

# A report, a plan, a White Paper and the return of secondary moderns

Patrick Ainley looks at the May government's education policies

Long ago in April this year, the Cameron government published a *Report on Technical Education* it had farmed out to Lord Sainsbury's Gatsby Foundation authored by a token big businessman, a new university vice chancellor, a college principal and Professor Alison Wolf who, even longer ago, wrote a review of vocational education for the coalition government. Sainsbury's report was published in April and in July the Government responded positively with a Skills Plan and a White Paper on *Technical Education Reform* under the joint moniker of DBIS and the Department for Education.

By that time under May's government DBIS had lost the universities and colleges but not research to the Department of Education and changed its name to the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. So, there was now an 'Industrial Strategy' and perhaps the *Skills Plan* might indicate what it was! Alongside 'Strategy' and 'Plan', another blast from an even more distant past was the use of the word 'Technical' in Sainsbury's Report and – of course – the confusedly announced return to secondary modern schooling! There are already 'technical schools' in the form of existing UTCs and Studios.

Indeed, 'technical' training and the employment of 'technicians' was once widely recognised in education and industry as corresponding to the divisions of knowledge by the former and labour in the latter. Like 'skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual labour', everybody knew what technical work was, even if they couldn't define it exactly. There were technical schools, colleges and even universities; plus polytechnics, which brought together under one roof many levels of training in different technical abilities – or was it education?

It was certainly not non-manual professional and managerial education, which was the preserve of the universities, despite the technical proficiency of many degree-qualified professionals. Yet professional education and training was also

vocational, even if technical training was not 'academic' but associated with the trades rather than the established professions. These were social class divisions derived from existing employment ones. As these have now changed under the impact of the latest applications of new technology, some order needs to be restored. So Sainsbury declares, 'Technical education is not, and must not be allowed to become, simply "vocational education" rebadged' (p.23).

It looks very much like it, however, as Sainsbury recommends technical education be delivered via apprenticeships in employment if not in FE, where Wolf has admitted elsewhere 'funding is unsustainable'. Nevertheless, clear routes through fifteen rather arbitrarily defined and descriptively incomplete 'occupational pathways' are proposed with progression from basic level through level 2 GCSE equivalent (which most 16 year-olds already have) up to degree-equivalent higher level apprenticeships and the 'qualifications jungle' cleared once more.

However, as Wolf has also acknowledged, the effort to re-establish quality apprenticeships is likely to be overwhelmed by the attempt to meet Cameron's target of three million of them by 2020. Of variable length and without legal guarantee of employment, often semi-skilled and many in services not really requiring prolonged training, these are too often 'apprenticeships' in inverted commas! According to DBIS surveys, since 2012 one-in-three apprentices were unaware they were even on an apprenticeship and one-in-five reported receiving no formal training, whilst 6 per cent of apprentices received less than the legal minimum 12 months' training. This is, as Martin Allen called it, *Another Great Training Robbery*.

Above all, most employers don't want or need apprenticeships since automating technology and flexible employment results in down-sizing and deskilling. If they do need apprenticeships, they run them themselves. They certainly don't want to run

them for government, as Sainsbury recommends 'empowering' them to do. Hence employers' reluctance to pay the apprentice levy, which the Government foisted upon large companies and then – contrary to expectations – said they still have to pay despite 'Brexit'.

Wolf had seen off the 'jungle' of vocational qualifications in schools where they counted in league tables as equivalent to academic ones. This left a narrowly academic Ebacc to sort the sheep from the goats at 16 and make it harder to get into university. But, despite raised student fees, this failed to choke off demand for university places because the repayment threshold was pitched too high and so allowed universities to provide more courses of often dubious quality and no obvious utility for fee debts many of which would never be repaid. (The latest Longterm Employment Outcome data shows 25 per cent of graduates earning less than £20k ten years after graduating, ie still below the £21k fee repayment threshold.)

Yet, because young people who are academically qualified – or can squeeze in anyway – are so desperate to get the degrees they hope will lead to at least semi-professional secure employment, they keep applying to university – 4 per cent more this year, a new record. The Government now hopes to reduce student numbers by raising the highest fees in the world still higher for institutions that meet the 'Gold Standard' in complying with behavioural measures of 'Teaching Excellence', support for local free and grammar schools, widening participation, and improving retention by 'raising attainment' (ie grades!), while at the same time encouraging competition from private sector providers of cut-price, two-year degrees to drive some of the existing universities out of business or into merger.

Meanwhile, with the latest application of new technology in what has long been an unregulated, service economy, the reserve army of precarious labour has ratcheted up to include approaching half of all employees, perpetually churning through intermittent, part-time, contracting (often zero-hours), unskilled, fungible jobs. Nor are those qualified by degrees for previously secure professions immune to being reduced to the same precarious conditions by the latest applications of new technology. (See Richard and Daniel Susskind on *The Future of the Professions*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *PSE*.)

The Government thus welcomes Sainsbury's proposals because they present the same supply-side solution that promises, as Cameron did, 'more apprentices mean more jobs'. Only of course they don't; any more than more graduates (and more qualifications/'skills' generally) mean more jobs, as Blair and Brown believed. So 'the strategy' is, as

usual, to attain 'world class excellence' to attract international corporations to invest in the UK rather than elsewhere and 'the plan' to achieve this is through clear progression routes to new qualifications for biddable labour, meanwhile maintaining PR Dave Cameron's impression management to claim that something is being done by providing more 'apprenticeships'.

Since May and Hammond seem to have partially reversed the austerity economics of Cameron and Osborne, what could happen is that May's commitment to restoring secondary moderns might fit with a technical route from 11+, not 16+ as the *Report, Plan* and White Paper all assume. However, it has not been thought through: sending all the girls who will predictably pass new selection tests in greater numbers than boys to new grammar schools – unless entry is again weighted against girls, which even Northern Ireland was prevented by the EU from doing – will not restart the limited upward social mobility that existed for a short period in the last century. This is because in this century there is general downward social mobility. Similarly, bringing back 'apprenticeships' will not magically turn the UK's deregulated and deskilled service economy into a productive and highly regulated one like Germany's.

Nor can reinventing the secondary modern vocational route, once again attempting to establish 'parity of esteem' with the academic / grammar schools, be sold to the majority of parents whose children fail to get in. It is a policy seemingly intended only to keep on side Tory backwoodspeople who sympathise with UKIP that shares the policy. In addition, it is quite likely to be defeated so May has already clarified, 'It does not mean bringing back binary schools but opening up the system'. In campaigning against secondary moderns, however, it is difficult for the broad range of opposition that has gathered against them not to fall back on defending the existing competition between schools to drive up 'academic standards' as providing more opportunities for (upward) 'social mobility' (were that possible or desirable).

Instead, what is required of the schools of a National Education Service worthy of the name is a general education for all that would include learning about work across a range of occupations, not narrow training to work in all too often obsolescent employment. Proper apprenticeships for sustainable work should be delivered by FE in partnership with private industries and public services linking schools to HE in local and regional learning infrastructures.

Patrick Ainley's new book *Betraying a Generation, How Education is Failing Young People* is published by Bristol University's Policy Press 2016.