

Reconstruction post-Covid

Education, training and assessment – a new vision

Michael Pyke

Abstract

This article reports on a conference organised by Reclaiming Education about the situation facing technical, vocational and further education as the Covid-19 pandemic slowly wanes. Issues addressed include the changing nature of the student cohort, the reduced scope for practical experience, the value of BTEC courses as against the new T-levels, the need for improved funding, and the continuing importance of education for social justice.

Keywords: further education; technical and vocational education; market model; national education service; T-levels

‘Reconstruction post-Covid’ was the title of a Zoom conference, the second one of 2021 to be organised by the Reclaiming Education group, held on 16 September. The speakers were: Sally Dicketts CBE, president of the Association of Colleges, and for 18 years chief executive of Activate Learning; Eddie Playfair, senior manager at the Association of Colleges and former principal of Newham Sixth Form College; and Tom Wilson, chair of Group Training Associations, England and a visiting research fellow at two universities. The conference was chaired by Melissa Benn.

Sally Dicketts proposed to address three questions: when was technical/vocational education in a better state than now; what are we trying to achieve in contemporary technical/vocational education; how can we achieve our goals? She herself entered this field in the 1980s and, although the content of courses has not changed greatly since that time, the make-up of the student cohort has changed a great deal and there has been a significant decline in resources. The student cohort of the 1980s was largely drawn from an ability range of whom the great majority now go to university. Currently, students pursuing vocational and technical courses are drawn from the 60th to the 80th percentile of the ability range. In the 1980s, students were able to have 20 hours a week of ‘hands-on’ practical experience, and courses had freedom and flexibility built into them. Nowadays, students are lucky to receive as much as nine hours a week of practical experience within courses that are much more rigid and mostly limited to 15 hours a week. Furthermore, there has been a significant decline in funding for further education.

Sally felt that the constantly increasing emphasis upon end-of-course examinations,

especially A-levels, was destructive of the kind of qualities which employers regularly claim to value, such as creativity, the ability to work in teams and solve problems, and personal resilience. The overemphasis on written examinations had also led to a serious loss of status for technical and vocational education. New methods of assessment were needed in which much more emphasis needed to be put on practical skills.

Eddie Playfair described the current situation as ‘not good’: the pandemic has exposed the serious levels of poverty and disadvantage in our country. At the heart of any recovery programme must be the need for social justice, but the present government shows few signs of understanding this and persists with an outdated ‘market’ approach to education which has only reinforced inequality. This has led to serious problems of motivation among disadvantaged young people, many of whom have become disengaged from education. Moreover, funding for FE is grossly inadequate.

However, if we take a historical view, we may see in the current crisis an important opportunity to renew our sense of solidarity. Eddie provided two examples of this from the 20th century: in 1916, at the height of the disastrous World War I, farsighted politicians were already making plans to revolutionise the education system by introducing universal free secondary education; while in 1943, at the height of World War II, R.A. Butler was introducing the Educational Reconstruction White Paper, which would lead to the great 1944 Education Act. As well as endangering society, a crisis may also be the spur to creative thinking.

Eddie listed the essential changes that are needed if the FE sector is to recover.

- The purpose of education has to be seen as transcending the merely economic. In addition to acquiring the skills for earning a living, young people need their education to address the question of how to live well.
- Those in charge need to understand properly the ways in which inequality limits the educational possibilities open to the disadvantaged. Compensatory mechanisms are insufficient unless the drivers of inequality are identified and tackled.
- The ‘market model’ introduced by the 1988 Education Reform Act needs to be scrapped and replaced by the kind of approach that led to the creation of the NHS. In other words we need a national education service.

Tom Wilson led off with a charge that few would disagree with: in terms of creating the kind of workforce that the UK needs, the present system is failing. He welcomed the demise of Gavin Williamson, not least because the latter had scrapped the Union Learning Fund, which had made a small but highly valued contribution to the improvement of knowledge and skills. He wondered if Williamson’s replacement would reinstate the fund.

The ‘mad dash’ to T-levels was a mistake and it was noticeable that employers were

not queueing up to provide the minimum 45 days of work experience that T-levels require. Meanwhile, BTEC, a qualification much respected by both employers and students, is under serious threat of having funding withdrawn whenever there is a T-level course deemed to be equivalent. The apprenticeship levy was improving from a poor start but needed extending to smaller employers, while its scope needed to be extended beyond simple apprenticeships to include other kinds of learning that employers can provide. Tom noted that Toby Perkins, currently the shadow minister for apprenticeships, employment and skills, favoured extending the wage subsidy offered for apprenticeships to cover more schemes. Unfortunately, the assessment of current schemes has been bedevilled by 'red tape', and qualified assessors are extremely hard to find.

Tom described the current Skills and Post-16 Education Bill as 'mostly vacuous rubbish' but welcomed the possibility hinted at in the bill of an equivalence being established between higher and further education. If this were achieved, the increase in prestige for FE would encourage much greater participation.

Among the lessons that government should learn from the Covid pandemic are:

- that teaching staff have risen to the challenge;
- that funding should be brought forward for the many adults who now need to reskill;
- that there is enormous scope for training workers in the skills needed to insulate the country's ageing housing stock.

Finally, Tom pleaded for a change in the government's attitude to adult learning, which he characterised as suspicious, overcautious and bureaucratic. Government should learn that successful organisations have earned the right to be trusted and to exercise autonomy.

The ensuing discussion served largely to reinforce the points that the speakers had made. There was an overwhelming consensus that things are in a mess.

Michael Pyke read English at Cambridge and then taught English and drama, mainly in comprehensive schools, until 2005. More recently, he has taught adult classes for the WEA. He is the media spokesperson for CASE and edits the journal *CASEnotes*.

pykemichael1541@aol.com

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