

Pocket Watch: Bacc to Tomlinson?

2012/54

17 October 2012

“We want to bring back a passion for learning and enable all learners to achieve as highly as possible.”
Tomlinson Report

Introduction

Some anniversaries seem to come round quicker than others. In four months time it will be ten years since Mike Tomlinson was invited by Charles Clarke, the then Education Secretary, to head up a Working Group on 14-19 reform. Over the space of 18 months, the Group painstakingly put together a comprehensive package of reform which ironically would have come to full fruition next year. The story of what happened to the Tomlinson reforms has been well told over the years but as subsequent parties have continued to grapple with similar issues so the proposals have gained almost an iconic status. Intriguingly as the battle for 14-19 reform once again comes to the fore, many people are reaching for that Report with its cover of four smiley faces that seemed to herald a world of new opportunities

Why has the Tomlinson Report retained its revered status?

Nostalgia apart, probably three reasons. First because it seemed to offer what nowadays would be called a progressive solution to a wide range of intractable problems, in effect retaining the best of existing qualifications but consolidating them into a broader framework of achievement. Second because it involved complete not piecemeal reform, extensive yes but built gradually thus avoiding the corrosive effect of constant upheaval. Third because it carefully cultivated support, got everyone on board in advance

So what went wrong?

Again three reasons stand out. The most well-known was Tony Blair's publically stated commitment to retain the A level as a separate qualification, at a stroke undermining the deck of cards. Second and third, its virtues also became its ills. The sheer complexity of the qualification design structure, up to 20 lines of learning at 4 levels, became self defeating while the infrastructure changes needed assumed a level of co-operation across regions, providers, agencies and so on that proved difficult to deliver

How do things stand now?

Now, as it appears that an ABacc may be added to the EBacc Certificate proposals let alone perhaps a Tech Bacc, thoughts are being cast back to Tomlinson and the benefits or otherwise of qualification frameworks. Some of the Tomlinson elements would not travel well into the current political climate, teacher assessment and modular structures being obvious examples. Others such as the emphasis on core learning, a project and end user endorsement would. At present ABacc and Tech Bacc proposals appear separate and confined, one to academic learning the other to technical learning. It shows there's still a long way to go

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2003/4 Tomlinson proposals

- **A new framework.** All 14 -19 programmes to comprise core eg functional skills, project, personal development, and main learning
- **A new qual framework.** Existing quals (both academic and vocational) to be replaced by a framework of Diplomas at 4 levels covering different lines of learning and developed through partnership groupings
- **Assessment and grading.** Mix of internal and external assessment but greater use of quality assured teacher assessment for initial levels. Pass, merit, distinction grading system
- **Infrastructure.** Programmes delivered through local 14-19 partnerships, providers approved through a gateway process. Range of training and quality assurance measures

2012/13 Bacc proposals

- **Gove model.** Suite of EBacc subjects at age 16, linear, ext assessment. ABacc at age 18 including linear A levels + contrasting subject, dissertation, voluntary work
- **Labour's Tech Bacc.** 14-19, achievement at age 18 based on accredited L3 voc qual, Eng/ma, quality work experience
- **Others.** IBacc, Welsh Bacc, Birmingham Bacc