

Why can't we do it like the Germans?

*Part 2 of an abridged version of the report by Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley: Another Great Training Robbery or a Real Alternative for Young People? Apprenticeships at the Start of the 21st Century**

Introduction

Following the ignominious departure of Michael Gove, it seems unlikely that delusions in a 'grammar school education for all' will be revisited. Instead, emphasis will most likely be placed again upon apprenticeships which already divide all 18+ year-olds ending their participation in school, college or training into two official categories: students or apprentices. This division may extend to a 'vocational' curriculum in schools from 14+ alongside an academic route leading to a competitive selection for higher education. This could be through Labour's current proposals for a 'technical' route from 14+ leading to 'technical A-levels' within mainstream schooling, or with more University Technical Colleges and other provision in separate bi- or tripartite schools, linked in some cases to widening participation for foundation and other sub-degree courses in some universities.

Young people who fail to complete the academic route to graduation and often beyond will still be at risk of marginalisation due to changes in the youth labour market and in the wider economy. These undermine the policy goals of restarting social mobility through academic competition and of regenerating productive industry through 'German-style' apprenticeships. Both these policies are 'magical solutions' to real social problems – the reverse of minority upward social mobility in the mid-twentieth century into mass downward social mobility in the twenty-first and the fact that the latest applications of new technology obviate the

need for apprentices. Both measures should be recognised as typical of the impression management that increasingly substitutes for government in a new market-state.

Our report therefore opposes the political and professional unanimity in favour of yet again rebuilding the vocational route. It examines past failures to do this since the collapse of industrial apprenticeships in the 1970s to see education and training substituted for employment as the UK economy opened to global competition in the 1980s. This has contributed not only to 'prolonging youth' but also to an ongoing process of social class reformation in which widening participation to higher education has been presented as professionalising the proletariat while disguising a proletarianisation of the professions. This is reflected in popular perceptions of an 'Americanised' class structure in which a new middle-working / working-middle class is divided from a marginalised so-called 'underclass' echoed in electoral pronouncements about hard-working as opposed to (by implication) not hard-working people.

For it can be argued that – following the prolonged recession from 2008 – rather than a permanently marginalised minority, a reconstituted reserve army of labour has ratcheted up to include perhaps half of all employed people in permanently insecure, unskilled and low-paid jobs. This leaves many young people seeking secure employment by running up a down-escalator of inflating qualifications. Earlier specialisation for narrow vocational and academic disciplines is a peculiarly

inappropriate preparation for such a situation, particularly given the paucity of provision revealed by Martin Allen's recent research into apprenticeships that we report.

So why can't we do it like the Germans?

German apprentices sign a three-year contract with a company licensed as a provider. 90 per cent of apprenticeship starts in Germany are at level 3 or above with training needs discussed by employer and trade union committees which also oversee apprenticeship content. 25 per cent of employers provide apprenticeships and all employers with more than 500 employees are bound to do so. Apprentices participate in a 'dual system', spending part of the week in work-based training and up to two days completing the *Berufsschule* – classroom-based study of the more theoretical aspects of their vocation. Alternatively, apprentices undertake 'blocks' of classroom learning.

While a smaller proportion of young people in Germany attend university – less than a third, a much greater proportion – up to 60 per cent – complete apprenticeships of several years and 90 per cent of them then secure employment. All German apprentices have proper employee status from the day they begin working, though, as in other European countries, apprentices are paid less than in the UK. This reflects more of a 'trainee' or even 'student' status as part of a recognised transition process from youth to adulthood through the development of an occupational identity. In Germany 40 out of every 1,000 employees are apprentices, compared to just 11 in the UK. An 'holistic' approach is designed to allow the apprentice to take 'autonomous and responsible' action in the workplace, by contrast with the UK model which focuses on particular skills at the expense of any personal or social development and on confirming existing skills rather than encouraging the development of new ones.

The German apprenticeship system has not dropped from the sky but is a product of nearly 70 years 'social partnership' and depends on a strong regulatory framework that is coming under increasing strain as marketisation and deregulation increases. The latest applications of new technology also undermine the need to maintain high training standards. However, employers and trade unions are still committed to maintaining a national framework involving both legislation and much higher levels of state involvement and financing than the British 'market state' could possibly allow. Providing a 'license to practice', entry to many occupations is restricted to those completing the relevant

apprenticeship programme.

'Social partnership' also has a strong cultural context; this embodies a commitment to conflict resolution and to a greater commitment from workers towards the companies they work for but also a greater emphasis on social welfare and clearly defined responsibilities of government towards its citizens. There has never been anything like this in the UK. 'Doing it like the Germans' would involve major changes to the content of vocational education and training as well as a major cultural and institutional transformation.

In contrast, the British 'market state' has followed an American model where education and labour market advancement has been considered largely an individual matter and where educational qualifications are seen as crucial to improving 'employability', rather than providing any automatic rite (and right) of passage or any occupational identity. In this respect, increasing the supply of educational credentials has substituted for the sort of 'industrial strategy' that exists in other European countries. Indeed, ever since the dissolution of the Department of Employment into the Department of Education in 1995, education has substituted for an economic strategy.

