

STAYING THE COURSE:

Changes to the Participation Age
and Qualifications

Edited by Conor Ryan

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FIRST PUBLISHED BY

The Social Market Foundation, March 2008

ISBN: 1-904899-57-9

11 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QB

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PRINTED BY

Windsor Print Production LTD

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Having spent her early career in education, she held a number of directorships in the construction and publishing industries. In 1994, she joined IBM UK's Corporate Affairs Division, prior to holding a variety of roles in IBM Global Services. She regularly serves on government taskforces and ministerial-level think-tanks concerned with industry skills needs, representing employer interests throughout the UK, and the UK's interests internationally.

FOREWORD

RT HON ED BALLS, MP

Raising the education age to 18 and the accompanying reform of 14–19 qualifications will be one of the most durable legacies of this Labour government. It is a central part of our Children’s Plan to make this the best place in the world for children to grow up, and to help every young person fulfil their potential. In no area of the education system has comprehensive and systematic reform been as long-awaited, and nowhere is it more important. As such, I warmly welcome this important collection of essays, which contribute to the debate about one of the most significant sets of reforms to be undertaken by this government.

High-quality education from 14 to 19 is vital for all young people. It is at this time in their lives that they seek to achieve both the skills and the knowledge they will need in order to succeed as independent adults in skilled work or further education, and the qualifications that will sum up for future employers, colleges and universities what they have learned and achieved. To be successful, these qualifications must be widely recognised, valued and understood, so that employers, universities and others can readily understand what someone holding them knows and is able to do. To be valuable to the young person, universities and employers must value the skills and knowledge that the qualification certifies.

Yet, at the moment, our 14–19 qualifications serve many, but not all, learners well. We have some qualifications, such as GCSEs and A-levels, which are well understood and respected across the full range of employers and universities, and by the general public. But there are too many others that are not sufficiently well understood and valued and, as a result, do not serve their purpose well enough.

At the same time, too many young people are disengaging from learning too early. Too often, those who fall behind in school are unable to catch up later. For too many, the pathway from qualifications to skilled work or further study is not clear enough. There has also been too little focus on the wider skills, such as creative problem-solving, team-working and self-management, which are so important.

We also need to keep up with the rising skills demands of our modern economy. The Leitch Review suggests that the number of unskilled and low-skilled jobs will decline from their current level of 3.2 million to 600,000 by 2020. This creates an economic imperative to ensure that every young person acquires the advanced skills and knowledge that they will need to make a success of their life.

It is true that, over recent years, more young people have chosen to stay in education and training beyond the school leaving age. This has particularly been encouraged by the introduction of education maintenance allowances, which support study by removing some of the financial barriers to staying on. Now, close to 90% of 16-year-olds and more than three-quarters of 17-year-olds choose to stay in some form of education or training. But this is still lower than in many similar advanced countries and is certainly not yet enough. Far from this improvement coming at the expense of standards, attainment has risen at the same time as participation: 71.4% of 19-year-olds achieved level 2 skills in 2006, compared to 66.3% in 2004.

This, then, is the case for reform. The bill we are now introducing to raise the participation age to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015 marks a step change in governments' ambitions in this area, and it will raise aspirations across the education system. It sends a clear message to all schools, colleges and local authorities that they must find the right route for every single young person so that each one is engaged in learning up to 18 and on a pathway to success beyond then. It sends a clear message to young people and to their parents that the question they must ask themselves is not "Should I stay in education?" but "What is the best way for me to continue my education?"

The bill is sometimes described as being intended to raise the school leaving age. This is not correct: it is a bill to raise the *education* leaving age. Not all young people will want to continue in school or at college. Some will prefer to undertake an apprenticeship or accredited training while working. Curriculum reform is one aspect of ensuring that all young people have an option that works for them. Similarly, changing the law will not be sufficient on its own. Successfully raising the education participation age must be part of a wider change of culture. To make it possible, we must have in place four key building blocks:

- 1 Reform of curriculum and qualifications, so that every young person has a pathway that can take them to success. No matter what level they start working at, or their preferred style of learning, there must be a route that will enable them to progress.
- 2 The right guidance and support, so that not only is there a suitable route available for every young person, but young people should know what is available, be able to make good choices and have the support needed to succeed.
- 3 The right financial support, so that no one is prevented by their financial circumstances from continuing to participate.
- 4 The full involvement of employers, so that there are enough apprenticeship places, including another 90,000 for young people by 2013, and so that more young people can learn through experience of work and while working.

Each one of these is crucial in its own right, and achieving them all will make it possible for us to raise the participation age successfully. At the same time, legislative change will galvanise the system to put all these conditions in place rapidly and for every young person. The first young people to be affected are now in year 6, and we must make sure that the necessary change in culture and expectations is made so that they are all ready and willing to participate – not because it is compulsory, but because they know that they will benefit.

One of the most important of the four building blocks – and central to this pamphlet – is reform of the curriculum and qualifications, and the new diplomas being developed that will be crucial to this. Their design has been led by employers and universities and will be tailored to their needs; employers and universities are asking for many of the same things. They want not just narrow knowledge of sectors or subjects, but a much wider range of skills: the ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing, to solve problems creatively, to learn and work independently, and to work with others and in teams; in addition, resilience and self-management. In other words, the whole range of personal, learning and thinking skills.

So diplomas are not about narrow subject knowledge or training for a specific job. They are not vocational qualifications; rather, they seek to bridge the old academic/vocational divide once and for all. They mix the theoretical and the practical so that young people can learn in a way which engages them more fully. They will exist at foundation, higher and advanced level and be capable of serving the full range of learners at different stages in their learning, including as entry qualifications for the most demanding universities. Because they are flexible, with many choices of additional and specialist learning elements, they have the capability to take young people in many different directions, whether into further learning or into skilled employment.

Our society has no difficulty with the thought that a degree-level course can be both rigorous and focused on one sector of the economy. Subjects like law and engineering have always had these characteristics. They are valued highly by employers and the wider society, and because everyone understands the intellectual and practical training that they provide, no one fears that they will unduly constrain the learner's future choices. As diplomas are established, it will not be long before people wonder why we ever found it difficult to see that a programme can be both educationally rigorous and work-related.

It was the Fisher Act of 1918 that raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14. Remarkably, that Act also included a provision stating that all young people should participate in at least part-time study until they were 18. It will have taken nearly 100 years to fulfil the promise of education for all to the age of 18, but there is no going back on such a commitment to realise the full potential of all our young people. In 20 years from now, the requirement to stay in learning until at least 18 will be just as natural as the requirement to stay in school until 16 has become since 1972. We now all have a responsibility to make a success of this historic step into the future.

AN SMF OVERVIEW

ANN ROSSITER

Raising the education leaving age is an idea with a long history, as Mike Baker points out in his analysis of the background to these proposed reforms. Churchill was arguing for a school leaving age of 17 as early as 1908, and the 1918 Education Act included the requirement that all young people between 14 and 18 should be in at least part-time education or training. That part of the Act was never implemented, and it has taken almost a century for a government to find the courage to tackle this issue anew.

It is important to be clear about what raising the education leaving age can and cannot achieve on its own. It cannot address the problem of the minority of young people who disengage with the education system too early, and therefore enter adulthood with few or no qualifications and limited life chances. Nor does it deliver a clear answer to the debate about the form 14–19 qualifications should take, or remove the problem of the mixed quality of work-based training. And there is no direct correlation between the compulsory education leaving age and the proportion of 16–18-year-olds staying in education and in the proportion of the population who are graduating from university.

What it can do is act as a powerful signal to young adults about the importance that society places on education. It can have a significant impact on our culture, which still undervalues education, formal or informal, as a path to prosperity and personal fulfilment. This is the real strength of a higher education leaving age.

The contributors to this collection largely support Ed Ball's proposals. However, Alison Wolf and Alan Smithers are important exceptions. Wolf takes the view that our education system is already reminiscent of a Heath Robinson contraption in its complexity. She suggests that we make a fetish of qualifications, while not focusing enough on the content of education. She argues that government time would be better spent paying attention to the needs of the labour market and the ambitions of our young people. In other words, raising the education leaving age is a dead-end. Smithers makes a different case against, taking the view that compulsion applied to adults is an unwarranted infringement of personal liberty and suggesting that the

history of extending the education leaving age is a history of attempts at curbing unruly youth, rather than at improving their lot in life.

The rest of our contributors are generally in favour. However, they do raise a series of crucial issues which will be thrown up by keeping all young people in some form of education until the age of 18. Taken together, their analyses identify a series of preconditions to the effective working of the policy.

The first and perhaps most central of these is consent. Extending the education leaving age to 18 involves compelling learners to take part in education who are, by this stage, clearly young adults rather than children. Although compulsion applied to adults is of course not unknown in developed societies, this is a major step for any government to take. There is a consensus that relying on penalties such as fines to ensure attendance is unlikely to be successful and would weaken support for the policy. Therefore, winning the consent of at least the majority of those who currently leave school at 16, as well as their parents and educators, will be important to make the policy work. Relying on fines to drive attendance would bring the policy (and the government) into disrepute.

And what will be critical to consent? Between them, our contributors suggest improving the quality of work-based qualifications even further; creating a demand-led approach to apprenticeships; the creation of a stable set of vocational qualifications which meet the needs of employers for soft skills, numeracy and literacy; and curriculum reform for school-based education for 14–19-year-olds. These are dealt with in more detail below.

However, it is also important to note what our authors have not considered as significant. When the policy was announced, newspaper reports raised the spectre of young adults being forced to attend school and disrupting the education of fellow students who actually wished to be there. Most of our contributors are clear that this is unlikely to be the result of the proposals, perhaps because most of those who would have left school at 16 would not be channelled into school-based learning, but into workplace-based or technical education of some sort.

Although there is a broad consensus about the need to re-examine the 14–19 curriculum among our contributors, there is no consensus as to whether diplomas are the way forward – can they replace A-levels or will their existence alongside A-levels perpetuate the vocational/academic divide? For example, Conor Ryan argues that the current AS and A-level system is not working because too many young people appear to be dropping out of education at 17, which suggests that their needs are not being met in some way – either because they are not getting good advice, or because some are being directed into education when they would have been better off in some form of training, or because the qualifications are not appropriate for them.

Both Ryan and Mike Tomlinson consider what young people are most likely to value in a new post-16 educational qualification, concluding that it must be sufficiently different from A-levels to offer real choice and provide a useful alternative for those children currently not well served by A-levels. In academic terms, it must be more valuable than current vocational qualifications in order to create an offering that is better suited to those young people who find both currently unattractive. Tomlinson also restates his case for a broader qualification which puts a greater emphasis on personal and employability skills and provides better outcomes in terms of numeracy and literacy. On the other hand, Karen Price is highly positive about the new diploma and in particular about the way in which it has emerged out of a close working partnership between educational providers and employers to provide qualifications that are both of high quality and relevant to the needs of the labour market.

Some contributors raise questions about the quality and availability of work-based training. Ryan raises the question of the 85,000 young adults who are currently in work but not in formal training, and suggests that one of the challenges in making the policy work will be working with employers to find a way of formalising any training these young adults currently receive. Templeman highlights some of the problems with apprenticeships and urges a more demand-led approach across the piece as well as recognising that there is plenty of scope to improve the quality of work-based training. Interestingly, implicit in many of the contributions to this collection is the

view that seeking parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications should not be a primary objective of government policy. Instead, it would be one of the important outcomes of getting the next stage of education reform right.

The overall tone of the collection is that winning consent from the education professionals, parents and young people themselves will be challenging but possible, particularly given the generous lead time for the policy. If this is the case, that is a great prize for a Labour government committed not just to the provision of good jobs and a healthy economic climate, but also to challenging the engrained nature of disadvantage and the generation of greater social mobility.

A BACKGROUND TO REFORM

MIKE BAKER

If the government ever thought that raising the education leaving age was going to be either popular or straightforward, then a quick history lesson would soon have shattered their illusions. For, a look at past attempts to raise the minimum leaving age shows that they have repeatedly run into opposition, scare tactics and long delays. Moreover, the extra resources, staffing and accommodation for the additional students have rarely proved to be sufficient.

The media coverage of the latest proposal has reflected a similar pattern of resistance to any increase in the education leaving age. Most newspaper coverage, which deliberately and confusingly misnamed the initiative as the “school leaving” age in order to achieve greater reader impact, has highlighted negative reactions. Even before the proposals were confirmed in the Queen’s Speech in November 2007, *The Times* had reported warnings from teachers’ leaders under the headline: “Raising of school leaving age could give thousands criminal record.”¹ Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph* reported: “Teenagers will rebel if forced to stay on at school.”² Rather more blunt was the *Daily Express*, whose editorial described it as: “A lesson in stupidity.”³

Even the more liberal commentators were not convinced. Deborah Orr in the *Independent* asked: “Will another two years in the classroom really help those who can’t write or add up?”⁴ Nor was there much enthusiasm from business and employers, with the *Financial Times* reporting: “UK education reforms draw critics.”⁵ The story quoted business leaders saying the plans would only work if young people learned the skills valued by employers – namely numeracy, literacy and vocational skills.

The one exception to the cold showers of criticism and the lukewarm trickle of faint praise was in the *Guardian*. Reflecting the views of head teachers and college leaders, it reported a “[w]elcome for plan to raise

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 1 Alexander Blair, “Raising school leaving age ‘could give thousands a criminal record,’” *The Times*, 31 July 2007.
 2 *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 2007.
 3 *Daily Express*, 12 September 2007.
 4 Deborah Orr, “Will another two years in the classroom really help those who can’t write or add up?,” *Independent*, 6 November 2007.
 5 Alex Barker and David Turner, “UK education reforms draw critics,” *FT.com*, November 6th 2007.

school age to 18".⁶ Yet, whatever the professionals thought, the view from the saloon bar of Middle England was probably summed up by Simon Heffer in the *Daily Telegraph*, who argued that instead of raising the "school leaving age" to 18, it would be better to lower it to 14.⁷

In the past, too, attempts to raise the school leaving age (and back then it really was a *school* leaving age) always faced strong opposition. In 1972, when the leaving age was belatedly raised from 15 to 16, there were concerns about the effects of indiscipline in schools and on crime rates. Soon after implementation, for example, *The Times* reported that West Yorkshire police had blamed a sharp rise in crime on juveniles who were "bored" by being kept at school.⁸

Dr Rhodes Boyson, later a Conservative education minister but then a London head teacher, wrote to the newspapers saying that "the staff of our harassed secondary schools are taking the brunt of the problem". He argued that the effect of forcing reluctant 16-year-olds to stay on in school had been "to expedite the departure of staff from city schools". He concluded that 16-year-olds were maturing earlier and were right to want to be out in the "real world of work".⁹

Back in 1972, even supporters of the campaign for the raising of the school leaving age (or ROSLA, as it became known) had been worried about whether schools were prepared for the change. In September 1974, the National Union of Teachers published a report that suggested that most local education authorities had made only superficial preparations. Despite the fact that ROSLA had been planned since 1964, and proposed as early as 1944, the NUT found that only a minority of local councils had made long-term plans.¹⁰ According to the NUT, most authorities simply regarded it as an extra year to be tacked onto the existing school system. There had been no coherent building programme and no coordinated plans for staff recruitment or in-service teacher training. This is a pertinent warning for today too.

6 James Meikle, "Welcom for plan to raise school age to 18," *Guardian*, 13 January 2007.

7 Simon Heffer, "A country wrecked by unlimited immigration," *Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 2007.

8 "Rise in school leaving age blamed for crime rate," *The Times*, 10 October 1974.

9 Rhodes Boyson, letters to the Editor, *The Times*, 9 January 1974.

10 *The Times*, 15 September 1972.

If you look even further back to earlier stages of the campaign to raise the school leaving age, two patterns emerge. First, the forces of conservatism were lined up against all changes to the status quo. Second, preparations were often so poorly funded or planned that they resulted in persistent delays and postponements.

In 1947, in contrast to now, *The Times* praised the then minister of education for insisting that the planned lifting of the compulsory school age would go ahead "despite the many difficulties which the raising of the age will entail". It referred to the immediate post-war problem of reducing the number of recruits from industry at "this critical time" and warned that the decision could only be justified "if the promised educational facilities are forthcoming".¹¹

Earlier still, the Fisher Act of 1918 had empowered local authorities to raise the leaving age to 15, but this had little real impact for many years, as schools struggled to find teachers and buildings.¹² An Education Act in 1936 required the leaving age to be raised to 15 from 1939, but this too remained largely ineffective as exemptions allowed those over 14 to enter what was called "beneficial employment".¹³

The 1944 Education Act – that remarkable piece of forward planning conceived during the Second World War – said that the leaving age should be 15 without exemptions from 1945; but this date too was postponed until 1 April 1947. The 1944 Act added that the leaving age should be raised to 16 as soon as possible.¹⁴ It was to be another three decades before that was achieved.

