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How many passes – or which ones?

It must really annoy teenagers waiting for their GCSE or A Level results to read articles saying how it was all so much harder in the good old days.

Whatever may or may not have changed in the exam system, it is certainly not the doing of those actually sitting the exams. Hampshire youngsters have just notched up some great results, and deserve celebration and praise. In my experience today's young people work every bit as hard at school as my generation did.

There is also better structuring and preparation of lessons these days, sharper appreciation of different learning styles and special needs, and generally smart use of IT and media to enhance learning. Teachers have done a great job and driven real improvements in performance.

But such has been the relentless focus on league tables that other things have been done, too, that somewhat flatter the improved results: 'equivalent' qualifications, modularisation, an explosion in re-sits, and so on.

Recently, attention has turned to another aspect – the mix of subjects studied.

The variety of courses on offer has risen dramatically, and it is good that there are opportunities for serious study of Music Technology or Photography, and for tasters in Law or Accountancy.

But these sorts of subjects used to be more explicitly 'options' courses, to be taken on top of a common core made up of subjects like English, maths, a language, the sciences, history or geography.

In recent years that core itself has been eroded. In 1997 half of all GCSE students entered for the full set of these key traditional subjects; last year it was less than a quarter. That quarter was disproportionately concentrated in private schools and the best state schools, while fewer than one in ten pupils on free school meals entered for the full set.

This matters because these are the subjects that we know universities and employers put a premium on. For the individual they are the ones that keep your options most open. The system has failed to draw that distinction.

In future, a new certificate – the English Baccalaureate – will show when a young person has passed a full complement of six core academic subjects (they can do others as well). It is right not to make these compulsory, but right too to signal that for most students, some subjects do tend to give you more options than others.