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A 21st-century curriculum for 14–19 year olds

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Speech to the Texas Lyceum Association, 25th Anniversary Conference, 7 October 2005

Age group	Published	Reference no.
14–19	October 2005	

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Document reference number:

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Introduction

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very grateful to the Texas Lyceum Association for inviting me to address your 25th anniversary conference. This is my first time back in the United States since I had the immense privilege in 1993/94 of living in Atlanta, Georgia, for a year as a Harkness Fellow of the Commonwealth Fund of New York. As well as an enriching professional experience, that year was a wonderful life opportunity. It's only now, eleven years later, that my daughter no longer sounds like Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*!

The letter of invitation to your event described:

> *….the quality and composition of our high school programmes as one of the most pressing issues before us today in education.*

I have to agree, and the fact that the pressing issues that you identify resonate so clearly with the pressing issues for us on the other side of the Atlantic made me keen to accept your invitation.

I try to keep up with developments in the United States as best I can. We have been watching the *No child left behind* programme with a great deal of interest. But nothing beats seeing, talking, being here… and so I am grateful for the welcome I have been given in Texas over the past few days.

An appropriate curriculum

What makes an appropriate curriculum has always been a matter of public and professional debate, and typically each generation arrives at a different answer. It is also a theme treated with relish by authors who base their works of fiction in schools, from Tom Brown's schooldays at Rugby School to Harry Potter and his friends at Hogwarts.

For those of you with children, events in and around Hogwarts School may well have become part of your daily family life during recent years. This has certainly been the case in the Bell household, where 16 July 2005 was an eagerly awaited day. It was the day of the publication of what I have recently learnt to know as HP6 – the sixth *Harry Potter* book. We didn't dress up as wizards and witches and queue outside a bookshop at midnight on 15 July, but there was certainly a good deal of interest in getting hold of an early copy. Perhaps because once an inspector of education, always an inspector of education, I couldn't help thinking what I would make of the curriculum at Hogwarts School. After all, Harry, Ron and Hermione now fit neatly into our 14 to 19 age bracket.

It is a strange mix of practical experience and rote learning. There is clearly tension between the extent to which the curriculum is devised by the school itself, or individual instructors, and the overarching framework for the curriculum established by the Ministry of Magic. I recognise the tension. But I remain unconvinced that the curriculum that Harry Potter has absorbed during his formative years is sufficiently balanced.

While the theory and implementation of Potions and Transfiguration seem to be thought through carefully and rigorously, training in Defence against Dark Arts appears very much hit and miss. As far as I can see, in an entire school year no practical lessons in this important subject are taught at all after the first day. I feel I could have offered evidence-based advice to Professor Dumbledore, but the call from J.K. Rowling never came.

Balance, breadth, relevance, quality – these issues are important to all of us today, wherever we work. In the next half hour or so I hope to offer some personal reflections on the debate about the 14–19 curriculum in England; then – as you would expect – I'll say something about the role of school inspection.

Education reform, English-style

Today's teenagers are tomorrow's parents, entrepreneurs, public servants and community leaders. It is reality, not rhetoric, to say that the future lies in their hands. It is our responsibility to equip them as best we can to meet the challenges they will face. I am not convinced we have got it right yet.

In England, over the past 15 years or so, education reform has been very high on the agenda of governments, irrespective of political persuasion. We have seen the implementation of a national curriculum, which sets out in some detail the content that should be taught to every pupil in state maintained schools in the country. We have seen the development of an assessment regime that takes stock of how pupils are performing at key stages in their educational career. We have seen the publication of the result of these assessments in a way that contributes to the public accountability of our schools. We have seen the devolution of authority and responsibility from the local authority to individual schools, their headteachers and their governing bodies.

We have also seen the establishment of a national schools' inspectorate – Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, which I lead as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. Ofsted is charged with ensuring that every school in the land is regularly and rigorously inspected, to a common inspection framework. And we have seen parents increasingly offered a choice of where their children receive their education; an informed choice based on Ofsted's performance data about schools and inspection evidence.

