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## The Tomlinson Recommendations: implications for 14-19 history

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In a *Guardian* article of 15 February 2005, (1) which arose from an interview conducted about a month ago, I did two things. The first I hope that you will approve of: I suggested that history was a good training for most things. Second, I said that I remained staunchly optimistic about the likely response to the Tomlinson recommendations. However, if I had been interviewed yesterday, I would have given an altogether more guarded response and that ambivalence will be interwoven in what I am going to say.

My sources in Whitehall have gone ominously quiet about the White Paper which is promised very soon in response to Tomlinson, and my other sources say that the government response will fall somewhere between endorsing everything in the Tomlinson Report and rejecting everything in the Tomlinson Report. So today I want to remind you briefly about what Tomlinson is recommending, and try to give that some accent for the teaching and studying of history. I also want to offer some speculations, if Tomlinson does go forward, as to what the challenges and opportunities for history might be. Furthermore, if the government decides to go forward in a different direction, where that might leave history? I am going to talk predominantly about 14-19, but I will offer a few comments about the interface between history in schools and colleges and history in the universities.

When the Tomlinson group got together we were given terms of reference by ministers, though we were formally an independent group. The essential thrust of Tomlinson was to look right across 14-19 qualifications, recognising that there was much which was valued and valuable but also noting where the system was not working and young people were being short-changed. In particular our emphasis was on the recognition of achievement and on the promotion of success. Mike Tomlinson said throughout that one of the vicious ironies of the current system is that you secure a level 1 qualification by failing a level 2 qualification, and that any system which gives a badge of achievement for failing to achieve something else has a kind of perversity built into it. So that emphasis on the recognition of success and the building of confidence was something which we hoped infused all of our thinking and our recommendations.

So we think that if you take the totality of our recommendations and the diploma framework that we are recommending you will end up with a balanced curriculum promoting skills and promoting real subject engagement and subject understanding. There is a strong commitment to better vocational programmes and I think that if anything survives from Tomlinson, even in the most pessimistic version, it will be a commitment to vocational programmes. Issues to do with stretch, issues to do with differentiation, issues to do with rigorous assessment were very much to the heart of what we were discussing, largely because of the political salience of the A level debacle of 2002. We are recommending that there be more information made available to employers, to universities and to other 'end-users' about young people's achievements, and that this is wrapped around in an integrated diploma framework.

There is a common architecture to the diplomas which we are recommending. In the core, which would be around 30 per cent of any programme, there is a set of functional skills: numeracy, communication, ICT, extended project research skills and the ability to manage one's own learning. Around this core there would be 'the main learning', and the main learning would be developed from existing qualifications, be they GCSEs, A levels, NVQs and so forth. So at the heart of the diploma framework is an articulation between the development of core and complementary skills and the sustaining of main learning, largely, but not exclusively, on a disciplinary basis.

The core was originally expressed in terms of Maths, English and ICT but, as the group developed, rather than expressing elements of the core in terms of disciplines they were expressed in terms of skills or competence: functional mathematics, literacy, communication and ICT. In the view of the Tomlinson group there is every reason for developing those skills through a range of disciplines. Moreover, I would argue, wearing my historian hat, that if we are talking about literacy, about communication skills, about the ability to present work, to defend work, to operate in groups and to use ICT, then history has an important contribution to make.

So if Tomlinson goes ahead, and schools and colleges are faced with the challenge of thinking how to deliver these diplomas, then my advice to colleagues in the secondary and college sector would be as historians to claim an entitlement to deliver core skills through history within the core, as well as seeing history as simply located as a disciplinary strand in the main learning. So that gives you some sense of what the core is about; the core would be there as appropriate for diplomas whether they were, in the old language, academic or vocational diplomas.

Alongside the core there would be what we have termed main learning, and we suggested up to 20 strands which would brand the diplomas. The syllabuses for these strands of main learning would be developed from existing qualifications - and that was at the heart of the argument that followed the publication of Tomlinson. Will A levels live or die? It was a peculiar and rather depressing argument that a qualification devised in the immediate post-war period must be preserved in aspic for all time. But the point was not to have a debate about A levels as the gold standard. Rather, it was to have main learning which will comprise that which is most valued from A levels or GCSEs, but that will also recognise some of the challenges facing those qualifications in the twenty-first century.

