

DO SCHOOL EXAMS NEED REFORMING?

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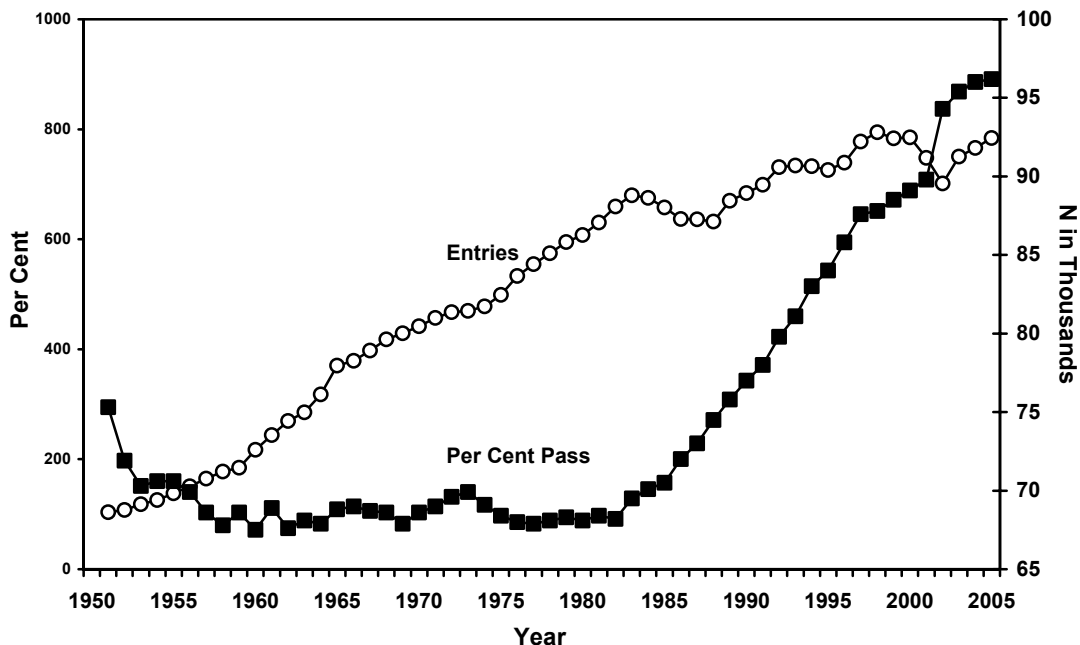
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1. With the dust just beginning to settle on the 2005 exam season, it is a good time to take a close look at the results. As in previous years, the grades have gone up and up leading to the usual cries of ‘dumbing down’, countered by lavish praise for schools, teachers and pupils. But what do the details of the results actually tell us? Is everything pretty much okay, do existing qualifications need to be improved, or is there a case for wholesale reform to a radically different system?

A-Level

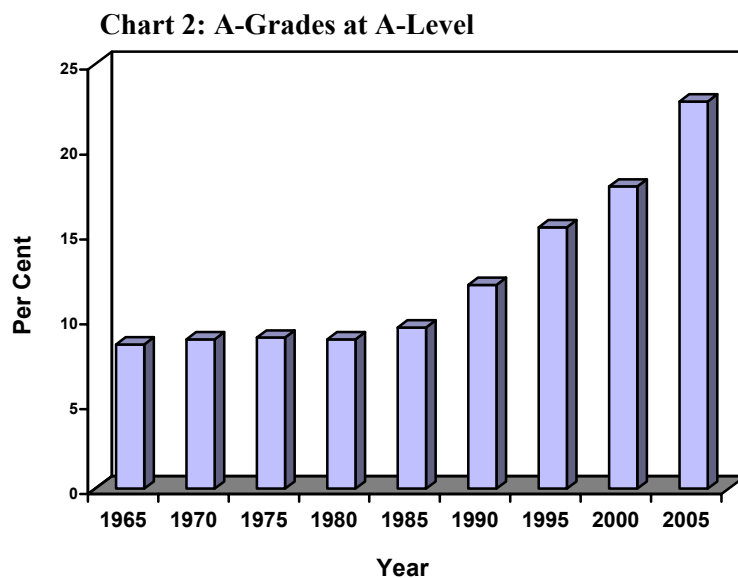
2. Chart 1 shows that there have been some remarkable changes to both the volume of entries and the pass rate since the first A-level examinations in 1951. Entries have gone up sevenfold from 103,803 to 783, 878 suggesting from the privileged few the exam now offers opportunities to the many. At the same time, the pass rate has risen from 73.5 to 96.2 per cent. More and more people are doing better and better. That is surely good news. Well up to a point, but only if an A-level pass stands for much the same thing. Hence the recurring row over standards.

