



Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre

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ALIS - COMPARISON WITHOUTH
MALICE

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ALIS – comparisons without malice

by David Elsom and Dr Carol Fitz-Gibbon

All kinds of people want to know how well a particular school is doing. They include parents trying to decide where their children might go and governors concerned about 'their school'.

Then, there are the LEAs legally responsible for monitoring the schools for which they are accountable; and, above all, teachers and heads anxious to have confirmation that they are doing a good job, or an indication that they could do better and, just as importantly, some ideas about how they could go about improving their performance.

Most of these groups want to be sure that the basis for looking at performance, or at comparisons, is a fair one. They rightly suspect that at the secondary level, GCSE or A-level results on their own do not tell the whole story. They know that differences in intake, levels of resources and different subjects taken, will influence whether a particular school looks good or not.

Equally they know that examination results are not everything: student satisfaction with the way in which they learned and were taught; their relationship with the staff; the way they were treated; the help they received at critical points in their school career; all these are just as important.

COMBSE

Ten years ago Carol Fitz-Gibbon, working in the School of Education at Newcastle University, was approached by a governor with these concerns about making fair comparisons.

Carol set up a research project initially called COMBSE, whose purpose was to allow Confidential Measurement-Based Self-Evaluation by schools taking part in the scheme.

Confidential – each participating school/college chooses a code name known only by itself.

Measurement-Based – the system measures the 'value added' between GCSE and A-level, student by student, and allowance can be made for other variables, such as socio-economic class of parents.

Self-Evaluation – allows each establishment to work out its own agenda for improvement, away from the glare of published, raw exam scores.

Originally, the scheme covered only A-level English and A-level mathematics in some dozen schools in the North East of England, but as more schools have become involved, so the number and range of subjects covered has increased: there are now some 120 schools and colleges involved, and in 1991–92 most A-level subjects will be reported on.

How does it work?

Each year a school or college arranges to give people from the A-Level Information System (ALIS) access to all final-year A-level students in the period November to February for a 'test and questionnaire' session lasting about one-and-a-half or two hours.

In this session students provide data about themselves; respond to questions about the teaching and learning styles they have encountered; and take a 'test of developed ability' which involves verbal comprehension and numeracy skills.

In late August the school/college provides ALIS with details of the A- and AS-level results, student by student, subject by subject.

The administrative burden on the school/college is kept to a minimum.

The costs of ALIS are borne by the LEA in some cases, but individual schools and colleges are now starting to pay their own costs; for a school with about 75 second-year

A-level students the cost (including ALIS-provided INSET) has been about £1,000, and for 150 students, about £1,250.

The reports

Every autumn each school/college receives three reports on all of the subjects covered by the scheme, based on the cohort who sat their A- and AS-levels in the preceding June.

Each of the three reports helps to answer certain important questions: in the first two of the reports, those relating to examinations and to attitudes, school/colleges can identify themselves and compare themselves to other apparently similar institutions, but only by the code names of other establishments.

Examinations

• *How can we most accurately predict results for a group of candidates?*

The best predictor of A-level grade is the average GCSE grade of a student, rather than their grade in a comparable GCSE subject.

• *What index would be better than the usual percentage of passes?*

The difference, positive or negative, between what we might have expected a student to achieve, by reference to their average GCSE compared to other candidates, and what they actually achieved.

• *Has my department done better or worse than departments with similar students?*

The average of the positive or negative differences between expected and achieved gives an indication.

Attitudes

• *Did students like the school/college?*

• *Would students recommend their friends to take a particular subject at this school/college?*

• *Is that percentage similar to other schools/colleges?*

Processes

(based on the whole data set, and not reported on school by school)

• *How did our class size and teaching allocation compare with others?*

• *How frequently were various teaching activities used?*

• *Were some activities associated with good exam performance or positive attitudes?*

Understanding the possible implications of the reports, and the limitations of what should be deduced, demands that those using ALIS are well trained, lest