
Not Tomlinson mark 2

Martin Allen looks at Rishi Sunak's ill-fated proposals for abolishing A-levels

At first glance, the proposals in *A World-Class Education System. The Advanced British* (distinctly English!) *Standard* (ABS), presented to Parliament in October appeared to represent a complete turnaround in Tory government plans for post-16 education - from separate academic and vocational 'pathways' to a new baccalaureate-style qualification, which, according to the Secretary of State Gillian Keegan was going to draw upon 'the best of A and T-levels', thus finally establishing parity.

But the Sunak plan, even if it committed to abolishing A-levels, really had little in common with previous attempts at creating a new curriculum for the upper secondary / post-16 age group, which culminated in the Tomlinson Review of 2004 and proposals for a multi-level general diploma. The reformers of the 1990s, continuing to operate with post-war assumptions about the contribution of education to economic growth and social prosperity, recognised a plurality of learning styles and the importance of generic and transferable skills. They supported a modular curriculum, with different forms of assessment including coursework and extended projects.

This model of education, and the corresponding assumptions about education's purpose and possibilities, was already crumbling. It essentially came to an end with Michael Gove's 2010 White Paper, where a 'grammar school' curriculum was reimposed, with distinct subject boundaries and end-of-course exams designed to test acquisition of the factual 'core' knowledge 'which everyone should have'.

The Gove offensive represented a return to a top-down 'jug and mug' system of learning, where teachers deliver lessons to students who (invariably sitting in rows of desks) are expected to memorise and recall. The Sunak proposals continued in this tradition, ridiculing the progressive ideas that came before, and citing the success of Conservative education policies from Free Schools and Academies to phonics, in raising educational performance levels (!).

Though it claimed to draw on international examples, the ABS essentially wanted to export a version of the five-subject Ebacc (which Tory educationalists consider offers a 'broad and balanced' curriculum and which all KS4 students are expected to achieve, but only a minority do) into post-16. Like the Ebacc, individual subjects would still be graded and universities would no doubt be more concerned about these than student performance in the full ABS.

Akin to old-fashioned university degrees, students would select Major (generally three) and Minor subjects, but would also be expected to continue with maths and English until 18. Students aiming for Russell Group universities would be encouraged to major in four subjects - but many of these students do four A-levels now.

Those wanting a more vocational/occupational direction would be able to reduce the number of subjects to enable work placements. So, though As and Ts would be officially abolished, divisions between academic and technical/vocational learning would still be apparent. There would in addition be an 'on-the-job route' for those under 19s doing apprenticeships - even if, as is currently the case, few would be able to secure these.

Of course, with the Tories heading for a heavy election defeat, these proposals were always unlikely to be ever implemented and were quickly considered unworkable by both UCU and NEU, not least because of the extra resources that would be required and the crisis in staff recruitment - the ABS proposals included significant increases in the number of teaching hours. Although they would probably have not needed an Act of Parliament to be implemented, the plans didn't feature in the King's Speech.

2024 will mark twenty years since Tomlinson's proposals, but there'll also be a general election campaign where there's unlikely to be any mention of reforming the post-16 and upper secondary curriculum. Labour has said little about A-level reform since Blair

ditched Tomlinson. Even though concerns were raised about funding, the two Corbyn 2017 and 2019 manifestos supported the Tories' T-levels and, by implication, the Gove-style A-levels, while if the UCU and NEU have expressed concerns about the ill-fated Ts, they have not campaigned for - or set out - clear alternatives.

We should see Tomlinson as a highwater mark. But if it was a chance lost, it is unlikely to be repeated. Campaigns for post-16 curriculum reform must go on, but will need to have different objectives, moving beyond simply combining A-level and T-level units in the way that Sunak and Keegan's ill-fated blue-print anticipated.

If, as argued, Gove's A-levels represented a step back in time, many of the assumptions behind vocational education no longer stand up to scrutiny. Over the years since their inception, more and more students have used vocational qualifications to enter an expanded higher education sector, rather than as an avenue into employment. Meanwhile A-level enrolments continue to rise.

Never achieving anywhere near the standing enjoyed by academic qualifications, vocational

education has become increasingly like them, weighed down by formal examinations and textbook learning. But also, many of the 'middle-jobs', with which it was considered to correspond by developing a series of 'competencies' or 'generic skills', have either disappeared as a result of continued technological advance/automation, or been filled by what policy-makers consider to be an 'oversupply' of graduates.

Rather than just being merged, both the 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks need serious reforming - the goal should be a 'good general education for everybody'. But the years since Tomlinson have also exposed the limitations of providing only an 'educational' response to the issues facing those completing compulsory schooling, as social mobility has gone into reverse and secure employment cannot be guaranteed. A broader settlement for young people is needed.

We print here an extract from the February 2004 Interim Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform that was chaired by the HMI Mike Tomlinson. The final report was presented in October 2004, and on the 18th of that month the then prime minister, Tony Blair, told a CBI meeting in Birmingham that 'GCSEs and A-levels will stay, so will externally marked exams', thereby destroying the whole Tomlinson initiative. We hope to include in PSE later this year fuller coverage of the issues involved in this debacle and its consequences for post-compulsory education to this day. The Tomlinson group recommended that 14-19 year olds should follow a curricular model comprising:

' - a core of generic skills, knowledge and experience common to all programmes and diplomas at a given level; and

- main learning comprising the specific subjects or areas of learning chosen by learners to suit their personal aptitudes, preferences and ambitions.

The common requirements of the core would include achievement in mathematical skills, communication and ICT with the aim of ensuring that all young people progress over time towards at least level 2 in these areas. All learners should also undertake an extended project or personal challenge appropriate to the level of their overall programme and designed to help them acquire and demonstrate the independent working, problem solving, research, planning, analytical and presentational skills valued by employers and HE. A range of common knowledge, skills and attributes, such as self-awareness, self-

management, interpersonal skills and international awareness, should be integrated into delivery of the programme as a whole. And all learners should participate in some wider activities based on personal interests, contribution to the community and experience of employment to foster their personal development. In addition, all young people should have access to personal planning, review and guidance to underpin their programmes, consolidate their learning and inform their choices.

Main learning would:

- ensure achievement and progression within specific subjects and areas of learning;
- support any area of specialisation by providing any required or optional complementary learning;
- enable young people to select subjects or programmes to pursue their own interests and/or to provide subject breadth and contrast with any specialised areas of study.'