

Prime MinisterC/O L  
C/S I

PRIME MINISTER

Content with  
this approach?Dms  
18/5

During our talk on 27 April we did less than justice to the improvement in the 16+ examinations which I announced in January with your approval.

I leave it to DES.

The present positionI do not find the paper very  
illuminating!

2. Both the existing examinations are defective. O level, designed for the ablest 20% in each subject, succeeds broadly, but not completely, in identifying the most able and putting them in a ranking order. But since it is largely norm-referenced, grades are awarded to let a certain percentage of the age cohort "pass" without any assurance that those who pass have attained a defined standard of knowledge, understanding, skill or competence or that those who do not pass have not attained this standard. (And as norm-referencing is not thorough-going, the percentage of those who pass varies from subject to subject, being particularly high in English.) In some subjects those who pass are likely to have gained valuable understanding and skills eg in mathematics and physics. But far too often what O level tests is mainly the capacity for the orderly recall of facts.

mk

3. Table 1 shows the percentage of school leavers (who include those who attempt the examination when they are older than 16) who attempt O level in given numbers of subjects, and the results.

4. The CSE was originally intended for the next 40% by ability below the O level aspirants and its lesser esteem reflects this. In practice it is now taken also by many of the ablest 20% and, in English and maths, by many of the least able 40%. Some CSE courses emphasise practical skills. But most, like O levels, put too much emphasis on factual recall. Like O level, CSE is largely norm-referenced: in particular CSE 4 is meant to be obtainable by the average pupil in the subject, without any accepted definition of what the standard to be attained means.

5. Table 2 shows the percentage of school leavers who attempt CSE in given numbers of subjects, and the results.

6. Table 3 shows that about 10% of school leavers obtain no grade in any O level, CSE, or joint examination (ie an examination which can lead either to an O level or a CSE award); and that a further 15% obtain only 1, 2, 3 or 4 grades; these are often at a low level.

7. The present situation has great disadvantages:

1. It encourages a narrow approach to learning - too much emphasis on factual knowledge, too little on understanding and skills. Some of those who 'pass' O level lack quite basic intellectual or practical skills in the subject.
2. Neither teachers nor pupils nor employers know what someone who obtains an O level or CSE grade can be expected to know or be able to do. Teachers and pupils lack a motivating target; employers can be reasonably sure only that those with higher grades will be abler than those with lower grades.
3. Norm-referencing means that some pupils, whatever their attainment, have to "fail", or get a poor grade, because others perform better. This is demoralising and unfair. Ever since I came to the DES I have said in public - and have not been contradicted - that about 40% of school leavers have learnt too little in knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour, from 11 years of compulsory schooling. I have also said, without contradiction, that boredom, in part due to an ill-defined and often inapt curriculum and in part to unsuitable examinations and ineffective teaching, is rife.

## The new policies

8. The Secretary of State for Wales and I are pledged to decide by the end of June whether to merge O level and CSE into a single system of 16+ examinations or to harmonise them.

Whatever that decision, we intend the examinations to be changed in two fundamental ways.

1. Examinations should differentiate between candidates of widely different abilities - by separate papers, separate questions, optional extra questions or otherwise - so that all are given the chance to do themselves justice and are rewarded on the merits of their performance: this means stretching the able more than happens now, and allowing the less able to show what they know and can do rather than what they do not know and cannot do.

2. The examinations, instead of being largely norm-referenced, would be more nearly criterion-referenced. We aim to introduce grade-related criteria which would give a reasonable assurance that someone obtaining a grade has also acquired certain broadly defined understanding, competence and knowledge in specified aspects of the subject. The standard thus set would be, grade for grade, at least as high as now and, we intend, tighter for the ablest (though no exact comparison is possible between a system which specifies defined levels of attainment and one which merely allows a certain percentage to pass).

9. These changes should yield great benefits.

1. There will no longer be, as there has to be now, a limit to the number who can obtain a given grade; conversely, it will no longer be possible, as it now is, to get a good grade while lacking some understanding or skill which is basic to the subject.

2. Defining with some precision what is required to obtain a grade will make teachers more effective, and motivate pupils better, because both will have a clear target: they can themselves see whether they are reaching it.
3. This definition will give employers a much better idea of what they can expect someone with a given grade to know and be able to do: employers requirements for particular types of skill or knowledge could be made part of the requirement for obtaining a given grade.
4. The emphasis on skills and competence would support our policy for a broad and relevant curriculum so that every pupil would be taught practical as well as other skills. It would in particular give the intellectual a taste of technology and make the dexterous more proficient in English and maths.

10. I have claimed - without contradiction - that this policy for examinations, coupled with the policy for the curriculum, should enable 80-90% of school leavers to achieve standards now expected only of half, and to have their achievement acknowledged by the award of appropriate certificates.

#### Time-table

11. I expect to lay the foundation for 8(1) above (differentiation) in the autumn when I promulgate the national criteria for the 16+ examinations. As for 8(2), the Secondary Examinations Council (Chairman Sir Wilfred Cockcroft) have identified the first 8 subjects for which grade-related criteria should be published next year, and hope to introduce in September 1986 examination courses based on these criteria.

KJ

17 MAY 1984

TABLE 1

O LEVELS

Percentages of school leavers,  
1983, who in the numbers  
of subjects shown -

	(a)	(b)
	attempted the examinations	achieved higher grades(A,B or C) *
Numbers of subjects		
7 or more	24.7	14.6
5 or 6	9.5	7.7
3 or 4	10.5	8.3
1 or 2	18.0	15.6
None	37.3	53.7

\* equivalent to the old 'pass' grades

TABLE 2

CSE

Percentages of school leavers,  
1983, who in the number  
of subjects shown -

	(a) attempted the examinations	(b) achieved grades 1-5
Numbers of subjects		
7 or more	26.5	22.0
5 or 6	23.4	23.2
3 or 4	15.1	17.1
1 or 2	13.1	15.1
None	21.7*	22.7*

\*Note that these school leavers include those who take O levels only

**TABLE 3**

**ALL 16+ EXAMINATIONS** (O level, CSE and Joint 16+)

Percentages of school leavers,  
1983, who in the number  
of subjects shown -

	(a) achieved any graded result	(b) achieved higher grades(O level grades A-C or CSE grade 1)
Numbers of subjects		
7 or more	54.8	17.2
5 or 6	19.8	8.9
3 or 4	9.3	10.0
1 or 2	6.2	18.4
None	9.8	45.5

Note: (1) Where column (b) percentages exceed column (a) percentages, many of the candidates achieving higher grades in the number of subjects specified will have achieved lower grades in other subjects as well.

(2) Grades achieved in a given number of subjects may be partly in the O level and partly in the CSE examination.

Education: Future Policy Pt 2.

17 MAY 1984







hcr

10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

21 May 1984

The Prime Minister was grateful for and has noted your Secretary of State's two minutes of 17 May about raising standards in schools and the improvements in the 16+ examinations.

(David Barclay)

Miss Elizabeth Hodkinson  
Department of Education and Science

BSS