As the EBacc education beds down, pressures grow for vocational alternatives

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Abstract

Though upper secondary education is increasingly dominated by the EBacc, there are growing calls for vocational alternatives and for schools to be more than 'exam factories.' This short contribution examines whether vocational education provides an alternative way forward.

Introduced by Michael Gove, the English Baccalaureate now forms the centrepiece of the upper secondary curriculum. With Nicky Morgan wanting 9 out of 10 young people to complete EBacc, 39% of students were entered in 2015, with 24% passing. This may still be quite low, but should be compared with 23% and 16% respectively in 2012 and confirms EBacc education is bedding down. Though the most high profile opposition to the EBacc has come from the performing arts community, concerned about the decline of music and drama as a GCSE option, there has also been renewed calls for vocational education to be revived as an alternative. Following recommendations in the 2011 Wolf Review (1) many vocational qualifications have been culled, or required to comply with strict criteria. At Key Stage 4 for example, the traditional BTEC First qualifications, popular with both students and teachers have been redesigned to include more formal written assessment, but now, rather than being a 'double' or even a 'triple' option, only count as a single GCSE.

Lord Baker and UTCs

Not all Tories have agreed with the 'academicisation' of the curriculum though. In particular Lord (Kenneth) Baker has continued to promote University Technical Colleges. UTCs are 14-19 schools offering vocational specialisation and sponsored by local employers as well as universities. Ironically Baker, as Secretary of State for Education, was the creator of the ten subject National Curriculum, under Mrs Thatcher. Concern about its suitability, particularly at Key Stage 4 resulted in the Dearing Review and the introduction of an alternative vocational pathway at 14. Baker seeks to continue the Dearing approach.

Until now however, the progress of UTCs has been limited. Fifty will be open and running by the end of 2016, but three have already shut as a result of a failure to attract enough students, while others are reported to be seriously undersubscribed, yet the 2016 White Paper (2) continues to emphasise their continued importance in raising standards. Even if schools will be under pressure to increase the number of students completing the EBacc, the new 'Progress 8' accountability measures (3) allow them to include up to three non EBacc GCSEs or equivalents. It is as if Progress 8 has been designed to enable the UTC curriculum specialisation to continue.

Employers want schools to be more than 'exam factories'

Vocational learning has also been given a boost by a series of national reports and interventions which have argued that the UK continues to face a skills crisis and that a blanket adherence to an academic curriculum is inappropriate for the digital economy of the 21st century. Last year, the CBI Director John Cridland complained that schools were becoming 'exam factories '(4) and in January this year, Ofsted

Chief Michael Wilshaw denounced current education as 'one size fits all', (5) arguing that 'less academic' students were being prevented from getting the high quality vocational education to get them ready for the workplace and citing the well-developed vocational pathways.in countries like Germany and Switzerland as a reason for their low rates of youth unemployment.

More recently still the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (6) has complained that many young people have been 'overlooked and left behind' because of the inequality between vocational and academic education. It calls for the National Curriculum to end at 14 and for the setting up of alternative structures which include Local Enterprise Boards and employers to meet labour market needs. As significantly, the Institute of Directors (7) while not directly attacking the EBacc has criticised the current emphasis on the 'recall' of knowledge, at the expense of 'soft skills', the overemphasis on testing and the loss of creativity and entrepreneurial skills. For the IoD, the education system still reflects workplaces of the 19th rather than the 21st century. Instead, it wants schools teach students to work collectively rather than in isolation, develop critical analysis and to be able to think across subject boundaries. Most of all it wants students to 'learn how to learn'.

Is vocational education the way forward?

If as Richard Hatcher's article argues, there are no concrete signs that the Government has any intention of redirecting the emphasis on academic learning, it cannot be assumed that this will always be the case. These days, employer organisations have increased influence over the general direction of the curriculum –probably more so than the teaching profession. And while many of the Conservative reforms claimed to be based on the educational practices in high performing economies of Pacific Rim countries, as has been argued, these have been highly selective (Allen and Ainley 2013) (8). There has also been increased recognition in these countries that their schools need to become 'more creative' (Allen & Ainley p 58)

Richard Hatcher's article has also questioned the evidence about the existence of a 'skills deficit' and has argued that poor economic performance is as much to do with low levels of investment in the economy. The Coalition and now the Conservative government have gone to considerable lengths to promote apprenticeships. amongst employers but well over half of new starts continue to be low level with school leavers being in the minority. In fact, just 5% of the age group take up an apprenticeship at the end of Key Stage 4, the same proportion as in 2012/13 (Allen 2016) (9) and apprenticeship applications continue to be much greater than the number of vacancies. In other words it is debatable whether in an economy where up to 80% of the new jobs created since the 2008 downturn have been low skilled (Allen 2016 p19) employers actually need apprenticeships in the way the government thinks they do.

There is also little evidence also, even if employer organisations see them as important, that individual employers value vocational qualifications more highly than academic ones. It also remains the case that vocational qualifications, despite numerous attempts to improve their status and to make them equivalent to academic certificates, continue to enjoy inferior status. Despite an increase in the number of university applicants with vocational qualifications –around one in four undergraduate students now enter university having studied at least one –many teachers consider them more appropriate for 'lower ability' students. As well as transferring to UTCs at age 14. Like others who campaign for more vocational education, Baker is not against traditional academic education. Instead he argues that it is

not suitable for the majority of children. Baker calls for separate schools for other types of learning (Baker 2013) (10). Though claiming to reflect German and other European models, these proposals also hark back to the thinking behind the 1944 Education Act.

Nevertheless, despite government attempts to make vocational qualifications more 'rigorous' by including greater amounts of external assessment, more factual and theoretical learning, there are clear overlaps between the pedagogy of vocational education, particularly the types of activities that the IoD document emphasises and the more student centred and self-directed learning that was a feature of he pre National Curriculum period. A future alternative curriculum that provided a good general education for everybody, rather than elite academic learning for the few and vocational education for the majority, could draw on these.

References

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