
Let's Not Reinvent the Vocational Route: a comment on Labour's proposals for 16-plus

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ABSTRACT A National Education Service should be genuinely cradle to grave. This article focuses on the key area, often neglected, of 16-plus education and highlights the need for substantial public investment using the lessons of past experiences to build on the principle of 'a good general education for all' at 16-19.

Labour's plans for a National Schools Service are to be welcomed. Perhaps understandably, we wait for more detailed policy statements in the other areas of what will then be a National Education Service, and this is particularly the case with policy for post-16 education. Nevertheless, the 2017 election manifesto correctly recognised the extent of the crisis in further education (FE), promising more resources but also committing itself to levelling the historical funding inequalities between colleges and school sixth-forms, guaranteeing that all post-16 education is free and restoring Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs). After the last eight years of austerity under the coalition and the Tories this is the least we can expect, and we look forward to discussions about how the commitments that have been made can be realised. Elsewhere, however, we would argue the picture is less straightforward. New Labour originally proposed bringing vocational and academic options closer together through its *Curriculum 2000* initiative but then rejected the 2004 Tomlinson proposals for an overarching certificate. Instead of this step towards the integration of academic and vocational learning, the party then reverted to supporting a distinct vocational route for the 'forgotten 50%', as those who did not progress to university were called by Ed Miliband and his education shadow minister, Tristram Hunt (see Allen, 2015). The 2017 manifesto continues in this direction, supporting the recommendations in the Salisbury Review (commissioned by David Cameron) for a revamped vocational (now renamed

'technical') route based on new T- (Technical) level qualifications. This cross-party and professional consensus once again reinvents the vocational route to contribute to the seemingly universally accepted goal of state education policy to 'increase social mobility' (by which is meant upward social mobility).

The Rise (and Fall) of Vocational Education

Full-time vocational courses developed in schools and colleges in response to the collapse of industrial apprenticeships in the 1970s alongside rising youth unemployment. As a result, rather than opt for exploitative Youth Training [1], many working-class young people voted with their feet, remained in school or enrolled at college – some continuing into the polytechnics. In the 1990s, Lord Dearing's review of the National Curriculum encouraged schools to use vocational qualifications as alternatives for 'non-academic' students from age 14. As well as being more appealing to these young people, the more learner-centred and more participatory pedagogy that was a feature of vocational learning was also said to reflect the demands of the 'post-Fordist' workplace. Yet, as noted above, the reality was that vocational courses developed because of the absence of work for school leavers, not as a response to the need to 'reskill'.

Some of the higher-profile initiatives, such as the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), claimed to be real alternatives to A levels. Others were expensive white elephants, like the specialist diplomas championed by New Labour (see Allen & Ainley, 2008). The most durable have been the BTEC awards, which continue to attract thousands of entries each year, with the most popular areas being Business and Health & Social Care.

The first T levels (in Digital, Construction and Childcare) are due to start in 2020, but will be available across different employment sectors from 2022 and aspire to be 'as rigorous and respected as A-levels'. [2] There are 15 routes, covering multiple occupations within them. The new qualifications are intended to be delivered in specialist FE colleges but include work placements. Employer representatives will be offered a lead role in the design of the specifications and standards.

The technical pathway will thus be a middle route between academic learning and apprenticeships to which they will be connected, both being under the auspices of a new 'Institute of Apprenticeships'. In fact, four of the 15 routes are to be designed to be delivered solely through apprenticeships. [3]

Despite all this, there is little real evidence of repackaged and rebranded vocational qualifications delivering any significant improvements in employment opportunities for young people. On the contrary, in her 2011 review of vocational qualifications, Alison Wolf (Wolf, 2011) reported that many of them (particularly lower-level ones) provided poor returns in the labour market and were much less demanding than academic qualifications. She therefore proposed that vocational options at Key Stage 4 be restricted to 20% of a student's timetable.

Employers have continued to prefer recruits with academic qualifications and by and large do not engage with vocational qualifications. Some educationalists have also continued to be suspicious of academic/vocational pathways, reminiscent of the grammar/secondary modern divisions in the 1944 Act when the number of Technical Schools – designed also as a ‘middle’ pathway – remained very small and unevenly distributed. Young people have also realised that the A level is the only qualification with real currency for entry to a ‘good’ university and the graduation that offers at least hope of the secure semi-professional employment at which they aim. As a result, over 50% of 16-year-olds now enrol on them.

The low status of vocational and practical learning has been an enduring feature of English education for decades. To compensate for this, vocational qualifications have taken on characteristics of academic learning –including such elements as external ‘end-of-course’ assessment.[4] This only alienated many of the very students they were designed to attract and did not attract other students away from the academic route.

At different ends of the political spectrum, both Lord Baker (Tory secretary of state for education under Mrs Thatcher, but now the force behind University Technical Colleges; see Baker, 2013) and, more recently, Jeremy Corbyn [5] have blamed a deep-rooted historical snobbishness in Britain’s two-tier educational system as a contributing factor in the UK’s poor economic performance as compared with a country like Germany, with its highly developed and much admired industrial training systems.

