



***T Levels, Higher Technical Education  
and Apprenticeship – A New Dawn or  
a Rerun of the Failures of the Past?***

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Add together the development of T levels, proposals for Higher Technical Education and reforms to Apprenticeship and we arguably have the most fundamental changes to vocational education for generations. Of course, we've had plenty of change in the last 25 years. Think of the introduction of NVQs, GNVQs, Foundation degrees, constant reforms to Apprenticeship and 14 – 19 Diplomas. Some initiatives have been moderately successful, others, 14 – 19 Diplomas being a good example, an unmitigated disaster. So, will current developments be different and indeed transformational? And what past mistakes do we need to avoid?

One big mistake is to view technical education, skills and apprenticeship as distinct to higher education. In an over simplified version of the world there is further education and skills and higher education and there are vocational and practical programmes and academic courses. This ignores the fact many of the most prestigious academic degrees are highly vocational, law, medicine, veterinary science, for example. In other occupations using a degree to accredit occupational competence is seen as a way of supporting the development of critical thinking skills, the police constable Degree Apprenticeship provides a recent example. For some occupations, registered nurse being a good example, a degree denotes professional status and confers a licence to practise. A vast amount of HE provision is vocational and underpins the requirements of professional and statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

Let's also knock on the head the simplistic notion that there are academic and practical programmes of learning. I want a surgeon to have excellent academic knowledge and the skills needed to handle a range of instruments effectively. Dividing higher education from further education also ignores the fact that many further education colleges have been delivering higher education, very successfully, for decades.

A second mistake is to assume technical education and apprenticeship are for a certain type of individual. The most common proposition is that technical education and apprenticeships should be for the 50% of young people who don't go to university. Superficially this sounds logical. The problem is that currently around 60% of Apprenticeships are at level 2, whereas the vast majority of university provision is a level 6. We're comparing apples and pears. There are some excellent level 2 Apprenticeships in craft occupations, but to suggest a level 2 Apprenticeship in business administration, retail or customer service is an equal alternative to higher education is just plain wrong. Apprenticeships at level 6 and 7 typically involve the use of a degree or professional qualification. Indeed, Apprenticeship at level 6 and 7 is often a university led programme and as such not an alternative to university. The above said I don't doubt there is a need to turbo boost technical education and Apprenticeship provision at level 4 and 5.

Debate on technical education and Apprenticeship is also sometimes bogged down by the English preoccupation with social class. There have been claims that Degree Apprenticeship has been subject to a middle-class land grab. Sure, we need to ensure Degree Apprenticeship is open to individuals from all backgrounds. But isn't the fact that Apprenticeship is becoming an aspiration programme for individuals from all backgrounds and their parents something to be celebrated? T levels are being positioned as an aspiration programme but are still supposed to attract more learners from lower socio-economic groups. A contradiction? I'd suggest a measure of success for T levels is whether they are offered by Eton or Harrow. One measure of the success of the Apprenticeship Reforms is that Degree Apprenticeship is an aspiration programme delivered by a wide range of universities. I'd suspect Degree

Apprenticeships delivered by Cambridge, Exeter or Imperial College London would attract pupils from the most exclusive independent schools.

So how do we ensure success?

**Firstly, we need clarity of purpose.** It's no good just saying we need a better technical education and Apprenticeship system. The question is why? I would suggest the answer is simple. We need a range of provision that tackles skills gaps and shortages at levels needed to raise the low productivity of the UK economy. As such technical education and Apprenticeship isn't just for certain cohorts or individuals from certain backgrounds and it's not only for the 50% who don't go to university. It's also fundamentally important that technical education and Apprenticeships aren't focused on clearing up problems created by the schools' system, for example, to specifically support the third of young people who leave compulsory education without a full level 2. The answer to poor school performance is to raise school performance.

**Secondly, we need an inclusive system.** Technical education and Apprenticeship aren't an alternative to university but may be delivered by a university or lead to university take-up. Technical education and Apprenticeship aren't for the non-academic or for individuals from specific socio-economic backgrounds. They should be a good choice for individuals from any background. We also need to be inclusive of providers – we need the full involvement of universities, further education colleges and independent training providers.

**Thirdly, we need fluidity.** Individuals completing T levels need to have the opportunity to progress to university. Individuals completing A levels should see Higher Technical Qualifications as an option. Higher technical qualifications should support progression to a bachelor's degree. There shouldn't be an academic and an Apprenticeship/technical education pathway.

**Finally, implementation must be market i.e. employer and not Government led and focused on the skills needed by the economy.** Government and its agencies have an important role to play, but the success or otherwise will rest with the extent to which employers can design and use technical education and Apprenticeship to meet their needs. Or put it another way Government should resist the temptation to meddle.