

POLICY WATCH

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A level results 2008: A postscript on the key issues

It could have been the weather, the Olympics, or the credit crunch but for whatever reason, the media this year seemed less obsessed with A level results and more with other matters. Perhaps as the Daily Mirror put it, "*the sniping at improving pass rates has become a depressing annual ritual*;" time to move on.

That said the choreography around A level results day remained pretty familiar. A build up in the weeks before that included: plugs for the IB, concerns that the 'gold standard' qualification was not what it was, an attempt to create a story out of the use of 'borderlining' or re-checking borderline papers, confirmation of a further investigation of standards albeit by a new regulator and continued debate about standards. All given added spice by a charge that may yet come to haunt the Government, the '*plateauing*' of performance in some Key Stage test results.

The now annual pre - results day statements from the two main employer bodies also had a familiar ring to them. [The Institute of Directors in their '2008 Education Briefing Book](#),' spoke of a '*credibility gap*' between what Government is reporting and what employers feel about education performance. As for the CBI, it returned to a big theme of last year - the appliance of science. "[We need to create an environment in schools that reflects the importance of science and the value of studying it](#)." The CBI believes that 'bright kids' should automatically be entered for Triple science, all part of developing long - term commercially important skills. It put forward a five - point plan to support this: an automatic opt in to Triple science; a big push on improving school labs; improved careers advice; more specialist science teachers; and financial incentives to lure prospective science, technology, engineering and maths teachers.

As for the results themselves, what did they reveal? Arguably four main themes, two of which were new, one fairly new and one old hat.

The first new theme was regional differentiation, some regions performing better than others in terms of high level results. Difference in performance by region seems to have taken over from gender or school differential as the new worry line. In terms of gender, boys continue to close the gap on girls with the overall pass differential now down to 1.2%. As for differential school performance, independent schools continue to forge ahead with a 9.1% increase A grades over the last six years compared to that of 2.7% for comprehensives. So the gender differential is closing and the school differential remains but a differential based on region brings a new form of social divide although one it has to be said, that concerns just a specific group of high level performers.

Regional evidence has been collected for some time in parts of the UK but this is the first year in which it's been presented for England and as most of the media noted, it reveals a clear North - South divide. "*A widening gulf*" as the Daily Mail described it perhaps most starkly evident when comparing A grade performance

between the North East and the South East. In the South East of England, for instance, 29.1% of entries gained an A grade, a differential of 10% against the North East's 19.8% of entries gaining an A grade.

Various theories were advanced for this. Some said that for London at least, it was down to the impact of the [London Challenge](#), others that the South - East had the largest proportion of wealthy parents and independent schools, others that there was greater poverty of aspiration in the North than the South. There may be wider concerns than totting up numbers of A grades by region, the spread of vocational learning for instance, but this form of social mobility is a key political issue and the Conservatives were quick to seize on the fact that that as the Guardian put it, "*some pupils now seem to be more equal than others.*" No wonder the Conservatives are making much of their proposals to in their recent '[A Failed Generation](#)' Paper on closing the social gap although it would be good to widen this out to include the impact of vocationalism on schools.

The second new theme this year was the impending Level 3 changes and in particular the onset of the new Diploma, the Pre - U and the A* each of which received considerable attention. On the Diploma, the view was pretty much let's wait and see if it does what it says on the tin; on the Pre - U, the interest was how many state schools might now resort to it rather than A level, while the A*, which the first students will start to work towards this September but will not be awarded until 2010 raised some hackles after it was revealed some universities might not use it in case it had a detrimental effect on widening participation. This news was rapidly followed by some expletive mutterings but time will tell.

As to the other two themes, one was newish and the other old hat.

The newish one, newish because there had been some evidence of this last year, was an increase in entries in what are generally regarded as 'traditional' A level subjects - maths, sciences and some Modern Foreign Languages with a decline in entries in some 'less traditional' subjects - those in performing and expressive arts were down 7.3% for instance. Maths and further maths were the bright lights with entries up 7.4% and 15.8% respectively but interestingly entries were also up for French, Spanish and Chinese. Some university listing of most 'valued' entry subjects may have been behind this but equally the Government has been banging on about the importance of such subjects and was quick to claim some credit.

The old hat theme was the long - term future of A levels, an old theme but now part of the wider 14 - 19 review in 5 years. The tone was set by a comment from Chris Woodhead in the Sunday Times that '*this is the beginning of the end for A levels*' although his University of Buckingham colleague, Professor Smithers was less Sgt Fraserish and argued now was the time '*to hone not drop A levels.*'

He had a point, this was a bumper year for A levels and less we forget, these are the all important headline stats at this stage:

- Overall UK pass rate up for 26th consecutive year from 96.9% to 97.2%
- A grades up from 25.3% to 25.9%, for the first time more than half of all entries gained a B grade
- A - C grades up from 72.8% to 73.9%
- A record 827,737 entries for A level and 1.13 for AS

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