But even if German vocational training may be more intellectually demanding, enjoy higher status and have much larger components of general education, a major difference is that it is part of a wider ‘social partnership’ where, in contrast to the UK’s largely ‘free-market’, deregulated approach to labour market entry, employers and trade unions work with local and national state bodies to ensure that secure employment is guaranteed for young people who complete apprenticeships.[6]

In England, the dramatic rise in the number of undergraduates who have used vocational qualifications as their main means of entry to university, or as part of it – around 1 in 3 school leavers are in this category – raises further questions about these qualifications being primarily a route to work. Alongside A levels, the vocational pathway has become a major route into higher education (HE), at least for entry to the post-1994 institutions anxious to fill their places.

Specific Skills or Generalised Knowledge?

A major problem with reinventing a vocational/technical pathway is that it ignores what the 2017 Labour manifesto recognised – that ‘technology is changing demand for different kinds of skills, and evolving patterns of work mean that people are more likely to pursue several careers during their working

lives' (p. 34). If this is the case, it is not advisable for 16-year-olds to lock themselves into specialised vocational areas.

In addition, there has been a move in employment away from specific occupational competence to more generic knowledge and skills. Thus, the Institute of Directors argues that 'workers need more than technical knowledge' (Institute of Directors, 2016) and that, as more work is automated, 'soft' skills are necessary for collaboration and innovation using problem solving, imagination and abstract reasoning as the likely domains where humans will retain a comparative advantage over robots. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) also claims that employers value positive attitudes and (that current buzzword) 'resilience' above formal qualifications.[7]

The same can be applied to digital skills. Though the parliamentary Science and Technology Sub-Committee's 2016/17 report correctly highlighted the dangers of digital illiteracy and noted that 90% of new jobs would require digital skills 'to some degree', this does not mean that all those doing such jobs will need familiarity with computer science, or even proficiency in programming or coding. There is nothing to prevent a range of general employment skills making up part of a 'core' curriculum for all students (see our concluding arguments below), and there have been previous attempts to do this, though most have been half-hearted and lacked authority.

The Decline of 'Middle' Jobs

Vocational and technical qualifications have traditionally been associated with entry to 'middle jobs' for which, until recently, a degree was not required, and which are generally considered to be at 'intermediate' skill level. Yet it is now increasingly argued that many of these jobs are being 'hollowed out' (see Goos & Manning 2003; DBIS, 2013), disappearing because of increased use of automation, as well as due to outsourcing and the fact that 'deindustrialisation' continues to happen more rapidly in the UK than elsewhere (see Lansley, 2012, particularly chapter 3).

However, according to some commentators (e.g. University Alliance, 2012), the decline in 'middle jobs' has been more than compensated for by a large increase in managerial and professional 'knowledge-based' jobs above them. Nobody can deny that there are more high-level jobs, but there are fewer than expected and not enough for all those qualified to do them (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). The Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), for instance, has forecast that between 2012 and 2022 only just over one-third of all new jobs that are created will be in high-skilled occupations. Other evidence confirms that it is increases in unskilled and low-paid work that are most significant. So the IPPR predicts that, although the number of health professionals will grow by 1.6 million by 2022, the number of care workers will grow by 3 million in the same period. Surveys also reveal that over a third of graduates are not in graduate jobs and remain 'overqualified but under-employed'.[8]

Neither do surveys of individual employers (UK Commission for Employment and Skills [UKCES], 2016) [9] provide real indication of there being significant skills shortages. UKCES found 86% of employers reporting a 'fully proficient' workforce, so that deficiencies were likely to be more prevalent at semi-skilled or unskilled levels. Three out of 10 respondents reported evidence of 'underutilisation' of skills and abilities among employees – approximately two million workers in total.

In other words, encouraging education and training for direct entry into jobs that may not exist by the time that training for them is completed will be a major disservice to young people. Rather than contributing to the seemingly universally accepted goal of state education to 'increase social mobility', young people on vocational programmes unable to access new higher-level employment are more likely to be downwardly mobile, sliding into low-skilled, low-paid, insecure, often part-time and, in a word, precarious jobs which already make up as much as 40% of all employment.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) estimated that in the years that followed the financial crash in 2008, 80% of new jobs were low paid and insecure, while, according to the *Financial Times* (19 January 2015), even in the decade before the crash, disappearing middle jobs were likely to be replaced by low-skilled employment, more so than in many other countries. Data from the Resolution Foundation (2018) is the latest in a line of studies showing younger workers as the group most likely to end up in low-paid employment despite their high level of qualification.

Learning the Lesson from Apprenticeships

Before promoting new vocational and technical pathways, their proponents should pay much closer attention to the fate of the latest apprenticeships with which, as noted, the new T levels will be aligned. Nearly a decade after David Cameron's unfulfilled promise to create three million high-quality apprenticeships, higher apprenticeships still make up less than 8% of the total. Latest figures show that between August 2017 and February 2018 there were 232,700 apprenticeship starts (reported to date), compared with 309,000 apprenticeship starts between August 2016 and February 2017 (reported at the same point last year). In February 2018 alone, there were just 21,800 apprenticeship starts, compared with 36,400 starts in February 2017. The fall in participation rates for those under 19 (7%) is especially telling.

