

# Reforming 14-19 learning

## Towards a new comprehensive phase of education?

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The Labour Government has since 1997 attempted to reform the English upper secondary education and training system, but without significantly altering its structure or culture. Despite recent changes to A Levels through Curriculum 2000, diversification of GCSEs with the introduction of applied subjects, the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council as a unified planning and funding agency and repeated reviews of the role of apprenticeship, post-14 education in England still carries the legacies of the past. It continues to suffer from the interactive effects of three fundamental factors – a deep academic/vocational divide; an intensely competitive institutional environment and the voluntarist youth labour market.

There has, nevertheless, been some progress over the last twenty years. Increases in full-time post-16 participation in the late 1980s and early 1990s and steady improvements in examination results mean that the English education and training system has moved from a 'low participation mixed system' (Finegold *et al* 1990) to a 'low equity medium participation school-based system'

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(Hayward *et al* 2004). However, over the last decade and because of the factors outlined above, it shows little sign of moving to the type of high equity/high participation system associated with some other European countries, particularly Nordic ones.

The Government is now considering reform of the 14-19 phase as its policy focus moves up the educational age range from primary and lower secondary to upper secondary. It commissioned an independent report into the future of 14-19 education and training, the Tomlinson Working Group which, in October 2004, recommended the establishment of a multi-level diploma system as a new framework for post-14 learning (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004).

Ministers have not yet decided whether to accept the recommendations of the Tomlinson Working Group in part or in full. In this article we will argue that if the Tomlinson proposals are to spearhead a movement out of a medium participation system, then not only will they have to be accepted in full but also immediately reinforced by the creation of a more collaborative institutional framework and, in the longer term, by

significant reform of the youth labour market and the role employers play in 14-19 education and training.

### **Three reinforcing factors – qualifications, institutions and labour market**

#### ***Divided and complex qualifications***

The 14-19 phase is now, arguably, the most important focus of education reform not only because it continues to perform less highly than upper secondary education in many other countries, but also because it remains a 'failure-based system' more culturally interested in selection than progression. As young people make their way through the National Curriculum, the current nature of 14-19 qualifications threatens to undermine recent attainment gains lower down the age range.

Selective A Levels still dominate the landscape both numerically and culturally, despite gradual internal changes such as modularisation and the Curriculum 2000 reforms. The GCSE examination, once regarded as a facilitator of post-16 participation, plays an increasingly regressive role because of the tendency of young people who do not gain 5 A\* to C grades at 16 to see themselves as educational failures. Vocational education, on the other hand, has undergone successive waves of reform to try to raise levels of participation and to achieve parity of esteem, the latest attempt being the creation of 'academicised' awards – AVCEs and GCSEs in vocational subjects.

We would characterise this situation as the perpetuation of division combined with constant change. This process of divisive piecemeal reform has, over recent years, produced modest attainment gains at both Level 2 and Level 3 (Hayward et al. 2004) but these have been more than offset by systemic problems – the alienation of significant proportions of young people who see themselves as unsuccessful; full-time vocational education which

is a pale image of the academic; over-assessment and mechanistic learning which affects all learners; and a complex system which is poorly understood by employers and parents.

#### ***A competitive and selective institutional system***

An equally powerful systemic feature is the competitive and selective institutional system formed at the high point of Conservative education policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Consultations with practitioners suggest that institutional factors will prove a major barrier to the effective working of radical curriculum and qualifications reform at 14+.

Practitioners' grounded perceptions, combined with recent research on post-16 institutional arrangements, point to a complex set of marketised factors working to reinforce competition and selection and to inhibit collaboration for learner progression and equitable participation in education and training. These include the focus on recruitment for institutional survival; the association of the possession of a school sixth form with school status; performance measures at 16+ tempting schools to neglect low attaining learners and to send disruptive learners to FE colleges at 14; a concentration of advanced level academic courses in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges and vocational and lower level courses in general FE colleges, all of which fuel institutional differentiation based on social and racial lines (Stanton 2004). The Tomlinson 14-19 reform agenda will find itself not only working within this competitive and selective institutional climate but also with an institutional divide at 16+.

#### ***A voluntarist youth labour market***

The landmark unification blueprint A British Baccalaureate, published by ippr in 1990, highlighted the important role of the youth labour market and the relatively marginal role of employers in post-compulsory education

and training in the UK. This essentially remains the case today. Once again, a complex set of systemic and policy factors are at work – an increasingly casualised youth labour market reflected in the growing role of part-time work for 16-19 year olds in full-time education; a youth labour market that draws low attaining learners away from education and into poorly paid jobs (Hayward *et al* 2004); an economy dominated by Small and Medium Sized Employers (SMEs) which have a poor record of employer involvement in education and training, and an underperforming apprenticeship system which is overshadowed by an expanding higher education system (Keep 2004).

