

Educational Standards

In October 1998 the British Academy invited a number of distinguished academics and researchers to present papers at a one-day symposium designed to bring together a number of perspectives on the issue of educational standards. None of the contributors claimed to offer a straightforward solution to the problems of definition – what is a standard – and measurement. Rather, they attempted to provide an analysis of the problems and to give a context to the debates, both historically and cross-nationally. The resulting publication, Educational Standards, is the first serious attempt to bring together such a distinguished collection of contributions on the topic.

In the extract below, Dr Mike Cresswell, Head of Research and Statistics at the Associated Examining Board, considers the problem of using public examination results as monitors of changes in educational standards over time.

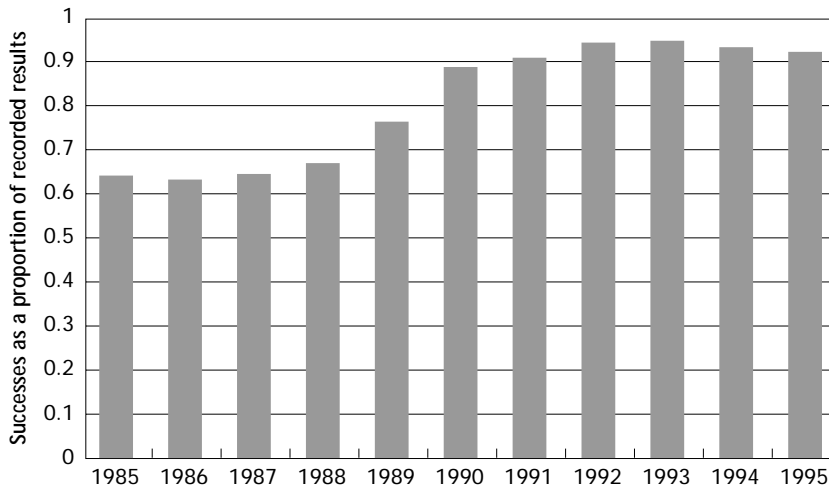


Figure 1. Success rate variations between 1985 and 1995.

Figure 1 shows how success rates changed between 1985 and 1995 in a particular assessment. However, before I say whether Figure 1 relates to one or more GCSE or GCE examinations, the reader is invited to pause and consider the question: does the graph indicate a rise in the standards of attainment of the candidates between 1988 and 1992 or a reduction in the assessment demands? Particularly adventurous readers might like to consider whether both effects took place and, if so, what their relative contributions to the overall pattern were.

In fact, Figure 1 shows the proportion of people reaching the summit of Mount Everest, expressed as a proportion of those who reached the summit or died on the mountain. Since Mount Everest has not shrunk significantly in recent years, the interpretation of Figure 1 presumably has to be that people have got better at climbing it. Does this mean that climbing Mount Everest has

become less demanding? In one sense, the answer is probably yes. For example, better equipment and more thorough preparation based upon the experience of earlier expeditions is likely to have contributed to the improved success rate. Here, then, is a further question to reflect upon: do such improvements represent an improvement in mountaineering standards or not?

Figure 2 shows the national percentage of girls in the Year 11 cohort who were awarded a Grade C or better in GCSE/O-level/CSE English between 1985 and 1995. Hopefully, it is now clear why interpretation of this graph in terms of either falling examination standards or rising attainment is problematic. In the Mount Everest example, appeal to the common human experience that mountains do not normally change height on short time scales enabled us to rule out one interpretation of the data but in the case of examination outcomes there is no such common experience. Thus the two sides in the annual argument which greets the publication of public examination results about whether educational standards are rising or examination standards are falling are defined by their preconceptions about the relative likelihood of improving educational standards on the one hand or changing examination standards on the other. Since the examination data cannot, by themselves, provide evidence one way or the other, they contribute nothing to the debate except a focus for argument. Either interpretation can be defended but neither can be proven without recourse to other information which is both sparse and, itself, controversial. It follows that serious attempts to monitor educational standards quantitatively must use information other than the statistics of public examination results.

