

The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper

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Despite the White Paper's title, the direct relationship between education and skills is problematic. Of course, there are links between the level of 'human capital' and economic prosperity, but not in the crude ways the White Paper suggests. And, of course, the ability to perform some specialist occupations is directly linked to classroom / academic knowledge. But, arguably, many intermediate work skills are generally learnt on 'the job' - with employers just as interested in 'generic' ability. This is even more the case as jobs become less specialised, and roles become more general - as they increasingly will in an era of technological change and AI.

It's also evident that prosperous economies tend to generate successful, more equal and better resourced education systems, rather than being dependent on them. These economies are successful for a range of other reasons - high levels of investment, high levels of innovation, high levels of state intervention, good labour relations - the list could go on.

But education continues to play an important function in the selection of candidates for different sorts of employment - probably the main function. However, because of their limited knowledge of what goes on in the classroom, employers use educational qualifications as 'proxies' and accept traditional conceptions of what a 'good' qualification is and which institutions are likely to provide them. These considerations are reinforced by the educational establishment and are extremely difficult to shift.

Rather than a 'skills match', it's more useful to see recruitment to the jobs market as a 'labour queue' - graduates are higher up, NEETs at the bottom - though with the disappearance of 'youth jobs' from the 1970s onwards, as a whole, employers have tended to recruit other groups of workers before young people, who in times of recession and

increased unemployment have provided a 'reserve army of labour' (as Marx termed it).

But in the labour queue, people are able to downsize (and by implication 'bump down' others). Thus, graduates are much more likely to end up in jobs, even if they may be 'overqualified' for them. (Graduate unemployment might be quite low, but graduate underemployment is a different matter.) It's young people at the bottom of the queue - the NEETs, many of whom have never worked - that suffer the most.

A 'missing middle'?

Though much of the White Paper reiterates existing government policy and thinking, it does contain some new initiatives and emphases. For example, the proposal to introduce new V-level qualifications attracted the most media attention and sent alarm bells ringing through the post-16 sector, not least because it's feared that many BTEC-type qualifications are scheduled to be defunded before the new Vs will be up and running. Even more confusing, the new Vs will sit alongside the T (Technical level) qualifications introduced in the Tories' 2016 Sainsbury Review as a 'middle' pathway between academic A-levels and workplace-based apprenticeships. They will be smaller than the Ts - each being equated to an A-level - compared with the three A-levels-equivalent Ts.

It's argued that the V-levels will allow students to 'mix and match'. This is true, but BTECs already enable this - with many students taking a single BTEC award alongside two A-levels or completing a standard BTEC alongside one A-level. There is also an earlier historical parallel. As part of New Labour's post-16 Curriculum 2000 reforms, the GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) was modularised and rebranded as a Vocational and then as an Applied A-level. This did increase

opportunities, but it also made students consider that rather than sign up for an 'applied' A-level then why not try the real thing. Young people are more than aware of how the qualifications system works!

But the White Paper's justification for introducing Vs goes far deeper than extending student choice. It argues that there's a crisis in 'intermediate level' skills - that there are too many young people wanting to go to university and not enough taking alternative technical / vocational pathways:

There are not enough individuals choosing to study qualifications at a higher technical level (levels 4 and 5), despite their positive economic returns and increasing demand in the economy for workers with these skills. We strongly support expanded participation in higher education, but the traditional 3-year degree is not the only option (page 7).

Nigel Williamson, the shift Tory minister responsible for education in 2021, said more or less the same thing in his (2021) White Paper:

Our skills system has been very efficient at producing graduates but has been less able to help people get the quality technical skills that employers want. Only 4% of young people achieve a qualification at higher technical level by the age of 25 compared to the 33% who get a degree or above.

While Williamson's arguments were designed to appease a Tory right wanting to restore universities to being elite institutions for a small minority, Labour treads more carefully and instead would no doubt cite the costs of a bloated HE sector. But there's also the failure - or at best the slow progress - of the Tories' clumsily designed Ts that is a significant reason for bringing in something new. And, of course, apprenticeships, reintroduced in the early years of the 21st century, have not provided the opportunities for 'non academic' young people.

But is there really a 'missing middle' in the way the Labour White Paper imagines? On the contrary, it's increasingly accepted that 'middle jobs' are disappearing as a result of technological innovation. The first wave of automation swept away many clerical, administrative as well as skilled manual jobs. While some of the predictions about the implications of AI may be overly pessimistic, it can't really be denied that this process will continue. In short, the postwar pyramid-shaped occupational structure is being replaced by an hour-glass or more likely a pear-shaped one.

All the young NEETs

The White Paper reiterates the Government's intentions to offer work placements to 18-20-year-olds who have been NEET / unemployed for 18 months - ministers have threatened to withdraw access to universal credit if they refuse (ignorantly unaware that up to half of NEETs don't claim anything!). However, many people and, it seems, even some practitioners and activists, don't seem to be aware that the law requires all young people in England to continue in education or training until their 18th birthday. So there shouldn't be any under-18 NEETs!