What have been the achievements of these reforms? Primary school standards are at their highest level; at long last the United Kingdom is holding its own –

and more – in international comparisons. Exam results in our secondary schools are also at their best level ever, with over half of our 16 year olds achieving our academic benchmark of five good passes in the examinations they take in their final year of compulsory education.

The parameters of the curriculum are now recognisably the same, wherever the school. While the emphasis is on the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, pretty much all pupils will be taught a common set of foundation subjects, including a modern foreign language, geography, history, art, music and physical education. They will also be taught religious education, citizenship and health education.

The 'pinch points' in the English education system

So what's the problem in the later years of high school?

While we have relatively high standards at 15, we have relatively low staying on rates after 16. A recent international league table, which listed 28 OECD countries according to involvement in education and training of 17 year olds, placed the UK 24th. In many countries there is a general assumption that education will continue to at least the age of 18. I would like many more young people to see that it is in their interests to continue learning.

For those for whom an academic route through education is clearly the most appropriate, enjoyable and useful, we have a good, possibly outstanding, track record. Typically young people take their general certificate examinations at the age of 15 or 16, and if they achieve good passes go on to take advanced level examinations in three or four subjects. For most students who get this far, this is the entry route into university education.

However, when I scratch below the surface, I am struck by further issues. The first is that even among those students who do well in their final year exams I hear concerns about their abilities in English and mathematics. I was interested to see we are not alone in having concerns about the basic skills of our college students. I have also heard the issue discussed here, and I understand that at least a quarter of students entering American colleges immediately take remedial English or mathematics courses.

The weakness of vocational education

A more serious problem, however, is the lack of high quality curriculum and qualifications pathways for students for whom an academic grounding is not the most appropriate route through education and into work. For students who prefer to learn in a different way, or who would benefit from a greater variety of learning styles, or who are more interested in learning in ways with direct practical applicability, there has not been real choice.

In countries where vocational learning enjoys high esteem, the qualifications achieved are recognised as a clear route into employment. In many advanced industrial countries, large numbers of young people pursue vocational routes from the age of 14, confident in the knowledge that what they are doing will be wanted by employers. This is not the case in England. We have not yet got vocational education right, and we are too far from achieving anything like parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses. Vocational education for young people in England has often failed to command the confidence of employers, higher education and the general public.

Each year, as Chief Inspector, I produce an annual report, a state of the nation overview of quality and standards in education. In last year's annual report my comments on vocational education were as follows:

> [It is] *excessively complex, bureaucratic and hard to understand... there are more than four thousand separate post-16 qualifications. Young people seeking an alternative to A level, usually those who lack sufficiently high qualifications, generally face one of two problems often depending on where they live... First, they face considerable challenge in arriving at the 'best fit' to their needs. It is just conceivable that 4,000 educational qualifications are needed for 16–19 year olds, but for each young person the choice may appear so daunting that there is no rational way of making it. Alternatively, most of the provision in an area may be of advanced courses... unlikely to be suitable for young people who have enjoyed limited academic success at school.*

Not an encouraging picture.

At the same time as I report on the confusion and complexity among the providers of vocational qualifications, I hear complaints from employers – and I know you do as well – that most high school graduates lack basic skills, and that there are significant skill gaps in most industrial sectors.

We are increasingly skill-based in our employment needs; few industries need to rely as they once did on employees who simply roll their sleeves up or bend their backs to perform routine manual tasks. Employers and industrial sectors report more and more 'hard to fill vacancies' and 'skill-shortage vacancies'.

The consequences ?

So what are the consequences of these issues? The economic reality is that the rapidly changing nature of employment requires increased flexibility and the development of more generic skills among the work force. We need to ensure that when students leave school or college they have sufficient basic skills to meet the demands placed on them by society and their employers.

