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Opinion

Why in exams do we want a 20% failure rate?

The problem with A levels is not that too many pupils pass but that not enough do

Jon Coles

Imagine for a moment that you work in the aerospace industry, making turbines for jet engines. Now imagine that you have a 2 per cent failure rate for your finished product. Would you think you are doing well or badly?

Imagine, in the worst-case scenario, that your below-standard components are actually fitted to jet engines that go into service. As well as killing a lot of people, I imagine that you would go bust very quickly indeed.

Suppose that each of your products costs £3,000 and takes 600 hours to produce. Imagine that you produce one million a year. Your 2 per cent failure rate costs you £60 million a year and 12 million hours of people's time. A scandalous waste that you would be keen to address by every means possible, I am sure.

Extraordinarily, this is precisely the waste produced by our A-level system every year. A million qualifications taken, about £3,000 spent on each one over two years and 2 per cent failed. Yet every year the call is not for lower wastage and less failure but for more — critics carp that things are not what they were, that standards have fallen and that we must return to a time when 20 per cent failed.

Things are certainly not what they were. Do you remember how they were? Your lower-sixth year for example: of course, in theory the lack of exam pressure was ideal for "reading around your subject", but be honest, was it not even more ideal for lounging around the common room? And exams? Perhaps your technique was to revise your best four essays and hope that three came up? Or perhaps you spent two years struggling as best you could, sat your exams, then turned up breathlessly on results day and discovered that you'd failed. If so, was it a good use of two years of your life?

It isn't like that now. For a start exams are modular. Now you might think: "Yes, exactly — resits are the problem." I'd agree that preventing multiple resits is a good idea. But resits have much less of an impact on overall grades than you might think: after all, every hour spent revising for a resit is an hour you can't spend on the next module you're supposed to be doing.

It's also unarguable that modular exams create a much harder working year with much greater focus on

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passing them. It would be astonishing if this had no impact on results.

But the second impact of modular courses is even greater. If you are not going to pass a course, you discover it straight away and drop it early. Some stop studying subjects after one exam in January in Year 12 (the old lower sixth) so they never appear in any statistics for failure. Some go on to the end of year 12 and finish their AS exams before dropping anything.

We should expect improved pass rates after all the billions we have invested

In total about 1.4 million AS exams were completed last year in the UK; strikingly, only 867,000 full A levels were completed. A significant part of the difference is accounted for by candidates dropping weaker subjects.

The exam system is better than old-style A levels because it identifies failure early, allowing pupils to concentrate on subjects where they might succeed or perhaps go elsewhere and do vocational or on-the-job training instead.

Let me worry you about something else instead. Only a little over a third of 19-year-olds achieved two or more A levels. And this has not budged in seven years. In all our hand-wringing about falling standards, we've failed to notice this.

Pass rates have gone up not because more young people are getting A levels but because those who in the past would have failed them now get vocational qualifications instead — about half as many students get vocational qualifications as A levels.

But the failure to increase the proportion passing A levels should worry us if we look at what else is happening in the world. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the proportion of South Korean pupils achieving high-school qualifications jumped from about a third to more than 95 per cent. At least three quarters of South Korean youngsters born at the turn of the millennium will go on to higher education. In China, the number of university students graduating will grow from under four million a year in 2010 to more than ten million by 2020. Meanwhile, we have fallen from near the top of the international league table for university graduation rates to mid-table and falling.

We should stop worrying so much about "grade inflation" and too many pupils passing. Improved pass rates are the minimum we would expect from more than a generation of government effort and billions of pounds of investment.

Instead, we should focus on matching and exceeding those parts of the world that are getting better fastest — where, just as in the aerospace industry, continuous improvement is expected and every effort made to eliminate failure.

Jon Coles is chief executive of United Learning, a group of academies and independent schools and former Director General for Education Standards, Department for Education

THUNDERER

The rail franchise system is on a fast track to ruin

Christian Wolmar

I almost feel sorry for Sir Richard Branson. Almost. Railways are an industry in which enterprise is constrained, from the limits on the number of trains to the regulation of fares. It's not really the dry ice and pretty women business he favours. Yet Branson plunged in to introduce some pizzazz and energy. There were new trains, faster and more frequent services, on-board shops. Some of it worked, some of it didn't.

But it is hard to feel too much pity for the bearded one. He played hardball with the Government when it had to pick up Railtrack's liabilities when the infrastructure company failed in 2001. It had promised track capable of taking 140mph trains with in-cab signalling. When that proved impossible, Virgin hit the Government hard for compensation.

That started a fraught relationship that means many civil servants — and ministers — will not be sad to see the back of Virgin. Branson failed to

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understand politics. When it became clear that Virgin was losing the franchise, he made public a whingeing letter to Justine Greening, the Transport Secretary — the sort of lobbying that should have been done behind closed doors. It showed the extent to which he believes his own propaganda as the good guy who deserves a break.

