

**An Array of Qualifications Beats a Bac. In *Bac or Basics: Challenges for the 14-19 Curriculum*. Ed Conor Ryan, pp 43-51. London: The Social Market Foundation, 2004.**

**ALAN SMITHERS**

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The ultimate choice in qualifications 14-19 is between having an array of different awards or just the one with perhaps a number of variants. Our present qualifications carry a lot of emotional baggage. We have all experienced them and know people who were helped on their way or thwarted by them. We are only too aware of their deficiencies. But this should not blind us to the fact that they do embody an important principle which is that in the years beyond compulsory schooling people should be free to shape their own studies. Existing qualifications – and I am thinking here not only of A-levels, but BTECs, NVQs, the International Baccalaureate and many others – do that. It may all look very untidy from the point of view of the bureaucrat. But it does leave people themselves firmly in the driving seat. If they want to specialise in the arts or the sciences or want to take a broad mixture of subjects the opportunity is there for them to do so. If they want to develop particular practical skills then there are, or should be, the qualifications to qualify them. If they want no part of it, if qualifications will not help them with their lives, then again they are perfectly free to take this decision and given the celebrity and wealth available in football, the music industry and many other fields who is to say they are wrong.

The idea of replacing the present untidy mixture with a single all-embracing qualification seems to be gaining favour. The interim report of the Tomlinson<sup>1</sup> Working group on 14-19 Reform has proposed for discussion an award at four levels which takes into account a variety of achievements and embraces a wide range of activities from specialist study to taking part in the school play or representing the school at sport. Like all the proposals for bac-style awards it would specify its version of desirable breadth, in this case a core of English, maths and ICT in their bowdlerised form of key skills. An early version of the British bac<sup>2</sup> exemplifies the point. It proposed that modules should be taken in three domains, (A) social and human sciences, (B) natural sciences and technology, and (C) arts, languages and culture. The modules would be of three types, core, specialist and work/community. As an example it suggested that a programme of studies might comprise core modules in (A) history and economics, (B) electronics and computing and (C) Spanish, drama and design. The specialist modules would be in (A) and (C) and there would be a cross-domain module in the finance of community art. There would also be an assignment based on work experience in an arts centre in Spain. The International Baccalaureate<sup>3</sup> which, is sometimes taken as the model, specifies particular combinations of academic subjects, but does not include vocational studies. But with all grouped awards students are no

longer completely free to tailor what they study, or do not study, but have to comply with what some committee somewhere has deemed necessary. The distinguishing feature of a bac-style award is that it prescribes combinations of studies.

Advocates of introducing a bac-style award seem to do so on the basis of three assumptions<sup>4</sup>. The first is that breadth is so desirable that it must be imposed, the second is that the different values attached to academic and vocational are unacceptable so they must be put into the same qualification, and the third is that by fudging school leaving more young people will remain in formal education. But all three seem to misunderstand the fundamental purposes of compulsory education and qualifications.

It is reasonable to require young people to engage in formal education for some part of their lives whether they want to or not because without it they will not be able to get as much out of their lives as they could. It is necessary that they should learn to handle words and numbers accurately, and the script for fully participating in their society. It is important that they should be introduced to the main ways we have found of making sense – the subjects - of this deeply mysterious thing we call life. But since it is ineffable it is down to us to create our own meanings as best we can. It may be through religion, music, the sciences, money, sport or in an almost infinite number of other ways. Compulsory education can provide the basis, but then it is up to us. As young people work their way through the national curriculum they will become increasingly aware of what they are good at, what adds meaning to their lives and where they want to be heading. By the end of compulsory schooling they will want to be moving in many different directions and the qualification structure should provide the opportunity for them to do this. This is best achieved through having a number of different qualifications that work in their own terms rather than trying to wrap up everything in the one.

It may be for the people advocating a bac-style award that breadth is more desirable than specialisation. But that is not true for everyone. Karl Popper<sup>5</sup> once said that there are people who cannot imagine that anyone does not like chocolate. Breadth like chocolate is a matter for individual decision. There are, in any case, many different kinds of breadth: across the arts and the sciences; across the arts, the sciences, languages and social sciences; across the academic and vocational; across study, sport and community service. Beyond compulsory schooling people should be able to choose what sort, if any, they wish to engage in. The present array of qualifications, whatever its faults, does enable young people to express their views of themselves. A bac-style award would do nothing to correct some of the recent problems that have beset A-levels, but instead would add a whole new raft of others to do with what to insist on and how the elements should be combined to produce an overall result.

