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Pocket Watch – Extending the college ‘brand’

Introduction

Premier, Career, Elite: all different brands of college that have been announced over the last few weeks. They join other well-known brands such as the Gazelle Group and 157 Group, the more specific brands such as University Technical Colleges and perhaps those now able to directly enrol 14-16 year olds (which may not warrant a separate branding,) let alone the more established brands such as community college, sixth form college, specialist college and of course the good old ‘general’ FE college. Nor should we forget the chartered college yet to emerge as a type or even the earlier Technical Academy, now seemingly submerged in other brands. The college sector has always gained strength from its diversity and the Government remains keen to encourage choice and competition but what are these new types or brands and does it matter if there are so many?

Premier, Career, Elite: what types of college are these?

Premier colleges refers to a group of colleges that have come together initially to sponsor and support the forthcoming Skills Show. Their common bond is a commitment to vocational training and they will be showcasing some of this at various sessions in the Skills Show. Currently there are 20 colleges in the group and with the Skills Show being hosted in Birmingham, they are not unnaturally heavily concentrated in the Midlands where they will work closely with the University College in Birmingham.

Career Colleges were announced this week by Lord Baker as a further extension of the UTC model. Currently there are 17 UTCs now open and a further 27 in the pipeline but with youth unemployment remaining high and with few opportunities available for young people who want to work in the service rather than the technical sectors, this is perhaps a logical extension of the UTC system. Certainly Lord Baker thinks so and is hoping to set up 40 such colleges over the next four years starting in Oldham next year. Lord Baker has always been keen on the Technical High School model which operates in America and has run in various guises in this country but whether branded as Career Colleges or not, the issue is that there already are nearly 30 Studio Schools covering similar ground and these latest variants need support from FE in the shape of space and potentially capital support, both currently in short supply.

Elite colleges was a term used in a speech to the Edge Foundation this week by the Skills Minister. Little further detail was added and although the broad thrust of the intention was clear, *“a new breed of elite colleges”* to lead the world in their respective area, the relationship with the fledgling chartered college was not. Whatever term is used, the aim appears to be to create a super brand of responsive colleges, potentially important at a time when there’s such a big emphasis on a better fit with local market needs, although whether this needs Government or local leadership to drive forward is a moot point.

Does it matter?

There’s no doubt that young people need a range of alternatives and many will see these variants as a response to the increasing academisation of the curriculum and the need to offer skills-based alternatives. The combination of work-based and institution-based learning is one that serves other European countries well and is arguably the issue whatever the brand.



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