So no one should be in any doubt that the precedents suggest that raising the education leaving age to 18 will take time, will face strong resistance and will require extra resources. But just because history tells a story of a gradual, if painful, move towards an ever-higher compulsory leaving age, does that mean that a further rise is inevitable or needed?

11 *Ibid.*, 18 January 1947.

12 H.C. Barnard: *A History of English Education* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 231–2.

13 *Ibid.*, 238.

14 *Ibid.*, 300.

The government argues that the benefits are clear, for individuals, for society and for the economy. For individuals, it argues that those who stay on are much more likely to improve their qualifications and, moreover, that those who achieve five or more good GCSEs will earn, on average, over £100,000 more over their lifetime than those whose qualifications are below level 2.¹⁵

The benefits for society are well rehearsed. They include the evidence from the 1970 British Cohort Study, which found that young people who were not in education between 16 and 18 were, by the age of 21, more likely than their peers to experience depression and poor physical health.¹⁶

For the economic case, ministers cite the Leitch Review. This argued that Britain's skill levels are far from world class and must improve urgently if we are to compete successfully in the global economy. This case argues that we must increasingly rely on our knowledge capital, as the proportion of unskilled jobs in the future economy will shrink rapidly.¹⁷

The latest international statistics from the OECD support this view. The UK is falling behind in both the proportion of 16–18-year-olds staying on in education and in the proportion of the population who are graduating from university. According to *Education at a Glance 2007*, 78.5% of 15–19-year-olds in the UK were in full-time or part-time education, compared to an OECD average of 81.5% and an EU average of over 85%. This places the UK 23rd out of 28 OECD countries. Only Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal and Turkey were lower.¹⁸

However, while this suggests that we need to boost our participation rates, it does not automatically make the case for raising the leaving age, since only a few of the countries ahead of the UK in the league table have higher leaving ages. According to the OECD, these are: Belgium (18), Germany (18), Netherlands (18) and the USA (17). So this means that countries such as France, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Korea and Sweden have all achieved 15–19 participation rates well above 85% without resorting to compulsion.

15 DfES, *Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16* (London: TSO, 2007), 12.

16 From www.cls.ioe.ac.uk.

17 HM Treasury, *Prosperity For All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills* by Sandy Leitch (London: TSO, 2006).

18 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: *Education at a Glance* (Paris: OECD, 2007), table c2.1.

The proposed raising of the leaving age will only start to come into effect from 2013, and it will not cover all 18-year-olds until 2015. For now, the government seems set on a stick-and-carrot approach to delivering this. There will be new financial support for young people from low-income homes through an extension of education maintenance allowances.

On the tricky subject of enforcement, the Green Paper suggested that persistent truants would be issued with an attendance order.¹⁹ In the more recent paper, setting out the detail for the bill, this has been renamed as the slightly softer-sounding “attendance notice”.²⁰ If the terms of this notice are not met, the young person could be issued with a fixed penalty notice by the local authority.

If the fixed penalty notice remains unpaid, the young person could be brought before the Youth Court, where the penalty on conviction would be a fine. The government has now made it clear that no young person could be sent to prison for failing to attend courses. However, other options for extracting the fine could be used. These might include taking the money from wages or imposing an unpaid work requirement.

This is the bit that many in education find hard to swallow. Indeed, the public consultation revealed that 48% of respondents disagreed with the proposed sanctions; only 22% agreed with them, while 31% were not sure. There was slightly more support (56%) for stopping all benefits received by those refusing to attend. Others suggested the penalties should include community work, such as cleaning up graffiti or litter, or military/national service.²¹

However, while it is unpalatable to many, compulsion is the only thing that makes the proposal anything more than a vague aspiration or a little-noticed government target. It is also the bit that requires legislation. Without it, there would have been little media or public attention to the proposed changes. In today's media, no controversy means no attention. And no attention would have meant, frankly, that it was not much of a priority.

19 DfES, *Raising Expectations*.

20 Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16 – From Policy to Legislation* (London: TSO, 2007).

21 DCSF, *Government Response to Consultation on the Green Paper* (London: TSO, 2007).

Finally, there is the really key question: what and where will these young people study? It is all very well telling 16-year-olds to keep learning, but it is essential to offer something that will be of interest, and of practical use, to them. GCSE retakes are unlikely to appeal much and AS-levels will mostly be beyond their reach, at least initially.

Meanwhile, GNVQs are being abolished.²² They were never much understood by students, parents or employers. More often than not, they seemed to offer learning that was neither academic nor hands-on and practical. Young people will not be persuaded to stay in learning unless they can see a real application and purpose for what they are being asked to do. For many, the decision to get a paid job, even without training, is a rational decision, making them more, not less, employable in the future once they have shown they can turn up on time and successfully hold down a real and meaningful job.

Nor is it likely that many of those who currently leave learning behind at 16 will be happy to stay on at school, even with the carrot of an education maintenance allowance. For them, a fresh start at a further education college or with work-based learning seems more likely. It will be a big challenge for the FE sector, which is already being stretched in opposite directions: with the growth of Foundation Degrees, and FE-based degree courses, it is reaching upwards into the university sector; at the same time, it is reaching down into the secondary school sector with the new diplomas and the freedom that 14-year-olds have to spend time in colleges.

This stretch is happening at a time of great uncertainty for FE colleges, as their funding for 16–19-year-olds is due to be switched from the Learning and Skills Council back to local authorities by 2010/11. It also coincides with a tightening of the public purse under the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review. As the sports commentators say, “It is a big ask”.

The new diplomas could offer the curriculum needed for this group. They offer job-related relevance, some practical learning and core skills. But the role of the diplomas remains unclear. Ministers, nervous that they will be seen as second-class qualifications, have insisted that the diplomas should

not result in vocational, but in academic qualifications. Nor are they any longer to be called “specialised” diplomas.

Nevertheless, there are some renewed signs of determination to make the diplomas work. When Ed Balls, secretary of state for children, schools and families, announced in October 2007 that the new diplomas could become the “qualification of choice” and the “jewel in the crown of the education system”, he appeared to be sounding the death-knell for A-levels, albeit not until after 2013.²³

His announcement, at the same time, of three specific areas for the new diplomas (in sciences, languages and humanities, from 2011) clearly suggested that he eventually wants them to replace A-levels. Why else propose diplomas in purely academic subjects, unless the plan is to do away with A-levels? The talk of the “jewel in the crown” was a clear, if politically coded, signpost that all post-16 qualifications should come under a single diploma umbrella, whether they are in the sciences or languages or in hair and beauty or travel and tourism. Isn’t that exactly what Sir Mike Tomlinson originally proposed and what the prime minister, Tony Blair, rejected?

Unless there is perceived parity of esteem for academic and vocational courses, the UK will continue to find it hard to overcome the old “British disease” of undervaluing practical education. The Germans and the Swiss do not make this mistake. It may be asking a lot for a single qualification to cover the spectrum from preparation for studying French or physics at university to preparation for careers in vehicle maintenance or hairdressing. But if it can be done, we might start to focus more on the type of learning that students excel at rather than on separating them into sheep and goats. If we can do that, we might slow the process that makes so many youngsters feel, at such an early age, that learning is not for the likes of them.

Meanwhile, much of the negative media reaction to the government’s proposal to raise the leaving age has been based on the false image of hulking great 17-year-olds being forced to wedge their knees under school desks as they plough on with history or geography.

22 From 2007. See Qualifications and Curriculum Authority withdrawal notice, October 2004.

23 Ed Balls, *Diplomas Could Become Qualification of Choice for Young People*, Press notice 2007/0195 (London: DCFS, 2007).

This is clearly nonsense. The focus will be in FE colleges or the workplace, with a concentration on vocational skills plus basic skills in numeracy, literacy and, perhaps, IT.

If this goes ahead, 40 years will have elapsed since the last expansion of compulsory education. A lot has changed since the early 1970s. Back then, almost half the UK economy was accounted for by sectors such as manufacturing, construction and agriculture, which mainly employed low-skilled workers. Now, these sectors account for only a fifth of total output and the people they employ need higher levels of skills than in the past. In these circumstances, taking a further step to extend the number of years we expect young people to keep learning hardly seems either over-ambitious or precipitous.

THE CASE FOR RAISING THE PARTICIPATION AGE

MICHAEL BARBER

Never known for a lack of self-confidence, Winston Churchill, then a 34-year-old cabinet minister, wrote a letter during his Christmas holidays in 1908 to the prime minister, Herbert Asquith, recommending that the government should learn from international comparisons. "Germany ... is organised not only for war, but for peace. We are organised for nothing except party politics."

Churchill went on to recommend an ambitious programme of social reform – "Thrust a big slice of Bismarckism over the whole underside of our industrial system", he concluded, "and await the consequences whatever they may be with a good conscience."²⁴The Liberal government of which he was a part went on to implement a number of his proposals and become one of the great reforming administrations of the twentieth century. However, one of the recommendations made by Churchill that Christmas was neglected: making education compulsory to the age of 17.

A decade later, by which time the country was scarred by the trauma of the First World War, the issue returned to the political agenda as the coalition government contemplated life in the aftermath of war. H.A.L. Fisher, the education secretary, took his 1918 Education Act through parliament. It included a requirement that every young person aged between 14 (then the school leaving age) and 18 should be in at least part-time education or training. But in 1921, with the economy in deep recession, the decision was taken not to implement this section of the Act.²⁵

In 1944, with another world war coming to an end and another government contemplating how to build the country for peace, R.A. Butler's Education Act proposed raising the school leaving age to 15 and then to 16, "as soon as practicable". It also repeated the 1918 Act's commitment to at least part-time education or training until the age of 18. Again, this section was not implemented; even raising the school leaving age to 16 did not happen until 1972.²⁶

²⁴ Roy Jenkins, Churchill (London: Macmillan, 2001), 146–7.

²⁵ Brian Simon, The Politics of Education Reform (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 30.

²⁶ Michael Barber, The Making of the 1944 Education Act (London: Cassells, 1994).

Now, a century after Churchill looked to Germany for inspiration, this country is again benchmarking its economy and its education system against the best in the world; and, again, it is plain that the current arrangements for post-16 education are inadequate. The commitment has been made once more to legislate for compulsory participation – at least part time – in education and training to the age of 18.

This commitment ought to gain support across the political system and from all those with a stake in the future success of this country's economy: employers, universities, colleges, schools, the education workforce and, above all, families and young people themselves. This time, surely, we should see the commitment through to implementation.

Of course, the legislative requirement, while necessary, is far from sufficient. It should be the keystone of an arch which also includes a radical reform of the qualifications systems, much more effective educational provision for the full range of 16–18-year-olds and, perhaps most important of all, further significant improvement of education between the ages of 5 and 16, so that all young people reach 16 motivated to carry on learning, not just to 18, but throughout their lives. We should learn from international best practice and see this drive as part of a wider strategy to build an education system that matches the best in the world.

THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE

Before turning to how this might be accomplished, we should first be clear about why this is important and what the nature is of the problem we face.

First, as Mike Baker has already noted, it is clear from international comparisons that, relative to the education systems of the best-developed countries, we have a significant problem. The UK is below the EU and OECD averages for participation post-16 with, currently, 87% of 16-year-olds and 76% of 17-year-olds in some form of education. On participation of 17-year-olds, we rank 24th out of 29 OECD countries. Meanwhile, around 10% of 16- and 17-year-olds are not in education, employment or training ("NEETs", as the jargon calls them). The government's current target of 90% participation among 17-year-olds would place the UK 10th in the OECD, but only if every

other country stood still – which clearly they won't. Ontario, for example, is already forging ahead with making education compulsory to the age of 18.

Second, the nature of the economy in this country is changing. In 1972, when the school leaving age was finally raised to 16, there were many semi-skilled and unskilled jobs available for the mass of young people leaving school with few or no qualifications. Even in 2004, there were 3.2 million jobs of this kind available; estimates for 2020 suggest just 600,000 such jobs will remain. In such circumstances, allowing failure at the current rate would be little short of criminal. Moreover, the net gain to the economy of compulsory part-time participation is likely to be £1.4 billion per cohort. In other words, the rewards could far exceed the cost, if the benefits of the new policy are fully realised.

Third, the prospects for an individual who leaves school at 16 with minimal qualifications and then drops out of education altogether are dismal and will get worse as the twenty-first century economy continues to evolve. For one thing, a person with a level 2 qualification will earn £100,000 more over a career than someone without. The gap widens still more for people with A-levels and degrees. Meanwhile, those not in education, employment or training between 16 and 18 are many times more likely to be involved with drugs and engaged in criminal behaviour. In short, this is not just about the economy; it's about equity. The 10% of young people who are NEETs simply have not achieved the high minimum standards that are essential for successful participation in the economy and society of the twenty-first-century. The longer we allow this to continue, the greater will be the social and economic damage both to the individuals concerned and to society as a whole. In short, we cannot afford to fail again with a reform that Churchill and Fisher knew was important a century ago and which has now become essential, both economically and socially.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Changing the law to make it compulsory to be in education and training at least on a part-time basis through to the age of 18, as the government proposed in the 2007 Queen's Speech, is an important symbolic step; an unambiguous statement of intent. However, changing the law on its own is far from enough.

There would be no point in compelling 16- and 17-year-olds to stay in education and training if there were no suitable provision, no relevant qualifications and no motivating programmes. Moreover, because of the scale of the change that the new law would require, it cannot be brought in overnight. The transformation implied will require a strategic approach. Success will depend on six steps being taken.

Step one: phase it in

For the reasons just given, the new policy will require being phased in over a number of years. The government plans to bring in the new requirements up to the age of 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015. On the one hand, the moral and economic case argues for real urgency; on the other, securing the necessary qualifications and provision is a major task and all experience suggests that changes of this kind cannot be rushed. A five to seven-year implementation phase seems reasonable. The key, of course, is make use of the time between when the law is passed and when it comes into force, to prepare the ground to secure success.

Step two: create the necessary qualifications and programmes

The implementation phase provides an opportunity to bring into place a modern qualifications framework. The success of the new diplomas, the first of which will become available in September 2008, will be critical. They need to establish their credibility with employers, higher education, teachers and, above all, students themselves. Over many years in this country, the academic/vocational divide has been widened by prejudice, the legacy of a class-conscious education system which always considered vocational qualifications as worthy of less respect than the academic equivalents.

Even the categories are now outdated. After all, two of the highest status courses in the top universities – law and medicine – are vocational. It makes much more sense in the modern world to think in terms of “theoretical” and “applied” rather than “academic” and “vocational”. What needs to vary is the balance between the two in any given programme and for any given individual. In plumbing for example, understanding Archimedes’ principle – a theoretical issue – is useful; while in surgery, a steady hand – an applied issue – is vital. Moreover, there needs to be a sustained campaign to shift attitudes so that both theoretical and applied aspects of programmes are

highly valued. In Singapore, they understand this. In relation to applied programmes, they deploy the marvellous slogan: “We think with our hands.”

Alongside the international baccalaureate, A-levels and diplomas, apprenticeships will be vital too. Employers need to rise to the challenge and understand that they have a collective responsibility to provide them. It is not just the qualifications that matter; as important is the quality of the programmes that leads to them. The 14–19 sector, with its range of contributors, needs to develop a real understanding of best practice across the spectrum, to develop more effective means of disseminating it and securing its adoption across the system. The new Ofsted will have a major contribution to make. Above all, the quality of provision needs to be high at every level. The twentieth-century error of combining poor quality and low status for vocational tracks was devastating, since together they created a downward spiral.

Step three: mobilise society

Government must of course play its part, but this radical shift cannot be brought about by government alone. Employers need to be committed; the education service, especially its teachers and lecturers need to embrace it; and families and young people themselves need to recognise the importance of education and take advantage of the new provision as it becomes available. In short, our aspirations as a society need to be raised. The old fatalism – deeply ingrained in parts of Britain – has meant that many young people write themselves off educationally. This attitude needs finally to be shaken off.

In the last decade, excellent advertising combined with effective reform has been highly successful in strengthening the system’s capacity to recruit teachers; a similarly sustained advertising campaign, again linked to effective reform, could raise young people’s aspirations and those of their families. Parents and young people will in any case require access to high-quality information to make the necessary decision about qualifications and other practical questions, such as access to education maintenance allowances. An advertising campaign could assist with this too.

Some young people will need more sustained support than this implies, especially those from difficult home circumstances or those who are “looked after” who have been scandalously betrayed by the education system for many years. If they, like everyone else, are to succeed in the future, they will need mentors, and the kind of encouragement and support outside school time provided by third-sector organisations such as Fairbridge and campaigned for by Barnardo’s.

Step four: change 5–14 education too

Even if the provision is of high quality and the qualifications are valued, unless more young people than at present arrive at the age of 16 with the basic skills established and motivated to keep learning, then the benefits of the new law are unlikely to be realised and the debate will inevitably focus on the enforcement required rather than opportunity created.

