A report from the OECD indicates that England is weak at providing post-secondary vocational education and training in comparison to many other countries. Part-time higher education, especially in the university sector, has experienced a calamitous decline and the demand for professional certificates and diplomas has flat-lined for a decade. The funding system still favours institutions offering three year full time degrees.

There is now a policy consensus emerging, backed up by recent reports from the CBI and the HE Commission, that England needs a more flexible HE system with more gateways and access to higher skills.

The introduction of higher apprenticeships and support for STEM subjects are moves in the right direction. David Willetts MP, the Minister for Universities, wrote in early April to HEFCE about developing new higher education campuses: this is a welcome initiative. There has also been discussion, from the Labour Party, about the establishment of ‘technical universities’, building on the partnership work of universities and colleges.

But more needs to be done if we are to create a system of higher skills that will support the re-balancing of the economy and provide access to higher skills for employees and the 57% of young people – 64% of young men - who do not enrol in the traditional full time three year degree route.

AoC has commissioned these think-pieces as a way to contribute and stimulate the debate about higher vocational education policy and possible ways forward. We hope you enjoy reading them and welcome comments and responses.
1. Nick Davy - AoC
The College Perspective: Why we need a Diverse Academic and Higher Vocational Education Tertiary System.

2. Bill Esmond - Chesterfield College
Higher Vocational Education: Unequal or Different?

3. Marina Parha - The Manchester College
What is Higher Vocational Education and how do we Define it?

4. Dr Sarah Shobrook - Truro and Penwith College
Inside Looking Out

5. Leesa Wheelan - Ontario Institute of Studies for Education University of Toronto
Rethinking the Purpose and Design of Pathways

6. Holly Hardisty - CBI
Tomorrow’s Growth Depends on a Diverse HE System

7. Nick Hillman - Higher Education Policy Institute
How will the Ending of Student Number Controls Affect Higher Vocational Education?

8. Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin - Institute of Education University of London
Expanding Intermediate Level Vocational Education: The Need for a Holistic Approach

9. John Widdowson - Mixed Economy Group of Colleges
Filling the Polytechnic Size Hole: The Role of Colleges

10. Rt Hon Liam Byrne - MP
Creating a more Diverse HE System: The Role of Higher Vocational Education

11. Paul Stanistreet and Alastair Thomson - NIACE
Creating a more Diverse HE System

12. Tom Wilson - Unionlearn
Higher Vocational Qualifications
Introduction

Participation rates in higher education (HE) between lower and higher socio-economic groups have narrowed over the past ten years, although the gap is still wide, and participation to high tariff institutions from lower socio-economic groups has stalled. Thirty-six percent of young men do not participate in HE at all. Participation in part-time HE at universities has fallen by around 37% in one year.

The historic emphasis has been on increasing participation through full-time undergraduate degree provision, with less discussion until the late nineties, on the effect this type of mass HE sector could have on widening access and participation, social mobility, progression for vocational learners, advanced skills formation and work based and part-time provision.

There are strong arguments to address the domination of the single track academic route – A Levels followed by university for a full-time residential degree – and seek a more diverse HE system with more emphasis on higher vocational education. Students are already walking away from this route, with only 50% of UCAS applicants coming from A Level backgrounds, and the fastest rising eligibility qualifications are vocational courses.

This ‘one-size fits all’ approach is a leftover from a previous economic and technological epoch. A new system is now needed that can develop new courses quickly with different lengths and attendance modes, can capture learning in the workplace and in other environments and allows learning to be credited throughout one’s working life. It should also attract new learners from different backgrounds – employees, the 60% young school/college leavers who do not access HE and those seeking a career change.

The increase of the student population by 30,000 in 2014 and lifting of the cap in 2015 is welcomed, but we need to be more imaginative if we are to create a HE system fit for the 21st century.

Demand

As the 2010 skills strategy states: “We are currently weak in the vital intermediate technical skills that are increasingly important as jobs become more highly skilled and technological change accelerates.”

The Skills Commission (2011) found: “The UK currently has 1,069,000 technicians operating in science, engineering and technology sectors, which accounts for 3.7% of the workforce – this

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2 BIS, Skills For Sustainable Growth, 2010, p. 4
compares unfavourably to the European average of 5.3%.”

A report by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) indicates that there is an appetite for part-time and flexible HE by those in work:

“Attitudes to HE were remarkably positive amongst our group of working adults...30% of our group of respondents would consider applying...and they want to study vocational subjects in local universities part-time in the evenings and at weekends. Working adults want local and flexible courses.”

In occupational areas where appropriate and relatively straightforward learning pathways exist HE progression rates from advanced apprenticeships are encouraging and include accountancy technicians at 50%, engineering at 21%, business administration at 19%; health and care at 25%, and children’s care at 19%.

Unfortunately, in too many occupational areas, accessible HE routes do not exist or are offered inflexibly.

Many professions are sympathetic to alternative routes of entry. It is important that this commitment to alternative progression routes, such as that which exists in accountancy and engineering, are clearly developed, signposted and understood by employers and information, advice and guidance professionals.

College supply

Colleges can be key partners in the development of a more diverse and vocationally orientated HE system; but reforms are necessary.

The present HE funding and validation system is insecure, with many colleges experiencing HEI withdrawal of numbers or a withdrawal of validation services. There is also evidence of HEI being unprepared to validate new courses or introducing new rules that stifle new course development in vocational areas they are unfamiliar with. This is unfair to students often studying locally because of family commitments and/or low income reasons, or those wishing to take up a local higher apprenticeship.

This is not the place to explore the complexities of these funding and validating relationships other than to say, by any measure, they are restrictive and place an unfair burden on colleges’ strategic and financial autonomy. Maintaining validation powers with universities for small college HE providers is probably sensible.

An alternative validation service is needed to help shorten course lead-times and exploit colleges strong links with local employers and build on their success in developing the apprenticeship system. For those colleges seeking taught or foundation degree awarding powers, there is a need for a faster and more transparent process.

It would also be logical to allow colleges to be funded through the loans system for bite-sized provision under the 25% part-time study intensity threshold and re-introduce financial

3 Skills Commission (2011) Technicians and Progression London p17
4 University is Not Just for Young People Working Adults’ Perceptions of and Orientation to Higher Education - DIUS Research Report 08 06 - Pollard E, Bates P, Hunt W and Bellis A Institute for Employment Studies
5 In health and social care and children’s care a bed-rock of statutory training seems to be a factor in incentivising further, mainly full-time, HE study.
support for part-time learners.

Professional qualifications and part-time prescribed HE are also unequally spread, with significant regional gaps in provision. Regional rates of progression from advanced apprenticeships in accountancy to part-time accountancy technician courses range from 4% to 76%. Similar regional variations exist in other occupational areas. Several city regions have very limited part-time HE provision. We have a very limited understanding of the private professional qualification market.

The government needs to look at incentives for providers to address these variations.

Milburn rightly criticises the professions for their restrictive recruitment practices, but sometimes over-emphasises the importance of law, medicine and journalism and tends to ignore the professions of the future – in IT, retail management, logistics and the creative industries – that many colleges and access universities educate for.

There is now support for a re-balancing of the economy away from an over-reliance on the banking and finance sector and very fast rising house prices, towards growth industries such as pharmaceuticals, aerospace and life sciences. These sectors will need an increased supply of science-based technicians if they are to succeed in the medium term. Many of these technicians could be trained using higher apprenticeship frameworks, HNC/D or foundation degree courses validated by colleges; or possibly a new qualification aimed at those progressing from advanced apprenticeships.

This type of provision is likely to be attractive to young men and women who engage with a more applied and practical curriculum and associated vocational pedagogy. This is not supporting a return to some form of tertiary modern stream but a recognition that studying vocational subjects is just as important as studying academic an end to educational snobbery.

These changes would allow the development of an advanced technician training strategy; and increase opportunities for those more suited to an applied HE experience.

The policy context

The strategy contained in Skills for Sustainable Growth included expansion of higher education in colleges:

“We will increase competition between training providers to encourage greater diversity of provision, including, for instance, FE colleges offering more Higher Education courses.”

The White Paper, Students at the Heart of the System, was supportive of the provision of HE by colleges:

“Colleges have displayed particular strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher education learners including mature and part-time students. They also have a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships.”

New Challenges, New Chances published later in the year was more specific; the key elements of the reform programme for the system included:

“Colleges have displayed particular strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher
education learners including mature and part-time students. They also have a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships.”

The policy intent exists⁶ – more needs to be done to ensure agencies work together to realise these ambitions.

Conclusion

HE is a complex and multi-faceted activity that is expected to meet the demands of the economy, society, individual choice and also fulfil a role as a public good. In England, for cultural, financial and historical reasons, HE has been mainly delivered through a three-year full-time residential honours degree courses. This may have been appropriate in an era of fewer highly skilled jobs, slower technological change and a more domestic-facing economy with simpler organisational structures.

This ‘one-size fits all’ approach is in effect a leftover from a previous economic and technological era. A system is now needed that can develop new courses quickly and with different lengths and attendance modes, can capture learning in the workplace and in other environments and allows learning to be credited throughout one’s working life. This will mean greater permeability between education sectors and the development of an access tertiary system encompassing both academic and vocational learning and an end to an obsession with hierarchy. And to achieve these goals will mean a shared partnership between Government, employers, providers and the wider civic society.

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⁶ See also the last Labour government HE White Paper: “We aim to widen participation through the expansion of the number of adults at university and by promoting a broader range of course models alongside the three year degree.” Higher Ambitions, The future of universities in a knowledge economy (2009) BIS
What’s in a name? For over a decade after the advent of the foundation degree, college tertiary education was described as ‘Higher Education in Further Education’ (‘HE in FE’). If the name evoked some alien child lost many light-years from home, this unintentionally captured the unease around some university-college partnerships. The students and staff of college HE provision were often seen as fitting badly into either sector. ‘Higher vocational education’ may sound better suited to colleges’ other roles, perhaps reminiscent of the old ‘higher nationals’ that started nearly a century ago. But, as new economic activities and job roles increasingly disrupt the traditional activities of both colleges and universities, the activities that should contribute to a higher vocational education cannot be comprehended by reference to past conceptions either of college or university. This contribution to the discussion, launched by the AoC, therefore begins by reviewing the opportunities and difficulties of recent policy changes, but seeks to go beyond these to look at more fundamental issues for tertiary education in colleges.

UK governments and international organisations such as the OECD\(^1\) have argued that forecasts of employment growth at associate professional and technician levels, provide a rationale for growth in qualifications at the ‘intermediate’ levels 4 and 5, below the bachelor degree. Colleges, with historic links to the workplace, have long provided sub-bachelor qualifications and part-time provision for many decades to around a tenth of undergraduates. New Labour sought to nourish this provision between 1997 and 2010, on a diet of university partnerships, Lifelong Learning Networks and IQER. While college provision came to conform more closely to the desired shape of academia, neither the prestige of its awards nor colleges’ HE student numbers rose significantly.

