

Tertiary education is in a mess: how to deal with it?

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Two pieces of legislation proposing major reorganisation of post-school education in England have been making their way through parliament. The Higher Education and Research Bill was launched in May 2016, days after the publication of its accompanying White Paper. The Technical and Further Education Bill was introduced in October 2016. Both have now reached the House of Lords. Meanwhile, two members of the House of Lords, Baroness Blackstone (Blackstone, 2016) and Baroness Wolf (Wolf, 2016), have published rival proposals for overarching solutions to the problem of bringing the branches of tertiary education into a system which makes better sense. Baroness Blackstone's chief concern has been with meeting the needs of the disadvantaged and atypical and part-time student, Baroness Wolf's with the sheer untidiness of the present overlapping systems of tertiary education provision.

How is a young person at the 'secondary' stage of English education to choose what further skills or knowledge to seek, where to obtain them and what type of qualification it might be appropriate to aim for? At the Second Reading of the Technical and Further Education Bill on 1 February 2017 Baroness Wolf pointed to the 'huge number of qualifications' and the hopeless confusion for young people trying to choose (Wolf, 2017b). Later in the same month the blog *WonkHE* published a challenging analysis of the difficulty of discovering even what 'learning providers' exist at tertiary level in the UK. The UK Register of Learning Providers (*UK Register of Learning Providers*, 2017), singled out as the most reliable by *WonkHE*, now lists over 30,000 providers.

Behind this confusion stands the question at what age, if at all, children should be 'selected' for academic or vocational specialisation, and the related problem that popular opinion still seems firmly set on the presumption that a degree is worth more, financially and socially, than any other type of qualification. The recorded failures of University Technical Colleges (*University Technical Colleges*, 2017), launched by Lord Baker to provide a dedicated route for 14-19 year-olds into technical

and vocational education (Robertson, 2016), suggest this is not easy to resolve. Baroness Wolf's earlier *Review of Vocational Education* (Wolf, 2011) was concerned with courses below Level 4, with a view to ending the current situation where young people were being 'steered' into programmes which are effectively 'dead-end'.

A fundamental problem is that degrees are no longer necessarily non-vocational. Philip Wilson of the College of Football Business (confusingly giving it a 'University College' title not yet granted) gave evidence to the House of Commons Public Bills Committee on 6 September 2016. He spoke of the College's offer in terms of 'specialist vocational experience and knowledge' with additional 'essentials' such as 'public speaking certificates to food and wine appreciation . . . media training and so on'. Its degree courses are validated by Buckinghamshire New University, itself living evidence of the trend to treat the vocational as 'academic'. The institutions from which the University evolved include the School of Science and Art, founded in 1991, which became the Wycombe Technical Institute, the High Wycombe College of Art and Technology, and, lastly, the Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education. It was a university college from 1999 until 2007, when it gained university title. This is not untypical of the most recent publicly-funded aspirants to university title. It exemplifies the shifts of emphasis which have comprehensively embedded vocational and technical education within higher education in recent years.

'Degree apprenticeships' were announced on 12 March 2015. The innovation appeared to consist in the framing of new arrangements under which 'businesses, universities and colleges' would 'develop practical, vocational degree courses' combining 'academic study from a traditional university degree and the practical experience and wider employment skills vital for career success'. These would differ from the existing 'higher apprenticeships' in making the degree 'an integral part of the apprenticeship, co-designed by employers to make sure it is relevant for the skills industry is looking for' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015).

Commentators have raised some basic concerns about autonomy for the HE sector which arise here: 'At its most simplistic level, standards and assessment plans are designed by trailblazer groups and approved by a national body, which lends itself to the question: where does the autonomy of the sector come into play?' (Boyd, 2017). Moreover in the case of apprenticeships, the employer not the student 'is the customer and so there's a need for a business-to-business sales strategy' (Boyd, 2017).

Baroness Wolf, speaking on the Higher Education and Research Bill in January 2017, noted that 'effectively inviting people to offer apprenticeships' has led 'overwhelmingly' to 'a growth in apprenticeships that do not require expensive equipment or involve high-risk activity, which means that you can cover your costs and more with relative ease'. She pointed out that the pattern of provision in the expanding alternative providers offering Pearson-Edexcel Level 4 and 5 courses also tended to be preponderantly 'accounting and business and business accounting - things that do not need huge up-front investment' (Wolf, 2017a).

This trend towards cheap hybrid academic-and-vocational business courses is exemplified in the two degree apprenticeships, both in the broad area of business and management, on offer from Plymouth University, a former polytechnic created in 1989 from several mainly vocational providers, which became a university in 1992. One leads to a BSc Hons (Chartered Manager) and is 'mapped to Chartered Management Institute (CMI) standards'. This 'allows successful students to apply for 'Chartered Manager' status with the CMI alongside gaining an honours degree', though the two qualifications remain distinct. The second is a BSc (Hons) Digital and Technology Solutions, again with an emphasis on business and management aspects (Plymouth University, 2017).

Universities UK published a blog by Rod Bristow, the president of Pearson UK and Core Markets, in which he set out yet another dichotomy, between a 'pathway' leading to: 'specific jobs and occupations such as heating engineer, laboratory technician, electrician or plumber' and another which 'forms the basis of careers including design, engineering, business or information technology', adding that 'The Skills Plan, for example, focuses almost entirely on occupations, not careers' (Bristow, 2017).

The government policy of encouraging more alternative providers to enter the sector and to aspire to degree-awarding powers and university title, as embodied in the Higher Education and Research Bill, threatens to compound still further the

staggering present complexity of tertiary education in England. Does it follow that what is needed is a unification of tertiary education? Not necessarily, but clarification is certainly increasingly urgent, at least in order to make the options easier for a beginner to identify. The most urgent need seems to be for a comprehensive mapping exercise, and for data gaps to be filled, especially the lack of a reliable list of alternative providers. The proposed new Register will be voluntary and will leave the would-be student still guessing about the way to read all those provider websites full of promises.

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