

[Forget competitive exam boards, we should abolish O-Levels altogether](#) [1]

Written by [Anton Howes](#) [2] | Wednesday 27 June 2012

Michael Gove's proposal to abolish competing exam boards for his new O-levels has sparked an important debate within the free-market movement. On the one hand, Liz Truss MP leads the approving side, while Dale Bassett of Reform, James Croft of the Centre for Market Reform of Education, and I, have all [cautioned against the dangers of establishing subject-by-subject exam board monopolies](#) [3].

Liz Truss's main response to our criticism has been that competitive exam boards represent a 'pseudo market' where government determines content, and that we have misunderstood the proposed structure: it is to be a franchise system rather than a monopoly. Similarly, she cites successful genuine free market qualifications like that of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), who don't have competing exam boards within their structure.

However, a franchising system is nothing more than a temporary monopoly. There may well be fierce competition for each contract, but it can only serve to restrict the hitherto limited number of competitors even further, as some fail to land contracts and go out of business. This sort of limited competition is also even more conducive to succumbing to the pressures of lobbyists and thus grade inflation as the 'buying' is done by a single body rather than by each individual school. [As James Croft has pointed out](#) [4], centralisation also concentrates risk, making it less likely for qualifications to gain and sustain confidence in their standards. Overall, the points made against monopolies still stand.

Nevertheless, the real problem is the persistence of a state-run and state-designed qualification. Comparing CIMA and O-levels is to compare apples to oranges: one is private, and one is not. Where politicians have control, centralisation must be avoided at all costs. The proposed abolition of the National Curriculum suggests that schools will no longer be bound to use O-levels, and will have more freedom to choose from an abundance of existing and potential alternative qualifications. But O-levels' very existence as a state-run and state-sponsored qualification will necessarily crowd out the competition, leaving it in a dominant position.

Instead, perhaps both sides of the debate could agree to abolish O-levels (and A-levels) altogether. Superior private alternatives already exist, and would welcome the prospect of a more level playing field without government distortions. Even better, existing institutions' experience of setting exams and designing syllabuses should be used, perhaps by encouraging the currently competing exam board companies to set up their own, entirely separate qualifications. This increased competition could also produce a variety of qualifications that meet employers' and universities' demands by including them in syllabus-setting processes. Rather than debating the design of a government qualification, we must be truly radical and propose its abolition.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/forget-competitive-exam-boards-we-should-abolish-o-levels-altogether>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5795>

[3] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/michael-goves-exam-board-monopoly-is-a-step-backwards>

[4] <http://www.cmre.org.uk/blog/examinations-reform/a-single-exam-board-might-seem-a-tidy-solution-but-further-rationalisation-of-exams-provision-should-be-avoided/>

[5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[6] <http://disqus.com>