T-levels get the go-ahead

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Chancellor Philip Hammond's 'Brexit budget' has confirmed the UK government is to go ahead and spend £500 million on the new 'college based' technical education pathway - now to be referred to as T-levels. Based on proposals in last summer's *Sainsbury Review* and the Cameron government's *Post-16 Plan*, will it provide a major boost for the flagging FE sector and improve the quality and status of vocational learning? As significant, will it help the employment prospects of those young people not continuing to university?

Since the late 1970s when, in response to rising unemployment and the failure of 'Youth Training', 16 year-olds started voting with their feet and remaining in full-time education, vocational education has grown and vocational qualifications have been continually redesignd, renamed and reconstituted - sometimes at huge expense (remember Labour's 14-19 Specialist Diplomas?).

But none of these initiatives have seriously challenged the dominance of academic education. Neither has there been much evidence of vocational qualifications developing skills that employers really want or that they have really been interested in them. Alison Wolf branded many low level vocational certificates as 'worthless' in her 2011 Review and, until now, it has been workplace-based apprenticeships which have been promoted as the main alternative for young people not continuing to university.

The new T-level proposals, however, seek to establish a technical 'middle' pathway between academic education and apprenticeships, with one recognised set of qualifications spanning Level 2 (GCSE standard) to degree equivalent, for fifteen occupational areas that range from Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care through to Transport and Logistics.

On the face of it, the injection of funds into an ailing FE sector would be most welcome, but the amount Hammond proposes will nowhere near compensate for years of cuts and the closing down of courses. The money will also be ring-fenced, only available for the new courses and, we must also assume, only going to those colleges that will be reclassified as 'Institutes of Technology'. There is also little recognition of the fact that more young people prefer to remain in school sixth-forms or transfer to sixth-form college, rather than go into FE. As for the content of the proposed courses, we don't know whether to expect a complete 'rewrite' or whether existing qualifications will be used. With the new pathway coming into effect from 2019 there isn't much time for new qualifications to be designed, and besides, vocational qualifications have already been streamlined to be included in the Government's current definition of Tech-Levels. Neither do we know how employers will be involved, although there will be extended periods of compulsory work experience.

Responsibility for monitoring the new qualifications will reside with the newly established 'Institute for Apprenticeships', with government arguing this will enable the college and work-based routes to be closely linked. In fact, some of the fifteen areas - Protective Services for example, which includes a range of occupations from police and fire service staff to 'maritime operations officers' (coastguards) - will only be accessible through apprenticeships.

Yet full-time college-based study is very different from following an apprenticeship, and it could be argued that the technical route has been reinvented because of both the shortage of opportunities for young people (total applicants still outnumber vacancies by ten to one and only 25 per cent of

starts are by under 19 year-olds) and the level at which most apprenticeships commence (60 per cent being still at Intermediate/GCSE level).

If there remain issues about the immediate future of the new qualifications, there are also longer term uncertainties. These essentially relate to the degree of correspondence between the proposed qualifications pathways and the actual workings of the labour market. In the *Skills Plan*, the importance of each of the fifteen sectors is only expressed through the number of people employed in it. There's no analysis of the general skill levels, specific skills shortages and the relative significance of some occupations rather than others. This reflects the fact that the UK labour market - compared to countries like Germany, for example, which has continued to run successful technical pathways linked to apprenticeships and is often seen as an example of the way forward for the UK - is largely unregulated and not linked to anything that resembles an 'Industrial Strategy'.

The success of German vocational training is not simply due to better quality or its higher status, more to the continuation of a 'social partnership' between employers, government and trade unions ensuring that training and skills policy is related to actual employment needs. It remains to be seen whether, without any definite assurances of employment, significant numbers of young people will sign up for T-levels rather than continuing on the academic track.

But there are also more fundamental issues. Even if the German approach has slowed down the decline of its manufacturing sector, the major changes to work and the occupational structure - particularly the collapse of many 'middle jobs' that is predicted because of increased automation - cannot be ignored. It's also argued that as new digital jobs continue to replace traditional ones, everybody will require much greater generic rather than specific technical skills.

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