

## **Another new vocational qualification for schools and colleges**

Last October's *Post-16 Education and Skills* White Paper announced government intentions to introduce a new V-Level (Vocational Level) qualification. At the time of writing the proposals are still out for consultation, but the intentions are already clear. Originating from the Francis Review, V-Levels will represent a 'second pathway' between T-levels and current A-levels, with Labour implementing Tory plans to replace the existing range of vocational qualifications, described by Francis as 'complex and difficult to access' (FR 143). This will include BTECs.

Each V-Level is planned to be 'broadly comparable' (FR 149) in size and status to an A-level, but will be aimed at those wanting a more practical approach to learning. Students will be able to sit them in a variety of subject areas, from early years education to engineering for example, but also 'mix and match', combining As and Vs. Both Francis and the White Paper argue this will widen opportunities with 16-year-olds not having to commit to the occupational specialisation that is a feature of the highly specialised Ts.

## **Has vocational education improved young people's employment prospects?**

However, the White Paper provides a further justification for the new Vs, claiming there is a crisis of 'intermediate' and 'technician' level skills in the UK economy - what the White Paper randomly refers to as a 'missing middle'. Compared with other European countries, it argues large numbers progress to university (degree courses are graded Level 6) but not enough reach level 4 or 5.

But is there really a missing middle in the way the Labour White Paper imagines? On the contrary, it's increasingly argued that 'middle jobs' have been disappearing as a result of technological innovation. The first wave of automation swept away many white-collar, administrative as well as skilled manual roles and while some of the predictions about the implications of AI may be overly pessimistic, this process will surely continue.

Full-time vocational qualifications, introduced in the 1970s and 1980s in response to rising youth unemployment, but regularly rebranded and redesigned, have encouraged a range of learning styles and until quite recently, included very different types of assessment to academic qualifications. This was deemed to reflect (often highly exaggerated) changes in the workplace. Yet they have never been properly endorsed by employers who continue to see traditional academic education as more rigorous and those who complete it, more capable.

Thus, employers prefer graduates to younger school leavers and with large numbers to choose from, many lower-level positions have become 'graduatised' – you need a degree to get the job but not necessarily to do it! Arguably, with one or two obvious exceptions, employers are also more interested in 'generic' abilities than narrow technical competencies which can be learnt 'on the job'. Surveys show they also value previous workplace experience, but vocational courses have been almost exclusively classroom based. T-levels are supposed to include a work placement but are not always able to provide this – with reports of students doing this 'virtually'.

If vocational qualifications were designed as pathways into employment, large numbers of students found they were able to use them to enter higher education, particularly the 'second tier' universities set up in the 1990s anxious to 'recruit' rather than able to 'select' students to fill courses. Around 100,000 17- to 18-year-olds use qualifications like BTECs for at least part of their UCAS application – significant numbers relying on them completely.

In response, Conservative governments made no secret they wanted to reduce the number of HE students, returning universities to institutions for the few, with vocational courses in further

education colleges for the many. Labour, only too aware of Tony Blair's mission to increase university participation, is more subtle. 'We strongly support expanded participation in higher education, but the traditional 3-year degree is not the only option' (WP 7). However, self-imposed financial constraints, the growing cost of financing HE without raising fees further and burdening young people with more debt, will certainly have influenced its thinking.

### **Whatever happened to apprenticeships?**

Employers also have the option to recruit school and college leavers through the workplace-based apprenticeship route, but only 1 in 4 apprenticeships are started by under 19-year-olds, compared with well over half by existing staff, including many management trainees. In other words, apprenticeship funding is used for people employers will train anyway.

It has been the failure of apprenticeships to provide an alternative for school leavers, in the way that David Cameron promised over 10 years ago that has sent Tory and Labour governments looking for alternatives for 'less academic' young people. The 2016 *Sainsbury Review*, which led to the Tories post-16 skills plan, brought us T-levels which, despite millions spent on promotional publicity are started by less than 1 in 20 16-year-olds. Now Labour is depending on Francis to provide something more effective.

Yet it should be a proper regenerated apprenticeship system that serves as a second pathway as it has in countries like Germany. However, this would require major changes to the labour market, from greater financial incentives for employers to statutory requirements about what they must do.

### **There are alternatives.**

Arguably, a distinct vocational education has run its course and we don't need a new qualification not operational until September 2027 and then requiring a 'bedding in' period. Rather than being withdrawn, the BTEC qualifications, popular with schools and colleges and which Francis concedes, play an important role 'in widening participation and access' (FR 143) should remain as part of the current post-16 offer.

However in the past, organisations like the NEU (particularly its predecessor the NUT) have promoted a range of alternative qualification models, ranging from 'overarching' certificates where vocational and academic pathways are together, to a 'general diploma' integrating vocational and academic learning. These discussions should be resurrected.

But though plenty has been said about reforming vocational education, there has been much less debate about the current A-levels since Michael Gove's changes over 10 years ago. Disappointingly, Francis, gives the green light for them to continue in their current form. Yet developing a general diploma would also allow academic education, both its content and assessment, to be re-examined, with the aim of providing a 'good general education' for everybody.

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