Different diplomas will be accented in different ways. The way in which the main learning is configured would reflect a certain kind of track. So you might have a humanities track, or a physical sciences track, or a social sciences track, but, importantly, there would be an open route, a free choice, as now. There would also be vocational routes offering vocational and pre-vocational specialisms such as engineering, manufacturing, technologies or health.

One of the keys to our recommendations is that all programmes should be stretching; they should stretch and they should reward. That led us to make a series of recommendations concerning the way in which programmes are described, the way in which syllabuses are devised and the way in which appropriate assessment is conducted, and I will return to these issues below.

If Tomlinson is to work I think there needs to be a liberation of time, away from assessment and preparation for assessment and back towards learning and teaching. One of the fundamental premises of the Tomlinson recommendation is that young people are over-assessed; they are over-burdened by assessment and very often the curriculum and the learning experience become broken-backed as a result of the burden and frequency of assessment.

Our recommendation was that we should trust teachers, and that there should be a rebalancing of assessment towards teacher-led assessment. This, I am told, is our most controversial recommendation. This is, of course, what we already do in universities. University teachers do the assessment; we do it, I believe, rigorously, and we do it with a series of quality assurance measures around. Moreover, and ironically, now the assessment of GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications is overwhelmingly done by teachers. They are re-badged 'examiners', and they are paid the money that they spend on their summer holidays by examination boards. What we were trying to do was make a virtue of what already happens - that is, teachers taking the lead in assessment - and to look at

ways in which we could use that to diminish the frequency and the burden of assessment. It seems to me that in educational terms the argument we made was unassailable. However, in political terms it is probably unwinnable.

We were also faced with the challenge of the periodic, or rather annual, questions: have A levels been devalued? Have GCSEs been devalued? And are A levels fit for purpose in terms of university admission and entrance? Those of us who look at this from the perspective of universities are well aware of some of the challenges facing what we tend to call 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' courses: that is to say courses where there is an abundance of well-qualified candidates. Across the higher education sector we can see the beginnings of a move towards the setting of special entrance tests by individual institutions. Last year Oxford reintroduced a history entrance test. The view of Tomlinson, and I think the view of many of us in higher education, was that the proliferation of entrance tests is a very damaging development to 14–19 qualifications because these entrance tests, particularly those for the so-called elite universities, will become the premier assessments. We wanted to ensure that through a revised 14–19 qualifications framework we would deliver what employers, as well as universities, want; we would deliver the degree of differentiation universities and selecting programmes were requiring.

This led to a couple of linked recommendations. One was that we stretch the grading scale at A level with A+ and A++ or some variation on that theme. My personal preference would be for more grades from the bottom of the B grade upwards. But the central proposition was that greater differentiation was needed at the top end, otherwise universities increasingly start relying on other forms of tests. There is, of course, a recommendation from the [Schwartz Report](#) that aptitude tests are piloted, and, if they run well, that there be a UK-wide or at least an England-wide aptitude test. The Tomlinson group was happy to support a pilot aptitude test, but broadly speaking believed enhancement to the selection process could be better delivered through the revised diploma framework.

Not only would there be greater differentiation within the main learning but also differentiation in terms of the overall diploma: pass, merit and distinction. The higher grades of the diploma – merit and distinction – would recognise breadth of study as well as depth of achievement. Whatever happens, those sorts of issues remain live and will have to be picked up by the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#) (QCA).

The range of a student's achievement would be captured on a transcript; we envisage this as electronic and we envisage this as being layered. That is to say the top level will be a summary statement and then authorised users would be able to drill down through the transcript to pick up, as it were, the richness of supporting data. This would carry component grades, details of wider activities undertaken and maybe some reflection by the student on his or her learning or wider activity. Operationally it would offer a relatively smooth interface with the electronic [University and Colleges Admissions Service](#) (UCAS) application process.

Thus we saw the transcript as delivering a much richer range of information on a student's achievement, both for universities and for employers. Controversially, also embedded in the report is a recommendation that the transcript carries data on the performance of the institution at which the qualification was achieved, so that the user of the transcript can contextualise the performance as against the institution. That is critical to solving what I call the 'University of Bristol problem' – that being the situation which has arisen at University of Bristol, which wants to admit students of real potential from the state sector whose paper record at A level underperforms that of students from the private sector. The university needs a robust basis on which to make that judgement and the fact that you can contextualise the unit data on the transcript as against the centre at which it was achieved gives you the ability to make that sort of judgement.

