

University Technical Colleges: worthy of support?

Stephen Lambert asks: could UTCs based on democratic accountability overcome the academic/vocational divide and give young people the skills to do the jobs?

The academic/vocational divide has bedevilled the UK's educational system since Victorian times. Vocational education has for over a century been perceived as second best to a traditional academic curriculum by Britain's elites. For the 'left behind' towns of the North to prosper economically we must escape this mindset and give the 'new vocationalism' the status it deserves. University Technology Colleges based on democratic accountability may be the answer.

As long ago as the Great Exhibition of 1851, weaknesses in Britain's technical education had been noted by several commentators compared with Germany. Butler's Education Act of 1944 established a post-war tripartite system of grammar schools, secondary moderns and technical schools. In reality what British society got was a divisive bipartite system with technical schools seen as the poor relation. Few were built by local councils after the war.

Cinderella

Although further education colleges have delivered the bulk of technical and job-related training from the age of 16, through apprenticeships, NVQs, City and Guilds and BTEC-type certificates/diplomas, the sector has only now been acknowledged by Britain's 'political class'. Yet it's still viewed by some private school and Oxbridge educated ministers and senior civil servants as the Cinderella service for 'other people's children'.

Of course FE still has a vitally important role to play to meet the needs of a changing economy

and to address the aspirations of thousands of youngsters. Contrary to popular belief, many working-class boys and girls still want to be electricians, bricklayers, chefs, mechanics, travel agents, train drivers, airline cabin staff, firefighters, social care workers, nurses, accountancy technicians and beauty therapists. It was partly for this reason that University Technical Colleges (UTCs) came into being.

UTCs were the brainchild of Lords Baker and Dearing a decade ago. They still command cross-party support. Their mission was to help grow the 'talent pipeline' by providing 'the next generation of engineers, technicians and scientists'. Designed for young people aged 14 to 19, UTCs were to deliver a predominantly vocational education alongside academic subjects. Backed by large employers and the new universities, UTCs aimed to give young people the technical skills that industry needed. They focus on technical specialisms such as healthcare, computer science, renewable energy and marine engineering. They are non-selective and non-fee-paying. They have a longer school day, starting at 8.30am and finishing at 5.00pm, to give their learners the ethos of a working environment. There are now 50 UTCs, with two in the North East - one in Newcastle and the other in South Durham - the latter having been awarded as Grade 2 'Good' by Ofsted.

A report published by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) claims that UTCs have failed to deliver for both young people and the national economy. True, their implementation has been uneven and patchy, with several hit by closures, poor recruitment, negative Ofsted inspections, a bad press, below average GCSE results, and a

stark gender imbalance with an under-representation of young women. Till recently UTCs have struggled to recruit pupils aged 14. Few pupils want to change schools, having made friends from the age of 11. With funding a priority, few schools want their students to leave. Most schools start their GCSE courses in year 9 - therefore some pupils are reluctant to exchange school for a UTC.

There's some evidence to suggest that youngsters who attend UTCs are more likely to come from low-income family backgrounds, having made poor progress in primary school. In short, too many have been failed by the educational system. Between 2013 and 2017 seven UTCs closed, despite costing £10m each to set up. By 2016, six of ten UTCs inspected had been rated by Ofsted as either 'inadequate' or requiring improvement. For some, they have been dismissed as vanity projects that don't work. For others, they were brought in too fast, without adequate preparation and planning. But that doesn't mean they are a bad idea. As Barnaby Lenon argues, 'We need to value head, hand and heart, not just cognitive ability'.

Rigid

For some pupils a traditional academic education manifested in a rigid national curriculum is a big turn-off by the time they reach 14. Some under-achieve. Kids of low-skilled parents still leave school with poor qualifications. According to Major and Elliot in their book *Social Mobility and its Enemies*, hundreds of thousands of youngsters leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Others simply don't turn up for school and end up as young NEETs. A more vocational-type curriculum, combined with some academic subjects, may meet their needs and cut truancy rates at the same time.

Although unemployment has fallen sharply since 1975, 1.4 million are still jobless in [2018]. Hidden unemployment is estimated by the TUC to be well over two million.

UTCs working in partnership with colleges, apprenticeship agencies, local authorities and devolved assemblies may be the way forward. They need to be part of a National Education Service, and firmly located in a democratic regulatory framework. Get the leadership and governance right and UTCs can succeed. They are working well in the North East.

Despite their bad press, last year 97 per cent of 18 year-olds leaving UTCs progressed to

higher education, work or an apprenticeship. 2 per cent took a gap year. Only 1 per cent became NEET. (The NEET rate today across the North is 8 per cent.) The average graduate, with a £50k student debt) earns less five years after graduation than a Level 5 apprentice two years after completion. Over half of graduates from 'low tariff' universities like Teeside or Sunderland are in non-graduate jobs.

Crucial

Subjects crucial to the nation's economic success in the growing digital and creative industries are less likely to be studied in secondary schools. According to the qualifications watchdog Ofqual, the number of GCSE entries in design and technology has dropped by 42 per cent. Entries in computing and ICT have also fallen. The numbers of entries for A-level or BTEC National Level 3 in Engineering have collapsed to just 10 per cent across the country. T-levels, intended to give parity of esteem to A-levels, don't come on stream till 2020, and few parents, young people or small and medium enterprises are aware of them. Yet employers and civic leaders complain of skill shortages.

To help overcome pervasive and endemic snobbery over the value and worth of trades and skilled jobs, reformed UTCs need to be supported by all, to become high quality, high status providers of technical and vocational education. As Barnaby Lenon notes, they are a 'good idea'. They have a crucial role to play in a post-Brexit economy outside London and the South East. In the future they may have to adapt by taking students aged 13 or 16.