Further questions arise in the light of Figure 3 which shows the national percentage of boys in the Year 11 cohort who were awarded a Grade C or better in GCSE/O-level/CSE English between 1985 and 1995. Comparison of Figures 2 and 3 shows that the improvement in boys reported results was substantially less than that for girls over the time period shown. This raises several interesting questions such as:

Are GCSE English examinations increasingly biased in favour of girls or are educational standards for girls improving at a faster rate than those for boys or are there social phenomena leading to a growing gap between the performance of boys and girls or is there some other explanation?

If the overall pass rate for boys and girls combined had been kept constant from 1985 to 1995, the boys results would have declined. Does this mean that boys were really getting worse at English while the girls got better?

The examination results themselves can shed no light on the answers to these questions, but it seems worth noting that those who want to interpret the data purely in terms of falling examination standards must be able to explain how these standards have fallen more for girls than for boys, even though they have taken identical examinations. In any case, there are many explanations for changes in examination candidates results relating to demographic, social and administrative variables, which mean that the interpretation of examination statistics per se in terms of the quality of education delivered by the school system would still be impossible.

For publication details of *Educational Standards* please see page 29.

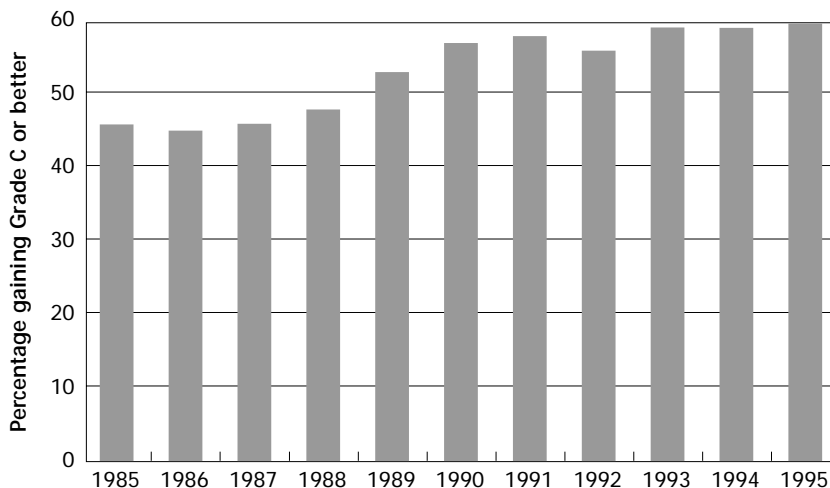


Figure 2. Year 11 girls pass rates in GCSE/O-level/CSE English 1985–1995. Data from GCSE Results Analysis: an analysis of the 1985 GCSE results and trends over time. Published in London by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority in 1996. (Note that the apparent drop in 1992 coincides with the use of a different original data source for 1992 onwards.)

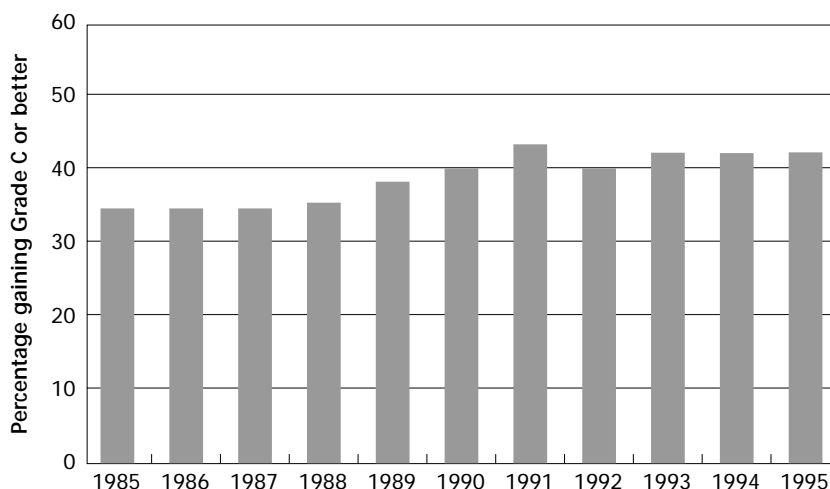


Figure 3. Year 11 boys pass rates in GCSE/O-level/CSE English 1985–1995. Data again taken from GCSE Results Analysis: an analysis of the 1985 GCSE results and trends over time. (Note that, as in Figure 2, the apparent drop in 1992 coincides with the use of a different original data source for 1992 onwards.)