14-19 Reform: Evolution not Revolution?

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"…. Public opinion in England is disposed to put quite an excessive reliance on the system of competitive examinations … Examinations, as ends in themselves, occupy too much of the thoughts of parents and teachers. Their very convenience and success has led to their multiplication and to their occupying too large a place in the system of national education." Discuss.

Given all the seemingly endless discussion on what is wrong with education over the past months, the above might seem to be a topical question for a Current Affairs A-level question. Actually - on two counts - it cannot be. At a technical level, the question is more 1960s than 2005 – open response; allows free-ranging discussion; not in keeping with the more typical structured question of today. But, perhaps more to the point, it would be found in the History paper.

True, the quotation comes from the report of a 'Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary Schools' - but the committee in question was set up in 1911 by the Board of Education. It identified a number of problems, including:

- too many systems and lack of clarity in definition or recognition;
- too little for low-achievers who ended their education with little to show for it;
- too much variability in interpretation of standards.

Its solution was an over-arching single qualifications framework, covering a variety of routes to the same goal, under the supervision of a single central council. It was called the School Certificate; the council was the Secondary Schools Examinations Council.

Now wind the clock forward 30 years. Another report, the Norwood, commissioned by the very same council that set up the 1911 one, was controversial. It was perceived as a means of abolishing examinations in favour of teacher assessment and of providing tailored qualifications appropriate for individual students. Ministers adopted the latter but steered clear of the former. It took a while to reach full implementation – but, in 1951, O and A-levels were born.

From then on, reports and their consequent government reactions came ever faster – CSE; introduction of GCSE; introduction of the ten-subject national curriculum; key stage tests; key skills; introduction of GNVQ; reduction to the three-subject national curriculum; curriculum 2000; abolition of GNVQ. An exhausted and overstretched workforce of dedicated teachers, lecturers and examiners worked overtime to understand and implement the changes and pleaded for stability and some continuity.

But still there were critical complaints:

- too many examinations and lack of clarity in definition and purpose;
- too little for the demotivated and disinterested;
- too little stretch for the most able; and, crucially, the poor esteem in which most of the vocational provision to the 14-19 age group was held. Oh, and by the way, examinations should be replaced by teacher assessment. So we had another committee (Working Group in 21st century-speak) and another Report.

The Tomlinson Report proposed revolutionary reform. There would be a single over-arching diploma, etcetera, etcetera (*pace* 1911). It was ambitious, visionary, all-embracing, expensive – hardly promoting stability and continuity, at least for those who had to deliver it – but it nonetheless caught the imagination of the education community.

But not the Government's – at least not as a single entity. Instead, the *14-19 Education and Skills* White Paper sets out both to steady the ship and to do something to lay down serious ground rules for raising the standing of vocational education for this age group. GCSEs and A-levels stay – representing continuity with the established order with no new names for employers and parents to learn. Simultaneously, they are to be adapted to include more focus on the basics (functional skills built into GCSEs) and to stretch the most able (harder questions in A-level). Of course, there are 'details' to sort out (i.e. how to make it happen) but these should be left to awarding bodies, schools and colleges to work them out. It is not government's job to do that.

At the same time, the White Paper's diplomas are targeted at specific areas which can be understood and have at least the potential (if designed properly and well implemented) to motivate and encourage youngsters for whom the present framework is manifestly failing. They can also allow – by inclusion of A-level – this 'vocational' framework to have the potential to give students another option to progress to HE and the highest calibre employment – thus at least giving a nod to 'parity of esteem'.

When first announced, this response to Tomlinson was heavily criticised by many in education, although by no means all. "Missed opportunity for radical reform" was a common cry. But this is to misunderstand the British experience and the long line of reactions to proposals for change – some of which we have noted above. Not since the seventeenth century has Britain espoused the revolutionary approach to change in its constitution and this reluctance to embrace revolutionary change runs deep in the British (and certainly English!) psyche. However, over time, British society does change substantially. We evolve, sometimes gradually, other times more swiftly – never precipitously.

Education is not exempt from this. Much has changed since the 1944 Act and the subsequent introduction of A-level. The long list of 'initiatives', 'ground-breaking reforms', 'radical changes' that have taken place since then are the history of successive governments commissioning reports, but never implementing all the proposals. So perhaps we should not be surprised if this White Paper is yet another that treads firmly in the footsteps of some of the significant educational reforms. Not the 'radical reform' it might be claimed to be; rather the next evolutionary step towards the delivery of an education that allows all students to reach their potential – with qualifications equally valued, whether academic or vocational.

Regardless of whether we agree with the Government's approach or not, surely the main task of the education community now is to make sure the 'new' system works to the benefit of students.