Tomlinson (14-19): A Radical Re-think

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Over the last few weeks you would have needed to work quite hard to avoid all the coverage of the *Interim Report of the (Tomlinson) Review Group 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (Feb 2004). In the face of reports of this kind, it's never a bad starting point to ask "what's wrong with things as they are?" In answer, Tomlinson would point out that we (in Britain) have the lowest percentage in Europe of 14-19 year olds in full time study. For participation at age 17, data from 2001 rank the UK 27th out of 30 OECD countries. If an educated and trained workforce is a desirable goal, then our current position in European and OECD league tables is a pretty good reason for making some changes.

It might be fruitful to ask some further questions. "Why is education based on "subjects", when these subjects don't relate to anything much that goes on out of school, like jobs for example?" "Why is education (as seen through its constituent subjects) seen primarily as an intellectual pursuit with, ultimately, the A' level "gold standard" of intellectual excellence?" "Why, in short, does education prioritise the mind and abstracted understanding of disciplines?" "Why have we downgraded practicality, competence and skill to the second class and vocational?"

Time after time, governments of varying political persuasions have launched initiatives that reflect the importance of a curriculum for non-academic young people (actually the majority of young people), and time after time they have run into the sand because the non-academic is interpreted as inferior; as second rate. Even taking such courses is seen (at least in part) as an admission of one's failure to be able to cope with "proper" studies. So, "parity of esteem" between vocational and academic programmes of study has become a mantra for those concerned with broadening the educational diet in our schools, and particularly of course in the critical 14-19 years.

It seems to me that the Tomlinson Working Group has decided that we have played at the edges of this problem for long enough and that it is time to bite the bullet and make real change.

> Since the 1970s there have been numerous initiatives aimed at reforming 14-19, but most have resulted in piecemeal change. The time has come to develop a coherent approach to curriculum and the qualifications available to 14-19 year olds. (DfES 2004).

Their *Interim Report* involves what can only be regarded as wholehearted and dramatic change to the status-quo. The thrust of this change is towards skills and employability.

Tomlinson has been around long enough to know all the wrinkles in the "parity of esteem" debate, and he appears to have decided that the only way to tackle it is to reconfigure the whole of the 14-19 system, regardless of the fact that the thrust of his remit is primarily with part of it. He knows that merely to create a new CSE, BTEC, GNVQ, vocational GCSE or A' level is to leave too much of the status-quo untouched. So the Working Group has gone for broke and thrown it all up in the air. Let's change the whole thing.

I do not intend to describe the details here, but suffice to say that the outline proposal is for 14-19 qualifications to be based on a diploma awarded at four levels (Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced). Current courses and qualifications may count towards the award of a diploma, i.e. the diploma is broader than any individual subject or course. So performance across a range of subjects/studies will determine the award of the diploma (similar to high school graduation in the USA). The vocational agenda is clarified further however through the teasing prospect of using employer-led groupings or sectors (engineering / tourism / finance) as a basis for ordering programmes of study.

Tomlinson brings a real sense of New Labour presentation to the report. It is written so as not to offend any of the major players in the 14-19 territory. Cleverly, the controversial labels "vocational" and "academic" have largely disappeared, and instead we are to have "specialised" and "open" diplomas, though it is far from clear why this twin-track is thought to be necessary. There will be a big slice of the previously cherished initiative of "key skills" for employment (numeracy, communication, ICT etc.) in the core of the diploma. Overall it appears to be a "third way" approach to curriculum change that neatly side-steps the heated history of our

dichotomised curriculum. But I have two further questions:

1. What (in this brave new world) happens to Design and Technology ?
2. Is it right?

As to the first of these, we have cause to worry. The QCA has recently (Feb 2004) developed a map of employment "sectors" against "subjects". So, for example, the "Social Science" employment sector happily absorbs subjects like History, Politics, Anthropology, Economics and Sociology. One can see this leading youngsters straight into "open" diplomas and University entrance. By contrast, the "Retail and Commercial" employment sector absorbs Retailing and Wholesaling, Warehousing and Distribution, Service Enterprises, and Hospitality and Catering. One can see this leading youngsters straight into "specialist" diplomas and employment.

But where is Design and Technology on this map? Frighteningly, the answer is nowhere. We should perhaps recall that the 1990 National Curriculum placed Design and Technology in the "extended core" of compulsory study, and that Hargreaves (only relatively recently in charge at QCA) described Design and Technology as "moving to the heart of the curriculum" and as having features that "other subjects can learn from". Tell that to Tomlinson.

In the new configuration, Technology is absorbed into the "engineering and manufacturing technologies" sector, and Design is absorbed into the "arts, media and publishing" sector. If these employment sectors do become the basis for organising curriculum for Tomlinson diplomas, then the unitary concept of Design and Technology that has been so carefully nurtured over the last thirty (or more) years, and for which we have a well-honed "importance of Design and Technology" statement in National Curriculum 2000, is in serious danger of being carved up and lost.

We have argued for decades that the value of studying Design and Technology is not about getting a job in engineering or publishing. It is about enabling all young people to understand how the made world works, and empowering them to operate within it as users and improving it through their own creative intervention. Design and Technology is an educational construct, not a vocational one. In Tomlinson terms, it belongs much more in "open" diplomas than in "specialist" ones. But all the debate I have heard in recent weeks suggests that we are moving remorselessly and erroneously in the opposite direction.

But this is only an interim report and there is much still to be worked out, not least the issues of assessment. Will some subjects count for more than others? What is the demand for external written examinations as against school-centred assessment? How will this be influenced by the user groups? Employers certainly but also, critically, the Universities (remember the stated goal of 50% university entrance). Assessment is where the rubber (of curriculum change) meets the road (of user acceptance). Again, calming nerves, Tomlinson himself sees a slowly-slowly process, moving gradually towards government endorsement and implementation. But is it right?

In the summer of 1997 this editorial drew attention to the bi-polar divide (vocation-academic) in schools. The lesson of history is that where two systems exist side by side: one with prestige and clout and the other with vocational connotations, then students (and their parents) who are undecided about their future will have impossibly difficult decisions to make. There will be a twenty percent cluster of students at opposite ends of the ability spectrum for whom this will not be a problem. But there will be sixty percent band in the middle for whom it will be very difficult indeed.

As the details concerning the assessment regime and models of curriculum implementation become public, I have a simple yardstick that I shall use to decide on the rightness of any changes. Are the choices easier for this sixty percent or is "open" and "specialised" merely euphemism? Until we see the detail, the jury is out.

References:

DfES, (2004), *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Interim Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform*, (DfES/0013/2004)