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Regulars

Editorial

by Robert Hunt



Maths A–levels are "too easy"

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has announced that Mathematics A–levels are going to be made more difficult, to correct a slide in standards over the past decade. Maths is apparently the only subject in which standards have fallen, and efforts are required to restore confidence in it.

The implicit suggestion that students currently studying for maths A–levels have "got it easy", and that their A–level qualification won't really be worth the paper it's written on, will not be received well by those students, or their teachers. After all, maths is still thought of as a "difficult" subject, with higher intellectual demands than many others. And few teachers want it to be made even more difficult and therefore even less attractive to potential students.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the A–level course does not cover the same material in the same depth as it did many years ago. This has caused severe problems for University maths courses, who are now having to teach what they regard as A–level material to their freshers. In particular, many A–level students are much worse at algebraic manipulation than was the case in the past, because they don't get as much practice as they used to. Consequently, the amount of maths which Universities can get through in a three year BA course is now less than it used to be.

So there are problems on all sides. What solution is there? After all, we don't want to put off people who want to study Chemistry, Biology, Economics, Business Studies, Psychology, Engineering, Computing (or a host of other subjects for which maths is not a prerequisite) at University from taking maths A–level: a proper understanding of mathematical concepts is extremely useful for the technical parts of those subjects at University. Without an understanding of maths, scientists can make fundamental mistakes and not even realise it. However, the fact that those scientists haven't had lots of practice at algebraic manipulation is not in itself a problem.

Perhaps the answer lies in creating a new A–level, aimed at those who want to *use* maths but who don't need to be experts in the more technical aspects of mathematics. Perhaps it could be called *Mathematics for Scientists*. We shall suggest it to the QCA!

About the author

Dr. Robert Hunt is the Editor of *Plus* Magazine.



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