

Policy watch

The Sykes Inquiry sets out its thoughts on restoring 'confidence' to A level and GCSE



If you want to know where Conservative education policy on schools is coming from a good place to start is the Sykes Inquiry which published its report last week.

Commissioned by the Conservatives in the wake of the national testing debacle of 2008, the Inquiry has spent much of the last 18 months looking into the qualification and assessment system for schools in England. The focus has been on academic qualifications, typically those taken by 16 and 18 year olds and their view is that there has been a loss of confidence in the whole thing. *"Confidence in the qualifications and assessment system has been diminishing for many years"* they conclude. It was a verdict greeted with obvious interest by Michael Gove *"I agree with many of the Review team's arguments,"* he declared, *"their report will help in the battle to restore confidence in our curriculum and testing system."* Restoring confidence is thus very much the theme of this report.

The report's recommendations, 21 in all, are not binding and many would feel come from a particular academic standpoint but it should not be assumed that by being tagged academic they play purely to a narrow elite. After all, proposals for *'simplifying the regulatory infrastructure,' 'eliminating the endless tinkering in the curriculum by government'* and *'redressing the balance between education and assessment'* would be widely supported.

That said the Inquiry's remit and focus was clearly on the academic side of things which was why most of its energies and 8 out its 21 recommendations concentrated on A level, a qualification ritually mauled in the media each summer but still the qualification to aspire to with 76% of students using it to get into university.

As the Inquiry saw it, many of the problems with A levels stem from the fact that it has been constantly interfered with over the years, *"we believe that most of the major problems with A levels stem from an increasing politicisation of assessments,"* and that as a result the qualification has lost clarity and purpose. The arguments about A level have been well documented and are further reinforced here: mission creep, *"they are trying to serve too many purposes;"* modularisation, contributing to a loss of depth and increasing *"compartmentalisation of knowledge;"* and *"an imperfect predictor of future performance"* let alone poor differentiator between high ability candidates, all reinforced by nagging questions about worth, value and equivalencies.

In essence, the Inquiry boil things down on A levels to three issues: a loss of core purpose as an HE entry qualification; the fact that end users particularly universities have been distanced from determining the shape and content of a qualification in which they have significant interest; and uncertainty about the value and worth of the qualification. Their recommendations reflect each of these.

On HE entry, they recommend the development of a standard University Admissions Test, something which has been under discussion for some time certainly since the Schwartz Report of six years ago. The model put forward by many is the American

SAT which has been the subject of lengthy evaluation by NFER. The model is not without its critics but the Inquiry believe that a standardised system, along with clearer guidance from universities would ensure greater equity, transparency and rigour in university admissions. On the issue of universities becoming distanced from the make-up of the A level, the Inquiry call for users, notably universities, to determine the content and structure of the A level rather than the government, *“the structure, as well as the nature and content of exams, should be decided, subject by subject through consultation with subject experts in universities and with other qualification users.”* This is the traditional model of qualification development although current models such as the DDP (Diploma Development Partnership) system exist. On the third of their core issues, that of the use of equivalencies for league tables, the Inquiry believe that the current points system should be got rid of and schools encouraged to develop their own profiles of qualifications achieved and, significantly, student destinations gained. Some of this may take time but it is becoming increasingly clear that the system of performance measurement through league table points is coming to an end and a new era of much more intelligent accountability using wider institutional data is arriving.

Next the GCSE, equally a subject for ritual criticism each summer and according to the Inquiry suffering from many of the same problems about lack of purpose, constant interference and uncertainties about value and worth. The GCSE is still viewed as a signature qualification for those reaching the end of a formal phase of education. But with more and more young people staying on, rules changing about staying on and an all through 14-19 phase taking shape, is such a qualification necessary? After all, not many countries have such an extensive system of external testing at this stage and much of the impetus for this testing seems to be for the benefits of performance measurement rather than for the benefits of the learners, *“like collecting Boy Scout badges”* as one independent headmaster notoriously put it.

The Inquiry here call for three things. First, for a greatly slimmed down core: namely just English and maths. That is not to say other subjects should not be taught, the Inquiry for instance greatly support the concept of a balanced curriculum, but that English and maths should be the only ones externally assessed and used for holding schools to account. Second, that as with A levels, the nature and content of all other GCSEs should be determined by users rather than government. And third, that the current league table system, including the focus on the traditional 5 A*-C, *“should no longer be the main measure for school accountability.”* As indicated above, significantly more sophisticated forms of data are now available which may render formulaic performance tables redundant.

Before leaving qualifications, it's perhaps worth noting that while vocational qualifications did not fall under their remit, the Inquiry felt that many of the principles identified for enhancing A level and GCSE, such as clearer purpose, greater deregulation and being determined by the needs of users rather than government, would equally apply to them. Overall, the Inquiry had less faith in government sponsored solutions either at 14-19 or post-19 and greater faith in more established vocational qualifications.

The Inquiry's recommendations would have significant impact in two other areas. Firstly in drawing back the role of the regulator to that of assuring the market and offer at a strategic level and secondly in stabilising the curriculum with revisions only every 5-10 years but resisting the temptation might be the problem.

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.