Chart 1: A-Level Entries and Passes



3. The pass rate is revealing. From 1951 to 1982 it fluctuated around 70 per cent, since when it has gone up every year, with a big leap between 2001 and 2002. The constant pass rate is no mystery; it was set at that level. No matter how well or badly the candidates did, the rule was to pass 70 per cent and fail 30 per cent. This was distinctly odd since the people who got to take A-levels in the early days were those who had passed the 11+ to go to grammar school and done well enough in the old ‘O’ level to proceed to the sixth form.
4. When it was decided to allocate grades on actual rather than relative performance set by quotas, the annual struggle to keep standards constant began. And the unanswered question is still: has the pass rate been going up year by year because the demands of the examination have been lowered, or because education has been continually improving? The pattern of results provides some clues.

5. The leap from 2001 to 2002 - which indirectly led to the resignation of the Chairman and Chief Executive of the QCA, Sir William Stubbs, and contributed to Estelle Morris giving up as Secretary of State – is in hindsight readily attributable to the modularisation of A-levels and the conversion of AS to a halfway house. It is evidently easier to tackle a course as a series of steps than in one go, and the AS results act as an early warning which can lead to either re-takes or withdrawal.
6. Over the years, there have been other changes in A-levels which are likely to have contributed to the improved scores. The questions have become more structured making them more straightforward to prepare for and train up to. There is more course work which rewards consistent application and is amenable to help from the family, friends and the internet. There have also been changes in content with, for example, the mechanics in maths reduced in favour of statistics. All of these, as it were, streamline the track. It is analogous to the replacement of grass or cinders in athletics by springy plastic making it possible to run faster or jump higher.
7. It also has to be borne in mind that examining is not measurement in the sense that recording time or distance is, but using judgement to assign numbers. The results suggest that examiners have come to feel they are doing a good job if the pass rate rises – but not by too much. Underlying this upward movement is that each year borderline candidates tend to be pushed up but rarely dropped down. Thus, when a year's results are compared with the previous years the latter will include those who were initially just below the standard. The net effect is to progressively lower the bar.



8. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the grades awarded have improved considerably and this means that A-levels are no longer meeting one of their essential functions – distinguishing between performances for universities and employers. A-levels derive directly from university entrance exams (which is why the examining bodies are still mainly based in the old universities). In the 1960s and 70s the universities gradually ceded this function to A-levels as the national examination. But recently

the leading universities have been introducing tests once more for their most popular courses.

9. Chart 2 reveals the reason. It shows that A grades, initially restricted to a quota of 10 per cent, have gone up dramatically since that cap was lifted. By 2005 the proportion had more than doubled to 22.8 per cent, including 23.9 per cent of the girls' entries. The leading universities have found that this is too many for them to be able to allocate their scarce places fairly and accurately. Employers are concerned too because they have become increasingly dubious about what a degree stands for and frequently look back to the A-level results as the more reliable guide.
10. The government has recognised the difficulty and is going to make module grades available as well as overall grades, but this will favour consistent all-rounders rather than giving the most talented a chance to show what they can do. It has also been mooted that the individual marks could be given, but this imputes more meaning to the percentages than they will bear. Would it be fair, for example, to award a university place on 73 rather than 72? More, it would serve mainly to identify the punctilious. There is an examination above A-levels, the Advanced Extension Award, but this is taken by very few. Overall, AEA entries in 2005 amounted to only one per cent of A-levels and the highest percentage entry for any subject was Spanish at 3 per cent and here the number of A-level candidates was itself small.

