

A levels have long been the battleground of education. Though weakened by the incessant determination of politicians to lower the standards and inflate the results, they have remained, due to the widespread confidence they command. But short the left and the educationalists want to see them off and will go to any lengths to do so. The Tomlinson proposals for 14-19 are the next stage in this war of attrition.

Chris Woodhead , who, as Chief Inspector of Schools, fought the battle for standards so resolutely, has now joined the debate on Tomlinson's plan. His pamphlet shows how Tomlinson's proposals for a series of interlocking diplomas to replace the A level, are the next stage in the debasement of learning. Instead of A levels, there will be an even more chaotic collection of diplomas, for which candidates will qualify through a range of personal qualities and skills, and rather fewer obligations to know mathematics, English, physics or history. This will make way for a system of both vocational training and academic education, where mastery and knowledge of a subject, is increasingly replaced by irrelevant and mechanical box- ticking operations. The Government should take heed of one of the most single-minded guardians of standards – and abandon Mr Tomlinson's Modest Proposal, before it is too late to do so.

**POLITEIA**

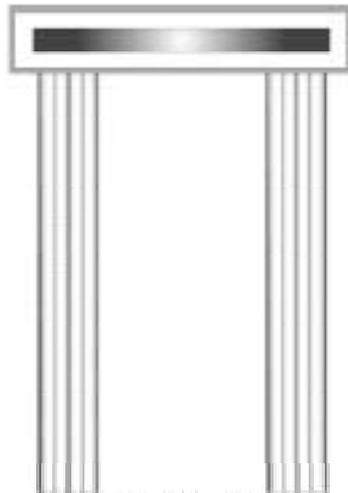
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# POLITEIA

A FORUM FOR  
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING

Chris Woodhead

How to Lower  
School Standards:  
Mike Tomlinson's  
Modest Proposal



*Address Series*

## POLITEIA: A Forum for Social and Economic Thinking

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School Standards:  
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Chris Woodhead

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## THE AUTHOR

Chris Woodhead was H.M. Chief Inspector of School at OFSTED from 1994 to 2000. From 1993 to 1994 he was Chief Executive of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, having been Chief Executive of the Curriculum Council from 1991 to 1993. His publications include contributions to Politiea's three studies in its *Comparing Standards* series, of which the most recent was *Comparing Standards : Academic and Vocational, 16-19 year olds* (2002).

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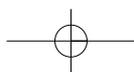
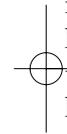
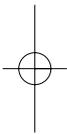
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*How to Lower School Standards***Introduction**

Over the last twenty years I have read most Government publications on education. Mike Tomlinson's Interim report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform is the worst. Intellectually unconvincing, his recommendations, in so far as they are intelligible, will lead to yet another educational disaster. He makes no attempt to explain any of the many shaky assumptions upon which his whole complex edifice is constructed. The detail, upon which all depends and in which the devil certainly lurks, is left hopelessly vague. A tissue of politically inspired assertion masquerades as an argument.

Tomlinson and his ministerial masters hope, it seems, that the sheer impenetrability of what is proposed will reduce potential critics to a state of numbed acquiescence. And, thus far, the strategy has, more or less, worked. The CBI and the IoD, whose members will have to pick up the pieces, have logged their disquiet. But the media has, unsurprisingly, failed to penetrate the verbiage, and the great and the good of the education establishment have, predictably enough, cooed their approval.

They would, wouldn't they? For Tomlinson has given them everything they want. The 'academic/vocational divide' is finally, miraculously, healed. A levels and GCSEs (and, incidentally, league tables, too) will wither on the vine to be replaced by a diploma which guarantees success to all. Welcome to the educational promised land! The egalitarian dream, if ministers are stupid enough to act upon this report, is about to be realised. Long live Tomlinson and his gargantuan, meaningless abstractions!

