

---

## Rather Than ‘Two Nation’ Labour, a Good General Education for Everybody

MARTIN ALLEN

Vocational education is supposed to improve work and employment skills, but many of the vocational courses developed in schools and colleges after the collapse of industrial apprenticeships in the 1970s have not offered real opportunities for young people in the labour market. Instead, a succession of new qualifications was introduced, which lasted a few years and were then discarded in favour of new ones. Some of the more high profile, such as the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), claimed to provide real alternatives to A Levels. Others were expensive white elephants, like the specialist diplomas championed by New Labour. The most durable were the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) awards.

Even though higher-level vocational qualifications provided opportunities to enter higher education, academic qualifications continued to represent ‘powerful knowledge’ in terms of the jobs market and access to more prestigious universities. Schools and colleges in the 1990s were encouraged by Lord Dearing’s pathways approach, developed out of his review of the National Curriculum, to use vocational qualifications for ‘non-academic’ students. The more student-friendly pedagogy and less hierarchical classroom relationships involved in these new qualifications were said to reflect the modern workplace and new types of ‘soft skills’ needed across the growing service sector, but they also provided ways for teachers and lecturers to nurse these students along a low-status route.

However, the repackaging of vocational qualifications as ‘applied’ learning – part of New Labour’s *Curriculum 2000* proposals – could not widen the student base nor gather greater employer support. As a result, many teachers and educationalists continued to be suspicious of the academic–vocational divide, seeing it as reflecting the divisions of the 1944 Act and contradicting the comprehensive principle of an inclusive and broadly balanced curriculum. More recently, the standing of vocational qualifications was reduced further as

some schools entered entire cohorts for vocational 'equivalents' to improve their standing in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) league tables.

On becoming Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove commissioned Professor Alison Wolf to review vocational learning. Wolf argued that students put on vocational pathways at age 14 were short-changed in the labour market because of the poor quality and low exchange-value of these qualifications. In response, Gove streamlined the number of vocational courses available at age 14, but also demanded more 'rigour'. By this he meant that to qualify as one of the eight subjects on which new school league tables would be formulated, a vocational qualification had to follow certain criteria, could not count as more than one GCSE and had to have more external assessment.

The Coalition has also defined which vocational courses can count as 'Tech Levels', the A-Level equivalent qualifications that can be counted in post-16 performance tables; but these have received little in way of any promotion, as in line with further recommendations from Wolf, the Coalition has been promoting apprenticeships as the main alternative to a university route. By 2013 it claimed there had been 1.5 million new apprentice starts. Now Prime Minister David Cameron promises a further one million, financed by benefit cuts.

However, Gove's 'grammar school education for all' approach was rejected by Lord Kenneth Baker, who as Secretary of State under Mrs Thatcher introduced the original National Curriculum. Baker argued for a continuation of the Dearing approach and created university technology colleges (UTCs) to provide a vocational/technical specialism linked to a particular company or university.

Baker's two-nation approach has been adopted by One Nation Labour. The Adonis Review [1] has called for 100 more UTCs to be established by 2020, while Shadow Education Minister, Tristram Hunt, used his speech to the Microsoft Foundation (August 2014)[2] to attack the 'backwardness' of Gove's grammar school approach. He reaffirmed the Party's commitment to a distinct technical baccalaureate route for the 'forgotten 50%' not following the university route and proposed the rebranding of further education colleges as 'Institutes of Technical Education' for those school-leavers who have not taken the academic route. Labour has also announced new technical degrees to be combined with workplace employment.

Adonis correctly identifies the shortcomings of current apprenticeships. Many have been low-level qualifications with minimal training, are likely to be available for existing employees rather than young people and are located mainly in low-paid service sectors rather than in construction, engineering and manufacturing. For Labour though, 'reformed' apprenticeships will serve as one route in a more general vocational track, even though in his 2014 conference speech Ed Miliband promised there will be as many apprentices as university applicants by 2025.

Adonis and Baker are admirers of the German system where vocational routes are available from age 14 and where a right to an apprenticeship is

available to all. Yet they overestimate the extent to which the UK's slide to a low-wage, low-skilled economy, creating 'lousy' not 'lovely' jobs, can be arrested by 'doing it like the Germans'. [3] Surveys report that between a third and a half of new graduates are now being pushed down into jobs for which they are overqualified, as well as the disappearance of many technician level/'middle' jobs. Meanwhile, other reports show no serious evidence of the types of skill shortages or high levels of unfilled vacancies that both Labour and the Coalition continue to talk about. [4]

While these developments have been accentuated by the economic downturn, they have not been caused by it. Rather, they are the consequences of more far-reaching economic and technological changes in the twenty-first century. As a result, any changes to education and training would need to be linked to a rigorous industrial strategy with massive increases in (public) investment and systematic economic planning. This is incompatible with the UK's free market and 'flexible' economy.

For example, rather than a narrow vocationalism, it would be better to provide a good broad education for everybody through a general diploma, which provides entitlement to different types of learning, offering high-quality technical education and training for those who desire it, with opportunities for workplace placements, but as one of a number of options and not as a distinct pathway. Learning about a range of social and political issues associated with work, rather than just 'how to', would also be a mandatory part of a common core.

It goes without saying that this level of change and innovation could not happen all at once and that the first stage would have to be an overarching certificate linking the different types of existing qualifications. If this were to serve as a bridge towards more radical changes, however, then subject combinations would need to be considerably more prescriptive than those outlined in *Curriculum 2000*, for example, or for that matter in the rejected Tomlinson proposals for bringing academic and vocational learning closer together. Finally, a universal general diploma could eventually provide the main avenue to higher education as well as being linked to new concepts of 'citizenship' for young people.

### Notes

- [1] Mending the Fractured Economy. Final report of the Adonis Review. <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4695/Mending-the-Fractured-Economy>
- [2] <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/95085249764/the-choice-in-education-70-years-of-the-butler>
- [3] See: Another Great Training Robbery or a Real Alternative For Young People? Apprenticeships at the Start of the 21st Century. [www.radicaldbks.com](http://www.radicaldbks.com)
- [4] See, for example, the UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2013, in which employers are just as likely to report employees being overqualified.

*Martin Allen*

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf)

---

**MARTIN ALLEN** has worked in secondary, post-16 and higher education and was an activist in the National Union of Teachers for 25 years. With Patrick Ainley he has published widely on young people, education and employment. More details at [www.radicaldbks.com](http://www.radicaldbks.com). *Correspondence:* [marall1@btinternet.com](mailto:marall1@btinternet.com)