Some in colleges have welcomed the Coalition Government’s vision of a more market-driven higher education, with an enhanced role for colleges. Weary of validation events and partnership meetings, they hope for an easier and brighter road, as competitors to universities, than they trod as universities’ partners. They hope that lower fees in colleges will increase applications, making courses more economically viable and reducing the relative burden of quality processes. They argue that colleges, as teaching-only institutions unencumbered by the burden of research, provide the best-value learning opportunities. Some are attracted by the prospect of awarding their own degrees; others want to go back to a re-born Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). Others worry whether these changes may debar their students from the kind of degree awards that college staff won the right to teach during the previous decade. They worry that the disadvantages already facing college students will be multiplied in a more differentiated ‘market,’ where colleges simply became the bargain-basement competitor.

An alternative is for college higher education to aspire to new heights; rather than offering inferior versions of higher education, colleges are well-placed to respond to emerging forms of economic activity in an increasingly fragmented world where new knowledge often emerges outside the academy. Their links with the workplace and with local communities can contribute to a clear, positive and higher vision of the future.

\(^{1}\) Office for Economic Co-operation and Development
Differences and inequalities

Despite the optimism that recent government support initially engendered in colleges, the mechanisms chosen to serve these aims have so far failed to produce the desired results. Far from students flocking to colleges’ low-cost offers, part-time numbers (the traditional strength of colleges) have fallen dramatically. This is unsurprising. A full-time applicant contemplating a loan has three years of study and longer for their income to reach loan repayment levels. A part-time student may be earning such sums already, or will hope to by the time their course is over. Meanwhile, although governments seek to encourage sub-bachelor courses, demand for bachelor degrees remains the focus of student demand (much as when the polytechnics found their HNCs less attractive than full-time bachelor programmes).

Yet, these are in some respects secondary details. Colleges attract young full-time students who do not want to live in university towns and adult part-time students who want courses close to where they work or live. Their contribution to widening participation is to attract applicants who do not want to study at universities, but these numbers remain low because of the low status of higher education in colleges.

Nor will colleges’ low costs as ‘teaching-only’ institutions transform this situation. The higher teaching hours in colleges may reduce costs, but this brings little direct benefit to students’ learning, and for colleges only offsets the higher costs of small-scale provision. If teaching in colleges is often more interactive or supportive than university practices, this has mainly been enabled by the smaller scale of provision. Meanwhile teaching is too often based on others’ research distilled into commercial texts and does little to inspire, while reinforcing colleges’ status outside higher education. In a world of new media, full of new opportunities for informal learning, colleges tend to offer standardised qualifications because of their size. The lack of degree-awarding powers is simply a reflection of these problems, rather than their source.

If ‘vocational higher education’ has a viable future in colleges, it is time to reframe the debate. Rather than comparing colleges to their university partners - or competitors - as cheaper or more teaching-intensive versions of the same thing, it is time to develop a coherent account of their differences; to explain how colleges can be higher as well as vocational institutions. Higher education in colleges will not flourish as an inferior version of what happens in universities. Its task is not to prove its acceptability in traditional higher education terms. Instead, it needs to define how it can provide meaningful learning experiences, at a higher level, to students who are closer to the workplace.

Colleges in the new economy

Within the existing higher education system, the vocational status of colleges should not be a burden, but a strength. While universities have been traditionally valued for their knowledge creation, and according to their contemplative distance from the toils of the workaday world, academia is daily becoming more closely linked to the workplace, with research sold through spin-off companies. Teaching in vocational areas has spread beyond the former polytechnics, with the business schools that were once the preserve of the former polytechnics, today imitated even at Oxbridge. While universities remain divided into very different groupings (as do colleges, for that matter), there is in all cases a desire for a stronger engagement with the world of work.

Of course, these are different orientations to work: research-based universities may provide scientific discoveries that work organisations will utilise. Newer universities and colleges will take a greater interest in how such developments are applied. However, knowledge is
also emerging outside the academy in new workplaces and industries. Colleges, as vocational institutions with many part-time students close to this world, possess unique opportunities to capture and share this.

New economic formations around the interactive web, provide important learning opportunities and sources of knowledge; so do the ways that older skills and industries are adapting to this new environment. Some of these are only beginning to be captured by academic research. Rather than waiting for these activities to be codified and commodified in core texts, colleges can provide opportunities for active and critical engagement with new developments in such specialist areas as low-carbon technologies, virtualisation or social media. Learning on higher college programmes should focus on opportunities for cutting-edge study that are less easily available to other institutions. Rather than emphasising teaching over research, we should seek opportunities to break down the boundaries between these activities.

Of course, the notion that higher-level learning can draw on experience within work settings learning is hardly new. Work placements were fundamental to the early polytechnics’ sandwich courses and one of the defining features of the foundation degree was ‘authentic and innovative work-based learning’ for which ‘“working” is in itself not sufficient’ (QAA 2004, para. 23). To be sure, the workplace is not primarily designed as a site for learning, and routine activity has too often formed part of students’ experience on placements. Yet the workplace can provide exciting and innovative opportunities for study that is not only informed by recent research but even contributes, in its own modest way, to emerging patterns of knowledge. The difference should be that higher-level study entails a critical engagement with emerging patterns of activity rather than routine learning of established practices.

This of course raises other questions (some addressed by other contributions to this discussion). How will programmes around these activities be validated? What kind of writing or review will record research into emerging work practices, or will these remain below the level, or in advance of, published work? This brief commentary cannot address these and other new questions, yet it remains important to think critically in the face of the hypermodern hyperbole of social media. However, the very need to ask them is indicative of thinking about the work of college higher education on a new level. The task is not to make colleges, or even a minority of them, more like universities (or for that matter like workplaces), but to bring critical analysis into the emerging world of work.

Of course, the idea of raising college provision to new levels flies in the face of traditional views of the role colleges play in higher education. It may seem impractical, given the time pressures on those teaching and managing college higher education. It certainly calls for imagination, commitment and hard work, when some in college higher education feel they are already at their limits. Unfortunately, the age of commodity products is no longer a viable option for college higher education or its students, if it ever was. To go forward, it is time to think about taking ourselves higher.
What is Higher Vocational Education and how do we Define it?

It is accepted by governments around the world – regardless of political persuasion and cultural backgrounds - that ‘vocational education’, described by the locally-meaningful term, are the way to meet growing industry needs and fill identified skills gaps. At the same time, the rise of market-driven training cultures globally has given more freedom and funds to sectors and employers to encourage them to get involved in curriculum design and delivery. In this way, it is hoped, the workforce of tomorrow will be more flexible, productive and competitive - fit to support industrial and economic growth.

The efforts of policy makers are fatally inhibited in the UK by an old-fashioned educational system. At heart, this still bears the values, assumptions, principles and regulation of the past. Until we review and redefine these, all such reforms will remain, broadly, a paper exercise. The fact is that we in the UK are not alone in being in a muddle about what vocational education is, who it is for, where it fits into the grand scheme of things and, perhaps most tellingly, whether we would like our own children to be part of it. In Europe alone the differences in the typology, funding, accessibility and participation rates in vocational education, despite the introduction of the European and training, evidence the lack of clarity and consensus regarding its nature and value.

In attempting to define “higher vocational education” (HVE) we need not only to distinguish between “education” and “training,” but also to agree on an understanding of “vocational”, which will be the focus of this paper. There are three main understandings.

According to the first, “vocational” refers to a range of occupations that have in common the performance of manual, practical or technical activities. Vocational education is thus seen as that branch of education that imparts job-related procedural knowledge and skills. Though such knowledge and skills may be transferrable, that is not the prime purpose of this form of education. In this framework “higher vocational education” would naturally be expected not to branch out of those occupational parameters, but simply to impart more specialised procedural knowledge and skill within them, in order to address today’s specialised industry needs. However in a rapidly changing world, such education is of limited value to both learners and employers alike: technological advances, new regulation impacting on occupational standards, expectations regarding performance and productivity, and market demand render the original occupational parameters meaningless.

A second understanding of “vocational education” relies largely on what it is not – that is by juxtaposition to, and contrast with, academic education. According to this way of thinking, “higher vocational education” is almost a contradiction in terms. That is because vocational education, by this understanding, is burdened with the stigma of having been designed specifically for those learners who have demonstrated that they are not bright enough to take the academic route i.e. the main and preferred route learners are expected to take, given the current educational model. This is not a particularity of the educational system in England. In a number of European countries, vocational education ‘is often a safety net for those who have not met a sufficient level of educational attainment in the compulsory (sector)...and are potentially at risk of social exclusion’1. This understanding further leads us to the disquieting

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1 Initial vocational education and training (IVET) in Europe, ReferNet, CEDEFOP, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute for Employment Research, Thessaloniki 2009, p. 48
realisation that the people whom we expect to be the pillars of our future economic prosperity are the very ones who relatively early in their education careers were judged to be ‘not good enough’. In England this judgement is made on the basis of the educational benchmarks that are universally and exclusively applied at that critical stage in young people’s lives - notably in core subjects such as English and maths at GCSE. It could be argued that the “academic” performance of such learners is not an issue, as vocational studies are the outcome of a different learning philosophy. Sadly this is not the case: with a few notable exceptions vocational studies, at all levels, are regulated strictly by academic principles.

The third understanding of the word vocational is that of “the true calling”. Vocational education, in this sense is the nurturing of learners who are naturally inclined towards a particular occupation. It follows that higher vocational education is the further development of natural talent for that particular occupation. This definition is more in line with the outcomes expected from higher vocational education (HVE) in that:

- it avoids the recognised difficulties posed by the “Vocational School Fallacy”
- it provides a different qualitative, rather than quantitative, focus for HVE
- it meets the current demands of employers and projected employment patterns by developing skills and attitudes rather than focusing on knowledge which, in most cases, has a sell-by date.

Let us assume now that we are about to devise a brand new educational system, with a view to achieving industrial growth and economic prosperity. To achieve this economic growth, as educators, we need to develop a contented, fulfilled workforce that believes in both the goal and its own ability to deliver it. Starting the educational journey with a pool of talent and ability surely stands a better chance of success than starting the same journey with a cohort of uninterested and demotivated young people. No surprises so far – the performing arts schools have argued this point of view very successfully during the recent Student Number Control debate, reasoning that talent for the arts is not in any way related to academic performance and high A Level grades. Adopting this understanding allows us to move away from the notion of vocational education as an alternative offered to young people who have already failed by our universal benchmark, but it is also making us consider the key questions faced by any educator when devising a new system, namely:

- What is the focus and definition of vocational and higher vocational Education? Clearly such focus has to be expressed positively rather than negatively (i.e. as distinct from academic). I consider “expression” in this instance to refer to structures, systems and experiences of learners and stakeholders, rather than the stated aims and objectives of HVE.
- What are the desired outcomes of higher vocational education and does the current framework for higher education qualifications best serve these outcomes?

