

A new technical elite?

Martin Allen

Bill Esmond and Liz Atkins, *Education, Skills and Social Justice in a Polarising World: Between Technical Elites and Welfare Vocationalism*, Routledge, 2022

Does the emergence of new advanced and higher-level qualifications constitute a break from traditional conceptions of vocational education - which since its emergence in the 1980s has been associated with both educational failure and providing pathways to low-skilled, low-paid work? In an extremely detailed and interesting analysis, Bill Esmond and Liz Atkins give a tentative yes. Qualifications like T-levels (and, we might add, the proposals in the 2021 Further Education White Paper for new Higher Level technical certificates as alternatives to university) correspond with the emergence of a 'new technical elite'. As the title suggests, vocational education is now also becoming polarised. This is not just unique to the UK, but is reflected in international responses, despite significant differences in the way provision is organised.

Yet the authors are far from optimistic about the potential of the new qualifications to increase opportunities, rightly noting how issues of class, race and gender continue to undermine education's ability to promote social justice. It is also the case that the Ts will be delivered in FE colleges, which, unless they are part of a local tertiary provision, continue to be given second rate standing to school sixth forms. But the potential of the new qualifications, which include extensive work placements (T-levels require a mandatory 45 days) to develop practical work skills, stands in marked contrast to the raft of lower level courses serving as a form of the 'welfare vocationalism' that is socialising students, invariably girls, into accepting menial positions in sectors like social care (identified by the authors as 'what's left of the welfare state') but also retail, hospitality and in various types of leisure services.

Esmond and Atkins are right about the emerging welfare vocationalism, with many young people failing to progress beyond Level 2 courses, but, maybe because of time or space, the authors fail to interrogate the 'skills agenda' promoted by the Cameron, May and now the Johnson governments. The T-levels, the new emphasis on higher level apprenticeships, and also last year's Further Education White Paper, are designed to reflect the emerging 'hour-glass' occupational structure the book refers to, one replacing

the post-war pyramid and mass employment in manufacturing.

But on the contrary, the occupational (class) structure is becoming more of a 'pear-shaped' arrangement where, with not enough jobs available for those already qualified to do them, most young people fight against potential downward mobility. Meanwhile a real 'technical elite' recruited from Oxbridge / top Russell Group universities, and with qualifications often in more traditional academic disciplines, is moving away from the rest in terms of their economic position. Indeed, later in the book the authors point out that, rather than enjoying the material security of the traditional elites, and because of the way the new digital industries now operate - made up of small firms using temporary employment contracts, or tying employment to particular projects - many from this new group will join a 'new economy precariat' increasingly resembling those trapped in welfare vocationalism.

While all vocational qualifications have skill development as their official objective, these full-time courses have emerged in response to *educational* problems, rather than *economic* needs. They first emerged in FE colleges and school sixth forms over forty years ago as responses to increased staying-on rates amongst a new generation of working-class students, the result of the absence of employment opportunities and the failure of youth training schemes. But these students were not considered suitable for academic study. Likewise, the T-levels and the proposed higher vocational qualifications are designed to restore academic education and attending university as something for the few - part of a wider 'Great Reversal' of education policy by successive Tory governments.

The record of 'middle' qualifications is not good (T-levels officially sit between academic A-levels and work-based apprenticeships). When the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) was reintroduced as a Vocational and then as an Applied A-level as part of New Labour's post-16 qualifications framework, enrolments dropped steadily. There was little evidence of young people ditching the 'gold standard' A-level route in favour of any other qualifications, while many of the students for whom vocational courses were designed were not able to access them. Blair's Special Diplomas (vocational qualifications for 14-19) also struggled to win proper recognition from employers. Like the T-levels, these

initiatives drew upon 'academic' styles of learning and assessment to improve their 'rigour'. Rather than offering something new, the T-levels are a continuation of the same.

Despite longer work placements - (there is already evidence that some colleges are finding these difficult to arrange) - students spend the majority of time in classroom-based and externally assessed 'core' learning. The fact that T-levels are also being overseen by the Institute of Apprenticeships rather than Ofqual (the body that monitors academic standards) gives a confusing message about their educational status, while government publicity for T-levels continues to emphasise that the qualification can be used for both university entrance or employment.

Of course, the jury is still out. The timetable for introducing the qualification has been extended, at least partly because of the pandemic, though a range of logistical issues had already been identified. But the major qualifications division continues to be between academic and vocational routes. Without changes in the way young people enter the labour market in this country - and because of the absence of real employer involvement, or the types of national planning that exist in countries like Germany - qualifications just serve as 'proxies'. It is likely that this will continue.

T-levels: too big to fail?

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The Government continues to roll out its programme of T-levels, the new technical qualifications in England, originating from a review commissioned by David Cameron and then a White Paper published by Teresa May.

The first three T-levels were launched in September 2020, in digital, construction and childcare. A further seven began in September 2021 (two more digital routes, two more in construction and three in health and science). In September of this year, another six will be launched, with the remaining seven in 2023 (plans have just been announced to introduce a 24th T, in marketing, for 2025). Meanwhile the Department for Education has published a list of around 450 institutions that have committed to delivering them.

According to the Department, 1,300 students started a T-level in 2020 and a further 950 enrolled on a 'Transition Programme' (a one-year course for students without appropriate entry qualifications, though Maths and English requirements have now been dropped) with 5,450 more registrations last September. The slow speed of the roll-out (only 80 centres are currently involved in delivery) means these figures cannot be considered representative, but media reports have claimed that many providers have undershot recruitment targets - particularly for construction - with a sixth form in Surrey said to have only one student! With well over 4,000 institutions offering post-16 education, the size of the take-up needs to be kept in perspective.

The list of potential providers also shows many centres, particularly schools, offering just one or two Ts. This is because the infrastructure requirements to provide the full range, for example the hairdressing and beauty and the agricultural and animal care routes due to start in 2023, are well beyond most schools. (Originally the Ts were going to be restricted to a handful of 'specialist' FE colleges, but now any provider with at least a 'Good' Ofsted rating is eligible to sign up.)

BTEC courses due to be axed

But with Rishi Sunak having announced £1.6 billion for developing T-levels for up to 100,000 students, and over 150 building projects, from sports therapy rooms and construction workshops to new 'digital hubs' already sanctioned, for many people T-levels are already 'too big to fail', and the Government is playing for high stakes. So much so, it wants to make the Ts the only alternative to academic A-levels and has already published a list of around 150 technical and vocational qualifications with content that overlaps with that of the first ten Ts which will have funding withdrawn from 2024. While many of these awards have low student uptake and may not be financially viable, the list also includes extremely popular courses such as the level 3 BTEC Health and Social Care diploma - which several thousand students are due to complete this year - and BTEC engineering certificates. *FE Week* has