One of the key performance indicators for Tomlinson is increasing the number of students in the system post-16. Indeed, we would regard it as a victory if the language changed; the language at the moment is of course characteristically the language of 'staying on' post-16, staying on after the end of compulsory education. But what Tomlinson envisages is that the normal expectation would be that young people stay in education and training up to 18 and 19 at least. So we constructed an interlocking framework of diplomas, a framework which recognised positive achievement, a framework where in order to achieve one level students were already beginning to work towards the next level, and that would pull them through.

The diploma framework goes from entry to foundation to intermediate to advanced; Foundation is level 1, intermediate is level 2 and advanced is level 3. We mapped those across to existing qualifications, so foundation covers GCSE grades D through G; intermediate takes in GCSE grades A\* through C and NVQ Level 2; advanced is A levels and NVQ Level 3, and so forth. I will return to entry level later, but it is essentially personalised to those with special educational needs of one sort or another. If a student achieves, for example, an intermediate diploma, he or she will have already have started to work towards advanced, so the incentives for young people to stay in the system are much greater than they are now; hence the interlocking structure we came up with. Tomlinson also recommended a series of follow-up pilots, developing parts of the thinking and part of the architecture, and proposed that full implementation should be over a ten-year period to avoid some of the problems which arose from the perhaps over-hasty implementation of [Curriculum 2000](#).

So what is supposed to happen next? Charles Clark, then Secretary of State at the [DfES](#), made a ministerial statement welcoming Tomlinson and indicating broad support. A White Paper was promised in January which, of course, means February or March, and we are currently on the cusp of it being published. (2) However, it is likely that the change at the head of DfES will have some implications for the way in which the White Paper is written. So as I stand here today, I am genuinely uncertain as to quite what the government response to Tomlinson now is going to be.

In conclusion I would like to offer some reflections on the implications for history if Tomlinson is adopted, and if Tomlinson is not adopted. So if this broad framework is adopted, if we have an implementation running forward over the next decade, what would be the challenges to history?

I have already hinted at one of them – that is, claiming a centrality for history in the school and college curriculum. The core, particularly around communication but not exclusively around communication, is an area where history can and should contribute, and can contribute richly. Another key element of the core is the extended project. One way in which Tomlinson aimed to reduce the burdens of assessment was to diminish the amount of time spent on coursework which replicated skills that were being tested elsewhere. So rather than having a lot of coursework, we recommended that at each level there should be a single, major extended project that might develop an area of main learning, or it might integrate a young person's learning at that level. I believe that the kind of skills which would equip young people to execute an extended project over a period of one or two years are precisely the kind of skills that history inculcates, and that history teachers are extraordinarily skilled in developing: skills in conceptualising a project, of developing and executing a research strategy, of presenting research findings clearly.

However, the challenge of the National Curriculum remains. The Tomlinson group was told firmly that the National Curriculum was off limits, just as our commenting on Key Stage 3 was off limits. So the position of history in the National Curriculum post-14 is unaffected by Tomlinson and we had no means of commenting on that. We were also criticised for not entrenching the position of science post-14 and, indeed, post-16. My response must be exactly the same: it was not part of our remit. So the debate around the contents and emphases of the National Curriculum is one that Tomlinson had no power to influence.

Regarding the stretching of the most able and the differentiation of performance, Tomlinson talks about more grade lines at the top end. Therefore those involved both in prescribing syllabuses and those involved in developing mark schemes would need to give some thought to where those grade lines would be drawn. My own view is that this would be relatively straightforward, and that those of us who were involved, and, indeed, are still involved, in A level examinations would be equal to that task. But there is a challenge in terms of differentiating performance in history at the top end.

The recommendation at A level is that we move from six units to four units and also that we break this very close link between what is taught, what is learnt and what is assessed. If I can digress, but relevantly, for a moment, I was one of the people who helped write what was then the first genuinely modular A level

history syllabus. And it was a very interesting experience because what we thought we were doing in writing that six-module curriculum was differentiating the assessment; that is to say it would be clear in a particular unit what skills we were assessing. What we did not expect, indeed the great unintended consequence of this, was that we would be breaking up the way in which history on that particular syllabus would be taught in the sixth form. We had assumed that teachers would continue to teach in much the same sort of way, with quite broad sweeps of history or special options and then, after completing the learning and teaching, you would move towards developing the skills for the assessment task. And I think, from talking to colleagues, that experience that I had back in the mid-90s has been replicated in other disciplines.

