

Exam scandal is a canker at the heart of learning

This week, over half of my Upper Sixth have been out of school, off to their interviews at Cambridge and Oxford. Gone are the days when playing for the 1st XV or a gift to the college wine cellar could guarantee a place. Impeccable results to date, a glowing reference, and high predictions are just the beginning. Then there are the interviews, and finally, for the lucky ones, a demanding offer.

Now that both Oxford and Cambridge have embraced the new A* at A level, candidates for both universities can expect to see one or more A* grades in any offers they receive. In a few cases, three stars may be demanded. IB candidates are familiar with the pressure. For some years, Cambridge, in particular, has set the offer bar very high. The maximum score in the IB is 45 points - only 80 or 90 candidates across the whole world achieve this score - and any score over 40 points is extremely impressive. Cambridge routinely request 41 or even 42 points, right at the top end of the spectrum, and frequently ask for top marks in two or all three of the pupil's higher level papers.

Rigour is what we expect from two of the best universities in the world, and we can't complain if they ask bright boys and girls to gain the highest grades. However, universities, schools and pupils all depend on the examinations themselves to be fair. We need to be sure that the systems work, and that, whichever board you have followed, you will be judged in the same way as other candidates. We need to know that an A level or GCSE sat with one board has the same currency as one sat with another. If fairness and transparency are not at least central objectives of every exam board, then the best efforts of universities to make meaningful offers, and schools and pupils to meet them, are so much wasted endeavour. In the same way, we need to know that IB, or Pre-U results, have been arrived at in a way that is thorough-going, and systematic.

And yet, in shocking revelations this week, we learn that senior figures at some exam boards are not only not acting fairly, but they seem quite unconcerned by the ethics of their behaviour. A chief examiner for Edexcel, a board responsible for 1.4 million GCSE exam entries, has been recorded saying that teachers should pick the Edexcel Geography GCSE exam because "you don't have to teach a lot." She also says how surprised she is that the official regulator ever allowed them to get away with such a thin syllabus. She is reported as saying, "There's so little, we don't know how we got it through." Meanwhile, a chief examiner for the Welsh Board is recorded as saying, "We're cheating. We're telling you the cycle [of compulsory questions]. Probably the regulator will tell us off." So far in this depressing scandal, three examiners have been suspended.

The revelations are indeed dispiriting, although many of us have long suspected what we now learn to be true. I can remember an excellent head of religious studies at my last school returning from a GCSE conference quite shocked at the cheating masquerading as "examiner tips" that made up a good part of the conference. There is money to be made not only in attracting as many as possible to take your exam, perhaps by offering the easiest syllabus, but also in spin-off revision guides and conferences. Like grizzled stadium rockers or premier league football teams, exam boards have realised the limitless merchandising possibilities of a youthful and needy customer base.

The quality of examining, marking and moderation is fundamental to the credit on which public exams depend. Boys and girls should not feel that paying to attend a conference is more valuable to them than genuine knowledge of the subject. Nor should teachers be tempted to believe that excellent results can best be gained from short cuts - choosing

second rate and empty syllabuses - when their own teaching, and the commitment of their pupils, should be the seedbed of classroom success. If schools and examination boards cannot get this right, then universities will be unable to trust the grades they themselves require, and the system, over-inflated, poorly regulated and based on smoke and mirrors rather than a sound currency, will fall around our ears in pieces.

Sounds familiar?