

Chapter 4

Learning to Compete? Challenging Michael Gove's Fallacies on Standards and the Labour Market

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Introduction

Throughout Michael Gove's period as Secretary of State for Education there has been constant reference to the failure of education to respond to the economic challenges of the 21st century. In particular, 'falling standards' in schools have been seen as a major reason behind the UK's declining ability to 'compete' internationally and been used as justification for importing some of the features of more 'successful' systems – particularly those from the Pacific Rim.

Using the upper secondary years as an example, this chapter argues that changes to the examination system are being made for rather different reasons – part of a *Great Reversal* (Allen & Ainley 2013), an attempt to create a new correspondence between education and the declining employment opportunities for young people. The chapter also argues that developing alternatives to Gove's qualification examination reforms is an absolute priority but that action to address declining labour market opportunities is also necessary.

Michael Gove and *Reforming Key Stage Four*

Even though the 2012 GCSE grade crisis enabled him to promote examination reform on the wider political stage, Michael Gove had already set out clear intentions. The 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* outlined proposals for an English Baccalaureate made up of

a ‘range of traditional subjects’ and serving as a new basis for secondary school league tables (4.21). The White Paper also indicated that ‘modules’ would be replaced by linear courses with final exams – with changes to regulations about ‘resits’ (4.48). Meanwhile, Ofqual, the qualifications watchdog, had been given much greater influence, instructed to ensure that exam boards used a ‘comparative outcomes’ formula, reminiscent of the ‘normative referencing’ used in the old GCE O-levels. This effectively capped increases in pass rates from one year to another, thus precipitating the grade crisis that Gove cleverly sought to distance himself from.

Despite being forced to back-track on his proposals for replacing GCSE with English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs), Gove has ensured that the new GCSE requirements, published in June of this year, reflect his general priorities. Tiered papers are also being abolished and a new one to eight grading system being introduced, so as to differentiate higher level performance more clearly. Even if the EBC proposals have been shelved; the E-bacc subjects will feature prominently in the new Key Stage 4 league tables, making up five of the eight subjects through which schools will be ranked.

Though not receiving anywhere near the same attention, A-levels have been reformed in similar ways, with AS levels becoming stand-alone qualifications rather than a compulsory part of A-level taken at the end of the first year. With a clear intention of restoring A-level as a ‘gold standard’ qualification and the main entrance qualification for elite higher education, Gove has directed Russell universities to be directly involved in the determination of syllabus content. While universities like Cambridge and the LSE have published their own B lists of subjects considered less appropriate as entry qualifications, the Russells have now introduced ‘facilitating’ A-levels, effectively the E-bacc subjects from which applicants should study two.

While claiming to be introducing more 'rigour' in assessment, running through Gove's curriculum reforms has also been an emphasis on restoring the 'content' of learning. Signalling his intent while still in opposition, Gove told an RSA conference (30/06/09) that every citizen 'had the right to draw on our stock of intellectual capital', calling for more of an emphasis on 'hard facts'. Thus the White Paper referred to the importance of core knowledge in the traditional subjects 'that pupils should be expected to have to enable them to take their place as educated members of society' (4.9).

Gove himself has been influenced by US English Literature professor ED Hirsch. Hirsch argues that American schools have a 'knowledge deficit' – with many students, he argues, now being denied the things they need to know. Thus, the new GCSEs – some of which will begin in September 2014 – have clear content specifications, outlining very clearly what students should be taught. For example, 'at least one play by Shakespeare, at least one 19th century novel', to quote from the English Literature draft.

Gove has also sought to differentiate academic knowledge from practical, applied and vocational learning, publishing plans to prevent 'GCSE equivalent' vocational qualifications being counted in school league table scores on the grounds that these are much less demanding academically and require less curriculum time (White Paper, 4.51). More specifically, schools will not be able to include success in the current BTEC-style qualifications – reducing the status of these courses still further. To qualify for league table inclusion, vocational qualifications will need to be redesigned to look more like their academic counterparts, both in terms of their size and their assessment criteria. As a result, the number of vocational qualifications will be severely pruned.

Nevertheless, there have been disagreements between Conservatives over the role that vocational education plays at Key Stage 4. While the 2011 Wolf Review argued that students following vocational pathways were being ‘short-changed’ – in that these qualifications were ‘valueless’ in the labour market – Lord (Kenneth) Baker has continued to press ahead with University Technology Colleges (UTCs), providing specialist technical and vocational training from age 14 and enjoying support from Mike Tomlinson and Andrew Adonis.

