

Pearson – Future of Qualifications and Assessment

Consultation submission from Magnus Bashaarat, Head of Bedales School

Introduction

Bedales is a co-educational independent school in Hampshire, founded by J H Badley in 1893 to be a humane alternative to the authoritarian regimes typical of late-Victorian public schools. The school became fully co-educational in 1898, with students given a formal voice by 1916, when the School Council was formed. Bedales now has around 760 boarding and day pupils between the ages of 3 and 18.

Today we continue Badley's work in seeking to challenge the influences and tendencies in society that threaten children's development and welfare. Our vision is to deliver a progressive liberal education of 'head, hand and heart' that develops independent, inquisitive thinkers with a love of learning.

To this end, in 2006 we introduced Bedales Assessed Courses (BACs) to replace some non-core GCSEs. Designed by Bedales teachers and with external moderators, BACs give students a say over what books they study, mainly involve coursework as opposed to exams, and focus on outdoors, arts and humanities subjects. They offer increased depth, more stimulating material, more active learning, less prescriptive syllabuses, and a wider range of assessment methods.

Curriculum and qualifications

We consider the national curriculum and associated qualification regime to be prescriptive, dull, narrow and inadequate for any education that seeks to help young people question, challenge and make mistakes as they become enthusiastic and independent learners.

We are not alone: there is growing dissatisfaction with GCSEs, increasingly considered redundant given the raising of the school leaving age to 18, and government's fixation with exams. As we see it, the only remaining value in GCSEs lies in informing A level grade predications for the purpose of university admissions. However, they are notoriously unreliable, and there is powerful evidence that the status quo does a disservice to applicants from the state sector and disadvantaged families. Reforms to university admission must proceed without argument, and once this is done there is no good reason for retaining GCSEs.

The world of work and adult life

Is the purpose of education to prepare young people for the world of work; to ready children for adulthood and provide them with the skills to lead fulfilling lives; or to provide them with broad academic knowledge, based on a shared culture and values? All of these must be considered the legitimate purpose of education, and to be complementary aspects of the same endeavour.

We should want young people to enjoy school, whilst seeking to prepare them for life beyond it (whatever that may hold) through a broad curriculum that inspires them to discover their interests and talents. Doing and making are key to this, offering engagement for those parts of ourselves different to those used in more obviously cerebral pursuits.

With specific reference to work, educationalists, entrepreneurs and business organisations argue that the skills taught through the national curriculum are too often the wrong ones, with the arts, humanities and languages being sacrificed on the alter of STEM subjects.

Measurement at Key Stages 4 and 5

Assessment is important, but this should not mean an exclusive reliance on terminal exams. A 2015 Demos publication – *Mind Over Matter*¹ – found that pupils in the UK lose confidence and are less happy as they move through school, and are less likely to believe that their teachers think they will be successful; whilst a third of final year students believe their school is focused only on preparing them to succeed in exams, rather than in life.

Preparing for and sitting examinations can be stressful. Whilst some young people thrive on the pressure of exams, others do not. No less importantly, the purpose of examinations must surely be the appraisal of students' knowledge of their subject – not of how they respond to fear. At Bedales, our teaching and assessment curriculum is designed explicitly to give our students more autonomy to explore their subjects, and report on what they have learned in appropriate ways. Whilst exams remain important, we see them as just one of a range of assessment methods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the cancellation of exams, and with it the re-emergence of teachers assessment drawing upon a range of evidence. We must build upon this, rather than dispense with it as an aberration at the first opportunity. Pupils' marked work could be used as the basis for an evidenced portfolio of achievement, and this would include results from any internal school exams. The same could apply to any pupil who wasn't planning to go down the university route after school. With appropriate moderation, this would play to strengths already present in our education system. Ultimately, government must trust teachers with the business of education.

Conclusion

As if we needed a reminder, the last year has taught us that we make predictions of the world and how it will be at our peril. It is hubristic of us to assume that young people will be content simply to populate a world that we have prescribed for them; rather, they will make the world themselves. If educators do our work well, we will give them the space and help them to develop the wherewithal to do this with skill, sensitivity and compassion – and without fear. Prescriptive curricula and rigid assessment orthodoxies stand in the way of this ambition.

Invoking Churchill, Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chair of the Sutton Trust, recently argued that the COVID pandemic offers us a once in a generation opportunity to reset. Sir Peter is right, but I would go further and suggest that, of necessity, many of the changes have already been made – albeit it on a temporary basis. The question is whether government wants now to halt the momentum that has been generated in favour of a return to a status quo that dissatisfied so many.

As we consider a world no longer dominated by the threat of COVID, we must aim higher than simply returning to what we knew. Whatever government decides to do next will require energy, and it would be a waste to expend that energy on heading back to where we were – a place that fewer and fewer people were happy being. We can, and must, do better.

¹ <http://www.demos.co.uk/project/mind-over-matter/>