Literacy and numeracy strategies in primary schools need to be reinvigorated following the excellent recommendations of the 2006 Rose Review. Between the ages of 11 and 14, every young person needs to make progress; at the moment too many young people become uninspired in this age group and barely advance. Effective catch-up programmes need to enable every young person who falls behind to catch up. The charter school chain programme Knowledge is Power (KIPP)²⁷ does this spectacularly well, for example, as do some – but not enough – secondary schools. Changing this is in part about the curriculum and in part about the quality of teaching. It is also important that young people at this age are offered an entitlement to a range of experiences which will open their minds to a world full of possibilities. Why not guarantee all of them the opportunities, for example, to participate in a stage production, to experience the challenges of an outward bound course or to spend time on a university campus and/or in a workplace? The new requirement to count English and maths in the five A–C indicator has been a major advance, not least because it reveals how much progress the system still needs to make in improving the basics in secondary schools, but this needs to be one part of a wider transformation, exemplified so well in the best academies and specialist schools.

²⁷ To read more about the Knowledge is Power Programme, visit www.kipp.org.

One final point: we have known for many years that a young person is much more likely to make progress in secondary school if he or she has just one adult in the school – just one – who really cares how well they do. Why doesn’t every school make sure that this is the case?

Step five: think about cohorts

Once the overall strategy for implementation is fully shaped, those responsible for the system need to think about what it will mean for each cohort as it moves through the system. In fact, it would make sense to have a tailored plan for each cohort so as to ensure that by the time its members reach the age of 16 they are all properly prepared for the new era. Maybe each senior official in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should have responsibility for a year group as well as their other responsibilities; maybe Ofsted should report on cohorts as they move through, as well as on institutions, programmes and key stages. If a particular cohort is not on track to be as well prepared as we would hope to take advantage of the new opportunities, why wait until they are 16 to discover the fact? At present, we don’t even look at the education system this way.

Step six: constantly strengthen the quality of teaching

The best education systems in the world recruit great people into teaching, train them well in classroom practice, both at the beginning of and throughout their careers, and expect every individual child and young person to succeed.²⁸ It is so simple to describe but, as the worldwide evidence shows, very difficult to do in practice. There has been significant progress with strengthening the teaching profession in this country in recent years, but in order to achieve world-class standards and to motivate all young people to exploit the emerging opportunities, further strengthening will be essential; indeed, it should be a constant priority for the system as a whole (as well as of government) to build continuously the capabilities of the teaching profession.

²⁸ Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed, *How the World’s Best Education Systems Come Out on Top* (London McKinsey & Company, 2007).

Within this context, the new legal requirement will need to be supported by specific professional development programmes, the school leaders, through the National College for School Leadership, and for all school staff, through the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA).

CONCLUSION: RIGHT THEN, RIGHT NOW

Unsurprisingly the controversy surrounding the proposals has focused on the penalties for non-compliance. If the law were passed and nothing else changed, these would indeed become the major issue in 2013. We hope, though, that this is not what will happen. Instead, the law will be backed by a powerful transformation of the education system along the lines proposed here. If that is indeed the case, then the vast majority of young people who would otherwise have dropped out will chose not to do so. Of course, a very small proportion will not make that choice. Nearly all – perhaps all – of these will have challenges in their lives, drug abuse for example, that will bring them into contact with the state – including the Criminal Justice System or the NHS. In other words, they would have problems that need to be solved anyway. The proposed requirement to participate in education, backed with the right measures, far from creating these problems, will make it much more likely that they are on the agenda and solved. This will require effective collaboration between schools and children’s services *before* young people reach the age of 16. Any individual likely to have difficulty participating in education beyond the age of 16 should have a personalised education (and care) plan well before they reach that age.

On 10 August 1917, H.A.L. Fisher made a statement justifying the introduction of what became the 1918 Education Act. Referring to the provisions that required young people to be in part-time education and training to the age of 18, he argued:

I now come to the most novel ... provision in the Bill. We propose that ... every young person no longer under any obligation to attend ... school shall attend such continuation school as the local education authority ... may require for ... the equivalent of 8 hours a week for forty weeks each year.

He then set out the case for this new proposal in words that ring as true today as they did then:

[T]he compulsion proposed in this Bill will be no sterilising restriction of wholesome liberty, but an essential condition of a larger and more enlightened freedom, which will tend to stimulate the civic spirit, to promote general culture and technical knowledge and to diffuse a steadier judgement and a better-informed opinion through the whole body of the community.²⁹

It is hard to better these words 90 years later. The transformation of the global economy since that time makes the case many times stronger and much more urgent. Over the last century, “Too little, too late” has too often been a justified criticism of education reform in this country. Let’s change that in the twenty-first century. Now is the time at last to implement the 1918 Education Act!

²⁹ Quoted in Stuart MacLure, *Educational Documents* Fifth edition (London: Chapman and Hall, 1986), 174–5.



WHY I AM AGAINST RAISING THE PARTICIPATION AGE

ALAN SMITHERS

Childhood is socially constructed. The Brown government is planning to lengthen it by two years in England (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will take their own decisions). In what Ed Balls, secretary of state for children, schools and families, has modestly described as “probably the biggest educational reform of the past 50 years”³⁰ the 2007 Queen’s Speech outlined legislation to require all young people to remain in education and training until the age of 18. The arguments put forward for doing so include: “skills for a fast-changing dynamic world”,³¹ “new and better opportunities”³² and “the problem of the ‘NEETs’ (those not in education, employment or training)”.³³

As Mike Baker has reflected in his contribution, historians will recognise that we have been here before. Compulsory schooling to the age of 10 was introduced in 1880 in the wake of the Forster Act of 1870, which established a framework of education for children aged between 5 and 13. The ostensible reason was to ensure that all children had a basic education so they could participate fully in the economy. But the impetus came mainly from the increasing numbers of unemployed youth – as the industries of the time became less dependent on juvenile labour – who were making a thorough nuisance of themselves, “idling in the streets and wynds; tumbling about in the gutters”.³⁴ The opportunity to go to school was there. The Newcastle Commission in 1861 found that 97% of children went to schooling of some sort at some stage. But the mugging of respectable folk as they went about their lives made it necessary to “administer a slight dose of compulsory education”.³⁵

Since the 1880 Education Act, the school leaving age has been progressively raised to 11 (in 1893), 13 (in 1899), 14 (in 1918), 15 (in 1944) and 16 (in 1972). On each occasion, it has been presented as being for the benefit of the children themselves and necessary to improve the skills of the

30 Ed Balls, quoted in the first leader in the Sunday Times, 4 November 2007.

31 Ed Balls, speech to the Fabian Society, 5 November 2007, reported in BBC News.

32 Gordon Brown, speech to the House of Commons, 11 July 2007, Parliamentary debates, Commons, 5th Ser., vol. 462., cols. 1449–52.

33 Ed Balls, speech to the Fabian Society, 5 November 2007.

34 J. McCosh, *On Compulsory Education* (1861), cited in F. Musgrove, *Youth and the Social Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 76.

35 H. C. Barnard, *A Short History of English Education*.

workforce, but always with an eye on protecting society from unemployed youth. There are thus three separate arguments for extending compulsory education and training: the economic benefits, benefits to others and the intrinsic benefits.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The economic case rests on the relatively low proportion of young people apparently completing upper secondary education in OECD comparisons³⁶. “Apparently”, because different criteria are involved and, while the UK uses “qualifications obtained”, other countries often rely on the less stringent “attendance”. Nevertheless, as the figures emerge, the UK ranks 23rd out of the 30 countries, with 70% completing upper secondary education, in a range from 97% in South Korea to 25% in Mexico. But participation in upper secondary education does not correlate strongly with wealth measured as GDP per capita. Luxembourg, the richest nation in these terms, comes 21st on participation, and Ireland, 4th on wealth, is 19th. In contrast, the Czech and Slovak Republics, joint 3rd for participation, rank respectively 25th and 27th on GDP per capita. Of course, many things besides education contribute to the earning power of a country, but that is the point: there is no simple relationship between the length of required education and the economy.

Neither does a successful economy require all young people to be in education or training for the same length of time. If, indeed, the future of the UK does lie in the production of high value-added goods, then this will depend on cherishing talent and creativity, and honing up the skills to produce high-quality output. Developing these different contributions is likely to be best served by a system differentiated on length as well as content. In the recent past, the government has been intent on expanding university education, but has neglected practical education. In consequence, while there is unemployment among our young people, the country has become ever more reliant on skilled workers from abroad. The government’s analysis needs to go beyond the popular cries of “equality” and “aspiration” towards matching education in terms of length and content to the different opportunities in the economy.

36 Alan Smithers, *Blair’s Education* (London: The Sutton Trust, 2007), 29, chart 6.1.

Nor is it enough to require young people to be in education; the time must be spent willingly and wisely. The Royal Economic Society has recently published a paper showing that the content of the curriculum is far more important for employment and earnings than the length of schooling.³⁷ Tony Blair’s insistence on more young adults going to university on the grounds that it would be good for the economy has been demolished by Alison Wolf.³⁸ But it has had two effects. It has led to a rapid expansion of higher education, with the introduction of some eyebrow-raising degrees, such as surfing and equestrian psychology. But the widening of the academic ladder to accommodate half the academic ability range has also devalued the education of the other half, many of whom have practical talents.

It is important that education contributes to the economy, but it is unlikely that this will be achieved by imposing education and training on unwilling attendees. Most young people at one time or another get fed up with the demands of school. They long to be free to get on with their lives. A strength of the present arrangements is that from 16 they are able to do so. People will throw themselves into subjects or training they have chosen for themselves, but react against what is forced upon them. What is needed is an array of freely chosen ladders which take young people on from compulsory schooling to the next stage of their lives. For some, this will be academic subjects; for others, practical learning. But whereas we have had good ladders from school to university, those from school to work have been sadly lacking. To be fair, the government is planning to introduce a range of new diplomas, but unless they lead to qualifications which open the doors to desirable jobs and higher earnings, they are likely to go the way of all the previous attempts. The so-called academic/vocational divide is misconstrued. It stems largely from the fact that, while it is clear what you can do with A-levels, it is not so with the supposed vocational qualifications. It is not that academic study is intrinsically superior, but that vocational qualifications obtained at school do not seem to lead to anywhere except the fringes of higher education. Attempting to fudge the difference by introducing academic diplomas will not make a “ha’p’orth” of difference unless the vocational diplomas are truly valued by employers so they will recruit according to them in preference to other qualifications.

37 Jörn-Steffen Pischke, “The impact of the school year on student performance and earnings: evidence from the German short school years,” *Economic Journal* 117 (2007), 1216–42.

38 Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter: Myths About Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

If the government is serious about improving education to underpin the economy, it should abandon its superficial assumption that more time in education means higher productivity. Rather, it should concentrate on introducing an array of opportunities, with good practical qualifications alongside A-levels, that young people will freely choose because they can see how what is on offer will enhance their lives.

BENEFITS TO OTHERS

The government identifies the “NEETs” – those not in education, employment or training – as a particular problem, with the implication that it would be good for the rest of us if they were not hanging about all day. Occupying them by keeping them in education and training has the same superficial appeal as it did in the nineteenth century, but it is hardly likely to benefit many of the young people themselves. Compulsion at 16 comes far too late for them. In Frank Field’s memorable phrase, our current education system contains “a conveyor belt of failure”.³⁹ About a quarter of young people leave primary school unable to read, write or add to the expected levels. At secondary school, most fall further behind and feel failures because they cannot reach the unrealistic goal of five good GCSEs (remember, this is claimed to be the same standard as the five O-levels that were once the narrow gate to the sixth form and university). Some actively opt out. Recent government figures show that persistent absenteeism increases with every year of secondary education. In 2004/5, in year 7 it was 3.5%, in year 8 it was 5.2%, in year 9 it was 6.8%, in year 10 it was 8.7% and in year 11 it was 11.6%. In total, there were 217,390 persistent absentees, of whom 67,660 were from year 11.⁴⁰

According to the government, in 2005/6 there were 206,000 NEETs, or 10.3% of the 16–18-year-olds. It will be evident from the two sets of figures that most were missing from the final year of current compulsory education. How likely is extending the period of compulsion by two years to bring them back in? The government is proposing a mix of carrots and sticks with grants for staying on, and on-the-spot fines and being taken to court for those who

39 Frank Field, interview on the Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, 5 November 2007.

40 DFES, Pupil Absence in Secondary Schools in England, 2005/06. National Statistics First Release (London: TSO, 2007), table 3.2.

do not comply.⁴¹ Parents could face parenting orders. But if the present range of sanctions employed to enforce the compulsory schooling as it is now are so unsuccessful, what hope is there for extending it? It is more likely that the imposition will lead to further alienation and disaffection. If the government is serious about helping the NEETs, rather than just getting them off the streets, it should concentrate on replacing the conveyor belt of failure with one of achievement, and provide opportunities that young people will want to choose. This will, in any case, be the only way to engage the 52% of NEETs who are aged 18 and not necessarily covered by the proposed legislation.⁴²

INTRINSIC BENEFITS

The main justification for extending education is that it will further enhance lives, but a recurring theme in this chapter is that beyond a certain point it must be freely chosen. Some compulsory education is necessary. Learning can be difficult, painful and boring, and left to ourselves we might avoid it. Essential learning needs to be backed by compulsion. In order to live in the modern world, we need to be able to handle words and numbers properly, and it is reasonable to insist upon this.

We also have to recognise that life is deeply mysterious. Three score and ten years as an organic machine on a small planet in an infinite universe is a hugely unappealing picture. As human beings, we have discovered a number of ways of making sense of our plight which have become formalised as the sciences, humanities, social sciences and expressive arts. It is reasonable to require young people to engage with these vital subjects for a spell, whether they want to or not, so they can discover for themselves what brings meaning to their lives. How long this compulsion should go on for is a moot point and, as we have seen, it has been progressively increased.

But if education is fulfilling its purpose, young people will increasingly come to know themselves. They will learn to recognise what they are good at, what they like doing and what they want to do with their lives. At some point, compulsion in education must give way to opportunities to express those abilities and interests, and develop those aspirations.

41 Alexandra Frean, “Youths will get £30 a week to train until they are 18,” *The Times*, 5 November 2007.

42 “Drop-out teens to get extra help,” BBC News online, 5 November 2007.

Compulsion and freedom are antithetic. There are very good reasons for a trunk of compulsory learning, but thereafter the educational system should provide opportunities – as branches of different lengths – to be freely chosen. At present, we have a national curriculum running through to 14 and then some limited choice to age 16. But from 16, it is up to the young people themselves, and that is how it should be. What they choose is an essential test of the quality of what is on offer. If 10% decide not to participate, it is because they cannot see anything in it for them.

Dragooning the drop-outs into education and training as a means of occupying their time is likely to encounter considerable resistance. If they are made to do something which they see as pointless, they are likely to make their feelings felt with disruption to those keen to learn. The government's responsibility in upper secondary education should be to create an array of attractive options which young people are anxious to take; it should not involve compelling them to be present on pain of penalty.

DIVERSION OF RESOURCES

But there are two other major concerns: one practical, the other biological. The timing of the proposed lengthening of compulsory schooling has been quite carefully chosen. The 2004 projections of pupil numbers for secondary schooling showed 2013 and 2015 to be at the end of a long downturn, thereby creating some slack in which to make changes. But immigration has caused that forecast to be revised, and an increase in pupil numbers of at least 4% is probable.⁴³ Further education is expected to bear the brunt of compulsion to age 18, catering for 46% of 16–17-year-olds on full-time courses – up from the current 37%. Schools will be expected to accommodate 39%, an increase of seven points. Work-based learning is intended to play only a small part, rising from 7 to 12%.⁴⁴ It is to be hoped that the government has properly budgeted for these extra numbers, especially the teachers who will be needed. We are already cruelly short of teachers of maths, physics and modern languages and if, indeed, practical education is to be expanded, it will be a major undertaking to attract and train teachers with the necessary expertise and experience. There is a real risk that attempting to increase

43 Office of National Statistics, "UK population set to increase to 65 million over the next ten years," Press statement, 23 October 2007.

44 DfES, *Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16*. Green Paper. Cm 7065 (Nottingham: DfES Publications, March 2007).

participation post-16 will divert vital resources from tackling the conveyor belt of failure that ends up with young people wanting to get out of formal education as soon as possible.

BIOLOGY

The other concern is more fundamental. Extending compulsory education seems to fly in the face of biology. Biologically, children are maturing faster, becoming taller, stronger and able to procreate from a younger age. But socially, we seem intent on trying to keep them children. Extending the period of tutelage and dependence takes away from young people control over, and responsibility for, their own lives. A recent report from the United Nations Children's Fund⁴⁵ showed alcohol abuse, drug-taking and teenage pregnancy to be rife among young people, especially in the UK. That is with the present compulsory education to age 16; two more years will further widen the gulf between biological and social childhood.