Raising standards: restoring economic competitiveness and restarting social mobility?

What are the motives for Gove’s reforms? Firstly, they are justified as responses to the ‘dumbing down’ of learning and to the exam ‘grade inflation’ which, he argues, took place under New Labour. Gove has made it clear that the new GCSEs will be more difficult to pass with Graham Stuart, chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, arguing Gove could be paving the way for ‘grade deflation’ (*Independent ‘I’* 16/06/13).

In *Reforming Key Stage Four*, the EBC consultation document, Gove cites an urgent need to restore ‘public confidence’ in an examinations system where ‘60% of those surveyed in a recent YouGov poll believe that GCSEs have got easier, while only 6% think that they have got harder’ (3.4). More specifically:

‘employers, universities and colleges are dissatisfied with school leavers’ literacy and numeracy, with 42% of employers needing to organise additional training for at least some young people joining them from school or college’.
(3.3)

Gove also frames his arguments in the context of what he considers to be the UK’s declining international performance,

looking to the education practices of high performing countries for inspiration. In other words, his concern about 'standards' is justifiable and necessary, he maintains, for the longer term ability of the UK economy to 'compete':

'...the emphasis on effort is particularly marked in the Confucian-heritage countries such as China, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. The assumption here is that deep engagement with subject matter, including through memorisation where appropriate, leads to deeper understanding.' (8.6) and 'Hong Kong... as with South Korea and Singapore also operates with a curriculum model focusing on "fewer things in greater depth".' (White Paper 8.10)

This claim has continued unabated throughout Gove's offensive:

'There is clear evidence that the standards of our examinations have fallen over time and that the expectations they set for our students are now below those of our international competitors... New GCSEs will set expectations that match and exceed those in the highest performing jurisdictions.' (DfE, Reformed GCSE subject content consultation, June 2013).

Launching a new National Curriculum in July that requires five-year olds to calculate fractions and write computer programmes, Gove told ITV's *Daybreak* (08/07/13), 'I want my children, who are in primary school at the moment, to have the sort of curriculum that children in other countries have, which are doing better than our own'. This type of comparative analysis has always been highly selective (see Morris 2012) and compares very different traditions of education, including those requiring pictographic characters as opposed to phonic literacy (!). Even Sir Michael

Barber, architect of many ‘school improvement’ reforms during the last two decades, has warned about the dangers of copying policy on the hoof (*Guardian* 22/8/12). Barber also pointed out that as policy makers in the Asian Tiger economies recognise that their economic systems need to become ‘more innovative’ and their schools ‘more creative’, some of the countries Gove admires are now looking to European education systems for inspiration.

Secondly, such comparisons have always been politically loaded. It is the rote learning and fact regurgitation of the Pacific Rim countries, rather than the relaxed and successful education system of league table free Finland (increasingly omitted from Gove’s examples and a country with relatively low levels of ‘school autonomy’), that have received attention. There are many other political, economic and social reasons for the high growth rates in the Pacific Rim that have little to do with their education programmes; for example, greater state involvement in investment plans, lower levels of wages and lack of labour market regulation and, in some cases, restrictions on trade unions.

Thirdly, as *The Guardian*’s Peter Wilby (08/12/2012) pointed out, the specific OECD international tests on which Gove based his evidence had since been declared invalid with officials reprimanded. For example, less than three months after Gove had published his proposals for exam reform, new ‘global league tables’ published by the multi-national education supplier Pearson and compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, ranked the UK sixth best in the world – although Finland and South Korea remained first and second. Oxford University researchers OUCEA (2013) have also argued that international test data as a whole cannot be taken at face value and are extremely limited ways of measuring a country’s educational standards.

