'A' LEVEL ECONOMICS AND THE STUDENT

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Every student who is studying 'A' Level subjects is expected to make careful and intelligent preparation. There are no short-cut methods to achieve this end. It is essential, for instance, to acquire first-hand knowledge of the views of the top authorities on the subjects which are being studied. A student with limited time at his disposal is allowed to be selective in his reading but this does not extend to reliance on mere notes or 'model' answers. Moreover, at this level, a student is also required to show evidence of personal thought. In other words, he must demonstrate that he is not merely learning but also thinking. This calls for a critical appreciation of the books which are being read and for reflection.

During examination time, a student must be on his guard against any form of irrelevance. It is futile for one to reproduce prepared material regardless of its relevance to the questions set. No credit is gained; much time is wasted. 'Padding' is also out. Students who try to show off their knowledge on matters other than those on which they have been asked will be penalised. Finally, failure to present one's views in a clear, logical and orderly way and failure to write legibly and in accordance with the basic rules of grammar are also failures to communicate and this weighs heavily against chances of obtaining a pass.

Evidently, the foregoing applies to all subjects and not just to Economics. The latter, however, has its own special pitfalls and to these we shall now turn.

To begin with, one must realise that Economics is not an extraordinarily difficult subject. The difference between it and other subjects is really conceptual, and the majority of students taking it are not unduly perturbed by its theoretical framework. Indeed, some students do exceptionally well, while the level of work of most of the others is creditable and attests to adequate preparation. However, since Economics is a positive science in that it avoids and discourages value-judgements, some students are apt to find it difficult to replace emotional opinions with sound logical arguments. But it is only a question of time before the adjustment is made. More serious is the tendency to treat economic 'laws' as unalterable laws of nature, whereas they should be regarded as tendencies or generalisations. Furthermore, although at times students exhibit an admirable knowledge of facts, at others they show a complete lack of understanding of the concepts underlying the 'laws'. One often comes across students who do not see the significance or application of certain principles. For example, a fundamental principle such as *diminishing returns* is sometimes treated in isola-

tion with little regard to its application to farm and factory production and to the problem of over-population. This emerges from a failure to grasp the practical importance of Economics as an aid to the understanding of human activity. When one loses sight of the realism of Economics, one begins to have doubts about the usefulness of the subject, and with doubts comes indifference. And it is this indifference which is the student's greatest drawback. Economics, therefore, must be viewed in relation to the real world, and the student must always be aware of the implication of economic theories.

Economics must also be seen as a complete entity. Sometimes students get lost in specific items and are thus not able to see the over-all pattern. In this connection, it is important to make a distinction between the long run and the short run. Students do not always make it clear whether they are discussing variations of costs with output with a fixed equipment or with all factors being variable. They often attribute a rise in costs to the law of diminishing returns and leave it at that, whereas the law relates to a specific situation in the short run only. Such carelessness is frowned upon in Economies; it is a mark of weakness. Another failing is when students try to explain the causes of a phenomenon such as Inflation in terms of one factor alone, whereas in the real world many variables play a part in the causation of an inflationary process.

Then there is the problem of over-confidence. This is best seen when students are answering multiple-choice tests. These tests, which have become an important part of 'A' Level syllabuses, involve a set of questions called 'stems' and each of these has five 'responses'. The object is for the student to tick the correct response, that is, the one that correctly applies to the question asked. Here students too often jump to the wrong conclusion after a careless weighing of the five possibilities. Further, multiple-choice tests are designed to test the student over the entire syllabus, and no student can hope to do well unless he has covered a substantial part of the set syllabus. What is equally important is that a student should be able to apply and interpret economic concepts and data, for it is this ability which examiners seek to assess in this type of test. A student has to weigh each response carefully before judging the correct answer. In Economics 'A' Level a student has to attain a minimum level of competence in both the essay paper and the multiple-choice test in order to obtain a pass mark.

What we have tried to do in this article is to put the requirements of an 'A' Level student in perspective. These must be constantly kept in mind, or, better still, nagging at his elbow. But much depends on the goodwill with which the student himself tackles his subject, for ultimately it is the student's condition, his attraction to the subject or repulsion, which will determine success or failure and for this we can offer no prescription.

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