How do we best nurture “a true calling,” and how does such a calling impact on different types of intelligence? Apprenticeships have been advanced by Government as the nearest practical answer to this conundrum, but they are a modernised version of a solution from centuries past, which in itself does not look good for a forward-thinking educational plan. Are we so lacking in conviction or ideas that we have to rely on the security offered by a brand that

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2 In his article, “The vocational school fallacy in development planning.” Philip Foster has argued convincingly that schools and learners are much more influenced in their choices for further career progression by the surrounding socio-economic factors and patterns of work than by schools and curricula. (Foster, P., 1965a in: Anderson, A.A., Bowman, M.J. (Eds.), Education and Economic Development. Aldine, Chicago.)
originated before the Age of Enlightenment?

How do we design delivery and assessment in a way which imparts work ethics, occupational attitudes and standards, while enabling learners to reflect on and improve these?

Finally, how do we make our system not only responsive but also pro-active, supporting industry to choose and shape the skills of future employees from a range of available skillsets? (The academic equivalent of this is called scholarly activity).

Yes, we can have higher vocational education; in fact, we must have it. It should be the type of education which promotes skills identified earlier in a young person’s life, as pertaining to particular practical aptitudes or abilities. But to achieve this we need to have a philosophy of vocational education, a set of positive values which define this type of education. We also need an impartial educational system, which identifies emerging aptitudes and natural talent at an early age, and does so positively.
This thinkpiece argues that it is now time to move away from the term vocational and its associated cultural connotations, and move towards imbuing college-based higher education (CBHE) with words that represent what is offered and which differentiate the college experience from that of a university experience. To develop this argument, I reflect on my own learning journey through an apprenticeship, degree and PhD and through my experiences of working in both the university sector and the college sector.

Current research around CBHE has been carried out by objective researchers mainly from the university sector. These are effectively outsiders looking in. This thinkpiece reflects on the experiences of an ‘insider’ looking out, and draws on subjective experiences from a student’s perspective and that of an educational developer/manager working in CBHE. A number of issues are raised for debate around the term vocational higher education and its associated cultural meanings. It is argued that the perceived differences in academic and vocational higher education are more akin to an ingrained cultural hierarchy and academic snobbery, rather than the actual experiences of students. In terms of educational experiences I have moved from being an apprentice to an academic, and from an educational developer to an educational manager. The following account draws on my experiences and lessons learned, and uses these to propose changes to the term vocational higher education.

In 1972 I entered HM Dockyard in Plymouth as an electrical apprentice. I was one of first female apprentices accepted into what was, and still is, a very male domain. As part of the apprenticeship I completed an associated City and Guilds in Electronics and Electrical Engineering parts 1, 2 and 3 and this was my first real experience of what is commonly known as vocational education. Part 3 was at Plymouth Polytechnic, now Plymouth University (in other words, it was a course of vocational higher education). At this point in time I was heading down a vocational pathway to becoming a fully qualified electrician, with the opportunity of progressing to an electrical engineer.

After a career break in the 1980s to bring up my family I decided to change careers and re-entered the educational arena in 1993. In my first foray with HE, I attempted to use my vocational qualifications for entry to a degree programme. However, they were not acknowledged as being an appropriate qualification. I went on to complete an Access to HE course which allowed me to progress to a degree. Between 1993 and 2000 I completed an Access to HE course, a first degree in Geography with Sociology and a PhD in Geography. The apprenticeship and university learning were two very different educational experiences, that place me in a unique position to reflect on a comparison of vocational and academic education from an ‘insider’s’ perspective.1

Looking back I ask myself, ‘were the university right in their assumptions about my apprenticeship and associated qualifications not being suitable for a degree course’? My response: both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Throughout the apprenticeship I learnt a lot of practical skills that were not transferrable to a university degree. However, I also acquired a number of skills that were transferable. For example, problem solving, analysis, team work and lateral thinking. The biggest area where my vocational skills differed was in relation to being able to

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1 People change careers five to seven times in their lifetime
write an academic essay with clear use of referencing; developing a critical argument came quite naturally.

While in university terms I was missing the core academic skills required for a degree, I would argue that I did have a range of skills that were relevant yet not recognised. I would argue that my ability to be analytical, solve problems and work in a team, prepared me both for university study and for the world of work. Thus I would argue that many of my apprenticeship skills prepared me for the actual world of work more so than my degree.

I pondered why this was the case. Was it the vocational nature of my apprenticeship training? The answer is - no. It was application of theory to practice. It was doing while learning that was the most important element of my apprenticeship. I learnt how an electrical motor worked. I then built a motor, tested it and identified any faults that needed repairing. My degree was much more theoretical and abstract, I wrote an essay and referenced it. The apprenticeship was both academic and applied and the degree purely academic. In the world of work, we need to be able to apply skills as well as understand them.

As with my educational experiences, my work experiences have also provided me with insights into the thinking and culture of different educational institutions. Since 2000 I have spent 5 years working in the university sector as an educational developer, and 8 in the college sector as an HE Manager. I was involved in the early pilots of foundation degrees (FDs) and their development nationally, and have since been involved in many validations of FDs. Again, I take the ‘insider’s’ perspective on how FDs have been heralded as a vocational higher level qualification, as opposed to the more academic nature of an Honours degree. I ask myself, ‘should there be a distinction between degrees and foundation degrees?’ Answer - yes. But what is needed are two types of qualifications, applied and non-applied, not vocational or academic.

In order for colleges to be able to do this they need their own specific set of criteria for awarding full degrees. One size does not fit all, and perhaps there is a hybrid to be established - that between Foundation Degree Awarding Powers and Taught Degree Awarding Powers. Would it be possible for QAA to develop a set of criteria for applied higher education? So would it be possible to create a framework for CBHE around a process such as Awarding Powers for Applied College Higher Education (APACHE)? This would then enable them to develop locally/regionally relevant applied higher level programmes.

The current tensions that abound around progression from foundation degrees to Honours degrees, relates to the academic differences between the two types of provider institutions, their ethos and their culture. If the two qualifications are to be different, so too should the progression route to Honours. Allowing colleges to develop their own Honours degrees as applied higher level learning, would benefit both students and employers.

In drawing this thinkpiece to a conclusion, I would like to suggest that the term ‘vocational higher education’ has outlived its shelf life. It does nothing more than reinforce the implicit cultural bias that suggests that vocational education is the poor cousin to a more traditional academic education. Sir Ken Robinson argues that our current education system was designed in the ‘intellectual culture of the Enlightenment’. It was constructed in an economic climate designed to meet the needs of an industrialising nation. Employer needs in the 21st century are quite different and our educational system needs to develop to reflect this, particularly higher education. The modern educational system needs to become a postmodern educational system, where change is rapid and the ethos of HE is less rooted in enlightenment thinking and more in the needs of students and employers.

2 QAA, UK Quality Code, Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark (2010)
I believe that the learning journey I have been on provides me with a unique insight into the perceived differences between what is termed vocational higher education and the more traditional academic HE. In my experience the only boundaries that exist are those advocated by academics who wish to maintain their elitism and the hierarchical structures established in an education system rooted in enlightenment thinking.

This thinkpiece raises a number of different points. Firstly it is important to look at the terminology used in HE. Words do make a difference and I believe that losing vocational as a term relating to CBHE will be beneficial, as it would provide an opportunity to establish a new applied form of higher learning. Secondly, no matter what the policy or the drivers from employers and universities, we need to keep sight of students, their needs and the challenges they will face. Progression through all forms of learning should build on existing knowledge and skills. In the 21st century the most important skills for students are those that are transferable.

Key points from this think piece

Change the term vocational higher education as the cultural connotations are now outdated. Look at referring to applied higher education as a new form of higher education that can both recognise the full skill set of students and bring together theory and practice.

- Encourage QAA to develop a new framework for colleges (APACHE), so they can develop full degrees of an applied nature that fit with both student needs and those of local employers (now and in the future.)
- Identify student’s skills as they progress through their learning journey. Stop throwing the baby out with the bathwater because he hasn’t used the correct soap.
Rethinking the Purpose and Design of Pathways

This brief paper will report on the outcomes of a three year Australian project that researched how to improve pathways within and between education and work. The title of the project was *Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market* and it was funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)\(^1\) The key conclusions from our work are that:

- Educational pathways are shaped by the relationship between qualifications and work;
- The nature and structure of pathways will differ between industries; and
- A uniform approach to policy based on one type of pathway from lower to higher level qualifications within the same field of education is unlikely to be effective.\(^2\)

Policy focuses on developing educational pathways so that a lower level programme will lead to a higher level programme within the same field of education. However, our findings are that more than half of students change their field of education when they undertake a second tertiary education qualification, but this varies by field of education. The structure of pathways that students actually follow (which differs from the pathways we design) is related to the structure of the labour market and the kinds of jobs they want and are available.

### Four types of educational pathways

There are, broadly speaking, four types of educational pathways and these are depicted in Figure 1. Each is defined by its links to work and the type of educational pathway between sectors of education. We have defined pathways by whether they have strong links to jobs and/or strong links to education. Strong links to jobs means that most people end up working in jobs related to their qualification, whereas weak links to jobs means that most people don’t end up working in jobs associated with their qualification. In Australia, the link between qualifications and most jobs is weak. For example, in 2012 only 33% of vocational education graduates ended up in jobs directly associated with their qualification.\(^3\) The links are tighter between regulated occupations where it usually takes a long time to train and where the occupational and professional bodies specify the entry requirements and criteria and have high input into the qualification. However, this describes only a relatively small percentage of the workforce.\(^4\)\(^5\)

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1. All research produced by NCVER is freely available. It is necessary to first register with NCVER at no cost. See [www.ncver.edu.au](http://www.ncver.edu.au). The project team included staff from the LH Martin Institute for Tertiary Education and Leadership, the Centre for the Study for Higher Education, and the Education and Policy Leadership group at the University of Melbourne; the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney; and, RMIT in Melbourne.


7. The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency suggests about 20% of jobs are in this category.
Strong links to education means that many students take a second qualification within the same field of education when they move from vocational to higher education, whereas weak links to education means that few students undertake a second qualification within the same field of education when they move from vocational to higher education. There are two types of educational pathways with weak links to education; the first is that not many students go on to undertake a second qualification in higher education when they finish their Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification; and the second is that many students undertake a second qualification, but usually in a different field of education. This is elaborated below.

Educational pathways can have:

- Strong links to work and strong educational pathways;
- Strong links to work and weak educational pathways;
- Weak links to work and strong educational pathways; and
- Weak links to work and weak educational pathways.

**Figure 1: four types of educational pathways**

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**Strong links to work and strong educational links**

In this type of pathway, most students work in jobs linked to their qualification, and there are strong occupational pathways so many students study a subsequent qualification in their field. The clearest example is nursing. There is a strong occupational pathway for nurses with a diploma from VET who continue to a nursing degree in higher education. Indeed, the narrow field of education of nursing has one of the highest number of students moving from VET to higher education of any field of education in Australia.\(^6\) Nursing is a regulated profession.

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occupation and like many other regulated occupations, the profession has had significant input into the structure of the occupational pathway and in the structure and design of qualifications, pathways, and the amount of credit that can be granted for a VET qualification when students move to a higher education qualification.