Gove's arguments about the need to return to a more 'knowledge based' curriculum deserve more serious attention. The need to 'bring knowledge back in' has for example, been endorsed by, amongst others, Michael Young (Young 2008) who was associated with the 'social constructionist' curriculum in the 1970s and by no means a supporter of Gove or the Coalition. Gove's mentor Hirsch argues a lack of 'core knowledge' denies disadvantaged children the chance to move on in society (an inversion of Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' argument). Attempting to position himself as a leading advocate of 'social mobility', Gove's 'Blairite' credentials win praise from Labour right-winger Adonis, but also from Labour renegade, now *Telegraph* columnist and Free School promoter, Toby Young:

'Not so long ago, the labour movement put great emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, with Left-wing intellectuals like R.H. Tawny believing all children should be introduced to the best that's been thought and said, regardless of background. How that philosophy came to be embraced by a Conservative, with Labour politicians defending the idea that the children of the poor should study the words of Simon Cowell rather than Shakespeare, is one of the great mysteries of the age'. (*Telegraph* 13/6/13)

Rather than calling for the reintroduction of grammar schools however, Adonis and Young unite behind Gove in his academies drive, Adonis seeing academies having the potential to recreate the ethos, traditions and curriculum of the grammars, but maintaining a 'comprehensive intake', thus ensuring social mobility. This argument that social mobility can be reignited, providing there is the right sort of learning in schools, has been reinforced by Ofsted Chief Inspector of Schools, Michael Wilshaw (*Guardian*, 15/06/13)

and BBC News.co.uk 21/06/13) and used to justify the government's academy programme.

A reactionary not a 'moderniser'

As will be argued below, reintroducing 'a grammar school curriculum for all' (Allen 2012) is not going to kick-start social mobility – just as re-establishing apprenticeships is not going to resurrect the 'technician mobility' of the post-war years (as Universities Minister Willetts argued on Radio 4, 24/06/13). On the contrary, Gove's curriculum project represents a step backwards, being used to narrow and to emphasize particular approaches to learning. For example, phonics and reading tests for young children in primary schools and requirements that children concentrate on memorising tables or particular types of mathematical calculations at the expense of other numeracy skills.

In subjects like history this also involves resurrecting particular conceptions of knowledge and 'nationhood'. For example, Gove considers the school history curriculum should reflect a particular heritage: 'I believe very strongly that education is about the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next... The facts, dates and narrative of our history in fact join us all together.' (Westminster Academy speech quoted by Allen 2012) In his RSA speech, Gove similarly lamented the results of a survey in which many history students entering Russell universities named Nelson, rather than Wellington in charge at Waterloo. Thus, former-Coalition Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, promised that in future history syllabuses would prioritise the values of 'knowledge and scholarship' rather than 'enquiry' and 'interpretation'. Rather than an emphasis on 'how to learn about history', there needs to be an emphasis, he argued, on 'what history to learn' (*Telegraph* 22/10/12).

Far from promoting economic modernisation through education, Gove's 'Kings and Queens' history curriculum, even if, as a result of opposition from historians and teachers, he has been forced to make significant concessions, reflects the 'restorationist' agenda central to the Conservative project of the 1980s (Jones 1989). Wanting to reverse an epoch of pedagogic reform and wanting to restore traditional curriculum hierarchies at the expense of newer subjects, was exemplified in the idea of the Ebacc.

Young people and qualifications, a changing context

Rather than based on any real evidence, Gove's attempts to blame the examination system for falling standards, let alone the UK's declining ability to compete economically, are part of a determined attack on post-war comprehensive ideals. Replacing grammar schools with comprehensives made educational opportunities more equal and, in particular, replacing O-levels with GCSEs and more open forms of assessment, where students know what they have to do to reach a certain level, along with the extension of course work, has also been an important reason why performance levels have increased. Helped by the *Curriculum 2000* proposals, A-level entries and A-level passes have risen to unprecedented levels with one in four candidates now achieving an A grade.

Despite Gove claiming his arguments about falling standards and 'dumbing down' are backed by academic evidence (*Reforming Key Stage 4*, 3.4), it is not clear if research findings can ever be conclusive. Ofqual may consider multi-choice assessment less demanding than old-style essay writing (Allen and Ainley 2013) but they test different abilities under different conditions. The Oxford researchers referred to earlier, argue that evidence about modular assessment being easier is 'mixed' and that an end of course written exam may not be enough as a test of main knowledge and skills.

