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Pocket Watch – Labour looks to reshape HE

Introduction

With 87 pages, 76 references and zillions of acknowledgements, Labour's new vision for HE launched last week in a **Paper** for the think tank SMF by Shadow Minister Liam Byrne, is a substantive piece of work. Essentially an argument for opening out opportunity through a high tech route, it poses as many questions as answers with its "*ten ideas for debate*" but is likely to be widely read for two reasons. First because it recasts the twin drivers of HE, namely the Robbins principle of open access for all who could benefit and the (Harold) Wilson principle of a high skilled economy forged on the white heat of technology, into a 21stc vision; universities, for example, now appear as "*power stations of the knowledge economy*," wider access as "*vertical integration*." And second because, following on from John Denham's funding speech in January and Ed Miliband's Tech Degree speech in July, let alone perhaps Vince Cable's FE/HE axis speech in April, it begins to sketch out an alternative scenario for a critical link in the HE chain at a time when political debate about higher education is beginning to gather momentum.

So what's it proposing?

The core proposal is for the creation of "*a clear gold standard route not just through college and into an apprenticeship but up to degree level skill*" through Tech Degrees. This would be delivered by Tech universities, "*elite universities working with the UK's top companies*" and colleges in a range of partnerships to create a seamless system and would allow students to earn while they learn. It's an attractive proposition and one that gets to the root of one of the more long-standing fault lines in the English education system, the so-called valley of death between FE and HE. There've been attempts to build ladders and membranes before and while this is by no means fully worked up, it re-energises the Poly concept around the current demands of skills development and wider social opportunity while offering an alternative option for many learners.

There are other proposals, most notably: the creation of Star Alliances and Global Hubs to enable a stronger relationship between HE R and D and business needs; an expansion of University Enterprise Zones; a re-vamped Aim Higher system to help widen participation; strong support for a more flexible funding system to support postgrads and mild support for online open learning.

And what's missing?

Funding remains HE's elephant in the room and there's nothing here on that beyond extending the pupil premium concept into higher education. Nor is there anything much on teaching and learning, the quality of the student experience, regulation, visas, the lifting of the numbers cap and many of the other business risks cited in PA Consulting's recent survey of vice-chancellors' big worries. Equally there's little further clarity on the HE-business front following the flurry of recent activity in this area, the HEIF, Catapult Centres, Witty Review, LEPs and so on, let alone the Science and Innovation Strategy due to be announced by the Chancellor in December. However by giving serious space to creating a 'genuine' high-level technical and vocational route at a time when employers are calling out for such skills and many learners are calling for alternative pathways, Labour may feel it has set out what Liam Byrne called "*a serious choice at next year's election*."



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