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Why the GCSE has had its day

Former headteacher Peter Inson, who lives near Colchester, argues that more robust examinations would be better for our pupils

IN 1963 I failed O-level English literature but left school with seven passes, able to do the things I then wanted to do. Sixteen-year-olds now could be forgiven for resenting the present fuss over English GCSE results. School examinations deal only with one aspect of their lives, albeit an important one, at an early stage. If testing is so important, they could well ask, why does the Government not arrange to test people as employees, as entrepreneurs, as parents and as citizens? Their efforts in the classroom, it must sometimes seem to them, are more important for their schools than for themselves; the system concerns itself with the coldness of aggregated results, schools' pass-rates and league tables, rather than the individual results of real flesh and blood students.

For years friends, acquaintances, employers, employers' organisations and academia have complained regularly about declining literacy standards on the part of young adults, all this while pass-rates have "improved." Aware of this confusion, young people have further reason to ignore adult concerns.

However, they must know that universities and business will judge them by their ability to use English well. Unfortunately, some people doubt that we can return to the undoubtedly higher standards of O-level English language. To which I say, why not? If we adults tell young people that there is no point in pursuing higher academic standards, then most of them will not even bother.

What is wrong with allowing students half the time to complete an essay of a similar kind in an O-level paper and to tell these candidates that errors of spelling, grammar or punctuation will be penalised rather than "taken into account"?

In 1980, in Dagenham, I entered many of my students for English language a year early. I told them that I was going to work them hard, and that they would hate me at first, but that they would thank me when they got their results, a year early, which they did: from this group



ADVICE: 'Essentially students need good reading habits, not necessarily fiction, to know and appreciate what can be done with the written language,' says former teacher Peter Inson, who lives near Colchester

Photo: ANDREW PATRIDGE



came the school's first successful applicant to Cambridge. Essentially students need good reading habits, not necessarily fiction, to

know and appreciate what can be done with the written language; parents can do much here and help is available, for example at <http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/home/index.php>.

Then they need to understand how the language works, just as we need to understand how a machine works in order to use it more efficiently. For example, the most important word in a sentence is the verb.

"Stop!" This one-word sentence has the same main verb as a much longer sentence such as: "Once you have left the terminal and turned left, diverted the children from the ice cream van and avoided being run

down by a taxi, stop by the bus terminal."

Both sentences want you to stop but the first involves a sudden, clear command, with no other words to get in the way, while the second requires an explanation which is

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conveyed with four additional, subordinate clauses.

Young adults should be able to understand any written material that an educated adult can manage and express themselves in written sentences that are clear and

coherent, remembering that, in conversation, we can ask the other person to repeat or explain what they have just said. What we write cannot be checked in this way and has to be right the first time that someone else reads it, perhaps years later.

O-levels do make greater demands of students and teachers should have the confidence and determination to make these demands – it is to their students, rather to the Government with its misleading league tables and statistics, that their first duty lies.

The GCSE, spawned originally by politicians – Michael Gove's Tory predecessors in office – has had its day and does not represent the best of which young people are capable. Schools, employers and universities need to consider better alternatives and side-line politicians. Cambridge International Examinations still runs O-levels and, along with Edexcel, provides International GCSE syllabuses ready to use. Singapore, that well-known economic backwater, continues to use British-style O-levels to assess its sixteen-year-olds. Where are the schools and

teachers prepared to use these better examinations?

Young people would be better helped were they encouraged to accept their results and get on with the next, still early, stage of their lives. Educational ways forward proliferate for those who want to make progress.

I re-took O-level English literature at the age of twenty-six, trained to teach English and went on to become an examiner of the examination I had failed at sixteen. Re-assure any disappointed sixteen-year-old that, so long as they are prepared to work, they will recover from a tiny blip in a busy life.

■ The former head of a state school in West London, Peter has taught in independent and international schools and been an examiner for A-level and the International Baccalaureate. Heinemann published his first text book, for IGCSE English, last year. "dunno," his novel about the efforts of a disturbed fourteen-year-old to grow up, won an Arts Council award. Test your English at www.peterinson.net