This is not to deny there have been issues. As a result of league table pressures, teachers have ‘taught to the test’, schools have given undue amounts of attention to some students rather than others and of course there has been a huge growth in commercial revision guides and tutorial services. If we are to reclaim the debate about ‘standards’, we have to understand that this issue is both a complex one, but also one that cannot be separated from wider social and economic changes. For example, in his Enquiry into the grading controversy surrounding the 2002 A-levels Professor Tomlinson concluded:

‘I believe it to be vital that there is greater public understanding of the examination process and that as a consequence there is an end to the annual argument about results. The standard has not been lowered if an increased proportion of students meet it as a consequence of improved teaching and hard work.’

Tomlinson’s comments illustrate the inherently insolvable tensions behind the debate about exam standards. Are standards really falling or is the problem that there are too many people meeting them and that as a result, particular qualifications are now less exclusive?

In post-war years qualifications were predominantly seen as requirements for white-collar employment and many working-class school leavers, especially boys without or with few qualifications, could make a relatively easy transition to industrial manual work, including apprenticeships. Now, with the decline in real employment opportunities, most will consider gaining the good exam grades essential as labour market labour currency to improve their place in the ‘jobs queue’ (Allen and Ainley 2013). In a slack labour market employers also know they can recruit well qualified

(now 'overqualified') young people for jobs for which qualifications were not previously required. Thinking that social mobility can be restarted by returning to a grammar school curriculum without addressing employment opportunities is an illusion.

The fact that one in four jobs now require degrees (UKCES 2012), largely as screening for applicants, says as much about increases in the number of graduates, as it provides conclusive evidence of increases in skill requirements. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2013), a third of graduates who had left university in 2012 and had found employment six months later were working in occupational groups that were not 'professional' and with almost one in ten unemployed.

As a result, it is the increased demand for qualifications by young people, including continuing demand for university places, despite the huge increases in fees, that provides as good an explanation for the so-called 'grade inflation' as changes in the content of learning and its assessment. For more and more young people, the education system is like running up a downwards escalator where you have to run faster simply to stand still.

In our book, *The Great Reversal*, Patrick Ainley and I argue that, rather than being something that promotes and improves individual aspiration and social mobility, Gove's curriculum proposals are part of a wider programme of reversing progressive reform in education. In 'a declining economy' social mobility has gone into reverse and cannot simply be restarted through education reforms. It was the expanding economy of the post-war period and the significant increase in managerial and professional jobs that allowed working-class children to move up the occupational structure, certainly not grammar schools providing access to

particular forms of elite knowledge in the way that Gove, Adonis and Young imply.

New Labour also promoted illusionary ideas about the global economy providing ‘more room at the top’ but the reality is that the occupational structure is rather different to the one predicted by Blair and Brown. Instead, it is argued that it is becoming ‘hour-glass shaped’ (Lansley 2012) with new managerial and professional jobs being created but also a raft of new low-skilled jobs and the ‘hollowing out’ of the middle. Alternatively, the occupational structure can be seen as going ‘pear-shaped’ with, for example, professional work increasingly undertaken by ‘para-professional’ labour (Allen and Ainley 2013) with nowhere near enough well-paid jobs for those who are ‘qualified’ to do them.

Whatever the exact nature of the occupational structure, the extent of the ‘mismatch’ between the educational qualifications that young people hold and the employment opportunities is more than clear. Felstead and Green (2012) showed that in 2012 there were 1.5 million more people with level 4 or above certificates than there were jobs requiring this level of qualification for entry (let alone for their actual performance!). This is more than those requiring no qualifications on entry (UKCES 2012). But this tells us more about the number of graduates in the jobs queue than it does about the increased skill level of jobs. As more jobs become ‘graduatised’ (UKCES reporting an increase of 1.9 million graduate jobs between 2006 and 2012, alongside a corresponding increase in the number of graduates), the boundaries between graduate and non-graduate work become increasingly fuzzy.

As a result, further ‘mismatch’ occurs lower down with Felstead and Green also showing supply exceeded demand at level 3 (A-level or equivalent) by 2.5 million and at level 2 (GCSE or

equivalent) by 2.2 million. As those with lower qualifications are bumped down the queue and the number of people in the labour market with no qualifications at all fell in 2012 to only 1.5 million, 5.9 million jobs require no qualifications. At the bottom end of the occupational structure there thus continues to be a strong correlation between unemployment and a lack of qualifications, but this is because of excess supply of labour as much as it is a decline in jobs. It is also a reason for what Wolf (2011) refers to as young people being 'pushed' back into full-time education to improve their relative advantage, rather than 'pulled' back because they don't have enough skills. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2013), the 'overeducation' of young people is now more serious than a lack of qualifications (referred to as 'undereducation').

