increasing complaints from schools and colleges their students were over-examined. To add to the problems, teachers found institutions differed on their requirements, admissions tutors within the same institution differed on requirements for virtually identical courses, and demands were made on an arbitrary and random basis. This situation clearly benefited the independent schools, far better placed to coach for specialist exams and track the kaleidoscope of admissions requirements, which in some cases change monthly – especially with the most oversubscribed courses. The government sought to address the problem of over-examining by cutting the number of modules from 6 to 4, which merely weakened the academic content without tackling the actual issue of repeat exams and university tests.

The government continued to deny that there was grade inflation, though 24% of candidates gained at least one A grade by 2005, and 10% gained the former gold standard of three A grades – disproportionately in the private sector, with massive implications for social mobility. New Labour continued to believe this was a sign of increasing standards. Its chief advisor, Sir Michael Barber, with the ear of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, claimed to the Select Committee enquiry into Testing and Assessment that the educational system overall was at an all time peak of excellence. However, the evidence

given in the same session by the expert Professor Tymms, of the School of Education at Durham University, accepted that grade inflation had taken place at A Level – but not perhaps at GCSE – and provided supporting evidence.[15]

The government only produced evidence of its own reluctantly and under pressure. The Department (then DCSF – now Department for Education) claims to have undertaken modelling tests in 2006 which proved the new A Level system delivered its objectives. These have not been published. When in early 2008 Education Secretary Ed Balls decided to postpone the planned review of A Level to a notional review of all qualifications in 2013, he avoided a confrontation with a wide range of critical voices who were increasingly uneasy about the direction of the A Level reforms. The A* issue was central, as critics claimed both that the A* was merely more grade inflation, and that as the new exams allowed coaching, this would benefit the public schools. The warnings became clear when experts testified to the Education Select Committee in winter 2007-08. By this time the decisions had been made – the new system started in September 2008. Nevertheless, the evidence provides a crucial insight into an opaque decision-making process.

A* and the Independent Schools

Experts in the exam boards and universities were deeply worried that the A* would benefit independent schools. The most detailed evidence was given by the Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University, Steve Smith. He stated that 31% of students getting an A grade came from the private sector – though they only teach 13% of the exam entry. In some subjects 50% of the As are from the independent sector. He warned, on the basis of a report he had just chaired, 43,500 students would get at least one A star as opposed to 24,000 getting three As now (thus the A star would worsen the problem of selecting the ablest), saying, 'the issue between now and the A*s coming in is to make sure that we do not see a move up from 31% of As coming from the independent sector'. He posed the question, 'Which schools do you think might decide that their job is to coach people to make sure they get the A star?'[16]

His concerns were, however, swept aside by the Schools Minister, Jim Knight. A member of the Select Committee, Annette Tabberer MP, asked Knight on the basis of what the vice-chancellor had said 'that it is possible that pupils from independent schools will account for the majority of the new A* grades at A-Level'. Knight said that he had looked at the data for three A star grades as they had believed 'in the importance of adding stretch for those at the very top end of the ability range at A Level, which is why we brought in the A* grade'. In his view, the evidence did not support the warning from the vice-chancellor that 70% of those getting three A grades would come from the independent sector. He argued that 'From our modelling, we anticipate that something like 1,180 independent school pupils would get three or more A stars from a total of 3,053, so 70% is far from the figure that we are talking about'.[17] The figure of a little over a third of top scores going to the

independent sector appears to come from modelling done in 2006, though this is not clear and the modelling is not available.

Smith was, however, not alone believing A* would benefit the fee-paying sector. In question 398 the Chair of the Select committee commented that 'the examination boards also said that A stars will make sure that fewer kids from less privileged backgrounds will get into the research-rich universities'. Knight again denied this, on the basis of 'actual achievement in A level exams'. Curious, since the old A Level exam did not include the new harder questions: perhaps the only criterion was a 90% grade boundary? The difference in interpretation of the statistics by independent experts including exam boards in this debate and Knight's department-based view was stark. Independent critics felt A* would be a gain for independent school pupils. Knight did not.

Ditched on the Way to the Altar: the marginalisation of A star

The Select Committee investigation of testing and exams ran parallel to the final preparations to the A Level reforms due to start the following autumn. Ed Balls became Education Secretary when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in summer 2007. He made two crucial decisions on exams. The first was to split QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) to make the Qualifications watchdog separate and independent as OFQUAL (Office for Qualifications). This was a response to the widespread belief that standards had become a political football. It was the delayed legacy of the 2002 scandals.