The issue of social class and its impact on educational outputs is one that I am acutely aware of in England. I am disturbed by the data we see about the gross

weekly earnings of the labour force according to level of qualification. But we also have our concerns about the nature of society itself. Poor behaviour of pupils in schools, and national concerns about street crime, binge drinking, a decline in community values and so on are matters covered by the media on a regular basis – even if the evidence doesn't support the level of hyperbole offered by a tabloid paper's headlines.

I was disturbed by the correlation between school attendance and criminal behaviour in data I saw recently. Of young males aged between 12 and 16 identified in criminal terms as 'young offenders', 47 per cent had truanted from their schools at least once a month. It is rare for young offenders to have no history of truancy.

Towards solutions

Enough of the problems.

How do I see the way through them? My predecessor, Sir Mike Tomlinson, was asked to review the qualifications framework for young people in the 14 to 19 age bracket. He took a detailed look at the status and quality of the English bi-partite system of strong academic qualifications and confused and over-elaborate provision of vocational qualifications.

I know he looked closely at the increasingly well received International Baccalaureate, although he recognised that this path was more suited to our most academically able young people. He came down on the side of a greatly simplified diploma structure which maintained the focus on basic skills but developed more and more demanding and vocationally relevant components to the qualification structure available to young people. I welcomed the report, but for policy makers at that time it represented a bridge too far.

So what has been proposed?

The headlines look like this:

- a strong foundation at Key Stage 3 – the first three years of high school education
- a strong core for 14 to 19 year olds, including a greater push for functional English and mathematics
- a system that can offer 'success for all', not just the academically gifted
- a new system of specialised diplomas, related to fields of work; for example, health and social care, creative and media
- increased capacity to offer vocational education
- an accountability framework that encourages schools to improve 'staying on' rates.

It is an ambitious programme and makes no secret of the challenges ahead. Although the focus is education post-14, I am pleased to see that it recognises that the first steps must be taken before pupils reach the age of 14.

There is, therefore, renewed support for the provision of a coherent foundation curriculum for pupils up to the age of 14. This will require the development of functional skills in English and mathematics to remain at the heart of the post-14 phase and form essential components of the curriculum to the age of 19. It will not be possible to achieve one of our new diplomas without having reached appropriate standards in English and mathematics or to have undertaken vocational work experience. I welcome this direction, and the new diplomas.

But we must move away from the sterile and demeaning debates about parity that emerge each year when exam results are announced: are vocational courses soft options? how can a car repair diploma compare with physics A-level? and so on. I find this snobbery towards vocational courses unpleasantly deep-rooted. That is why I support the notion of an overarching set of hierarchical diplomas which encompass 'academic' and 'vocational' components and don't let up on the desire to maintain and improve the core skills of all our young people.

I welcome the attention given to maintaining the pressure on pupils to achieve essential basic skills. I welcome any moves that simplify the structure and range of vocational qualifications. I welcome anything that seeks to break down the lack of parity between academic and vocational qualifications. Above all, I welcome any moves that seek to engage all young people in education and learning for life.

An international dimension

I have very much enjoyed the opportunity to spend some time in the United States catching up on developments and issues here. As I said earlier, it is no surprise to learn that the pressing issues for you are also pressing issues for me. I have always welcomed opportunities to expand horizons by taking an international perspective; sometimes I think we don't do enough of this.

The issue of the 14–19 curriculum seemed to me of sufficient importance to commission a survey of what practice in this area looks like elsewhere. In 2003 I asked a team of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to undertake a series of overseas visits and report back to me on vocational education and training for 14–19 year olds in Denmark, the Netherlands and New South Wales, Australia. The outcomes of those visits interested me greatly. Let me say a few words about what we found.

Several aspects of vocational provision interested me in particular. Vocational education in all three of the countries we visited was interpreted more specifically than is usually the case in England. In essence, it is seen as developing skills for particular forms of employment. For example, HMI visited

the Shipping and Transport College in Rotterdam, the only college in the Netherlands to provide courses within this particular occupational area.

