

Speech

Nick Gibb: the social justice case for an academic curriculum

From:

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Schools Minister sets out the government's plans to reinforce the importance of a core academic curriculum for all pupils.



When introducing the second reading of his great [Education Act in January 1944](#), Rab Butler addressed a common objection of the time to the expansion of secondary education which he was about to oversee: 'Who will do the work if everybody is educated?'

Butler's response was characteristically uncompromising: that 'education itself will oil the wheels of industry and will bring a new efficiency, the fruit of modern knowledge, to aid the ancient skill of farm and field'.

The view he was standing against - that a rich education for all is unnecessary, and perhaps even undesirable - is one which has sadly been repeated many times over the past 70 years in different forms. Today, it is more likely to be heard as a denial of the value of rigorous, academic subjects for the most disadvantaged students.

This is an idea which those of us committed to social justice should reject. If we are to deliver a fairer, more socially mobile society, we must secure the highest standards of academic achievement for all young people, and especially those from the least advantaged backgrounds.

Academic decline

Many of us have always seen this denial of the value of academic disciplines for the dangerous falsehood that it is. The data shows, however, that this was not sufficient

to prevent a precipitous decline in the study of academic subjects in the years prior to 2010.

By 2010, just 43% of the cohort took a GCSE in a foreign language. In history, the figure had fallen to 31%, and in geography to 26%.

Instead, schools had been tempted to teach qualifications which attracted the most points in the performance tables - not the qualifications that would support young people to progress. The number of so called 'equivalent' qualifications taken in schools up to age 16 exploded from 15,000 in 2004 to 575,000 in 2010.

Year after year, disadvantaged young people were encouraged to take less demanding qualifications so that the 'powers that be' in the education world could congratulate themselves on their performance whilst failing to prepare pupils for success in later life.

In 2011, we asked Professor Alison Wolf to conduct a [review into vocational education](#). Her findings were stark: that many young people had previously been encouraged to take vocational qualifications which were of no, or even negative, value in the labour market. What's more, the students being let down in this way by our education system were disproportionately from poorer backgrounds.

Progress

Since 2010, we have made rapid and significant progress to address this decline in academic standards.

We introduced the new [English Baccalaureate](#) performance measure, showing the proportion of pupils in a school entering and achieving a good GCSE in English, maths, science, history or geography, and a foreign language. Schools have risen to this challenge. The proportion of pupils entering the EBacc has risen from 23% in 2012 to 39% today, and the percentage achieving it has increased from 16% to 24% over the same period. Last year, almost 90,000 more pupils were entered for the EBacc compared to 2010.

We have also acted swiftly to [implement Professor Wolf's recommendations](#). To ensure that vocational qualifications are demanding and high quality, we have removed over 3,000 low-value qualifications from performance tables and introduced rigorous new standards and qualifications. Recognising the vital importance of GCSE English and maths, we have introduced a requirement for young people who fail to secure a C in GCSE English or maths at 16 to continue studying those subjects as part of their course in further education.

But the scale of the challenge we inherited in 2010, and the importance of these academic subjects to the future strength of our culture and economy, means that we need to do more.

Overall, disadvantaged pupils remain half as likely to be entered for the EBacc as their non-disadvantaged peers. 23% of pupils eligible for the pupil premium were entered for the EBacc, compared with 45% of all other pupils.

This gap persists even among the most able pupils. Just last week, the Sutton Trust published analysis which looked at the GCSE performance of pupils who had previously scored in the top 10% nationally at the end of primary school. They found that, even within this group, pupils who had received free school meals were significantly less likely to be taking history, geography, a language, or triple science at GCSE than their peers.

These children, who showed such early promise, have been let down by our failure to offer every pupil the chance to benefit from a core academic curriculum.

This culture of low expectations has afflicted whole local authority areas. Despite our reforms, fewer than 10% of pupils in Knowsley achieve the EBacc, compared to 30% in Halton in the north-west, 35% in Westminster and 34% in Hackney. These disparities are not simply explained by social circumstance - in all 4 local authorities, the proportion of pupils identified as disadvantaged is between 40 and 56%. This is simply unacceptable.

Today, I would like to set out this government's plan to address this challenge by strengthening academic standards further.

But first I want to defend our emphasis on academic subjects against 4 criticisms.

Low expectations

Some have argued that we cannot expect disadvantaged pupils to take academic subjects, or to be motivated by their study. In 2011, an Associate Director of the Institute of Public Policy Research said that:

The problem [with the EBacc] is that very few students from disadvantaged backgrounds actually take those subjects, they won't be motivated to take them. Ministers are now [effectively] incentivising schools to focus their efforts on middle-class children who do well in these subjects.

