

Case Study: The A-level marking fiasco

The publication of students' A-level results in 2002 saw the beginning of an extensive and highly political debate about standards in education. It was argued that the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA examinations boards had downgraded some of the papers they had marked in order to avoid accusations of making A-levels too easy to pass. An inquiry was ordered by the Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris, and was headed by Mike Tomlinson. After some weeks of debate, it was decided on October 4th that the coursework and examination scripts of more than 90,000 students would have to be re-marked, to ensure that standards of assessment were fair and equal. This decision served to calm the moral panic that was occurring, although many people spoke out against the government's handling of the fiasco. Meanwhile, the students whose grades were being questioned faced some difficult choices, especially if they were now at university. Those who had narrowly missed the A-level grades they needed to secure a place in their first choice of university could either stay where they were or gamble on the chances of their work being marked up to the higher level that would allow them to move. They risked serious financial problems if they had to take an unscheduled gap year, and universities were not to be given any more funding for taking on extra students.

Source:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/alevels2002/story/0,,811651,00.html>

Questions:

1. What does this story tell us about the marking of exams as a *social* process?
2. Why did the government need to address the risk of the public losing faith in the education system?
3. Some critics have pointed to the way in which the A-level system is organised, and argued for the introduction of the International Baccalaureate instead. How would this course be different from A-levels?
4. What do you think are the likely consequences of the fiasco for universities and higher education?
5. Will the re-marking of students' work have any effect upon inequalities in education?