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Pocket Watch – This skills business

Introduction

If nothing else November has proved yet again how obsessed we seem to be with all things skills with 9 reports, 4 major speeches, 3 set piece events (the CBI and AoC Conferences and the Skills Show) and acres of commentary all in the space of four weeks and all on the same theme. Much of the ground covered was familiar but equally some pointers emerged. Here's six.

Six emergent themes (when it comes to skills)

1. More reform is being lined up. That was one of the messages in the speech to the AoC by Tristram Hunt. It appeared that he and Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Umanna are heads down on a new White Paper on reforms to FE, apprenticeships and vocational qualifications. *"We are beginning to work on it now and will look to publish in the first 100 days of the next Labour government."* Arguably we already know some ingredients such as Institutes of Technical Education, L3 apprenticeships and industry placements for teachers but the fact that it's a White Paper suggests it could be more sweeping
2. There's growing interest (again) in vocational provision in schools. It was a theme in two speeches by Nicky Morgan this month and one by Sir Michael Wilshaw. In addition Nick Clegg weighed in with proposals to build on the UCAS system and create a database of courses and training for 16-19 yr olds while Labour is busily working up the Lord Adonis proposals for Directors of Enterprise in schools. They add to a rising tide
3. Experience of work or at least work-related learning is very important in helping give young people a leg up on to further training or employment. The OECD Skills beyond School report identified it as a critical ingredient in best vocational systems, the CBI called for work-related learning to be brought back at KS4, Sir Michael argued that vocational options should be available from age 14 while everybody remains enthusiastic about apprenticeships which of course combine the best elements of on and off site learning
4. You can't get far without English and maths although we're still not sure which sort of English and maths is best suited to the labour market. Skills Minister Nick Boles called them not subjects but tools for life and commissioned the Education and Training Foundation to look at alternatives to GCSE. Labour confirmed it was keen to develop an alternative L2 maths qualification but also minimum teaching requirements in FE
5. Two key phrases are coming to define what vocational learning is about. One is *'line of sight to work,'* a maxim applied to qualifications and learning by the Commission on Vocational Teaching and Learning some time ago and rapidly gaining prominence. And the other, and referred to variously by the CBI, OECD and UKCES is *'earn while you learn'*
6. Two other determinants also remain in vogue and seem likely to feature in any Party's skills plans for the future. One is *'devo-max,'* the devolution to regional bodies of some planning, funding and commissioning responsibilities for skills training. Where Greater Manchester has gone this month, others seem set to follow despite some concerns raised by the Skills Commission, AoC and others about fragmenting current arrangements. And the other is *'employer-led,'* a theme running through most reports and speeches on skills this month with most, like the UKCES, seeing employers in the driving seat or pretty near

Steve Besley
Head of Policy



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