

The Times, Letters to the Editor

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 27 2025

Student creativity

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER CBE

Sir, While the rise of AI tools such as ChatGPT certainly poses challenges to academic integrity, it also offers a chance to rethink assessment methods altogether (“Universities urged to test whether assessments are ChatGPT-proof”, news, Feb 26).

Emphasising critical thinking, creativity and collaborative problem-solving can make assessments more robust against AI manipulation, while better preparing students for the real world.

Instead of focusing solely on preventing AI use, universities should explore more innovative and meaningful ways to assess learning. Some are doing so, including in mathematics.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

TUESDAY MAY 10 2022

The gap year, resilience and university access

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Carol Monaghan (letter, May 6) is right: it is incumbent on any head teacher, let alone the government’s commissioner on social mobility, to put in place strategies to tackle the inequality of opportunity perpetuated by traditional gender-based subject choices. I urge all head teachers to take advantage of nationwide initiatives such as Founders4Schools and Maths4Girls, which link students and their teachers to a network of inspirational volunteer role models from diverse backgrounds who share their career stories.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 20 2021

Booster campaign

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I am 63 in three weeks, had my second jab more than seven months ago and do not need a campaign to encourage me to roll up my sleeve. With capacity exceeding uptake, what do I need to do to persuade the NHS to allow me to book for a booster so that I can contribute to the statistics for this category rather than the ones for hospital admissions or deaths?

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

THURSDAY AUGUST 12 2021

Grade inflation and the reform of A-levels

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, When we return to externally assessed examinations we could allocate two grades, one based on a standard as before that rewards achievement, along with a numerical grade representing how candidates ranked with the rest of their cohort, eg if they were in the top 10 per cent or top 20 per cent, etc. More often than not the latter is what I am asked for by employers when providing references for my graduate students. A-levels graded in this way could also assist highly selective universities in allocating places to students.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

THURSDAY OCTOBER 1 2020

Vice-chancellors' call to axe A levels next year

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, An obvious corollary of the request by Sir David Eastwood and Sir Chris Husbands for next year's A levels to be cancelled is for the scores of universities across the UK to pool their world-leading expertise in statistical modelling to assist Ofqual in developing a robust algorithm for any future moderation of "centre assessment grades". Now would seem a good time to start exploring this.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

FRIDAY APRIL 17 2020

Opening schools and ending the lockdown

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Although I would be supportive of schools returning as soon as can be justified by the science, allowing any kind of partial return to work on the basis of age should apply to teachers too. Many schools are dominated by staff in the 50-plus age range; it would seem inappropriate to require employees in these upper age ranges in other professions to "work from home" but force similarly aged teachers to return to work alongside many other such teachers and hundreds of children.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

SATURDAY JANUARY 11 2020

Private drama played out on a global stage

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, In contrast to the royal family, many parents live in anticipation of hearing their offspring announce that they “intend to work to become financially independent”.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

FRIDAY JUNE 28 2019

‘Maths ‘fixation’

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I agree with Alice Thomson (Comment, Jun 26) that “we should look more carefully at the maths children will need”. This is precisely why there are three “maths” options in England for 16-18-year olds. Some of the careers that she refers to will lead on from the new T levels that will “give young people the skills that industry needs, including relevant maths”. For the rest, there are two distinct advanced mathematics options: A-level mathematics “for would-be engineers, architects, accountants and hedge fund managers”; and core maths, developed for the remaining 250,000 or so students who do not wish to take A-level mathematics, or need to do so for future study or careers.

Core maths is taken by students alongside their A levels and/or applied general qualifications. It does not comprise “calculus” or “vectors”, but focuses on “applying known numerical and mathematical skills, techniques and methods to new problem areas, and on using and applying mathematics and statistics to address real-life scenarios”, with a significant statistical element that will be relevant to many professions — including journalists.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

SATURDAY APRIL 6 2019

‘Unethical’ nature of unconditional offers

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, You report (“Universities shamed for snaring students with ‘unethical’ offers”, Apr 5) that Damian Hinds, the education secretary, has urged universities to review “unacceptable” admissions practices that have led to students being “backed into a corner” to accept places. He is concerned about “conditional unconditional” offers from any university which informs students that they are guaranteed a place, but only if they put the university as their first option.

