
Bacc to the Future: why we urgently need a more coherent and exciting framework for learning

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ABSTRACT Our current curriculum and qualifications framework is a ‘fragmented mess’ according to many of those who teach in, and lead, our schools. How can we change it with minimal disruption, particularly after four years of often destructive meddling from above? A number of individuals and groups at school level have been working to develop a ‘baccalaureate’ style approach to learning and accreditation which offers a genuinely comprehensive framework for a modern comprehensive system. To implement it would involve minimal disruption and public expenditure, merely large doses of pedagogic and political imagination and will. Can our politicians meet the challenge?

One of the problems that arises when determining ‘urgent educational priorities’ for the next government is that this *last* government has imposed such constant and aggressive change upon schools and teachers. The Gove years, with their very specific blend of evangelical reform and rancour, have left a profession depleted and demoralised. When the new Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, appointed in the summer of 2014, announced an official consultation on workload over twenty thousand teachers responded within a few days.

For this reason, perhaps, some education professionals, clearly unhappy at the direction of Coalition policy, have been thinking through proposals for substantive reform but involving minimal upheaval. Chief among these is the Head’s Round Table (HRT), a group of school leaders drawn from a range of school types – academies, grammar schools and maintained secondary schools. The HRT, which was established after initial Twitter exchanges, has produced a five-point manifesto for the 2015 election which includes proposals on teacher education, ‘intelligent school accountability’, ‘restoring coherence to a fragmented system’ and tackling underachievement at the source.[1]

But it is the HRT's idea for a 'rigorous inclusive and flexible curriculum and qualifications framework' which I find particularly exciting and which finds echo in qualifications reform proposals from other sources, in particular the third report from the independent Skills Taskforce, the 14-19 review on skills and qualifications, headed by Chris Husbands, Director of the Institute of Education.[2]

The HRT recognises that the current system is in a fragmented mess, with vocational qualifications post 16, in particular, extremely weak. Those with special needs are virtually abandoned within the current system and yet there is still not sufficient stimulation, opportunity and scope for all learners. But rather than create new exams – more potentially disruptive reform – the HRT proposes a new framework that can incorporate existing qualifications in an imaginative and coherent way.

The key suggestion is for a new 'national baccalaureate' that will give equal weight to the academic and vocational but will also contain some core, common components. All students will study maths and English up to the age of 18, as well as undertake a personal project and other non-exam-related forms of learning such as community service. In order to make the right decisions about their upper secondary school choices and how these relate to opportunities in higher education and eventual employment, students will have access to properly funded guidance and careers advice, a much-needed reform (and investment) long urged by those such as Richard Pring, President of the Socialist Educational Association (SEA).

The new 'bacc' framework has nothing to do with Michael Gove's ill-thought-out English Baccalaureate (Ebacc), the hastily introduced, retrospective and punitive performance measure introduced by the Department for Education in late 2010 that is now to be replaced by Progress 8, a broader and more balanced assessment of student performance, from 2016.

Under the HRT scheme, students who wish to take the vocational route can 'put together' a technical baccalaureate; hopefully, following full implementation of the government-commissioned Wolf review of vocational education, which was published in March 2011, this will now include more robust qualifications, while more academic learners will continue to take A Levels and take the university route.[3] On leaving school, a student will be given a transcription of all their scores and achievements which will give both higher education institutions and employers a full picture of the nature and scope of their attainment.

The beauty of the new bacc is that it offers a genuinely comprehensive framework for a comprehensive age. It returns, in robust, realistic form, to an early aim of the comprehensive movement: to bridge the harmful and self-limiting class-based division of the grammar/secondary modern divide and introduce a 'common curriculum for all students'. Certainly, up to age 16, most students will follow a broadly similar pathway, but with more flexibility and variety built in to this midway period of their schooling, as currently exists in nations with the most successful school systems such as Finland and Canada.

But with the addition of skills and special projects to the ‘knowledge’ component of both the pre- and post-16 period, it moves us away from the ‘grammar school lite’ emphasis of so many recent reforms and makes sure that schools can best serve all students.

The Husbands review, which includes among its members Tom Sherrington, a lead figure in the HRT, makes many similar proposals. It, too, suggests a National Bacc based on four learning domains: core learning (qualifications such as A Levels or accredited vocational qualifications), maths and English to age 18, a personal skills development programme and an extended project. A similar idea, entitled the modern baccalaureate, has also emerged in recent years from Archbishop Sentamu Academy in Hull. Here, too, students put together credits for everything from an extended project, community support and ‘meeting a personal challenge’. The ‘mod bac’ allows for greater flexibility, enabling students to mix academic and vocational elements right up to the age of 18. For more practical skills, it checks elements of its programme against CBI employment criteria, including problem solving, team working and application of numeracy and information technology skills.[4]

Currently, all these proposals include an intermediate stage, incorporating General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications. However, it is possible, given that the school-leaving age is soon to move up to 18, that ultimately we will move to lighter touch, less expensive – and less stressful! – forms of assessment at 16.

For the moment, these diverse initiatives offer a more coherent and contemporary framework for learning. They can be utilised by any school in the country, whatever its mix, and balance, of learners. The proposals also foster useful cooperation between schools and colleges in any given area. They work with the mass of qualifications we already have and would not be prohibitively expensive to implement. Politicians, please take note.

Notes

- [1] <http://headteachersroundtable.wordpress.com/2014/05/07/a-great-education-for-all-our-education-manifesto-2015/>
- [2] http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Skills_Taskforce_3rd_report.pdf
- [3] <http://headteachersroundtable.wordpress.com/2014/05/07/a-great-education-for-all-our-education-manifesto-2015/>
- [4] http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Skills_Taskforce_3rd_report.pdf

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