

Learning comes first: shifting the focus from examining to the curriculum.

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning and welcome. I am delighted you could join us for this very topical discussion about the relationship between examinations and the curriculum. In introducing it, I want to focus on the way in which exams have come to define the curriculum, and suggest that we need to reverse this - that it should be the other way around.

Shortly before Christmas, the Daily Telegraph ran a series of stories about exam boards, and their Inset training. An undercover reporter had attended teacher training days where it appeared attendees had been given advance warning of what questions were likely to come up, and where a senior examiner and subject head for one of the boards had boasted about how easy their papers were. There was naturally a public outcry, and the House of Commons Education Select Committee, already conducting an inquiry into exam boards, held a special hearing to try to shed further light on the matter.

Why was this story so disturbing? For all the criticism of the exam system, it is still generally accepted as fair, as providing a level playing field on which students can demonstrate their capabilities and compete. This is important, because increasingly we live in a credentialist society where all exams are high stakes – success or failure can decisively affect a young person's life chances. Any suggestions of shortcomings in exam security or of a lack of integrity among those responsible for administering them are therefore rightly matters of grave public concern.

However, the story raised another issue that received less public attention, namely the implicit assumption that exams have become extremely predictable. Gone are the days when the conscientious student might go into the exam room, after months of diligent preparation and possibly years of excellent teaching, and simply find that the questions they had prepared for didn't feature. Dread of this happening was a regular feature of my and many other people's education, spurring one either to ever greater efforts to cover more of the curriculum, or a resigned fatalism that one would be exposed, when the great day came, to the hazards of luck. Now, however, we quite regularly receive letters from students (and sometimes teachers) complaining that the questions they prepared for have not come up, as if that were not a legitimate thing to happen in an exam. Behind the complaints lies a depressingly instrumental view that it is not worth learning anything unless you are to be examined on it, and that an exam is not fair if it strays beyond the strict parameters of what has been covered in textbooks and lessons. In the terms of the issue we are considering today, it assumes that exams and the curriculum are co-terminous rather than recognizing that exam questions can only sample the key concepts and body of knowledge associated with a subject, and do not constitute its totality. It is the implications of this I now wish to discuss.

Written public exams are a relatively recent phenomenon, at least in the West, and people have been educated, and educated well, for many hundreds of years without taking them. In the nineteenth century, however, as more of the population gained access to education, there was increasing demand for them, as they were seen as a method of promoting uniform standards and codifying the curriculum. They then swept the board in the twentieth century, being a feature, and to some extent organizing principle, of nearly all public education systems, completing the transition that led Foucault to characterize school as "a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination". What will happen in the twenty first century?

In England, of course, we are in the middle of a review of the National Curriculum. My colleague Tim Oates, who is leading the expert panel responsible for this, will no doubt be familiar with the reform cycle described by the American educationist and philosopher John Dewey at the beginning of the last century (in 1901) as follows: "Someone feels that the school system...is falling behind the times. There are rumours of great progress in education ...elsewhere. Something new and important has been introduced [and] education is being revolutionized by it...the matter is taken up...the School Board ordains that the particular new [subject] shall be taught.... [and] the next year, or possibly the next month, there comes an outcry that children do not write or spell or figure as they used to." Early findings from the Review are now out for consultation but its themes would be familiar to Dewey: what is the

right balance between skills and knowledge? Which subjects should be compulsory? What should be determined locally and what centrally?

A curriculum's legitimacy and relevance are firmly grounded in local conditions, but we live in an age where the curriculum needs also to look to best international practice and to cultivate an awareness in students of the impact of globalization. The curriculum can also become, in the words of the American education historian Herbert Kliebard, an "arena where ideological armies clash over the status of deeply held convictions", not always the most helpful basis on which to conduct a constructive discussion and arbitrate between the many and competing demands for school time.

The social context for this discussion is that nearly 50% of young people leaving school now go to university, so that there are more people getting degrees than would have taken A levels a generation ago. In this we mirror (indeed have slightly lagged behind) international trends. This increase has been accompanied by several major changes to both the National Curriculum and the structure of A levels and GCSEs, in particular the introduction of AS levels and the widespread adoption of modularization (though we are now moving away from this). These changes reflect the age of change in which we live. The printed word is no longer the principal method of knowledge transmission, subject domains have been transformed by new discoveries, especially in the sciences, and multi-disciplinary approaches in HE have become the norm rather than the exception. In addition, the economy has changed dramatically, demanding different and more flexible skills of school leavers and the graduate work force.

This leads to a paradox. Most of us here are educational practitioners, and we will therefore be familiar with the fact that successful changes in education generally take a long time to get established. That is sustainable when there are low levels of external change. However, this has not been the case over the last twenty-five years, and this has created scope for politicians to become involved, as only they are able to deploy the resources to accelerate change, and mobilize disparate interested parties, and as they can provide a focus for accountability. How great then the change from as recently as 1976, when Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's policy director Bernard Donoghue recalled, following Callaghan's Ruskin speech, that the Department of Education was "deeply shocked that a prime minister should have the impertinence to trespass into its own secret garden".

What has this meant in practice, in particular in relation to the balance between examining and the curriculum, which we are discussing today?

It seems to me that the major consequence has been an excessive focus on exams and examining, as exam results are so easily used as instruments to measure change, and that this has been at the expense of coherence and curriculum. We should think of education as an ecosystem, and of course this ecosystem will be damaged if these major elements fall out of balance.

That lack of balance has been further aggravated, I would suggest, by a preoccupation with trying to achieve a precision in measurement, and at the same time make exams more accessible, that can sometimes work to the detriment of what is being measured. The fearsome apparatus of very detailed mark schemes and qualification and subject criteria that are a feature of public exams help ensure fairness and provide a robust basis for calibrating levels of demand and ensuring comparability. However, they also give rise to a mechanistic approach to learning of the sort I mentioned earlier when describing letters of complaint from those who thought it unfair if their exams included the unexpected.

How do we deal with this, and shift the focus back from exams to the curriculum?

I think the most important thing we can do, in particular in relation to A levels, is re-connect exam boards and HE. OCR, our UK exam board, is currently running nine subject consultative committees with representatives of HE and the learned and professional societies, and this was a model we also used when we developed the Cambridge Pre-U. I would also like to see Universities and learned societies involved in monitoring standards. The simplest way to achieve this might be for the Regulator Ofqual to convene major subject

committees each autumn which would review the previous summer's exam session, and comment on whether the exams had been too easy or difficult, on whether one board's paper was better than another's and whether the content levels were right. As I said above, it takes a while for educational change to establish itself, and such a system would need a few years to build up a stable base of praxis. If it were given the chance to do so, however, it would be a better way of maintaining standards than the current set of arrangements, and would also offer a more effective method for grounding exams in the curriculum.

I will finish by quoting Claude Elliott, headmaster of Eton College during the Second World War. Greeting new boys in 1942, he described a bleakly reductionist view of the curriculum: "You are here to be kept off the streets during your difficult years. So you will be made to work every hour God gives you. If you are dim, you will be helped over the hurdles. If you are clever, your potential will be assessed and you will be punished if you don't fulfill it....I wish you good luck. You are going to need it." For all that there are improvements to make, we have come a long way from that!

Simon Lebus
29 January 2012