



Definite Article

Perfect thinking

Alice Phillips appeals to universities to recognise excellence over narrow perfectionism.

IN 1972, a petite Russian gymnast, Olga Korbut, became the darling of the Munich Olympics and made gymnastics compulsive television viewing with her skill and her engaging charm. All was good. In Montreal in 1976, Romanian gymnast, Nadia Comaneci, scored the first 'perfect 10'. Again and again. 7 times in all. Yet she rarely smiled. Overnight, almost without our noticing, hundreds of little girl gymnasts worldwide began to seek absolute perfection rather than simply excellence and brilliance.

How well do we teachers know that the outstanding score in a test or exam applies far more pressure on the student facing the *next* test. Yet, as a profession, when GCSE was introduced in 1986, we were hoodwinked into the notion that a 'one-size-fits-all' examination was a must, and to achieve that spread of marks, we must 'use the full range of the marks'. Overnight, 100% – the perfect score – became possible. A dangerous genie was released from the lamp.

∴ 'Perfection was simply not possible and that, frankly, was a good thing... you were rewarded if you put maximum effort into work...'

As a teenager in the 1970s, I vividly recall that it was a very good day when an English or History essay scored over 14/20. I was content and valued the recognition. Perfection was simply not possible and that, frankly, was a good thing; the pursuit of excellence as I sat down to write each piece was exciting, interesting, and unthreatening. At the end of the day, you were rewarded if you put maximum effort into work, thought carefully about the content, and provided interesting and original ideas. You felt a freedom to experiment and explore without fear of penalty.

The world of gymnastics from Comaneci onwards gradually took a turn for the worse. Small gymnasts began to be too small, to look distorted in their growth, with unnaturally extended hands and arms, and unhealthily thin frames. Their smiles were mechanical.

Tales abounded of harshly intense and joyless hours of coaching. To reach that magic 10 led to ever more contorted moves, twists, turns, jumps etc. Gymnastics ceased to be engaging watching and instead started to raise anxiety in the viewer as more and more daring feats were accomplished, along with more wobbles, falls, injuries and tears. Yet somehow it remained compelling. It was not sustainable and in 2006 the marking was revised, making a perfect score impossible.

In the world of public examinations, a similarly slippery slope towards a perfection orientated system was in sight. In 1988 when the first GCSEs were graded, from A-G for *all*, the higher grades became more attainable by many. Wasn't that a good thing, I hear you cry? Criterion referenced exams meant that those who could meet the demands of the mark scheme gained the grades. It was not done by proportions of the population accessing certain boundaries. Yes, in principle that did seem more fair.

The down side? Teachers and students began the move from the pursuit of excellence and understanding towards 'teaching/learning for the test'. Inevitable. Great teachers want to inspire their pupils but they also want them to do well within whatever the current 'system' demands. The pursuit of perfection began to hold sway.

Of course good teachers, diligent students, and ambitious/anxious parents were soon more equal to this challenge and 'grade inflation' was recorded over time. I've always disliked that term. If students were worthy of the highest grade for an attainment within that kind of system, they deserved to get it. As did their teachers deserve great credit for delivering what the system wanted. The problem was the system. The parallels with the world of gymnastics are clear...

Before we knew where we were, universities wanted a more discriminating 16+ exam grading scheme and the dreaded A* was added to the pile. And then something very significant happened. Our most exalted universities in particular, finding selection harder, decreed that for consideration for a place at all, candidates would have to have at least 6 or 7 A* grades at GCSE. Teachers and students set off once again in pursuit of that new perfection: not just a few A* grades but a full set became the target. A disastrous pressure – particularly for our most academic young people. While there are no doubt other contributing factors, surely this has been a significant cause of the rise in teenage mental health issues we have seen in the last decade.

The government has sought to address this point in the last few years by making GCSEs more demanding – such that content will be deeper and gradings changed once again. From this Summer, Grades 9-1 attempt to reverse the trend and change significantly the expectations of students and teachers. Will this remove the unhealthy scramble for perfection?

The answer is that this will depend on those who have the future of young people in their hands: employers and higher education institutions. The responsibility is theirs. Grades 7 and 8 will be the equivalent of the old A and A*. Where does that leave 9? Rare, I hope. A truly wonderful surprise on results' day in the odd subject where scholarship is acknowledged. Please, God, let that be so.

Dear Vice Chancellors, when you review your selection criteria, with no AS Level grades on University application forms, please ensure that GCSE Grade 9 is not a requirement, but a 'nice to have'. Please readjust the focal point of academic study back towards the pursuit of excellence, excitement and experiment and away from the narrow, risk-averse focus on perfection. Your future research students will be the richer for it and the whole country will benefit.

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