Chart 3: A-Level Choices

Subject	1992	2000	2005	Change 1992-2000	Change 2000-05	% A Grade 2005
Home Economics	3,503	2,019	1,185	(-42.4)	(-41.3)	18.7
Economics	40,222	17,113	17,625	(-57.5)	+3.0	31.0
French	31,261	18,221	14,484	(-41.9)	(-20.5)	32.9
German	11,338	8,692	5,901	(-2.3)	(-32.1)	35.6
Physics	41,301	32,059	28,119	(-21.3)	(-12.3)	28.6
Geography	45,653	37,112	32,831	(-18.7)	(-11.5)	24.2
Maths	72,384	67,036	52,897	(-7.4)	(-21.1)	40.7
Religious Studies	7,561	9,178	16,859	+21.4	+83.7	25.3
Technology	9,227	14,650	17,914	+58.8	+22.3	15.6
Music	5,447	6,815	9,774	+25.1	+43.4	18.9
Business Studies	19,179	38,226	30,719	+99.3	(-19.6)	14.1
Spanish	4,720	5,632	6,230	+19.3	+10.6	36.7
Media/Film/TV	-	15,269	28,261	-	+85.2	13.6
Psychology	-	30,187	50,035	-	+65.8	17.8
Expressive Arts	-	11,401	18,310	-	+60.6	16.5
Law	-	10,325	14,538	-	+40.8	16.9
Sport/PE	-	16,529	20,126	-	+21.8	12.7
TOTAL	731,240	771,809	783,878	+5.5	+1.6	22.8

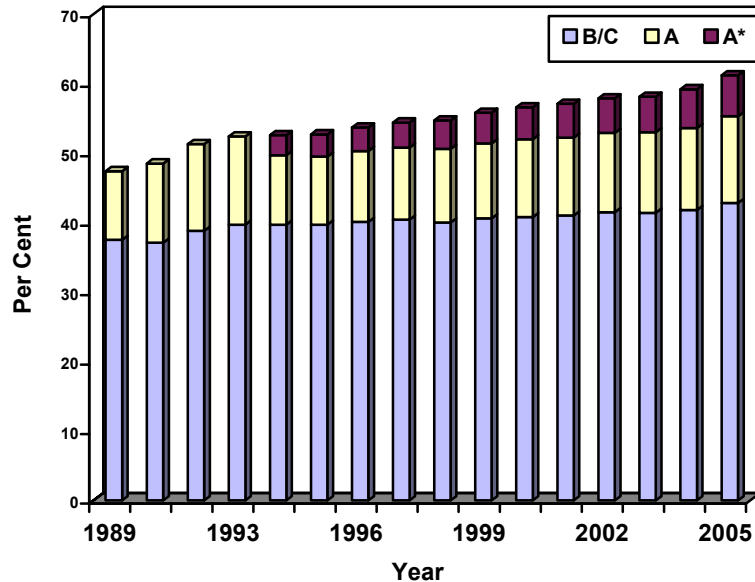
11. So do these various difficulties harbingers the end of A-levels? An important reason for retaining them is that they confer freedom on students to tailor their own courses.

Chart 3 shows the trends in student choices. Since 1992 entries have dropped in many of the traditional subjects - French, German, Physics, Maths, and Geography, economics, and home economics. The biggest winners over that period have been religious studies, music, business studies and technology, but they have been surpassed by new examinations in media/TV/film, psychology, sport/PE, law and expressive arts. The percentage of A grades in 2005 varied considerably between subjects, with the highest proportions in the contracting subjects suggesting that weaker students were selecting themselves out to take the newer offerings. Girls who overtook boys in the proportion of A grades awarded for the first time in 2000 have now opened up a consistent advantage of about two percentage points.

GCSE

12. As with A-levels, GCSE results have been improving each year. Chart 4 shows that while 45.6 per cent of the passes were at C and above in 1989, by 2005 this had risen to 61.2 per cent. Higher proportions are also achieving the top grades. Twice as many A* are being awarded now as when it was introduced in 1994. The 2005 results have leapt above the trend line and the government might wish to claim that this was mainly due to the literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3 strategies. But English and maths themselves recorded only small rises. Again, the major pass rate increases were in subjects like French, German and dual award science where entries have fallen suggesting that the weaker students were transferring out or being switched out.

