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## ‘Raising Standards’ or Reducing Aspirations and Opportunities Still Further? Michael Gove and Examination Reforms

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**ABSTRACT** Well before the examinations grade crisis of 2012, Michael Gove had set out clear intentions for reforming public examinations. Though he claimed to be improving examinations and assessment by replicating practices that took place in high-performing countries and thus improving the ability of the UK economy to ‘compete’, this contribution argues that Gove’s agenda aims to reduce student success rates and reflects declining employment opportunities for young people. It calls for radical alternatives.

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’ (DfE, 2010) 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 – and tighter controls on ‘resits’ (4.48). Meanwhile, Ofqual, the qualifications watchdog, had been given much greater influence and was 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 backtrack on his proposals for replacing GCSEs with English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs), Gove has ensured that the new exam specifications published in June 2013 reflect his overall priorities. Tiered

papers are also being abolished and a new 1-to-8 grading system is being introduced, so as to differentiate higher-level performance more clearly. Even if the EBC proposals have been shelved, the EBacc 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, AS levels becoming standalone 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 instructed Russell Group universities to be directly involved in the determination of syllabus content. Universities like Cambridge and the LSE publish their own 'B' lists of subjects considered less appropriate as entry qualifications, but the Russells have now introduced 'facilitating' A levels, effectively the EBacc 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 June 2009) 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' (DfE, 2010, 4.9).

Gove himself has been influenced by the US professor of English literature E.D. Hirsch. Hirsch argues that American schools have a 'knowledge deficit', with many students not being taught 'the things they needed to know'.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, the new GCSEs, some of which will begin in 2014, have detailed 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 should be considered much less demanding academically and require less curriculum time (DfE, 2010, 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, in terms of both 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 Report (Wolf, 2011) 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?**

What are the motives for Gove’s reforms? First, 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. He has made it clear that the new GCSEs will be more difficult to pass – with Graham Stuart, chairperson of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, arguing that Gove could be paving the way for ‘grade deflation’ (*Independent*, 16 June 2013).

In ‘Reforming Key Stage 4’ (DfE, 2012), the EBC consultation document, Gove cites an urgent need to restore ‘public confidence’ in an examinations system where ‘60 per cent of those surveyed in a recent YouGov poll believe that GCSEs have got easier, while only 6 per cent think that they have got harder’ (3.4). More specifically:

employers, universities and colleges are dissatisfied with school leavers’ literacy and numeracy, with 42 per cent of employers needing to organise additional training for at least some young people joining them from school or college. (DfE, 2012, 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. (DfE, 2012, 8.6)

Hong Kong ... as with South Korea and Singapore, also operates with a curriculum model focusing on ‘fewer things in greater depth. (DfE, 2012, 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. (Reformed GCSE Subject Content Consultation Paper, DfE, June 2013)

Launching a new National Curriculum in July 2013 that requires 5-year-olds to calculate fractions and write computer programs, Gove told ITV's *Daybreak* on 8 July 2013: '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 it 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 August 2012). Barber also pointed out that as policy makers in the Asian Tiger economies have recognised that their economic systems need to become 'more innovative' and their schools 'more creative', some of the countries held up by Gove now look to European education systems for inspiration.

Second, this type of comparative analysis has remained 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 the 'school autonomy'), that have received the attention. There are many other political, economic and social reasons for the high growth rates in the Pacific Rim that have little, if nothing, to do with their education programmes, such as the existence of national investment plans, low levels of wages and lack of labour-market regulation – with, in some cases, restrictions on trade unions.

Third, as the *Guardian's* Peter Wilby pointed out on 8 December 2012, the specific international tests by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 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 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.[2]

### **Restoring Social Mobility?**

Gove's arguments about the need to return to a more 'knowledge-based' curriculum do deserve more serious attention, however. The need to 'bring knowledge back in' has, for example, been endorsed by Michael Young (2008), influential in the promotion of a 'social constructionist' curriculum in the 1970s and by no means a supporter of Gove or the coalition.

Gove's mentor Hirsch argues that 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 influential Labour right-winger Adonis, but also from Labour renegade and now Free School promoter and *Telegraph* columnist Toby Young.

In the words of Toby Young: Not so long ago, the Labour movement put great emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, with Left-wing intellectuals like R.H. Tawney 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. (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2013)

Rather than calling for the reintroduction of grammar schools, however, Adonis and Young unite behind Gove in his academies drive. Adonis (2012) sees academies as having the potential to recreate the ethos, traditions and curriculum of the grammars while maintaining a 'comprehensive intake', thus ensuring social mobility. The 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 (writing in the *Guardian* on 15 June 2013, and speaking on the BBC News on 21 June 2013) and used to justify the coalition's academy programme.

### **A Reactionary, Not a 'Moderniser'**

As will be argued, 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 suggested by Skills Minister David Willetts on BBC Radio 4, 24 June 2013). On the contrary, Gove's curriculum project represents a step backwards, being used to narrow and to emphasise particular approaches to learning. For example, phonics and reading tests are being imposed for young children in primary schools, as are requirements that children concentrate on memorising tables or particular types of mathematical calculations at the expense of other numeracy skills.

