

Despite a UK labour market that is hungry for skills, academic education has triumphed over training, apprenticeships and preparation for specific occupations. **Alison Wolf** looks at why vocational education continues to lose out – and what can make it a more attractive option.

The paradox of vocational education

Student enrolments in higher education have expanded enormously in both developed and emerging economies over the past two decades. In 2021, the average share of 25-34 year olds with a tertiary qualification in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries was 48% compared with 27% in 2000 (OECD, 2022). Enrolments in emerging economies are consistently much higher than they were in the west at equivalent income levels.

But as demand for qualifications has grown, the nature of higher education has changed. Increasingly, it is discussed in terms of what it does for people's earnings: does it increase graduate wages, and is it making clear contributions to economic growth? A growing majority of degrees are "vocational" in title and intent: engineering and science, health occupations, and business studies dominate.

The contrast with the 19th and early 20th century is dramatic. In his famous 1852 lectures on *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal Newman argued that university education was both hugely important and should be essentially non-vocational.

"This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper

object, and for its own highest culture is called Liberal Education," he wrote.

This view held sway for generations: today it has more or less vanished even from discussion. It might seem that vocational education has triumphed – it is what both governments and students want.

This is particularly evident in the UK. Politicians focus on employment and salary outcomes as proof of degree "quality" or otherwise. Longitudinal Education Outcomes data link individuals' education with employment and earnings data, enabling researchers to analyse returns to degrees by subject and by institution.

The results are made publicly available with the explicit intention of guiding student choices.

And yet outside university, the opposite seems to be happening. Vocational education is not on the increase, but in decline.

That is largely because in the labour market, degrees are increasingly used as a "gateway" qualification. As employers face job candidates bearing ever more credentials, they use rules of thumb for ranking applicants. Increasingly, employers select first by whether someone is a graduate, and then, less publicly, on the



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basis of which university they attended. No-one will get sacked for drawing up an all-graduate shortlist. Worldwide, people respond by seeking higher education for themselves or their children.

Does this matter? Yes. This incredibly one-dimensional way of selecting people is neither just nor efficient. Many of the skills that the labour market wants are not developed well in academic institutions. Many people do not thrive as full-time students – at 16, 18 or older. Setting life chances this way is narrow and unfair: if you rank everyone on a single dimension, half the population will, by definition, be in the bottom half.

For many years, there has been concern about the English (and UK) school systems' failure to provide high-quality vocational and technical pathways, increased of late by the growing shortage of technical and craft skills in the workforce. Initiatives to address this have been generally qualification-focused: BTEC diplomas, or the failed, short-lived "GNVQ" and "Diploma" reforms.

There has been one new initiative to create specialist institutions, the University Technical Colleges (Long et al, 2020): these are for 14-18 year olds and each offers a specific technical pathway. Between 2011 and 2022, 60 opened, but 13 have

closed and three have become 11-19 schools. In January 2019, they were operating at 45% capacity.

This is not from some specific form of UK snobbery. Other countries – such as Germany and the Netherlands – have faced plummeting enrolments in old-established vocational high schools. Policymakers must recognise parents' determination to keep options open as long as possible for their children. What is also needed is an alternative that does not simply offer a rather watered-down version of the core pre-university curriculum, but has its own distinctive identity, and prestige. In practice, that means an apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships offer a genuine alternative to formal education, as well as their own internal prestige, hierarchy and substantial, well-documented wage returns. We nearly destroyed them in this country, but pulled back in time, so there are now genuine improvements in standards, and strong competition for places.

But far too few apprenticeships are available for young people. And we have not learned the core lessons from Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, whose apprenticeship systems are world leading. Local employers must be central and in control. This is what keeps apprenticeships not just effective in developing skills but in providing an alternative to an increasingly hierarchical higher education system.

This is an edited version of the CEP lecture *The Paradox of Vocational Education* given on 7 December 2022 at LSE.

A recording of the lecture is available on the LSE website (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2022/12/202212071830/education>).

Alison Wolf, who is the Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management at King's College London, sits as a cross-bench peer in the House of Lords.

Further reading

Robert Long, Shadi Danechi, Nerys Roberts and Philip Loft (2020) 'University Technical Colleges', House of Commons Library briefing paper.

John Henry Newman (1852) *The Idea of a University*.

OECD (2022) 'Education at a Glance'.