



**Worshipful Company of Educators**

**Education Committee**

**Discussion Evenings 2016**

**5 December 2016**

**'16+ Education: how can we get it right?'**

**Bill Watkin**

In introducing the evening's speaker Martyn Coles, Lower Warden and chair of the Company's Education Committee, described Bill Watkin's extensive experience of secondary education and hinted that Bill's talk would range across a sprawling landscape accompanied by a keen sense of humour. The audience was not disappointed.

Bill explained that there was much change afoot. The Education and Adoption Act outlined how 'coasting' schools would be identified and their issues addressed. Nick Gibbs, Minister of State for School Standards, had made it clear that the 2015 manifesto commitments would be followed but in May 2015 the new Secretary of State for Education, Nicki Morgan, had promised a period of calm and stability to allow the recent reforms to bed down. Despite assuring everyone that there would be no mid-year changes these did happen, for example the announcement by AQA that almost 20 A-level subjects would no longer be offered. Ms Morgan had also described a 'rigour revolution' in schools and there was much talk of 'raising the bar', a phrase frequently associated with her predecessor, Michael Gove. There were to be continuing reforms of GCES and A-levels and Bill outlined the assessment regime that would start from two years old onwards.

Bill spoke of the role of the Regional School Commissioners (RSC) and the growing influence they exercised. While each RSC was advised by a headteachers' board, he noted that none of the boards yet had a headteacher representative from the 16-19 sector. He commented on the new National Curriculum which owed much to the American philosopher E.D. Hirsch and which was very heavily knowledge-based and where skills were regarded as secondary. While few would argue that raising attainment was important, his worry was that if everything were made so much more difficult to achieve, then 'leaky boats may not be able to rise with the rising tide' – the impact on less able and vulnerable learners needed to be considered carefully. The new GCSE qualifications would be more difficult to pass and it was very likely that there would be an apparent drop in reported outcomes.

Bill saw the emergence of more free schools as this was government policy. The newly appointed head of the New Schools Network had already indicated his intention to increase the target for new free schools from 500 to 750 by 2020.

Bill explained that sixth form colleges taught a sixth form curriculum, primarily A-levels and applied A-levels, but were part of the Further Education (FE) sector. If such colleges were to become academies they would no longer have to pay VAT and this could have a significant effect on their finances. The

Sixth Form Colleges Association had conducted a Funding Impact Survey which showed that the colleges were increasingly reducing their offer to students from 4 to 3 A-levels and that minority subjects were being cut because of financial restrictions. In some areas school sixth forms are closing because schools could not afford to support small numbers of students. International comparisons show that funding levels in England are lower than in many other countries. A National Funding Formula is due to be introduced by 2018-2019 but this will involve a redistribution of resources across regions, rather than across age ranges. There are burgeoning financial demands places on schools and colleges: sixth form colleges were already having to deal with the effects of rising inflation, increased pension and NI contributions, and the consequences of the raising of the national minimum wage on staff costs. Added to all that was the shortage of teachers in key areas, a notable example being maths.

Bill also mentioned that currently multi-academy trusts (MATs) could introduce forms of selection within their schools. For example, 'centres of excellence' for gifted and talented students could be established and MATs could move students between their various sites. It appears that the DfE had shifted its position on this having previously stated that such moves would be in contravention of the admission rules. He saw value in the new Opportunity Areas which sought to improve life chances across the whole age-range and increase participation in university education as well as providing better pathways for young people into higher and technical education and training. There would be a high priority on responding to local needs within each of the initial six areas. The Technical and Further Education Bill would encourage development of school and college-based technical education as well as apprenticeships. The recent area reviews, designed to rationalise 16-19 provision, had given impetus to sixth form colleges considering academisation but the reviews were flawed inasmuch as school sixth forms were not included within the reviews. The latest information was that 50% of sixth form colleges were actively considering becoming academies.

Bill turned to a survey of the post 16 curriculum which presented challenges for sixth form providers. He noted the need to balance the need for numbers (and thus income) with quality (retention and destinations). The new grading system for GCSE will take time to be understood and consistently applied. The transition between the A and AS-level system and the new A-level structures could prove to be problematic. Other concerns that Bill identified were the effects of the EBacc, linear A-levels (no longer modular) and whether these prepared students effectively for degree work which often involves modules. The pressures on secondary students gave rise to concerns about the mental health of young people and there needed to be investment in services to meet these needs, especially when one considered that the average age for the onset of depression is now 14.