Chart 4: GCSE Pass Rate per Entry

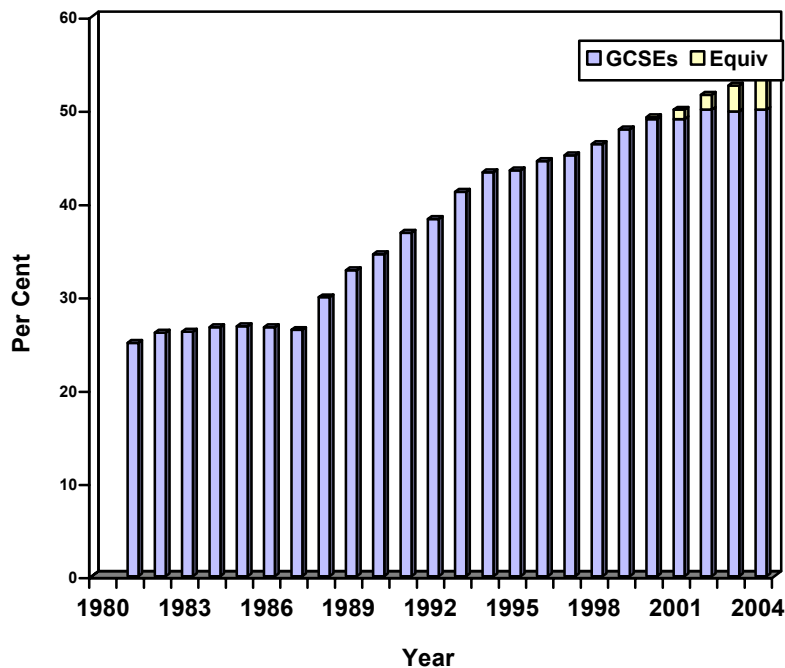


13. Unlike A-levels, GCSEs are part of compulsory education and there is less room for individual preferences, but there is some manoeuvrability. This year saw large falls in modern languages which are no longer a full course requirement at Key Stage 4 suggesting that schools are coping with the chronic shortage of language teachers by in some cases disapplying the subject for some students. In the sciences there seems to be an increasing bright/dim split. Physics, chemistry and biology, in recent years mainly the province of the independent and grammar schools, have been making

something of a comeback for the very able judging by the very high proportions of A*/A grades – which is good news for A-levels. But the double award science is also losing students to the single award, intermediate GNVQ and applied science GCSE. Here the grades are much poorer and the ‘vocational’ awards are likely to be a bit of a dead-end providing neither a platform for science A-levels, nor preparation for a career as a science technician (from which the idea of an applied award derives). It looks as though schools in the target and league table culture engendered by the Blair governments are increasingly juggling with pupils’ entries to maximise the school’s standing – which is not necessarily the same as the pupils’ best interests.

14. The proportion of pupils reaching five A*- C grades at GCSE or what is deemed equivalent is very important to schools, in some cases being vital to their very survival. Chart 5 shows that the proportion attaining at this level has more than doubled since GCSEs replaced ‘O’ levels. Interestingly, from 2001 the proportion achieving five good GCSEs themselves has plateaued at about 50 per cent and the increase has been through intermediate GNVQs which count as four GCSEs. Even so the increase is less than the two per cent a year the DfES agreed with Gordon Brown’s Treasury under a public service agreement suggesting that the government might be disappointed with an improvement rate that makes others sceptical.

Chart 5: Five Good GCSEs or Equivalent



15. A pattern which screams out from the GCSE results, but which receives almost no attention in England, is the extent of the differences between the countries of the UK. Chart 6 shows that children in Northern Ireland do outstandingly well. Ten percentage points above England and Wales in passes GCSE A*-C and substantially superior A-levels. Only two likely explanations suggest themselves. The first is that the grammar school system gets the best out of more pupils, not just those going to the grammars, which is not a finding that many people in education want to hear. The other is that the exam board in Northern Ireland works to different standards, but

that is checkable and one would have expected it to have been ironed out. An interesting natural experiment may be upon us if as seems likely Northern Ireland politicians get their way and scrap the grammar and modern schools.

