

A-levels

Given the flurry of changes in education over the last two decades, you may find yourself understandably confused about the state and nature of modern A-levels. This is a fuddy-friendly explanation for those of us who remember when Bagpuss lived on TV, not DVD.

Please raise you palm and say 'HOW!?'

Although all A-levels have dumbed-down by at least two grades over the last two decades¹, the sciences (including maths) nevertheless remain elite qualifications designed primarily for those with straight A and A* grades at GCSE (or 8's and 9's in the new system). Consequently, a student with mainly B's (or 6's and 7's) at GCSE would be predicted a D or E in science A-levels, while one with mainly C's (5's) would be expected to fail. This often comes as a shock to many parents, who equate GCSEs with the old O-levels. In fact, GCSEs comprise work that would have been covered by moderately able fourteen year-olds in the 1980s, while the old O-levels correspond more closely to AS-levels (which can be taught almost entirely using O-level textbooks²). Students therefore do not start 'old' A-level work until their second year, which covers roughly half the 1980s specification. Although somewhat depressing, the sciences have at least fared better than other subjects, many of which now never reach the old A-level standard. Despite this decline, science A-levels nevertheless still stretch even bright students, who have generally been ill-prepared by the low demands of GCSE; indeed, the step-up from GCSE to A-level is in many ways harder than the old climb from O-level, not least because modern GCSEs involve virtually no rote-learning, whereas a typical science A-level requires the retention and manipulation of more than 200 key ideas.

Although science A-levels therefore represent a stern challenge, they also facilitate access to better universities and careers. Admissions officers understand their elite status and tend to treat scientifically literate applicants more sympathetically (even when applying for humanities courses). Additionally, scholarships, bursaries and other incentives are increasingly being channelled into science-oriented courses which

¹[Click here to see Coe \[2007\]](#)

² Perhaps the most obvious indicator of this deterioration in standards is that only 4% of students used to attain a grade A in O-levels, whereas about 25% of the far easier GCSEs were (until the change in 2017) being awarded at A and A*

directly benefit the economy. Beyond university, job opportunities and rewards are also greatly enhanced for scientists: for example, a typical humanities degree boosts lifetime earnings by approximately £50,000, whereas the average for engineering is around £400,000 (which rather makes me regret becoming a historian). The most compelling argument for studying sciences, however, is simply that they are jaw-droppingly interesting. And even quite good fun (albeit in much the same way that sliding face-first down Everest probably seems a real chuckle . . . when later viewed on YouTube from a hospital bed through the comforting haze of high-dose opiates).

How the new (linear) A-levels work

Unlike the old, modular A-levels, the new linear specifications are fairly straightforward. Students are tested at the end of two years (generally over three exams, each covering different aspects of the course) and given a single grade that reflects their performance. Although AS-level still exists, it is an entirely discrete qualification (covering about half the A-level content and tested less rigorously) and contributes nothing to the A-level grade. Essentially, for those educated prior to the early '90s, the new A-levels look a lot like the old A-levels (although the content and question rigour still appear less difficult in comparison). The grade boundaries have been significantly lower in the few exams set thus far, most likely to prevent a possible grade apocalypse as students and staff grind up to meet the heightened rigour of the new exams, so it will be interesting to see if they rise over time (as they clearly should if the exams are to raise standards, as intended).

Feel free to have a lie down now.

Thanks.

Mark Mullins