

A-level grades: why we need democratisation

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One fundamental issue behind the grade boundaries controversy is democracy. It is in the interests of working class people that the highest possible level of democracy should obtain in the field of qualifications, and we should seek to pursue this - through our unions, through pressure on the Labour Party, through political groups, through community organisations and via forums internal to colleges, schools and universities. What concrete steps can we advocate that would democratise the system?

First, we should be unequivocally in favour of the criterion-referencing of qualifications, defending and seeking to extend it where it already exists, especially where it is under threat, and calling for its introduction where it does not. And where this entails opposing norm-referencing we should do that too, just as unequivocally. Why?

Working class people as a group, as well as the majority of them as individuals, have everything to gain from the maximum extension of criterion-referencing and the withering away of norm-referencing to the extent that it is a corollary of this. All other things being equal, a tendency towards criterion-referencing, and hence away from norm-referencing, increases your chances of **knowing**, in advance of entering the assessment process, what you will have to do in order to get a given qualification - **and/or** a specific grade within it. For example, when you take the practical part of a criterion-referenced assessment like the driving test, you can know that to pass you must be able to look frequently in the mirror as well as through the windscreen, that you must not coast round corners etc etc. In other words, you know that if you are able to do certain things and refrain from doing other things, you are entitled to pass the test. The fact that some examiners may be stricter than others - ie may apply the criteria more tightly - does not alter this fact but rather underlines it.

The fact that these criteria are known means that, subject to the difference in individuals' situations - for example, whether your family owns a car in which you can practice, how much you can afford to spend on lessons etc - you have the best possible chance of organising yourself to achieve the qualification. Whereas if the driving test was **norm-referenced**, if - as is sometimes rumoured - there really were quotas as to the number or the proportion of candidates allowed to pass at any given time, that chance for self-organisation would, for the majority, be sharply diminished, because passing or failing would come to depend much more than at present on the decision of people over whom you can have little possibility of influence, let alone control. In class society - to move discussion on to the broader field of educational qualifications in general - those people, the people who determine the norms, and regardless of the class from which each of them personally may be drawn, cannot avoid operating overwhelmingly in the interests, not of the working class, but of the class which exploits us.

So to this extent we should stand up for criterion-referencing. **And** for us, then, it was a step forward when in 1988 the basis for awarding A-level passes and grades was altered from a norm-referenced to a criterion-referenced one. We should resist any attempt which may be made as a consequence of the current crisis to reverse this step.

However, it would be misleading and demagogic to leave the question there, with a simple cry of 'criterion-referencing good, norm-referencing bad'. The present controversy about AS- and A2 grade boundaries illustrates why such a standpoint, though right in itself, would be inadequate. The fact that **A-levels** were criterion-referenced from 1988, **despite being a big step forward from a** working class perspective over what had happened from their



introduction in the early 1950s up to then, nevertheless did not prevent the capitalist class from continuing to use them in *its* own interests, including both as a technical instrument for assigning people to positions in the **labour** force, and as an ideological weapon to attack and divide the working class. Nor did it prevent individual members both of the ruling class itself and of the much wider layer of people who operate largely in its interests - the upper professional classes if you like - from gaining advantages for their sons and daughters through the qualifications system.

There are two reasons for this. First, although **A-levels** became criterion-referenced to the extent that what you had to do to get one had now to be spelt out with respect to each subject, fulfilling these criteria still **did not** guarantee that you would get the qualification or grade that you wanted, because, as the present controversy has shown, the awarding bodies retained the right to adjust grades once marks **had** been allocated. In fact the Government laid an obligation on them to do so as part of their license to award qualifications at all. In other words, an element of norm-referencing remained in place alongside the criterion-referencing that was introduced, and most media commentators on the present debate - ie people articulating what is essentially a ruling class standpoint - treat this as desirable **commonsense**. Secondly, and more profoundly, although criteria were now open to inspection by, for example, teachers in comprehensive schools, colleges etc, rather than existing as an unspoken gentleman's agreement amongst a coterie of public school and Oxbridge examiners, that same coterie nevertheless remained in control of deciding them. Let us look in more detail at each of these factors in turn.

When commentators treat the continuation of norm-referencing within an ostensibly criterion-referenced

system as commonsense, they are right - but only within the framework within which such commentators operate - that is, one which assumes that the present social order is the best there can ever be. As members of the working class who seek to act in its interests we must decisively reject this framework. To those commentators it stands to reason - at normal times literally goes without saying - that '*we*' (ie the capitalist class and its state) must retain the power to control at any given time what proportion of those taking public examinations should pass, get the top grades and hence enter the competition for higher education places, professional **and/or** para-professional jobs and the like. But as workers we have no interest in accepting this.

However, our objection is not to norm-referencing in itself. On the contrary, we should under certain circumstances be in favour of this.

For example, where there is a genuine social need to produce a limited number, say, of health professionals or physics researchers, then we should be in favour of norms being set and applied at the level of the qualifications system to produce this number and not more or less. This would be better than letting lots of people achieve the qualification and then allowing interview panels, which are more likely than exams to discriminate against those who are already exploited and oppressed, to allocate HE places or jobs. Under those circumstances, the issue for us would be, not whether to have norm-referencing, but who should decide, by what mechanism, in whose interests, **how** many or what proportion of those who met the criteria should be awarded the qualification. But everything here depends on whether the ostensible need is genuine or not. For example, there is not a genuine social need to produce people who carry out cosmetic surgery for the super-rich, as happens under the existing social order. But suppose the working class were to take power and, with resources that were still limited, to set about producing doctors to eradicate TB. It would then be right to determine who could enter medical **training**, first by making explicit the criteria **to** be met in the qualifying **exam**, and secondly by deciding democratically how many of those meeting these criteria should be trained, ie how far down the order of marks the cut-off point should lie.

