Higher Education Policy Institute

Misunderstanding Technical and Professional Education: Six Category Mistakes

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When the late Sir David Watson wrote about Category Mistakes in higher education he was providing a commentary on a high-stakes sector about which the public and policymakers care deeply for political, economic and societal reasons. In revisiting his approach, this time for Technical and Professional Education, we are touching on an area of education policy that has historically had such low stakes that it has been largely ignored and arguably underpowered and underfunded over many decades.

Now, however, a different approach to skills is widely regarded as central to a new industrial strategy, critical to the post-Brexit economy. For example, it featured as a key policy previewing the Budget in March 2017.

Back in 2016 and following the *Sainsbury Review of Skills*, the Government published the *Post-16 Skills Plan*. More recently the development of new post-16 technical qualifications, called T-Levels, has been announced. There are to be 15 technical routes covering a range of sectors which, according to the *Skills Plan*, will 'prepare individuals for skilled employment in occupations which require both a substantial body of technical knowledge and a set of practical skills valued by industry.'

The *Plan* also sets an expectation that each route must be 'a distinctive, prestigious, high-quality offer in its own right; a positive informed choice.' If this new approach is to provide a credible alternative to the well-trodden academic route of GCSEs and A-Levels, it will need to offer clear appeal to young people. If it is to avoid foundering as quickly and comprehensively as many earlier skills initiatives, it will need to confront the category mistakes of the past.

1. Parity of esteem

In his Budget speech, the Chancellor said:

there is still a lingering doubt about the parity of esteem attaching to technical education pursued through the Further Education route. Today we end that doubt for good, with the introduction of T-Levels.

However, the quest for parity of esteem between T-Levels and A-Levels may be a false promise and a self-defeating goal. It is as meaningless to compare A-Level Art with A-Level Physics as it is to compare precision welding with parsing Shakespeare, though both undoubtedly require high-level skills.

If these new technical routes are to have credibility among young people, parents and teachers, then the critical ingredient is currency for progression to employment or further learning. When they are routinely requested by employers and proudly stated on CVs, they will have achieved the status they need. This will happen if the learning they engender is valuable and the assessment is regulated and rigorous. There should be no need for them to be unhelpfully benchmarked against A-Levels which have a different purpose and structure.

2. Public understanding

The enduring currency of GCSEs and A-Levels has been underpinned by high levels of public

understanding of exactly whom and what these qualifications are for. This should be a goal for the new technical routes too. The two diagrams below from the *Post-16 Skills Plan* attempt to set this out. But it remains unclear whether T-Levels are intended to be umbrella qualifications designed to provide knowledge and skills to support a range of occupations within an employment sector, or whether they are supposed to qualify students to carry out various skilled occupations.

For example, the list of proposed routes shows 'Creative and Design' as preparing students for occupations such as 'art producer, graphic designer, audio-visual technician, journalist, product/clothing designer, upholsterer, tailor, furniture maker'. It is difficult to imagine a single qualification which could adequately cover all this (as well as all those sofas). With the 15 proposed routes mixing industry sectors such as 'agriculture', and occupations such as 'marketing', potential candidates will struggle to understand what exactly they will be qualified for.

3. What's in a name?

A-Levels are 'Advanced', as opposed to 'Ordinary' O-Levels. But the term 'T-Level' conflates a purpose ('technical') and the scale of the challenge (Level) involved, which is troubling.

If T-Levels are to be Level 3 qualifications, which is the regulated position of A-Levels, then what term will be used for Level 2 technical and professional qualifications?

An intuitive naming convention for the new routes, and the qualifications associated with them, will be essential for public understanding and to offer clarity for employers.

4. Tripartitism…

The Government seeks to split qualifications into distinct technical and academic pathways without fully considering what to do with the 'Applied General' qualifications category, which includes the popular BTECs.

As qualifications, BTECs have a mixed reputation. They are undoubtedly popular for widening participation in higher education. But they are viewed by some universities as offering insufficient preparation for successful higher-level study in key subject areas, and are patchy in their utility for specific occupations.

Nevertheless, they are taken up in hundreds of thousands, often serving less academic and less able students, possibly by challenging them at Level two-and-a-half, despite their regulated position at Level 3.

According to Pearson:

BTECs are developed in consultation with employers and higher education experts, so they can trust that anyone with a BTEC will demonstrate the high standards of knowledge, practical skills and understanding required for further study and employment.

To paper over the obvious overlaps with the proposed T-Levels by re-categorising them as 'academic' qualifications, as the diagram below suggests, will ensure widespread confusion among students trying to pick the right qualifications to support their future and employers trying to understand the suitability of job applicants.