CONCLUSION

If my arguments are correct, it does not look as if compelling young people to be in education and training to the age of 18 will bring the assumed benefits in terms of the economy or helping the disadvantaged, and may well undermine the intrinsic benefits of freely chosen education.

The proposed legislation is based on superficial economic analysis which betrays a crucial lack of understanding of how young people develop biologically and cognitively. Instead of the simplistic notion that more education for more is better, it should look towards creating high-quality compulsory education for as short a time as possible and build on that an array of attractive opportunities that young people will freely want to choose.

Compelling young people to take courses removes an essential test of the quality of the provision. Allowing young people to grow up and giving them more control over their lives would be good for them, good for the economy and good for us all.

45 United Nations Children's Fund Innocenti Research Centre, *An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* (Florence: UNICEF, 2007).

CHOICE NOT CONFORMITY

CONOR RYAN

There was considerable acclaim when Mike Tomlinson – who offers his own perspective in the next chapter – published his proposals for a “unified framework for 14–19 learning” with a single diploma to cover all aspects of learning and qualifications for 14–19-year-olds.⁴⁶ Tomlinson, who had been tasked by the government with developing such a framework, argued:

The existing system of qualifications taken by 14–19-year-olds should be replaced by a framework of diplomas at entry, foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. Successful completion of a programme at a given level should lead to the award of a diploma recognising achievement across the whole programme. There should be up to 20 “lines of learning” within the diploma framework.

But underlying Tomlinson’s framework was a belief that a “parity of esteem” between qualifications could be created through regulation, whereas true respect for qualifications can only emerge through experience. Moreover, pursuing a regulatory parity, as is in danger of happening with diplomas, could not only damage existing qualifications; it would also deny young people the choices they should have if they are to be forced to stay in education or training until their 17th or 18th birthdays. Instead, we should not only make a virtue of those choices; we should promote each on its merits. By doing so – and by developing strong diplomas and apprenticeships – we can increase respect for vocational and applied qualifications, without the bureaucratic construct that any “overarching diploma” would inevitably become.

THE TOMLINSON MODEL AND WHAT FOLLOWED

Tomlinson’s diploma was based on 20 “lines of learning” which, his report said, must “reflect sector and disciplinary boundaries at the time of implementation, but be flexible and kept under review”. They should also “cover a wide range of academic and vocational disciplines, combining them where appropriate and allowing further degrees of specialisation within individual ‘lines’”. As well as being relevant to universities and employers,

46 DFES, 14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform by Michael Tomlinson (London: TOS, 2004).

they should “be transparent and readily understood by end-users”.⁴⁷ While the report was initially welcomed by Charles Clarke, then secretary of state for education and skills, its main recommendation was subsequently rejected by his successor, Ruth Kelly, who told the House of Commons:

There are some who argue that to transform opportunities for our children we should scrap the current system of GCSEs and A-levels. I do not agree. We will not transform opportunities by abolishing what is good, what works and what is recognised by employers, universities, pupils and parents. We must build on what is good in the system, and reform and replace what is not working.⁴⁸

Kelly’s package consisted of a strong focus on English and mathematics at GCSE, the promise of new “specialised diplomas” developed with employers through sector skills councils, and a toughening of A-level standards. The Conservatives, having already rejected the “abolition of A-levels”, emitted more sound than fury. But Tomlinson’s supporters felt betrayed. The Liberal Democrat spokesman on education, Phil Willis encapsulated their views:

Does not the secretary of state realise that continuing to separate GCSEs and A-levels from the vocational offer perpetuates the very division that Tomlinson hoped to bridge? How does she intend to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational programmes now that the diploma in its entirety has been rejected?⁴⁹

Indeed, Tomlinson had created a remarkable coalition of teaching unions, independent schools and universities behind his proposals. But his basic assumption – borne no doubt of the terms of reference he had been given by ministers – also reflected a mistaken assumption that the best way to attack prejudice against particular qualifications is to rebrand them, and create what those in the qualifications world lovingly call and aspire towards – parity of esteem.

47 Ibid., 8.

48 Ruth Kelly, speech to the House of Commons, 23 February 2005, Parliamentary debates, Commons, 5th Ser., vol. 431, col. 311.

49 Ibid., col. 318.

Kelly’s basic model has survived through Ed Balls, secretary of state for children, schools and families, who now has cabinet responsibility for pre-19 education, though he has sought to bring it closer to the Tomlinson model. Kelly’s successor, Alan Johnson, had already refined the package in November 2006, with plans to strengthen A-levels further through a new A* grade for top performers and to widen choice by funding colleges and schools to offer the international baccalaureate (IB) to a wider group of students as a less specialist pre-university academic qualification.⁵⁰ More recently, Balls added three academically oriented diplomas, while ditching plans for a 2008 qualifications review originally intended to placate critics of the rejection of Tomlinson. Balls declared that diplomas could become the qualification of choice for teenagers, though he also, crucially, renounced a central tenet of the Tomlinson formula when he declared in October 2007 that the government would not interfere with A-levels and GCSEs:

If Diplomas are successfully introduced and are delivering the mix that employers and universities value, they could become the qualification of choice for young people. But, because GCSEs and A-levels are long-established and valued qualifications, that should not be decided by any pre-emptive Government decision, but by the demands of young people, schools and colleges.⁵¹

THE CURRENT QUALIFICATIONS MIX

So, even though there were some who interpreted his remarks as spelling the death knell for A-levels, Balls was effectively saying that the market would decide. And as a result of the measures announced by successive secretaries of state since 2004, young people already have a stronger choice of qualifications available to them, a choice that should widen after diplomas are more widely introduced and the IB is made more widely available. There are four main qualifications routes open to (at least some) young people from September 2008:

- 1 A-levels and GCSEs retain considerable popularity, offering a largely specialist route to university in a wide range of subjects. In all, 319,000

50 “More choice for pupils: international baccalaureate to be available in all local authority areas,” Press notice 2006/0180 (London: DFES, 2006).

51 DCSF, Press notice 2007/0195.

students took A-levels in 2007,⁵² while virtually all 15-year-olds – more than 650,000 of them – took GCSEs.⁵³ Students typically take five or more GCSEs (12 subjects are not uncommon) by year 11 and those seeking an academic post-16 route would typically take four or five subjects to AS-level in year 12, and then two or three subjects to A2-level in year 13.

- 2 Diplomas, combining practical and academic learning with the basics, are discussed at greater length elsewhere by Karen Price, but will initially be available in Information Technology, Health, Engineering, Media and Construction. From 2009, they will be introduced in Environment, Manufacturing, Beauty, Business and Hospitality, with Public Services, Sport and Leisure, Retail and Tourism being added from September 2010. Each diploma will be piloted for three years before its universal introduction, and just 40,000 young people are expected to take the first diplomas from later this year, when it is available initially in 900 schools and colleges.⁵⁴ In 2007, Ed Balls announced three further diplomas in Science, Languages and Humanities, to be introduced from 2011.⁵⁵ Diplomas for 14–19-year-olds will all be available at levels 1, 2 and 3. Young people will be entitled to study for a Diploma from 2013, and a series of partnerships between schools and colleges is being formed to ensure the entitlement is real.
- 3 The international baccalaureate, a global qualification offering a less specialised but more rounded alternative to A-levels. Students must take a mix of English, Maths, science, foreign languages and the arts, with credits for an extended essay and community service.⁵⁶ There are currently 106 English schools and colleges offering the IB, a majority of them in the state sector, and the government is committed to funding at least one maintained institution in each local authority area outside London to offer the IB from 2010.⁵⁷

- 4 There are 200 apprenticeships⁵⁸ available across 80 industry sectors. Five sector subject areas account for just under 90% of apprenticeships: business administration, construction, engineering, health care and retail. Young apprenticeships are available from the age of 14, with 9,000 young people taking part in a programme for 14–16-year-olds, though most apprenticeships are for 16–25 year-olds, with 154,000 at level 2 and 98,000 at level 3 (the advanced apprenticeship) since 2006. Of these, 160,000 are aged 16–18. Each year, 24,000 young people participate in the “Entry to Employment” pre-apprenticeship programme.⁵⁹ Other young people are on training programmes paid for or provided by their employers.

Around 22% of 16–18-year-olds are not on any of these programmes. Of the two million young people in this age cohort, the government reports that 1,223,000 are in full-time education, 328,000 are in training programmes (including that provided by employers, and recognised by the Department for Children, Schools and Families as leading towards a qualification), 248,000 are working without training (although they have a legal right to request time off for study) and 206,000 are defined as “not in education, employment or training”, a category often called “NEETs”.⁶⁰ Among the NEETs at age 18 are students taking a gap year and young people caring for families.⁶¹ It is also worth recognising that few NEETs are in that position for more than a year: the figures reflect a position on a particular day. Within government, it is recognised that what the National Audit Office reported in 2004 still holds true today: there is a high degree of churn among NEETs, as young people move in and out of education, employment and training. In the year to November 2003, for example, 301,000 young people became NEETs while 309,000 moved out of the category.⁶²

52 DCSF, GCE/VCE A/AS and Equivalent Examination Results in England, 2006/07 (provisional), Statistical first release 35/2007 (London: National Statistics, 2007).

53 DCSF, GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2006/07 (provisional), Statistical first release 34/2007 (London: National Statistics, 2007).

54 See <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=39>.

55 DCSF, Press notice 2007/0195.

56 For more on the IB, visit www.ibo.org.

57 See <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=3&pid=283&ctype=TEXT&ptype=Single>.

58 See <http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk>.

59 See Learning and Skills Council, Further Education, Work-Based Learning for Young People, Train to Gain and Adult and Community Learning: Learner Numbers in England – October 2006, Statistical first release ILR/SFR12 (London: National Statistics, 2007).

60 DfES, Schedule for the Publication of National Statistics October 2007 to September 2008, Statistical first release SFR 22/2007 (London: National Statistics, 2007).

61 “New exclusion figures show schools are getting tougher,” Press Notice 2007/0116 (London: DCSF, 2007).

62 Connexions Service: Advice and Guidance for all Young People (London: NAO, 2004).

**CHOICE AND INCENTIVES:
THE CHALLENGES IN RAISING THE PARTICIPATION AGE**

This is not the place to rehearse the rights and wrongs of lifting the age to which young people are required to stay in education or training. Michael Barber and Alan Smithers have done so eloquently elsewhere in this volume. But those most affected by the change would be the 85,000 or so 16- and 17-year-olds currently in work without accredited training, as well as the 105,700 NEETs in this age group. There is also a widespread recognition that if the reform is to be successful, young people should have access to the right choice of qualifications. As Alan Johnson put it in the foreword to the *Raising Expectations* green paper:

Young people have access to a broad and engaging programme of education and training – a programme which will be extended over the next few years to increase choice further still. By 2013 every young person will be able to take a course which is inspiring, motivating, and challenging, and which will give them the skills to be more successful in life.⁶³

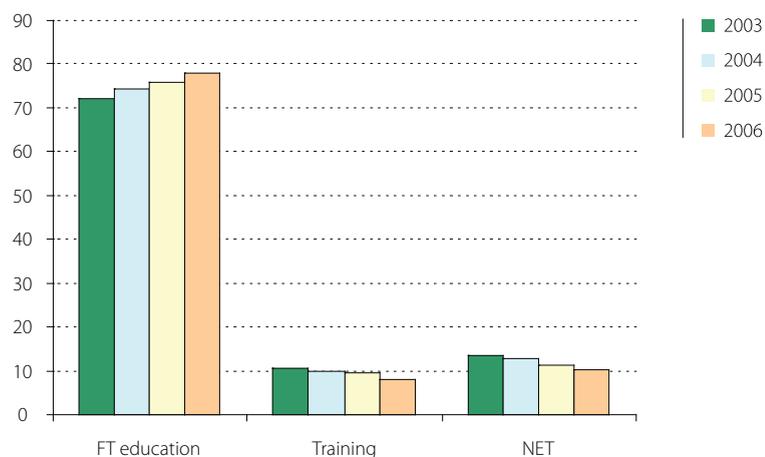


Figure 1: 16-year-old participation in education or training 2003–2006

63 DfES, *Raising Expectations*, 3.

This is indeed a worthy objective. Yet there are a number of challenges which, unless they are addressed, could diminish these choices and make it much harder to enthruse those young people who currently exercise their choice to go into work without accredited training or who are spending at least some of the year as NEETs. Without such enthusiasm, the government would have to rely on fines. For a start, government must ensure that young people’s choices are not distorted by the financial incentives on offer. Since 2004, young people whose families earn less than £30,810 a year have been able to access an education maintenance allowance (EMA) worth up to £30 a week, provided that they turn up regularly for school. Further incentives may be paid upon completion of agreed learning goals.⁶⁴ The evidence suggests that EMAs have led to some improvements in the proportion of young people staying in education, but that the proportion going into work-based and other training programmes has fallen: 72.3% of 16-year-olds were in full-time education at the start of the academic year in 2003; by 2006, this had risen to 78.1%, representing an increase of 38,400 young people staying in school or college. At age 17, the proportion increased from 59.8% to 65%, or 34,300 extra young people in full-time education. While the figures coincide with a reduction of those not in education or training (NET – includes those in work without accredited training), the increase equally represented a significant fall in the number of young people in training. Over the same period, the proportion in work-based learning or employer-funded training fell from 10.4% to 8% at age 16 and from 14.2% to 11.8% at age 17, equivalent to 15,900 fewer trainees in each age group.⁶⁵ The graph (figure 1) shows this pattern for 16-year-olds (it excludes the 4% of young people in part-time education, a figure largely unchanged since 2003).

Some might argue that this isn’t a problem, since more young people staying on at school is surely a good thing. But the problem is that too many are dropping out a year later. Take the 16-year-olds recorded as being in full-time education in 2005 – 75.8% of the age group. By 2006, when this cohort is aged 17, just 65% are still in school or college, which suggests that 66,000 young people have dropped out of full-time education that year. Of course, some have gone into training programmes, but the statistics suggest that 38,300 are in jobs without training and a further 9,000 have dropped

64 See the EMA guidance at <http://ema.lsc.gov.uk/ema-guidance/>.

65 See DFES statistical press releases SFR 27/2005, 30 June 2005 and SFR 22/2007, 26 June 2007, available at www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway.

out of work, training or education completely. This will be the group most impacted by the change to the participation age. And the reasons for their dropping out will be as crucial in enforcing the new law as incentives will have been in persuading them to stay in education in the first place.

These drop-out figures suggest three problems with the current system. The first is the lack of transparent advice for young people when they are making their choices at 14 or 16, but particularly when there is a chance that they might leave school. The school, if it has a sixth form, has a financial interest in keeping pupils on the rolls for another year, and since EMAs have been introduced, a growing number of young people stay on an extra year to do AS-levels, but don't go on to A2-levels. It would often be better if they were encouraged to take a qualification that might help them gain a better job or were encouraged to opt for a college course or an apprenticeship instead.

As the legislation currently before Parliament proposes, schools should be under a legal duty to make impartial advice available if young people are to be required to stay on in education or training; and their provision should be considered as part of Ofsted inspections to ensure such impartiality.

The second problem is that, in providing stronger incentives for young people to stay in education, those incentives available for those who go into training have been reduced. For example, the entry to employment programme E2E – which is an important pre-apprenticeship programme for young people not yet at basic GCSE standard – had between 13% and 44% fewer starts in 2006/7 than in 2005/6, according to a report for the Learning and Skills Council and the Association of Learning Providers.⁶⁶ Providers also reported that Connexions advisers were less likely to refer young people to E2E since the start of EMAs. And there are also more basic issues: the old training allowance which was subsumed into EMAs paid £40 a week before it was scrapped; EMA has a £30 maximum. Whereas the proportion of young people not in education or training is falling, the proportion of 16-year-olds in work without training has risen in recent years,⁶⁷ even though young

66 Sue Garmonsway *The Extension of Education Maintenance Allowance to Work-Based Learning* (London: LSC and ALP, 2007) available at http://www.learningproviders.org.uk/latest_news/final_ema_report.pdf. Variations differed between different periods of the contract year.

67 In 2005, 3.2% of 16-year-olds were in this position; by 2006 it was 3.9%. The proportion of 17-year-olds in work without training rose from 8.8% to 9.0% over the same year.

people have had a legal right to request training since 1998. Young people at college are unlikely to have to be present for 35 hours or more, as in a job. And whereas the allowance is suspended if a young person misses classes in a week, it is also suspended where a young person doesn't show for work on one day, giving them less incentive to come in later that week. Yet for some young people, particularly those most likely to become NEETs, a pre-apprenticeship course will be far more relevant to their needs than other educational or training options. As one recent government paper put it: "For young people not yet working at level 2, it is essential that there are good quality qualifications available at level 1 and below that recognise their achievements and enable progression to the next level."⁶⁸ The government has ensured that EMA is available more widely to E2E participants. But the EMA should not act as a disincentive. And for others, advanced or mainstream apprenticeships would be the best option. It helps neither young people themselves nor their fellow sixth-formers to pretend otherwise.

