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## Pocket Watch – 3 themes to Vocational Excellence

### Introduction

It wasn't long ago that a political speech about skills would hardly raise a murmur but Ed Miliband's **speech** on tech degrees at the Pearson/Sutton Trust Vocational Excellence Summit last week attracted considerable media noise. The media often has its own agenda of course but whisper it quietly: skills or 'what skills we need for economic growth' is fast becoming a significant pre-election issue.

It's not a new issue of course, stalwarts can often cite similar debates going back to the 1870s but it's one that both Parties are keen to be seen getting to grips with. Last week's developments which saw the launch of the Government's Growth Deals, the publication of Labour's Policy Review Report into people-powered public services (surely a policy proposal in search of a snappier title,) the release of further polling data on apprenticeships from the Vocational Excellence Summit and an Opposition debate on vocational and technical education showed how fast things are moving here.

Overall, three themes seem to be emerging from this buzz of activity: a drive towards localism; a quest for lessons from abroad; and the need for clear vocational routes able to match those on the academic side. It's around these three themes that the Parties are defining their lines on skills, not always as we heard last week in very dissimilar ways. Emphases may change a little given the latest reshuffle but this is how things look to be shaping up at the moment.

### Localism

Local management of services, devolution, empowerment, call it what you will localism is the new holy grail for delivery of public services including some skills training; it neatly combines small state with big local ownership and all that goes with that.

The model for the Government is the 2012 Lord Heseltine 'No Stone Unturned' Report, a heavyweight analysis of what's needed to unshackle and stimulate local growth, adopted in modest form by the Chancellor in his 2013 budget. Last week saw the first fruits of this with the announcement of sums of money through local Growth Deals intended to support what the Prime Minister called "*things that matter locally: better roads and railways; more houses; more jobs; and more opportunities for young people.*" It may not have been large chunks of money, the Chancellor has only committed to £2bn a year over the next 5 years but it is supported by EU Structural Funding, it retains the Heseltine concept of a single locally managed pot and it gives LEPs some flexibility over how they use it based on their strategic plans. The Government hopes that along with City Deals, the Regional Growth Fund and Employer Pilots, it all demonstrates a strong commitment to local ownership.

The Opposition which confirmed earlier this year that if it took over in 2015 it would retain the LEP structure, has also been expressing an enthusiasm for localism pretty much along similar lines. The drive here has come from the recent Adonis **Report** which called for a significant shift in funding responsibility to local partnerships and from last week's **Report** from the Local Government taskforce, commissioned as part of Labour's Policy Review. Under the theme of people-powered, this Report proposed a 'New English Deal' for local communities in the form of a phased greater devolution of responsibilities in areas like child care, policing, skills training and some health care, backed up by a significant pooling and transfer of funds.

To counter concerns about waste or profligacy, the Report called for combined authorities to be required to set up local public accountability systems modelled on Westminster's Public Accounts Committee. For the world of education however, interest lay in two aspects. First in the proposal to shift public skills funding for young people, Ed Miliband referred to 19-24 year olds although the Report included 16-19 year olds, to local commissioning partnerships, (presumably LEPs and/or combined authorities) and linking it with youth and careers services.

And second, the endorsement of the Blunkett proposals for managing the school system through local directors of school standards. The commissioning of 16-24 skills funding in particular looks like constituting a significant political battleground.

### Lessons from abroad.

It may be the World Cup but German systems are in high demand at present and nowhere more so than in the area of skills training and apprenticeships where, as MPs noted when they debated the matter last week, Germany was once again held up as a prime example.

The core problem has been captured most famously perhaps by Tim Oates in his research Paper some time ago when he concluded that *"we devised an excellent system of technical education and exported it to Germany where it has thrived ever since."* Germany is not the only country, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Denmark have all been cited as potential role models and although some people have expressed concern about how far systems can be transported from one country to another, recent Reports from McKinsey, the OECD, IPPR and others do seem to suggest that there are some broad lessons that can be learned.

The most important one and the one highlighted in all such Reports is the need for employer engagement in both the design of learning and its application, something both Parties are committed to but where our structure for enabling this is not as advanced as in other countries. Other lessons include: lengthier and higher level apprenticeship programmes, acknowledged in Labour's endorsement of a L3 threshold; better opportunities for 'real' work experience for those nearer entry to the labour market, again endorsed as part of the Nat Bacc; and clearer recognition of so-called employability skills, something still on the agenda here. As for a transition age of 14 rather than 16, the issue appears to be that whatever the age, and countries differ on this, it's the consequent simplicity of alternative routes that remains the key, something both Parties here are striving for.

### Clear vocational routes

It's not only localism where the Parties are going head to head, there's also a rush on to claim credit for creating a substantive vocational route, one able to match the more established academic route. The problem area as Vince Cable pointed out earlier this year has always been at the higher end, the bridge between FE and HE, L3/4 and L5. Ed Miliband's announcement last week that Labour intended to focus on creating tech degrees was thus significant not only because it filled this space but because it was the final piece in its jigsaw for reform of vocational provision, *"the culmination of One Nation's Labour vocational education reform programme,"* as Liam Byrne hailed it.

Details of this reform programme were laid out by Tristram Hunt in an Opposition-led debate on technical and vocational learning last week and included a National Bacc framework for 14-19 year olds, 'gold standard' two-year, L3 apprenticeships and now the cherry on top in the form of tech degrees. Quite how far that cherry will take hold remains to be seen. The attractions as Ed Miliband described them are that it would be jointly designed with employers, would allow for earning while learning and would *"provide a clear route to a high-skilled technical or professional career."* The Government has countered that much of this is already in place, it's already been there and done it and arguably higher level apprenticeships, HE in FE let alone HNs, Foundation Degrees and employer sponsorships all attest to the fact that there's a lot going on in this higher voc space some of which the Government can claim credit for. The key difference at present appears to be that a Labour Government would prioritise this degree route for any future university growth, a clear policy pointer for the future.

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