This is a concern which was difficult to sustain in 2011, and has now decisively been proved wrong. 'Outstanding' schools across the country are demonstrating that a rigorous academic curriculum is the way to overcome educational disadvantage, not an inevitable victim of it.

King Solomon Academy, situated in the heart of a disadvantaged community in Paddington, is one of these schools. 67% of GCSE pupils at King Solomon Academy are eligible for the pupil premium, but despite this, 93% of pupils entered the EBacc, and 76% of pupils achieved it in 2014.

Rushey Mead School in Leicester is yet another example of an 'outstanding' school where they have high expectations for all their pupils. 33% of the school's intake is eligible for the pupil premium, 72%, are entered for the EBacc, and 42% achieve it, well above the national average.

These schools show that all pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can find academic subjects motivating.

We should never lower our expectations because too many young people are failing to reach them. Rather, we must raise standards by supporting teachers and turning around schools which are struggling. The government is determined to rise to this challenge.

A broad curriculum

It has also been suggested that our emphasis on academic subjects in the national curriculum, and especially the introduction of the EBacc, 'crowds out' the study of other important subjects, particularly the arts.

We should acknowledge that the curriculum always involves trade-offs: more time on one subject means less time on others. Over the years, I've been asked to add scores of subjects - from intellectual property, to Esperanto, to den building - to the national curriculum. Many of these are important and interesting.

The question, though, is always whether they are sufficiently important to justify reducing the time available for the existing subjects in the curriculum, and I make no apology for protecting space for the English Baccalaureate subjects wherever possible.

That is not to say, of course, that subjects outside the English Baccalaureate have no place in schools. The EBacc is a specific, limited measure consisting of only 5 subject areas and up to 8 GCSEs. Whilst this means that there are several valuable subjects which are not included, it also means that there is time for most pupils to study other subjects in addition to the EBacc, including vocational and technical disciplines which are also vital to future economic growth. The vast majority of pupils will rightly continue to take the opportunity to study further academic GCSEs or high value, approved vocational qualifications at KS4 alongside EBacc subjects.

Indeed, the government has consistently promoted high-quality arts and cultural education. Music and art are statutory subjects in the national curriculum, and we are spending over £270 million in music education programmes between 2012 and 2016. And we're spending in this period over £113 million on the [Music and Dance Scheme](#), and over £19 million on a range of cultural education programmes.

The supposed choice between a core academic curriculum on the one hand, and the study of a broad range of subjects on the other, is a false one. Before they begin to specialise, we have to ensure that all pupils have the chance to establish a solid academic foundation upon which they can build their future. Several high-performing countries, including South Korea, Japan and the Netherlands, ensure that a core curriculum of academic subjects is studied and then examined at the age of 16.

Success in the modern economy

Others have argued that, in today's economy, when we cannot predict the jobs of tomorrow, a core academic curriculum is no longer relevant. In his new book, 'Creative Schools', the educationalist Sir Ken Robinson writes:

The old systems of education were not designed with this world in mind. Improving them by raising conventional standards will not meet the challenges we now face.

This argument - that the world today is fundamentally different, so high standards in academic subjects are now less important - is not new. As the American education historian Diane Ravitch has pointed out, educationalists such as William Heard Kilpatrick were predicting the same decline in relevance of academic subjects a hundred years ago:

There is nothing new in the proposals of the 21st century skills movement... If there was one cause that animated the schools of education in the 20th century, it was the search for the ultimate breakthrough that would finally loosen the shackles of subject matter and content.

Sir Ken is correct to recognise the value of flexibility and creativity to success in life and the labour market. But he is wrong to suggest that the best way to foster these attributes is to reduce the emphasis on core academic subjects. As Tom Bennett, a teacher and founder of the superb ResearchEd conferences, put it in his excoriating review of Sir Ken's latest book:

Is there anything more sad than the sight of someone denying children the right to an academic curriculum and the fruits thereof, than from someone who is the very pinnacle of such an education?

By contrast, the best preparation for securing a good job is a solid grounding in core academic subjects: Professor Wolf describes achieving at least a C at GCSE in English and maths as of 'critical importance' to employment. And University College London 'considers experience of learning a foreign language a vital element of a broad and balanced education'.

This isn't a debate between academic subjects on the one hand, and vocational qualifications on the other. It's about ensuring that all school children up to the age of 16 are properly educated in those academic subjects that best equip them for their future; either for high-quality vocational education after 16, or further academic education until ultimately going on to engage in training for a vocation.

