

Bound in shallows and in miseries: reform of the route to higher education is now long overdue

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Twenty-seven years on, I welcome SoS Gavin Williamson's current resolve to reform entry into Higher Education.

The August roller coaster of students' emotions, not to mention those of their families and teachers, upon receipt of GCSE and A level results, is an annual reminder that the present systems are faltering.

Take first the structure of the 14 – 19 curriculum and its schemes of assessment, well overdue for revision. Second, methods of entry to and the very organisation of higher education are increasingly out of step with the National Education and Training Targets.

It is Shakespeare's Brutus who reminds us:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and miseries.*

Two overlapping reform tides command our present attention. Wise, collaborative initiative is needed from central government and the educational establishment. This will require that the former shifts from its preoccupation with short-term solutions, while the latter must prove willing to accept that inertia should not prevail.

In common with most headteachers up and down the country I spent part of August fielding matters arising from GCSE and A results. First came the mid-

month cries of anguish and delight from 18 year olds. As widely reported, this year's cohort divided neatly out into C P Snow's two cultures. Maths and science candidates have moved effortlessly into their first-choice universities, even those who slipped a point or two.

In striking – and galling – contrast Arts students, even those with A and B grades, have struggled to secure their chosen place of study where the upper grades happen to have come out in the wrong order.

How do you explain to frantic parents that despite securing the overall UCCA points total required their son is now not able to go to the city to which he has been preparing to move since the university made its offer *eight* months ago? How do you console a 'rejected' geography student who knows she has worked harder than her physics counterpart only to see the friend accepted with lower grades?

Students funding themselves through university, including tuition fees, will come sooner rather than later to the British system. The nation cannot afford otherwise and the sooner we are honest with ourselves the better for our current generation of secondary-aged children.

Faced with such costs parents and students will willingly and properly opt for two-year degrees, and there is no reason why compression of time should compromise quality. Moving to a January start would remove the August silly season of unnecessary disappointments.

Sixth form students could then be applying in the early autumn on the basis of substantive grades and more meaningful school references. Might they also be expected to use the 'gap' term for some form of locally based community service?

If we are not to be bound in shallows and miseries well into the early decades of the 21st century, there has now to be creative, unfettered dialogue between the schools and university sectors.

Our Secretary of State for Education (John Patten) is well placed to begin the process this autumn. In doing so he may enhance the continuing education life chances of future generations.

Roy Blatchford's recent books are '[*The Three Minute Leader*](#)' and '[*The Forgotten Third*](#)', published by John Catt Education.