

Baronesses battle

Patrick Ainley *investigates current debate about the future of tertiary education.*

Baroness Tessa Blackstone, former-Labour Higher Education Minister then Greenwich University Vice Chancellor, and Baroness Alison Wolf, King's College Professor and long-time Tory education advisor, are far removed from students and teachers in further and higher education but in two recent lectures they present two possible futures for what they both call 'tertiary education'.

Wolf is now a cross-bench peer and presents her latest report / lecture for a Lib Dem thinktank. It is a successor to her 2015 pamphlet *Heading for the Precipice* that concluded both FE and HE funding is 'unsustainable'. As a way out she now advocates integrating further and higher as tertiary education. This follows the US organisation of community colleges linked to universities. However, it also suggests a way to reduce the numbers of university students.

This is heresy for teachers committed to changing lives and society through education. In the last century, even up to 1987-97 when Blackstone was Master of Birkbeck (London University's adult college), limited upward social mobility still allowed selected individuals to move from working-class jobs to middle-class careers through access to HE. In this century, this has become virtually impossible as professions are being dismantled by digitisation and deregulation in conditions of general downward social mobility.

Despite the New Labour government's investment in human capital to increase the supply of 'skills' (ie qualifications) for 'the knowledge economy' that Blackstone is still committed to, more graduates have not generated more graduate-level professional jobs. Instead, a degree is now needed for previously non-graduate employment, displacing other job-seekers into more precarious – often insecure and part-time – employment. In hopes of avoiding this,

university applications have risen to record numbers despite the Coalition government tripling fees to world-record levels.

The Coalition attempted indirectly to reverse New Labour's widening participation to HE not only by making it more expensive but also harder to get in, following Alison Wolf's recommendation of cutting back on vocational qualifications in schools. Neither of these measures produced the intended reduction in student numbers: 1) because most universities are dependent for their survival on fee-bearing students and so applicants will get in somewhere, irrespective of their qualifications or lack of them; 2) because the level at which fee/loan repayments began was set at £21,000 – way above most graduate earnings, even years after graduation. So it is no skin off students' noses to take on debt as most will never fully repay it.

The current Conservative market-led solution therefore aims to raise fees still higher while altering the repayment terms and differentiating 'quality' institutions. Meanwhile, private universities will be subsidised by the state to provide cheaper and shorter programmes of mainly business, accountancy and legal studies. By contrast, Wolf's ostensibly non-market solution is to expand sub-degree programmes in both colleges and universities by giving 'a uniform and unified tertiary funding entitlement for all adults, which they can use when and as they like' (p43).

These 'technical' courses will supplement the apprenticeships Wolf also favours but acknowledges will only meet skill shortages in specific sectors – currently engineering, IT and construction. She therefore criticises Cameron's target of 3-million-apprenticeships-by-2020 that May's government is still committed to as diluting quality. And certainly most employers don't want or need apprentices in the UK economy's persisting 'low-skills equilibrium'.

Their lack of enthusiasm is shown by their unwillingness to pay the levy Wolf recommended for large companies. Besides, employers will often take graduates for technical jobs in place of apprentices.

Nevertheless, reintroducing secondary modern / 'technical schools', as May's government also proposes, is supposedly intended to complement tertiary technical training and apprenticeships. This leaves academic schools competing to cram their sixth formers into universities, a route preferred by all those advocating vocational training for other people's children. Wolf shares this preference, not recognising how disheartening relentless cramming is for students and teachers alike in the grammar-school based National Curriculum.

Yet, even after completing their lengthening 'student journeys', fewer graduates gain access to careers, even after postgraduate programmes and internships. For the proletarianisation of the professions is laying waste the core middle-class constituency of HE. This repeats the way industrial crafts with apprenticeships in employment supported by FE were deskilled in the past. Reviving 'apprenticeships' and 'technical' schooling alongside grammars will not create more jobs, any more than increasing the supply of graduates does.

Wolf's suggestion of a funding entitlement to tertiary learning that could be taken up as and when required might appear a relief to many 18 year-olds pressured into thinking they must 'go to uni' or die! It might also rescue FE from more mergers and rationalisations to integrate it as part of Tertiary Education (ie FE+HE), instead of once again cutting provision for its four million-plus (depending how you count them) full- and part-time, mainly adult students.

But school leavers will predictably reject Wolf's sub-degree alternative to HE – as they reject apprenticeships – since they know they need 'a proper degree' (however tedious and expensive) to get a proper job. The weakness of both proposals is that they do not recognise this as an economic problem not an educational one and that, following the logic of deregulation, the UK has become a largely post-industrial and service-based economy. Accompanied by persistent austerity, the Government's 'industrial strategy' only invites a race to the bottom with countries outside any EU regulation.

The solution cannot be to reinvent the vocational route as Wolf once again urges. Nor to 'raise standards' in 'grammar schools for all' in academic preparation for the 'comprehensive higher education' Blackstone advocates. This not only confuses vocational higher and further (tertiary) education with general secondary and foundation primary schooling but bamboozles students with the debased

qualifications teachers are compelled to inflict upon them while warehousing them temporarily in colleges and universities.

Instead of these two sides of the same coin, teachers and students should raise the question of a socially useful education with discussion at all levels of learning about how education can develop individuals to apply their imaginations and abilities to resolve the crisis of their generation and thus sustain the future of society.

References

Blackstone, T. (2016) *Universities: some policy dilemmas*. Gresham Lecture 27/7

Wolf, A. (2016) *Remaking Tertiary Education: can we create a system that is fair and fit for purpose?* London: Education Policy Institute first annual lecture 14/11.

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