
Another round of vocational qualifications won't create better jobs

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One of the key arguments in the White Paper is the need for more technical qualifications - a continuation of Tory claims about 'intermediate' skill shortages. There are enough graduates (it's argued), but not enough technicians. As a result the White Paper sets out plans to introduce new Higher Level technical qualifications, backed up by learning loans, the first of which (in Digital) will begin from 2022, enabling transition from T- (Technical) levels, considered as alternatives to GCE A-levels, which were due to start this academic year. But the White Paper does not provide any real evidence of skill needs. It is now increasingly argued that the occupational order is 'hour-glassed' (even pear shaped) and it's widely accepted that the 'middling jobs', which technical qualifications have traditionally been aimed at, are disappearing - the post-war 'pyramid' model of class and occupation has been pulled apart.

The White Paper wants to persuade us that there's not enough employer involvement in the vocational curriculum, and that this has stopped the UK becoming an industrial powerhouse like Germany. But will employers be getting increasingly involved in FE colleges, in the way the Government wants? This is unlikely. While employer reps have continued to sit on qualification design boards, individual employers in the UK have never been that interested in - or even that knowledgeable about - vocational qualifications - they would rather recruit people with 'trusted' academic qualifications. And of course, there are plenty of graduates to sign up.

The White Paper's claims about apprenticeships being a 'huge success' are absurd, ignoring the fact that, until recently, the majority of starts have been at GCSE standard - a level that many young people have already reached, or have been started by existing employees. The White Paper devotes most of its attention to Higher-Level apprenticeships - these represent just over one in ten of all starts, with few opportunities so far for school or college leavers. It doesn't seem to understand either that it is

employers, not colleges, that initiate apprenticeships, and that, unlike the post-war period, 'deindustrialisation' has meant that many employers neither need nor want them. If apprenticeships had been a real alternative to academic learning, then why would there be a need to reinvent the classroom-based vocational route?

Instead of up-skilling, full time vocational learning in schools and colleges has grown up in response to a collapse of labour market opportunities for young people in recent years. Now facing non-existent apprenticeships or a lifetime of casualised 'precarious' work, young people have continued in full-time learning - a situation of 'education without jobs'. The vocational pathways that have developed in response to increased staying on in full-time education have been used to divide and direct students away from academic study. This has been central to Tory thinking since Lord Dearing's review of the school National Curriculum in the 1990s, and which continued with Kenneth (Lord) Baker's University Technical Colleges (UTCs). More recently, the Sainsbury Review of post-16 education established the T-levels. Now the Tories have another aim - to reduce the numbers going to university - so returning HE to 'how it used to be'. They despair about the implications of unpaid student debt.

As is the case with T-levels, it is unclear who will sign up for the new college-based technical awards. Encouraged by the Augar Review, and facing loss of government financial support if they don't make their course more 'vocational', as if there are not enough of them already, non-elite universities are likely to offer their own versions of them. The White Paper was also drafted before the pandemic, the effects of which may lead to further changes in occupations or increase the threat of automation. Rather than locking learners into specific pathways, more generic learning and a broader curriculum is needed. But there also have to be proper job creation policies for young people.