This partly explains why we are where we are. Young people are indeed very skilled at the kind of assessment tasks we set them (and we should, and I would, absolutely defend the grades that they get in terms of the terminal assessments). However, university teachers will continuously say that the depth and the richness and the security of broader subject understanding has been diminished in that process. Therefore I think that one of the challenges which faces us as historians is how we redress some of that balance between learning and teaching on the one hand and assessment on the other. I think it is a real challenge and I think there is a great prize to be won there in terms of the excitement of learning and in terms of the excitement of teaching.

If Tomlinson is not adopted, then some of the opportunities disappear. If there is not a core, or a skills agenda to which history can contribute, is there a danger there that history might get further marginalised? If there is no extended project, that kind of opening for the nurturing for historic skills, as well as generic skills, would disappear.

But most of the other issues that I have raised remain whether or not Tomlinson is adopted. They are still there for history within the national curriculum. Those issues of stretch and differentiation, the burden of assessment and syllabus specification are still there if A levels continue as they are. Tomlinson offers a framework within which some of these issues can be addressed and addressed fruitfully. But if we continue, at least on the academic side of the house, as we are then these issues will not go away, and I think UCAS and the universities will have to address them.

Irrespective of whether or not Tomlinson is adopted, my work on the group and reflecting on it as a historian left me feeling that there were a number of real challenges. I am worried about the fragmentation of teaching and learning. I am worried that this has been the unintended consequence of modular syllabuses. As I indicated a moment ago, I was involved quite early on in modularisation and I have been involved in modularisation at university level too, so I do not say this as one who is hostile to modular syllabuses, but I think we need to reflect on what modular syllabuses have done in terms of the way students approach their learning and in terms of their range and depth of understanding. I do think it is absolutely crucial, both at school and college level, and at university level, that we rediscover learning for learning's sake, knowledge for knowledge's sake, and not learning and knowledge for assessment's sake.

I want to raise the question of whether AS level has been good for History; there is probably a variety of opinion in this room. My own view would be that one of the consequences of virtually universal assessment at the end of year 12 has been to intrude into that process of engagement and intellectual maturation.

Partly arising from my Tomlinson experience and partly arising from my reflections as somebody involved in university education I think that we are all faced now with the challenge of how we respond to young people learning differently. Schools and colleges have travelled further down this road than universities. In large parts of universities we have not yet come to terms with young people who learn predominantly through the Internet, who have very well developed visual competence and ability to conceptualise visually, but who have not read many books, cover to cover, by the time they are 16 or 18. There is of course an old view in the universities that people have to do it our way; I think that is well passed its sell-by date and I think the challenge of how young people learn, following the information revolution, is one that faces us whether we teach pre-18 or post-18. There is some enormously exciting work going on in schools. There is some enormously exciting and innovative work going on in the university sector, but I think the challenge is there and I think it is very profound for a literary discipline such as history. So in terms of learning – and I am not talking about what the professionals write but about the way history is taught and learned – can history survive as a largely literary discipline? The answer to that is probably yes. But I want to ask some questions about the challenges; what are the challenges in terms of engaging young people in history, and what are the challenges in terms of enabling them to develop other kinds of skills?

And finally, others no doubt have raised this, what will be in the importance and what will be the impact on history of higher tuition fees post-2006? Those of us who are in the higher education sector in England expect a degree of volatility post-2006; we expect different subjects to fare differently in the new markets which will emerge to some extent post-2006. As a historian I am quite bullish about the position of history. Application numbers have largely stabilised and the subject carries high perceived value both on the part of students and on the part of employers. But I think it would be a rather glib kind of overconfidence to say we that do not need to attend to the position of history or that we do not need to attend to the attractiveness of history post-2006; we do and we should.

I hope I have given you some sense of where I think history is positioned in this debate over 14-19 qualifications; I hope that much or most of the Tomlinson recommendation is adopted by government in the White Paper; I hope, if that is the case, that historians in schools and colleges will be wholehearted in their engagement with that new process. If Tomlinson is not adopted then I think we have raised some quite important questions about core skills, GCSEs and particularly about A levels, and I think these debates will continue. It is critical that subject specialists are not only involved in those debates but shape and lead them.

## Notes

1. 'Road Runner', *The Guardian*, 15 Feb. 2005 [<http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1412489,00.html>, accessed 21 July 2005]. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. The White Paper was published after the conference on 23 Feb. 2005, and can be viewed at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=10&pid=140&ctype=TEXT&ptype=Single> [accessed 21 July 2005]. [Back to \(2\)](#).