

Burying the academic-vocational apartheid

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Is the one lesson of history that we don't learn from the past? Or is the electoral cycle the greatest enemy of sustained educational progress?

'Half Our Future' was the title of John Newsom's landmark report in 1963 to the government of the day, a title signaling that the needs of half the school population were not being met at age 15. Three of its principal recommendations read:

The school programme in the final year ought to be deliberately outgoing - an invitation into the adult world of work and of leisure.

The school should resist external pressures to extend public examinations to pupils for whom they are inappropriate.

Extended workshop and technical facilities should be provided whether wholly within the schools or jointly with further education.

These recommendations - about preparing for adult life, examinations, and collaboration between schools and colleges - resonate down the years.

Technical schools established in the 1960s were never given a chance to flourish, withering in the wake of Prime Minister Harold Wilson's infamous pledge that comprehensive education would offer a grammar school for all.

Fast-forward four decades.

The Tomlinson Report of 2004 - which promised significant reform to better balance the academic and the vocational - failed to gain Tony Blair's support. In 2005 the Secretary of State's '14-19 Education and Skills' document wearily acknowledged that vocational education had often failed to command the confidence of employers, higher education and the general public.

Down the decades, the UK education system has seen waves of acronyms rise and fall: TVEI, CPVE, GNVQ, UTCs, Diplomas, and now T and V levels. None

has fundamentally addressed 'the forgotten third', the term I used to describe this vital element of the school population : [The Forgotten Third](#).

John Newsom, in the vocabulary of his time yet with some foresight, observed:

'Vocational' is a dangerous but indispensable word. It rightly means all that belongs to a man's calling. That itself is no doubt an old fashioned word, but at least suggests that there is more to a job than money.

There must be many of us for whom - on a personal level - leaving school or college and pursuing a vocation meant taking up a calling to teach, to nurse, to be an architect or minister of the church. There may be many others who readily and properly interpret 'vocational' as learning a skill or a trade.

We find ourselves confined by the historic associations of language. 'Trades' and 'professions' are such an example. We need to bury the vocational-academic apartheid - and its either/or vocabulary which so bedevils curriculum and examination frameworks.

A newly installed Prime Minister with a Cambridge English degree has appointed a Secretary of State for Education with a degree in Chemistry from King's College. They sit in an Oxbridge dominated Cabinet. Can these leaders prompt the required step change to champion the profile of strong education and training pathways which has eluded their predecessors for nearly 70 years?

Can they move beyond to-fro political rhetoric to trigger sustained change and come anywhere close to embedding systems which are bread and butter to the Germans and Swiss?

If thoughtfully led, this *can* be done through the concerted determination of educational professional associations and examination boards in tandem with employers and trades unions. It will take time. We can surely learn from our chequered history.

In the end, this is about the dignity, self-worth and sense of purpose of a third of the nation's children as they complete 12 years of compulsory education.

Roy Blatchford chaired 'The Forgotten Third' commission.