

[It's secondary education that needs to get real, Mr Ebdon](#) [1]

Written by [Henry Hill](#) [2] | Wednesday 22 February 2012



If one phrase were needed to sum up all that is wrong with the choice of Les Ebdon as 'Fair Access' Czar of British universities, it must be this:

*?I don't think universities can just say: ?Oh well it is because they are doing the wrong GCSEs??
Universities have to deal with the world as it is rather than the world as we would want.?*

What he means is that universities should not be allowed to maintain high standards and insist on schools meeting them. Instead, universities should supplicate themselves to whatever mania is sweeping the teacher training colleges at the time.

Ironically, Ebdon's policies mark the latest in the public education sector's long march away from anything resembling 'the real world'.

As I [wrote](#) [3] in June, this sort of thinking is the result of the 'progressive' education establishment's attempt to combine its love for fashionable theories with the terrible results when those theories are field tested.

Instead of adopting more effective teaching methods, to which much of the teaching profession has developed a certain ideological antipathy, state educators realised that they had another option: move the goalposts that marked success.

This started with the concept of 'value added' results. In essence, where schools had to deal with 'disadvantaged' groups such as ethnic minorities, immigrants or the poor, educators demanded that grades and league table positions reflect how well they thought they had done, given the poor materials to hand. Instead of seeing these children as challenges, they sought excuses.

But all these illusory achievements count for little when universal standards are applied, as in university applications. Because no matter how hard state educators insist that one child's Cs are equivalent to another's As because the first child is black or poor, in the 'real world' so beloved of Professor Ebdon a C is still a C and an A is still an A. Grade inflation notwithstanding, of course.

Once again, instead of renouncing failing methods 'progressive' educators are instead trying to lower the bar. It is our world class universities that must adapt 'to the real world', not our many unsatisfactory secondary schools.

Yet even if you crowbar these children into universities, they still aren't properly equipped for the

experience. Some universities already have to dedicate time in first year to equipping students with the sort of basic skills they should have developed during their A Levels.

These students will be accruing tens of thousands of pounds of debt to acquire second- or third-rate qualifications, all the while denying a place to a more capable student and weakening the strength and international competitiveness of British higher education.

Yet how far can this fantasy be sustained? What happens when these students hit the employment market and find that the illusory value-added grades they've been given by lazy educators aren't actually worth the same as qualifications acquired through impartial assessment and intellectual rigour?

Will the next generation of Ebdons insist on 'value-added' degrees, and that employers must deal with the world 'as it really is, not as they would wish it to be'? Will employers be forbidden from 'discriminating' against such qualifications?

It sounds totally outlandish. But following the logic of Ebdon's appointment, it no longer sounds impossible.

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) ^[5]

Source URL: <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/its-secondary-education-that-needs-to-get-real-mr-ebdon>

Links:

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/its-secondary-education-that-needs-to-get-real-mr-ebdon>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/henry-hill>

[3] <http://dilettante11.blogspot.com/2011/06/simon-hughes-is-wrong-it-is-state.html>

[4] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[5] <http://disqus.com>