Strong links to work and weak educational links

In this type of pathway, most students work in the job associated with their qualification, but not many people who complete a qualification in vocational education go on to undertake a second qualification in higher education. The clearest example is engineering. Not many tradespeople (for example, electricians) become engineers (for example, electrical engineers). Some do, but not many. While there are some jobs that can act as a stepping-stone for the trades to the professions (for example, technicians or technologists), they comprise a very small percentage of the occupational grouping. These occupations also tend to be regulated by the occupational and professional bodies, and they specify the entry requirements for the occupation and the broad features of the qualification, its curriculum and the qualifications needed to teach in it. However, while there is a strong link between qualifications and occupations, there is a high degree of occupational segmentation between occupations, and occupational pathways are not strong. Consequently, educational pathways are not strong.

Weak links to work and strong educational links

In this type of pathway, the link between qualifications and jobs is very weak and most students end up in jobs that aren’t directly associated with their qualification. However, when they finish their vocational education qualification significant numbers move to higher education to do a degree in the same field of education because it is necessary to have a degree to get a good job. These jobs tend to be unregulated, and employers use qualifications as a ‘screening device’ so that possession of a degree is a general indicator of capability, application and potential. The ‘management and commerce’ field of education in Australia is the best example of this, and it includes the broad area of business studies. This is one of the strongest educational pathways in Australia.

Weak links to work and weak educational links

In this type of pathway, the link between qualifications and jobs is very weak and most students end up in jobs that aren’t directly associated with their qualification. However, educational pathways between vocational and higher education are also very weak. This type of pathway describes the ‘pure disciplines’ such as the natural and physical sciences and the humanities. The reason there are very few pathways between VET and higher education is that in Australia, the vocational education sector doesn’t offer the pure disciplines because all qualifications must be occupationally focused. The mandated form of curriculum is competency based training where the qualification is made up of units of competency that describe workplace tasks and roles, and each unit of competency relates to a specific workplace requirement. The pure sciences and humanities don’t fit easily within this framework. However, there are high numbers of students who undertake a second qualification within the higher education sector, but in a different field of education. So, many science and humanities graduates in higher education will subsequently undertake a qualification in medicine or teaching or in another field of education that has tighter links to occupations. We have described this as a weak educational pathway for two reasons: first, there is very little movement from vocational to higher education; and second, when students do undertake a second qualification, it is usually in a different field of education. When students directly use a qualification from the pure disciplines to get a job, it is usually in unregulated occupations and employers use qualifications as screening devices, as in the third type of pathway above.
The nature of qualifications - as signalling or screening devices

These findings led us to think about the nature and purpose of qualifications and their relationship to educational pathways. Broadly speaking, qualifications are used in two main ways:

- As a signalling device, to signal that the person has obtained the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes required for that particular occupation or profession. Qualifications are used in occupational labour markets where entry and progression requirements are specified by the occupational and professional bodies. Qualifications specify in broad terms what people can know and do, and curriculum and skills are clearly specified and mapped. Qualifications are used to move from lower to higher levels within the broad occupational field.

- As a screening device, to signal that the person has the broad attributes, capacities and potential employers require of ‘good’ employees. Qualifications are used in internal labour markets where the specific requirements for the job are learnt on the job, and entry requirements are varied and not tightly specified (beyond usually requiring a qualification at a particular level – mostly degrees). Generally speaking, progression within the broad occupation is not tightly linked to specific qualifications (other than as an initial hurdle for employment, and many different qualifications can serve this purpose). In this scenario, while vocational qualifications in Australia specify the knowledge, skills and attributes associated with that qualification because they are competency based, it would be more appropriate if knowledge, skills and attributes were less tightly specified and broader in scope.

Thinking about policy - the purpose of qualifications

All qualifications serve three purposes: 7

- As a mechanism to enter the labour market or to move to a higher occupational level. All qualifications need to provide access to the labour market and they do, although they do so in different ways. Qualifications in occupational labour markets specify the occupational requirements, whereas qualifications in internal labour markets specify the broad attributes, capacities and potential of the individual. The way they are designed needs to reflect the different ways in which they act as qualifications for the labour market.

- As a transition to higher level qualifications. All qualifications need to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to study at a higher level in their field. The nature of the knowledge (whether it is more or less tightly specified) will differ according to whether it is an occupational or internal labour market. This has implications for how tightly pathways are defined (this is discussed further below). The new Australian Qualifications Framework requires that all qualifications, with the exception of the doctoral qualification, ensure graduates have the knowledge and skills they need for work and further study. 8 However, the extent to which Australia’s competency-based vocational education qualifications meet this requirement is questionable.

- To widen access to tertiary education. All qualifications should have as one of their objectives supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher level

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studies. Middle level vocational qualifications such as diplomas are particularly important for equity for two reasons: first, they provide better labour market outcomes than lower level VET qualifications; and second, they are the transition qualification to higher level studies, particularly degrees. These middle level qualifications are consequently the link between lower qualifications in vocational education and higher level qualifications in higher education. This means they matter, even when there are not related to strongly defined occupational pathways.

Overall, while all qualifications serve these three purposes they do so in different ways and the design of qualifications should reflect these differences. Australia’s vocational education policy framework does not recognise these differences. All qualifications must be related to specific occupations and based on units of competency that specify specific workplace requirements. This is based on the assumption that all industries share the characteristics of an occupational labour market with tight links between education and jobs, and strong occupational pathways. However, most industries are not like that, and the link between qualifications and jobs is very weak. Moreover, such a model is too tight even for strong occupational labour markets with strong occupational pathways because it doesn’t give sufficient emphasis to the second purpose of qualifications, which is to support students to undertake higher level studies within their broad field.

Thinking about policy - implications for pathways

The above analysis also has implications for pathways. Government policy which seeks more, more, more pathways based on linear pathways between qualifications within the same field of education does not reflect the different kinds of pathways that are needed to reflect the different relationships between qualifications and the labour market. The implication is that a uniform policy approach to educational pathways will not achieve government objectives. Policy to promote, develop and support pathways needs to reflect the different relationships between qualifications and jobs.

1. Strong links to work and strong educational pathways

In general, these types of pathways work well. They need to be supported by the occupational and licencing bodies and underpinned by the occupational pathway and educational institutions need to be encouraged to work with these bodies to develop, maintain and sustain the educational pathways that are needed to support them. This matters because while these pathways tend to work well, they are not problem free. For example, the relationship between vocational education trained and higher education trained nurses in Australia is quite fraught, reflecting industrial tensions in the hospitals. This is reproduced in the academy, and overlain with the usual tensions that arise when trying to get the two sectors of tertiary education to work together. Students will use this educational pathway where it exists, because it offers access to the occupational pathway.

2. Strong links to work and weak educational pathways

These types of pathways will remain weak while the occupational pathways remain weak. If governments wish to increase educational pathways in these areas, the key focus should be to work with the occupational and professional bodies and employers and unions to create more effective occupational pathways. Blaming educational institutions for the lack of educational

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pathways fails to locate the source of the problem, which is strong labour market segmentation. Educational institutions are implicated however, because the design and structure of qualifications and the amount of credit higher level qualifications will provide for lower level qualifications can often be parsimonious (and to be fair, this is often an outcome of the accreditation requirements of the professional body). Broader policy approaches need to be considered to support these types of pathways. Our research found that the pathway from skilled trade to professional (for example, in engineering) is just too long and difficult and does not take account of the reality of students’ lives, and their family and personal obligations.\(^\text{10}\) However, pathways are still important because they provide an opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to higher level qualifications. The design of lower level qualifications needs to ensure students are well prepared to study at a higher level.

3. **Weak links to work and strong educational pathways**

While preparing students for a broad vocational field (for example, business studies) these types of pathways need to emphasise educational transition. Attention also needs to be given to whether they support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher level studies. For example, our research has found that the narrow field of education of financial services as high levels of articulation from vocational to higher education, but does very poorly in providing access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both qualifications and pathways in these types of fields need to take a broad approach to preparation for work, as well as supporting students to study at the next higher level within their field.

4. **Weak links to work and weak educational pathways**

Generally speaking, unless and until vocational education adopts a broader approach to qualifications and moves away from tying qualifications to specific occupations using competency based models of curriculum, there will be little or no pressure to develop pathways in these types of field. This is because vocational education doesn’t offer the pure disciplines associated with these types of pathways. However, there are implications within higher education, and they are that pathways should include more explicit attention to preparing students to study in different, more occupationally focused, fields of study. While many of these pathways are implicit and well understood (for example, from science or humanities to teaching), it may be possible to support students to enter less traditional fields of education linked to other occupational areas.

**Conclusion**

The implications from this research are that a more differentiated approach is needed in designing qualifications and pathways. Qualifications and pathways differ in balancing the three purposes of qualifications (labour market entry or progression; higher level studies; widening access for disadvantaged students). In part this is a reflection of whether they are designed for occupations in strongly defined occupational labour markets or whether they are designed for occupations in internal labour markets. It is also a reflection on the type and nature of occupational pathways within each broad area. The curricular implications are also important, and these are that tying qualifications too tightly to specific occupational outcomes undermines the potential of qualifications to support both occupational and educational outcomes.

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progression. Rather, preparation for work needs to prepare students for broad fields of practice and equip them to study at higher levels. However, qualifications and pathways will need to do that in different ways, reflecting the different kinds of relationships between qualifications and occupations and the different kinds of labour markets they serve.
Introduction

The changing nature of the UK economy means that the majority of people will need a route to higher skills if we are to compete in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. To meet this higher skills challenge, the CBI believes that we need to widen the gateways into higher skilled work for far more people. Drawing on the recent CBI report, Tomorrow’s Growth, this think piece makes the case for expanding new routes to higher skills – including higher apprenticeships and part-time higher education. While we have identified a growing community of interest in this area, on the part of both business and higher education providers, this type of provision is under developed compared to other European countries. This paper will look at some of the barriers to expanding the market in flexible higher education provision and suggest some practical steps that government, business and the education sector can take to remedy them.

Higher skills are an economic and social imperative

Our economy is changing, rebalancing towards investment and exports, reshaping the economy around the high-value, high-skill activities that will enable us to pay our way in an intensely competitive global economy. Access to skilled staff is the essential ingredient and the UK needs to raise skills levels across the board.

With economic changes, the labour market is following suit. By 2020, we expect half of all employment to be for higher skilled roles like managerial, professional and associate professional positions. This is borne out by higher anticipated employer demand, particularly in key industrial strategy sectors. For example responding to the 2013 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey, 71% of firms manufacturing and 86% of firms in engineering and science anticipated increased demand for higher skills in the next 3 to 5 years. One way to alleviate skills mismatch is to develop more partnership-based and vocational higher education provision, with greater levels of business involvement in colleges and universities.

While our changing economy makes higher skills an economic imperative, opening up routes to higher skills will offer opportunities to a more diverse group of people, widening the talent pool and tackling inequalities. This doesn’t mean the end of the traditional three-year degree, but we need to widen the gateways into higher-skilled work for far more people, including those already working, or those for whom a degree may not be the best option.