The third issue is the lack of appropriate vocational options, something that diplomas have the potential to resolve from later this year. But their success will depend on a much clearer sense of their purpose than has hitherto been shown. Initially conceived by ministers as a vocational alternative to A-levels – later described as "specialised" – the diplomas have since evolved into an uncomfortable hybrid, with ministers happy to present them as a potential replacement for A-levels after the qualifications are next reviewed in 2013. One reason for this is that government is terrified of "difference" in qualifications, preferring instead to believe that a "parity of esteem" can be achieved through regulatory consistency rather than what the qualifications do in practice. Yet the two qualifications are very different – and they also differ significantly from the IB, due to be more widely available from 2010, or apprenticeships – and selling them to students, teachers and parents will not be easy if their distinctiveness is obscured. Instead, the government should focus on ensuring that young people not only know about diplomas, but also what each diploma can offer them in terms of learning requirements and potential employment or higher education afterwards. A young person wanting to mix the academic with the practical will see the merit in a diploma, in that it resembles a professional qualification. Others preparing for university may prefer A-levels or the IB. These are distinctive

68 DCSF, *Raising Expectations*.

qualifications with different strengths. To pretend otherwise could endanger the best chance in a generation to provide a strong vocational education of the quality envisaged but never delivered by the 1944 Education Act. Put simply, ministers could destroy the new diplomas if they try to make them do too much.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED TO REINFORCE REAL CHOICE

The government's most important policies for 14–19-year-olds hinge on getting the right qualifications in place. The participation age will become a cause for resentment rather than an opportunity to succeed unless young people have the right advice, incentives and guidance. Choice rather than fines should be the way forward. Diplomas could falter unless there is greater clarity about their purpose and less concern about upstaging A-levels. Apprenticeships have grown under Labour, and young people seeking work-based learning should not be offered diplomas instead, where they are not the right option. The government has talked a lot about providing young people with a "personalised education". While that has meant a difference in teaching and learning, it should surely be as important in the choice of qualifications on offer to teenagers. Choice needs to be promoted, enhanced and enabled. Once diplomas are in place, there can be no greater task in ensuring that young people have the best start for adulthood.

THE CASE FOR A UNIFIED DIPLOMA

MIKE TOMLINSON

Over the past 50 years there has been repeated discussion of the curriculum and qualifications available to young people at the ages of 16 and 18. A-levels were introduced in the early 1950s to replace the school certificate, a group award. In the 1980s, we had the creation of the GCSE, from the former GCE O-level and CSE courses, as the qualification for 16-year-olds. In 2000 came reform of the A-level to provide for the AS and A2-level awards. Discussion of post-16 reform has been continuous for at least the past 20 years, but any proposals to reform A-levels has met with failure. The question is, why did they fail?

Put simply, the argument most frequently offered was that the "gold standard" of A-levels could not be touched. There is no doubt that it has been seen as the pathway to higher education, a tried and tested qualification which is understood by students, parents, universities and employers. But there has been no comparable "gold standard" for those students who opt for a more applied or vocational pathway, nor has there been any serious debate about the content of A-levels, only about its value as a qualification, and even this has been questioned more recently.

I wish to argue that it is time to consider the curricula available to the 14–19 age group, their suitability to equip all students with the knowledge and skills required in the twenty-first century and how one might once and for all remove – or at least narrow – the divide between the so-called academic and vocational pathways.

What is the argument for this significant review of the existing curriculum and qualifications on offer? The reasons are well documented in reports and papers issued over the last decade. Among them are:

- the low staying-on rate at 16 and 17, which placed the UK 24th out of 28 OECD countries. Our staying-on rate is 78%, whereas that of our near neighbours in Europe is above 90%. We have some 5% of students

leaving school at 16 after 11 years of education with no qualifications at all;⁶⁹

- continuing concerns with the levels of literacy and numeracy among school leavers at all ages, including those proceeding to higher education;
- the disengagement of 14–16-year-olds from learning and from schools;
- the lack of high-quality vocational provision which meets the needs of employers and provides a real progression for the student;
- the need for the most able to be stretched and challenged much more than is achieved at present;
- the argument for reducing the assessment burden on students aged 14–19.

While some progress has been made in raising achievement and providing more flexible curricular packages for the 14–16 age group, our system still fails too large a proportion of young people. This failure affects personal choices as well as the economy, and has a potential impact on social cohesion. To seek solutions by modifying qualifications has been the pattern of the past 10 or more years. Many will remember the different acronyms – CPVE, GNVQs, NVQs, TVEI, AS-level and so on⁷⁰ – for attempts to address specific issues or groups of students. None sought to deal with the system as a whole.

If this analysis of the weakness of our present system is even partly justified – and past piecemeal reform has failed to deliver the improvements originally claimed – then it is time to look again. This time we should do so in a more holistic way, starting not with qualifications, but with the curricula available to 14–19-year-olds and the outcomes needed if all young people are to be educated to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

⁶⁹ DfES, Raising Expectations.

⁷⁰ CPVE was the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education and TVEI the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, both introduced in 1986. GNVQs are General National Vocational Qualifications, while NVQs are National Vocational Qualifications; the former have now been phased out. AS-levels are Advanced Supplementary exams, typically taken in the first year of an A-level course.

I believe the curricula offered to 14–19-year-olds should have four requirements:

- 1 Subject knowledge centred on the main studies being pursued.
- 2 Competence in the basics of mathematics, language and IT appropriate to the level of subject study and the next stage of education or training.
- 3 The development of a range of personal and employability skills. Included here are skills such as working in a team, creativity, managing time, researching, analysing and synthesising information, and managing one's own learning.
- 4 A broad curriculum. This does not require more subjects to be studied, as breadth can be defined in ways other than the traditional one. Breadth can be achieved within a subject or small group of subjects if the curriculum and time allow for a variety of student experiences and challenges. Breadth does not have to come at the expense of depth – this is a sterile argument which has dogged discussion of the curriculum, notably for post-16 students.

While presenting these four requirements as separate entities, they do not necessarily have to be taught as discrete “packages”. Skills need developing within subject study, as do basics. My argument is that a curriculum meeting these requirements will provide young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in both adult and working life. Furthermore, it is vital that the value of each component is reflected in the assessment system and in the associated qualification. Finally, the curricula available must meet the needs, abilities and aspirations of all levels of attainment.

The curriculum must challenge all students and the qualifications must enable progression along clear pathways, with no dead-ends as at present. So there should be nothing that prevents a level 3 student progressing to higher education; a BTEC engineering course at this level does not currently give the student the option of progressing directly onto a degree course.

Accepting the above analysis, do the present curricula and qualifications

meet the needs specified? And if they do not, what needs to be done?

I do not believe our current arrangements do satisfy these requirements. The first reason centres on the development of the skills required. While we continue to provide almost a free choice of subjects, particularly post-16, full skill development will have to be included in every subject studied. If this is not done, students will not have equal access to the development of the skills. However, to have such a requirement built into every subject wastes teaching time through duplication of effort. The same argument applies to the development of the basics at the appropriate level. Are these to be included in every course studied, and hence waste time?

Many believe that GCSE mathematics and English between them provide for the mastery of the basics. However, data now available show this not to be the case. Students who gain an A*–C grade at GCSE in August will often fail the basic numeracy test taken the following month.⁷¹ This is unacceptable and goes some way towards explaining employers' frustration with young employees whom they take on. Of course, the GCSE could be modified to prevent this problem from arising, but it is more important to provide courses in the functional basics, defined by what young people need to have mastered in order to be effective citizens and workers.

The answer to how we ensure that these skills and knowledge are developed in all students does not lie with the continuing obsession some commentators have with separately qualifying every course, allowing for total freedom of choice and welcoming the very large number of separate qualifications presently available. Do we really need some 4,000 or so separately qualified courses? I don't believe we do. It constitutes an alphabet soup of qualifications with no national framework, which makes it very difficult for parents, students, teachers and employers to understand their value or have clear progression routes to university, college and employment, except in a very small number of cases.

These various criticisms of the present system can be addressed through the concept of a group award or diploma. Such systems operate very effectively in a number of European countries such as France, where

71 DFES, 14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 reform by Michael Tomlinson.

“le bac” is the only route available and, of course, there is the International Baccalaureate (IB), used in schools throughout the world. In these particular models, student choice, particularly post-16, is very constrained and the teaching time required far exceeds that normally given to sixth-formers in England. I do not argue that choice in England should be so limited, but some limitations may be beneficial if the whole curriculum is to deliver the aims set out earlier. In the UK, the “Welsh bac” is already in place and early signs are that it is being well received by schools, students, higher education and employers. In Scotland, the qualifications system has the flexibility to provide for a group award or bac if desired. These models retain some large element of choice, characteristic of our present sixth forms.

A PREFERRED STRUCTURE FOR DIPLOMAS

My preferred diploma structure – and that recommended in the 2004 review that I led – has three elements:

- 1 The core, compulsory and common to all diplomas and hence transportable if the student wishes to move to a different diploma programme.
- 2 The main study. For 14–16-year-olds, some of this is specified by the national curriculum, but beyond this there will be choice. Post-16, it allows for more choice and more specialisation.
- 3 Supplementary study. These courses could be compulsory, because they support the main study or optional in that they allow the student choice of courses related to main study.

The compulsory core would include functional mathematics, language and IT to a level appropriate to the diploma; an extended project linked to the main study; structured work experience; and careers guidance. The extended project could involve any combination of writing, design, composition or model-making; unlike the IB, it need not be a written project. It would develop the skills of research, analysis, synthesis, application of knowledge and presentation. These skills are needed both by universities and employers. The extended project would be the “glue” which binds together the whole programme of study and might in some cases be linked to future careers. For example,

someone studying physics, chemistry and biology at advanced level, and who wants to be a doctor, could focus the extended project on a medical topic. The student's work in the functional elements would be examined and graded and the extended project would also be graded. The level of performance required would be specified in advance and the diploma would not be awarded unless the required performance levels were achieved.

For students aged 14–16, the national curriculum requirements would form a significant element of the main study. Some choice would also be available, with students able to pursue academic or applied studies, or a mixture. At this age, the applied studies would be broad in character and not job specific. Specialisation would be possible after 16. The main study for post-16 could be academic or applied. The academic study would continue to be along the lines of current A-levels, while the applied study would be one of the 14 specialised courses that the government has had developed by employers and universities. Contrary to what is often reported, the content of current GCSEs and A-levels would be retained, though it might be necessary to bring about some changes, particularly at A-level, if the studies are truly to challenge, stretch and reward scholarship. All the courses would be assessed in ways appropriate to the content. Where this involves written examinations, there would be more synoptic questions than at present and students would be able to sit the examination after two years of study rather than in modules during the two years. There would be rules of combination, some dictated by universities, others by employers, to ensure that the main studies enable future progression. It would not be possible to study small courses which together have no obvious coherence, and which would prevent the student from further progression.

Supplementary study could be compulsory or optional. The courses would be compulsory where they were needed to support the main study or were specified by universities or employers. For example, a post-16 science student would have to do supplementary mathematics for science or engineering (both of which might be preferable to studying A-level mathematics), or a humanities option might be required to pursue a statistics course. If no supplementary studies were required, then it would be open to the student to choose, the number dependent upon the time available. These courses could be assessed through the main study (where compulsory) or separately where they were free choices.

Taken together, these three components would provide a means of meeting all the curricular aims set out previously, and they would do so in the most coherent and logical manner. The “package” would then be the qualification, achieved if all components were studied successfully to a specified level. There would be no need separately to qualify each course studied.

Instead, the diploma itself, as the qualification, could be graded or given a points score, as in the IB, with the grade or points for each component also provided. This would give users maximum information about a student's attainment across a wider range of work than is currently covered by A-levels. The diploma should be available at entry, intermediate and advanced levels, sometimes referred to as levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Progress through these levels is then possible, with the advanced diploma (level 3) providing entrance to university or employment and covering both the academic and applied routes within the single coherent structure. This would reduce significantly the number of separately qualified courses, bring a much simpler system into place and help bridge the gap between the academic and applied routes.

THE GOVERNMENT'S DIPLOMAS

Many elements of my preferred diploma are included in the applied or vocational diplomas being developed by the government. The first five will be available to teach from September 2008 (Creative and Media, Construction, Engineering, IT, Health and Development). Karen Price describes the IT diploma in greater detail in her chapter for this book. The next five will become available for teaching from 2009, and the final four in 2010. A statutory requirement is for all 14-year-olds to be able to study any one of the 14 pathways, requiring schools, FE, work-based trainers and employers to cooperate. As others have discussed in this volume, the government intends to require young people to remain in education, training or a job with training until 18. To make this a reality, there must be the curricula available which will motivate every student and provide progression, including apprenticeships and jobs with training. Employers and universities have been centrally involved in determining the content of the new diplomas and many are indicating their support.



In October 2007, the secretary of state for children, schools and families, Ed Balls, announced the extension of the diploma policy to cover science and mathematics, languages and humanities. These will complete the coverage of the curriculum and bring the so-called academic subjects into the diploma structure. These three new diploma areas will be available for teaching from 2011 and a review will be conducted in 2013 to decide whether separately qualified GCSEs and A-levels will remain. In the meantime, these will be available alongside the diplomas.

So, what might be the position in 2013? It could well be that the diplomas will have proved to provide the breadth of knowledge and skills required by higher education and employers and will be meeting the needs of all students rather than those of some. This would require apprenticeships to be recognised for a diploma qualification. At advanced level, the diploma will be providing much more stretch and challenge than the separate A-levels and have much closer links with first-year university courses. At the lower levels, the diplomas will be motivating students with applied studies involving structured work placements and clear routes for progression. Staying-on rates will be high and achievement levels will be raised. The diploma could be the qualification of choice, used by universities and employers.

However, this position can only be reached if the content of each diploma is carefully thought through with employers and higher education. Teachers and lecturers will need high-quality in-service training; careers education and guidance will need to be much improved in both quality and delivery; and parents, students, teachers and employers will need to be kept informed and feel satisfied that the diplomas will be accepted by universities and employers. At present, more and more universities are indicating they will accept diplomas, particularly the engineering one.

Before 2011, however, schools are going to be placed in a difficult position, deciding which qualification they should adopt: the diploma or GCSEs and A-levels. This could be problematic for the future of the diploma, but I believe strongly that by 2011 it will be the qualification of choice. Why? Because it will offer breadth (though not defined by the number of different subjects studied), a coherent package of study which develops both knowledge

and skills, and clear progression routes; in addition, it will motivate students and support their aspirations for the future. If this can be achieved, then secondary education will have been transformed for all students, and the objectives set out in my 2004 review will have been achieved.



WHAT BUSINESS WANTS FROM APPRENTICESHIPS

MILES TEMPLEMAN

In a speech given in October 2007, the prime minister, Gordon Brown, outlined his ambition for the country to be “world class in education and to move to the top of the global education league”.⁷² This is a welcome ambition, but not a new one. Angst about the nation’s educational performance stretches back well into the nineteenth, let alone the twentieth, century. Ten years earlier, the attainment of a “world-class education system” was one of the key objectives set out by Tony Blair for the incoming Labour government, as he spoke outside Number 10 on 2 May 1997. And aspiring to excellence in education, or pledging to achieve it, is a staple aspiration shared by politicians of every hue and, of course, by employers.

But if the ambition for first-class education was treading a well-worn path, there was another statement of intent in Gordon Brown’s speech to which followers of education policy have become almost equally accustomed. The phrase: “We plan a radical overhaul of apprenticeships”, is wearily familiar. For it is difficult to think, at least in the skills and training field, of any initiative so relentlessly reviewed, reformed, tweaked and tinkered with than apprenticeships. The government view of these changes, that of “a sensitive and evolving process of improvement”,⁷³ surely stretches credibility to its limit.

Although Britain has a long tradition of apprenticeship – a tradition, indeed, stretching back to the guilds of the Middle Ages – what we now know as apprenticeships, that is to say the government training scheme, was born in 1995 as “modern apprenticeships”. The creation of the new scheme was announced by the then chancellor of the exchequer, Kenneth Clarke, in his budget statement of 30 November 1993,⁷⁴ and has remained central to the approach of successive governments to improving intermediate level skills. The *Leitch Review of Skills* reinforced this primacy by recommending a dramatic increase in the number of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom

72 Gordon Brown, speech at the University of Greenwich, October 2007; available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page13664.asp>.