The Labour Government has supported a voluntarist and flexible youth labour market because the supply of low-level jobs was seen as a way of overcoming long-term youth unemployment, a major legacy of the Conservative years. It appears to have been a policy of 'employment at any price'. However, this kind of labour market flexibility and employer voluntarism will not effectively support a 14-19 phase in which vocational education plays a stronger role, because it does not send strong signals to learners to become qualified (licence to practice is a minority trend) and is not able to generate sufficient employer engagement in education and training. These are profound barriers to any further system development.

It follows, therefore, that a movement from a divided and selective medium participation system to a more inclusive and equitable high-participation system will require changes on at least three fronts – curriculum and qualifications, institutional arrangements and their accountability frameworks and the youth labour market. The question is how these structural changes can be realistically

addressed over time. In our view, the first move could and should be in the area of curriculum and qualifications because this provides the educational values and purposes around which the institutional framework and the youth labour market should be shaped.

### Reform No 1:

#### The Tomlinson 14-19 diploma system

The Tomlinson approach to reform of 14-19 education marks a departure from earlier piecemeal reform attempts because it is a systemic unifying strategy, which seeks to reform academic and vocational education within a single framework. In this sense, it could be seen to introduce a concept of comprehensive education into the upper secondary phase. Previously, the concept of comprehensive education has previously been associated in this country with the organisation of compulsory education.

The main features of the Tomlinson reform proposals revolve around a unified multi-level system of diplomas ranging from Entry to Advanced Level and encompassing all types of learning for 14-19 year olds from general education to occupational specialisation linked to apprenticeship. It is a curriculum and qualifications system purposefully designed to meet the needs of all learners.

- The diploma system consists of up to 20 'lines', which cross the academic/vocational divide and which provide clear ladders of progression both within and between levels of the framework to ensure learner mobility.
- Information, advice and guidance is built into the diploma entitlement to support effective choices within the diploma system.
- Each diploma contains a common core that requires learners to gain functional

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mathematics, communication, ICT and a personalised extended project; to experience within their learning programme the type of common knowledge, skills and attributes required for further study and adult life; and to undertake wider activities beyond the taught curriculum. Core learning thus provides a basis of general education regardless of the type of specialisation being followed.

- The remainder of the diploma programme comprises main learning, which can either be more open and choice-based to satisfy the requirements of the Open Line, or more prescribed to satisfy the requirements of the specialised lines.
- Core and main learning together are designed to form coherent and relevant learning programmes, which can be regarded as the type of learner entitlement that has never been guaranteed in the English system by individual qualifications.
- The diplomas comprise components of learning, some of which build on current qualifications or parts of them and others that will be designed specifically for the diploma system.
- Learner achievement, which will be recorded as a combination of credits, grades and narrative, is listed on a diploma transcript which is cumulative, can be summarized at key transition points and can be used to promote progression.
- The whole diploma system is underpinned by a new approach to assessment which gives a greater role to teacher professional judgment, particularly below advanced level, and which aims to reduce the assessment burden of the current system. This will require a new approach to quality assurance which is discussed in more detail below.
- The Tomlinson Final Report is predicated upon a long-term reform process of about ten years which combines a clear long-term vision with short- and term medium term objectives. It also recommends a consultative

and consensual approach to change involving all stakeholders and based on cross-Party agreement.

The power of these proposals radically to alter 14-19 education and training and to lever the system from a medium to a high participation one depends on introducing them as a holistic package. It is only when the proposals work symbiotically that the features of the unified multi-level diploma system can tackle some of the barriers present in the medium participation system – lack of motivation, disengagement, weak vocational qualifications, division, selection and academic elitism.

The most immediate threat to the Tomlinson proposals is a partial response by government that would result in a ‘dilution’ of their positive effects. If the diploma simply became a weak wrapper around existing qualifications (in effect an overarching certificate approach) it would leave much of the current qualifications arrangements and their problems untouched. It is important, therefore, that government exercises leadership at this point and indicates its support for strong curriculum and qualifications reform. In our view, it is unfortunate that these proposals have been published in the run up to a general election when the Labour Government may feel more fearful of announcing radical changes to GCSEs and A Levels.

However, close scrutiny of the reform proposals shows that support for a strong model is not a significant political risk because the diploma system is potentially far more ambitious and demanding than current qualifications and the transition from the current system to a new one can be managed in a careful and stable way.

### **Reform No 2: a new tertiary learning system**

As we have argued earlier, current qualifications and institutional behaviour interact to create a selective, competitive and divided

education and training system. The Tomlinson proposals, important and radical as they are, only address one of these dimensions. The full benefits of the new 14-19 diploma system cannot, therefore, be realised without additional measures to encourage new types of institutional behaviour.

Progression within the diploma system will require high degrees of institutional collaboration so that learners can choose appropriate routeways from 14+. Post-16 institutions will, therefore, need to feel that they are supported to collaborate to provide these routeways, rather than feeling that they are simply competing to recruit. Moreover, learners should be able to move freely between and within different levels of the system, based on independent information, advice and guidance, in order to build on the achievements contained in their transcripts.

There are other aspects of the Tomlinson reform agenda which also suggest the need for institutional collaboration.

