

My dictionary defines reform as, *correction of abuses or malpractice*; a formidable task for Tomlinson to undertake in relation to our 14-19 curriculum and qualifications. It is also a task, as he knows too well, where many before him have failed.

The malpractice and need for reform is comprehensively dealt with in this report, and indeed was acknowledged by Government in setting up Tomlinson's working group. The failure of the current system to provide even adequate vocational learning and qualification and to ensure that all young people have the basic and core skills needed for life and work has to be put right. Our failure to stretch the most able is surpassed by our failure to engage, let alone stretch, young people with more practical skills and aptitudes. The assessment regime of multiple exams and tests is not only a huge burden on the system and individuals but it distorts the curriculum and turns off many young people. So as Tomlinson points out, the status quo is not an option and further piecemeal change not desirable.

Tomlinson has said all along that his plan for reform is an evolution not a revolution. Despite the urgency and the extent of the change and correction that's needed it is easy to see why he has taken this stance. The immediate political reactions to Tomlinson's proposals were a conservative protection of the so called gold standard of existing "A" levels [in Michael Howard's case an anti-progressive leap backwards to the system which prevailed in the middle of the last century], and an apparent desire to preserve external assessment throughout the 14-19 phase. There is clearly a danger that despite the advice of Tomlinson and the overwhelming support of much of the sector and the profession, our political leaders' reactions and apparent desire to preserve much of the status quo could undermine the whole reform programme.

The proposed reforms are not revolutionary in that they do not seek to attack and overthrow "A" levels. Tomlinson is too canny a political operator to steer a head on collision between his reforms and that formidable structure. His approach is a more subtle building of new and alternative structures so that over time "A" levels cease to dominate and distort our qualification and curriculum system. The new dominant structure in Tomlinson's landscape will be the more inclusive Diplomas, which should prevent us from designing our whole 14-19 curriculum as if we were preparing all our pupils for university and academic study. It is a bold and shrewd approach; progressive and radical change where it is so urgently needed, yet seeking to avoid the head on collision with "A" levels which has crashed so many other attempts at reform. It may not be revolutionary but it will revolutionise secondary education.

His approach to assessment reform is similar in style; pragmatic, politically aware yet progressive. It is interesting how perceptions of rigour and excellence [especially academic excellence in schools] have become

synonymous with exams and tests in this country. No other country examines like we do. Exams have their place in the system but they are often a blunt instrument of assessment, are unsuitable for some learning, have a tendency to distort the curriculum as teachers teach to the test, and they place an enormous burden on individual pupils and the system. You might expect therefore that everyone would be pleased to see fewer of them.

Shifting the balance to more internal assessment should be welcomed. Good teachers assess all the time. It is an essential skill for all teachers to be able to accurately assess their pupils' progress and achievements. Of course teachers will need more training and support in conducting assessments but this can only be a good thing. If their assessments are to carry more status and bestow validity on pupils' achievements then monitoring instruments and methods will need to be established, and standardisation and moderation processes built into the system. There are models in higher education and further education which already use similar approaches, have the advantage of developing common understanding and consensus on assessment decisions, and which help to build and improve quality in assessment. Such a system alongside judicious use of external assessments, with assessment properly rationalised and genuinely fit for purpose, would surely be progress. Is it just that we don't really trust our teachers but it would be politically suicidal to say so?

There are forces of conservatism and there are those who argue for even more radical reform. I had hoped for a fundamental understanding of how credit could be used to support reform, recognise all achievements and provide real currency for learners. I'm not convinced we have that. Nevertheless Tomlinson recommends a credit system compatible with that being developed by QCA for adults and we can hope to build on that as the two reforms are taken forward.

Despite my reservations therefore I wholly support Tomlinson's approach to reform. It is above all progressive. It seeks to provide a design blueprint for the needs of a new generation of young people. It needs and deserves our support and above all a bold and progressive response from our political leaders in the new year. They must take responsibility for building on the consensus which Tomlinson has already achieved and give our young people a system fit for their futures.

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