Actually, no. These proposals will neither restore intellectual rigour to academic examinations nor

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provide the less academically able with the practical, vocational courses they so desperately need. They will throw the system into chaos as pupils, their teachers, parents and employers struggle to come to terms with this new Tomlinsonian world of 'interlocking diplomas'. My initial response was to wonder whether the whole thing was an elaborate spoof, a 21st century Modest Proposal. But no, Tomlinson is deadly serious, and, in his encyclopaedic mastery of current educational cliché and puppet-like determination to fulfil his ministerial remit, he has produced a work of perverse genius. Who, given the mess we are in, would have thought that anyone could dream up a set of recommendations that will actually make things worse? Tomlinson has.

### **The Vision**

Let us begin with the vision. His 'proposals for a 14-19 phase', Tomlinson tells us proudly, 'are characterised by inclusiveness, challenge, quality and choice, where all students are able to achieve their very best performance'. Some readers might, I suppose, have thought that his august group of educationalists was about to reveal a system of examinations that deliberately prevented students from achieving their best performance. Most will wonder why we need this twaddle. 'Inclusiveness', Tomlinson continues, 'is at the heart of our vision'. Of course, 'the many not the few': the mantra the Prime Minister has been muttering these last seven years. And Tomlinson has listened carefully. 'Crucially', he writes, this means 'meeting the needs of those with learning difficulties and others who face obstacles to learning with the opportunity to progress and achieve within programmes that reflect their personal circumstances'.

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Personally I would have thought that if you are learning, say, French, the challenge, whatever your personal circumstance, is to master French vocabulary and grammar. But then, naively perhaps, I thought that Tomlinson was writing about a system of public examinations and that the purpose of an examination is to distinguish between those who understand and/or can do what has been taught, and who deserve, therefore, to move forward to a more demanding course of education or training or to be appointed, in competition with others, to a particular job, and those who do not. On this antiquated view, the idea that 'programmes' should reflect 'personal circumstance' subverts the whole point of the exercise.

Neither am I happy with that word 'crucially'. I agree that vocational education and training is, by and large, dire and in need of urgent reform. But so, too, are academic examinations. A Level grade inflation means that admissions tutors at top universities are confronted by a string of applicants with top grades. Some are openly adopting a lottery approach. 'If most applicants have 3 As at A Level, how do you tell them apart?' *The Sunday Times* asked recently. The answer was that: 'You don't. You just bin half of them'.

Tomlinson seems to recognise the problem. 'Many existing programmes', he notes, 'do not always provide sufficient stretch'. He will not, of course, come out and admit that the problem is that academic examinations have been dumbed down to the point where they do not discriminate between the excellent and the good, but he does say that learning must be made more 'demanding'. The trouble, as we shall see, is that the detail of his proposals militates against this admirable, if motherhood and apple pie, proposal.

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Somewhat tautologically, he informs us (the third element of the vision) that 'a high quality system is one where programmes of learning are valued by young people, providers, end users and the wider community'. But, again betraying his underlying and corrosive sentimentality and egalitarianism, adds that 'it is not just a matter of attainment representing high standards of intellectual challenge; attainment should demonstrably require effort, hard work, perseverance and attention to detail'. No, it should not. Attainment is attainment. Some succeed effortlessly; others have to slog. The degree of effort is as irrelevant in the field of education and training as it is in athletics. What matters is the achievement and whether the system is robust enough to ensure that those who deserve to win do so.

His assertion that 'a high quality system should balance specialisation and general learning' is equally sinister. The more 'general learning' (see page x below) academic students are forced to endure, the less time they will have to pursue their academic studies. And, while his statement that this 'high quality' system must also 'motivate learners' is up to a point true, it is worth remembering how easily a proper concern for 'motivation' can collapse into the usual shallow plea for relevance and instant gratification.