We need a faster, more diverse approach to higher skills

The CBI believes that different routes into higher skills – for both young people and experienced workers – are fundamental to meeting this challenge. By combining workplace skills with the opportunity to apply knowledge, learn-while-you-earn schemes can ensure work ready learners. As a nation, we’ve long failed to maximise the potential of effective

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1 UKCES, The 2010 Report Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK Key Findings and Implications for Action
2 CBI/Pearson, Education and Skills Survey 2013
routes into vocational education – even as far back as Prince Albert’s Royal Commission in 1851 this was a priority for action.³

But the tide may be turning. Since the 2012 higher education reforms, we’ve seen CBI members increasingly think about the long term impacts of the changes on their graduate talent pipelines. With students reviewing choices at 18 with a much more critical eye, businesses and education providers are working together to develop more vocational provision that places a stronger emphasis on employment.

Exciting as these collaborations are, conversations with businesses and universities made it clear that we need to look much more closely at the barriers to expanding the market in more flexible provision. For instance, the number of new part-time students has plunged by 40% in the last two years and although higher apprenticeship starts have increased by more than 500% since 2009/10, they still made up only 2% of starts over all in 2012/13⁴.

**Barriers to the marketplace must be addressed**

CBI analysis conducted as part of our *Tomorrow’s Growth* report found a number of demand and supply side barriers in the market place that need to be addressed.

The first of these is finance. Effective student financing plays an important role in driving inclusion and can help ensure that course fees do not act as a barrier to individuals seeking to re- or up-skill. Take the example of part-time higher education – 2012 saw a 40% drop in applicants compared to 2010. The reasons behind this drop are complicated, but unavoidably coincided with fee reforms.

The extension of fee loans to part time students should have been a cause for celebration – an end to the poor deal that previously stopped part-time students from drawing down on student financial support. Hampered by an initial poor roll out, it seems that many were put off by the higher fees, perceived complexity and the prospect of taking on debt. We’re pleased that the Student Loans Company and UCAS responded quickly to concerns, but it’s a situation we’re all going to have to keep watching carefully.

In the *Tomorrow’s Growth* report, we called for a revisiting of the equivalent and lower qualifications policy. Last year’s announcement of a partial relaxation of the rules for engineering, technology and computer science subjects is very welcome, but we’re keen that government works with businesses to make sure that exemptions have the strongest possible alignment with our industrial strategy.

We also need better access to information, for employers and learners alike. The market in higher-skills provision is becoming increasingly complex as a result of fee reforms, the changing jobs market and growing numbers of innovative collaborations between businesses and providers. But students and businesses often lack information about the options open to them for meeting higher-skill needs, and their relative benefits.

For young people in particular, we have to tackle the perception that A levels then university is the only route to a good career. Long term, we need a comprehensive new approach to careers advice, and guidance must improve careers advice structures so that all young people have the information they need on all the options available to them. In the short term, we lack a single portal with information on the full range of higher education options available. A vocational UCAS-style system, with similar prominence, would help raise

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³ [http://www.royalcommission1851.org.uk/](http://www.royalcommission1851.org.uk/)
⁴ BIS Data Service
visibility and parity of esteem of vocational routes. We also want to make sure that innovative and diverse provision is visible to policy makers and for this reason more data should be centrally collected and analysed on the take up of alternative routes.

Finally, we came across some fantastic examples of partnerships in our research. Yet many of the universities, colleges and businesses we speak to all felt that the structure of the education system, and of businesses too, often mitigates against enhanced co-operation.

Some of the most innovative delivery partnerships we came across arose where colleges or universities had the sustainable infrastructure to broker relationships with local businesses. The CBI would like to see business outreach a core function of all higher education institutions to help them maximise the opportunity on offer.

Businesses have a share of the responsibility too. Employers must get better at articulating skills needs and invest in the expertise to help them understand their needs, not only now, but to plan strategically for the future. An important piece of feedback from the roundtables we held with business leaders for this report was that many felt that this was not always the case. Committing key staff to articulating skills needs is vital.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, changes to the UK economy and jobs market will require higher and wider levels of skills across the economy. One way to address growing demand and assure business confidence is to widen the route into higher skilled work, boosting apprenticeships and other vocational routes to progression. Despite a burgeoning community of interest in this area, our analysis suggests there are a number of factors that need to be addressed, for the most to be made of partnerships between providers and business, encompassing finance, information and building a focus on the end goal of sustained employment. Government, business and education must work together to tackle these issues or we risk falling short in delivering a balanced growth that works for everyone.
In December 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the House of Commons that higher education (HE) institutions will be free to recruit as many students as they wish. When that happens, the Coalition will become the first government to implement the principle enshrined in the Robbins report of 1963 that ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’.

The small print reveals the Coalition expect this commitment to mean an extra 30,000 entrants in the coming academic year and an extra 60,000 each year thereafter. That will roughly mean a 20% increase in the number of full-time first-degree students. It is the Treasury’s best estimate and double the figure for untapped demand included in the 2010 Browne report. But it is a guess-timate and no one knows if it will prove accurate. Indeed, when Australia removed their number controls a couple of years ago, they were taken aback by the level of demand unleashed: there were far more enrolments than the government had expected.

Many people have said the Chancellor’s announcement was a bolt from the blue. Unlike numerous other official announcements of a similar magnitude, it was not leaked – nor pre-briefed – before the Chancellor stood up to make it a key feature of his autumn statement. There had been no prior consultation with the sector and research-heavy institutions have since expressed a fear the science budget could pay the price. Ministers meanwhile claim the costs can be covered – at least in the short term – by selling off more student loans, although their figures on this have been challenged.

Whatever the whys and wherefores of these debates, which will continue to run back and forth, we should be clear about one thing. More places will mean more high-level skills, more social mobility and, because there will be more competition between institutions, a greater focus on the quality of higher education. When places were tightly constrained, there were fewer people with higher-level skills than there might have been, less competition between institutions and a crowding out of under-represented groups. In Australia, one effect of removing number controls was a blurring of the line separating ‘selective’ institutions from ‘recruiting’ institutions: it’s a world with more competition in which institutions are free to grab as many students as they can and the overwhelming majority of providers have ended up as ‘recruiting’ organisations.

The removal of number controls was announced on my final day as a special adviser to the Universities and Science Minister, David Willetts MP. I am proud of being a minor player in the team that put the policy together, as admissions need no longer be a zero-sum game for institutions in which every accepted applicant counts against a fixed total. But the fact that the policy was kept under wraps until the last minute reflects not only the secrecy with which it was prepared; it also reflects the fact that the package was put together at speed, with a limited amount of underlying analysis. That doesn’t mean it was picked off a dusty shelf just to spice up the autumn statement: it was firmly in tune with the Government’s stated policy, as outlined in the higher education white paper of 2011, of liberalising more higher education places each year.

But the fact remains that the policy is a rather bare vessel. There are three important known
unknowns. First, numbers. England has roughly double the population of Australia and the removal of number controls here also theoretically opens up our institutions to people resident across the European Union. Yet the official predictions assume a demand-led system will produce roughly the same number of extra students as it did in Australia. What if that turns out to be an under-estimate? Will the extra students that have not been budgeted for be shut out (in which case it won’t really be the end of number controls) or will they have to be self-funded to enrol? Conveniently, the problem is unlikely to arise this side of the 2015 general election, but that doesn’t lessen its importance.

Secondly, quality. Some providers, including relatively new entrants, will look for considerable expansion in the number of students they educate. What might that mean for the quality of higher education? We simply do not know which levers will be pulled to ensure there is no unreasonable diminution of quality when the influx happens. How do you avoid a “pile ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap” approach? Cheaper forms of higher education are not in themselves a bad thing and we might see greater price variation in a more competitive environment. But many of the students newly able to enter higher education will face additional barriers to learning and these are rarely cheap to tackle successfully.

Thirdly, practicalities. Despite the Coalition’s quango cull, there are a multiplicity of bodies involved with regulating higher education. In a newly liberalised world, what additional tasks will be expected of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Quality Assurance Agency, the Student Loans Company and others? Will the boundary between the Skills Funding Agency and HEFCE remain the same? In my first Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) pamphlet, published in February 2014, I listed eight pinch points in the current system that could come to look even more anomalous as the whole sector grows and as the wait for a new legal framework for higher education continues.

We also do not know much about whether providers and certain disciplines will be treated differently to others. The spin suggested just one system. For example, alternative providers are included in the decision to remove the numbers cap. Yet ministers recently clamped down hard by ending in-year recruitment at a number of private providers offering Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas that were expanding worryingly fast. So it would be odd if such institutions were now to benefit fully from the new liberalisation. Moreover, it is pretty clear that the extra places will not cover some of the most competitive courses, such as medicine, because they are so incredibly expensive to teach.

The end of number controls will make little difference to the top end of the Russell Group: Oxbridge displays no desire to expand their undergraduate numbers and other older universities were effectively freed from number controls a couple of years ago when the Coalition introduced their AAB policy. But it provides a very significant opportunity, as well as a threat, for higher vocational education. In particular, it could mark a rejuvenation of higher education in further education colleges (FE in HE) and a step towards a more coherent FE/HE system. When there are no restrictions on the number of places, there are fewer barriers against the sort of local higher education provision FE colleges can provide and the new students enticed into the system may particularly value the focus on teaching, the local roots and the value-for-money that characterise colleges. In the absence of fines for over-recruitment, the stories of recent years about universities snaffling back places that had previously been offered to their partner FE colleges should become a thing of the past.

Just as importantly, the new policy may offer an opportunity for colleges to offer more pathway courses. The Australian experience saw an unexpected increase in new stepping-stones from vocational providers to traditional universities. Unsurprisingly, the extra students newly attracted to Australian universities typically have a poorer record of
past academic achievement than other students, as well as a relatively higher non-continuation rate. But those who make use of good pathway courses have proved to be more sticky than those that don’t.

So what are the threats for colleges? First, a wave of new private providers could challenge them. These could be better resourced, more nimble and more focussed on grabbing new opportunities than well-established colleges with lengthy internal processes and a variety of purposes. Secondly, the alternatives to traditional higher education offered by colleges could suffer reputational damage if higher education is not only the norm for the middle class but the new norm for a majority of young people – the Osborne / Willetts expansion will take England far beyond Tony Blair’s target of half of all young people securing some experience of higher education and way beyond some competitor nations, such as Germany. Thirdly, employers could be encouraged to cultivate deeper links with universities and new providers at the expense of colleges when the headroom is created for new courses to start. Fourthly, the necessary backstops to ensure the policy does not backfire could affect different types of institutions differently. Until we know what the backstops are, we won’t know if this could disproportionately affect FE colleges. Fifthly, those designing the details of the new system could prove more receptive to the lobbying of the traditional university sector than the FE sector.