While the college does provide general courses, it also offers bespoke training for the shipping and transport industries. HMI observed classes in which 16 year olds worked on practical tasks associated with aspects of transportation and inland waterway navigations. These included using a computer programme to work out appropriate waterway routes for particular kinds of consignments. What impressed us was the close involvement of the industry sector in the design of the curriculum and the likelihood that it was well matched to industrial reality.

My inspectors were also struck by the focus on the acquisition of professional attitudes among the young people, many of whom had special educational needs. For example, they were expected to demonstrate compliance with health and safety requirements, such as wearing appropriate industrial clothing. We were also impressed by the level of investment in the facilities. The work spaces were large and well lit and included heavy goods vehicles container facilities for practising loading procedures, facilities funded by companies within the industrial sector. Computer-based simulations were impressively developed, helping students to develop competence in, for example, managing fire at sea or using a fork-lift truck.

What else impressed us? Well, the two supervising tutors in the classes we saw had up-to-date and relevant knowledge and experience of the sector. One, for instance, had recently been a master on a commercial barge. Interestingly, although most of the tutors had recent and relevant experience of working in the sector, all are required to have completed a teacher training course. All teaching staff are required to undertake annual updating in the relevant industrial sector.

What else interested us? Staying on rates in full-time educational training beyond the end of compulsory education are higher in the three countries visited than in England and there is often a general assumption that education will continue to at least the age of 18. In the Netherlands, for instance, all students are required either to take another year of full-time education or two years of part-time education after the age of 16. Drop-out rates at the age of 17, particularly in New South Wales and the Netherlands, are low.

Assessment at the age of 16 is seen as less of a watershed elsewhere than it is in England. The GCSE examination in England is viewed as a rite of passage of the highest importance, stamping the card of those intending to move into higher education and, in some cases, closing down routes for those with unfulfilled academic ambitions. In New South Wales, for example, certification at the age of compulsory education is pretty much inclusive of all students, provided they complete the required courses to a satisfactory standard. The vast majority of students gain the School Certificate at the age of 16 and stay on to take the Higher School Certificate at the age of 18. This is the norm for

most students and, as a result, there is much less of that feeling of failure at the age of 16 than we see in England among those who 'don't make the grade'.

What else did we learn? I mentioned in the example of the Rotterdam College the close involvement of the employer and other stakeholders, including trade unions, in developing the content and the associated qualifications of the vocational courses. This long established and positive feature of vocational education in the three countries visited is an aspect that could be strengthened in England. On the other hand, there was also recognition in the three countries of the dangers of vocational education becoming too industry dominated and focusing on too narrow a range of skills.

As important as any of the features we observed overseas was a greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses than there is in England. We thought that this was because there are clearer vocational pathways to higher education and employment in the countries we visited. In Denmark, for example, there is the same 13-point scale for the assessment of vocational and academic courses, with an average point score for university entrance and employment purposes.

In New South Wales, vocational courses have equal status with academic courses in the Higher School Certificate and can be included as part of the university admissions index. The acceptability of vocational qualifications to both universities and employers alike does much to raise their status.

I mentioned that the courses that we saw at the Rotterdam College were often taught by experienced professionals from the industrial sector, for example master mariners with years of experience in the marine transportation industry. As schools increasingly take on responsibility for providing vocational courses, it is proving difficult for them to ensure that the teachers of the courses have relevant industrial experience.

Teachers of vocational courses in Denmark, the Netherlands and New South Wales normally have recent industrial experience and are often required to update their knowledge of the sector they are engaged in. In Denmark and the Netherlands, for instance, lecturers typically undertake structured short placements in industry during school holiday periods, and exchanges between teachers and employers are common features of vocational education.