In subjects like history, it also involves resurrecting particular conceptions of knowledge and 'nationhood'. Thus, 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, as having been in charge at Waterloo. Former coalition Schools Minister Nick Gibb was to promise that in future history syllabuses would prioritise the values of 'knowledge and scholarship' rather than 'enquiry' and 'interpretation'. Rather than putting an emphasis on 'how to learn about history', there needed, he argued, to be an emphasis on 'what history to learn' (quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 2012).

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). Gove wants to reverse an epoch of pedagogic reform and to restore traditional curriculum hierarchies at the expense of newer subjects, as exemplified in the idea of the EBacc.

### **Young People and Qualifications: a changing context**

Rather than being based on any real evidence, Gove's attempts to blame the examination system for falling standards and the UK's declining ability to compete economically are part of a calculated attack on post-war comprehensive ideals. He wants us to forget that replacing grammar schools with comprehensives has made educational opportunities more equal and, in particular, that 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* reforms, for example, A-level entries and A-level passes have risen to unprecedented levels, with one in four candidates now achieving an A grade.

Despite Gove's claims that arguments about falling standards and 'dumbing down' are backed by academic evidence (DfE, 2012, 3.4), it is doubtful whether research findings can ever be conclusive. Ofqual may consider multi-choice assessment less demanding than old-style essay writing (Allen & Ainley, 2013), but they test different abilities under different conditions. The Oxford researchers referred to earlier argue, for example, 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 that there have been issues. As a result of league table pressures, teachers have 'taught to 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 inquiry 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, 2002)

Tomlinson's comments illustrate the inherently insoluble tensions behind the debate. 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 the post-war years qualifications were predominantly seen as requirements for white-collar employment, and many working-class school leavers, especially boys without qualifications, or with few, 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 currency to improve their place in the 'jobs queue' (Allen & 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.

The fact that 1 in 4 jobs now require degrees (ESRC/UKCES, 2012) says a lot about increases in the number of graduates, as well as providing conclusive evidence of increases in skill requirements. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 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', with almost 1 in 10 unemployed,<sup>[3]</sup> with the median salary standing at £20,000.

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 exam structures and assessment. For more young people, the education system is like running up a downwards escalator, where you have to run faster simply to stand still.

### **A New Correspondence between Education and the Labour Market**

In our book *The Great Reversal* (Allen & Ainley, 2013), Patrick Ainley and I argue that rather than being something that will promote individual aspiration and improve 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 Toby Young imply.

New Labour continued to promote illusionary ideas about the global economy providing 'more room at the top'. 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) – new managerial and professional jobs may be being created, but a raft of new low-skilled jobs are also being created and the middle is being 'hollowed out'. Alternatively, the occupational structure is becoming 'pear shaped', with, for example, professional work increasingly being done by 'para-professional' labour (Allen & Ainley, 2013) and nowhere near enough well-paid jobs for those qualified to do them.

Whatever the exact nature of the occupational structure, the Gove reforms are part of an attempt to create a new 'correspondence' between education and an economy where there are decreasing labour-market opportunities. This requires state education to return to its traditional function of maintaining social control – a function that has been explicit from the beginning in the 1870. Rather than being a vehicle for social mobility and individual progression, educational opportunities are rationed by making exams harder, but also, as is the case with Willett's university tuition fee increases, progression to university is now a more precarious and more expensive activity.

### **A General Diploma for Everybody**

In view of the overall decline in opportunities for the majority of young people, not only is a different response necessary, but also new strategies for education are needed that are linked to a programme of economic and labour-market reform in the interests of young people, including job creation initiatives and apprenticeships that lead to real jobs (Ainley & Allen, 2010; Allen & Ainley, 2013). Otherwise education will experience a 'crisis of legitimacy' not only in the eyes of an increasing number of young people, but also in the eyes of their parents, as even though most teachers and lecturers would continue to argue that a good education is more than just about 'getting a job', employability and economic security remain near the top of young people's list of what they expect from education.

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 illusionary) '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 2002 Tomlinson proposals, where elite schools would have been able to pay lip service to the principles behind an overarching certificate whilst being allowed to continue with an exclusive curriculum offer. If the General Diploma is both to allow for more specialisation by students as they get older, but also to act as a 'leveller', then although it could be administered and developed through localised networks, a degree of central state intervention would be unavoidable.

With staying on in education is 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 that could also be linked to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The General Diploma should also be accessible by all to provide a mandatory entitlement to a range of learning, but should 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 twenty-first century and the search for a post-Gove consensus.

### Notes

- [1] <http://www.coreknowledge.org./ed-hirsch-jr>  
 [2] <http://oucea.education.ox.ac.uk/research/recent-research-projects/research-evidence-relating-to-proposals-for-reform-of-the-gcse/>  
 [3] <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/2903/393/>

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