


VOCATION

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No matter how you sell it, making a division between academic and practical courses of study will always leave students – and society – short-changed, argues Professor Mick Waters...

The days have gone, if they ever existed, when a society could survive by having an elite who were well educated according to a particular set of narrow academic criteria, and others who were simply allowed to become hewers of wood and drawers of water later on.” So said the Secretary of State to the Parliamentary Select Committee in June 2010, a month after his appointment.

Mr Gove was right to order the recalibration of vocational qualifications earlier this year following the very sound Wolf Review, but once again the government has ended up attacking the symptom rather than the disease in the system. The ridicule heaped on certain courses of study after his announcement was terrible and an insult to the efforts of thousands of young people and their teachers. Surely, some solid evidence of experience and assessed competency in practical subjects would be good for youngsters as they come forward to secure a modern apprenticeship? It is not the

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PROF. WOLF

qualification that is the problem.

Instead of making a song and dance [*performance arts*] about vocational qualifications, there could have been better consideration about how the situation the government was trying to address arose. The market-driven school system, built upon accountability through high stakes examination, put enormous pressure on schools to improve their results. This led to a call from schools for more accessible examinations and ‘equivalents’ were developed. Indeed some schools kick-started the process by designing courses and then applying to the regulator for validation. A key criterion was the amount of ‘guided learning hours’ required, and it was here that the smoke and mirrors began. The market-driven awarders would claim a qualification needed the equivalent of four GCSEs’ worth of time when in reality it was all pretty swift. Hence the growth in long thin courses, short fat courses... anything to get the qualifications banked ready for the annual league table.



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Just for once, though, the perverse incentive worked in favour of the youngsters. Many teenage pupils found themselves doing something at school that engaged them, applied knowledge and skills from elsewhere into something practical, and seemed to have some link to the world of work. Some were so proud of their qualification that it spurred them on to do well in other, less mouth-watering courses.

Back to the future

Behind all this, of course, is a bigger agenda. The Secretary of State wants to drive a wedge between academic and vocational learning. It is possible to learn skills and knowledge, *and* engage in practical and scholarly learning; it is possible to learn about contemporary issues affecting our global society *and* to enjoy the facts about the development of the world. It does not have to be one or the other. However, playing with polarity and working on extremes helps to develop the notion of sorting people out. This need to separate the sheep from the goats [*animal husbandry*] is fundamental to the ideology of the government – yet, some ‘top professions’ such as law and medicine, where scholarly rigour and practical skill go hand in hand, see themselves as vocational. Indeed, the term ‘practical’ would be better than ‘vocational’, though the division between subjects is still false. Geography, for instance, is an intensely practical subject, exhilarating in its application and theory.

The diplomas developed following the Tomlinson Review of 2005 sought to bring together the academic and practical aspects

of learning in realistic contexts. Those schools involved in, and in some cases continuing to offer, the early diplomas reported increased pupil engagement, parent interest and employer involvement through relevant and pertinent activity, tailored to the aptitude and capability of the youngster.

The diplomas are pickled now, of course [*food preservation*], and Michael Gove is wedded to the English Baccalaureate: the five key subject areas that will matter in league tables at GCSE. He believes that by kicking out the clutter of equivalent qualifications we will be able to see yet more clearly where the ‘good’ schools are. Fisher Family Trust, another question mark in the system, is already sending schools their estimated results for next summer with comparisons to last year’s, and their local and national performance. Because it is in charts and colours, it must be accurate.

The influence of local media is massive and in a very short time, this is likely to drive parent preference toward schools that offer the English Baccalaureate. These will become over-subscribed and so, before long, it might perhaps be suggested that testing aptitude at entry, say around the age of 11, could be sensible.

And so, we will end up with E Bacc schools offering an academic pathway; the ‘Acabacca’ establishments. Then there will be ‘Slackerbacca’ schools for everyone else, where it will not really matter what the children study. In fact we could arrange another league table system for them, using these less powerful qualifications.

Degrees of Separation

The trouble is, all that this emphasis on so-called academic learning does is drive youngsters away from a much-needed emphasis on design, technology, culture, arts, enterprise, and engineering. It wouldn’t be so bad if the EBacc subjects encouraged youngsters to delve into deep study and scholarship, but the spectre of the league tables means that many teachers and their pupils frustrate each other with the need to swallow gobbets of learning to satisfy the next examination rather than explore and exploit the big ideas of a subject. Eventually, pupils coming forward for A level will have a narrower range of experience, and as they feed through to higher education there will be less call for courses in areas like media studies, performing arts, mechanics, health and construction. Recent statements regarding transferring the oversight of ‘A’ levels to Universities are code for the Russell Group having a mutual self interest in perpetuating the ‘gold standard’ of these qualifications, whilst other HEI’s will pick up the crumbs with their alternative offerings; thus ensuring that the two-tier positioning is sustained.

And meanwhile, we will still need people to make pasties [*food preparation and hygiene*], organise queues at petrol stations or airports [*logistics management*], drive tankers [*managing dangerous substances*], sort out charitable donations [*basic accountancy*], and count days in the calendar (though that’s probably seen as ‘academic’). Given there is a drought situation and hosepipe ban in most of our country, perhaps Mr Gove is right in driving youngsters towards the ‘drawing of water’ that he referred to in his 2010 speech to parliament. One thing that is certainly drying up is real thinking about the learning needs of young people.



ABOUT THE EXPERT

PROFESSOR MICK WATERS IS PROBABLY BEST KNOWN AS FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE CURRICULUM AT THE QCA, WHERE HE GAINED A REPUTATION FOR COMMON SENSE AMONGST TEACHERS WHILE CONSULTING ON AND EXPLAINING THE NEW NATIONAL CURRICULUM. HIS LATEST BOOK, THINKING ALLOWED, WILL BE PUBLISHED BY INDEPENDENT THINKING PRESS IN OCT 2012.