Only at a much later stage of development, under a situation where scarcity had been abolished, would it be possible - and then it would be obligatory - to abandon norm-referencing **and** let anyone who met the **criteria**, and eventually just anyone who wanted to, to enter medical training. Under that quite different situation, the process of teaching and learning **itself** - as opposed to assessment as we understand it now - might well sort out who ended up with the capacity to work as a doctor.

Our objection, then, is not to norm-referencing in principle under all conceivable circumstances, but to norm-referencing as it operates here and **now** in capitalist society. And under those circumstances, in contrast to media

commentators, no matter how liberal or progressive they may be, and despite our support for struggles against the bureaucracy currently associated with criterion-referencing, we reject norm-referencing and call for its replacement by criterion-referencing.

This brings us to the second point raised above, namely that the introduction of criterion-referencing for A-levels in 1988 did not prevent a coterie of examiners from continuing to operate the system in the interests of the capitalist class and against those of the working class. The continued dominance of this coterie shows that for us it is not enough to call merely for **critterion-referencing fullstop**. We must also address at least two other issues, namely: who sets the criteria? and 'how are the criteria to be applied?' (Of course, these questions can only come onto the agenda for action once those in power have conceded criterion-referencing of some **kind**, however **limited**.)

Although there are differences between awarding bodies - for example, the academic side of AQA, deriving as it does in part from the Associated Examining Board (AEB), is not so under the thumb of traditional universities as OCR - A-levels are **now and** have always been a device by which the ruling class interests that overwhelmingly dominate the **pre-1992** - that is, the selecting - universities control what happens in secondary schools. With respect to state secondaries this means essentially the process by which one section of the working class and of other classes close to it is creamed **off** to administer - and thereby ultimately to crush - the rest. That is what the **A-level** assessment process was for at the start and what it remains for today. Now clearly there is no such thing as assessment without criteria. All judgements are made on some basis, whether or not the person who judges can say what this is, and whether or not he or she does in fact say what it is. The question is whether those criteria are made explicit and also whether they are then made public. Between the introduction of A-levels in 1951 and 1988, regardless of how lowly some of the people may have been who did the initial marking of A-level scripts, they operated within a consensus shaped essentially by Oxbridge academics and teachers in public schools - the coterie we have referred to. Within limits, everybody knew the sort of thing you were looking for in marking English Literature, Physics or whatever. From 1988, for all kinds of reasons to do with the political constituency of **Thatcherism**, its assault from the right on some remnants of ruling class privilege, what you were marking for had to be written down so that in principle anyone could look at it. But in essence much the same people, or people entirely subservient to them, did this writing down, and much the same ethos continued to hold sway. In fact, we might even argue that, having strengthened its position by the apparent concession of **critterion-referencing**, this ethos became still more prevalent - in other words, that changing on the surface allowed it to remain much the same underneath.

That is why we must call for criteria to be set by quite other people. We must call for them to be set by groups of people who are elected and recallable by the constituencies that matter from our point of view. Thus if, for example, A-level English is in practice a qualification for doing a law degree, then we should demand that lawyers who regularly defend working class people in court, at industrial tribunals etc, and shop stewards from amongst relevant para-legal workers, should have a central say in determining the criteria for that A-level, along with those who are genuinely academic researchers (ie as opposed to the professors who steal their insights) both in law and in English, with representatives of those who need legal protection the most - for example black people - plus also basic grade teachers of English, and also with personnel officers from firms who employ people with this qualification or with the degrees to which it affords access. In short, defending and extending criterion-referencing necessarily entails putting forward demands about who sets - and who can change - the criteria.

It also entails making demands about how criteria should be applied. This is another field in which, having conceded criterion-referencing, the ruling class can and does turn that concession to its advantage, minimising the extent to which its **pro-working** class potential can be **actualised**. The current grade boundaries controversy has not touched on this aspect and yet there is every reason to think that a system in which moderators are accountable only to those above them in awarding bodies fosters a situation in which they can and do use their discretion in day to day decisions to discriminate against working class people. Moderators **must** be made answerable to the constituencies who should set the criteria as outlined above.

We must call, at the very least, for a unified awarding body, and, like some other commentators in the current debate, for it to become directly answerable to parliament, as opposed to remaining a quango answerable nominally to the Secretary of State but in fact to Downing Street advisers. We must also demand that the powers of this awarding body be truly limited to administration, such that the crucial decisions, both about what the criteria shall be and how they shall be applied, cease to be taken by a bloc of awarding body **officials** with Russell Group academics, public school heads of department etc, and start to be taken by bodies to which our side can elect representatives, and from which it can recall them. We must try to narrow the space awarding bodies have to decide qualifications policy - and thereby what shall be taught and learnt - under the guise of ideologically neutral administration.

In short, one basis of our answer to the crisis which has developed in the qualifications **system**, and which is calling into question many other aspects of the role played by qualifications in the capitalist social order, is real and consistent democratisation.