

PRIME MINISTER

*await policy unit*

## REFORM OF EXAMINATIONS AT 16+

I explained in my minute to you of 17 May the fundamental changes that Nicholas Edwards and I intend to make in order to improve the O level and CSE examinations. We now have to decide whether to merge O levels and CSE. We have set out in H(84)20 our view that we should and our reasons.

*(attached)*

2. The case - no doubt originally solely egalitarian - has won over the years wider support because it would reduce the confusion and costs (educational and financial) associated with the present wild proliferation of syllabuses and subjects.

3. H Committee agreed in February 1980 to the merging of O level and CSE. When I became Secretary of State for Education and Science, however, I had misgivings about the merits of this policy, and decided to defer a decision on whether it should be implemented until I could be sure whether it would improve educational standards. Since that time, the situation has changed: in particular -

- (i) national criteria have been developed which we are in process of further tightening to make examinations more rigorous and practical;
- (ii) the policies for making schools better, which I announced with your approval in January this year, have been widely welcomed;
- (iii) grade-related criteria will be defined and introduced to set and raise standards for grades at each level of ability at 16+ (work has begun with a view to cover the main subjects within 2 years);
- (iv) the case for differentiated assessment, so as to stretch the ablest and the average while giving the less bright a fair chance, has been accepted.

4. Most people in the world of education and many outside want the merger of O level and CSE. We believe that we can now set our own terms for it including the requirement of national criteria; grade-related criteria; differentiated assessment by separate papers or by separate or differentiated questions in the same paper; and a drastic reduction in the number of examining groups and the present number of syllabuses and subject titles.

5. Moreover we propose to introduce - in a sense re-introduce - distinction certificates for candidates gaining good grades in a broad range of key subjects. This should reassure our supporters - as will our requirement that the GCE boards maintain their identity and remain explicitly responsible to us for guarding and raising the standards of the top 3 grades, which correspond to the present O level grades A - C (the former "pass" grades).



6. Nicholas Edwards and I accordingly consider that the policy agreed by H in 1980 should now be confirmed. We have, however, judged it right to go back to our colleagues in the new situation. Given their agreement, I plan to announce our decision in Parliament on Wednesday 20 June.

7. I am sending a copy of this minute to Nicholas Edwards.

KJ

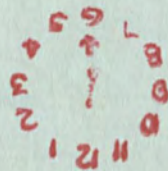
12 June 1984

It seems to me that this scheme will depress the standing of 'O' levels as a whole. Many people will now have an 'O' level certificate whose educational standard would not have justified it under the previous system. Employers will not therefore put the same value upon it.

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EDUCATION: future policy



12 JUN 1984