

Everybody needs good (office) neighbours

Tristan Walker-Buckton wants a little understanding.

RECENT WEEKS HAVE SEEN THE ANNUAL release of both A level and GCSE results. It being silly season, column inches were filled with pictures of pretty girls getting their results and the usual accusations that the exams are getting easier.

Now obviously everyone knows that this is true. The spotty whelp who served me my sausage McMuffin this morning had 12 A* GCSEs and an A level in business studies.

But I am concerned that such an attitude is beginning to penetrate the workplace. Round about now, when half of my office disappears on study leave in the run-up to the exams, I hear mutterings of outrage at the amount of study leave afforded to students today, leaving everyone else in the lurch – especially as the exams are clearly much easier than in the old days.

Talking to some of you, I gather that this isn't confined to my office – and that the worst offenders are those who qualified in the past few years. Ah, how quickly they forget!

A little number-crunching from the exam pass list on the profession's website belies the notion that the exams are getting easier. Figure 1

shows average Institute pass rates for the three main stages and overall since April 2001.

Setting aside the depressing fact that overall we sit down to twice as many exams as we eventually pass, it's clear that it's just as difficult to qualify now as it was when the office smarty-pants sat his exams. Despite the odd 'rogue paper', it seems as if the examiners and markers are doing their job and standards are being maintained.

Such attitudes are therefore just sour grapes – but perhaps not without reason. The responses for the study package survey have highlighted that a lot of you are not being allowed to take the study leave you are entitled to owing to pressures at work, with some real management crackdowns in some cases. This is a short-sighted attitude to take. The exams may come at an inconvenient time, and mean more work for the people we leave behind in the office, but the sooner everyone passes, the sooner we can all get back to working those five-day weeks.

But whatever happened to the collaborative working environment? The exams already feel like a solitary

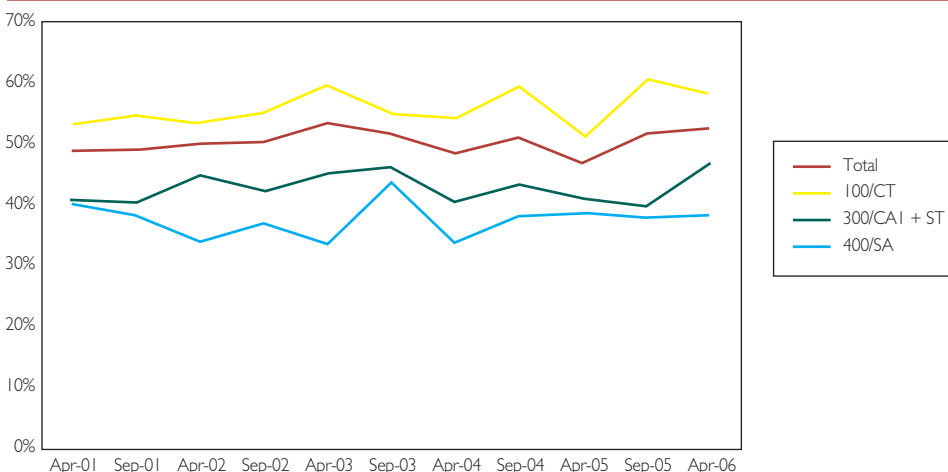
pursuit. The flexibility of the system means that students who start as peers quickly move on to take different exams. And the exam system is changing so rapidly that qualified colleagues, our mentors, are barely able to keep track of what's in each exam, let alone provide help when we get stuck with a part of the course.

With many firms tying career advancement and pay levels directly into exam progression, it can even seem like we are competing against each other. Which is exactly what happens – with average pass rates of 50%, exam success isn't about doing well yourself, it's about beating the person sitting next to you.

As we prepare to go over the top again, I'd just like a little more support from the guys back at command HQ. Though they may be looking back with rose-tinted glasses, the challenge we face is just as hard as back when they themselves were struggling through and it's only with their active support that we can succeed.

In turn, we must remember what things are like now so that we can best help those who come after us when we are all smug and qualified. Not that they'll need much – obviously the exams will be much easier by that point.

Figure 1 Institute exam pass rates April 2001–April 2006



What's in the package?

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to respond to my study package survey. The results so far are fascinating and there's a much wider range of packages on offer than I expected – even among firms of similar size operating in the same markets.

I still don't have enough responses to piece together the whole picture though, and it would be especially useful to get some more responses on the bigger firms. So while you're having your morning cup of tea and crumpet, please just drop me a few lines outlining the study package you get in terms of time off and allowance for materials, bonuses for exam success, and the provision for resits.

All responses are anonymous and I'm not looking to 'name and shame' anyone so I don't even have to know your company's name.

In the meantime I wish you all the very best of luck for the September sitting. Chin up guys – its nearly Christmas!

Tristan

Please send contributions to the student page to
 TRISTAN WALKER-BUCKTON
 Watson Wyatt Ltd, Watson House, London Road, Reigate RH2 9PQ
 T 01737-274556
 F 01737-241496
 e tristan.walker-buckton@watsonwyatt.com