

Rediscovering the ‘new vocationalism’

Stephen Lambert

For many observers the Government’s preoccupation with rolling out academies and free schools across the English educational system is an irrelevance at best and a fad at worst. The emphasis needs to be refocused on improving and raising the status of vocational and technical education for that 60 per cent of post-16 year olds who don’t follow the academic GCSE/A-level path.

Since the 1944 Butler Education Act, ‘vocationalism’ has traditionally been seen as second best to A-levels – a very peculiar English trait unknown in other European countries like Germany. From 1947 very few technical schools were established. A small number were set up in industrial areas such as Wallsend and Sunderland, but the vast majority of youngsters attended secondary modern schools between 11 and 15, with a minority at grammar schools.

With post-16 education now mandatory, over 70 per cent of young adults attend general further education colleges or are following short apprenticeships with private training providers. Yet despite higher levels of participation, a report by the regional thinktank Policy North notes that in the North East 45,000 16-24 year olds are NEET – in other words, 21 per cent of the region’s young adults are neither in education, training or employment, the highest such figure in the UK.

Across Tyne and Wear, most youngsters attend Newcastle College Group, Gateshead, Tyne Met. and Sunderland College and follow high quality BTEC National Diploma programmes in a broad range of occupational areas, including health and social care, manufacturing, business, IT, uniformed services and creative arts, while others follow Level 1 or 2 courses of variable quality, as noted by the Newcastle City Council report, *The NE: Skills for the Future*.

Despite progress in educational standards across the North, research done by Estelle Morris, vice chancellor of Sunderland University, shows that the UK remains near the bottom of international measures of attainment. The region has a relatively low proportion of adults with technical skills, yet top employers are crying out for qualified ‘technicians’. About half of the adult labour force (ie people

between the ages of 16 and 64) lack basic numeracy skills. One in six have the literacy skills of an average eleven year old – sufficient to read the front page of the *Sun* newspaper. As Morris notes, this is a key factor behind why many people end up in low paid, low skilled jobs or become part of a permanent ‘reserve army of labour’, in and out of precarious jobs, often on zero hours contracts. Although official unemployment has fallen, it’s still the case that overall 1.5 million are jobless. 400,000 16-24 year olds are receiving JSA despite a ‘skills shortage’ in some parts of the British economy.

The Government has built up a ‘policy consensus’, backed by the CBI and TUC, on ‘rebuilding a vocational route’, boosting ‘apprenticeships’ and giving the ‘new vocationalism’ an impetus. In 2015 the Cameron government signed up to creating three million apprenticeships, funded by a £3 billion levy on large employers, as an alternative to higher education.

Yet some critics remain sceptical. In his book *Betraying a Generation* (2016), Patrick Ainley, professor of education and training at Greenwich University, points out that the Government’s approach amounts to nothing more than a ‘magic solution to somehow conjure up a German-style productive industry out of the UK’s deregulated economy’. Whilst backing the need for an industrial strategy, Ainley points out that there’s a danger that post-Brexit some employers will be allowed not to pay the levy. For Ainley, a number of employers simply don’t want apprentices. If they do they will train up young adults themselves – like at Nissan, the Japanese car manufacturer based in Sunderland – or hire university graduates for ‘technician jobs’. A recent survey carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) illustrates these concerns. One in six employers expect to cut apprenticeships while the CBI has called on the Government to delay their introduction till 2018. Whatever happens, some educationalists believe that the apprenticeship programme could resemble the discredited Youth Training scheme of the 1980s, which in the main provided little real training and rarely resulted in a well-paid, meaningful job at the end of it.

However, the little-reported, government-funded Sainsbury Review of technical education, published in Spring 2016, reaches a number of important conclusions. The report highlights that the majority of 16-17 year olds don't opt for academic A-level programmes but follow a vocational-type level 3 curriculum instead. At present a significant minority of sixth form students do three A-levels with a BTEC Subsidiary level-3 qualification either in IT or business, which works well. But Sainsbury calls for a 'bipartite' approach when it comes to compulsory post-16 education: an academic route for some and a vocational pathway for the majority, based on 'parity of esteem'. One clear danger of this approach is that the old post-1944 'bipartite' system is reintroduced, reinforcing class divisions – A-levels for the middle classes and vocationalism for the 'masses'.

Rejecting the 'marketisation' of post-16 qualifications – 300 in number according to the Wolf

Report (2011) – Sainsbury and Alison Wolf herself call for a single qualification for each vocational area. More work needs to be done by FE colleges, they urge, to place 250,000 learners in work placements.

The time is now to give vocational education the status it deserves. A plumber or beauty therapist is just as important as a media studies graduate. Arguably the Labour government's policy obsession with getting 50 per cent of 18 year olds into higher education was ill-judged. Many young adults, especially working-class, white men, don't want to go to university. With the abolition of the £3,000 maintenance grant, even fewer will opt for HE at 18 or 19. Even those who are there question whether it's the right decision. Some continue with their academic studies, accruing huge debts, and end up in a job in which a degree is not necessary. A minority drop out after the first year. Many would be happier and better off pursuing a high quality level 4 apprenticeship with a real job at the end of it.