

# 14-19: changes and progress

## Mike Tomlinson

1. May I begin by summarising the changes argued for in our report.
  - A simplification of vocational routes and provision which gave progression to L3 and content driven by employers and HE.
  - The need to ensure levels of Maths and English are adequate at every level.
  - The development of skills around research, analysis, synthesis and presentational (written).
  - A revision of A levels and GCSEs to strengthen the rigour and assessment. BUT, to retain them as the building blocks of:
    - A Diploma structure to ensure coverage of essentials as well as breadth.
2. I will not bore you with any details of the journey from the proposals to the current position of the reforms. Instead, I will set out where I believe we are and a personal reflection on the plans and policies.
3. So, where are we? In outline:
  - We have in law a 14-19 phase and a requirement for all 14-19 year olds to have access to all the Diploma routes by 2011.
  - UCAS gave a positive tariff to the Diploma at L3.
  - The first 5 vocational/specialised Diplomas started this September with some 20,000 students involved.
  - The next 5 will be offered from September 2009 and it appears some 75% of schools and over 90% of colleges wish to offer the Diplomas.
  - The functional English and Maths courses are available and separately graded, but importantly no student can gain a Grade A\* at GCSE without a pass in the functional element.
  - Employers and HE remain in the lead on Diploma content.
  - Additional funding per student has been provided to schools, money for 'travel' provided for rural areas, and staff INSET has been centrally funded.

- HE has almost totally indicated a willingness to consider the Diploma at L3 for HE entry (very important).
- At A level, changes were introduced this September:
  - 4 units not 6
  - Ext. Proj available as AS
  - Assessment to include synoptic questions requiring extended answers
  - A\* to be introduced
- Three further Diploma lines to be developed for teaching in 2011, covering Maths/Science, Humanities, Languages. HE very much in the lead on DDPs.
- A credit based system is envisaged in the future.
- School leaving age to be raised to 18.
- Review of A levels etc in 2013.

If I have left out any important element then I am sure my DCSF colleagues will make good my failings!

4. I do think it is necessary here to stress the enormity of the changes this 14-19 reform requires of schools and college staff, students, parents, employers, and of course HE. The goal is to have a curriculum offer suited to all and every student, to offer real progression opportunities and to have strong, readily understood and accepted vocational qualifications and routes. My working group argued for evolution not revolution, and contrary to many media (and some political) statements we did not argue for the abolition of A levels! Nor do I want pursuance of "parity of esteem".
5. So, what are my personal reflections on where we are now and what the future holds? I will stick to the educational matters, not the political.
  - The involvement of HE and employers in the Diploma design has been a very positive feature of the reforms. This must continue, with HE being more and more involved with L3 provision.
  - While there has been some information about the reforms, much more should have been done to inform all stakeholders of the changes and the opportunities. The communications strategy simply has not been sufficient, or sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of all groups.

- While welcoming the emphasis on vocational Diplomas I am now left wondering if they are truly vocational. The applied element is not to my mind vocational. I worry that we may have provision which is not truly vocational – instead a mixture which serves no sector well. Add to this the decision to allow the WE to be in any sector, and my fears grow. This would never be allowed in many of our European competitors.
  - That said, I do believe positive progress has been made in the reform of our 14-19 system. Academies and BSF could and should make a greater contribution. Why have all not got real vocational schools appearing?
  - Careers education and guidance has improved.
6. I would now like to turn to the A level or academic provision. I welcome the reforms introduced this September – all of which were argued for in our report. But, I see them as necessary precursors to more significant reform – i.e. a Diploma – which the Secretary of State announced last autumn. My continued contact with HE, schools and importantly students, leaves me in no doubt that much more searching questions need to be asked of our A level system before it is considered fit for purpose. So, what do I wish to see done? Well, my overriding priorities are to re-establish the importance of scholarship and a firm knowledge base, and, through the assessment system, reward it and provide real differentiation in the performance of students. The present assessment arrangements are strangling scholarship and reducing students and teachers to identifying key words that collect marks rather than sustained argument built from knowledge and a love of the subject.
7. So, here are my views on what now needs to be done.
- Review the benefits and downsides of modularisation. Worse still, modularisation built upon a view that every subject is divisible into the same number of units.
  - Reconsider the resit arrangements. I would like to see fewer.
  - Review or reintroduce a subject core of knowledge into all A levels with degree provision, the core being defined and agreed by HE.
  - Have assessment that rewards scholarship, has a majority of synoptic questions requiring extended answers, and, dependent upon the decision about modularisation, have more terminal examining.
  - L4 provision in schools with common HE acceptance.

8. One final point in relation to the three 'academic' Diplomas: you, HE, must ensure that subject knowledge is not sacrificed for 'application'. If this happens we could end up with qualifications that do not give easy transition to degree study. Further, within the DDPs your representatives must ensure that the necessary supporting study is included and is compulsory, e.g. Maths within the Science Diploma.
9. Thank you for your patience. Obviously, time dictates that I could not go into the detail some of you might want. However, questions now may help to satisfy some of you.