'Choice', the fourth element in the vision, is 'needed to recognise the differences between the needs and aspirations of individual learners and contributes to making a reality of personalised learning'. Again, in one very basic sense, this is obviously true. The fourteen year-old who wants to be a bricklayer should not be compelled to learn Latin, and vice versa. But, as with his comments on 'quality', an apparently innocuous statement hides a failure to understand what is needed if we are ever to have a

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decent system of education and training for 14-19 year olds. 'Personalised learning' is the primrose path to a mix and match approach to curricula and qualifications that undermines the essential integrity of the body of knowledge (be it bricklaying or Latin) that the student has to master. Anything worth learning can't be 'personalised', and the belief that it can, promoted by Schools Minister David Miliband every time he opens his mouth, rampant amongst educationalists and fundamental to Tomlinson, in part explains why the recommendations of this report are a recipe for disaster.

There is a further point to make about Tomlinson's vision. It is, and this is true of the report generally, written in terms calculated to bring a warm glow to the reader's heart. 'What', he asks, contemplating, no doubt, the roars of rapturous applause, 'will success look like?' His answer: 'We will have fulfilled our remit if young people are motivated to continue learning, whether in education, training or employment, and face fewer barriers to participation'. Of course, who could disagree? The danger is that in nodding our sage approval we fail to notice the yawning gap between the noble aspiration and the absurdity of what is actually being proposed. It is fortunate that Tomlinson's inability to control his flights of visionary enthusiasm helps to raise a sceptical smile from all but the most ardent devotees of sentimental goo. 'Young people', he gushes, 'must be taught to be aware of themselves, their talents, their aspirations and limitations; to understand how they appear to, and interact with others; and to create a vision for themselves and their future which they can use to make choices'. You couldn't make it up, could you?

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**The Situation at Present, and Tomlinson's Response**

Contrast these utopian excesses with where we are now. I quote Tomlinson's own analysis: 'Only 55% of employers surveyed by the CBI were satisfied that school leavers are equipped with basic literacy and numeracy . . . High truancy and behavioural problems are evidence of significant disengagement at or before age 14 . . . 5% of young people reach the end of compulsory schooling with no qualifications . . . A young person from a professional background is five times more likely to go into HE than one from an unskilled'. So much for 'the many, not the few'. So much, seven years on, for Mr Blair's promise of 'a world class education system'.

Tomlinson's verdict is correct. The system is failing too many students. I do not share his belief that the 'right', whatever this means, programme of course and qualifications can ensure that every student in the land can end up with something good to show for their years at school. Human beings make their own obstinately irresponsible choices; schools cannot solve every social ill; and this kind of Blairite utopianism is the enemy of improvements that might be possible. I do agree that 'the time has come to stop tinkering'. The 'numerous initiatives' of the last few years have not, as Tomlinson recognises, resulted in any significant improvements. Indeed, I would say that they have made things worse. But Tomlinson believes that the problem is the 'piecemeal' nature of the reform: the lack, pre-Blair and Miliband of the necessary political will, and, stupidly, he thinks that if the imperatives that drove the earlier reforms were to be pursued more radically all would be well. He remains, for example, committed to the principle of 'breadth', the very goal which led to the introduction of the AS examination he now, belatedly, criticises. He wants

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all courses to conform to a common 'template', forgetting, it seems, the disaster of GCSE, which was driven by the idea that one examination can test the understanding of pupils of widely differing abilities.

He, of course, will argue that there is sufficient flexibility within his common framework to offer meaningful differentiation, and, for reasons he never explains, that it is vital to adopt a 'coherent' approach which delivers a 'unified' system of examinations. So let us examine, first, his 'strategy' for reform and, second, the detail of what he wants the Government to do. We can then decide whether his proposals are likely to result, on the one hand, in qualifications which raise academic standards and rescue university admissions from the lottery they have become, and, on the other, to offer the less academic, perhaps more practically orientated, 14 year-old the chance to make something of his or her life.