Attention was also drawn to resits for GCSE English and maths taken in the first year of the sixth form. The data showed that a very small percentage of those achieving a grade E or below achieved a grade C or better at a resit. Enabling such students to follow a functional skills maths course rather than resitting GCSE would probably provide a more useful qualification for them.

The Sainsbury review of qualifications had proposed two distinct pathways, an 'academic' which would prepare learners for further study and a 'technical' which would prepare students for employment. The report had also suggested that 'Applied General Qualifications' should form part of the 'academic' pathway and that these would support progression to higher education. The Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) were liked by both universities and employers. Students who had A-levels and AGQs frequently achieved well at university.

It was the case that sixth form colleges were the best providers at improving grades at resits. It was very important that these colleges were fully aware of the changes being made at Key Stage 4 and

that there was appropriate provision for all learners. The Secretary of State, Justine Greening, had stated that the government would examine closely the vocational and FE sector.

There then followed a discussion of some of the issues raised in Bill's presentation. Asked by one questioner to comment on how he saw future developments, Bill responded that education was subject to a vast range of influences. With regard to vocational education, there was a danger that vocational qualifications would be seen as a poor relation by some. He was asked whether the self-government of schools would improve the situation but Bill did not see academies bringing any more freedom. Greater accountability was being demanded and he suggested that the government doesn't always respond in the right way. For example, the government made a mess of Key Stage 2 assessment this year but said that, in an effort to get it right in the future, no changes would be made this year and as a result anomalies with the assessments continued for the time being.

Bill did consider that the government's commitment to developing skills for training and employment was genuine. There was another question about the re-launch of apprenticeships and whether these could be appropriate for various trades. Bill thought that schools could teach a vocational education approach up to 16 and then academic students could branch off. There were questions and comments about the role of universities in apprenticeships and Bill noted that some universities, like schools and college at 16, often saw potential students at 18 as funding units. A member of the audience pointed out that universities needed to be involved in apprenticeships because they were offered up to Level 8 and so fell within the universities' sphere of interest. Another audience member commented that there was confusion about the direction apprenticeships were taking. Bill's view was that the EBacc could discourage schools from offering vocational educational qualifications pre-16 because they had less cachet, with the result that fewer students would come through a vocational educational route.

The question was posed as to whether university technical colleges (UTCs) were supposed to offer the blend of vocational and academic education and at a higher level that Bill had been discussing. Bill's view was that some UTCs were endeavouring to recruit the right kind of learners and were sometimes forced to take students who had not achieved particularly well. Some UTCs were struggling (and more than one had closed recently because it could not recruit sufficient students) and, as it stood, the movement was in difficulty. A member of the audience, who was a governor of a UTC, stressed that the university technical colleges should be distinctively vocational. Some young people could see where they wanted to go at 14, could see an exciting future and were capable of making that decision.

Replying to a comment about the notion of a 'high rigour' curriculum, Bill commented that the government has attached that description to one particular type of curriculum, i.e. the academic. That same approach should apply to all curricula in schools and colleges. The government's view could be interpreted as a result of social or class divisions but the fact remained that many people do not value vocational qualifications.

Susan Fey (Upper Warden) pointed out that when she became Master of the Company in 2017 her theme for the year would centre on vocational education and she encouraged everyone to participate in her programme for that year. There would be plenty of opportunities for discussions and exchanges of views.

Bill was asked about the outcomes of the area reviews that he had mentioned in his presentation. He considered that some colleges would merge and that they would be fewer in number. However, there had been little attempt to rationalise the curriculum as a result: the driving factor was financial

robustness. One development for colleges is the opportunity to join or form an academy chain: this route would entail the loss of some autonomy but may help to preserve student numbers.

In thanking Bill for his presentation and stimulating debate, Martyn Coles noted that Bill had demonstrated the very wide range of provision but also the turbulence that abounded in the sector, not only amongst the general public and some education professional but also amongst policy-makers. There would be opportunities during the next Master's year for the Company to engage in meaningful debate about the issues that Bill had raised and to encourage a wider audience in the City and beyond to join in those discussions.

*(Bill Watkin is CEO of the Sixth Form Colleges Association but was speaking in a personal capacity)*