It is, though, difficult to describe FirstGroup's bid in any way other than crazy. To stay in the black, it will need 10.4 per cent growth year on year from the moment the franchise starts in December, right through to 2026. While Virgin has indeed achieved 10.2 per cent in recent years, that was after Network Rail had spent £9 billion on improving the track and infrastructure and Pendolinos had replaced the old BR stock. There is no such step change in the offing now.

So it is difficult to see where the huge increase in passengers will come from. There is little leeway to increase off-peak fares, given the regulations, and putting up cheap fares dramatically will only send young people back on to the coaches trundling up and down the M1 and M6.

Many industry insiders privately believe that the West Coast line is heading the way of the East Coast, where two companies, Sea Containers and National Express, had to throw in the towel after massive overbidding.

So it is not entrepreneurial mettle that is at stake here; it is the very structure of the rail industry. Failure on the West Coast would lead not so much to questions about FirstGroup's judgment as to questions about the judgment of ministers in sticking to a franchising system that already looked broken after that double failure on the East Coast.

Christian Wolmar's latest book is The Great Railway Revolution (Atlantic)

Matthew Parris My Week

Let's see Mo draped in the flag of Somaliland

Mo Farah is not from Somalia. He is from Somaliland, a smaller, adjacent territory, relatively peaceful and better governed than Somalia has been: formerly a British colony. Somaliland (where Mo is worshipped) broke away from Somalia and is to all practical purposes an independent nation, but the international community has refused to recognise it; and the British Government (privately sympathetic to Somaliland) has never dared to break rank. British ministers and diplomats are feeling sheepish about failing to support the good guys against the bad guys.

As readers of my Saturday column may have sensed, I'm a bit of a legacy sceptic when it comes to big international jamborees — even shindigs as uplifting as these Olympics have proved — but if there's one legacy it would be nice to think London 2012 could leave, it would be a raising of Somaliland's profile here in Britain. Along with the Union Jack it would be a fine thing if one day Mo Farah could wrap himself in the flag of Somaliland too.

Is there death on Mars?

Incredible — like southwest Bolivia — those pictures from *Curiosity* on Mars. Humans next? On these pages last week the Astronomer Royal, Lord (Martin) Rees of Ludlow explained that getting astronauts home safely to Planet Earth complicates space missions horribly. So perhaps, he ventured, we might one day think about one-way trips for willing, paying tourists?

May I volunteer? Some, I know, enjoy their very old age. But I've watched my father felled by heart disease at 58; and his father likewise at 59; and I watched both of them crawl on in wretched health, enduring in their final years lives that would have been better not lived, costing the taxpayer vast sums better spent on the young. I'm sick of old people moaning that they wish they were dead. We live by choice.

So I've been asking myself at what age, for me, the thrill of landing on Mars would tip the balance against whatever pleasure remains for me in my declining years here on Earth. I turned 63 last week. I feel fit, but shall count myself lucky if I feel the same at 73. After 75 will be borrowed time.

So 75 it is. 2024. If I'm well enough to be strapped into a spacecraft, and sufficiently lucid to enjoy the adventure, then I'll be ready for blast-off. Wouldn't escaping our own planet's gravitational field be the biggest escape of all? Would I really pass that up just for a few years rocking gently in front of the television watching synchronised diving in the 2028 Olympics in an overheated nursing home with urine-soaked carpets? Instead to die on the Red Planet. Wow! Count me in! Amazing final moments! What a way to go!

High hurdles

You know that feeling that there's something not quite right about a story? I got it reading reports of obviously suitable candidates for the post of elected police commissioner being disqualified by trivial convictions in their long-lost youth. So I asked my researcher, Matthew Shaw, to make himself an overnight expert on the Commons standing committee proceedings of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act (2011) when a cross-party group of MPs scrutinised and revised the Bill.

As first drafted, the Bill set the hurdle at a level that must be cleared by anyone wanting to stand for the local council (disqualifying anyone actually sentenced to three or more months in prison within the previous five years). A Labour member of the committee then complained that this could set former criminals in authority over the police. The minister came back with an amended hurdle, enormously higher (anyone ever in their lives convicted for an imprisonable offence, whether or not they were themselves imprisoned). Still not satisfied, another Labour MP asked the minister to confirm that this would apply even to offences committed in youth. The minister did confirm that. Committee members were clearly ratcheting up the bar.

Curious, I thought. Then my eye fell on a remark by the minister introducing his amendment. It was, he said, "certainly the view of the Association of Chief Police Officers" that the hurdle should be raised. The reasoning, he added, was that the police themselves face a high hurdle. True enough. But his amendment raised it much higher than would-be police recruits actually do face, because even with serious convictions such as rioting, the force is allowed to use discretion when contemplating disqualification. I was astonished at the flexibility given here to chief constables.

Shall we sum up? ACPO, with Labour's support, have consistently opposed the whole idea of elected police commissioners. Trying to reassure ACPO, the Government have been lobbied into setting standards for would-be candidates higher than chief constables themselves set in recruiting officers. Advantage ACPO. Ministers' revenge? Remove police discretion to recruit former convicts as officers.