

# A new technical elite?

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*Education, Skills and Social Justice in a Polarising World: Between Technical Elites and Welfare Vocationalism (Routledge Research in Vocational Education, 2022)*

Does the emergence of new advanced and higher-level qualifications constitute a break from traditional conceptions of vocational education – which since its emergence in the 1980s, has been associated with both educational failure and providing pathways to low-skilled, low-paid work? In an extremely detailed and interesting analysis, Bill Esmond and Liz Atkins give a tentative yes. Qualifications like T-levels (and we might add, the proposals in the 2021 Further Education White Paper for new Higher Level technical certificates as alternatives to university), correspond with the emergence of a ‘new technical elite’. As the title suggests, vocational education is now also becoming polarised. This is not just unique to the UK, but is reflected in international responses, despite significant differences in the way provision is organised.

Yet the authors are far from optimistic about the potential of the new qualifications to increase opportunities, rightly noting how issues of class, race and gender continue to undermine education’s ability to promote social justice. It is also the case that the T’s will be delivered in FE colleges, which unless they are part of a local tertiary provision continue to be given second rate standing to school sixth forms. But the potential of the new qualifications, which include extensive work placements (T-levels require a mandatory 45 days) to develop practical work skills, stands in marked contrast to the raft of lower level courses serving as a form of the ‘welfare vocationalism’ socialising students, invariably girls, into accepting menial positions in sectors like social care (identified by the authors as ‘what’s left of the welfare state’) but also retail, hospitality and in various types of leisure services.

Esmond and Atkins are right about the emerging welfare vocationalism with many young people failing to progress beyond Level 2 courses but, maybe because of time or space, the authors fail to interrogate the ‘skills agenda’ promoted by the Cameron, May and now the Johnson governments. The T-levels, the new emphasis on higher level apprenticeships and also last year’s Further Education White Paper are designed to reflect the emerging ‘hour-glass’ occupational structure, the book refers to. One replacing the post-war pyramid and mass employment in manufacturing.

But on the contrary, the occupational (class) structure is becoming more of a ‘pear-shaped’ arrangement, where, with not enough jobs available for those already ‘qualified’ to do them most young people fight against potential downward mobility. Meanwhile a real ‘technical elite’ recruited from Oxbridge/ top Russell and with qualifications often in more traditional academic disciplines is moving away from the rest, in terms of their economic position. Indeed, later in the book the

authors point out that rather than enjoying the material security of the traditional elites and because of the way the new digital industries now operate – made up of small-firms using temporary employment contracts, or tying employment to particular projects, many from this new group will join a ‘new economy precariat’ increasingly resembling those trapped in welfare vocationalism.

While all vocational qualifications have skill development as their official objective, these full-time courses have emerged in response to educational problems, rather than economic needs. The first emerged in FE colleges and school sixth forms over forty years ago as responses to increased staying on rates amongst a new generation of working-class students, the result of the absence of employment opportunities and the failure of youth training schemes. But these students were not considered suitable for academic study. Likewise, the T-levels and the proposed higher vocational qualifications are designed to restore academic education and attending university as something for the few – part of a wider ‘Great Reversal’ of education policy by successive Tory governments.

The record of ‘middle’ qualifications is not good (T-levels officially sit between academic A-levels and work-based apprenticeships). When the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) was reintroduced as a Vocational and then Applied A-level as part of New Labour’s post-16 qualifications framework, enrolments dropped steadily. There was little evidence of young people ditching the ‘gold standard’ A-level route in favour of any other qualifications, while many of the students for whom vocational courses were designed, were not able to access them. Blair’s Special Diplomas (vocational qualifications for 14-19) also struggled to win proper recognition from employers. Like the T-levels, these initiatives drew upon ‘academic’ styles of learning and assessment to improve their ‘rigour’. Rather than offering something new, the T-levels are a continuation of the same.

Despite longer work placements (there is already evidence that some colleges are finding these difficult to arrange) students spend the majority of time in classroom based and externally assessed ‘core’ learning. The fact that T-levels are also being overseen by the Institute of Apprenticeships rather than Ofqual (the body that monitors academic standards gives a confusing message about their educational status, while Government publicity for T-levels continues to emphasise, the qualification can be used for both university entrance or employment.

Of course, the jury is still out. The time-table for introducing the qualification has been extended, at least partly because of the pandemic, though a range of logistical issues had already been identified. But the major qualifications division continues to be between academic and vocational routes. Without changes in the way young people enter the labour market in this country – and because of the absence of real employer involvement, or the types of national planning that exist in countries like Germany – qualifications just serve as proxies. It is likely that this will continue.