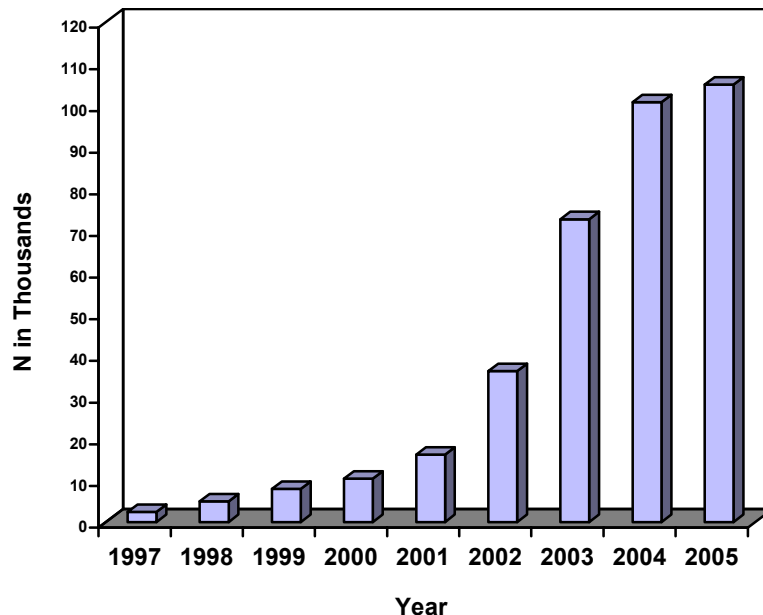
Chart 6: Countries

A-Level	Entrants	% Pass	% A Grade
England	717,127	96.2	22.4
Wales	35,475	96.8	23.7
NI	31,276	97.5	31.2
UK	783,878	96.2	22.8
GCSE	Entrants	% A*-C	%A*/A
England	5,330,581	60.8	18.2
Wales	307,033	61.3	17.8
NI	198,891	71.0	24.0
UK	5,736,505	61.2	18.4

Vocational Qualifications

- This year saw a boom in vocational qualifications at the intermediate level with, as Chart 7 shows, entries for the intermediate GNVQ at their highest even though applied GCSEs, its intended replacement, had come on stream, and these also attracted a third more entries than last year. There are some who would like to see this as evidence that we are finally getting in place good ladders from school to work to rival the ladders to university.

Chart 7: Intermediate GNVQ



1. 1997-2003 pupils only, 2004 and 2005 all entries.

- But Chart 8 reveals that another explanation may be more tenable. Over half the GNVQ entries and a third of the applied GCSE entries were in just one subject, Information and Communications Technology. This has exploded since schools

noticed the league table potential of the intermediate GNVQ where a pass counts as four good GCSEs. Ofsted inspectors have commented that even the applied GCSE does not really justify being counted double. The other major growth ‘vocational’ subject has been science, again something with which schools can cope and, as we have already seen, seems to be taken by those for whom the double science award is too demanding.

Chart 8: Entries for Intermediate Vocational Courses 2005

Field	Intermediate GNVQ		Applied GCSE	
	N	%	N	%
Information and Communication Technology	57,991	55.2	49,081	32.4
Science	10,995	10.5	18,184	12.0
Business	10,982	10.5	21,969	14.5
Health and Social Care	9,216	8.8	24,631	16.2
Leisure and Tourism	5,665	5.4	17,290	11.4
Art and Design	4,199	4.0	5,692	3.8
Performing Arts	1,982	1.9	640	0.4
Media: Communication and Production	1,723	1.6	-	-
Engineering	946	0.9	7,912	5.2
Hospitality and Catering	553	0.5	123	0.1
Manufacturing	395	0.4	4,187	2.8
Construction	191	0.2	100	0.1
Retail and Distributive Services	91	0.1	-	-
Land and Environment	38	0.0	-	-
Learning for Life and Work	-	-	1,819	1.2
Financial Services	-	-	41	0.0
Journalism	-	-	26	0.0
Total	104,967	100.0	151,695	100.0

18. In contrast to the large number taking quasi-academic subjects, entry to the more practically-sounding fields is miniscule. Hospitality and catering, manufacturing, construction, retail and distributive trades, land and environment together account for only 1.2 per cent of the intermediate GNVQ and 3.0 per cent of the applied GCSEs entries. The suspicion that schools have neither the equipment or expertise to offer real vocational education is compounded by the introduction of the nebulous ‘Learning for Life and Work’ as worth two GCSEs.
19. The expansion of ‘vocational’ education at intermediate level has not been matched at advanced level. Since GNVQs were re-packaged to the same shape and size as academic A-levels, as Chart 9 shows, take up has fallen. This has been the case in nearly all subjects including ICT. About half the GNVQs were created in fields where there were similar A-levels and conversion to vocational A-levels has marked them out as a lesser alternative. With applied GCSEs and vocational A-levels it does not look as though we are putting in place the stepping stones for the practically-minded into employment. Rather the results suggest that they are being mainly

taken by those with less academic ability and, in the case of vocational A-levels, as a way into universities which have the most difficulty in filling their places.