Classroom, not work-based learning

Rather than developing the sort of integrated system that exists in Germany where work-place training is conducted alongside classroom learning, full-time vocational education in the UK has had little direct input from employers and has been almost entirely classroom-based. Qualifications like GNVQ, for example, had no work experience requirement. They were taught almost entirely by school teachers and college lecturers, many of whom had little other employment experience. Rather than forming part of an employment strategy, vocational qualifications in England have played a 'credentialing' function, being used as 'second chance' qualifications by a new generation of sixth-form students to enter university, or at least new universities rather than older ones.

In order to improve the status of vocational courses, the last Labour government re-branded GNVQs as Vocational A-levels. Created in the 1990s to replace established BTEC qualifications and extending NVQ notions of specific competence contradictorily to a general area of application as applied GCSEs and A-levels with more emphasis on academic content and assessment, this resulted in 'the worst of both worlds' as students who had already been alienated from academic learning found these courses no longer appropriate, while those who were always going to follow traditional

academic options continued to see applied qualifications as inferior. The result was that participation rates fell and many schools and especially colleges returned to rejuvenated BTEC courses.

New Labour's 14-19 specialist Diplomas proved an expensive disaster (Allen and Ainley 2008). Designed to 'put employers in the driving seat', they ended up being drafted by consultants, repeating the same mistakes as previous vocational qualifications – in other words, being neither 'academic' nor 'vocational'. The special funding for these qualifications was withdrawn by the Coalition and they have become virtually extinct.

In her 2011 *Review of Vocational Education* for the Coalition, Wolf argued that UK vocational awards (level 1 and 2 in particular) provided low or even negative labour market returns and that 350,000 young people – between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort – 'got little or no benefit' (p7) from post-16 education. With figures showing the number of key stage 4 vocational 'equivalents' achieved approaching 500,000, Wolf argued that vocational learning should only make a 'limited contribution' and comprise no more than 20 per cent of a young person's curriculum offer and that apprenticeships would provide much higher rates of return to young people by giving them workplace experience. She recommended employers be paid to take on 16-18 year olds, providing apprentices also received clearly defined off-the-job training and education.

Wolf's critique of vocational learning did not stop Lord Kenneth Baker, who as Secretary of State in 1986 created the original ten subject National Curriculum, setting up with the Edge Foundation University Technical Colleges (UTCs) which offer technical specialisation alongside main GCSE subjects like maths, English and science, but also 'Career Colleges' that have a more direct link with particular occupations. Being sponsored by both universities and employers, Baker hopes UTCs will enjoy the 'parity of esteem' that post-war secondary technical schools were unable to achieve – and enable young people to move into work, apprenticeships or higher-level technical education.

A good general education for everybody

Rather than another attempt to rebuild a vocational route with 'parity of esteem' to the long-established academic one, the vocational nature of higher and further education should be recognised as extending to the most prestigious of subjects at the most elite of institutions, as in the 'original vocations' of law and medicine but also the other still HEFCE-funded science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)

subjects, plus the academic vocation itself. This is the way that higher education can recover itself in connection with further training to recognise a post-compulsory education that is both theoretically informed and practically competent.

At the upper end of secondary education, rather than Labour's proposals for an alternative Techbacc for half of 14+ school students, a general school-leaving diploma should be available for everybody. Education in schools should also be informed by the discussion, research and scholarship preserved and developed by post-compulsory further, higher and adult continuing education in a process of critical cultural transmission, creation and recreation.

Fundamentally, however, the perception of 'the problem' needs to be changed: from being seen as one where young people lack the 'skills for employability' to recognise that it is the majority of employment that is being systematically deskilled by outsourcing, subcontracting, bite-sizing, unbundling and all the other 'flexibilities' inflicted on labour by employers applying the latest automating technology.

Schools, colleges or universities offering 'pre-vocational' general, further or higher education, or government-backed pseudo-work placements, bogus apprenticeships and endless internships are no answer to this crisis of employment. Instead, the starting point should be one of entitlement. This is not 'the right to work' under which the old left continues to operate within a post-war collectivised model of the labour market. Rather, we argue for conditions under which entitlement to work and to learn about work – and not just to work – are part of a process of cultural creation and recreation. This involves thinking through what a general schooling leading to graduation as citizen and worker 'fit for a variety of labours' would involve, as well as how to revocationalise academicised higher education. It will also require an alternative economic strategy of job creation to generate real employment opportunities to meet real human needs.

References

Allen, M. and Ainley, P. (2008) *A New 14+: Vocational Diplomas and the Future of Schools and Colleges*. London: Ealing Teachers Association

Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*, London: Department for Educational

****The full version of Martin and Patrick's report is available as a free download from their blogsite: [radicaledbks](#).***