A final point that struck a chord for me related to careers guidance and counselling. We were impressed by the extent of the professional effort that was invested in providing young people with high quality careers guidance and counselling. It is absolutely essential that the young people – perhaps as young as 14 – are given the best quality objective advice about their educational prospects and the pathways open to them. This was a lesson we learnt from our Danish colleagues; guidance and counselling are a key part of vocational education.

So I am sure there are lessons we can learn in England from observing what my HMI identify as best practice elsewhere: the balance between specific and general vocational education; the importance of increasing staying on rates; greater involvement of employers and stakeholders; steps taken to improve the parity of esteem; improving the industrial experience of teachers involved in vocational education; improving the quality of accommodation and resources; and providing high quality careers education and guidance for young people. It's quite a shopping list.

Increasing flexibility; what's happening now?

There are an increasing number of secondary school students in England who are benefiting from an 'increased flexibility programme', bringing together those who have on occasions been seen as competitors for the same cohort of young people: schools, further education colleges, and providers of work-based learning. It is fascinating to see how popular these partnerships have been and how the numbers of participating students have exceeded expectation. The message from students is clear: we like this and want more of it. Equally encouraging, we are finding improvement among a large number of students in attitude, behaviour and social skills.

Inspection!

Before I finish, let me make one further point. I am not only concerned about what education young people receive in schools and colleges, I am deeply interested in the quality of it. This is where Ofsted comes into the frame, and my role as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. Not only is it my job to report on the quality of what I see in the English education system, it is increasingly and quite properly seen as my responsibility to work unequivocally to improve the English education system. I have not the slightest doubt that the inspection of schools and colleges provides a necessary catalyst for improvement at a local level and high quality advice for ministers and policy makers at national level. I am in a most privileged position. I can say to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills – and I have regular meetings with her – that 'on the basis of the inspection of every school and college in the country, I have found such and such to be the case, and the basis of this, I recommend the following course of action'.

So what are the principal features of the English inspection system?
We undertake short, focused inspections that spend no more than two days in a school, and carry out these inspections in every school in the land on a regular basis – currently at least once every three years. The outcomes of each inspection are presented in a public report available to parents and all those with an interest in the system. All reports are published on the Ofsted website. Take a look. See what you think.

Short, reader-friendly inspection reports emphasise what a school does well and what it should do to improve. The issues for improvement form the basis of the

agenda when we revisit the school. Where a school, or college, has serious weaknesses, it is required to respond to our inspection report through an action plan. The institutions know, to quote Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*, 'I will be back.'

Indeed, if we have particular concerns about a school, or part of it, we will return much more frequently to assess progress. If we find progress to be inadequate, or the capacity to improve lacking, I never hesitate to advise the Secretary of State that additional, radical steps must be taken, such as the replacement of senior staff in a school, or, in extremis, the closure of the school. However, increasingly we see inspection as working with a school and not just something that is done to a school. Hence we emphasise the importance of a school's self-evaluation; the first component of a school inspection is a review of what a school makes of itself.

I take pride in the inspectorate being not only an instrument of public information and accountability but also a catalyst for change. These mechanisms are interdependent. Open reporting of all inspection findings not only holds those inspected to account but also helps keep these important services – education and childcare – in the public eye. But I hope I maintain sufficient humility to recognise that inspection itself does not improve anything; improvement comes about when teachers and lecturers, headteachers and principals and, ultimately, children and young people, recognise the issues they face and determine how to deal with them.

You may be aware that inspection of schools in England is not always popular with teachers. I accept that an inspection can be a stressful occasion, but I also know that children and young people only get one chance at education and that parents have a right to know how good their children's school is. In particular, I take great pride in Ofsted's track record of speaking up for the most vulnerable children and young people in the system, those children that the system has failed and is failing. In the secondary field, many of those failures relate to students for whom the academic route traditionally admired in the English system is not appropriate.

Conclusion

I therefore welcome the direction in which education for pupils beyond the age of 14 is moving in England, and wish you well in your ambition to tackle similar issues on your side of the Atlantic.