

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY.

What do you think makes a good education?

I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about what makes a good education. In doing so I want to avoid an instrumental discussion of league tables and accountability measures, since these often have the effect of destroying that excellence they are designed to promote, and start instead by stating in general terms what I expect a good education to achieve. In my view receipt of a good education should mean that young people leaving school will:

- I. have acquired the social and intellectual competences necessary to navigate 21st century life, including literacy, numeracy, computer skills and some level of scientific literacy
- II. be equipped to engage with their community and society as active citizens
- III. have sufficiently broad and rich a cultural grounding that they can enjoy a rewarding inner life and
- IV. find themselves equipped for the next step in life, be that employment or HE.

Are we succeeding in this? Clearly not, not anyway at a universal level, to judge from the dissatisfaction expressed by employers, representatives of HE, and politicians. I therefore want to consider how the exam system might help us improve things.

In doing so I must first of all acknowledge that exams and education are not co-terminous. It is perfectly possible to be excellently educated without having taken an exam in your life, as was generally the case until the widespread introduction of public exams in the middle of the 19th century. However, low levels of public trust mean we now live in a credentialist society and young people need well-recognised qualifications if they are to succeed in today's global economy. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that their qualifications reflect meaningful achievements, and that they provide a solid platform that they can build on in the next stage of their lives (something - I would add in parenthesis - that is made more difficult inasmuch as one function of exams is the rank ordering and the making of judgements about peoples' ability, and we live in a culture to which both of those things are antipathetic).

Is this therefore being achieved at present? In responding negatively, critics of the exam system identify several problems.

The first of these is the suggestion that there are too many exams and not enough education, that schools, in short, have become exam factories. This is not borne out by the reality. Although the number of vocational qualifications taken in schools has increased since 2003 from 22000 to 540000, reflecting a recognition that students need both practical and academic skills, the average number of GCSEs and A levels taken per candidate has actually fallen from 3.2 A levels to 3, and from 8.5 GCSEs to 8.1.

This being said, the taking of exams is nevertheless now a much more intrusive feature of a young person's schooling. Modularisation has meant that that the sitting of A levels and GCSEs is spread over a longer period of time, while demand for HE places has led some candidates to seek to differentiate themselves by taking ever larger numbers of exams; also, the laudable desire to offer candidates a second

chance has created an inbuilt mechanism for gaming the system through retakes. The answer to this is not to get rid of modularisation, but instead to ensure that schools and students are able to choose different pathways, something we have sought to achieve at Cambridge Assessment by offering linear alternatives to modular exams in the form of IGCSEs and the Cambridge Pre-U. In doing so, we recognise the reality that different approaches suit different teachers and learners, and that trying to force everybody through the same doorway, done mainly in the name of equity by making it easier to achieve comparability, leads in practice to an unfair failure to recognise the diversity of different learning and teaching styles.

This idea of putting everybody through a single doorway has also, in my opinion, been responsible for a second major problem with the education and exam system, namely that preoccupation with achieving a 'parity of esteem' that, in focusing on exams rather than education, has so handicapped the development of satisfactory vocational routes. The evolution of Diplomas, which cost tens of millions of pounds and which has so far yielded only 743 applications to HE, is a classic case in point. The qualification was over-engineered, is complicated and expensive to administer, and was developed on the back of a series of bureaucratically and politically mediated interactions between employer organisations, the qualifications regulator and awarding bodies that was always going to have an overly complex outcome. The lesson is that changes to the qualification system cannot improve things unless they are firmly grounded in what the education system can deliver on the ground rather than wishful thinking. Any improvement in vocational provision is going to need to reflect this.

The third, and final, obstacle to the universal delivery of good education on which I want to concentrate has been the gradual stepping back of HE from what goes on in secondary schools, and it is good to know that the Coalition plans to address this. We have the ludicrous situation that over the last twenty years the number of applicants to HE has doubled, while the number of HE staff available to process their applications has halved. As a result, HE has come to rely ever more on public exam results, just at a time where budgetary pressures, the demands of an RAE driven research agenda and changes in the Regulatory environment have led it to reduce its involvement in the exam system. In parallel, exam boards have been disenfranchised as control of the curriculum and assessment design has passed either directly to the state or to various intermediate regulatory agencies. What is so striking about the success of systems like the IB is that they have managed to maintain standards by successfully creating 'communities of interest', that embrace schools and HE as users of the qualification, and the exam board itself. This creation of 'communities of interest' is a model we should now seek to replicate in the English public exam system.

I said earlier that exams are not co-terminous with education. Similarly dealing with these issues, namely the provision of diverse qualification types, supporting vocational education through the education rather than the exam infrastructure, and maintaining the standard of academic qualifications through the creation of 'communities of interest' in which schools, HE and exam boards are all represented, will not on its own ensure a transformation of our education system. They are all, however, necessary elements of that transformation we now need to achieve if we are to succeed in our ambition of making the benefits of a good education much more widely available. Thank you.

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