**The Strategy for Reform**

The advantages as Tomlinson sees them of 'diploma framework' are as follows:

\* recognition for the achievement of the whole 14-19 cohort within a single common framework which is transparent and easily understood by learners, teachers, parents, higher education (HE) and employers;

- an inclusive ladder of progression where achievement is recognised at specific levels, but diplomas are locked on to one another so that achievement at one level builds towards achievement at the next;
- coherence, structure and relevance within all young people's 14-19 learning, which links clear choices to options for subsequent progression in

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learning and employment, whilst also allowing for learner choice and for movement between different routes;

- a core of learning and assured achievement for all in key components, such as communication and mathematical skills, irrespective of the route chosen;
- tackling arbitrary distinctions between, and giving recognition to, different types and modes of learning and achievement through the use of common design features, particularly the common core, prescribed volume and a single, but appropriately differentiated, assessment regime;
- 'space' for innovative learning and teaching and personal choice;
- a framework for a reduction in assessment burden (particularly external assessment);
- trustworthy qualifications of sufficient volume to deliver breadth, depth and stretch and of which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; and
- more information about learners' achievements and their development of knowledge, skills and attributes.

My response is as follows. Why do we want 'a single common framework'? What *are* the advantages? Does Tomlinson really believe that his labyrinthine proposals (see page x below) will be 'transparent' to anyone? Any sensible set of qualifications has courses which follow one on the other as the student learns more, but what exactly is meant by 'an inclusive' or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'flexible', 'ladder of progression'? Has he ever tried to climb a flexible ladder? What do the words 'coherence, structure and relevance' mean? Tomlinson never

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explains their, for him, talismanic force. Does he not understand that the more 'movement' there is 'between different routes', the more likely it is that the integrity of each route (which depends upon the sequential mastery of specific knowledge and skills) will be undermined? Why does he want highly literate or numerate 16 year-olds to continue with specific instruction in these core skills? Why, to put this objection in a different way, does he think that FE and the sixth form is the place to redeem the failures of primary education? (Answer, though he does not give it, 'because it would at least mean that universities would no longer have to run remedial classes in basic literacy and numeracy'.)

I am not sure what he means by 'different types and modes of learning', but, assuming that he has in mind the academic and vocational, why does he believe that this distinction is 'arbitrary'? What, again, does he mean by space for 'innovative learning and teaching'? Why, arrogantly, does he think that his qualifications are going to be any more 'trustworthy' (whatever this means) than current qualifications? Doesn't he realise that the balance between breadth and depth is deeply problematic and certainly ought to be different in different courses? If the parts (four genuinely demanding A levels, for example, in different subjects) are worth having, why worry about the whole? And, finally, why build (whatever this means) more 'information about learners' achievements and their development of knowledge, skills and attributes' into the formal qualification system, when, once upon a time a decent reference did the trick, and, though Tomlinson has conveniently forgotten this, when Records of Achievement have spawned so many useless pages of formulaic prose and ticked boxes?

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**Diploma Programmes:  
A Template for 14-19 Learning**

Tomlinson asserts that 'all 14-19 programmes' should 'comprise a balance between the generic learning needed by everybody for further learning, employment and adult life and the specific subjects and areas of learning in which young people wish to progress'. He proposes, therefore, that all students should study 'the specific subjects or areas of learning' which 'suit their personal aptitudes, preferences and ambitions' (one noun is never, as you will by now have gathered, enough when three can be paraded) and a 'core of generic skills, knowledge and experience'. The core will include mathematics, communication and ICT, an 'extended project or personal challenge . . . designed to help them require and demonstrate the individual working, problem solving, research, planning, analytical and presentational skills valued by employers and HE'. In addition, 'a range of common knowledge, skills and attributes, such as self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal skills and international awareness' will be 'integrated into delivery of the programme as a whole'. All learners will 'participate in some wider activities based on personal interests, contribution to the community and experience of employment'. And everyone will have 'access to personal planning, review and guidance to underpin their programmes, consolidate their learning and inform their choices'.