No mention is made, however, of the practice whereby applicants are contacted by a university before the deadline for making their decision on which offer to accept as their first option, saying that they will reduce their offer, but only if the applicant makes them their first choice in the next two weeks. As this alternative admission practice is merely a variant of the “conditional unconditional” scheme, I wonder whether the education secretary might also consider this as “unacceptable” for similar reasons?

If so, I would urge him to ask the Office for Students to collect data on this practice as well, with a view to removing unnecessary pressure from a further group of students. This would fit in very well with his excellent mission on the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

THURSDAY JANUARY 17 2019

Ofsted and behaviour in class

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Anyone watching proceedings in the House of Commons would grade, in Ofsted terms, MPs’ behaviour on whispering to one another (or worse) when an MP is speaking to the House as “requires improvement”; on the matter of phone-checking, as evidenced from those sitting immediately behind the attorney-general when he opened Tuesday’s debate, the grade would definitely be “inadequate”.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 18 2018

Maths and real life

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I agree with Henry Coverdale's view that pupils should not abandon maths at 16 (letter, Sep 13). Sir Adrian Smith's review of post-16 mathematics, published in July 2017, and the government's white paper, Building a Britain fit for the future, published in November 2017, recognise the need for mathematical and quantitative skills studied post-16 for entry into higher education, and for the future workforce.

It is therefore reassuring that the government is committed to increasing participation in mathematics post-16. Core maths, in particular, has been designed to meet the justifiable concerns raised by Andreas Schleicher, the education director of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Its focus is on developing fluency and confidence in applying known numerical and mathematical skills, techniques and methods to new problem areas; and on using and applying mathematics and statistics to address real-life scenarios.

Yours faithfully,
PAUL GLAISTER

SATURDAY MAY 5 2018

Teachers' holidays'

FROM PROF PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, In your news report "Teachers offered a year's paid leave to boost recruitment" (May 3) you state that teaching "is renowned for its generous holidays — 13 weeks a year".

Teachers work extremely long hours during the week and often at weekends, spending much of their time in the so-called holidays preparing for the term ahead, marking, keeping up to date with the many changes to the curriculum, learning about enhancements in approaches to teaching and the use of technology in support of learning, etc.

Anyone who is envious of teachers because of this myth of long holidays should try their hand at teaching and make a judgment for themselves. Before doing so, however, they might want to check out the salary levels for the majority of teachers.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 25 2006

Place your bets

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Presumably the likelihood that the London Olympics will start on time in 2012 (letter, Feb 23) will be increased significantly if favourable odds are offered to anyone wearing a hard hat?

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 9 2005

Football's ashes

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Presumably goalposts will require a slightly larger urn?

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

SATURDAY MARCH 12 2005

Houses of Parliament at loggerheads over anti-terror Bill

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I hope that the farce in the Houses of Parliament is being viewed from abroad merely as an elaborate stunt in aid of Comic Relief.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
March 11.

FRIDAY JANUARY 23 2004

Need to sharpen TV-watching skills

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Should teenagers follow in their parents' footsteps, or pursue a career in their favourite pastime? Your headline "TV is as important as maths, says Jowell", (some editions, January 21) would seem to offer many of our youngsters a credible alternative.

Our daughter has already made up her mind.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
January 21.

THURSDAY OCTOBER 2 2003

Brown and Blair speeches assessed

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, There are many different routes to the same destination and, when following the wrong route, it is usually possible to effect a U-turn without the aid of a reverse gear.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
October 1.

MONDAY MAY 19 2003

Fickle factor

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Although the national infidelity figures of 9 per cent for women and 14.6 per cent for men appear to cast the male population in a poor light (report, May 15), the mismatch surely demonstrates that these women are actually more promiscuous than their male counterparts?

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
May 15.

SATURDAY MARCH 8 2003

Council tax and local responsibilities

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Although I should be celebrating the recent increase in my council tax of 11.7 per cent, it being lower than the average 12 per cent over each of the last five years, I can't help feeling that the cumulative increase of 82 per cent is out of step with 19 per cent for my salary over the same period.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
March 5.

SATURDAY FEBRUARY 8 2003

Fuel formula

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Mr Douglas Goodman's mathematical formula to prove that his daughter's petrol tank will always be empty when she returns home (letter, February 6) is commonly known as the law of diminishing returns.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
February 7.