73 The Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs’ Fifth Report of Session 2006–07 on Apprenticeships (London: TSO, October 2007), 14.

74 It would, he said, “provide a major boost to work-based training and increase substantially the number of young people obtaining the technical and craft skills which not only employers but trade unions agree the country has been lacking.” See House of Commons Hansard Debates, 30 November 1993.

to 500,000 by 2020⁷⁵ (a target subsequently adopted by the government), and the Prime Minister recently went so far as to describe apprenticeships as “the keys ... to our future”.⁷⁶

WEAKNESSES WITH THE CURRENT SYSTEM

Quality of training provision

Apprenticeships clearly hold an anointed position in the training hierarchy. And yet the frequent alterations, changes in nomenclature and myriad recommendations issued by task forces and advisory committees over its relatively short lifetime tell their own story.⁷⁷ The programme has been blighted by some key weaknesses, most notably the quality of work-based learning provision and the proportion of apprentices completing their whole apprenticeship framework. The transformation of the first of these must be regarded as a success story. In 2001–2, a dire 58% of work-based learning providers were judged by the then Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) to be inadequate to meet the needs of learners. By 2005–6, the proportion had fallen to 12%.⁷⁸ According to the latest Ofsted annual report, only 7% of work-based learning providers were judged to be inadequate in the academic year 2006/7.⁷⁹ The turnaround reflects both genuine improvement among training providers and also the effects of ceasing to fund poor providers. It is vital that this momentum is maintained.

Completion rates

Higher-quality provision should, in turn, feed into improved outcomes. There is some positive news on this score too. In 2001–2, data from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) showed that, of the 157,000 leavers from modern apprenticeship programmes, 119,396 (76%) left without completing the full requirements of their framework. Success fluctuated wildly by area of

75 HM Treasury, *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy*, 21, para. 65.

76 Gordon Brown, speech to the 139th Trades Union Congress, 10 September 2007.

77 At the time of writing (November 2007), yet another internal government review is currently under way. Conducted by the DCSF and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), supported by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, it will “bring together a strategy for expanding and improving Apprenticeships.” See The Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs' Fifth Report of Session 2006–07 on Apprenticeships (London: TSO, October 2007), 3, para. iv. [cf. note 72]. It will offer recommendations to ministers on how the apprenticeship programme should respond to the requirement to expand in order to deliver government commitments to introduce the entitlement for young people and to meet the Leitch ambition. Information provided by a DCSF official, 25 October 2007.

78 Adults Learning Inspectorate, *The Final Annual Report of the Chief Inspector* (London: TSO, 2006), 7.

79 The inspection remit of the ALI has been subsumed into an enlarged Ofsted. The new organisation – the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills – came into being on 1 April 2007.

learning, with completion rates as low as 16% for apprentices on retailing, customer service and transportation advanced modern apprenticeships.⁸⁰ As with the quality of training provision, the situation has improved. LSC data for 2005–6 show the proportion of apprentices completing their framework having more than doubled, to 53%.⁸¹ The 2007 Ofsted report puts the figure at 60%,⁸² still “far too low”, and with success rates the wrong side of 50% in areas such as leisure, retail and care. An upward trend, therefore, but not good enough for a flagship training programme, particularly when compared internationally. The equivalent rate in Germany is at least 75%.⁸³

Supply-driven

Another historical weakness of the apprenticeship programme – contrary to the traditional pattern of apprenticeship recruitment – has been its supply-driven, rather than demand-driven, orientation. Apprenticeship recruitment has been orchestrated by the education department, the LSC and training providers, with a central target set to ensure that a particular proportion of young people participate. This emphasis on quantity has been damaging to quality and performance. Moreover, the supply-driven approach has also had the unfortunate corollary of sidelining employers, who have often taken a back seat to training providers in the provision of Apprenticeship frameworks.

Encouragingly, the government started to move away from a focus on numbers starting or participating in apprenticeships towards those actually finishing them. Then came Lord Leitch's *Review of Skills* which, somewhat ironically, given the report's overarching desire for a demand-led skills system, proposed a new UK target for 500,000 apprenticeships a year by 2020. The government has accepted this ambition. Its approach to meeting it reveals that the conversion to quality over quantity wasn't a Damascene one. The Public Service Agreement (PSA) target for apprenticeships set for the period covered by the 2007 comprehensive spending review – 130,000 apprentices

80 Learning and Skills Council, *Further Education and Work-Based Learning for Young People – Learner Outcomes in England 2001/02*, Statistical first release ISR/SFR25 (London: National Statistics, 2003), 21–2.

81 Learning and Skills Council, *Further Education and Work Based Learning for Young People – Learner Outcomes in England 2005/06*, Statistical first release ILR/SFR13 (London: National Statistics, 2007), table 7.

82 Ofsted, *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2006/07* (London: TSO, 2007), 44.

83 House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs, *Apprenticeship: A Key Route to Skill. Volume I: Report* (5th Report of Session 2006–07, HL Paper 148-I) (London: TSO, 2007), 20, para. 51.

to complete the full apprenticeship framework in 2010–11⁸⁴ – could actually be met by ramping up numbers with no overall improvement in the *rate* of completion.⁸⁵

A CHANGE IN THE LEVEL OF TRAINING

We can see that progress has been made on these three issues – training quality, completion rates and a predominant emphasis on supply over demand – perhaps not quickly or fully enough, but progress nonetheless. However, this apparent progress ignores an important change in the level of training that apprenticeships increasingly represent. When ministerial speeches trumpet the headline increase in apprenticeship numbers since 1997, they rather disregard what is going on under the surface. Much of the increase in numbers of those “in apprenticeship” has come as a result of converting other government-supported forms of work-based learning into apprenticeships.⁸⁶ And, for a scheme designed to address weaknesses in intermediate, technician-level skills (level 3), apprenticeships have also progressively come to be dominated by participation at level 2. While the total number of learners in apprenticeships increased from 212,300 in 2000/1 to 252,300 in 2005/6, this disguises a fall in both absolute terms (from 125,700 to 98,000) and proportionally (from 59% of apprenticeships to 39%) in the number in advanced apprenticeships (i.e. level 3). The same trend can be seen in the number advanced apprenticeship starts (72,400 to 52,100: 41% to 30%).⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the number of learners on level 2 apprenticeships increased from 86,600 (41%) to 154,300 (61%) over the same period. This pattern is given added salience by the clear signal issued by Leitch on the need to shift the balance of intermediate skills from level 2 to level 3.

84 HM Government, *PSA Delivery Agreement 2: Improve the Skills of the Population, on the Way to Ensuring a World-Class Skills Base by 2020* (London: TSO, October 2007), 5. This target is for England.

85 The PSA target for apprenticeships set for the period covered by the 2007 CSR is for 130,000 apprentices to complete the full apprenticeship framework in 2010–11, up from the 2005–6 baseline of 98,000. Measured against the total number currently leaving apprenticeships (185,104 in 2005/6), this would give a healthy completion rate of 70%. However, the PSA target document goes on to state that the achievement of the completion target “will require an increase in the average number of apprentices in learning to around 300,000 by 2010–11” as well as “a continued focus on driving up success rates.” See *PSA Delivery Agreement 2: Improve the Skills of the Population, On the Way to Ensuring a World-Class Skills Base by 2020* (HM Government, October 2007), 11, para. 3.12.

86 House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs, *Apprenticeship: A Key Route to Skill*. Volume I: Report, 13, para. 25. Total numbers on all government-supported work-based learning programmes have increased by just 7% since 2000 (*ibid.*, 13, para. 25).

87 Learning and Skills Council ILR/SFR 12, tables 5 and 6.

LATEST INITIATIVES AND THE WAY FORWARD

So, with another internal government review of apprenticeships under way, what is proposed under the latest “overhaul”? The initiatives announced in Brown’s speeches were fleshed out into a fuller programme by the inclusion of an Apprenticeships Bill in the Queen’s Speech. The more detailed proposals include: a national matching service to bring potential apprentices together with employers; widening the pool of employers currently offering apprenticeships, including a duty on public bodies to do so; a legal duty on the LSC to provide “sufficient” apprenticeships in every area; recognition of completed apprenticeships; and reforms to funding arrangements. The government has also announced its intention to offer, by 2013, an apprenticeship entitlement to every qualified young person who wants one.

Some of these measures are useful, though further improvements can be made and much will ultimately depend on implementation and delivery. However, there are a number of areas where attention is required.

Systemic improvements

The system has to become more “intelligent” and proactive. The matching service should be a useful tool in connecting supply and demand, and should enable the government drastically to improve the data it currently maintains on those involved in apprenticeships (both apprentices and employers). It could also provide a framework for enhancing the initial assessment of apprentices, to prevent young people from being placed on inappropriate programmes. DfES data showed that at least a third of 16–18-year-old men on an advanced apprenticeship (level 3) programme in 2005/6 had not achieved a level 2 qualification, while many of those on a level 2 apprenticeship were already qualified to this level.⁸⁸ As the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee concluded, these figures “point to confusion and waste”.⁸⁹

88 House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs, *Apprenticeship*.

89 *Ibid.*, 24, para. 63.

The intended “pre-apprenticeships programme”, for those not ready to meet the entry requirements for an apprenticeship in their chosen sector,⁹⁰ must be implemented carefully. Places on this programme must take account of the number of apprenticeships being offered by employers. The government might also look at the case for introducing an initial “probationary period” into apprenticeships, as is a feature of the German system. Funding mechanisms must continue adequately to incentivise completion. Finally, there should be good “follow-up” procedures to track those who leave their apprenticeship prematurely. Some might be encouraged to continue in training.

Training quality

It is critical to maintain recent successes in tackling the blight of poor-quality work-based training provision. However, Ofsted could take greater steps to support quality improvement across the sector, building on the legacy of the ALI. In conjunction with the Quality Improvement Agency, it should spread best practice on apprenticeship provision, including how employers can most effectively support apprenticeship training. An additional area of particular concern for employers is Ofsted’s increasingly “light touch” approach to inspection and the risks this carries for the availability of detailed specialist inspection reports that enable organisations to judge which training providers best meet their needs. The indication in the Queen’s Speech that the apprenticeships legislation will include a new focus on promoting quality through strengthened inspection arrangements is very welcome.

Completion rates

The issues of training quality and completion rates are so important because they affect how the scheme is perceived both by employers and potential apprentices. Thus, as with training quality, a continued focus on increasing the proportion of apprentices completing their framework is vital. Notable improvements have been registered in recent years, but completion

rates remain too low overall and there are worrying sectoral variations. Although the government expects to achieve a 65--8% completion rate by 2011,⁹¹ this is still below the level achieved in countries like Germany, where apprenticeships are also of longer duration. An apprenticeship completion certificate, or diploma, could help to encourage apprentices to finish their programmes. With the government having announced it would introduce an apprenticeship diploma back in 2001, this reform is long overdue – even the pilots are not due to be completed until 2010.

Careers advice and guidance

The new matching service must be underpinned by much higher-quality careers information and advice. At a time when the choice of educational options is expanding, it is ever more critical that young people are supported and guided by an excellent careers service. The government acknowledges that “[t]here is room for improvement in the careers advice and guidance provided to some young people” and it is “working with key stakeholders to make improvements”.⁹² It is imperative that it does so. Incorrect initial occupational choice plays a very significant role in apprenticeship non-completion, and poor careers guidance may also reinforce the stark gender stereotyping visible within some apprenticeships. Evidently, this point is of wider application than simply apprenticeships. *Every* young person must have access to high-quality, impartial advice on all available educational routes.

Progression

While the government asserts that, “Progression to higher skill levels throughout the learning and skills system is an important objective”,⁹³ the apprenticeship system is not currently functioning as an effective educational pathway. There should be more progression through the apprenticeship system, both from one apprenticeship level to another, and from apprenticeships to higher education. In practice, this “ladder” functions for an unacceptably small minority of apprentices. For example, the proportion of those who complete level 2 and progress on to a level 3 apprenticeship may be as low as 20%.⁹⁴

90 Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs’ Fifth Report of Session 2006–07 on Apprenticeships, 5.

91 Ibid., 6.

92 Ibid., 7.

93 Ibid., 9.

94 House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs, Apprenticeship, 39, para. 125.

Involvement by employers

Inspection evidence suggests that some of the most successful apprenticeship programmes are those run by employers themselves. Greater involvement by employers in directly delivering apprenticeships would therefore appear to be an obvious policy goal. At the same time, the government's ambitions to meet both the Leitch target and its apprenticeship entitlement offer depend fundamentally on encouraging more employers, particularly smaller employers,⁹⁵ to offer apprenticeship placements. However, during its 2007 inquiry, the Lords' Economic Affairs Committee was "unable to find any new thinking from those responsible for policy in this area as to how to attract more employers to offer apprenticeships".⁹⁶ Seeking both increased numbers of apprenticeships in small firms, and a greater degree of involvement by these firms in apprenticeship delivery, is problematic. The efforts expended in recent years on stimulating greater employer participation, including a multimillion pound advertising campaign and the work of the apprenticeships task force and subsequently the apprenticeship ambassador network, have delivered relatively little. One solution worth pursuing, particularly for smaller organisations, is the work of group training associations, which help employers in a locality to share the costs and administrative burdens of running an apprenticeship programme. However, there might ultimately be a natural limit to how many employers wish to be involved in apprenticeships – a point discussed further below.

Sustainable growth

The history of the apprenticeships programme has too often been characterised by a pursuit of quantity over quality. Following Lord Leitch's recommendation, the government now seeks to double the number of apprenticeships to 500,000 by 2020. This is in itself likely to prove extremely challenging. There are also attendant concerns that the renewed push for numbers will again come at the expense of considerations about quality. Ideally, the programme should be allowed to expand at a pace that exceeds neither the level of sustainable high performance nor employer demand. It seems a vain plea.

⁹⁵ "It should be noted that, for the Apprenticeships programme to expand dramatically, much of the new provision will have to come from SMEs" (Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs' Fifth Report of Session 2006–07 on Apprenticeships).

⁹⁶ House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs, Apprenticeship, 39, para. 122.

Stability

Apprenticeships have been in a state of almost continuous revolution since their inception. It is not inconceivable that this very volatility may itself have had a negative impact on the proportion of employers using apprenticeships. Some stability is now required, and the focus restored to more effective delivery.

Off-the-job training

In 1999, the National Skills Task Force made a number of recommendations to improve the quality and standing of apprenticeships. One of these was that the level of technical knowledge and understanding required by apprenticeships be strengthened through the inclusion of related vocational qualifications in all frameworks. This led to the introduction of technical certificates. Before these were brought in, the qualifications required by an apprentice did not necessitate any off-the-job training. However, the rules on technical certificates were modified in 2005, with the effect that the knowledge element of an apprenticeship no longer had to take the form of a separate qualification. Relaxing these rules may have helped to make some apprenticeships more attractive to employers.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the Institute of Directors (IoD) is concerned that this move might become symptomatic of a drift away from technical certificates, particularly given the renewed emphasis on securing greater volumes of apprenticeships. As a general rule, the theoretical knowledge underpinning an apprenticeship should be protected as a central feature. Not only does it complement the on-the-job competence skills of the NVQ, it also broadens the apprentice's education and provides a more solid platform for further progression in education and training. There is consequently a strong argument to insist on the inclusion of off-the-job training in both level 2 and level 3 apprenticeship frameworks.

⁹⁷ It is unlikely, though, to have had a substantial impact on completion rates. "One of the vexed issues in discussions about apprenticeship completion has been the alleged complexity of the apprenticeship package over and above the requirement to gain an NVQ ... By definition, of course, a requirement to gain three components (TC, NVQ, key skills) must be more of a challenge than to complete only one (the NVQ). On the other hand one must recall that over half of leavers (in 2003–4) did not go as far as completing their NVQ". John West, "Improving completion rates in apprenticeship: a comparative and numerical approach" (Centre for Labour Market Studies, July 2005), 7. From his analysis of other research, West further concluded that, from the point of view of reducing early leaving rates, certain factors popularly considered important were in fact not major ones in terms of alleviating acute non-completion rates. E.g., "there is no evidence of trainees leaving early because of the key skills issue or (still less) by demands for off-the-job training" (ibid., 23).

THE WIDER PICTURE

Two final, broader, points need to be recognised. First, regarding the provision of apprenticeship places, apprenticeships will never be suitable or feasible for all organisations, of all sizes, in all sectors of the economy. This was a clear message from the last research conducted by the IoD on the programme. In an NOP survey in 2003, only 13% of members' organisations were using apprenticeships to train employees. Most tellingly, those not using apprenticeships did not do so from a reluctance to invest in training (97% of IoD members' organisations provide training for their employees), or to provide vocational training leading to qualifications. Organisations did not use apprenticeships primarily because they had alternative preferred methods of recruiting or training staff. This is perfectly reasonable; apprenticeship-style skill-formation is not suitable for all. The government envisages "large and exciting challenges"⁹⁸ in meeting its apprenticeship commitments. It is right. But in the final analysis, there is probably little it can do to raise the participation in apprenticeships of those employers who have different training requirements or different training practices or who do not otherwise see apprenticeships as an appropriate or sustainable activity for their organisation.