Back in the early 1990s, when the National Curriculum was being developed, there was much discussion of cross-curricular skills and themes. If I remember right, there were to be five of each and the idea was that they would knit the individual subjects of the National Curriculum into a 'seamless web of meaningful educational knowledge',

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though, even then, the more radical proponents of the cross-curricular approach were questioning why we were bothering to teach children boring facts and figures that they would forget once the examination had been taken. To argue that the wheel has come full circle and that it is the traditional subject which now has to be defended against the invasive skill would be to exaggerate: Tomlinson has 'main learning' somewhere there in his template. The core is nonetheless at the heart of his proposals. It will occupy a significant (though, typically, unspecified, amount of teaching time), and, to state the very important obvious, the more time that is dedicated to the enhancement of self-awareness the less there is for anything else, be it bricklaying or Latin.

My main concern on this latter point is for the most academically able. Why should they be forced to waste their time on 'communication' and 'mathematics' when they are already literate and numerate? If the argument is that an A grade in GCSE does not constitute an adequate preparation for further and higher education, and I agree that it does not, the sensible response would be to make the GCSE more demanding, not to waste sixth form time on learning that should have been mastered years earlier.

Tomlinson and his collaborators find it helpful to think about the development of 'common skills' in terms of 'three dimensions – the reflective and individual learner (e.g. skills such as problem solving, individual learning and the attribute of personal persistence); the social learner (e.g. interpersonal and teamwork skills and the ability to empathise); and the learner in society and the wider world (e.g. the development of active citizenship and international awareness).' I do not. I want our most able 17 and 18 year- olds to concentrate their energies on what matters: the study of subjects

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which they have chosen, the pursuit of knowledge that opens up the possibility of further understanding in a never-ending quest, the magic of grappling with concepts that take them to the very limit of their intellectual ability.

Such study is morally as well as educationally good. The student, as Iris Murdoch once said, is forced to confront the otherness of the world. The 'soft fat ego' is defeated, or at least challenged. But, no, Tomlinson wants teenagers, at the time of their lives when they are (if my own experience is anything to go by) most prone to introspective self-preening, to be encouraged to become more 'self-aware'. He does not, of course, explain what he means. He does not tell us how the teaching of 'self-awareness' is to be 'integrated' into, say, the teaching of A Level mathematics. He does not deem the assessment of progress in deepening self-awareness to be worthy of discussion. Where do you stand on a ten point self-awareness scale? On a good day, I reckon I might score 4 or 5. If Tomlinson is so blind to his own absurdity as to write this nonsense, he rates about minus 3.

'International awareness' is plucked from the air. Why not 'ecological' awareness or 'gender' awareness or 'race' awareness? And it is not just this curious preoccupation with 'awareness'. The old canard about 'problem solving' makes its inevitable appearance. You cannot be taught to solve problems in the abstract. Their solution depends upon the possession of the necessary knowledge and the confidence to use it, which comes from long familiarity and good subject teaching. So, too, with 'managing your own learning' and every other 'skill' and 'attribute' that must now be taught. These are the will of the wisp delusions of the progressive educational estab-

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lishment, and Tomlinson, in his credulity, has packed each and every one into this rag-bag core.

Finally on the core, it is worth noting that Tomlinson is unhappy with both GCSE English and mathematics. GCSE English is not, in his view, 'a good proxy for communication', what ever this means. The problem seems to be that it does not 'include a minimum specified level of communication knowledge and skills', though I have to admit that this gloss leaves me none the wiser. He is concerned that too many students 'do not respond well to GCSE Maths'. True, they do not. But Tomlinson's solution is typical of his whole approach. 'We need', he says, 'to overcome the learning phobia which undermines some young people's motivation and their confidence in their ability to progress in mathematics by providing accessible and flexible range (sic) of mathematics options'. In other words, GCSE Mathematics, which according to David Burghes, the Professor of Mathematics at the University of Exeter, is already 'pathetically easy', must be made easier. So, too, I presume, with English. Personally, I would suggest that the problem and the solution lie in primary schools; that the challenge is to improve the quality of teaching in both primary and secondary schools; and that GCSE English and Mathematics should be made tougher, not softer, qualifications.

