
The FE White Paper, an immediate reaction

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Whether you welcome the White Paper or not depends on whether you believe a word that Boris Johnson says, particularly about 'levelling up' and 'greening' the economy.

On the latter, it has been widely noted that it is not a very Green Paper. However, if the Government were genuinely committed to what Danny Dorling at an online CLASS conference last year called 'levelling up properly' or 'levelling up and not pretending to do so', this is where Skills would come in.

The title of the White Paper, *Skills for Jobs*, signals that it is talking not just in terms of the academic outcomes to which schools are dedicated in a futile efforts to equalise access to university - especially in the deprived North as against the supposedly privileged South. Skills show that you mean business and are going to do something about 'the non-academic' majority of school leavers who do not go to higher education. Instead, they will go to further education, where 'those who are good with their hands' will be able to achieve equally with 'those who are good with their brains'.

Skills, moreover, show you know what you are talking about - like Gavin Williamson! For he is concerned that 'other people's children' have been overlooked by his Oxford-educated New Brexit Party Cabinet chums. Never mind that we have heard this faux-concern repeated ever since industrial apprenticeships collapsed along with the rest of British industry in the 1980s. Successive governments then substituted a succession of Youth Training Schemes, vocational qualifications, specialist colleges and technical institutes, all competing to drive up standards 'with employers in the driving seat', as the White Paper puts it.

None of these technical and vocational initiatives have 'rebuilt the vocational route' as they ostensibly set out to do. John Major's 'Apprenticeships' were 'Modern' in that they were no longer time-served nor guaranteed employment on completion. Unlike 'Ancient' apprenticeships, they were not run in partnership with trades unions nor, like their much lauded German equivalents, were they highly regulated, but existed in a free market. They sounded reassuringly secure though - and yet 'modern' at the same time - 'postmodern' perhaps! David Cameron relaunched even more flexible apprenticeships extended to service, retail

and office sectors, where many skills could be learnt on the job, and so they did not recruit the five million apprenticeships promised, despite extensive and expensive advertising.

Two reasons for failure and the root of the problem

There are two interlinked reasons for this history of failure. One is that school leavers know that nowadays a degree is the minimum for a chance of even semi-professional semi-permanent employment. So they are prepared to go into exorbitant debt for student loans and fees as an investment in their own human capital on courses of often dubious quality - especially in the current circumstances in which vice chancellors have kept universities open rather than forego the fees upon which their survival depends.

The other reason is simply that most employers don't need apprentices any more. If they do, they train them themselves, and/or recruit graduates rather than school leavers for them. This is especially the case for the higher-level apprenticeships to which apprentices will supposedly progress. (There are exceptions, such as the Rolls Royce engineering apprenticeships that have been reported many times to be harder to get into than Oxford, but they only go to prove the rule.)

So now we come to the root of the problem - why have 'skills' been so degraded to behavioural competences that it is very unclear what the word means anymore? Indeed, 'skills' are commonly substituted for qualifications. Not to speak of 'personal and transferable skills' that are confused with what psychologists would formerly have described as 'attributes', or 'personality traits', such as demonstrating initiative or the ubiquitous 'resilience'.

This is because of the degradation of work in the twentieth century, to quote the title of a 1974 critique. This exposed the pressure to produce more goods for sale at a profit that would guarantee a return on investment in machinery that was at the same time becoming more expensive and complex. The rate of profit was falling from the end of the post-war boom on, and the economy was opened to investment by global financial capital. This benefitted privatised services at the expense of productive capital and state

services, gaining investors much quicker returns. As their jobs were automated, skilled workers were laid off, later to be joined by non-manual office and managerial employees.

Handing over colleges to employers but tightening central control

Now colleges are to be reincorporated under Business Centres, with employers designing 'almost all technical courses' - there won't be any other sort, especially in industrial sector-dedicated 'National Colleges'! Trainees and apprentices fed on from 'vocational' courses in schools will have 'access to flexible student finance' to train and retrain - just as those accepted for HE can take out student loans! There will be 'a nationwide lecturer recruitment campaign' but no pay rise to bridge the £9,000 gap with teachers!

Yet whilst the Government hands FE colleges over to employers, it is tightening central control over the sector. The White Paper proposes 'new powers for the Secretary of State for Education . . . [to] intervene quickly and decisively in cases where there are persistent problems that cannot otherwise be addressed, either with colleges not delivering effectively or where local providers are unable to deliver the skills priorities for that area' (p12), and 'we will consider introducing new statutory powers for the Secretary of State to take a more active role in regulating the provision of initial teacher education [for schools and early years, as well as FE and Skills] if the improvement we need to see is not achieved' (p62). This is of a piece with other centralising measures of the new corporate state that is being introduced under cover of Brexit.

For in hopes that 'Global Britain' will compete on equal terms with the EU and other developed economies, the Government is 'taking back control' by setting up (tax-) Free Ports and Enterprise Zones to encourage investment in new productive - or at least processing - industries where there might be demand for employment that has not been automated and outsourced in what has long been a predominantly service economy. But the surviving 240 English colleges cannot all be moved to these zones and ports - although at *PSE's* Zoom discussion of the White Paper on 28th January, imaginative plans for the East Midlands Free Port were reported by participants from there!

This does not mean that the robots are coming and mass technological unemployment can only be managed by the provision of universal basic income, else large sections of the population will lose access to the wages they need to survive. In a reiterated process that skills a minority at the expense of a de-or multi-skilled majority, skills of maintenance,

diagnosis and fault-finding become generalised. Not that these skills too do not get simplified in turn; if machines are not self-repairing, electronic surveillance detects malfunctions that can be repaired manually with interchangeable modular components. Meanwhile, the fewer and fewer tasks that become more and more skilled, eg. designing if not building new machinery, are developed by specialist training on graduate and post-graduate courses - in engineering for example. Other obsolescent skills are sometimes retained as 'crafts' for niche markets.

But new general skills and knowledge are also needed for the green economy the White Paper makes so little of. These are not only the 'hard skills' to insulate homes and install solar panels etc but also the 'soft skills' of care (not mentioned in the White Paper) that require recognition and reward if the care sector is ever to be properly aligned with the NHS by integrated career paths. Care in the widest sense of nurturance and support is also necessary across a range of activities from environmental concern to education. The skills involved can only be delivered in a non-academic way, including the professional knowledge underpinning them. Local authority responses to the pandemic that are of this type have been shown to be more effective than the reflex policy response of corporate government to 'cement . . . private sector companies in the public sector supply chain', as the Head of Serco put it in a leaked email (*Guardian* 21/10/20).

An alternative to the threatened extinction of humanity was presented by Labour's 2019 election manifesto, and its proposals for a red-green economy remain the benchmark of a missed opportunity. However, such a transformation will not be implemented by following the campaigning methods of traditional social democracy. Rather, to force change means pressure from the bottom up, like that 'kicking off' worldwide in Russia, Myanmar . . . everywhere.

Here pressure is also building, notably but not solely, in the form of Black Lives Matter and XR Rebellion. However, these and other more or less spontaneous forces challenging the centre from the Left lack coherence and agreed ideology, despite the shared situations of oppression from which they arise, above all to convert their demands for equality into organisational means to deliver it. This is certainly the most immediate and essential education, and perhaps some schools, colleges and universities can soon be given over to it!

Reference

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.