

# A radical vision for a 14-19 curriculum

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A bigger, broader and more meaningful curriculum for the post-14 cohort is a longstanding aim of progressive educationalists. It is attainable, and, although unlikely in the present political climate, those on the left need to keep faith with this braver curriculum 14-19 in order for a future Labour government to commit to radical curriculum reform and introduce a National Education Service (NES) championed for so long by its advisers, teachers and researchers. This means implementing, in the 14 to 19 phase, a unified developmental curriculum, where the academic and vocational are equally valued. At its heart, it should be developing in our young people the skills and knowledge necessary to engage fully with the modern world in a critical and reflective way. Communication in all its facets,

problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and reflection must feature. It must also be flexible and personalised, allowing young people to choose courses which suit their aspirations and interests. Finally, the assessment model should recognise the achievements of all learners, including those with special educational needs (SENs), rather than segregate them through crude pass/fail measures. We have been close to achieving the above on occasion, notably with the Tomlinson reforms proposed in 2004 and the short-lived Curriculum 2000 agenda.

A progressive 14 to 19 curriculum must:

- develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to enable young people to be responsible citizens and independent thinkers. Students should be
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prepared for employment, competent to make choices and learn throughout their lives;

- prepare 19 year olds to progress to employment or continue in education, with useful social and learning skills and qualifications that are valuable and understood by both employers and education institutions;
- be sufficiently engaging to retain young people at risk of leaving education, employment and training.

The Tories initiated the Sainsbury Review, which they have accepted in full. Currently, Labour has accepted it too. The Sainsbury Review was flawed from the beginning as its terms of reference only included 'technical education and qualifications' as opposed to 'academic' GCSEs and A-levels, which would continue their role in selecting the elite to run the establishment untouched. Further, it only considered post-16 study, and was therefore prevented, unlike Tomlinson, from recommending courses and programmes pre-16 to provide progression onto more vocational routes post-16. It is now the case that pupils at Key Stage 4 have to meet, to say the least, challenging entrance criteria based on success in academic GCSEs to be able to study at A-level. If they do not meet them, they are 'guided' into vocational courses like BTECs or into apprenticeships. Vocational courses are often not, therefore, a positive choice for students, but rather a fallback reluctantly undertaken because they have 'failed' in their academic courses. The Government's insistence on ever higher proportions of pupils taking the EBacc combination of subjects at GCSE will further reinforce the perception that vocational courses are only for those not bright enough to succeed academically.

The new Tory T-levels, proposed for post-16 study and arising from the Sainsbury Review, maintain and reinforce the existing academic/vocational divide.

While unsurprisingly welcomed by the Association of Colleges (AOC), which may well see benefit in the assumption that FE colleges will deliver the new T-level qualifications, there have been wider criticisms, including of the implication that certain routes are associated with particular qualifications, the requirement for students to choose routes at 16, and the suggestion that students who want to transfer onto 'academic' routes at 16 will have to spend time 'transitioning' from one pathway to another. Currently students can choose a combination of advanced vocational (often BTECs) and academic qualifications. In 2017 the number of university students with BTECs had doubled since 2008 to

more than 100,000. At the Government's insistence, rigorous external examinations now form part of the qualification, so this puts paid to the argument that BTECs are chosen because they are an easy option. The rushed introduction of T-levels and the recent refusal to continue funding BTECs looks suspiciously like cutting off a route to university favoured by students coming from families without university experience. It also looks like a deliberate attempt to reduce student numbers, university places, and even the number of universities.

T-levels have been criticised as being ill-thought-out qualifications, for which, also, schools, colleges, students and employers are ill-prepared. The simplistic claims made in the Sainsbury Review that T-levels will lead to certain jobs have also been debunked as unrealistic and far-removed from the real world in which vocational qualifications are already studied by many students, and where so-called academic routes often include vocational and technical education and vice versa.

T-levels in some subjects are being piloted, but concerns continue to be raised, eg the requirement to undertake lengthy, local industrial placements (a particular challenge in rural areas) and the refusal of the Department for Education (DfE) to fund students' transport costs. The first T-levels are due to be launched in 2020. Other than criticising the timetable for implementation, it appears that Labour is effectively supporting the Conservatives' 'two-pathway' agenda without considering the options, or whether and how this agenda aligns with a 'cradle to grave' NES, or the Party's ambitions to deliver a green economy. To ignore this issue would be to once again mean that Labour would miss the opportunity of a lifetime.

Despite its age, the Tomlinson agenda would have:

- revolutionised assessment, reducing the number of exams taken;
- allowed for students to take assessments when they were ready rather than at a particular age;
- allowed for students to take either specialised vocational or academic courses, as well as a mix between the two, from age 14, effectively abolishing the vocational/academic divide once and for all;
- included all learners;
- provided a qualification framework accessible throughout life.

It remains the basis or a model for any radical reform of the 14 to 19 phase of education.