Second, while apprenticeship processes certainly can be improved, the scheme cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the education system. We simply must equip a much higher proportion of the nation's young people with good skills earlier in the piece. Too many, despite 11 years of compulsory schooling, are inadequately prepared for further education and training – including apprenticeships. Most obviously, there is a clear failure to inculcate the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Yet broader "employability" skills are also too often lacking, skills beyond technical competence such as attitude, punctuality and motivation, skills upon which

employers are placing increasing emphasis. And we need to ensure that more young people recognise the fundamental importance of acquiring skills that will last for the rest of their lives. How this is to be achieved is an extremely difficult question to answer. The principal role is for schools and parents. But, with only 25% of IoD members believing that young people are well prepared for employment, there is also a key role for employers. Many are already widely engaged with the education system, from serving as governors to offering work experience placements and helping to develop qualifications. We need to see more of this engagement. Striving to forge, nurture and extend these partnerships should be key business priorities.

98 Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs' Fifth Report of Session 2006–07 on Apprenticeships.



LESSONS FROM THE PROFESSIONS

ALISON WOLF

Discussions of qualifications and curriculum tend, everywhere in the world, to be highly parochial. This is unfortunate. It means that educational debate often completely ignores some of the most striking, important and “taken-for-granted” aspects of a national system.⁹⁹ Education and training for English teenagers is a case in point. For decades now, our system has been characterised by

- ever greater institutional complexity;
- endless reform and restructuring of qualifications;
- national planning at an increasingly micro level;
- a preoccupation with “parity of esteem”.

All these trends make us increasingly distinctive in an international context.¹⁰⁰ They also account for why our education system so persistently short-changes those not bound for university.

Constant changes in education and training for 16–19-year-olds reflect governments’ recognition that current arrangements are dysfunctional. Unfortunately, the preferred remedy is for ever more of the same approach. We should therefore look for some alternatives. Indeed, we do not even need to look very far. Our professions, which are rooted in national history and institutions, but which are also increasingly global in their organisation, demonstrate how successful alternative approaches can be. Professional bodies should be allowed to develop, flourish and extend their educational activities back into the younger age groups that many of them once enrolled; and craft and trade groups should be encouraged to reinvigorate themselves and offer qualifications on a similar model.

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 99 For discussions of how and why countries’ education systems have remained highly distinctive, see Andy Green, Alison Wolf and Tom Leney, *Convergence and Divergence in European Education and Training Systems* (London: Institute of Education, 2000); and Iris C. Rotberg (ed.), *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2004).

100 Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths About Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin, 2002). The ideas underlying NVQs did influence government policy-makers in a few countries which are traditionally close to the UK: Australia, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland.

This would not require further comprehensive upheaval and system change, but it would mean government doing rather less than at present. First, however, we need to understand the effects of the trends identified above, and why they need to be reversed.

AN ECCENTRIC ENGLISH SYSTEM: FOUR STEPS IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

Institutional complexity

The English believe themselves to be a practical sort of nation, opting for what works rather than being driven by some abstract theory or principles. They also count Heath Robinson among their minor geniuses: the creator of wonderful drawings showing eccentric inventors at work, creating ludicrously complicated machines which are held together with string, glue and endless levers, and which carry out, with monumental complexity and inefficiency, the simplest or most pointless of tasks.

A diagram of the departments, authorities, quangos and “partnerships” involved in contemporary English education policy is straight out of a Heath Robinson drawing. The most recent, full and almost accurate depiction of the current system was prepared by the Audit Commission for the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee,¹⁰¹ and it is “almost accurate” because, of course, in the six months since the report’s publication, there have already been changes, with government departments reorganised wholesale, and new quangos created.

What has not altered is the extraordinary cat’s-cradle complexity that the commission’s diagrams display. This is a system of multiple and cross-cutting responsibilities, oversight powers, requirements to consult and requirements to sign off. A conservative estimate shows there to be 20 different institutions with a significant role in the development of new qualifications or curriculum for 16–19-year-olds.

This is not normal, in historical or comparative terms (and nor, unlike a Heath Robinson drawing, is it amusing). There may, somewhere in the world, be systems of equal or greater complexity, but they are not to be

101 House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *Post-16 Skills*, Ninth Report of Session 2006–7 (London: TSO, 2007)

found among the main developed nations of either the EU or the OECD; and the costs of such a system are enormous. These multiple institutions are expensive in themselves, but they also institutionalise inefficiency and guarantee delay. This is not because the people employed by them are lazy – on the contrary, they tend to be very busy indeed, not least because they all need to consult each other all the time. But any system in which lines of authority and loci of decision-making are unclear is inherently inefficient and, equally importantly, extremely slow and cumbersome. This may not matter much when the topic is marginal changes to a core curriculum for 5–14-year-olds. It matters a great deal when the system is relating directly to a dynamic labour market – a point to which we return below.

Qualification reform

England is also distinctive, internationally, in making qualifications and qualification reform the centre of its attempts to upgrade the quality of its education. This is less obvious when one focuses on 14–19-year-olds, as in this publication, than when reviewing the education system as a whole; for all developed, and almost all countries, have established certification systems for upper secondary schooling, though not necessarily for vocational training. But no other country in the world, to the best of my knowledge, has been as determined as England to tie ever-greater proportions of public educational funding, for *all* ages, to the attainment of formal qualifications: qualifications, moreover, which must all go through a tight process of regulated design and centralised accreditation.¹⁰² And I am confident that no other country has done this while also frequently changing the nature, design and name of important qualifications for young people.¹⁰³

A-levels have been with us for more than 50 years, and GCSEs for roughly half that time: long enough for the labour market, as well as families in general, to be familiar with them, although a good number of employers

102 “Train to Gain,” which directs ever-increasing portions of the adult education and training budget into financing the award of qualifications to adults in the workplace, is the latest manifestation of this approach. See Alison Wolf, Andrew Jenkins and Anna Vignoles, “Certifying the workforce: economic imperative or failed social policy?” *Journal of Education Policy* 21, no. 5 (2006), 535–66. The Leitch Review’s recommendation that SSCs be involved in approving vocational awards appears in practice to be creating a double approval and accreditation hurdle rather than improving the existing process. House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *Post-16 Skills* (vol. II: oral evidence).

103 Australian policy for vocational education and training has shown some non-accidental similarities to our own. Upper secondary school education is a responsibility of the states, not the federal government; states differ in their policies, practices and frequency of reform, but none of them has implemented as many far-reaching changes in the nature of upper secondary certification as has England in the last three decades.

are still talking about O-levels, the predecessor of GCSEs.¹⁰⁴ But while GCSEs are taken by virtually the whole cohort, A-levels are taken by less than half. Students who stay in education and are not taking A-levels form a large and growing group, and have been offered a steady stream of short-lived qualifications, many of them forgotten by everyone except a few educational historians.¹⁰⁵ The most recent casualties of endless reform are GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications). These were originally launched in the 1990s alongside government promises which sound remarkably and ominously like those accompanying the new diplomas, but were first renamed and then abolished altogether.

This constant change matters, not just because of the immediate costs of developing (and abolishing) qualifications and their accompanying assessment regimes, but also because labour market uses qualifications as signals of the holders' skills and attitudes, *especially* for the young without any work history. Employers cannot follow the twists and turns of education reform: indeed, in interviews with full-time senior personnel managers for large companies, colleagues and I were told on a number of occasions that they had made an explicit decision to stop even making any attempt to keep up.¹⁰⁶

It may not be sufficient for a qualification to be familiar if it is to have labour market value. It is definitely necessary that it, and the nature of its "signal", be well known. In most countries, including the USA and most of our large European partners,¹⁰⁷ young people are offered a very limited number of upper secondary options, not all equally valuable, but all of them well established. English young people following a non-A-level route are thus atypically disadvantaged.

104 Andrew Jenkins and Alison Wolf, *The Growth of Psychometric Testing for Selection. Why Has Test Use Increased, Will Growth Continue, and What Does this Mean for Education?* CEE Discussion Paper No. 29 (London: Centre for the Economics of Education, 2002).

105 Richard Aldrich (ed), *A Century of Education* (London Routledge Falmer, 2001).

106 Jenkins and Wolf, *The Growth of Psychometric Testing for Selection*.

107 France has also created new qualifications as a way of trying to increase the fit between education and the labour market, and improve youth employment rates, though far fewer and less often than in England. As demonstrated by CEREQ, in a series of research publications, most of these have not achieved their original objectives. See T. Couppié, C. Gasquet and A. Lopez, "Generation 98: The first seven years on the labour market," *Training and Employment 74* (Marseille: CEREQ, 2007); see also P. Cam, "The French baccalauréat since 1985: level of qualification or type of diploma?" *Assessment in Education 8.3* (2001), 291–314.

The repeated invention of new awards is a part of England's qualification-centred approach. Equally important include the downgrading of adult provision that is not formally accredited, as well as a heavy regulatory regime centred around the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Seen in international perspective, the QCA is, again, an unusual institution, though one with its roots in long-standing national practice. English certificates and examinations – both academic and vocational – were originally developed outside the state, by university-linked school examination boards and by occupation-based groups, including both the professions and the crafts (the latter, notably, through City and Guilds). Publicly funded school and craft examinations have been, de facto, nationalised, sitting under the QCA.¹⁰⁸ Professional examining bodies have retained more, albeit varying, degrees of autonomy.

Recent English history demonstrates that state regulation is no guarantor of credibility and value. Qualifications may be valued without government accreditation – and may also be devalued with it. While A-levels remain the most widely recognised and valued upper secondary award in England, the public generally believes that A-level standards have fallen. This is in part because of problems and scandals associated with rushed changes in the structure of A-levels, implemented by the government through QCA.¹⁰⁹ And nearly 20 years after their introduction, as part of an attempt to rationalise and promote vocational awards, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) do not come close to enjoying the general recognition and trust, or the wage dividends, once associated with City and Guilds awards.¹¹⁰ The latter have now been largely restructured and accredited as NVQs in line with government requirements: even so, when City and Guilds runs an advertising campaign, it does not market its awards as NVQs, but as City and Guilds qualifications.

This is not to imply that, pre-QCA, everything about the qualifications system of England was in good shape, let alone perfect. Nor is it to suggest that other countries have no problems with the credibility or quality of qualifications. On the contrary: anyone who believes that we alone are

108 Aldrich, *A Century of Education*.

109 J. Sturgis, "The English examining boards: their route from independence to government outsourcing agencies." Unpublished PhD thesis: Institute of Education, London, 2006.

110 Lorraine Dearden, Leslie McGranahan and Barbara Sianesi, *An In-Depth Analysis of the Returns to National Vocational Qualifications Obtained at Level 2* (London: Centre for the Economics of Education, 2004).

convinced that standards are falling has not been out much of late. But insofar as the purpose of QCA was to guarantee, through centralised state regulation, not only the quality but also the credibility of qualifications, it must be deemed a failure. In contrast, the relatively autonomous qualifications issued by universities and professions remain highly valued. This, too, we return to below.

Central planning

The third distinctive feature of the current English system is the high and increasing level of central planning. As already noted, it is standard for countries to have formal, national certification for upper secondary level, so this aspect of English peculiarity is not obvious when discussing schools. We should, however, be aware of the singularity of a system which not only wishes all education and training to lead to formal qualifications, but also

- places all qualifications offered with any level of public support in a multi-level “qualifications framework”, with formal equivalence between any qualifications placed at a given level, whether or not this is Ancient Greek, cabinet-making, further mathematics or pastry skills;
- provides estimates, reaching well into the future, of exactly how many qualifications at different levels the economy will “need”, and translates these into formal targets;¹¹¹
- ties both institutional funding and individual access to these targets, including complex rules about when, and for precisely which, qualifications individuals may receive publicly supported education.

The result, of course, is a rigid, inflexible system which is ill-suited to respond to either changes in the labour market, or to the actual ambitions and desires of its users, whether they are 16, 36 or 60 years of age.¹¹²

111 Most recently in the Leitch report. See also Wolf et al., “Certifying the workforce.”

112 Dermot Kehoe (ed.), *Practice Makes Perfect. The Importance of Practical Learning* (London: Social Market Foundation, 2007). If the government accepts QCA’s current proposal to require all qualifications to be broken into tiny units, the level of bureaucracy will increase yet further.

Parity of esteem

The fourth and final peculiarity listed above was a preoccupation with “parity of esteem”. Governments’ recurrent commitment to ensuring that academic and vocational education share equal status rests on a conviction both that England is unusually “bad” in giving higher value to academic qualifications and that parity does exist in other countries. The desire to make all routes equal is one of the underlying motives for the National Qualifications Framework, a creation which embodies the quaint assumption that, if you call something a level 2, which is the level ascribed to GCSE, it will have the status of GCSE; that if you call something level 3, like A-level, it will be treated as equivalent to A-level, and so on. This, of course, has not happened, not least because no one outside education has the faintest idea what a “level 3” is.

More recently, the conviction has emerged that parity can be delivered through a single, unified framework for all upper secondary learning (as recommended by Mike Tomlinson). This rather ignores the fact that, if we are all listed on a single scale, half of us are going to come in below average. It is also rather hard to reconcile with the firm conviction, held by many English people since about 1860, that the Germans have got vocational education right, or the more recent conviction, held since about 1970, that they also have no status differences between their academic and vocational options. Hard to reconcile, because a defining characteristic of the German education system is that there are completely *separate* academic and vocational streams, starting in the early secondary years and leading to quite distinct upper secondary certificates.

As with qualification policy more generally, there seems to be a belief in English government that esteem for vocational options can be established by fiat. In this context, it is frequently pointed out that some vocational options do enjoy high status, as indeed they do. These are, of course, the professions – medicine, law, accountancy, plus a number of less stellar but well-respected occupations, such as chartered surveying or pharmacy. The implication is that these are high status simply because they are called “professions” or because training is largely university-based.

It is certainly true that a contemporary occupation attempting to improve its status (for example, nursing or physiotherapy, or, further back, teaching) will try to become graduate entry and claim the title of “profession”.¹¹³ But the occupations which were the early “graduate professions” were not randomly chosen. They were the occupations which were powerful and important already – the Church for the cure of the soul, the law for the running of government, and medicine for the cure of the body. Not all practitioners were graduates, either; UK law, for example, became an all-graduate profession only recently. The barber-surgeons, who offered more practical and effective help than the physicians, became respected “professionals” much later, because and as their skills became recognised. And in this country, a number of professions, including, crucially, accountancy, still do not require a university degree, as opposed to professional qualifications.

So professional occupations do not simply have their status bestowed on them by being made degree-based. They do, however, enjoy respect and status and they also all lay down occupational standards, curricula and qualifications. What lessons do they offer for our upper secondary system?

PROFESSIONS, QUALIFICATIONS AND THE LABOUR MARKET

I have argued that the current English education system is highly distinctive. The organisation of our professions is distinctive too, though shared with much of the English-speaking world. Organised professions pre-date the development of universal education, the public funding of universities and the creation of national school-level examinations, let alone the highly regulated curriculum and assessment regimes that have developed in the last few decades. They were not created by the state, but emerged and exist by dint of possessing specialist knowledge that requires long and difficult training.

As a result, they offer services whose quality purchasers and users have to take largely on trust. This makes them potentially powerful and difficult to control, for the only people who can really tell if a professional is operating competently and honestly are other professionals. A key role of the

professional associations is therefore to control entry, which is usually done on the basis of a combination of examinations and time served, and where, again, society has to rely on professionals themselves to judge whether someone is competent.

For a profession as a whole, there are strong, indeed overwhelming, reasons for protecting quality and standards, since it is the public’s confidence in these that secures their position, reputation and, ultimately, their incomes. For individual professionals, the temptation may be to “free-ride” on this while lining their own pockets. Professions guard against such abuse by developing and inculcating – more or less successfully – a “professional ethic”, socialising new recruits into internalising high ethical standards, and also by policing the profession themselves, checking for poor-quality services (or worse), dealing with complaints and punishing offenders; again, more or less successfully.

Professionals exist in all developed societies, in the sense of there being many occupations with highly specialised knowledge, but what marks a full-blown “profession” in the English-language sense of the word is control over entry. This means that the occupation sets its own entry requirements as opposed to advising others (i.e. the state) on what these should be: and it may set its own examinations and assessments directly, or accredit others (often by approving a university-based course) or both. A commitment to quality at the point of entry into the profession is self-interested and real; and professional bodies both can and do withdraw accreditation from university courses when they fall below standard.¹¹⁴

In the previous section, I argued that our current education system was extremely inefficient. Its complexity means that modifying curricula or qualifications takes a very long time, even though the contemporary labour market is flexible and fast-changing. Constant change and reform means that qualifications rarely have time to establish themselves, even if they are good, before being swept away. Centralised planning involves a “one-size-fits-all” approach to the design of qualifications, irrespective of whether this is appropriate. And cheer-leading about “parity of esteem” has done nothing

113 H. A. Wilensky, “The professionalization of everyone?” *American Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 2 (1964), 137–58.