Chart 9: Advanced Vocational Qualifications

	AdvGNVQ/ VCE Double	VCE Single	<i>Total</i>
1994	3,978	-	3,978
1995	38,017	-	38,017
1996	53,527	-	53,527
1997	74,843	-	74,843
1998	80,069	-	80,069
1999	83,402	-	83,402
2000	80,290	-	80,290
2001	77,666	-	77,666
2002	42,291	32,246	74,537
2003	43,807	40,914	84,721
2004	39,045	42,708	81,753
2005	32,802	43,391	76,193

Radical Reform?

20. The 2005 examination results and the trends leading to them suggest that there are problems with both existing academic and vocational qualifications. These have been seized upon by those disappointed by the government’s rejection of the Tomlinson proposals for an all-embracing diploma. It has been argued that the current state of our school examination system demands radical reform.
21. This is tempting, but it does not stand up to scrutiny. Three main advantages are claimed for a diploma over awards in individual subjects: it would increase breadth of study; it would raise the esteem of vocational education; and it would encourage more pupils to continue in education and training after the age of 16. It is also suggested that a diploma could be devised to stretch the most able and reduce the assessment load.
22. It is true that a diploma could be used to increase breadth of study by imposing it. But this would be a committee decision as to what is desirable breadth whereas as the existing system of individual awards enables students to create their own breadth. A big problem with imposed breadth is what do you do with students who do not pass every part. It was to get over this problem in the old Higher School Certificate that A-levels as individually certificated subjects were introduced in the first place. The International Baccalaureate has also run into the same difficulty when attempts have been made to extend it beyond its natural range of very bright all-rounders.
23. Bundling up vocational qualifications with academic qualifications would not increase their esteem one iota. The value of a qualification depends on what you can do with it. Vocational qualifications in medicine, accountancy and trades like gas fitting enjoy high esteem because they lead to sought-after employment that is well

remunerated. Some, but not all, academic A-levels enjoy high esteem because they open doors to the leading courses at the top universities. For vocational qualifications to achieve high status they too have to open doors and that means that they have to become a respected currency in the labour market with employers recruiting on them and rewarding people who hold them.

24. A diploma could be used to improve staying on rates, but only by in effect raising the school leaving age to 18, when there are already 50,000 truants a day up to 16. Far from solving the problems which beset current qualifications, a Tomlinson-type diploma would bring in a raft of its own
25. Current A-levels do not spread out people enough at the top and there is too much assessment. The first could be tackled directly by including some harder questions. All candidates would then get a fair chance to demonstrate their talents and universities and employers get better distinguishing information. It is a bit like having to make the javelin heavier when people became so good at throwing it that the spectators were at risk. At the same time the assessment load could be reduced by examining A-level and AS as courses not as modules, with AS being taken as a stopping off point for those who did not want to continue rather than by everyone.
26. Current school vocational qualifications are pretty dismal, but while wrapping them up in a diploma might briefly disguise this, of itself it would do nothing to remedy the situation. For this to happen they will have to be employer-led. They will also have to take place in both employment and educational settings and should draw on the expertise of further education. Otherwise they will remain less a way of providing high quality education for the practically minded than of occupying the less brainy.

Conclusion

27. The trends in examination results do indicate some weaknesses in current provision, but nothing to suggest wholesale reform is needed. At A-level current candidates are doing just too well for the exam, but as we have seen this can readily be remedied.
28. At GCSE the pattern of entries suggests that the behaviour of schools is being markedly influenced by the way the results are reported. Government plans to base the five good GCSE criterion on English and maths will go some way towards getting it into line with the purposes of education. But ingenuity knows no bounds and there is talk of side-stepping into four-rated BTECs when the intermediate GNVQ is phased out. Since the applied GCSEs have also been reported as lightweight the recent growth of interest in vocational qualifications in schools may have more to do with their league potential than their value in the labour market. There is a strong case for revisiting the weighting of vocational qualifications in league tables.
29. As with A-levels, improving vocational education is best achieved directly rather than throwing everything into the melting pot of a diploma. Overall, the 2005 results suggest that some improvements are called for, but the clamour for a diploma smacks of somewhat desperate opportunism.