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Pocket Watch – Postscript to another busy exam results season

Introduction

Two sets of national exam results, an updated Corporate Plan from the Exams Regulator, a report on the 'crushing' effect that exam results can have on young people and weeks of glaring headlines. It all adds up to another busy summer of exam results but as the days shorten and a new education year beckons, what can we take away from the 2013 exam results season?

A 'steady' set of A level results

"A very stable set of results" was how the Chief Executive of Ofqual characterised this year's A level results. It was a sentiment expressed by a number of commentators based on the fact that this year's changes, a 0.1% increase in the A-E pass rate and a 0.3% decrease in the number of A*/A grades, were pretty minimal. The overall figures did mask some interesting trends including notably an increase in entries in maths, sciences and economics, a drop in numbers taking modern foreign languages and the continued uptake of the Extended Project where entries were up by 6.4% but the key message as Anthony Seldon highlighted, was that such trends pointed to 'relentless grade inflation being addressed at last.'

That said what issues do remain?

First what to do about modern foreign languages where entries for the traditional French and German dropped again, by 9.9% and 11.1% respectively and where although Spanish was up by just over 4%, the overall picture remains worrying. Some have argued that we need to shift from traditional to more current languages yet entries for both more 'current' Chinese and Polish were also down this year. Languages become compulsory at KS2 in 2014 as part of the new National Curriculum so things may pick up in the future but for the moment the Awarding Organisations are launching a six-month inquiry to see if they can get to the root of the problem. Second, why the shift towards the facilitating subjects? Partly no doubt because these are the very subjects that leading universities have chosen to highlight but also because as many commentators noted, young people have become more 'savvy' about their job prospects, most of their secondary education has after all taken place in the shadow of recession.

Third, the A level reforms, not due to be implemented for initial subjects until Sept 2015 but where some issues still rankle. The de-coupling of the AS from the A2 remains a bugbear and was singled out by both Oxbridge and the HMC in their commentaries so it will be interesting to see how far the AS, down in entries by 0.4% this summer, emerges as a co-teachable option or not. According to the HMC, the independent sector remains wary about the A level reforms generally although the overall issue remains the speed of change. Fourth, university entry, which eased this year with ABB students able to 'trade-up,' putting recruitment back to pre tuition fee levels but where issues remain about widening participation as well as managing student numbers in the future. We're not likely to see a repeat of last year when some leading universities struggled to fill places but we are seeing clearer competition for young people with apprenticeships and opportunities in leading companies proving attractive. Marks and Spencer for instance received 3,000 applications this year for its 30 trainee manager positions, many no doubt drawn by the prospect of a salary rather than a loan. It may be a competitive market for many young people but as the Prince's Trust highlighted, not for all.

A more 'turbulent' set of GCSE results?

If stable was the term used to describe the A level results this summer, turbulence was the word that many commentators preferred when describing the GCSE results. "A constantly changing and turbulent environment" was how the ASCL described it.

The issue was not just that GCSEs were going through a significant period of change but as Ofqual put it in a pre-emptive strike; "there are a number of changes this year that mean the

overall results could look different to results in previous years even though standards will be maintained." The changes they were referring to included more challenging science specs, the introduction this year of the awkwardly named SPAG rules (marks off for poor spelling, punctuation and grammar in Eng Lit, history, geography and religious studies,) an increase in iGCSE entries, and increased numbers of early and double entries. The overall effect was to create a slight drop in the numbers gaining A*-C grades, down 1.3% to 68.1%, replicated across English, maths and more noticeably science, and a slight drop, 0.5% to 6.8%, in the numbers gaining A* grades while raising a number of questions.

First, the issue of early and double entry, practices which lay behind some performance dips and which both the Education Secretary and Ofsted have been keen to discourage. Defenders claim that schools are only doing this to improve their students' prospects even though the results don't warrant this, *"in general 15 and post-16 year olds perform less well than 16 year olds,"* but most fingers point towards the accountability system. If schools are measured on how many students gain 5 A*-Cs, then they're going to use every opportunity to ensure they meet this target. All of which makes the Pearson/Centre Forum Paper on the new secondary accountability measures, published on results day and urging the Government to scrap the proposed threshold measure in favour of an enhanced progress measure, even more important. Second, iGCSEs, attracting increased entries for English (hugely) and maths again this year but where, according to the TES Forum at least, questions have been raised about its value as an alternative to GCSEs. Ironically many schools had turned to the iGCSE at the behest of the Education Secretary and some of the huge increase in English may have been as a result of last year's GCSE problems but a lot may now hinge on how far the new style GCSEs gain credibility. Third, and noticeable this year given it was introduced as this year's GCSEers were making their option choices, the EBacc effect. This has generated considerable increases in entries in the standard EBacc subjects, geography entries up by 19.2%, history by 16.7%, record numbers taking single sciences and most dramatically given the reverse at A level, entries for languages at their highest levels for five years. A satisfied sigh from Whitehall perhaps.

Ofqual sets out its plans for the future

A regular feature of the qualification system at present and one that cropped up in comments again this year is the pervading sense of constant change and what impact this has on performance and standards. The next couple of years for instance will see revisions to the National Curriculum, reforms to GCSE and A levels and changes to vocational qualifications and regulatory procedures all being introduced. Ofqual's latest Corporate Plan issued just before the results season got under way is a useful reminder of what's being lined up.

The Plan takes us up to 2016 when, pending an intervening general election, most of the Government's current qualification changes will be in place. It's interesting to consider how different things will be for a typical 16 or 18 year old by then compared to 2010: more challenging specs, final exams rather than resits and modules, appropriate levels of English and maths, defined programmes of study at 16-19, differently structured GCSEs and A levels, revisions to vocational qualifications. Love it or loathe it, the Gove revolution has certainly had an impact and we now wait to see it reflected in such measures as improved international rankings, increased youth employment and employer and university support.

As for the Ofqual Plan, it lists over 40 actions for the future, 26 by 2014, the rest by 2016. Of particular interest are plans to strengthen assessment standards by requiring Awarding Organisations (AO) to develop comprehensive assessment strategies as they develop new GCSEs and A levels, a new national reference test to help maintain GCSE standards, a review of the appeals process, a full-scale review of the QCF, examination of comparative prices of key vocational qualifications and 'go-compare' type data on AO costs and service performance.



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