The only certainty is that both HE in FE and traditional HE, as well as the interface between them, will be transformed in coming years. Students are likely to benefit as choice and competition change, hopefully improve what is on offer. Within the constraints imposed by the Government and HEFCE, it is now up to institutions to determine precisely what the future higher vocational sector will look like. Prospective students and institutions of all types both currently have the ball at their feet.
The metaphor of an hourglass is often invoked to highlight the UK’s relative weakness in producing intermediate skills. The bulge at the top of the glass is explained by the expansion of higher education (HE), giving the country a strong showing in the international league tables on HE participation. The bulge at the bottom reflects strong growth in the proportion of the population qualified to Level 2. Successive governments’ education and skills policies have played a key role in contributing to these achievements. However, the hourglass’s slim waist is seen as a longstanding problem. The recent OECD review of post-secondary vocational education in England has highlighted the limited take up of, and demand for, intermediate level provision particularly at Levels 4 and 5, allowing unfavourable comparisons to be drawn between the UK and competitor countries. Moreover, many vocational qualifications at Level 3 have weak currency for progression, either to the labour market or HE, and the quality of advanced apprenticeships is still a cause for concern.

Over many years, policy makers have castigated vocational education and training (VET) providers for their lack of responsiveness to employer needs. Although more recently, agencies such as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills have called on employers to increase their demand for skills. At the end of the last Labour Government, Lord Mandelson presented the economic argument for creating a more highly-skilled technician or intermediate level workforce, to support growth in high-tech, high added-value industries. His solution was to create a ‘technician class’ through expanding advanced level apprenticeships. In pursuit of a similar goal, the Coalition Government has published plans for a ‘technical baccalaureate’ (techbacc) targeted at 16-19 year olds taking ‘technical programmes’ at Level 3 that lead to jobs requiring ‘significant theory and knowledge acquisition’, such as technicians in STEM-related, creative or service industries, or that lead into Higher Apprenticeships. It is also implementing reforms designed to strengthen the value of adult vocational qualifications and apprenticeships, following the Whitehead and Richard Reviews. We argue however, that these top-down qualification and supply-led initiatives will struggle to be effective. A holistic approach is needed that connects supply and demand, stimulating both for mutual benefit.

The importance of institutional relationships

Embedded within their communities, further education (FE) colleges make an important contribution to local economic and social well-being. They have always played a major role in providing intermediate and higher-level vocational education via part-time (including day and block release) and full-time courses, working closely with local and regional employers to ensure relevance and quality. The viability and currency of these courses and qualifications is dependent on their appeal to employers, and acceptance as entry qualifications to the next rung of the educational qualification or professional career ladders. For example, Level 3 engineering apprentices are eligible to join the relevant professional body if they are participating in an approved scheme. The qualifications they attain give them the platform to

progress to the next level of membership, and put them on a potential trajectory to undergraduate and postgraduate level qualifications, and eventually Chartered status. The point here is that the pull of labour market and professional body requirements, coupled with the push from the VET system, create high quality, high value intermediate provision. It is the availability and configuration of institutions, occupational status and identity of engineering, and requirements of the contemporary engineering workplace, that combine to produce a healthy and effective relationship between the demand for, and supply of, intermediate skills.

It follows that the relative underdevelopment of intermediate provision cannot be laid solely at the door of VET providers. Instead, the problem calls for a wider range of insights and a more holistic analysis. To illustrate the importance of this perspective, we draw on recent research for the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, in which we explored the nature and availability of intermediate level roles in the healthcare sector, the education and training pathways into these roles, and associated career progression opportunities. We argue that lessons about the potential for developing intermediate vocational can be learned from our four case studies (Dental Technicians, Radiography Support, Healthcare Sciences, Maternity Support), representing diverse parts of the healthcare sector.

In the case of the dental technicians, the role of statutory regulation and professional registration, as well as the technical and scientific nature of the work itself, were key to understanding the shape of, and demand for, intermediate level training. The General Dental Council specifies the occupational standards (including theoretical and practical elements) that candidates have to meet in order to qualify for entry to the statutory register of dental technicians. These standards can only be achieved through successful completion of approved courses, including a BTEC Extended Diploma in Dental Technology and an occupationally specific foundation degree (FD). Registration gives the individual access to the protected occupational title, a portable qualification which is in effect a licence to practise, and recognition by registered dental laboratories that have to recruit and train staff in accordance with statutory regulations. The irony here is that currently these highly successful courses do not qualify for Advanced Apprenticeship funding.

The development of intermediate level courses for radiography support staff depends on whether there is demand from local employers. In the NHS Trust we researched, a shortage of qualified radiographers (a statutory profession), coupled with technological innovation had created scope for the devolution of some tasks formerly only undertaken by radiographers. This created an opportunity for semi-skilled healthcare workers to be trained to fill new ‘Radiography Associate Practitioner’ posts, via completion of a specially designed FD. Local employer – education partnerships were put in place to develop the course, and to enable ‘top-up’ progression to a bachelor degree in radiography. This model worked well at the local level by filling the Trust’s workforce skill gaps and providing excellent intermediate education and training, as well as career development for a cohort of individuals. However, the lack of a national occupational and employment framework for creating jobs, has meant that demand is uneven, the course is hard to sustain, and the portability of the qualification is relatively weak.

The story in our healthcare sciences case study revolved around the separation of ‘professionals’ and ‘laboratory assistants’, leaving the ‘intermediate space’ underdeveloped. In the past, many laboratory assistants would progress to the higher level via work-based training programmes.

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However, as in other areas of healthcare, a move to graduate-level entry aligned with professional registration requirements, has disrupted this route and consequently intermediate-level provision (HNC) has faded. The prospects for developing intermediate positions supported by appropriate vocational education, are weakened by the wide availability of biomedical science graduates seeking work. This has lessened the need for employers to train existing workers to undertake intermediate tasks, as they can recruit new graduates instead.

Our maternity support case study highlighted the under-development of an intermediate position between the midwife (graduate entry) and healthcare assistant (no formal qualifications required for entry). In this occupational field, there is no clear link between the attainment of intermediate level qualifications at level 3, 4 or 5 and career progression. It is left to individual employers to determine if they need to develop new intermediate roles and education and training pathways, as well as how they would articulate subsequent entry to midwifery (or nursing) training. In this scenario, there is little incentive for colleges to invest in the development of new courses, when the demand signals from ‘the market’ are weak.

Conclusion

We can see that the insights offered from our four case studies have wider relevance for debates about the potential to expand intermediate/higher vocational education, and the role colleges can play in this. First, the evidence reinforces the importance of thinking about the problem and potential solutions in the round, not just from a supply-side perspective. Second, our examples show that the nature of the labour market is a key factor in explaining the spread and intensity of employer demand for intermediate skills. Where there is an established occupational labour market based on collective understandings of standardised education and training pathways, and recognition of qualifications, demand is likely to be high. If this is reinforced by regulatory requirements, such as licence to practise, then portability and exchange value for the individual are assured, and providers can have confidence in the sustainability and popularity of the relevant courses.

Third, changing forms of production and work organisation enabled by new technology and/or by efficiency imperatives mean that work tasks and roles are being reconfigured and redistributed up and down workforce hierarchies in a variety of sectors. This provides an opportunity for colleges to work with employers to think through the potential for developing intermediate roles, and the potential to design and create associated education and training pathways. Fourth, policy can play an important role in creating the conditions for expanding intermediate VET. For example, the policy push towards improving apprenticeship standards and expanding the higher apprenticeship programme, can extend the pipeline of apprentices and their employers requiring high-quality intermediate provision. Finally, registration and regulation are very important levers. Access to professional body membership and qualification ladders, provides a clear signal that the development and recognition of occupational expertise at each level is valued.

By fostering the holistic approach advocated here, we argue that the UK would begin to make progress in reshaping the hourglass and, as a consequence, make much better use of the considerable expertise and potential in its FE colleges.
Filling the Polytechnic Size Hole: The Role of Colleges

The Government’s industrial strategy sets demanding targets for all those seeking to contribute to economic recovery. Higher level skills are a vital component of a modern economy but the reforms to higher education appear to have served the needs of full-time students, and those institutions catering for them, rather than the more immediate demands of businesses of all sizes. This has been reflected in the significant reduction of participation in part-time higher education by those in employment. One response has been to draw attention to the apparent gap left in the market by the demise of the Polytechnics, institutions which were considered to have a grip on the higher level skill needs of their markets and communities. This short paper argues that colleges of further education are ideally placed to respond and fill that gap, and to go further than the Polytechnics. To do so, they need to be given greater autonomy as validators and providers in the newly created higher education system.

Mind the gap: identifying the problem

More colleges now benefit from direct funding for higher education, following the greater availability of allocations under the Student Number Control mechanism. This has caused both colleges and partner universities to reflect on the nature of those partnerships. More direct funding has resulted (intentionally), in a reduction in franchised relationships, in favour of one of validation only. This is potentially a more transactionally based model, which risks the development of relationships based on short term financial priorities, rather than long term strategic relationships aimed at addressing issues such as higher skills needs and widening participation. Some universities have reviewed their relationship with colleges, and withdrawn or restricted validation services and remaining franchise relationships. Others have moved in the opposite direction, welcoming new partners whose existing relationships have foundered. However, this simply illustrates the volatility of those relationships and weakens the policy intent to strengthen the provision of higher education in further education Colleges.

Ironically, a policy shift intended to empower colleges as more autonomous providers, may reinforce the monopolistic power of universities as validators, placing colleges in a weaker financial and strategic position.

At the same time, changes to the fees regime and the introduction of loans via the Student Loans Company, have impacted on different types of students in different ways. School and college leavers have fared relatively well and adjusted to the new arrangements with little apparent early impact on recruitment. Clearly, any long term effects are yet to be felt. However, it seems apparent that there has been an adverse impact on recruitment to part-time courses and from mature students. (“The power of part-time: Review of part-time and mature higher education” Universities UK) October 2013). This is important when considered against the policy drive towards higher level skills for jobs and provision, which is relevant to employers and those they employ. In the longer term, this could have a significant and undesirable effect on key aspects of economic recovery and wealth creation.

In addition, as the recent Higher Education Policy Institute report (“The impact on demand of the Government’s reforms of higher education” HEPI October 2013) has shown, the new
funding regime may encourage some universities to pursue full-time markets at the expense of other more demanding and less rewarding provision, such as part-time courses. They may also choose to develop international provision or focus on research. None of these activities is invalid or unnecessary, and indeed are actually essential to both the health of the system and economic success. However as the new markets for higher education evolve, the gap between the strategies of institutions and the needs of the communities and the economy at local regional and national level, may widen.

This risk to higher level skills provision has sometimes been described as a “polytechnic sized hole”. This reflects concern that the role fulfilled by those institutions, has not been uniformly accepted by universities as they develop their business models to follow the market for student recruitment, create valuable overseas markets, or focus on research. There is a recognised requirement for provision which responds to local and regional higher skills needs, provides opportunities for higher education for those choosing to combine work and study, and gives space for innovation and growth in areas such as higher apprenticeships.

Mind the gap: what needs to change

Colleges offering higher education have a positive and unique contribution to make in filling this gap. In doing so, they will undoubtedly find themselves occupying the same space as those universities which accept the challenge of working in a volatile and financially stretching environment, with private providers, professional bodies and those large employers which take advantage of any changes to the funding and regulatory regime to enter the market.