5. …or Bipartism?

Before the massification of post-16 education, it was the norm for school sixth-forms to deliver a predominantly academic curriculum. It is only relatively recently that schools have ventured into what used to be exclusively FE College territory to deliver vocational qualifications such as BTECs – albeit often without the workbenches and realistic working environments that colleges offer.

The *Sainsbury Review* anticipates the new routes being delivered in colleges, either full-time or as part of an apprenticeship. If they do gain the desired currency and reputation for employability with the consequent demand for their delivery in colleges, many school sixth-forms could cease to be viable. Is that the intention – A-Levels in schools and T-Levels in colleges? On the other hand, if schools continue to deliver Applied General qualifications such as BTECs, colleges may struggle to recruit adequate demand for T-Levels.

6. Careers education

Although the *Sainsbury Review* envisages that the same technical routes would also be delivered in an age-appropriate way for adult learners, the *Skills Plan* is clearly aimed at 16-19-year olds and T-Levels will be promoted as a post-GCSE option. While it is relatively easy and safe for a young student to choose three or four of their best GCSE subjects to continue at A-Level, they will have had no prior exposure to the 15 pathways. How could a STEM-orientated GCSE student (for example) choose confidently between the 'Engineering and Manufacturing' pathway and the 'Transport and Logistics' pathway?

The proposed routes

Route name: Business and Administrative
Numbers employed: 2,204,000
Typical job roles: Human resources officer, office manager, administrative officer, housing officer

Route name: Construction
Numbers employed: 1,625,000
Typical job roles: Bricklayer/mason, electrician, building/civil engineering technician, carpenter/joiner, construction supervisor

Route name: Legal, Finance and Accounting
Numbers employed: 1,325,000
Typical job roles: Accounting technician, paralegal, financial account manager, payroll manager, finance officer, legal secretary

Route name: Engineering and Manufacturing
Numbers employed: 1,320,000
Typical job roles: Engineering technician, vehicle mechanic, aircraft fitter, printer, process technician, energy plant operative

Route name: Childcare and Education
Numbers employed: 1,061,000
Typical job roles: Nursery assistant, early years officer, teaching assistant, youth worker

Route name: Sales, Marketing and Procurement
Numbers employed: 957,000
Typical job roles: Buyer, procurement officer, sales account manager, market research analyst, estate agent

Route name: Health and Science
Numbers employed: 916,000
Typical job roles: Nursing assistant, pharmaceutical technician, sports therapist, laboratory technician, dental nurse, food technician

Route name: Social Care*
Numbers employed: 866,000
Typical job roles: Care worker, residential warden, home carer, probation officer, welfare counsellor

Route name: Transport and Logistics*
Numbers employed: 590,000
Typical job roles: Ship's officer, railway signalling technician, HGV driver

Route name: Catering and Hospitality
Numbers employed: 569,000
Typical job roles: Chef, butcher, baker, catering manager, events manager

Route name: Creative and Design
Numbers employed: 530,000
Typical job roles: Arts producer, graphic designer, audio-visual technician, journalist, product/clothing designer, upholsterer, tailor, furniture maker

Route name: Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care
Numbers employed: 455,000
Typical job roles: Conservationist, park ranger, farmer, horticulturalist, agricultural manager, agricultural technician

Route name: Protective Services*
Numbers employed: 398,000
Typical job roles: Police officer, fire service officer, non-commissioned officer (NCO), maritime operations officer (coastguard)

Route name: Digital
Numbers employed: 352,000
Typical job roles: IT business analyst/systems designer, programmer, software developer, IT technician, web designer, network administrator

Route name: Hair and Beauty
Numbers employed: 293,000
Typical job roles: Hairdresser, barber, beauty therapist

* It is expected that these routes will primarily be delivered through apprenticeships.
Note: These figures have been rounded to the nearest 1000.

The *Sainsbury Review* is clear that the framework will not succeed unless it is underpinned by excellent careers guidance. However, it needs to be more than the usual careers fairs and talks delivered by well-meaning employers. To support successful progression to T-Levels at age 16, pupils will need to have access to a serious, well-designed curriculum in earlier stages that exposes them to the pathways and the sectors involved, and supports them to make informed choices.

The 'Baker Clause' in the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 ensures a 'range of education and training providers' can access pupils aged between 13 and 18, to promote technical education qualifications or apprenticeships. This is unlikely to be comprehensive enough for the average 15 or 16-year old to make a confident career choice so early in their development. For the *Skills Plan* to succeed, a comprehensive approach to pre-16 careers education will be essential.