It is likely that a new bac-style award would incorporate both academic and vocational elements in the belief that this would achieve parity of esteem between them. But this is to misunderstand how qualifications come to be valued. Esteem cannot be assigned but has to be earned. Qualifications earn their value through

what you can do with them. Some A-levels are prized because they are the means to gaining places on the leading courses at the leading universities; others are less sought-after because they do not open these doors. There is no intrinsic reason why the academic should be rated higher than the practical. Some of the most prestigious degrees are vocational, in medicine and law for example. But it is true that many vocational qualifications are not highly regarded. A major reason for this is that they are not fully recognised by employers in the sense that they will recruit on them, pay more to the holders of them or promote on them. Our existing array of qualifications does need to be improved by the employers coming fully on board to develop better ladders from school to work. Those that carried people to desired occupations would come to be valued in their own terms. Simply attaching the vocational to the academic will have little impact as the clear pecking order of the various bacs in France amply demonstrates.

A more insidious idea behind the bac proposals seems to be that too many people are taking the first opportunity to leave formal study so we need a qualification to lock them in beyond compulsory schooling. This is to assume that education is necessarily a good thing and young people should be encouraged or coerced to spend longer and longer in it. Education can be wonderfully liberating if it adds meaning to your life and takes you in the directions you want to go. But as an imposition it can be something to be resisted. Already we are told about 50,000 children a day are truanting from compulsory schooling<sup>6</sup>. Attempting to raise the leaving age beyond 16 would only exacerbate the problem. Rather than trying to find ways of covertly keeping more young people in formal education we should be asking why they do not want to be there in the first place. It could well be a comment on what is on offer and the better and more honest way of increasing participation would be to improve provision so that more wanted to freely engage with it.

Besides the philosophical objections, there are major practical problems with introducing a bac-style award. It would greatly increase the need for teachers and is likely to be a timetabling nightmare. All grouped awards also come up against the dilemma of what to do if students pass well in some parts but not the whole of it. Do they get the award or don't they? A-levels were introduced because their predecessor, the Higher School Certificate, was denied to students who did not reach the prescribed level in all parts of it. Attempts to introduce the International Baccalaureate into some colleges<sup>7</sup> have foundered because students could not pass it all and had to be content with college certificates in bits and pieces. How much better to have respected qualifications that recognise achievement in individual subjects and fields?

The focus so far has been on the advantages of a qualification array has for students and those teaching them. But the flexibility and specificity that it confers are also extremely important to the end-users – the universities and employers. A-levels derive directly from university entrance examinations. On the strength of them a higher education system has evolved in which students can be educated to a high standard in just three years with few dropouts. With this streamlining, the government has been able to afford to be generous in the financial support it has

given students. There is a different shape to higher education in countries which have broader qualifications at 18. The degree courses take longer – up to seven years in Germany – and many more students embark on courses they do not complete. Students moving into and out of the system have to find more money themselves and in the United States many pay the full costs of the courses.

Inevitably, if students were expected undertake a range of studies as prescribed by a Tomlinson-bac, they would not be able to pursue their chosen subjects in such depth as they do now. Universities would have to add at least an extra year to courses to maintain degree standards. This will leave the government with the stark choice of having fewer students going to university, finding more money from taxes or asking students to pay more. The current Higher Education White Paper<sup>8</sup> betrays just how difficult the government has found it to come up with acceptable financial arrangements for even the present system. Universities are also reliant on good information about the specific capabilities of applicants so that they can take fair and acceptable decisions. But instead of specific information on a person's capability in say, history or physics, this would be agglomerated with a lot of other distracting information. Employers too have grown use to using A-levels. As the number of graduates has increased and their applicants have swelled, employers have increasingly come to use the grades obtained at A-level as an initial filter preferring this as a good national examination to the somewhat variable degree classes across universities. If the national system no longer serves them then both universities and employers will have to resort to devising their own entrance tests.

The Tomlinson Inquiry was prompted, in part, by the various difficulties that A-levels and vocational qualifications have recently run into, but in seeking to sort them out we should not confuse the principle with the implementation. A-levels and vocational qualification in their current manifestations may not be exactly right but they are consistent with the purposes of post-compulsory education and qualifications.