However, the ability of colleges to respond is limited by the constraints of the systems for course validation, which still rely on university partnership, even within an approach to the allocation of student places which was intended to favour the college offer.

Arrangements for validation which require, in the vast majority of cases, university agreement are a serious limitation. Although since 2007, colleges have been able to apply for the power to award their own foundation degrees. So far only three have completed the process; none have full degree awarding powers. The reasons for this are too detailed for this paper, but one seriously limiting factor in the growth of college-validated higher education has been the constraint placed on consortium working. In essence, every college seeking to achieve awarding powers must make an individual application, with the consequent duplication of effort and expense. This approach also imposes additional bureaucratic burdens on regulatory bodies, rather than rely on mature institutions providing leadership and taking responsibility.

The restrictions imposed on current holders of foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) mean that they are prevented not only from entering into franchise arrangements with other colleges but also from forming effective validation partnerships. The greater availability of student places directly to colleges may have actually reinforced this constraint, as universities are able to offer services which even the largest college with FDAP is unable to do. The monopoly on validation may thus have been strengthened.

In response to this, some have argued for the re-introduction of a national awarding body such as the former Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). However attractive the arguments in favour of this may at first appear, there are powerful counter arguments. Any such body would require substantial funding, including set up costs, which in the current economic climate could only come from college budgets. A national body would also risk becoming yet another bureaucracy, imposing its own methodologies and over time losing...
its connection with the college system. It could also be seen as yet another monopoly holder. There is also the real danger that awards approved by this body would be regarded as second class provision when compared with the university alternative.

Rather than embark on this route, a more pragmatic, quicker and more cost effective option would be simply to remove the constraints currently placed on colleges which prevent them working together in robust validation partnerships. These would be subject to the same quality criteria via the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as other degree awarding bodies. There would thus be no question as to the status or value of the awards as they would comply with the existing processes and safeguards. Colleges have already demonstrated their willingness and ability to work in close collaboration, and are more than capable of designing and developing effective approaches to higher level skills provision, given the space and power to do so.

There are also opportunities to develop new approaches to higher national awards, particularly in sectors where those awards have maintained their recognition and value as a career stepping stone. Colleges have been teaching these awards for many years, often to part-time students.

Finally, colleges are in a strong position to align all of this provision with qualifications classified as “Non-prescribed Higher Education”, including those leading to higher level national vocational qualifications and examinations offered by a wide range of professional bodies.

**Polytechnics Plus: how colleges can go further**

Released in this way, colleges can achieve a great deal more than the former Polytechnics. They can offer locally available accessible provision, which provides clear progression pathways from vocational qualifications at level 3, to cognate vocational disciplines at higher level. Colleges already offer a range of vocational qualifications which do not articulate readily with the more academic offer of universities, despite demand from employers. College-led validation would tackle this, developing subject knowledge alongside employability skills and enterprise. Colleges are well attuned to the needs of local and regional businesses, including small businesses, in a way that universities with national or international agendas sometimes find difficult to do. The lower cost base found in colleges has already resulted in lower fees for students. This may be particularly important in what appears to be the more price sensitive market for part-time and mature students.

Colleges also have extensive experience of delivering Apprenticeships across a range of specialised disciplines, working with large national employers and small local enterprises. They are thus ideally placed to make a significant contribution to the development of higher apprenticeships. Liberated from the constraints of the traditional academic subjects often imposed by universities, they can begin to respond quickly and directly to the skills employers need to ensure the success of their business. Employers have sometimes been discouraged from expanding Apprenticeship opportunities by the perceived weight of the bureaucracy which often follows. College validated provision will remove one of the most time consuming and often frustrating aspects of this, (the additional university validating partner) and allow employers to play their full part in designing, delivering and assessing qualifications to get the skills they need. As more employers engage in the process, higher apprenticeship will become a positive choice for highly qualified school and college leavers at eighteen, providing a real alternative to traditional full-time models.
Conclusion

Colleges have the potential not only to fill the “polytechnic hole” but to go further. To do so colleges need to be liberated from the constraints of the current funding and validation systems to serve students and employers who may not be benefitting from the reformed higher education system. Colleges already compete successfully in a range of markets with beneficial effects. That energy, creativity and enterprise must be released if the higher education system is to respond with vigour and flexibility to the demands of the industrial strategy.
For three years, Britain has been trapped in an economy where wages have grown slow, and prices have grown fast. Our competitiveness is going backwards: productivity has collapsed, and is 7% lower than it was in 2008. Working people are on average £1,600 worse off a year since the 2010 election: a family today has to work an extra two hours a week, just to make what they did four years ago.

What that means for families struggling with the cost of living crisis today is that we’re simply not creating the good supply of high paid, high skilled, high valued added jobs that we need if they are to earn their way out of today’s crisis.

That’s why Labour has said we will put an end to low pay by looking at higher sector minimum wages, and by encouraging businesses to offer the living wage. It’s why we’ve said we will freeze energy prices, and it’s why we’ll extend childcare provision.

But for the long term, there is only one big way out of this mess: and that is to grow our knowledge intensive sectors; that part of the economy that accounts for one-third of output, one third of business, but just 19% of jobs. If it was a third of jobs, that would be an extra 2.4 million better paid jobs to go round. Right now, those jobs pay 40% over the national average; that’s a pay-packet £161 a week bigger.

But the challenge is that global science is now out-pacing UK skills. Our teaching is not keeping up with either the trade or the technology re-shaping the world around us. Competitors like Germany, Korea and Israel are all growing science spending faster than us. Our spending on science is falling in real terms by £100 million a year.

Meanwhile new science powers like China are growing science spending at 36% a year as they shift from being an IP copier to an IP creator. New Chinese firms like Xiaomi and BGI are showing they can beat the world in the invention business.

And others are not simply inventing things, they are making things. At the Rolls Royce-Hindustan Air plant in Bangalore last week, I saw firsthand, production quality that is simply world-class. Rolls Royce and its partners have 850,000 engineering graduates every year to choose from. The people it hires are world-class. But salaries for people of the quality Rolls Royce need in India are between £3,000 and £5,000 a year. How do we compete with that?

Yet it’s not just the power of our competitors out-pacing our capabilities – it’s the power of computing too. Eric Brynjolfssoon and Andrew McAfee’s book ‘The Second Machine Age’ is an incredible story of how our ability to combine different technologies is revolutionising the decline of routine jobs. The world of tomorrow, argue the authors will be divided into very well paid, highly skilled creative jobs, and very low paid, non-routine jobs in the services sector with very little in-between.

Indeed, economists at the Oxford Martin School now estimate that 47% of jobs in our economy may be automated over the next two decades.
In this world that is coming, if we’re to prosper, if we’re to build a bigger knowledge economy, it is critical that we find ways to teach creative, practical intelligence, not just to some but to all. The definition of the world class education system of tomorrow will be that there is not one, but many ways to rise.

Today, our universities draw on a talent pool that is simply too small. We do well at helping students on an academic track go on to higher education. But we do a terrible job at helping those on an apprenticeship track make the same journey.

Here’s what the OECD said about the problem last year: ‘The weak articulation between level 4 and 6 programmes and university bachelor programmes is a serious problem’. There are now something like 200 apprenticeship frameworks – but just 13 of them stretch up to higher level skills. Just 6% of apprentices go on to bachelor’s degree level skills. Matt Hancock tells me we have just 6,000 apprentices training for level 5 qualifications.

Yet this is what young people want. A couple of weeks ago, I was in a different Rolls Royce plant in Derby and I asked some apprentices there why they’d chosen Rolls Royce. ‘It’s easy’ said one ‘We’re told in our first week here that the sky’s the limit. It’s the chance to go all the way, to go up to a degree level skill – but get paid along the way’.

Down the road at Derby College, I met a group of final year students. Most said they thought they had no choice but to go to university; yet almost all wanted an ‘earn while you learn’ way through that maximised their work experience and their chance of getting a job at the other end.

Right now, it seems, 94% of apprentices do not get that Rolls Royce experience – and as a country I don’t think we can afford that in the years to come. In this ‘second machine age’, we’ll risk becoming an economy where too many are trapped in low skill, not high skill jobs, while other nations race ahead.

We’ve got to create a system with equal access for A level students and apprentices; what you might call an ‘earn while you learn’ revolution.

The government is boasting that its ‘uncapping student places’. But from what I can see, it’s only uncapping places for half of our young people who happen to be on an academic route. What about the other half we’d like to be doing apprenticeships?

We need to think of ways in which we can build up non-traditional routes into university, so that no matter who you are or where you’re from, you have skills that are prized by employers, and have the opportunity to progress into highly skilled jobs.

To deliver this, we’ve got to look at how we create a proper system of tertiary education, where our great FE colleges are much better inter-connected with our universities. Colleges will become the mission-critical partner in transforming the apprenticeship system. We need close ties between FE and HE if we’re to help those on an apprenticeship track move up through the system.

And while I’m on the point, we’ve clearly got to look at the situation now faced by post-grads who are finding it harder and harder to get access to Career Development Loans, yet face a jobs market where far more are asked for a post-graduate qualification.
Conclusion

Higher education was crucial for me in the journey from behind a fry-station at McDonalds in Harlow, to the Harvard Business School, to representing Birmingham Hodge Hill.

But just 30% of my constituents enjoy the chance to get into higher education, and I want to transform that. If we’re to build a bigger knowledge economy we need higher education to be stronger; but for me, part and parcel of delivering a stronger, bigger system is reform to ensure there are many ways to rise.
Creating a more Diverse HE System

The current government’s priorities for higher education have been threefold: to reform the financing of undergraduate study, to encourage a better and more transparent academic experience and to facilitate a more diverse system.

Quite why greater diversity is seen as so important is an interesting question. One of the distinctive features of British higher education in comparison with the systems of other European countries is its arm’s length relationship with the state. As a result of this, higher education providers enjoy relatively high levels of financial, organisational and curricular autonomy which have allowed them to define their own role as centres of research and scholarship as well as teaching institutions. The English system is already relatively diverse, encompassing research-intensive universities with multi-disciplinary global reach along with institutions that have niche research specialisms and those with more modest regional aspirations. Add to this the Open University, and the substantial amount of higher education that takes place in further education colleges, and the system can hardly be described as monolithic.

It would be nice to think that what the government means by diversity would be a system that has something to offer a wider range of the population: whether that be those from under-represented groups or those wishing to study part-time. Or perhaps government wants a system which attaches greater weight to foundation degrees and higher national diplomas (HND) qualifications and is not quite so dominated by a three or four-year course of full-time study leading to a Bachelor degree. Or one which offers different forms of delivery beyond three ten-week terms a year.

In fact, whatever the government may have wanted, the result is greater marketisation of higher education with the growth of more private providers. Some of these have now acquired university status, while others have not, but what is beyond doubt is that the amount of public money that now goes, via student loans, to these institutions is increasing rapidly – substantially over £100m a year.