A centre-piece of the diploma proposals – professionalisation of assessment – will require the establishment of strong local quality assurance and improvement arrangements, reinforced by national bodies, such as the inspectorate and QCA. It is highly likely that individual institutions in an area would feel compelled to co-operate around validation and licensing in order to maximise the range of diplomas on offer and to guarantee their right to offer the full range of assessment strategies. Moreover, a role for Chartered Assessors, one of the proposals in the Final Report, could work across institutions in a local area to assure consistency of assessment and standards of achievement.

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‘tertiary learning systems’ based upon the reconfiguration of planning, accountability, funding and performance mechanisms. This may require five areas of action.

- *a local 14-19 plan within which all 14-19 providers operate* – work of this type has already started through 14-19 area-wide inspections, strategic area reviews, local LSC 14-19 strategies and some of the 14-19 Pathfinder pilots. The important point here would be to give this type of plan the ‘teeth’ needed to facilitate and ultimately enforce collaboration.

- *changes in the nature of performance tables and the accountability framework* to move it from a competitive individual institution-based 16+ focus to a collaborative, area-wide 19+ focus. In practical terms, this might involve giving a dominant role to area-wide measurements and targets at 19+ based on distance-travelled and the accumulation of diploma credits. Individual institutions could be judged not only on their own performance but on how much and in what way they contribute to area targets.

- *equity of pay and conditions to support collaboration* – it is difficult to envisage lecturers in further education colleges wanting to work more closely with teachers from schools if pay and conditions disparities continue.

- *a common, simplified and stable funding mechanism* has also been identified as a critical precondition. Government will have to find ways of incentivising collaboration, though past initiatives suggest that relatively little additional funding can often have a positive impact on institutional behaviour.

- *a clear governance and funding framework designed to support collaboration and the delivery of the 14-19 plan* which may require, in the first instance, a new concordat between

Local Learning and Skills Councils and LEAs, who, together oversee the formation of the new tertiary learning system.

The institutional landscape is not only competitive it is also very complex. This is particularly the case in relation to the provision of vocational education and training which may involve schools, sixth form colleges, FE colleges, voluntary and community-based providers, private sector providers, employers and Ufi/Learn Direct hubs (Stasz and Wright 2004). Unified tertiary systems have to promote effective collaboration and will need to indicate who is leading what and when organisational merger may be necessary.

**Reform No 3:  
support from the labour market,  
training framework and employers**

The system of vocational education and training (VET) in this country contains a fundamental paradox – reluctance of more than a minority of employers to be significantly involved in VET, yet a government assumption that this type of education and training should fundamentally be an employer responsibility and not a government matter.

The current government strategy, within a voluntarist logic, is to develop a ‘demand-led’ system intended to promote employer engagement. Post-16 providers, notably colleges, are exhorted and may be pressurised through new income targets to provide flexible provision responsive to employer needs. Some progress could be made in this direction by the more unified, collaborative and flexible supply side approach promoted by Tomlinson.

A rationalised and effective diploma system could prove attractive to employers by offering opportunities to become involved in the design and even delivery of learning so that it better meets their needs. The Tomlinson reforms include proposals for regionally

and locally designed units and courses. Colleges collaborating closely with each other and with local training providers rather than competing with each other may prove more effective in responding to employer needs. The unitised framework of provision for adults, currently being promoted by QCA and the LSC may prove more flexible than large qualifications with large amounts of external assessment.

However, the problem with focusing solely on supply-side flexibility is that it is unlikely to produce the type and volume of employer engagement required for a more vocationally-oriented 14-19 phase. In the longer term, a new approach will be required which moves away from the principle of voluntarism towards the notion of partners bound together within a strong framework of regulation and incentives. Such a framework might comprise the following:

- the state assuming a more central role and acknowledging that employers will be ‘reluctant providers’ of VET;
- policy based on *employment* demands and not just *employer* demands (Keep 2004) in which skills issues become part of wider economic developments including work organisation;
- the spread of a more regulatory approach with ‘licence to practice’ developing in a wider range of sectors – recent requirements for Level 2 in the Care Sector has, for example, resulted in a sharp increase in demand for Care qualifications;
- emphasising social partnership – this may be emerging within the Skills Alliances and regional delivery partnerships because of the inclusion of trades unions; and
- providing a range of incentives (financial and business advantage) for employers to engage with education and training.

The establishment of a new type of ‘demand-led approach’, which focuses on the role of the state in stimulating employer demand for

skills and qualifications, will prove a long haul. It is important, however, to recognise the potential strength of a synergy of measures to promote employer demand for skills and the predictability that this produces for the suppliers of skills. A point might quite quickly be reached where the scale of demand makes it worthwhile for education providers to be involved in long-term and stable partnerships with employers.

## Conclusion

The Tomlinson curriculum and qualifications proposals can thus be seen as a first and necessary step towards a comprehensive 14-19 phase which places the participation, achievement and progression of all learners centre-stage. We have argued that this first bold move has to be matched by at least two others not only to secure the effective operation of the Tomlinson reforms, but also to bring about the real and lasting change that can only be realised when all systemic barriers are removed ■

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