Enforcing this legislation (part of the 2008 Education Act) has been difficult - the most recent ONS statistics show 75,000 16-17-year-olds categorised as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) - around 1 in 20 of the entire cohort. Local Authorities are legally required to implement the legislation but have never been given additional resources for this and the Department for Education only publishes advice and 'guidelines'.

Anyone familiar with Liz Kendall's 2024 White Paper *Get Britain Working* will be in no doubt about Labour's intentions to 'come after the NEETs', but the recent White Paper concentrates its fire on the 16-17 age group. It reiterates the role of LEAs but also outlines new sets of responsibilities for schools - after all the majority of 16-year-olds are now educated outside the LEA in academies. Thus:

We will strengthen the role that schools play in post-16 transition to education and training so that each pupil has a planned destination before they leave.

It outlines schools' responsibilities for improved 'tracking' and giving students 'advice', including a rider that Ofsted's 'renewed framework' will expect schools to meet these expectations (!). We can only speculate about the White Paper's declaration that any potential NEET will be 'allocated a place at a college' and that this institution will be required to monitor - and, we must assume, be responsible for ensuring - attendance.

The Skills White Paper in a wider context

This contribution has only addressed a relatively small part of a White Paper which also sets out to potentially change the role of universities and address teacher recruitment. Rather than generating greater economic efficiency, as shown above, White Papers are as much a response to social and

political concerns, particularly the need to control, reorganise and discipline specific groups of young people. Way back at the start of the 1980s, as the post-war boom faltered, the Manpower Services Commission was used to promote new skills for the growing number of unemployed school leavers. In reality it was little more than 'training without jobs'.

So just as the introduction of the Vs is designed to move young people away from the academic university route, the White Paper's draconian attempt to hold schools and colleges responsible for implementing post-16 statutory requirements is an 'organisational' solution designed to officially reduce the number of young NEETs by pushing them back into 'learning', rather than offering real alternatives - proper progression into jobs that they want or an education that they really need.

In other words, employment White Papers are also about maintaining an educational system that's divided and divisive. This might always have been the case with the Tories. We can't, in current times, expect Labour to be different.

There's far more NEETs than apprenticeships

As part of a campaign to convince voters that Labour is serious about responding to a crisis facing young people - and in particular, the existence of nearly a million NEETs, prime minister Starmer has announced plans to create another 50,000 apprenticeships for school and college leavers.

But it's a mistake to see apprenticeships as an alternative pathway for those not continuing on the academic track, the original intention for their reinvention twenty years ago. Statistics released at the start of December show over 350,000 apprenticeship starts during the last twelve months, slightly up on last year, but only one in five have been by under-19s. There's no data available on 16-17-year-olds, but we must assume this total to be minimal. Prior to 2007-08, less than one per cent of starts were by people aged 25 or over (in 2006-07), yet this proportion grew to 45 per cent by 2011-12 as employers used funding for existing staff. The age distribution of people starting apprenticeships has been similar since then.

It's also a mistake to think that government creates apprenticeships, or that further education colleges do - in fact private suppliers provide more apprenticeship training. On the contrary, an apprenticeship is linked to a job and a wage paid by

an employer. So, effectively, government would need to create another 50,000 permanent jobs. With a budget allocation of just £750 million this isn't going to happen. Instead, the additional funds will mainly top up training costs of smaller employers. (Unlike large employers, who are required to pay a levy, SMEs are required to contribute 5 per cent.)

Higher apprenticeships continued to grow in 2024-25. Starts at Level 4 and above increased by 15.1 per cent to 140,730, compared to 122,230 in 2023-24. Getting on for a third of all starts were in business and law alone. The 33,560 at Level 7 points to a new stratum of 'Master' apprentices on part-time MBAs, though government has announced plans to stop funding Level 7s after 2026 - part of a broader review of apprenticeship funding priorities, focusing more on craft/technician skills levels.

Yet there is little evidence that employers want to take on and pay wages to school and college leavers for disappearing 'entry-level' roles, a major reason for the decline of (Intermediate) Level 2 and the tapering of (Advanced) Level 3 schemes. This is even more the case when there are graduates increasingly prepared to do this work.

Continued messaging from successive governments emphasises that apprenticeships open doors for young people, and the NEETs get criticised for not looking for one. But the failure of a work-based route at 16-plus is the main reason for the creation of another round of full-time vocational - now rebranded as 'technical' - qualifications post-16, like the clumsily designed T-level and the proposed new V levels.

But figures show that the majority of those who are able to continue to sign up for A-levels, or use traditional vocational qualifications like BTECs, which the new Vs are designed to replace, as stepping stones to higher education. Everybody else is effectively stranded - or heading to the precariat, to be more exact.