There is a further twist to Tomlinson's diploma proposals. He wants young people to be able to choose between a 'specialised' and an 'open diploma line'. The former is for those who want to make progress within 'specific disciplines and areas of employment'; the latter is for those who do not know what they want to do, or, as Tomlinson would prefer it, who are keen 'to select a mixed pattern of subjects or areas of learning'.

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Tomlinson himself acknowledges that the open diploma is a nonsense: it cannot deliver a coherent programme of study, 'equivalence between units in volume and level of achievement will be difficult [I would say impossible] to guarantee, and over-assessment, given the multitude of units, is inevitable. But, having noted these very sensible objections, Tomlinson immediately embraces the idea of an open diploma, stating that his approach will allow students 'relatively unregulated freedom to choose mixed programmes', whatever 'relatively' in practice might mean, and that everything is going to be fine. He also tells us that the 'specialised' diploma will not be so 'clearly delineated and separately designed' that it militates against 'personalisation'. Confused? So am I.

#### **'Diploma Levels and Progression'**

'At each level', Tomlinson asserts blithely, 'diplomas will be at least as demanding as the programmes currently undertaken by young people. The combination of the core and main learning will make them more stretching and wider-ranging than many existing programmes.' For the reasons given above, I do not see how this can be true. The core is an absurdity; it will waste a great deal of time that could have been spent on serious educational study; and Tomlinson has nothing whatsoever to say about how grade inflation and the erosion of intellectual rigour in academic examinations can be reversed. Neither does he tell us how decent vocational courses and examinations might be developed.

There are to be four diploma levels: Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced. Intermediate and Advanced will apparently equate to GCSE A\*-C, intermediate GNVQ and Level 2 NVQ and A Levels and Level 3 NVQ respectively. Foundation

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Level corresponds to GCSE grades D–G, foundation GNVQ, level 1 NVQ, and Entry Level to ‘Entry Level Certificates’.

The truth, of course, is that a GCSE grade D–G is worthless. Tomlinson can blather on about how it is ‘right in principle’ that ‘all young people should have recognition for their achievement’, but, if that achievement is so minimal that the real world does not want to know, then he has a problem. He can label and re-label, package and re-package, but no amount of hot air and pious posturing can compensate for the fact that some students do not achieve. He cannot, however hard he tries, get round the fact that ‘inclusiveness and progress’ (to use his terms) are irreconcilable bedfellows.

What does he have to say about the Entry Level Diploma, this bright new invention that is going to motivate those who are currently excluded? Nothing. It will:

- provide a flexible, balanced and enriching programme of learning that promotes self-determination for the learner;
- provide a suitable level of challenge both for individuals who reach their potential within Entry Level or choose to leave the diploma system at this level and for those who progress to level 1;
- promote progression both within Entry Level and to Level 1 and beyond;
- provide a record of the distance travelled by the learner over the course of the programme; and
- assess in ways that are appropriate to the needs of learners and the nature of the programme.’

Words, words, words. Reassuringly, he tells us that future work will ‘build upon existing principles

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such as those enshrined [sic] in the: 'Entry to Employment Entitlement Curriculum' (LSC), 'Designing a Learner Centred Curriculum for 16-24 Year Olds' (QCA), and 'Valuing People' (the Department for Health). You do not need to have read these masterpieces of bureaucratic gobbledegook; their titles tell you all you need to know. Tomlinson, who has worshipped at their corporate shrine, is confident that he 'can create a diploma which provides a suitable level of challenge' for these young people who have been taught nothing. 'The egotism of such a man', as Coleridge said of Milton, 'is a revelation of spirit'. He is constructing new deckchairs as the Titanic sinks, and Mr Miliband, Minister for School Standards, cannot, it seems, understand the damage that these recommendations would cause. Michael the Magician Tomlinson has pulled the rabbit out of the hat and convinced us all that the Government knows how to solve the problem of chronic student underachievement. Who cares if it is nonsense? It will see them through the next election and that is all that apparently matters.

