Britain: furore over A-level exams motivated by defence of class privilege

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The release of last month's A-level results, showing a continuing year-on-year rise in the numbers passing, was greeted with predictable outrage.

Ever since marking standards for the A-level—examinations taken by 18-year olds, usually as a prelude to entering university—were changed in 1987, there has been no shortage of academics, politicians and journalists charging the government of the day with tarnishing the famous "gold standard" of educational attainment.

Notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of such complaints, they have generally been seized on by those pressing for a more restrictive system of higher education. The essential thrust of critical comment is that misplaced efforts to utilise education as a "social leveller" should be abandoned, in recognition of the fact that there simply is not enough "room at the top" for everyone desiring a place.

The controversy over this year's examination results demonstrates the extent to which such an open championing of elitism now holds sway within Britain's ruling circles.

Up until 1987, a proportion of A-level candidates were guaranteed to fail, regardless of the actual standard they had obtained, by virtue of "norm referencing"—measuring the results of each year's batch of students against one another as opposed to an absolute standard. This ensured that only the top 10 percent of entrants in any year could obtain an A grade, whilst the bottom 30 percent of entrants were automatically failed.

With just 15 percent of the population taking A-levels throughout this period, this system of marking meant that those obtaining an A-grade were academically in the top 1.5 percent of their year group and were almost certain of a place in such socially elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

Under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, marking arrangements were first changed to a "criteria"-based system, whereby if candidates met certain standards they received the appropriate grade.

This fairer system was in keeping with Thatcher's rhetoric of creating a "popular capitalism," according to which a truly meritocratic society was under construction that would ensure the most deserving would find no arbitrary obstacles in their path to success.

However, this concealed a more fundamental economic imperative—namely the drive to attract greater transnational corporate investment into Britain using, in part, the claim to have a well-educated and skilled workforce necessary to develop the new "high-tech" and service-oriented economy.

In reality, under capitalism the development of technology and telecommunications that had facilitated the globalisation of production could only benefit a few at the expense of the majority. As the Tories dismantled state-run industries and embarked on a programme of privatisation and slashing social spending, millions were left without jobs. And whilst the City of London and financial speculators profited, for most people the "new" employment opportunities consisted of low-paid assembly line work or service jobs such as work in call centres or fast food franchises.

The result was that poverty levels rose, and wage rates fell as Britain carved out a niche as the cheap labour capital of Europe. With no opposition to these attacks being mounted by the Labour Party or the trade unions, a higher education came to be viewed as the only means by which young people could avoid a lifetime of poorly paid drudgery.

No government could afford to oppose this development. In the first place, it would have meant abandoning efforts to providing a "business friendly" investment environment—one where employers called all the shots and could demand a well educated workforce that was still willing to work for a pittance.

As important in many ways, the chance of going on to achieve a university degree was essential to maintaining the facade that social advancement was possible for a significant section of the population in a society that was in reality becoming ever more polarised between the haves and have-nots. The undermining of the claim that anyone could benefit from capitalism through individual effort, hard work and natural ability was regarded as potentially disastrous not only for the government of the day but for the entire political set-up. So, when the Labour government of Tony Blair came to power seven years ago, it famously declared its top priorities to be "education, education and education" and pledged to ensure that 50 percent of young people had some experience of higher education by 2010.

It is to meet this aim that education and the exam system in particular have been subject to almost constant change. On one level this politically inspired change has proved successful for the government. The numbers applying to universities has significantly increased—from 4 percent in 1951 to almost 30 percent today. This figure has undoubtedly been helped by the increase in candidates achieving A-level passes. In 1984, the pass rate was 70.1 percent, of which 9.3 percent were A grades. This year the success rate is 96 percent with 22.4 percent A grades.

However, the backlash within ruling circles and amongst educationalists has grown with each passing year. Numerous critics have pointed out that A-levels have also been made easier as a consequence of the government dividing it into two parts, with students taking six units of assessment per subject—which can be retaken if necessary—in place of "big bang" final examinations. This change means that British 16- to 18-year olds are now the most tested in Europe, and has resulted in exam-drilling, with schools making no efforts to provide a balanced and rounded knowledge of the subject, they contend.

There has also been an increase in the numbers of students taking what are derided as "soft" subjects, i.e., those deemed easier to pass, they continue. The numbers taking A-levels in media studies and psychology, for example, has shot up whilst the numbers taking physics and maths have dropped by 26 percent and 20 percent respectively since 1992.

Such criticisms are naturally bitterly disputed, but the row over A-level standards serves to obscure a more fundamental imbalance.

If one were to take the current controversy at face value, one could be

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forgiven for believing Britain was awash with high achieving, if sometimes undeserving, university graduates. In reality, the numbers taking A-levels remain a minority—just 36 percent of 18-year olds. Of these, one-fifth achieve an A grade in one subject and just 2 percent achieve grade A in three or more subjects.

