

My column 'Michael' spoke about my relationship with one particular student back in maybe 2004, who I liked a lot, and who had great talent, but who had got the whole process of exams out of perspective, to such an extent that his worry was seriously impairing his performance. It was my professional opinion that if I could give him a jolt somehow, so that he could realise that life would go on whatever happened with his A Levels, then he would have a better chance of realising his potential. In the end, he performed brilliantly, got his A in Maths and Further Maths and went to Warwick to read maths and was (as far as I know) very happy there. Job done.

This student was unusual. Some, maybe most, students don't worry enough about the grade they will get, and don't do as well as they might. This kind of student I would jolt in a different kind of way. I would like these students to worry more about getting an A; believe me, I would really love it if all my students got As or better. As for aspiring to go to Cambridge, if that is where you want to go, then I will do everything I can to help you get there. Two of my current students have been given places at Cambridge to read maths next year, and I am delighted for them. But Cambridge is not right for everyone. Perhaps I should come clean and say that in 1978 I went up to Cambridge to read maths, a subject that I ate, drank and slept. Over the years that followed, my love of maths nearly died. I did okay in the exams, but I found the teaching as dry as dust. It seemed to me that Cambridge cared solely about the top 10%, the few who would go on to be professors, and neglected the rest. I've just completed my MSc at UEA, and the contrast has been incredible – this has been university maths where I have loved every minute.

I'm sure things have changed at Cambridge. Universities were not given grades for teaching in my day. I should say that Clare College were wonderful to me in my time there, and have been since. But I stand by what I said in my article, that it is better to go to Bangor and love it (which includes being suitably challenged academically) than go to Cambridge and hate it – I think that is self-evident. Sometimes a weaker student will work really hard to win a place at a 'less good' university, while a bright student will hardly break sweat to get a place at Cambridge – yet it is the bright student who is paraded before the local papers. I'm not sure that's right.

Jonny Griffiths, 13-2-12