**Recording and Grading Achievement  
(or The Chickens Come Home to Roost)**

Tomlinson knows that his proposed diplomas must provide universities and employers with the information they need if they are to select the best candidate, but he also wants to be 'inclusive': everyone must succeed. He wants, moreover, to create a system where what matters most is the breadth of the qualification gained, but he knows that it is the grade achieved in the individual component that will matter in the real world. No amount of hot air and pious exhortation can resolve these unresolvable dilemmas. In these, the final chapters of his report, the chickens come home to roost.

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The chapter summary provides a nice example of both the dilemma and the mindset. The 'grading of diplomas within each level would provide incentives for learners to achieve depth and/or breadth of learning beyond the minimum diploma pass thresholds'. Indeed, Mike, it would. 'But', Tomlinson continues anxiously, 'it carries a risk of devaluing a diploma pass'. Indeed, Mike, it does. An A grade is better than a B, a first class degree is superior to a second. It is a great shame, but there it is. If you want 'inclusivity', then you cannot grade because the achievement of the gifted is going to reveal the lesser achievement of the less gifted. Hard old world, isn't it?

Eager, perhaps, to disguise the absurdity of his position, Tomlinson waxes lyrical about the system of assessment he will deliver. 'We are confident', he writes, that 'a strategy can be devised to ensure that assessment:

- measures achievement in ways suited to the subject, level and type of learning;
- has validity, reliability and wider currency, underpinned by appropriate quality assurance;
- helps learners to extend, deepen or consolidate their knowledge, skills and understanding;
- enriches their experience through a variety of types and styles of assessment;
- provides formative feedback on their progress
- avoids undue burden on students, teachers/tutors and awarding bodies; allows time for learning; and embraces the potential benefits of e-assessment; and
- makes appropriate use of the professional judgement of teachers/tutors.'

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The truth is that he is stuck with yet another unsolvable dilemma. He wants, on the one hand, 'more varied assessment arrangements, and greater use of teacher-led assessment' and 'a quality assurance system which reinforces the autonomy and expertise of schools, colleges and training providers to undertake assessment', and, on the other, 'clear external guarantees that standards are being maintained and applied consistently'. As with so much else in his report, aspiration rides roughshod over reality. The greater the use made of teacher assessment, the more likely it is, as a recent NAHT report points out, that judgements will be inconsistent. Much as he would like to, Tomlinson cannot have it both ways.

#### **An Immodest Proposal**

What follows is a statement of the obvious: simple, straightforward, and – in that it challenges the collective wisdom of Mr Tomlinson and his august colleagues, and, if his reports are to be believed, the vast majority of the professionals who have responded to his consultations – immodest. So be it.

My proposals assume agreement on five basic propositions:

First, an examination is a mechanism to differentiate between the good, the average, and the weak. It follows that some candidates must fail, and, conversely, that, if all win prizes, the examination is failing to achieve its basic purpose.

Second, education and training are different activities. Education involves the initiation of the student into a body of established knowledge, a discipline with its own canon of literature, and modes of understanding; training is the teaching of the specific knowledge and skills that are needed to

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fulfil a particular job or task. It is not that the one is better than the other, just that they are different. We need, therefore, distinct academic and vocational courses, each with its own challenge and integrity.

Third, and, following on from this, there was nothing wrong with the traditional O and A Level examination. The problem was the lack of vocational courses and qualifications. The challenge now is to restore the academic expectation of the former and to develop the latter. It is not, as David Miliband has taken to saying, 'rocket science', but it does help if the rocket is pointing in the right direction.

