

POLICY WATCH

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Tony Blair and Alan Johnson set out new directions in 14 - 19 provision

The irony was quickly spotted. "Over a year ago," the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders said, "the Tomlinson Report called for a bac style qualification and ministers rejected it. If the Government believe so strongly in the need for a high quality bac qualification, it should have implemented the proposals in the Tomlinson Report in full."

He was referring to Tony Blair's speech this week to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Conference in which he argued amongst other things that the International Baccalaureate should be made more widely available in England. "We believe that there should be at least one sixth form college or school in every local authority offering students the choice of the IB. So we will support up to 100 extra schools and colleges in training staff to offer the qualification by 2010."

"Don't misunderstand me" the Prime Minister went on to say, "the majority of students will continue to do A levels and GCSEs but Diplomas and for some, the IB offer new options." The trouble was that some understood only too well. "Bac for the best, Diplomas for the rest" intoned Chris Keates of the NASUWT, a sentiment that may be hard to shake off.

By all accounts this was the speech that Tony Blair had wanted to make at the Party Conference in September but had been prevented from doing so by a collective seizure over when he would step down. This latest foray suggests that the Prime Minister feels he has a lot of tidying up to do before he can lay the 'education, education, education' agenda to rest and that much of it is to do with setting the pointers for 14 - 19 reform for the future.

The speech followed a familiar choreography. An initial litany of how much things have improved since 1997, 'best ever GCSE and A level results...more teachers...more computers...more funding...fewer failing schools,' a robust defence in the wake of some of the headlines following last week's Annual Ofsted Report. Then on to 'what else we need to do.' A concoction of more IB, harder A levels, more Academies and more Trust pathfinders with personalisation and choice as the two main ingredients. "What was once monochrome" the Prime Minister opined "is now a spectrum offering a range of freedoms and pathways."

It was left to the Education Secretary an hour or so later in a presentation to Sixth Form Colleges to spell out some of the details.

Adopting a more industrial tone, he argued that "instead of crudely divvying up children into academics and horny handed sons and daughters of toil, we need a more sophisticated system which provides every student with a mix of theory and practice that matches their aptitudes and aspirations." That's what many people

thought they were doing as they worked on their range of options for 14 - 19 learners but he went on to define a more particular "choice of routes."

Under the vision he sketched out, there would be four choices of routes.

First the new Diplomas, "one of the least noticed yet most radical parts of the Education and Inspections Act." Second, Apprenticeships which have seen a "huge renaissance," up from 70,000 to 250,000 and likely to be given high priority in next year's Spending Review. Third, A levels, where "we must ensure that it maintains its status" for which confirmation of three measures. From 2008, the opportunity for all A level students to take the extended project; and from 2010, more open ended questions in A level papers and a new A* grade "to reward achievement" and by default see off those concerned about A level's ability to differentiate. The existing A - E grading scale, incidentally, would remain. Fourth, that opening up of the IB opportunity for which colleges, especially sixth form colleges would be the "natural first choice" to offer it and the 14 - 19 Gateway the mechanism to identify 'suitable partners.'

Many people are now struggling to see what impact this collective foray will have on what is already a hugely challenging 14 - 19 agenda. Little of this was in the 'rule book' when the overall Implementation Plan was released a year ago. Schools, colleges, Local Authorities and many others set off on that plan in good faith, local Prospectuses are being drawn up and partnerships nurtured around a set of provision that may now change. The danger must be as John Dunford hinted that a lot of suppressed frustration at the rejection of the Tomlinson model will be re-awakened just at a time when critical decisions need to be made.

Three points seem to be exercising minds at present.

First is what impact this may have on the skills agenda. For many people the most urgent issue in 14 - 19 reform is not high performing A level candidates, important though they may be but the growing numbers of young people leaving formal education without either the expected personal or functional skills needed for adult life. This issue has gained momentum during the autumn as the NEET figures have risen, the OECD warnings become more pronounced and the CBI messages more vivid. Yet days away from the expected release of the Leitch Report on UK Skills, the Prime Minister has chosen to focus on a particular form of qualification and structural reform only. For a Government committed to meeting employer needs and that has invested so much in basic skills, it seems strange not to have taken the eve of Leitch opportunity to hammer home some messages about the importance of these skills.

Second, to pick up a point raised in last week's Sunday Times, it seems equally strange for a Government committed to A levels let alone to rationalising the number of qualifications available to 'open the floodgates' as the paper put it to 'a bewildering range of alternatives.' It had in mind AS, A2, the Pre U and now the IB, the beginnings of "a recipe for muddle and confusion" for employers and universities.

The third is what the Conservatives have called the emergence of 'education apartheid,' in which some schools seem 'free' to study one set of qualifications which are denied others. Not for nothing has this been called 'the fetish of choice.'

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