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Pocket Watch – Labour’s plans for FE

Introduction

This week Labour’s Skills Taskforce published the second of three promised reports on vocational education and training, this time on the FE sector. Timed to coincide with the annual gathering of providers at the AoC conference, the **report** resurrects the model of Centres of Vocational Excellence of the Blunkett era in the form of licensed Institutes of Technical Education (ITE.) It’s a model the Party has been considering for some time and comes as all Parties look to the FE sector to develop the skill levels needed in the future, especially in the core subjects while at the same time raising the prestige of vocational learning generally. With the Government sketching out its own thinking on colleges as social enterprises driven by the dual demands of rigour and responsiveness and due to launch the new chartered status procedure early next year, an interesting battle is emerging for the soul of FE.

What’s the pitch?

The argument is that by focusing on ‘traditional’ qualifications, the Government has ignored the needs of many young people, “*the forgotten 50%*” perhaps. The evidence is there: damning reports on literacy and numeracy, employers complaining about the skill levels of young people, continuing high levels of youth unemployment let alone disengagement. But the problem is that FE providers, let alone the funding and systems that drive them are big beasts, trying to deliver on a range of agendas, rushing to keep up with all the changes, firing off in all directions: “*in truth too much energy is being wasted on attempting to do too much.*” So there’s a need to get back to something like the old tech college, focusing on the needs of the future workforce and ensuring they’re equipped with ‘*high quality, L3 apprenticeships,*’ let alone English and maths.

What’s being proposed?

Essentially three things. First, to ensure the quality of provision, a licensing system, potentially managed by UKCES now playing a key role in developing the skills system, and based on criteria that include the quality of English and maths provision, expertise in vocational teaching and the strength of relationships with employers and the local labour market. Approved providers would gain the status of an ITE and be entitled to deliver Tech Bacc or apprenticeship qualifications. Second, in a riposte to the current debate about teaching qualifications, “*all FE lecturers teaching young people should hold English and maths at L2 or above, not just those teaching these core subjects.*” There would also be other requirements on CPD and expectations on industry experience. Third, in an effort to strengthen employer relationships, ITEs should sit on LEP boards and develop a stronger reciprocal training and investment relationship with employers.

What questions do the proposals raise?

The phrase used most frequently in the Shadow Minister’s speech was ‘*vocational excellence,*’ something that Governments have grappled with in the past and something the Opposition clearly feels needs tackling now. There are some quite ‘bold’ ideas in here: all lecturers to hold a teaching qual in English and maths: what timescale, what cost; the new licensing system: sledgehammer or nut; something-for-something with employers: attractive but difficult to deliver on? More immediately, it’s 20 years since the sector gained its independence, it will want to know if that’s still part of the deal.

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