Fourth, 'breadth' is a good, but a slavish adherence to breadth that dismisses a proper concern for the detailed mastery of a particular subject as the gravest of our contemporary educational ills is, in fact, the silliest of our contemporary educational fads – particularly, of course, when 'breadth' means a ragbag of basic skills (which should have been taught in primary school) and quasi-therapeutic goals such as 'self awareness'.

Fifth, the history of state involvement in the development and regulation of public examinations since Sir Keith Joseph took his ill-advised decision to create the GCSE has been a disaster. Driven by the political recognition that re-election is more likely if exam statistics improve, and, recently, an obsession with social engineering that rides roughshod over all serious educational considerations, politicians cannot be trusted to do what is right. The state should stop fiddling and allow those who depend upon examination results (universities and employers) the freedom to develop a system that makes sense to them.

*Chris Woodhead*

The first four of these propositions are, or should be, self evident. How, though, can universities and employers assume their proper control?

Let us take universities and academic qualifications first. The conventional wisdom is that all would be well if there were only one examination board, which, would, of course, be controlled by the state. At present, there are three, and, in competing for business, it is alleged that the temptation is to cultivate custom by offering soft options. To which my response is 'Why not?'. To repeat: state regulation has failed. Ministers pretend, and so do some teachers (though many do not). Everyone else knows that it is easier to achieve an A grade or a first in 2004 than it was, to pick a date at random, in 1968 when I graduated with a 2:1 from Bristol. The problem is not that the evil of market forces has spread uncontrolled, but rather that we do not have a market in academic examinations.

In a real market, some qualifications would certainly be easier to achieve than others. They would be easier and everyone would know that they were easier. An A from Board Z would not win you a place at Oxford and Cambridge. Indeed, if Oxford and Cambridge and the rest of the Russell group had any sense they would, in collaboration with, say, fifty top independent and state schools, use the freedoms I propose to develop their own examinations – examinations designed to identify the academic élite which would very rapidly secure their reputation within the market place. Other less demanding examinations would be developed in order to meet different needs. Why not?

On the vocational front a similar approach would allow employers to develop courses and qualifications that met their particular needs. Last year I spoke at the annual conference of the British

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Chambers of Commerce. Margaret Hodge, then Minister for Higher and Further Education, delivered a panglossian speech lauding the rise in standards and the robust intelligence of the Government's strategies. The audience sniggered politely. They read the letters of applications and they know that standards are not rising. They know that Tomlinson's bleak analysis of where we are is right. And they know that the jargon and the complexity and the bureaucracies have not delivered, and never will. Let's cut through the jargon and the complexity and sack the bureaucrats. Why not?

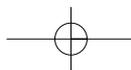
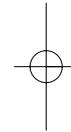
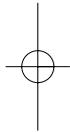
**Conclusion**

Personally, flipping through Mr Tomlinson's report to see if there is anything else that needs to be said, I cannot see one reason why not. 'Mike Tomlinson', Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, announced recently, is leading us towards 'a single framework for all qualifications'. So, too, he added, is the Government. He is right. The masterplan (and it is no coincidence, perhaps, that Mr Boston's initials read KGB) is to break every qualification from the most practical to the most academic, from bricklaying to Latin, an NVQ to a PhD, down into 'units or modules'. Students will study a module, combine one module with another, and, to quote Boston, 'the qualification will be completed when the box is full'. Tick the box, secure the certificate. So much for the integrity of the academic and the vocational. So much for the sequential mastery of bodies of knowledge and skill. Today it is Rome, tomorrow Paris: another guidebook tick. What matters is not, it seems, the meaningfulness of the qualification. That is irrelevant. The name of the game now is conformity to the common framework: the delivery, God help us, of the masterplan.

*Chris Woodhead*

He ended the speech from which I have taken these remarkable statements with the comment that 'Since taking up this job nearly two years ago, I have never been more optimistic'. It is nice to know, I suppose, that someone is happy.

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