With huge increases in the number of degree holders however, the relative advantages of attending university (referred to as 'the graduate premium') not only cannot be guaranteed, but becomes increasingly risky with the danger of financial loss increasing if you 'fail' and fall below the new benchmark 2.1 that was previously only required for the further expense of post-graduate study. As Brynin (2013) recognises, arguments about the continued significance of the graduate premium take no account of issues about 'distribution' – some graduates enjoying a huge premium but others earning little more than non-graduates, sometimes even less. With a third of graduates within 'a pay band from 30% above and 30% below the mean', Brynin suggests that within 15 years about half of these are likely to be earning only an average income but that 'more and more school leavers have to become graduates in order to earn average pay' (290).

Though the graduate recruitment consultancy 'High Flyers' maintains there will be a slight improvement in graduate

employment opportunities for 2013, (BBC News 13/01/13) the agency's prediction is restricted to the top 100 graduate employers. The Higher Education Statistics Agency figures provide a much bleaker picture, showing that 36% of graduates who left university in the last year were working in occupational groups classed as 'non-professional' – 13% in sales and customer services, – and almost one in ten out of work. HESA also reported a 'mean' graduate salary of £21,000 – the same level at which students are currently required to start paying back student loans – but a 'median' salary of £20,000.

A new correspondence for education and the labour market

The aim of the Gove school reforms are part of an attempt to create a new 'correspondence' between education and the economy in a situation of decreasing labour market opportunities. This involves state education returning to its traditional social control functions – explicit from the beginning in the 1870 Education Act. Rather than being a vehicle for social mobility and individual progression, educational opportunities are rationed by making exams harder but also, as with David Willetts' higher education reforms, progression to university is now a more precarious and more expensive activity. Complementing Gove's attempts to recreate a more exclusive academic education in schools, have been Willetts' efforts to limit the growth of, if not reduce the size of, the university sector by trebling tuition fees to £9,000. Willetts' hopes for a market in uni' fees have been undermined by the fact that most English institutions are charging the highest level. Even if there has been a dip in applications and, according to the Sutton Trust (2013), 'more than two-thirds of secondary school pupils in England and Wales have major reservations about the cost of going to university' initial evidence (or UCAS data at least) shows that young people may not be put off applying if they consider there are

no other opportunities and if, as argued, some form of 'graduate premium' continues to exist. They may also conclude that with average earnings falling in real terms, they may never have to pay off their student loans! In fact, it is the potential implications of a student debt bubble (McGettigan 2013) with two out of five debts in danger of not being repaid, that is now becoming a concern to the Treasury (*Sunday Time* 21/04/13), adding to pressure on Willetts and with the implication that loan interest rates may have to increase, or more significantly, the income threshold level after which the repayments kick-in having to be lowered.

Apprenticeships. Doing it the German way?

The flip-side to reducing the number of university students has been the rolling out of new apprenticeship programmes as the Coalition promised 250,000 more by 2015, following Wolf's report that work-based learning provides much higher returns than classroom-based vocational education. Those like Baker and Adonis, but also Will Hutton (*Observer*, 10/03/13), who look to the German model of apprenticeships as the way forward, will have been encouraged by Angela Merkel's comments about the success of the 'dual system' in not 'just trying to make our young people academic' (*Guardian*, 03/06/13). According to the IPPR (2013), while a smaller proportion of young people in Germany may attend university, a far greater number complete years-long apprenticeships with 90% of trainees securing proper employment. The German apprenticeship system however was a product of post-war 'social partnership', something which Merkel's neo-liberal policies are intended to reverse. Employers and trade unions established a national framework involving both legislation and much higher levels of state involvement and financing than the British 'market state' could possibly allow (as Hutton recognises). As a result, the German apprenticeship system, which stretches

well beyond the manufacturing sector, means that many young people have only been legally allowed to enter many occupations when they have completed the apprenticeship programme supporting them. Nor can even small employers set up new businesses without taking on and training apprentices. Even so, for many years now, more young Germans follow the grammar school route to higher education than combine technical schooling with apprenticeship.