The entry of these new providers – which tend to be teaching rather than research-focused – is changing the character of the HE system, drawing parallels with the way the further education system (the ‘Learning and Skills’ sector to use government’s preferred terminology) has changed following the entry of private independent providers there too.

While most of Britain’s established universities have been set up as autonomous bodies by royal charter or Act of Parliament (as indeed FE colleges are incorporated) they acknowledge that they have responsibilities and duties beyond their walls and beyond the academic world. The way this public mission is discharged takes different forms, ranging from the almost vanished extra-mural tradition to the labour market responsiveness of the former polytechnics (a consequence of their pre-1988 history as local government institutions).

With the exceptions of the OU and perhaps some of the London HEIs, the vast majority of public higher education provision is deeply rooted in a sense of place (perhaps most pronounced in the older civic ‘redbrick’ universities) and this can be seen in the way that so many Vice Chancellors are on the boards of Local Enterprise Partnerships. Institutions are
constantly reviewing and re-making their relationship with local employers and civic leaders and are also major employers in their own right with a stake in the local economy.

The benefits of engagement are apparent in a city like Lincoln where collaboration between the University of Lincoln and the transnational engineering firm Siemens has resulted in the first wholly-new School of Engineering to be established in a British university in two decades. The company has transferred its own equipment to the Engineering Hub and located its own in-house training team there. The school has been instrumental in bringing new engineering business to Lincoln. In a different way, the £60m Hive development in Worcester, is Britain’s first joint university/public library – benefitting the wider local community as well as students and staff of the University of Worcester.

The days of academics descending from their ivory tower to spread wisdom to the world are long-gone. In a world where knowledge-creation also occurs in private businesses, the role of the public university in sharing and disseminating knowledge grows in importance as the private sector will generally seek to monetize value for shareholder benefit before public benefit and private HE providers undertake very little research and scholarship.

The changing landscape also involves a more porous and blurred boundary between further education and higher education (and the public/private boundaries between institutions in both sectors) with the growth of Higher Apprenticeships at Level 4 and 5 building on foundation degrees and HND/HNC qualifications. Such apprenticeships, offering learners a direct route to employment, represent a bigger challenge to HE rather than to FE. This is because a Higher Apprenticeship does not require a university’s accreditation, and, not less importantly, has the potential to offer a learner access to fulfilling skilled employment without the prospect of £27k+ of student loan debt that a new graduate may have on completion of a degree course.

Perhaps now is the right time to think in a more challenging way about exactly why so many of the divisions and distinctions in post-school education exist (often accompanied by unhelpful snobberies). The main issue should be about creating a more flexible tertiary education system that meets the needs of a diverse and aging population with differing aims and needs throughout their lives, instead of allowing the post-school agenda to be dominated by a model focused on providing an extended, usually residential, education for those wishing to study full-time for three or four years and fitting in others around the margins.

The Minister, David Willetts, said recently that the introduction of new providers into a system can be the most dynamic driver of change. He may be right, but perhaps because of the enthusiasm with which governments have introduced new initiatives in both further and higher education, some within the system remain conservative and sceptical about change. Even before Kingsley Amis claimed of HE in 1961 “more is worse” the system has been resistant to reform of any kind and there is still a persistent preoccupation with universities as finishing schools for already privileged school leavers.

Making the system more flexible to meet the needs of learners is still seen as a threat by some rather than an opportunity, but change is inevitable because of the influence of technological and demographic change, and the future needs of the economy. The system will have to open up to different kinds of learners looking for a variety of educational experiences in a range of established and new disciplines. This will mean making the system more creative about what it offers, improving opportunities for older learners and increasing recognition of other non-academic achievements. Being more supportive of credit transfer and accumulation will be crucial too.
While the reasons for the ending of access to public funding for anyone wishing to undertake higher education qualifications at an equivalent or lower-level to that at which they had previously studied may have been understandable, the consequences appear to have been far greater than anticipated, possibly contributing to the rapid decline in part-time courses in HE. The next administration may find it worth looking at a further relaxation of the equivalent or lower qualification rule as a way of re-incentivising demand from students in employment and able to repay any loan taken out.

Incentivising higher education providers to offer more flexible and part-time courses co-designed with employers would also help. Such provision might better allow those who have followed a vocational pathway to Level 4 through Higher Apprenticeships to switch to an academic track. Similarly such courses might help those who have followed a more academic route to acquire the vocational skills to improve, increase or extend their careers in a fast-changing labour market.

Employers have an important part to play here in applying pressure for change, using both sectoral and place-based forums to influence national and local government’s industrial, employment, growth and inclusion strategies.

Competition for resources and suspicion of providers, students or qualifications that appear ‘different’ from the norm are not going to disappear. The challenge though, in an economy in which public expenditure at the levels of 2008 is unlikely to return any time soon, is surely to get more value from all the educational resources available to get the best for individuals, communities and society. Greater collaboration and fewer silos would help.
Every year, unionlearn supports a quarter of a million working people into learning. Most are learning informally or at level 1 or 2. Only 5,000 enrol at HE level. Another 10,000 are engaged in more informal higher level learning and CPD. Why so few? These days, union members are better educated than the average employee. Almost 40% of union members hold HE qualifications. Only 20% have very low qualifications and skills. Why are unions able to support those with very low skills more than those with higher skills?

There is no lack of appetite. Thousands of union learners at level 2 or 3 would welcome the chance to carry on learning. Many employers want more technician level skills. What is the problem?

Union Learning reps (ULRs) will say it is hard persuading employers to fund time off; the classroom nature of many courses is off putting; cost; time; lack of information on what courses will cover or lead to; and a sense of remoteness from everyday working life. Employer reluctance is often due to those perceptions, not necessarily opposition to training. ULRs can persuade employers by finding the right, work based, course.

Employers say the same: at a recent meeting of construction employers hosted by a leading south coast college, the builders present said they wanted site management or contract managers just as much as Bricklayers and Carpenters. They were not keen on foundation degrees (too theoretical and academic) and preferred work based HNDs. The college could not provide them (too few learners to justify the course investment) without collaborating with other providers (too difficult). The construction employers had grouped themselves into training consortia but would have liked more college support.

Many of these issues are included in the admirable OECD review Skills Beyond School. The funding, qualification, accreditation, and careers advice systems all need major reform. But they are just the presenting problem. The real problem lies deeper. Frankly, to put it very bluntly, there is a great gulf between the vocational/working class and academic/middle class skills systems. Colleges and private providers do vocational and universities do academic. Vocational jobs are seen as lower skilled than academic, mainly because they are paid less, rather than by any objective assessment of competences. Those two systems reflect British social and class history. They are woefully outdated. Despite endless talk, the two systems remain unbridged, damaging both the economy and life chances of millions.

What to do? As a small foray into bridge building, Unionlearn won funding from the Gatsby Foundation in 2012 to explore ways of encouraging working people in mid level jobs to register as Technicians. It has been a learning curve. The first target was to persuade the 30 plus leading Professional Bodies, such as the Mechanical Engineers, Civil Engineers etc to open their doors to aspiring working people who did not yet have the full suite of qualifications for Chartered status. All the Professional Bodies are supportive. Their umbrella body, the Technician Council, is encouraging them to offer membership, recognition and support to mid career technicians. Some employers, such as Royal Mail and Rolls Royce are offering help with professional body membership fees. Unions like Unite, Prospect and the CWU are encouraging their members to join. We are making slow but steady progress. Those Professional Bodies which are most open to Technicians do better than those which see...
them as an adjunct to the main Chartered membership. But few professional bodies yet see technicians as equals. Change is slow.

Action is needed much earlier. UCAS should be widened. There should be a tariff for apprentices alongside the tariff for A levels, NVQs, HNDs and other vocational qualifications. That would encourage school leavers to see all vocational qualifications as a way of entering university, if they wished. It would encourage universities to see vocational qualifications as valuable entry routes. Yet there is entrenched opposition. Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister admitted failure by announcing in February that there would be a “UCAS style system” for apprentices. What this turned out to mean was several different schemes, each funded by Local Authorities which have neither the funding or the expertise, sitting alongside but wholly separate from UCAS. Yet again the great gulf remains unbridged.

Some bridges are being built. A pioneering scheme from the Aviation Council is developing an apprenticeship route for pilots as an alternative to the normal £90K cost of training. Accountancy remains one of the very few professions open to people who don’t want to go to university or can’t afford to do so. It is possible for employees in many (but by no means all) organisations who start at the bottom to move up into management, gaining management qualifications, and end up on the board. Yet those are exceptions. As fast as bridges are built, others are quietly demolished. The 2013 Milburn report on social mobility lamented the barring to working people over the past 20 years of professions like academia, journalism and law. Those are now the preserve of students with well connected parents, able to afford university fees and years of unpaid internships or work experience. Previously they were bridges for people from working class backgrounds to gain higher vocational skills and join the middle class.

Why is the divide so entrenched? A major problem is that UK employers have less influence over the qualifications and skills system than employers in other countries. Despite the demand from UK employers for more mid level and higher vocational skills, the two skills systems are not responding well. Some employers are taking action themselves. Tata Steel, EDF, Siemens, Nissan and many other big employers are developing their own training and promote their employees. It is no accident that many such employers are not British. It is also no accident that they are working closely with their Trades Unions, reflecting the social partnership on skills that is a characteristic of strong skills systems such as in much of Europe (well beyond the oft quoted example of Germany), Scandinavia and Japan.

The UK vocational skills system needs urgent and radical reform. The recommendations in Skills Beyond School are right. The strategic development of high quality vocational programmes as a major national priority for the next government is essential. Reform of funding and qualifications are long overdue. The UKCES, SSCs, Industrial Partnerships and LEPs (rather than a new vocational body) should drive forward this agenda at national, sectoral and local level. It makes sense to work towards a unified HE and FE funding system, as in Scotland which has a stronger higher vocational system. Employers and employees should exercise much more influence over the design and award of qualifications, through social partnership arrangements, and with tax relief incentives for both employers and employees to raise available funding. Government should use procurement right across the public sector to drive up demand.

Stronger, more informed and better quality demand, from employers and employees is the key to reform. That in turn will drive the creation of a larger and stronger higher vocational system, with more employer funding, based on more work based courses, more HE in FE, more flexible part time and e-learning models. Providers who can meet this demand should be able to earn the autonomy to design and award their own qualifications, like universities.
Inevitably, the new system will be more complex with more choices. Learners and employers will need better information on ways to navigate the system and find the bridges. School students need careers advice, structured work experience and the chance to experiment. School leavers and employees need access to expert guidance and support, for example from ULRs. This should go beyond the UK; the EU is developing a detailed and up to date range of information on the competences, qualification requirements, pay and skills of thousands of occupations. All that data should be open to employees and employers to encourage demand and mobility.

We won’t abolish the class bias in the skills system overnight. But we can build more and better bridges. This is not just a technical matter of skills policy. It is fundamental to reversing the growing tide of inequality, restoring some democratic choice to working people over their lives and developing a sustainable competitive economy.