

Competition and market-forces exert a downward pressure on the breadth and rigour of 16-plus education

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Market forces and consumer-power may drive up the quality of some commodities, but not school examinations. [John Butterworth](#) gives an authors' perspective on the problematic relationship between awarding bodies and educational publishers.



The House of Commons Education Committee is currently investigating the administration of examinations for 15-19 year olds. High on the Committee's agenda is the question of whether to recommend a change to a single awarding body (AB), or alternatively to one AB per subject. Regrettably, there is considerable ammunition available to those who support such a move. It would be very hard to imagine a structure for administering examinations less likely to raise or even maintain standards than the one we have in the UK at present. Only a naive optimist would hope that a handful of large awarding bodies competing for a finite pool of customers (a.k.a. candidates), would take the initiative in setting more challenging assessments than their competitors.

Combined with the added pressure of league tables and university admissions, a rhetorical question emerges: What head, or parent, would thank a teacher who chose the more challenging of competing syllabuses with a view to giving their students a richer intellectual experience at the risk of poorer grades? Natural selection and market forces ensure that this is not a viable option.

Add to this the network of alliances which has grown up between the awarding bodies and selected educational publishers. [The relationship between Edexcel and Pearson is summed up in their own words:](#)

Edexcel is part of [Pearson](#), the world's largest education business ... Edexcel is the UK's largest awarding body offering academic and vocational qualifications and testing to schools, colleges, employers and other places of learning...

The Awarding Body for A-Levels (AQA) and Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) have also formed close ties with particular publishers in the past, offering exclusive endorsements to text books and other resources on a routine basis across whole swathes of the curriculum. [The Society of Authors](#) has grave concerns about these practices, not only because of their restrictive nature, but also on broader educational grounds. Many of the textbooks that are branded by the examination boards as the best, if not the *only*, publications which can deliver the syllabus for their awards, are actually shallow and constricted in their treatment of the subject.

A subject and a syllabus (or 'specification') are not the same things. However, all too often the reliance on officially endorsed texts reduces the former to the latter. Teachers teach, and students learn, just what they need to pass the exam. ABs promote their 'products' (namely their awards) by offering highly focused resources to support their specifications.

The Society of Authors recommended to the Education Select Committee that a number of different actions be taken. Firstly, there should be a requirement for students to show in some part of their

examination that they have consulted a wide range of different sources. Likewise, there needs to be a course-structure which allows this to happen. Exam questions should be introduced which require longer, essay-style answers, as this will greatly increase breadth of learning and literacy and communication skills. Additionally, there should be a time allowance, before the new curriculum is launched, for publishers and authors to create quality new teaching materials. Contrary to recently stated policy, we should abolish league tables; and also contrary to recently stated policy, we should make school libraries compulsory.

The Society canvassed members – many of whom were themselves teachers and/or examiners – on the state of educational publishing for GCSE and AS/A level. Out of the high volume of responses, the following were typical:

“Publishers have stifled initiative in their pursuit of materials more or less guaranteed to ‘get pupils through the tests’, which is what the schools want... until you get rid of this mentality or change the tests they will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog.”

“Reputable publishers are still keen to provide quality and value in the material they publish for teachers but they are hampered by the lack of money available to schools. Fewer books are being bought and publishers are being forced to concentrate more and more on market success.”

“Exam boards have become increasingly concerned to maximise revenue. They have allied themselves with the big educational publishers to produce ‘exam board recommended’ texts. It is hardly surprising that examiners have authored these books. Sometimes quite slim books are co-authored by a considerable number of them. This might account for some of the lifelessness of the product.”

As an author and examiner I know of at least one hurriedly-produced text book that was assured endorsement *before it was written* because of the standing agreement between the exam board and the publisher. On the back cover it declared that the book was: ‘Written by experts; checked by examiners.’ It didn’t add that in fact the experts *were* the examiners. I have no reason to think that this was an isolated case, though I understand that such arrangements have lately come under greater scrutiny.

The comment noting that the examination tail wags the education dog is entirely apt. Under any rational arrangement, a public examination exists to stimulate learning, and provide discriminating data to those responsible for selection and admission to the next level of education, or to deserved and appropriate employment. Exams permit selectors to make fair and informed judgements about the ability and achievement of those who sit them. The selectors are the proper consumers, and it is surely by them that the quality of the product (if we must call it that) should be determined. But the selectors do not hold the purse strings or provide the revenue that funds the assessment industry. The revenue may come from the taxpayer, but it is routed via the candidates and the schools that they attend, and it is they who decide which brand to buy. No A-grades for guessing the criteria most likely to determine their choices.

To reverse the inexorable downward pressure on standards, control and regulation must be restored to those whose interests are served by *increasing* the challenge posed by examinations, rather than offering the most attractive option to the candidates. Market forces and consumer-power may drive up the quality of some commodities, but not examinations.

The Society of Authors has publicly stated its concerns that, in the current climate: “There is little incentive or opportunity for students to appreciate a subject’s subtlety, to research its complexity, to write discursively, or even to learn to think for themselves.”

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

John Butterworth is a free-lance writer, researcher, and former teacher. His field of work for the past 20 years has been thinking and reasoning skills in post-16 education, and he is a senior examiner for both UK and international awarding bodies in critical thinking and related subjects. He has written a range of educational books for various publishers, including OUP, CUP, and Nelson Thornes; and is a long-standing member of [The Society of Authors](#).

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