

21st century apprenticeships: a real alternative or something else?

Stephen Lambert *looks at the evidence*

The Government launched its industrial strategy with new-look apprenticeships in early 2017 at Gateshead College. The skills minister, Robert Halfon, announced an extra £170m funding for Institutes of Technology, which could involve an upgrading of further education colleges in the North East. Both Gateshead College and nearby Bishop Auckland are likely to

benefit given their 'excellent' track record in delivering technical vocational education and apprenticeships.

While some high-tech sectors of the regional economy have been identified, the Government has used its industrial policy to unveil the Post-16 Skills plan, based on the 2016 Sainsbury Review. The plan sets out fifteen new routes into high skilled

employment to allow those young people who don't want to go to university to achieve a technical qualification from level 3 to Foundation Degree (Level 5).

Of course this appears to be an attractive opportunity for teachers who work in the region's sixteen under-funded FE colleges. Yet as the educationalist Martin Allen points out it remains unclear whether the Government's

strategy will help job opportunities for the 60 per cent who don't go to university at 18.

Nor is it a new idea. The former Conservative minister, Michael Heseltine, outlined a similar state interventionist policy back in 1984 under Mrs Thatcher, which came to nothing. Twenty years later the New Labour government commissioned the Tomlinson Review, which called for the introduction of specialist diplomas for the 14 to 19 age cohort.

Back then there had been concerns about keeping the A-level, long seen as the 'gold standard' of British schooling. Vocational education enjoyed a low status. Tomlinson's main proposal was to replace GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications with a single diploma over a ten year period. The diploma would have operated at four levels: entry (pre-GCSE); foundation (GCSE up to D grade); intermediate (GCSE at A to C); and A-level.

Students would have been able to progress at their own pace in mixed-age classes. A-level students would have taken more challenging tasks to get higher marks. The diploma, backed by many policy-makers, would have been made up of 'modules' (short courses) from the existing A-level and GCSE modules. Students would have opted for one of the twenty pre-designed specialist diplomas. As Tomlinson argued, this would have strengthened vocational qualifications, as the so-called 'academic' subjects could have been studied alongside the more 'vocational' ones.

All learners from 14 on would have studied 'functional skills' - numeracy, communication and ICT - and would have done an extended written project alongside work experience, paid jobs or volunteering. By 2005 Tony Blair had shelved the report to avoid

upsetting 'middle England', who were wedded to the academic A-level. With the election of the coalition government, Michael Gove in his first week as education secretary axed the idea of 14-19 specialist diplomas.

By 2012, the government-commissioned Wolf Report released its findings about the state of post-16 vocational education in the UK. Its conclusions were damning. Too many youngsters were doing low level vocational qualifications in colleges, with little value to their job prospects. Apprenticeships were too short and bore no resemblance to the old-style five-year apprenticeships which had dominated post-war British industry, commerce and public services. In short, the system was in a mess. It needed urgent surgery.

Ailing

Today, 25 per cent of youngsters aged 16 to 19 do A-levels. But three-quarters are either on high quality BTEC programmes, ailing apprenticeship schemes, or low level 'mickey mouse' training schemes. A minority on Tyneside are able to combine A-levels with BTEC National level 3 certificates in job-related areas such as business or technology.

Both the CBI and TUC have long argued that the North East and areas elsewhere have fallen behind other countries in the level of 'intermediate' skills held by the workforce. Some continue to see the German system of technical education and the apprenticeships as the way forward. Certainly there's a lot of mileage in this argument. Yet at present competition for the available high quality apprenticeships with reputable employers is fierce. Take Nissan, the Wearside car manufacturer.

Over 1,000 qualified 18-24-year olds applied for a dozen well paid apprenticeships!

Yet it is increasingly recognised by some forward-thinking policy analysts, like Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley in their important book *Another Great Training Robbery*, that several skilled and 'technician' level jobs across the economy are vanishing. This is due to further technological changes like automation and digitisation. Where these jobs do continue to exist, they are likely to be filled by university graduates who find themselves 'overqualified and underemployed'.

With the advent of robots, the decline of blue-collar and white-blouse work and potential mass unemployment, it may well be the case that there won't be enough highly skilled jobs to go around for those who are qualified. It may well be that 'deskilled' work at the bottom end of the service sector and precarious self-employment will continue to increase.

As Allen notes, it's likely that growing inequities, rather than lack of skills, will be the main problem in the UK jobs market of the future. Governments may be forced to explore alternative strategies such as the Universal Basic Income Guarantee being piloted in Finland and Holland, and job-sharing, to address these issues.