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UK Education and Training Standards Fail the International Test: Lessons to be learned from competitors in Europe and the US says major Politeia study

As thousands of candidates across the country take their A-levels, the government and its curriculum advisers are at loggerheads about the latest changes announced for the exam. The quarrels reflect the chasm between the policy of the government of the day to increase, for political reasons, participation and pass rates, and that of those it employs to act as the gatekeeper of standards.

Politeia's latest study *Comparing Standards: Academic and Vocational, 16-19 year olds* shows that the problem goes far deeper. *Comparing Standards* examines how this country's standards compare with those found in similar industrial democracies elsewhere. The study breaks new ground, by using a team of independent specialists in a range of academic (maths, history and language) and vocational (electronics engineer, chef, and nursery nurse) subjects. It has conducted a specialist examination for each subject, of the syllabuses, curricula and examinations for the six countries of our study and explained how this country compares in terms of standards and qualifications. The team has done so without fear or favour of the government, or its official quangos.

The conclusions are disturbing. In both the academic and the vocational spheres, this country already offers narrow and shallow courses where others demand far more knowledge to a deeper level. Moreover the emphasis here on what is taught is often wrong and key subjects may be omitted. The exams and qualifications system is chaotic. School leavers receive the same qualifications without having taken the same or even similar courses and exams on the same basis. The A-levels have become subjective, undemanding, and depend too much on the personal qualities or preferences of the candidate, rather than using the same yardstick to measure all. Assessment for vocational courses is broken into a number of 'competencies', rather than, as happens elsewhere, candidates being tested by written and practical exams. Furthermore the changes planned by the government will make an already appalling situation worse, because they fail to tackle the fundamental problems

Politeia's education commissioners, Professors Sig Prais and Alan Smithers, and Chris Woodhead analyse the reports and discuss their implications for standards in this country.

The study makes a number of practical proposals for reform of 16-19 academic and vocational examinations:-

- The overall structure should change with the appointment of a body of specialists independent of the government of the day to ensure that courses and examinations are of a rigorous standard, and to register only those examinations that qualify. In vocational education, the legal stranglehold of the QCA should be ended.
- The trend to modular exams and the use of coursework in A-levels should be reversed.
- A-level should be returned to being a single examination, and the AS-level should be abolished.
- In vocational education, the competency based assessment model should be abandoned and replaced by externally set and marked exams, with nation wide syllabuses and tests, which would ensure that essential theoretical and practical material would be taught and tested.
- The present pursuit of uniformity should be abandoned and three distinct pathways introduced for vocational, technical and academic.

An extended version of Chapter 2, Systems, is posted on our website together with the table of contents. The study itself is available from Politeia, 22 Charing Cross Road, London, WC2H 0QP

Price: £12.00 (including P&P)