

‘Here we go again’: some reflections on the Post-16 Skills Plan

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A road well travelled?

Tackling the Hydra (a conflation of goals)

‘achievement’; ‘retention’; ‘global competitiveness’; ‘employability’;
‘engagement’; ‘skills’; ‘demographics’; ‘changing labour markets’; ‘employer
needs’ ‘productivity’ etc.

A trip down memory lane.....

UVP, CPVE, TVEI, GNVQ, AVCE, Diplomas

(At the same time: BTECs, OCR Nationals, CACHE awards etc.)

Currently.....

16-19 Study Programmes to include Tech Levels (Level 3), Technical Certificates
(Level 2) and substantial work experience

And now..... Review of Technical Education, July 2016; Post16 Skills Plan

What's the problem?

‘Forming a picture of policy for 14-19 education and training in the United Kingdom is a bit like the blind man confronted by an elephant. It is possible to understand specific parts, but the size, shape and sheer complexity of the elephant remains obscure.’ (Stasz and Wright, 2005)

What are they saying?

- ‘For too long vocational studies and qualifications have been undervalued. This must change – we must introduce qualifications and pathways that are an excellent standard, that deserve and are accorded high status....’

(Secretary of State, consultation document – *14-19 extending opportunity, raising standards*, 2002)

What are they saying?

- “Britain’s educational Achilles heel – our failure to provide world class vocational education is finally getting fixed.” (Matthew Hancock, June 2014)
- ‘We stripped them out of league tables. From 3,175 vocational qualifications available to 14-16 year olds, now there are just 186.’
- ‘A new rigorous, ambitious vocational offer from 14 right through to 19 and beyond.’

‘Finally getting fixed’?

- *‘Past reforms over previous decades, have failed because they lacked real commitment, with governments changing plans before they could have real impact.’ (Skills Plan, p.6)*
- *‘Employers will sit at the heart of the system and take the lead in setting the standards. Crucially, standards will be designed by considering what is needed to move to skilled employment and then working backwards.’ (Skills Plan, p.7)*

Sound familiar?

'Employer led qualifications to reflect the skills demands of the labour market and the needs of employers' (Diploma guidance)

'Employers as key partners from the outset' (Diploma guidance)

'Employers in the driving seat' (16-19 Study Programmes)

'... employers must play a leading role. Employers, working with expert education professionals, need to set the standards; they must define the skills, knowledge and behaviours required for skilled employment.' (Skills Plan)

'we anticipate that employer groups will continue to lead on the design of standards and assessment plans.' (Skills Plan)

Diplomas for 14-19 year olds

14 Diploma lines in three phases (development 2005-2010; in schools from 2008); Technical education = 15 routes (some significant by their omission)

Aim of the Diploma - learners to:

‘acquire a range of widely applicable skills, relevant to a broad employment sector and developed within an applied learning context’

Structure: *Principal learning + Generic learning + Applied and specialist learning*

Triple lock: DDPs (employers) + Qualifications and Curriculum Authority + Awarding Bodies

Diplomas and employer engagement

Challenges

- ◆ confusion about the nature of Diplomas,
- ◆ employers' limited understanding of qualifications development,
- ◆ evolving guidance to support employers' work,
- ◆ heterogeneity of employer group – consultation with employers,
- ◆ capacity to engage.

Opportunities

- ◆ influencing and improving existing provision and contributing to qualification content,
- ◆ significant industry experience,
- ◆ willingness to invest resources,
- ◆ commitment to continuous engagement, (or to abandon the journey)?

Study programmes and employer engagement

Substantial qualification	English and maths	Work experience	Other activities
<p>A levels or Tech level qualifications (L3) or Applied general qualifications or Technical certificates (L2)</p> <p><i>(possibility to mix qualifications but to a limited extent)</i></p> <p><u>Other provision</u> Traineeships Supported Internships</p>	<p>Students not holding GCSE A*-C must be enrolled on a GCSE; students already holding GCSE maths should be encouraged to study level 3 maths qualification (e.g. Core maths)</p> <p>Traineeships and Supported Internships - English and maths at appropriate level</p>	<p>Should be provided for all students with an external employer in a workplace environment. Those not taking a substantial vocational qualification, those on Traineeships and Supported Internships to spend majority of time on work experience</p>	<p>Non-qualification activity: developing employability skills; volunteering; Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme; work-related activity</p>

Getting employers on board

- **The pitch:** ‘rigorous’, ‘specialising in specific industry, occupation or occupational group’, ‘develop industry specific knowledge and skills’, allow progression to Apprenticeship, employment, or HE’; ‘licence to practice or exemption’ (IOM) ‘recognised by employers’ (Engineering Council) (DfE, 2016)
- **How?** Consultation (employers and professional bodies), LMI, ‘design, structure and concept test’, letters of endorsement, identification of employer engagement within specification, the role of Ofqual (DfE, 2016)

(Source: DfE (2016) Technical and applied qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds: technical guidance for awarding organisations)

Getting employers on board

- **Work experience** – ‘external employer in a workplace environment’; for Traineeships and Supported Internships = majority of time;
- **Other activities** – developing employability skills; Green (2013) Skills = productive + expandable + social;
- Capacity? Evidence from Ofsted (2014) and AOC (2014); AOC (2016) *‘the Plan’s provision for everyone to have work experience alone would cost hundreds of millions of pounds and much input from employers nationwide to be a success’*
- Responsibility? Awarding organisations, schools, colleges, training providers, others(?).

A strong VET route: seven modest principles

- Synthesis of knowledge, skills and attributes
- Relevance
- Progression
- Flexibility
- Authenticity
- Programme coherence
- Re-engagement

(Acquah and Huddleston, 2014; Canning, 2012; Maguire, 2011; Ross et al, 2011; Stanton, 2006; Merton and Parrot, 1999)

Unresolved issues

- Deep-seated structural and historical issues remain (tracked systems with little permeability)
- Retention of young people within 14-19 phase requires a multiplicity of offerings; '1 in 4 students enter HE from a vocational route' (OCR); other learners working at levels 1 and 2?
- Post-16 institutional competition and selection perpetuate social division; no mention of schools in the Skills Plan
- Don't mention the 'v' word (how about 'technical'?) – academic/vocational divide influences learners/ choices, returns to learning and opportunities

Some early conclusions

- Different starting points and expectations;
- Employers respond positively if engagement is meaningful, directly related to sector skills needs, and within their competence;
- Responsibilities and financial burdens have shifted;
- Capacity;
- Changing (reforming?) qualifications is only part of the picture ('intended', 'enacted', 'experienced curriculum' (Billett, 2014));
- What have policy makers learnt from previous reforms?