The second was to set up a committee to investigate the 14-19 exam reform programme he had inherited. Balls set up a committee to evaluate the reforms under the remit of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). This was a remarkably short-lived committee, beginning on 23 October 2007 and reporting four months later. Balls announced its results in a written response to the House of Commons on 31 March 2008. One of the members was Dr C.J. Parks, Director of Admissions at Cambridge University and a strong supporter of a three-A Level subject diet and a new A* grade to aid admissions tutors.[18] Balls announced that the Vocational A Level was to be withdrawn – a move interpreted as a step to smooth the way for the new work-based Diplomas – and that AEA would be discontinued, ending a tried and tested exam with half a century's experience, initially as the Special Paper. Crucially, Balls removed the possibility of an A Level review in 2008, suspending scrutiny pending a full review of qualifications in 2013.

This was a promise which could hardly be fulfilled, as no government can bind a subsequent government and the Brown Administration would have to win an election due in 2010 and remain in power for another three years. Effectively, assessing the state of A Level had been abandoned. Following the May 2010 election the 2013 review is effectively dead in the water as there is no indication the Cameron administration is committed to it. However, this

removes any obstacle to an immediate investigation into A Level and university entrance.

Ed Balls's decisions were a high-risk strategy placing all the eggs for stretch and challenge and discrimination of top candidates in the A* basket. But only sixth months later the crucial A* proposal was tarnished well before it was actually awarded. Gordon Brown had set up a committee, the National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE), consisting of representatives from business, universities and colleges, and schools and early years settings. The higher education representatives included Professor Steve Smith. The higher education section of the report for October 2008 dropped a bombshell. It stated:

> Government should look to establish base data on the predictability of the new A Level and Diploma A* grade prior to predicted A* grades being used in the Higher Education applications and offers processes. … We are concerned that there is no evidence yet upon which to assess whether the new A* grade can be predicted with accuracy.[19]

Remarkably, this implies that the government has decreed a grade be instituted without checking if it can be used. The grade was supposed to have been rigorously tested. And while 2008 saw a new system introduced so did Curriculum 2000. Was the Council concerned about a 2002 style scandal? Or were other concerns present? What advice did Professor Smith give the committee?

The government accepted the recommendation, but found that it could not enforce it. The higher education ministers tried to suspend use of the A star for three years (till the notional 2013 qualifications review), but Cambridge and other universities went ahead with using it: indeed demands for 90% of UMS marks had already been made in 2009, a year early. The Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge was on the NCEE, and presumably agreed with its findings, but Cambridge made A*AA its baseline tariff for 2010 admission, though some admissions tutors were already exploiting a loophole in the Cambridge regulations to ask for higher tariffs even though the new tariff baseline had only just been agreed by the university.[20]

For admission to higher education in autumn 2010, A* is thus being used by a small group of elite universities including Cambridge. The Socialist Education Association raised its concerns that this would benefit public school entrants with universities minister Dave Lammy in spring 2009. Lammy rejected the concerns and stated that 'Cambridge have done their own assessment that suggests using A* in offers will not disadvantage candidates from maintained schools'.[21] SEA asked for the assessment to be provided, but this was not produced.

By March 2010, discussion over predicting A* results began to be overshadowed by real A Level exam marks. The first exams on the new syllabuses took place in January 2010 and the results were announced in mid-March 2010. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 'Two thirds of pupils at some of

the country's leading independent schools have scored the new A* "supergrade" in their A Levels, leading to new fears about grade inflation'.[22] The report was triggered by an HMC survey of 24 high-performing independent schools where some pupils had completed January modules. However, this small sample was of maths candidates, likely to be doing Further Maths and so untypical. More worryingly, in four other subjects 45% had gained A*. The sample is too small to be representative. Earlier in the month *The Times* had reported that half of all A Levels sat at independent schools are graded at A already on the old syllabuses, according to research by Cambridge Assessment, the exam organisation based at Cambridge University, and that the research showed 'the extent to which intensive coaching can help students to achieve top marks'.[23] The Select Committee had already been told that coaching is the key factor in achieving top grades, benefiting the amply resourced independent schools – by Steve Smith (see note 16). In August 2010 the final gradings on the new system will be announced. They are likely to be controversial.

Does the A* Grade Threaten Social Mobility?