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 26 2001

Wind-up

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Having heard about the lifeline offered to so many in Africa by the wind-up radio, and recently paying almost half of the original cost of a watch to have the battery replaced, I wondered whether there has been any progress on the development of a wind-up version of the wrist watch?

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
September 25.

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 3 1998

From start to finish

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Following years of practical experience on the matter, I should like to offer my own (fairly succinct) piece. *How to wash up*, as the natural successor to Delia on cooking and Nigella on eating (letter, October 30).

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
October 30.

MONDAY OCTOBER 27 1997

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, For my part, I am hoping that the EMU native to Europe will display the same characteristics as its antipodean namesake. Despite a profuse amount of flapping, it never succeeds in getting off the ground.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
October 23.

SATURDAY AUGUST 26 1995

Capital letters

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I have always been openly sincere (Mr J.A. Hill's letter, August 19) but secretly hopeful, and remain so.

Yours
P. GLAISTER

MONDAY MAY 29 1995

Do calculators spoil our children?

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, As one of many lecturers nationwide charged with smoothing the transition from school to university for students embarking on a mathematics degree, I very much welcome the School and Curriculum Assessment Authority's inquiry into pupil's use of calculators. It is my impression that many of these students lack basic arithmetical skills.

It is easy to forget that calculators, like their more modern counterpart the computer, are merely tools to help those who already understand what they are doing. Giving a primary school pupil a calculator is like giving an infant a word-processor before it can write.

For my sins I also scrutinise students' calculators before they take them into an examination. This helps to minimise the opportunity to cheat. I find it deeply disturbing that many students now treat their calculators like a life-support machine which they cannot do without.

I would like to see the current trend reversed.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

THURSDAY JULY 14 1994

Off the rails?

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, If the recent figures from BR concerning the number of trains that they hope to run during today's one-day strike by the RMT union are to be believed (report, July 13), then a linear extrapolation based on a one-day strike every week, a six fold increase on the number of trains running during the first strike, and the 20 per cent of total proposed for today, imply that the whole rail network will be back to capacity just in time for Christmas.

Having two one-day strikes a week is good news, therefore, since this should only serve to hasten matters.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
July 13.

WEDNESDAY MARCH 10 1993

Into the siding?

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Whatever type of locomotive is depicted, a carriage full of standing passengers is surely a must.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

SATURDAY DECEMBER 5 1992

Fit and proper

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, The decision by the Danish company Lego to build a theme park on the site of the former Windsor Safari Park (report, December 3) should come as welcome news for some of those hit by the recession in this area, particularly small firms of builders, or should I say firms of small builders.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 28 1992

Always behind

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I frequently lose the button from my trouser back pocket whenever I sit down on a wooden chair with horizontal slats. The button shoots off with immense speed, never to be seen again. The obvious solution is to remove the jacket *after* sitting down, but I always seem to forget.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

TUESDAY DECEMBER 18 1990

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, I thought that it was widely accepted that, in any worthwhile system of appraisal, an appraisee is encouraged to make constructive comments or criticisms about any aspect about their working environment, including the role of managers. This makes the process not a one-way, but a two-way process, and leads to the most effective management of personnel.

Unfortunately, this concept does not seem to be mentioned in the recently announced system of appraisal for teachers in England and Wales.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
December 11.

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 22 1990

Maths for all

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, A computer scientist will add 1 and 2 bit by bit.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 13 1990

Once removed

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, Whilst I share the concern of my fellow Britons over our old people, I fail to see how a Grandparents' Day ("Life and times", September 12) will alleviate the problem. To be a grandparent it is neither necessary nor sufficient to be old.

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER

THURSDAY MARCH 8 1990

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, On learning the community charge that my wife and I will each have to pay in April, I fear that, in our case at least, we will finally have to put to rest that old adage that "two people can live as cheaply as one".

Yours faithfully,
P. GLAISTER
March 5.

THURSDAY MARCH 30 1989

Softly, softly

FROM DR PAUL GLAISTER

Sir, With the advent of the modern plastic dustbin, the ever-decreasing population of house-wives and what seems to be an increase in the mean wind speed over the United Kingdom, may I offer a new collective noun for common usage – a “rumble” of dustbins?

Yours faithfully,

P. GLAISTER

March 23.