Recent disquiet with A-levels has centred mainly on assessment overload and their failure to provide sufficiently accurate information to universities and employers to enable them to take the decisions they have to take. Both stem from the recent modification referred to as Curriculum 2000<sup>9</sup>. Starting out from the wholly admirable intention of enabling young people to create their own breadth at A-level across a norm of five subject, the Government took up the proposal from the Dearing Review (1996)<sup>10</sup> to introduce the Advanced Subsidiary as a one year qualification for those who wanted it. But along the way the idea became changed so that all A-levels were modularised and AS became a stepping stone for everyone. Hence instead of assessing a course it became necessary to assess the modules, six in every A-level, with a consequent massive increase in the total amount of examining. Assessing by module has also undermined confidence in the qualification because modules can be retaken and combined in different ways to produce an overall result. It is perfectly understandable given all this messing about why some leading independent schools should be opting for the International Baccalaureate. But I suspect that this has less to do with its

educational merits than a desire to be shot of government interference in examinations.

There are indeed some fairly specific problems to be tackled in existing qualifications, but this can be done without junking the whole lot. For example, the assessment load could be reduced by having the AS available for those who wanted a one-year qualification with most students by-passing it. We could then return to the notion of assessing the overall A-level course through an appropriate mix of exams and course work. It would be perfectly possible for schools and colleges to teach the courses in modules if they wished, but for assessment to be on a whole course basis.

It is also true that some universities no longer find that A-levels distinguish adequately. They receive so many applicants with identically good qualifications that it is very difficult for them to demonstrate that the scarce and valued places are being allocated fairly. Again this is something which can be addressed specifically. If the examinations are distinguishing candidates well, but the differences are being masked by the grading procedures than we should make more use of the marks. They could be standardised and to avoid imputing accuracy beyond that deserved published in bands of five percentage points. If even this did not distinguish sufficiently between the top performing candidates then the examination could be made tougher by including some more difficulty questions, rather in the way javelins were modified when throwers began to throw them too far or the position of the long jump pit had to be altered when jumpers seemed likely to overshoot the end. It might be objected that this was altering the standard, but it is no different from a currency being revalued or devalued.

End of school qualifications are a currency enabling transactions to take place between what the students has been doing and what they want to do next (if a qualification is required). It is important that they operate fairly and accurately in present conditions and less so that they should be comparable with what has gone before. A lot of the debate each August about whether A-levels have been dumbed down is essentially sterile because they are now performing a wider function than when they were part of the narrow ladder of 11-plus-O-levels-A-levels picking out just one in twenty of the age group for university. In being expanded to cater from just over a 100,000 entries in 1951 to three-quarters of a million in 2003, they have generally adapted well though with inevitable changes. They remain a tried-and-tested currency, part of an array of qualifications that has shown itself capable of adapting to the needs pupils, schools, universities and employers.

In contrast, bac-style awards are monolithic. The Tomlinson-bac is an interventionist's delight and a bureaucrat's dream. It would be a vehicle for those who think they know best to impose their will on others. It would also enable bureaucrats to put everyone on the same scale. With one all-embracing qualification there would be no escape from it. Everyone would get a label at one of four levels. This could be derived from every move pupils make between the ages 14 and 19 whether in their studies, wider education, sport or community

service. If you happened to come out at the bottom of the heap you would be stuck with it. It would not be so far from the world satirized in Michael Young's<sup>11</sup> *The Rise of The Meritocracy* where one's IQ was stamped on an identity card and used to regulate what you could do with your life.

A-levels have been with us for over fifty years and there is a tendency to see them as tired and to want to do something different. But we had a grouped award from 1917 to 1951 and that was rejected for sound educational reasons. We require young people to attend school between the ages of 5 and 16 to give them a basis for their lives and, if compulsory education means anything, towards the end of it at least young people should be coming to know something of themselves. It is important, therefore, to have in place an array of qualifications that will take them forward in response to their emerging sense of their abilities, interests and aspirations. The spread is too wide to be contained within the one qualification. Existing qualifications are far from perfect, but they do provide good ladders from school to higher education which need to be matched by ladders into employment. In reviewing qualifications 14-19 we should be looking to improve what we have rather throwing everything into the melting pot.

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