Anti-intellectualism

Finally, and perhaps most perniciously, some even suggest that a core academic curriculum represents a kind of elitism - as if the study of Wordsworth's poetry or Rutherford's Standard Model is for some people, not others.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educationalist with a commitment to the education of the poor. But his vision of an effective curriculum differs sharply from my own. He believed that the traditional model of education, in which a teacher communicates knowledge to his or her pupils, is oppressive because this deprives them of the opportunity to challenge received wisdom and develop their own contrary perspective.

Freire was of course right that society's culture and body of knowledge is disproportionately the product of those who have themselves benefited from a rigorous academic education. And in the past, unequal access to such an education has meant that the leading lights of literature, science and the arts have often come disproportionately from advantaged backgrounds.

But it is exactly for this reason that we now need to extend the benefits of a rigorous academic education to all. The body of academic knowledge belongs to everyone, regardless of background, circumstance or job.

This is not a political issue of left and right, but rather a choice whether to stand behind aspiration and social justice, or to take the easier route of excuses and low expectations.

It is striking, therefore, that the government's commitment to academic rigour receives support from many politicians across the political spectrum. Diane Abbott has proved to be one of the most eloquent supporters of our approach, and has spoken out powerfully in favour of a core academic curriculum:

Precisely if someone is the first in their family to stay on past school leaving age, precisely if someone's family does not [have] social capital, and precisely if someone does not have parents who can put in a word for them in a difficult job market, they need the assurance of rigorous qualifications and, if at all possible, core academic qualifications.

This view is reflected in parents' hopes for their children. In 2010, the Millennium Cohort Study found that 97% of new mothers wanted their child to go to university. A core academic education remains an aspiration for all, and the government is determined to stand with parents and teachers to make it a reality.

To those who criticise our focus on academic subjects, or suggest that the EBacc is a Gradgrindian anachronism, I have a simple question: would you want your child to be denied the opportunity to study a science, history or geography, and a foreign language?

Next steps

It is for these reasons that the government will take further steps to restore academic subjects to the heart of the curriculum in all schools.

We are reforming GCSEs and A levels so that they are more rigorous, and provide better preparation for employment and further study. GCSE students taking modern languages will now have to translate into the target language accurately, applying grammatical knowledge of language and structures in context. GCSE students in maths will have to know how to develop clear mathematical arguments and solve realistic mathematical problems.

A level maths students are now required to study both statistics and mechanics. For both A level maths and further maths, there is a greater focus on mathematical

problem solving and modelling, and language and proofs to ensure students understand the underlying mathematical concepts.

We are working with teachers and publishers to increase the use and availability of high-quality textbooks in schools. Good textbooks provide a structured, well-honed progression through a subject's content. They also ease workload for teachers, who no longer need to spend whole evenings and weekends preparing ad-hoc resources. Despite these benefits, textbooks are now a rare sight in English classrooms: only 10% of primary maths teachers here use a textbook as the basis for their teaching, compared to 70% in Singapore and 95% in Finland. I have challenged textbook publishers to do better, and am determined that we will secure high-quality resources to underpin an academic curriculum.

We are improving standards of mathematics by supporting schools to adopt the proven mastery approach to teaching maths. The mastery model emphasises whole class teaching, systematic progression, and - crucially - the expectation that every child can succeed in mathematics. This approach is informed by teaching methods in Shanghai, where 15-year-olds significantly outperform their English peers. Shanghai tops the PISA table for performance in maths and students there are on average 3 years ahead of their counterparts in England.

And just to emphasise its importance for success in later life, Shanghai also came top in the PISA table in financial literacy, scoring significantly higher than the second-placed Flemish community in Belgium.

All of these measures will continue to raise academic standards, so that every pupil receives the education to which they are entitled. In due course, we will also set out details of our expectation that secondary school pupils should take English Baccalaureate subjects at age 16. In doing so, we will listen closely to the views of teachers, headteachers, and parents on how best to implement this commitment. And we will ensure that schools have adequate lead in time to prepare for any major changes.

For some schools already leading the way, such as King Solomon Academy and Rushey Mead School, this change will pass by unnoticed. But for others, where only a small minority currently achieve the EBacc, there is no doubt that this will be a significant challenge. We will support these schools to raise standards, but make no apology for expecting every child to receive a high-quality core academic education.

Together, these measures will give more pupils the preparation they need to succeed - whether that's getting a place at a good university, starting an apprenticeship, or finding their first job. They will provide the foundations of an education system with social justice at its heart, in which every young person reaches their potential.