114 For example, in recent years the chartered surveyors and pharmacists have both withdrawn accreditation from specific universities and the surgeons have withdrawn training accreditation powers from particular hospitals. (These actions can, of course, all be reversed once improvements are made).

in itself to promote it, and all too often reflects a misunderstanding of how esteem is actually achieved. When a profession sets its own examinations, does it avoid these traps, inefficiencies and rigidities? Yes.

First of all, the institutional structure is simple. The organised profession establishes an examining subsidiary, which reports back to it and provides oversight and quality control via its expert membership.

Second, the profession is not tempted constantly to relabel and reinvent qualifications, since its overall reputation rests on their familiarity and currency. Why would professionals who advertise their own qualifications (with letters after their names) wish to abolish them? At the same time, there is continuous pressure to update *content*, since the newly qualified will be working with and for those already in the profession. There is also pressure to ensure that *methods of teaching* and training are practical, since professional training everywhere is marked by strong involvement from practitioners. The profession, in other words, has a strong and direct interest in having qualifications that are up to date and excellent, as well as a direct line into the process via its professional body. The professions are also, unlike national education agencies, part of international networks and bodies, since they are genuinely integrated into a global economy and need to establish, and work with, global requirements and standards.

Defenders of the current system might, at this point, observe that all current vocational qualifications have involved consultation and input from employers, that the sector skills councils (SSCs) exist for this purpose, and that, post-Leitch, their powers are to be increased. And no doubt, on paper, and when explained to new ministers and incoming civil servants, the whole system does indeed look neat, all-encompassing and business-friendly. The reality is otherwise. There is a world of difference between channelling qualifications through organisations run for and by a trade or profession, with which members have strong and ongoing links, and inviting people to “consultations” on qualifications organised by the state. It is hardly surprising that, in practice, it is almost impossible for the QCA to secure any, let alone regular, business attendance at its consultation meetings.

As for the SSCs, their organisational structure has far more to do with the government’s desire to cover the whole labour market with a very limited number of organisations than with any natural representation of labour market reality. The Association of Accounting Technicians, sponsors of this publication, have pointed this out very clearly for their own professional area:

We ... do not believe ... that the gaps in the SSC system have been recognised. Accountancy is one significant examples of an area of employment that is not represented within a SSC. There are an estimated 1 million accounting jobs across the economy in large and small organisations, public and private, in all sectors of the economy.¹¹⁵

It is worth reading that short excerpt through twice, because it encapsulates the failures of our current approach: failures that are systemic, not incidental.

The third system characteristic which I identified earlier was detailed national planning for “skill needs”, often justified in terms of increasing global competition and the need to be “world class”. What skills could be more central to our economy than those of accountancy – an occupational area whose numbers have been rising steadily as the nature of the labour market changes? And yet our SSC structure, created by civil servants as part of this trend to central planning, has no “home” for an occupational area of critical importance, one with a million employees.

The answer is not to restructure the SSCs. That would simply create new and different anomalies elsewhere. The answer, instead, is to abandon utterly the idea that centrally conceived and government-funded agencies can encompass and direct the whole of a complex labour market in one of the world’s largest economies. The people who know what is occupationally relevant, who are close to what employers want, and who can safeguard quality effectively are those who actually know the area, and are answerable to it, not to government targets – in other words, the organised occupations themselves. Some will be small, some large; and they will emerge or

115 Evidence of the Association of Accounting Technicians to the Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into Post-16 Skills (January 2007), para 12.

disappear with labour market changes, not on the basis of slow and painfully negotiated restructuring of sector skill councils by members of a Whitehall bureaucracy.

Finally, professional training has hardly lost esteem compared to academic study because it is outside the main regulatory system; if anything the opposite.¹¹⁶ The professions have preserved relative autonomy because they offer “high-level” qualifications, mostly to graduates, with specific or accredited degrees frequently offering exemption from some examinations. But there seems no reason in principle why other occupational groups should not regain the freedom to offer qualifications in the same way, and the sooner the better.

But does this have anything to do with schools, and with the education of 14–19-year-olds? It certainly can and should. At present, the government’s thinking, for this age group, is increasingly “tripartite”: A-levels for the university-bound, diplomas with quite general content for those who may go into university or may go into work, and apprenticeships for occupational training. A single integrated framework would mean diplomas for all in full-time education.

Either way, this leaves apprenticeships as the only truly vocational option for the young. Yet many employers are unwilling or unable to offer apprenticeships as currently constituted, especially the small and medium sized. Many young people may be nowhere near an employer who can offer what they want, and falling numbers of “level 3” apprenticeships bode ill for the future.

At the same time, many professions traditionally offered entry by a career ladder which did not require a degree, but which instead could be followed by a 16-year-old – or a 36-year-old – working their way up through intermediate qualifications. These routes have atrophied, in part because of the growing popularity of higher education, but in part, I suspect, because the professions wished to avoid any entanglement with England’s full-blown regulatory regimes, as they apply to all sub-degree provision. The one major exception is accountancy, because of the sheer scale and vitality of labour

market demand. (The AAT has 65,000 registered students working towards its qualifications in a given year, many of whom will continue up the ladder to full professional qualifications, and a membership of more than 110,000.) But there, too, the regulatory regime increasingly discourages anything other than an apprenticeship route.

To summarise: our current system is dysfunctional. It makes it extremely difficult to offer young people in school or college any form of occupational or professional qualification other than an apprenticeship. As a knock-on effect, college-based courses for adults are also suffering, creating barriers to exactly the sort of re-skilling and career changes that governments, correctly, wish to encourage.

The popularity and status enjoyed by professional qualifications underscore the benefits of letting occupational groups organise their own awards and accreditation. Instead of imposing a single model on all, we should allow the professions to offer qualifications in schools and colleges, using their own current quality control procedures. Not all will wish to; but some will. If, as I would predict, these qualifications are popular and valuable, they can serve as a starting point in reversing the counter-productive trends of the past 20 years.

116 Wage returns to professional degrees and qualifications are extremely high, especially when compared to arts degrees.



HOW THE I.T. SECTOR HELPED TO SHAPE DIPLOMAS

KAREN PRICE

The diplomas, which 14–19-year-olds will be able to take from September 2008, amount to a fundamental change in secondary education in the UK. They will blend general education with applied learning, building on the best of what is currently available at secondary level, while introducing innovative new content. They will offer young people a new route to develop the skills and knowledge they will need for successful careers and further study.

In all, there will be 17 diplomas. Of these, 14 will focus on learning within the context of a broad economic sector: Business, Administration and Finance; Construction and the Built Environment; Creative and Media; Engineering; Environmental and Land-based Studies; Hair and Beauty; Hospitality and Catering; Information Technology; Manufacturing and Product Design; Public Services; Sport and Leisure; Retail; Society, Health and Development; and Travel and Tourism. Three will focus on the subject areas of humanities, languages and science.

Diplomas are intended to excite and motivate students of all abilities. This means that, as well as preparing the most able for demanding university courses and professional careers, diplomas must also encourage students who might otherwise disengage from learning to stay on in education and fulfil their personal potential. It can be difficult to appreciate how a single qualification can appeal to and be suitable for a very broad range of students.

The diploma aims to achieve this through its flexible structure and innovative content. They will be available at three levels: foundation, higher (equivalent to between five and six GCSEs) and advanced (equivalent to three A-levels). The main educational content of each diploma will be set in the context of one of the economic sectors or subject areas. Students will also be able to include additional options such as GCSEs, A-levels or specialist study that builds on the main content.

All diplomas incorporate maths, English, the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) and personal skills such as team-working and problem-solving. Every student will also undertake a special project and work experience.

The criteria by which the success of diplomas will be measured are ambitious; and so they should be. We are, after all, talking about our children's future.

To succeed, diplomas must meet the needs of several key audiences. They must meet the needs of employers for young people with the skills and knowledge to contribute effectively to business success. They must meet the needs of higher education for young people with a thirst for learning and higher order skills in critical analysis and problem-solving. And last, but definitely not least, they must meet the aspirations of a wide range of young people – from students preparing for university courses to those planning to enter the workforce directly from their diploma studies.

The diploma is not without its detractors. In a crowded qualifications landscape of GCSEs, A-levels, the international baccalaureate, the pre-U and apprenticeships, the introduction of a revolutionary – and as yet unproven – qualification has caused widespread and often emotive debate. These discussions have highlighted deeply embedded attitudes towards applied learning.

Many assume that the involvement of employers and the focus on the application of knowledge means that diplomas are “vocational”: preparing students directly for specific occupations. This is not the case. Diplomas will provide a broad-based education in the context of different sectors or subjects. They will ensure that students leave school or college better prepared for work – but not at the expense of their educational foundations. Many also assume that applied learning is somehow less worthy than theoretical learning. In reality, the ability to acquire knowledge and then

apply it can often be more demanding and require a greater understanding of the subject matter than purely theoretical learning.

The concept of a diploma-style qualification at secondary level was first proposed by Sir Mike Tomlinson in late 2004, as he describes in his chapter in this book. Tomlinson had been commissioned by the government to consider how 14–19 education could be improved. In his report he recommended a single, over-arching diploma available at three levels.¹¹⁷ Following further debate, in 2005 the government announced plans to introduce a suite of 14 diplomas, each relating to an economic sector.¹¹⁸ This was followed in 2007 by the decision to introduce a further three diplomas focused on broad subject areas. Diplomas would be phased in between 2008 and 2011, with the commitment that, by 2013, every student in England who wants to undertake a diploma will be able to do so.

In an unprecedented move, the government placed employers at the heart of their creation. Sector skills councils (SSCs) were charged with bringing together employers, educators and others to develop inspiring and relevant qualifications that reflected the long-term needs of business and higher education.

The creation of diplomas effectively got under way in the summer of 2005, when five groups of people embarked on an intensive programme of work. These groups were the diploma development partnerships (DDPs) for the first five diplomas to be introduced in September 2008: Creative and Media; Construction and the Built Environment; Engineering; Information Technology (IT); and Society, Health and Development. Led by the relevant SSC, each partnership included employers, universities, schools and colleges, as well as other stakeholders on whom the success of the diploma would depend.

The development of the diploma in IT provides an example of how these first diplomas were created. The employers who led its development

117 DfES, 14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform by Michael Tomlinson

118 DfES, 14–19 Education and Skills, CM 6476 (London: TSO, 2005).

included BT, CA, the Cabinet Office, Centrica, Cisco, EDS, Fujitsu, IBM, John Lewis, LogicaCMG, Microsoft, Oracle and Vodafone. Each committed a great deal of time to the development work. This group was supported by consultation with more than 600 other employers representing organisations of all sizes, as well as numerous universities.

The starting point was an evaluation of current concerns and needs. For example, all parties – including employers and higher education – were concerned about standards of maths and English, both of which are extremely important for success in IT-related careers. Standards of written and verbal English underpin the ability to communicate effectively in a professional environment. Competence with numbers is essential for understanding business issues and making decisions. In addition, everyone wanted to see a greater emphasis on young people’s ability to analyse information, solve problems and apply creative thought.

The development partnership was keen to use the opportunity offered by the diploma to transform IT-related education and really to inspire and excite students about technology. It believed that the diploma should provide a platform for students to explore how IT can be used to solve problems in business and society. As a result, its focus will not be on “IT-user” skills – the basis of many existing IT qualifications in schools – but will instead feature the professional application of technology in a business context. It is based around three equally important themes: people, business and technology.

Employers and universities were adamant that, to be of real value, the IT diploma must appeal to the full range of students, including the most able. Furthermore, it should not be over-specialised. So it will provide a broad, rounded education relevant to all students, whatever their future aspirations, although it will be particularly appropriate for those considering an IT professional or business career. There was widespread agreement that there should also be the flexibility to support a diversity of personal choice and interest – from science to psychology and maths to music.

Once a consensus had been reached on the key principles and objectives, the focus moved to the structure of the diploma, its content and what

students would be expected to achieve. This work was done in partnership with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to ensure consistency across the different diplomas, and with the awarding bodies who would turn these specifications into formal qualifications. This stage also involved detailed consultation with employers and educators who remained at the heart of the decision-making process.

The result is a diploma which we believe will help to address the UK’s critical IT skills gaps and shortages by attracting more young people to technology. It will ensure that those young people develop knowledge and skills that add real value, both to their personal careers and lives and to the economy. A student taking the diploma in IT at advanced level will, among other things, develop an in-depth understanding of the impact of technology on the way companies operate; get a chance to design, develop, test and manage technology systems; learn how to prepare and deliver a business case; and explore the key factors influencing the success or failure of technology projects.¹¹⁹

The way in which diplomas are being developed has given rise to some misgivings. Many of these were summarised in an education and skills select committee report in May 2007.¹²⁰ For example, the report felt that in some cases teachers and awarding bodies had not been sufficiently involved in the early stages of development, resulting in late changes to content. It also stated that the timetable for development had been too tight, putting undue pressure on those involved. There are always lessons to be learned when doing something challenging for the first time, but this should not detract from the huge achievement of the development partnerships. No one gave up or walked away when the going got difficult; without exception, everyone involved was committed to getting this right.

The report also concluded that “it is far from clear that those in charge of developing the different diplomas share a common understanding of the kinds of learning they will demand and the purposes they will serve”. This reflected an ongoing concern, which is that it is difficult to describe diplomas in a very simple way – one that is easy for young people, their parents and teachers to understand and appreciate. For example, there still

119 Further information on the diploma in IT can be found at www.e-skills.com/itdiploma.

120 House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 14–19 Diplomas, HC249 (London: TSO, 2007).

needs to be a consensus on the use and interpretation of terms such as “applied learning” and “vocational” within education. The word “vocational” remains in widespread use when discussing diplomas, particularly in the media, despite the fact that these are not vocational qualifications focused on developing skills for a specific job; instead, they will provide a broad-based education that prepares young people for a wide range of careers or further study. It is likely that many of these issues will resolve themselves once diplomas become a reality from later this year.

The delivery of the first diplomas presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for schools, colleges, employers and government. By their very nature, diplomas include more varied and more work-related content than existing qualifications. They require access to a wider range of resources and teaching expertise than many schools or colleges can provide on their own. Anticipating this, the government has arranged for diplomas to be delivered through groups of schools and colleges working together in consortia. As well as providing a practical solution to resource and capability issues, such arrangements will also enable young people to experience a stimulating variety of learning styles and environments.

A selection and support process has been introduced to help the schools and colleges to deliver the first diplomas. Last year 149 consortia across England were successful in their bid to deliver one or more of the first five diplomas. Around 40,000 young people are expected to take up diplomas from September 2008. The first years of diploma delivery will be closely monitored and assessed as a pilot.

Inherent in the new diplomas is an innovative approach to teaching and learning. This has significant implications for the way students learn and the teaching resources required by schools and colleges. Many schools already have an excellent track record in using new technologies to enhance and personalise learning and this will provide an ideal foundation for diplomas. Teachers will need to prepare for and become comfortable with new content. It will be critical for the success of diplomas that teachers are provided with adequate training and support. The work under way by various organisations to provide this will be essential for successful delivery.

Employers also have an important role to play in helping consortia to deliver diplomas to the highest standards. At a local level, employers might offer work experience, deliver lectures or provide students with projects that meet the objectives of the diploma. At a national level, employers might provide material to create inspiring, relevant resources for students and teachers.

In summary, the introduction of diplomas is likely to have a profound and far-reaching impact on secondary education in England. So far, they have not been given an easy ride. In fact, they have been subjected to a lot of criticism, some of it justified, some of it not, much of it simply misinformed. The reality is that introducing a major new qualification into a well-established education system is never going to be easy. It takes time to win the hearts and minds of young people, their parents and teachers. In an already crowded educational marketplace, they will want to see that the qualification is respected and credible. No one wants to take a risk with their children’s education.

Diplomas have immense potential. They have the capability to provide a broad, relevant and exciting education, with new and individualised ways of learning and the flexibility to explore individual interests. Their innovative content and learning approach could make a huge difference to the lives of many young people. With their emphasis on education set in the context of a key economic sector, they will help to prepare young people with the knowledge and skills that are needed in order to succeed in today’s fiercely competitive global employment market.

The UK holds the blueprint for a world-class qualification. University and employer endorsement will be critical for success. If everyone – employers, higher education, government, schools and colleges – puts their full weight behind diplomas, we will look back in ten years from now and wonder why their value was ever doubted.

