Distance learning no barrier to top GCSE grades

Friday 26 August, 2016

Yesterday, schools minister Nick Gibb praised the hard work of ‘hundreds and thousands of 16-year olds’ who received their GCSE grades. But it’s not only teenagers who study for GCSEs and A levels. An estimated 50,000 people - enough to fill the classrooms of about 30 secondary schools - sit GCSE, IGCSE and A level exams under their own steam each year as so-called ‘private candidates’. They received their GCSE results yesterday too, among them students of national not-for-profit course provider the National Extension College (NEC).

When it comes to top grades, NEC students are surpassing the national levels of outstanding GCSE attainment. Of the NEC students who have told us their results, 9.8% received an A* grade against the national figure of 6.5%. Nearly a quarter (23%) were awarded an A* or A grade – 2.5 percentage points higher than the national figure. Pupils over the age of 16 re-sitting English and maths has been cited as the reason for this year’s fall in grades. The GCSE results of NEC students suggest that distance learners are helping to drive results upwards.

When it comes to subject choice at GCSE, NEC students are mirroring the trend in schools across the country to opt for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. Between 2015 and 2016, there has been an average increase of 11.6% in the number of students choosing NEC’s science GCSEs and IGCSEs (biology, chemistry, physics and combined science) and an 11.5% increase in the number taking maths. The national increase in the number of students taking sciences since last year is 6.3%.

Among the NEC students receiving their results yesterday were:

Louise Herbert, **A in IGCSE science** – she took the course to help her fufil her ambition to become a primary school teacher. Stella says: ‘This result will change my life and has made my confidence soar.’ (Louise Herbert is a pseudonym)

John Lebeter, B in IGCSE history - his first exam result since leaving school 23 years ago. John, who works as a flight attendant, says: ‘People think studying gets harder as you get older but I’ve found absolutely the reverse. I’m aiming for five GCSEs with good grades so the very least I will be able to say is that I got the grades I should have got years ago.’

Catherine Speechley – an A* in IGCSE French, studied in her 40s as one of a number of subjects chosen to catch up with subjects she left behind at school. Library assistant Catherine says: ‘Distance learning works for me because I’m very self-motivated and know exactly how much self-discipline you need to succeed.’

NEC Chief Executive Dr Ros Morpeth OBE said: ‘The 50,000 people determined improve their qualifications at the same time as working, bringing up children and caring for elderly relatives deserve our congratulations every bit as much as teenagers in schools and colleges. Schools minister Nick Gibb said yesterday that he wants to make our country “a place where there is no limit on anyone’s ambition or what they can achieve”. NEC students come from all walks of life and may not have done as well at school as they had hoped. For them to be able to achieve all they are capable of achieving, access to vital qualifications like GCSEs is essential.’

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