Properly designed careers education would also provide a helpful way to distinguish between occupations and sectors. As well as needing technicians, engineering businesses need IT specialists, project managers, lawyers, accountants, human resource professionals and so on. It would also be good to see some of the students who flock towards the professions at university pausing to see that they could pursue their careers in a range of industry sectors. All those aspiring lawyers should know that they might still have to choose a sector in which to practise.

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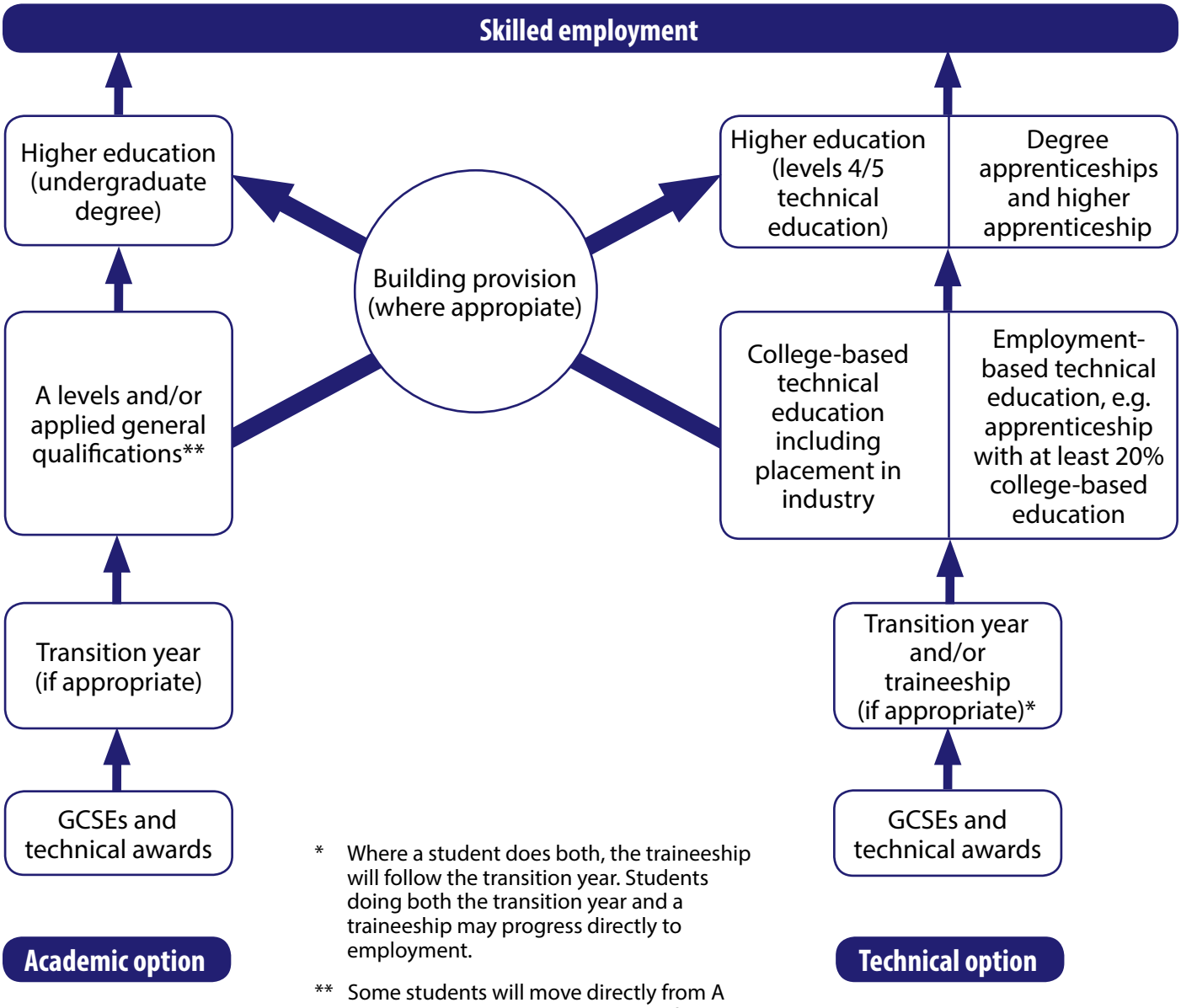

* Where a student does both, the traineeship will follow the transition year. Students doing both the transition year and a traineeship may progress directly to employment.

** Some students will move directly from A levels and/or applied general qualifications to degree and higher apprenticeships.