Britain has one of the lowest rates of young people continuing schooling after 16 years of age amongst the industrialised countries, with just 46 percent of school leavers going on to any form of further education, of which just over half go into university. Amongst the latter, the children of manual, semi-skilled and unskilled workers remain a minority, at just 18 percent of intake—a ratio certain to decrease as a result of the introduction of tuition fees.

Pupils at independent schools, which are partially or wholly selective, continue to take the lion's share of places at the elite universities, even compared to those with better grades from state schools—45 percent to 26 percent respectively.

The reality for many young people is one of low educational attainment. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has said that one-third of its members are having to finance additional lessons in basic English and maths lessons for employees 16 to 19 years old just to bring them up to scratch.

A 2003 survey by the government's Department for Education and Skills acknowledged that one in five adults in the UK are below the numeracy standard set for 11-year olds, and almost half of adults have a lower level of maths skills than is needed to obtain the lowest possible GCSE pass grade. And last year, the government said that it was shelving its target for 85 percent of 11-year olds to meet a set standard in English and maths by 2004 for a further two years, and even then it would just be an "aspiration."

Clearly, the row over A-level grades has nothing to do with educational standards in general. Preserving the "gold standard' is about restricting access to the top jobs and careers to the social elite, while skimming off only the very best from the lower orders in order to utilise their talents in the service of capital.

This function of the education system has been maintained despite all efforts to utilise education as a mechanism of social change—whether through the essentially progressive experiment in comprehensive schooling of the past, or Labour's far more dubious efforts in recent years. Not only have such changes often met with ferocious resistance from within ruling circles, but they have proved ineffective precisely because educational changes do not impinge on the actual economic basis for "rising to the top" in capitalist society—the ownership and control of the means of production by the bourgeoisie and the consequent ability to exploit and oppress the working class.

The right-wing Bow Group put the issue most succulently in its paper, "A Fair Deal for Students." In the days when Britain's universities taught just 5 percent of the young adult population, "possession of a degree was a recognised passport to a better career," it explained. Today some 10 percent of graduates are unemployed six months after leaving university, it reports, with little variance between degree subjects.

The biggest factor accounting for unemployment amongst graduates is university status. A graduate from the prestigious Oxford University, for example, has only a 3 percent chance of being unemployed six months after graduating, compared to a 19 percent chance for those from the lowly University of East London. Oxford University is one of those that have complained that the higher number of A-level grades means it has to deal with undergraduates that automatically expect to be admitted to the alumni.

(As regards actual standards of teaching, it is worth noting that the Bow Group record that in 1972, when 7 percent of young people went on to higher education, some 30,000 academic staff were employed in the UK. By 1994, student numbers have risen by 400 percent, to 1.7 million, whilst staff numbers have increased by just 10 percent—a ratio of almost 31 students to one academic staff, compared to 16 to one in the 1970s).

The Bow Group report complains that a lack of graduate-skill level employment means that many university students are "simply wasting their time and money." "Young people are staying on longer than ever before in education, simply in order to be qualified for lower skilled jobs than in the past," it adds.

"A Britain in which 100 percent of young people went to university would simply be a Britain with better educated benefit claimants than ever before.

"The flaw in government rhetoric, and in particular Labour's current rhetoric, is the failure to acknowledge that there is a cap on the number of graduates from whom the economy can benefit."

The Bow Group is politically aligned with the Conservative Party, but its overall aim of ensuring greater selection in higher education is now a matter for urgent government consideration.

Several commissions have been appointed to review Britain's education system. A working party reviewing education for 14- to 19-year olds, chaired by the former chief inspector of schools Mike Tomlinson, is due to report. So too is an inquiry into university admissions, chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, vice-chancellor of Brunel University.

Both are certain to recommend greater selection. Schwartz is said to favour the introduction of US-style entry tests, so as to enable universities to "differentiate between the excellent and the very good candidates." The top universities are said to be anxious to introduce further grading structures so as to enable them to identify "high flyers," through such mechanisms as extended "super essays" to be taken as routine in admission procedures, or the introduction of further gradations in exam results, i.e., A1, A2, etc.

Tomlinson is predicted to recommend a new diploma scheme to replace the current GCSE (general school leaving exams taken by 16-year olds) and A-level system, running alongside additional entrance examinations. One half of the new diploma will be targeted at attaining certain "core skills" in maths and English and the third quartile aimed at those currently achieving A-C grades in A-levels. The highest quartile will be split into four, so that universities can pick and choose from amongst their applicants.

Even so there are already complaints that the government is not moving fast enough, with Tomlinson's recommendations set to be spread out over a 10-year period. Some universities have begun setting additional tests for applicants to pass—particularly in law and medicine—and there are growing demands that the government free universities to determine their own fees and set their own working conditions and curriculum.

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