The debate about A Level grading and in particular the A* 'supergrade' touches on major issues of social mobility, equal opportunities and meritocracy in British, specifically English society – though A Level is the major 18+ exam in Wales and Northern Ireland as well, the bulk of independent schools are in England. It is generally believed that British education is or should be a meritocracy, with the exam system identifying and rewarding ability and potential. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that the educational system reinforces social inequality. At its starkest, the overall situation is one where bright working-class children fail to make progress, dim middle-class children do well. However, the Sutton Trust has argued that 'a student in a state school is as likely to go on to a leading university as a student from the independent sector who gets two grades lower at A Level'.[24] There is more to this situation than A Level grades, though the fact that 50% of independent school students got A grade in 2009 is telling.[25]

There are other factors which determine the overachievement of independent schools in university entrance irrespective of A Level grades and which are outside the scope of this article. At the university level it is clear that social class is the major determinant of entry to higher education, particularly for the prestigious Russell Group universities, which dominate entry to high-status professions. Indeed, it has been argued that universities are practising a form of social engineering aimed at 'perpetuating largely white middle class privelege'.[26] The statistical data provided by the Sutton Trust support this, showing that 'The proportion of university entrants going to Oxbridge from the top performing 30 independent schools was nearly twice that of the top performing 30 grammar schools – despite having very similar average A Level scores … At the top performing independent schools, a third more pupils are admitted to the 13 Sutton Trust universities [27] than would be expected given

the schools' average A Level results', so the problem is not just an Oxbridge problem.[28]

Clearly the issue is not just one of A Level grades, and the current research does not give the full story as it focuses on entrants rather than applicants. Universities point out that they can only admit those students who apply, and grammar and other state students appear not to be applying, thus focussing attention on raising aspirations. But while the aspirations of the candidates are part of the story – if they do not apply they cannot be admitted – it is not the whole story: for why do they not apply in the first place? What obstacles to bright candidates from state schools perceive before them? This is an area which has had little research devoted to it.

These wider problems are outside the scope of this article. While universities demand high A Level and equivalent scores, the fact that high A Level scores (especially A grades) are the province of the independent schools is a key factor in lowering social mobility. Furthermore, the supporters of A Level argue that this exam system identifies ability in a scientific manner and is an objective measure of the ability to perform at university level – even though studies consistently show A Level is not a good predictor of university performance, and state school students outperform the competition at university. Nonetheless this view remains the dominant factor in shaping university entrance policies, the university administrators themselves having travelled the A Level route.

This summer's exams will bring the pot to the boil. A* will be under the spotlight as a qualification, either as the solution to the problem of identifying the most able, or just another measure of the independent school ability to coach for university entrance. If the latter, then social mobility at university level will be called into question. It is already the case, as the Sutton Trust has argued, that 'the expansion of higher education in the UK disproportionately benefited those from high income groups, and has been shown to be one of the prime factors behind the country's low social mobility'.[29]

At the 2010 general election all parties claimed to be in favour of meritocracy and the promotion of social mobility. The changes in A Level, which have accompanied a massive increase in university participation, have at the same time reinforced if not accelerated social inequality. The poor simply do not succeed in this system, and increasingly the skilled and lower middle class do not either. The A level exam system alone is not responsible for this. Changes such as the imposition of tuition fees and cultural factors play a role. Yet A Level gives an apparently objective justification for social inequality. A* will be under the spotlight. Unlike most changes to educational procedures, this one will be headline news as soon as the A Level results are out in late August.

The debate will be given added savagery by the attempt of the Russell Group universities to remove the cap on tuition fees and charge unlimited amounts for the most in-demand courses. Their claim, leaked by Oxford University students before the election, and finally published after the election on 17 May 2010, underlines the way money is becoming the determinant of

elite university admission. If the Russell Group get their way, even more barriers to working and middle class students will be erected and Britain will return even more rapidly to the world of *Brideshead Revisited*. Exams do not stand alone in the accelerating trend to social inequality.

At the heart of the highly technical arguments over exam reform lies a fundamental social question. Is Britain – specifically England – becoming a nation where money buys educational privilege? What type of society will Britain be in the twenty-first century? After a period of relative meritocracy, are we seeing a return to the world of *Brideshead Revisited*? And does A-Level reinforce these developments?

Notes

[1] Keith Bartley (2008) *Education Review*, 21(1), 68.

[2] Free School Meals issue, *Times Educational Supplement*, 19 February 2010, p. 5. This edition also contained a front page article reporting research into extra funding for teaching deprived children, and found a £250 million New Deal programme since 2002 had produced 'no statistically significant improvements' and negative changes for some non-white pupils.

[3] The Office for Fair Access (OFFA), classically a bureaucratic approach to the problem of the domination of the elite universities by the public schools and their high fee paying parents. As its report of May 2010 stated, the dominance of the wealthiest classes had not changed since the 1990s. Its well-meaning work could not counter the way public schools as the most successful exam factories get their pupils the best grades: and top universities are wedded to grades with almost religious fervour. OFFA could not argue the case that the grades no longer measure student ability, they measure teacher coaching. The New Labour government made marks available to admissions tutors, thus reinforcing the view that exams measure ability. The only ability being measured by the new-style exams is the ability to pass exams. Thus the circle of privilege is complete.

