

HEADLINERS

We get better A levels because we work harder

The arrival of AS results brings a predictable lament, but pupils themselves know the workload is getting harder, not easier.

I'm not looking forward to opening my AS exam results today.

If last year's GCSE results are anything to go by, no matter how well I and my fellow students have done, someone is going to tell us that the exams we worked for were easier than they should have been, and easier than they used to be.

For people who are disappointed with their grades, such a response

from the adult world only serves to make them feel even worse. They will ask themselves: "How could I have done so badly on such an 'easy' exam?"

For those who have worked hard and achieved good grades, this

persistent criticism undermines their achievement and future motivation - what's the point in working harder for your A-level grades when the exams are going to be rubbished?

Last year, when the 2002 A-Level pass rates went up yet again, for the 18th year in a row, headlines across the country screamed that exams were easier than they'd ever been. A week later, when GCSE results came out, the only way the newspapers could make sense of the 97.9 percent pass rate was to accuse exam boards of being slack. And it's the same this year. The only difference is that the backlash started earlier than usual - before the results were even out!

Other students feel the same way. When I asked some of those at my school who were actually sitting the A-level exams this year, they told me how demoralised they felt by the reported public views. Like me, they're working harder than ever before - not only in the classroom but also outside of school with private tutors.

I've taken over 45 different exams since I entered school, and I too

have had to turn to tutors to help me with them. For my Key Stage 2 Sats, for example, I turned to tutoring because I thought they would make my grades higher than others who were applying to the same secondary comprehensive school that I wished to get into. Yes, the school is supposed to accept applicants from all abilities, but everyone knows that good schools have more applicants than they can accommodate, and proven ability matters to them.

Besides Sats, I was also tutored for GCSEs and AS-levels - and I

expect to have still more tutoring for my A-levels. It's not that I prefer extra tuition; after all it's very expensive, and my family doesn't have that sort of money. So, in addition to doing more work for school, I also have to find time to earn the money to pay for it! Still, I wish to make the most of my courses, and to be accepted by the university of my choice.

I'm not the only one, of course. Eleven-year-old Jason, from East

London, told me that he wouldn't have been able to get good grades in his Key Stage 2 SATS exams if his mum had not paid for him to have a private tutor. "It helped me a lot," he says, "because if I didn't get the answers right at school, the tutor would help me. It was different at school because there were so many people shouting the answer. With my tutor I got more attention and more time."

Jason also feels it is unfair for adults to put down the efforts made

by young people. "There's lots of pressure on us to do well but then they tell us it's getting easier. If that's true, why are so many children getting tutors to help them get through their exams?"

My friends Ben, 17, and Tom, 18, both from London, had private tutors when they were sitting exams. Ben felt he needed to cover more ground in his subjects than he was able to do during school time, while Tom was afraid he would not pass his GCSEs with good grades unless he got extra help. They too resent the criticism of the examinations that they did well in. "What do they want?" says Tom. "Do they want to make exams harder for us and then let us fail?"

You might think that the exam pressures that I and my classmates are under would lead me to prefer a baccalaureate system, such as they have on the continent. Many more courses taught to a lower standard would be a lot less stressful!

But, in fact, I think the pressure for instituting the bac here is

just another way of devaluing the exams we are working so hard to get. What we want is appreciation of the work we are doing, and respect for the learning we are achieving. It is not an easier life that we want, it is acceptance that the work we are doing is worthwhile.

There will always be cynics who doubt the abilities of young people.

Convincing many adults that we're putting as much, if not more effort into exams than they did when they were younger is not easy, especially if the results are not allowed to speak for themselves.

It's childish to put other people's success down to anything other

than their own efforts. Maybe the only way we'll solve this debate is by forcing 'grown ups' back to school one last time, so that they can sit their exams again. That will prove once and for all just how easy exams have got! - or not!

About the team

This story was produced by Annabel McLeod, 16. It was published in [The Independent](#).

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