In the UK, where the industrial base has been largely replaced by an invariably low-skilled, poorly paid service sector, most employers simply don't need apprentices. Some employers have even used government funding to upgrade existing employees to apprentices; for example, 'apprenticeships' for those completing short-term training courses for supermarket work and many other schemes continue to be for less than six months, only offering low-level training and qualifications. According to the IPPR (2013) around 40% of 'apprenticeships' go to people over the age of 25 as starts for those aged over 25 increased by 234% between the middle of 2010 and the end of the first quarter of 2011

When employers do genuinely seek to recruit young people for apprenticeships linked to guaranteed future employment, applications massively outstrip vacancies with demand for places on the few legitimate schemes being in some cases up to ten times over-subscribed (*Independent* 30/05/2013). Rolls Royce schemes are notoriously harder to get into than Oxbridge. Once again, this confirms that youth unemployment is a job, not a skills problem, even if the two are often confused. A genuine apprenticeship system would need to be part of a longer-term economic regeneration and employment strategy. Neither Coalition nor Labour, for that matter, have one.

New Strategies for Youth and Education

New strategies are needed to ensure future economic security for young people that go well beyond the reform of education – although this is still both necessary and desirable.

First of all, there needs to be a series of alternative economic policies in the interests of the new generations and for the future of society. This would be part of a plan B(+) for the economy in general, accepting that without a 'Keynesian' fiscal stimulus there will be no serious reduction of unemployment. In this respect, Labour's commitment to continuing with Coalition spending targets effectively prevents a programme of state-funded job creation, which must be central to any alternative (Allen and Ainley 2013). Disappointingly, though offering job guarantees to young people who have been out of work for six months, current Labour Party thinking still fails to properly acknowledge the reality that young people face in the labour market. 'We have an education system which does not prepare people for work' (Labour Skills Taskforce Interim Report 2013); yet the same document also refers to findings from UKCES that only one in five employers actively try to recruit young people and of those who do, only one in four find them poorly prepared for the workplace and this mostly applied to graduates (Skills Taskforce 6). Other research (CIPD 2013) also shows few employers specifically target young people for recruitment, resulting in the job search process being a 'frustrating and demotivating experience' and highlighting the need for more youth friendly selection procedures, including reinstated careers guidance.

With Nick Clegg now admitting that the Coalition's £1bn 'Youth Contract' has done little to reduce the number of those Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) (*Guardian* 16/07/13) and with research showing it just as expensive to keep a young

person on the dole, a specific programme of youth job creation must build on but also go well beyond the last Labour government's Future Jobs Fund, which was based on much higher levels of employer subsidies but was also pitched towards public and voluntary sector organisations, rather than private business.

Local Authorities, providing they are given the power and finance to do so, can also work alongside voluntary organisations to provide more secure employment opportunities for young people (Ainley and Allen 2010). Here there are some encouraging signs that Labour is considering a more coordinated approach towards matching young people with potential employers, but without an alternative plan for the economy, these types of initiatives can only remain severely compromised.

A general diploma for everybody

Even if we cannot 'educate our way out of recession', Gove's reforms need to be challenged with a coherent alternative rather than just reverting to the status quo. While we do not need a new sheep and goats test at 16, neither do we need to prioritise an exclusively academic curriculum any more than we do the (often illusory) 'skills' of vocational learning. Bringing together current academic and vocational qualifications in a 'general diploma' within a core curriculum entitlement could be a start to this process.

But it would have to be the diploma as a whole, rather than these individual qualifications that would have to be recognised as the main achievement. This has been a potential tension in previous blueprints for reform, including the Tomlinson proposals (DfES 2004), where elite schools would have been able to pay lip service to the principles behind an overarching certificate but then continue with an exclusive curriculum offer. If the general diploma is to both allow for more specialisation by students as they get older, but also

to act as a 'leveller', then, while it could be administered and developed through localised networks, a degree of central state intervention would be unavoidable.

With staying on in education already the norm, even before the official raising of the participation age, such a diploma, awarded at 18, with an intermediate level at 16, could also represent a stage in the transition to adulthood explicitly linked to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The general diploma should also be accessed by all to provide a mandatory entitlement to a range of learning, but also constitute the main avenue of progression to further, higher and adult continuing education and training.

Most importantly, reforming education and exams at Key Stage 4 should also be part of a more general debate about learning in the 21st century and the search for a post-Gove consensus.

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