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Pocket Watch – In praise of voc skills

Introduction

Are we beginning (at last) to recognise the importance of vocational skills? At last, because for so long, indeed some would say since the education reforms of the late 19th c, they've been regarded as a lesser alternative. It's not that they have been ignored, in fact this week has seen the latest celebration of voc learning in VQ Day, rather it's that they've been consigned to the margins of the education and training systems, subjected to a constant stream of wheezes and initiatives and struggled from a lack of funding and recognition as a result. Now a **Report** from the think tank IPPR has made a strong case for saying we ignore such skills at our peril: *"winning the global race will require more than simply expanding general higher education, Britain also needs stronger and better-quality vocational education, coupled with new business models that make better use of workplace skills."* And they have some impressive facts and figures to support this.

What are the three main messages from the Report?

1. The occupational impact of so many post-war 'baby boomers' retiring is greater than has been previously recognised and in terms of job and skill demand *"will be far greater than that caused by business growth."* Couple that for example with the results from last autumn's OECD's adult skills survey which found that the basic skill levels of the incoming workforce was almost uniquely in this country at least lower than that of the outgoing workforce and the importance of this demographic shift becomes even more stark
2. Our picture of an hourglass economy, one in which there were lots of high-skill jobs at the top and lots of low-skills jobs at the bottom with little in between is becoming out dated. This is partly because the labour market is experiencing growth in what can best be described as technician, L3/L4 jobs where industries such as pharmaceuticals, digital technology, advanced manufacturing and green technology, are leading the way. It's also partly because the nature of work is changing; technology for example is now virtually ubiquitous rather than the preserve of the high-skilled
3. There's still a lot more to do to get a better fit between what employers need (in terms of a qualified workforce) and what they get. This issue is more than just provider responsiveness; it's about appropriate skills and qualifications where appropriate means employer designed and labour market driven. The roll call of names of people who have led major Reports into this area is impressive: Leitch; Wolf; Richard; Whitehead, and is beginning to have some impact but there's still some way to go

Some headline facts and figures from the Report

- Demand for high-skilled professionals remains high, an extra 5m jobs projected
- Although just over a third of all jobs will be created in high-skilled occupations, the remaining two-thirds will come from low and medium-skills occupations
- Of those low/medium-skilled jobs, a large chunk (1.6m) will come from personal care services, healthcare in particular and a large number also (1.2m) from business and public services and half a million from skilled construction trades
- 5.7m jobs are projected to come from 'the bottom of the occupational ladder'



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