

[Michael Gove's exam board monopoly is a step backwards](#) [1]

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Michael Gove's proposals for education are certainly an upheaval, but scrapping competing exam boards for the new O-levels may be a big mistake. The reasoning behind the proposal, espoused by supporters like Liz Truss MP, is that competition causes a 'race to the bottom', with teachers and schools self-interestedly choosing the easiest qualifications for any given subject in order to boost their rankings in the league tables. The argument goes that this has been one of the chief causes of 'dumbing down' in school qualifications.

Irrespective of whether this is true or not, it doesn't necessarily mean that we should throw the competition baby out with the bathwater. As Dale Bassett of Reform points out, competition has generated some excellent curricula in response to the demand for higher quality, like International GCSEs, the International Baccalaureate (vested interest: I took it), and the Cambridge Pre-U. It is not clear how far the new proposals will limit the ability of schools to deviate from the GCSE/O-Level path in order to choose these alternatives, though the scrapping of the National Curriculum suggests that school freedom will be extended rather than curtailed.

But beyond competing curricula, a plethora of different and competing exam boards within a particular qualification gives us the opportunity to discriminate more effectively when figuring out individual kids' ability and knowledge. For example, English from Exam Board X may be superior to English from Exam Board Y, but despite the fact the 'buyers' of exam boards are schools and teachers, they have had to conform to government-sanctioned rankings and league tables that treat competing qualifications as equivalent. Employers and universities have suffered from the illusion that this lack of distinction makes too.

The proposals to limit exam board competition to monopolies for every subject (or duopolies between O-levels and CSEs) would therefore exacerbate the problem by limiting healthy academic discrimination even further. With only one exam board to be lobbied for each subject, we would face a system where every self-interested education minister could easily 'dumb down' the system even further, no matter how much an overhaul could raise standards in the immediate short term.

Free-marketeer MPs like Liz Truss should be more wary of the dangers of this proposed exam board monopoly. Rather than abolishing competition, the real solution to grade inflation may lie in more accurate and discriminating government league tables, or even their replacement with a competing system of tables by universities, employers, and other private groups. The abolition of the National Curriculum may well free schools from the shackles of clumsy government league tables too, but we will have to wait and see for more detailed proposals.

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