

2015/17

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Pocket Watch – The 14-19 Conundrum

Introduction

14-19 education has always been fraught. It's the time when youngsters go through the most changes, when we cram in the most exams and when youthful hopes and fears battle it out in equal measure. Getting the curriculum and support systems right at such a critical stage in a young person's development remains one of the big challenges for the education system and many have the scars to prove it. Recent weeks have seen fresh momentum in this area with the government setting out plans for a core curriculum built around the EBacc, the CBI and the Opposition calling for a review if not overhaul of the whole 14-19 package and a group of enterprising teachers opting to seize the initiative and devise their own National Bacc. It's eleven years since the legendary Tomlinson review attempted to do much the same for 14-19 provision and much has changed on the surface but essentially four challenges remain

Four big challenges

1. 14 or 16, at what age should students choose different curriculum and potentially future career paths? Many countries start the process at age 14 although in fairness they have systems that allow for transfer between pathways as students progress. This is not a new debate here, the Skills Minister referred to it as *'an age-old debate that will not be settled in this parliamentary term but one we should have again,'* when he raised it in a recent debate in Parliament. Supporters point to the fact that starting at 14 could overcome some of the drifting that can happen at KS3, that youngsters are more savvy now about career choices and that we already have some institutions that operate this way, UTCs being the obvious example. Opponents, and this seems to include the DfE at present (*"a rigorous curriculum until age 16 is the best way to ensure that every child succeeds,"*) argue that 14 is too young to make what could be difficult choices and that what's more important at this stage is securing a basic level of skills that provide the platform for more specialised learning
2. A common core. The government's latest pronouncements about provision of the EBacc package has once again raised questions about a) the need for a common core and b) what should be in it. As Professor Chris Husbands has indicated, curriculum entitlements always tend to raise hackles as to what's in and what's out and the EBacc model is no different; what's different this time is the emphasis on a more 'academic' core which could exclude some students and could divert attention from some wider learning. For Professor Sandra McNally: *"the requirements of the EBacc seem like a minimum for a developed country"* as long as they incorporate those wider employability skills. It comes down in other words to what constitutes a balanced curriculum which is where professional expertise should apply
3. Exams at 16. The perpetuation of an exam 'hurdle' at age 16 at a time when not only participation to age 18 is becoming the norm but fears about schools becoming exam factories are growing is a no-brainer to many. The poor old GCSE has been under assault for some time now and the CBI's John Cridland was very clear in his speech last week that it should go. The problem as the FT pointed out recently is that our education system has been put together haphazardly, the bits don't all join up neatly but do serve particular purposes, in this case a measure of performance in a system that needs a post-16 gateway. On that basis any demise could be regarded as premature
4. Parity of esteem (between academic and vocational routes.) A phrase that has bedevilled reform in this area for some time and is as much structural as cultural. Many would like to see the phrase dropped in favour of a focus on desired outcomes, different routes but similar results, leading to rounded and successful youngsters rather than sheep and goats

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