[4] The book version (Faber, 2006) says mid-1980s. Film says 1983. The boys have all got A grades in their History A Level, some have got three As. The thick member of the group, constantly pilloried for being inarticulate (described by Bennett as 'possibly not very bright' [p. 4]), is the overtly working-class boy, Rudge. The book (script) does not make it clear what grades they got, the film makes Rudge's grades clear. Rudge got ABB – qualifying him for Common Entrance in 1983. In 2010 he would be a failure, nowhere near Oxbridge qualification. However, he gets into Oxford, Christ Church, but in a brilliant piece of stagecraft it is made clear he does not get in because of passing Common Entrance, but for other reasons. The key point of the play, which is far from nostalgic, is clearly that under the pressure of entrance examinations, coaching and not education becomes the result. This was to become an increasingly relevant lesson, central to this article's thrust, though most of the enormous popularity of the play seems to have been based on a misinterpretation of the work as a rite of passage exercise.

[5] HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) *Demand for HE to 2029* (5th report), Barham Bekhradnia & Nick Bailey, para. 55. The report also comments on the growth of NEETS, showing this includes many high achievers at GCSE who become totally alienated. It is not clear from the note (para. 22) why so many high achievers drop out.

[6] Figures for GCSE and A Level are from Warwick Mansell (2007) *Education by Numbers,* Table p. 5. Politicos.

[7] Statement is in Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families Third Report of Session 2007-08, Volume II, page EV13. Answer to Q. 34.

[8] The initials tell a story. JMB = Joint Matriculation Board – Northern Universities: NEAB – Northern Examination and Assessment Board. AQA – Assessment and Qualifications Alliance: AEB Associated Examining Board (set up mainly for technical exams but ran A Levels from the 1960s).

[9] Warwick Mansell, *Guardian*, 25 August 2009. Teachers and examiners privately concede the point, and sometimes publically do so. Officially teachers, examiners and politicians deny there are hard and soft exams and a market for easy ones.

[10] Quotes from *Problems of the GCSE Advanced Level Grading System,* JMB, June 1983, p. 4.

[11] Private Correspondence from the Programme Leader 14-19 at QCA, 1 May 2007.

[12] The planners presumably did not intentionally want to confuse the issue, but the initials matched those of an exam called the Advanced Supplementary, which was an additional exam which stood alone. Only the Advanced Subsidiary was part of the new A Level and counted towards the final grade. The Supplementary exam was discontinued after 2000.

[13] Research by Helen Patrick for QCA, 2004. Note OCR/QC 04/07.

[14] White Paper, *14-19 Education and Skills*, CM 6476, February 2005.

[15] Evidence to Select Committee, op. cit. Tymms. 'Standards appear to have been maintained at GCSE for several years. A2 level tells quite a different story … we find that pupils of a particular ability are getting higher and higher grades, and have been for many years'. Answers to Q34 and 25, Tymms also believes grade inflation at first degree level. Not the view of Barber; Michael Barber was Tony Blair's chief advisor on education, and became Advisor to the National Council for Educational Excellence, chaired by Gordon Brown, in 2007.

[16] Smith's comment that 31% A grades from independent schools, answer to Q259. On the dangers of A star, answer to Q 262. Discussion in Select Committee, op. cit., on 28 January 2008.

[17] Knight's replies are to questions 396-398. The evidence of 1180 independent school candidates gaining three A* from Ralph Tabberer, Knight's advisor.

[18] For Parks on Cambridge requirements, intially advocating the AEA (*Sunday Telegraph*, 15 January 2005) and repeating this in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 January 2006, extending the argument for compulsory AEA questions in the A Level exam. This was transmuted into A star. Which is not AEA.

[19] NCEE report, October 2008, HE section, recommendation 7.

[20) Cambridge University Press release, 16 March 2009, on decision to use A*. Dr Parks said 'the usual checks and balances will be in place to ensure that … this decision won't disadvantage students from one given background over another'. For reports that Cambridge already required grades above its new standard A*AA offer, *Sunday Times,* February 2010.

[21] Letter from Chair Tony Pearce, Reply Lammy, 6 April 2009. Correspondence published in *Education Politics* 100, August 2009, pp. 6-7.

[22] *Daily Telegraph,* 27 March 2010.

[23] *Times,* 17 March 2010.

[24] University Admissions by Individual Schools, February 2008, p. 1.

[25] *Guardian*, 21 August 2009.

[26] The views are those of Professor Harinder Bahra, of Leeds Metropolitan University, reported in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 13-19 November 2008. He was supported by Professor Aneez Esmail, of Manchester University, who argued for affirmative action for ethnic minorities.

[27] The 13 'Sutton Group' universities are the top universities as defined by the Trust through averaging league table places.

[28] Sutton Report, 2008, op. cit., p. 4.

[29] Sutton, op. cit., p. 7.

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