Since Cameron's promise, two thirds of apprenticeships have been at intermediate level (equivalent to GCSE and without guaranteed progression to advanced level or even into permanent employment). For much of this period also, almost as many apprenticeships have gone to existing and older employees whom employers have reclassified to access funding. Not only is the number of apprenticeship starts falling [10], but well over half are low-level schemes only lasting around a year.[11]

As with vocational education, apprenticeship schemes have been redesigned and rebranded, bogus training providers hounded out and an employer levy introduced to increase funding. Labour is right to emphasise the importance of 'quality' in apprenticeships and to keep the levy (Manifesto 40), but, as has been argued (Allen, 2015), because of the predominance of service-sector employment that requires little in the way of formal training, many employers are reluctant to spend money on apprenticeships. (For this reason, in contrast to the male-dominated industrial apprenticeships of the post-war period for which there is such nostalgia, the majority of apprentices today are women in stereotypically female roles in retail, offices and sales.) For vocational training programmes to be successful, therefore, they must, as in Germany, be part of a longer-term industrial strategy that guarantees employment progression. For the UK, this would require huge increases in public spending and much greater levels of state intervention. To its credit, Labour makes this connection but, as we have argued (Ainley & Allen 2018), it will be a Herculean task to resist global changes to work and occupation (Brown et al, 2011).

What Sort of Education Should Be On Offer after 16?

In the meantime, arguing that vocational/technical pathways do not improve prospects for young people does not mean that we should accept that academic learning does not need to be reformed. The 1970s and early 1980s were a time of major reforms not only in content, but also in the delivery and the assessment of the upper-secondary curriculum. This culminated in the introduction of GCSE – a common exam for all students. As part of *Curriculum 2000*, Labour 'modularised' A levels, helping to increase participation rates substantially. New courses in new areas also emerged – for example, in social sciences and media studies.

Yet Michael Gove's 'reforms' dramatically reversed these developments; the EBacc now dominates the Key Stage 4 curriculum, and at post-16, traditional A-level subjects are considered superior. The Labour manifesto makes no mention of these attacks, but a more detailed and less hastily produced Labour policy for education will need to address them. We would argue for a 'good general education for all' in the 16-19 age group. This would include a mandatory right to a variety of learning experiences, including 'vocational' ones, and, if properly planned and properly resourced, would finally bury the outdated and unequal 'two-nations' approach, at least in state schools.

However, reform of tertiary-level learning must also be extended from FE to HE. The government is embarking upon a post-18 review. While ostensibly focused on 'accessibility', 'value for money' and funding, it includes proposals to rate and perhaps fund individual university departments based on the earnings of their graduates. Students will be encouraged to speculate on their own human capital by regarding their differentiated fees (by course and institution) as investments. Meanwhile, universities will be rated on a crude gold, silver and bronze metric of their 'teaching excellence', predictably entrenching divisions

between the self-styled Russell universities, the intermediate campus ones and the former polytechnics, many of which are already declining into platform universities run largely online.

Advocates of a comprehensive higher education therefore seek access for all, with fees replaced by a grant or basic income. This would not be popular with many of the 18-year-old school leavers who choose not to apply to HE. Nor would it be welcomed by the many students on courses of often dubious value for which they are grossly indebted. Instead, there should be lifelong entitlement from 18+ to access further and higher continuing adult education, including the statutory youth service that John McDonnell committed to on 23 February 2018 at a Conference of the General Federation of Trade Unions. This tertiary entitlement should be available to all, full or part time, at any time of life, in or out of formal employment.

Notes

- [1] According to Dan Finn (1987), rather than improving employment prospects, YTS was little more than 'Training Without Jobs'.
- [2] Justine Greening, DfE briefing, 11 October 2017.
- [3] Protective Services, Sales & Marketing, Social Care, Transport & Logistics will be designed around apprenticeship standards.
- [4] As part of New Labour's Curriculum 2000 reforms, GNVQs were relaunched as Vocational A levels and then renamed 'Applied', but candidate numbers have fallen dramatically and the BTEC-type qualifications they were designed to replace have remained popular.
- [5] *TES* 5 July 2018, <https://www.tes.com/news/corbyn-life-long-training-crucial-economy>
- [6] See Allen (2016) for a brief overview of 'why we can't do it like the Germans'.
- [7] See the CBI's 2016 employer survey: <http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/cbi-education-and-skills-survey2016.pdf>
- [8] Economists have generally used the term 'under-employed' to refer to situations where employees seek more hours to secure higher take-home pay, but it is also now increasingly accepted that employees being overqualified for jobs that they hold results in lower productivity.
- [9] Employers Skills Survey 2015: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/704104/Employer_Skills_Survey_2015_UK_Results-Amended-2018.pdf
- [10] file:///C:/Users/Allen/Desktop/Apprenticeship-and-levy-statistics_May-2018_commentary.docx.pdf
- [11] For a general overview of the problems surrounding apprenticeships, see Allen (2016).

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