

POLICY WATCH

2008/46

28 July 2008

The Conservatives sketch out their thoughts on a skills revolution

You can tell where this Paper is coming from: it has ten pages pointing out what is wrong with the Government's current skills policies but six on its own ideas. The intention is to present what David Cameron calls on the opening page "[a modern vision for skills and training](#)" but for the moment it's simple messaging and compelling visioning that counts and this Paper has plenty of both.

Over the last decade, skills, or to be more precise skill levels and economic competitiveness, have risen up the policy agenda. All major political Parties have bought into the [Leitch upskilling agenda](#) and its 'ambitions' for 2020 but the question remains as to how best to get there; that's where the cracks between the Parties can be seen. A few months ago, the Government released its own proposals in the form of a hefty [White Paper](#) that dismantled much of the current system in favour of a new dual skills system designed to "[minimise unnecessary costs and bureaucracy and create a light touch environment](#)." This Conservative Green Paper presents an alternative approach, one that contrasts Labour's "*top - down, bureaucratic system, dispensed at the whim of Ministers*" with what it claims is a freer and simpler system built on '*greater opportunity*' and driven by three '*wants*.' "*We want to expand real workplace apprenticeships; we want to revitalise adult and community learning; we want to free the supply side of training.*" Three wannabes that won't cost an extra penny; "*our strategy of refocusing public money away from the failing elements of Government schemes and unnecessary bureaucracy will free up almost £1.4bn for building front - line skills.*'

So what's being proposed?

First an expansion in the provision of 'real' apprenticeships where the emphasis is on the word 'real.' Labour has claimed, with fair justification, that apprenticeships have been revitalised under their stewardship; the [National Apprenticeship Service](#) and other proposals in the recent [Draft Apprenticeship Bill](#) provide strong evidence of this. The Conservative counter claim is that "*Gordon Brown has only increased the numbers of apprenticeships by changing the definition of what one was*" and that many schemes do not constitute genuine work - based apprenticeship programmes. So they propose using the [Train to Gain](#) budget "*to support real apprenticeships of all ages*" and backing this with a £60m Business Skills Development Fund to support 'other' workplace training schemes. Those who fail to secure a full apprenticeship place "*can embark on a college based programme - led apprenticeship or study towards qualifications at a colleges,*" a default position not presented in a very attractive light it has to be said. As for the qualification itself, "*employers should have control of the work - specific aspect of the framework while apprentices should be confident that the academic and technical qualifications they work towards can lead to further study,*" a nod towards transferable skills but a difficult balancing act all the same.

Parts of this will seem attractive especially to employers. For example, there would be financial support to help small and medium employers take on apprentices, "*we would establish a bonus of £2000 for every business between 1 and 250 employees that takes on an apprentice to be paid on the successful completion of the full framework,*" while using Train to Gain money to fund employers directly would also attract. However, the interest in raising the esteem of apprenticeships by encouraging parity with academic routes and HE progression needs further thinking. Apprenticeships need to be valued for what they are not for trying to mirror academic routes while progression into HE seems to worry politicians more than apprentices many of whom according to a recent press article, are seeking worthwhile routes into employment rather than further study.

Second revitalising adult and community learning. The argument here is that "*Labour has overseen a catastrophic collapse of adult and community learning*" though it's a bit unfair to lay it all at their door. The proposal again is to redirect slugs of existing money; £100m into a Community Learning Fund particularly for short updating or skills refresher courses, delivered through local FE colleges and with the aim of adding social value. And a similar amount to support NEETs again with short courses through FE. The objectives in both cases, namely adult and community learning and NEETS, are right but the mechanisms appear undeveloped. That may be deliberate at this stage but when Labour has put together some fairly comprehensive strategies on both Informal Adult Learning and a NEETS, Opposition alternatives need to be equally comprehensive to attract full support.

Third, freeing up the supply side. The headline catching proposal here involves FE and the intention to strip away some of its shackles in favour of greater self regulation. The recent [White Paper](#) proposals seem to have been the final straw for the Conservatives. In their view, there would be "*no need for quangos such as the Young People's Learning Agency to oversee and co ordinate different funding systems;*" the role of the [UK Commission](#) would be 'redefined' to co - ordinate the work of SSCs, which in all fairness is what it is doing at the moment; and SSCs themselves would stay but with a greater responsibility to accredit courses and an extra £35m to enable them to do so. But it's the resurrection of an FE Funding Council for England that may attract most interest; who said the best ideas are the old ones?

Other proposals in this area include the creation of Lifelong Learning Accounts, different from Labour's Skills Accounts in that they could be used for more varied forms of training and would encourage individual topping - up. Also, an old favourite, beefed up careers support with professional careers advisers in every secondary school and college in England, an all - age community based careers service and better online information and guidance.

As to how the new '*vision*' would be paid for, always a key question, the Conservatives claim they wouldn't need any extra money because they would simply re - channel existing resources. Over £1bn would come from re - channelling Train to Gain, £85m from removing the LSC and creating a slimmed down FE Funding Council, £40m from eliminating adult careers advice and £210m from re - directing the existing Connexions budget. This would represent a saving of £1.4bn. Out of that, £775m would be used to support new apprenticeships, £285m for the careers service, £100m for NEETs, £100m for Community Learning, £60m for Business Skills Development and £35m for SSCs. The numbers add up; do the ideas?

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