

The Tiffinian

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Editorial	2
The Staff	3
Notes and News	12
Awards Ceremonies	29
University and College Places 2012	34
Sports	38
House Activities	97
The Arts	105
Societies, Courses and other Activities	118
Old Tiffinian Section	132
Obituaries	149

EDITORIAL

“All,” said Heraclitus in the sixth century B.C. (or ought I to write BCE?) “is flux. Nothing stays still.” How true of our sphere of existence over the last twelve months or so!

Academies and free schools now abound. Education Secretary Michael Gove proposed a revival of O levels and CSEs to supplant GCSEs. But deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg demurred, so Mr. Gove relented.

Then, against a backdrop of well over a thousand state schools droppings GCSEs for the O level style International GCSEs, CBI director-general John Cridland calling for their abolition, and Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College, labelling them “a straitjacket on scholarship”, Mr. Gove pledged to end more than two decades of GCSE “dumbing down” by consigning the latter to oblivion, in favour of new English Baccalaureate Certificates (Ebaccs) centred upon English, mathematics and science, initially from 2015, with history, geography and MFL following a year later, in the biggest overhaul of the examination system for a generation. In addition, extra marks would be awarded for spelling, punctuation and grammar. No more grade inflation! À bas teaching to the test! Allez rigueur!

Competition between exam boards would also finish, as would league tables reflecting non-academic subjects, while internal assessment, coursework, projects and results fed by narrow end-of-module tests would disappear, or be reduced in mark weighting, with a candidate’s final grade dependent mainly or, indeed, wholly on an end of course exam., with limits on retakes, as in days of yore.

Consequently, GCSE results fell for the first time in the exam’s history – even independent schools saw a 1.8% drop in A*/As – and the annual inflation in A level awards was reversed for the first time in a generation, with tougher essay-style questions to follow for future cohorts, when the modular approach would be terminated here, too, and possibly A/S levels with it. A return to credibility?

Not as such. Many results (especially in English) were subsequently raised after wholesale regrading (particularly in Wales) in the wake of controversy and a record wave of appeals, our establishment being no exception. And 340,000 A level and GCSE papers were later marked up after schools submitted excuses to justify enfeebled individual performances.

Meanwhile, critics of the Ebaccs, understandably I feel, voiced solicitude for the arts, culture and sport, warning that concentration on the core subjects risked marginalising these in schools, thus jeopardising true breadth of learning. Nor did some subjects in these areas lend themselves to end-of-course only assessment. As Bob Dylan said: “The times, they are a-changing.” Whither next?

Not everything has changed, however. The MFL crisis continues, the number of A level takers in French and German in freefall (though numbers in Polish and Mandarin are up, I hear). The independent schools still dominate A* results. Meaningless, obsolescent maths teaching risks killing the subject off nationally – almost 9 of every 10 pupils drop it at the earliest opportunity – and further damaging the economy.

Almost half of teachers questioned believe school buildings pose a threat to health and safety. There is an inability to attract enough top-quality staff to the state sector. Significantly increased numbers of teachers are taking early retirement because of factory-style targets, poor pupil behaviour, stress, and pension changes; and 56% of the rest in state schools took almost a fortnight off sick in the year.

Except, of course, that at Tiffin, yet again, none of these norms appears to apply (although I am not sure about Polish takers). The number on roll is our highest ever; more the 80% of this year’s leavers are now at Russell Group universities, 17 at Oxford or Cambridge; and as figures reveal ten candidates are contesting every grammar school place across the country, considerably more than that apply here and we are listed as the country’s seventh-most over subscribed school. We feel we are probably doing something right – read the succeeding 129 pages and judge for yourself – and our main apprehension is that ill-considered funding cuts might desiccate the spring, and perhaps delay LRC2, the next phase of our building project.

Tim McCann