The politics of work-based learning in the UK | Vice Chancellor keynote to EU seminar | November 2017

Good afternoon. It's great to be hosting this international seminar on work-based learning.

UoB work-based learning credentials

The University of Bedfordshire is very much rooted in Luton's industrial history and heritage.

In 1908 the Luton Modern School was founded, serving the skills needs of local industry. In 1937 the School evolved into the Luton Technical Institute, and subsequently into the Luton College of Technology in 1958.

In 1993 along with a number of other providers of vocational and technical higher education, we became the University of Luton. And in 2006, following the acquisition of a campus in Bedford, the University of Bedfordshire.

Today, we retain our major campuses in Luton and Bedford, but we are active in Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and London, as well as globally, with a growing portfolio of international partnerships as far afield as Myanmar, Egypt, Vietnam, Oman and Mauritius.

But throughout all our developments and changes as an institution we have remained consistently committed to the principle that we can best transform the lives of our student through equipping them with the skills to succeed in the workplace.

If you look at our current course portfolio, you'll see that consistency of focus on preparing students for professional employment.

There's the Business School with courses like HR management, events management, project management, accountancy, law and marketing.

We're a leading provider in our region of Nursing, Healthcare and social work professional courses, and we are in the top 25 per cent of providers of teacher training in the country.

In the creative industries we have courses in media production, fashion and creative design, journalism and performing arts.

On the science side, we have psychology, life sciences, sports science, computing and sports therapy, with new provision planned for optometry, pharmacy, nutrition and mechanical engineering from 2019.

Our research profile is likewise focused on the application of knowledge to real-world problems, whether in business, public services or sport, arts and culture. Our researchers have a significant influence on policy and practice in fields as diverse as workplace wellbeing, use of robots in provision of healthcare, child sexual exploitation, sustainable international tourism, English language acquisition and disability in education.

As many of you will be aware, the UK Government has recently placed a stronger emphasis on higher and degree apprenticeships, with new apprenticeships standards at Level 4 and above, and a new Apprentice Levy on all businesses with a paybill of over £3 million, which they can use to fund apprenticeships for their staff.

Apprenticeships are a particular form of work-based learning in which 80 per cent of the employee's time is spent in the workplace and 20 per cent in education. A degree apprenticeship leads to a full degree qualification at Level 6 or 7.

As a result of that policy the number of higher or degree apprenticeship commitments made by employers increased fourfold between May 2017 – the start date of the new levy – and September 2017.

As a consequence of the availability of, and demand for, higher and degree apprenticeships, universities like ours with a focus on work-relevant course provision, were able to expand our provision.

We have recently embarked on a prestigious contract with major supermarket retailer Tesco to deliver 60 apprenticeships in project management, and have secured further apprentice contracts with BMW and Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust, to train assistant practitioners in health.

A further area where we are active is in the provision of Level 6 top-up provision for students progressing from our partner further education colleges with foundation degrees at Level 5. We also provide a top-up option for our international partners, where we validate courses delivered in the home country at Level 5 and then join us here in Bedfordshire for their Level 6 top-up to complete their Bachelors degree.

In sum, we are a university, but a university whose offer to students is focused on technical, professional, vocational, work-based courses – whatever you want to call them.

And it might not surprise you to discover that we are also hugely committed to, and successful in, widening participation in higher education. More than half our students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds or from families with no history of participation in higher education. More than a third of our students are mature returners to education and around a quarter are from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds under-represented in higher education.

<u>‘Too many going to university’ argument</u>

I’ve explained a little bit about who we are and the sorts of courses we offer to give some context for the rest of my talk today.

I’m hugely proud to lead a university that creates the opportunity for young and mature learners alike to transform their lives. I believe that sense of pride and moral purpose is shared by my staff and by our communities.

But the value of the work we do is certainly not recognised universally in the UK by politicians or opinion-formers.

In the UK the question of the development of technical, work-based, professionally-focused education has never been, if you like, a technical question.

It has always been deeply politically controversial, tapping into some of our deepest national insecurities and prejudices.

It is a truism among policymakers that the UK has not effectively developed its vocational and technical education provision. Critics point to the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and especially to Germany as evidence of our supposed failure to properly deliver work-based learning that generates the skills that employers demand and that would drive national productivity.

But the basis for the claim that we have failed to develop our technical and work-based provision is often the participation rate in higher education, which has reached 50 per cent of young people, the target that Prime Minister Tony Blair set when I was a Minister in the Labour Government. The unquestioned premise is that it is well understood what universities do, and that it is not technical and professional education.

As an example, take the economist Alison Wolf, who in an article for *Prospect* magazine in August of this year described Britain's polytechnic institutions – all of which were awarded university title in 1992 – as an alternative to universities, offering full degrees, but with close links to local labour markets and a focus on part-time and adult study opportunities. A description I need hardly point out that is not a million miles away from the mission of this university!

Wolf claims that as a consequence of the abolition of the polytechnic institutions, for students, full degrees are 'the only game in town', a situation she considers to be inefficient for the economy.

Wolf is a hugely influential academic and one of the architects of the current new technical education system as a panel member for Lord Sainsbury's independent review of technical education in 2016.

Yet for her argument to make sense, several things must be true.

Alternatives to degrees

One is that students must have genuinely no alternative to a three-year degree qualification. That is untrue. Since the 1960s, Higher National Diplomas, two-year, employer-focused qualifications at level 5 have been available in the UK. Subsequently foundation degrees, two-year, employer-focused qualifications became available. While a Minister in Government I brought in provision for further education colleges to award their own foundation degrees, giving them the autonomy to work with local employers to meet local skills needs.

Where we have been especially successful in the UK is in the provision of progression routes from Level 5 to Level 6. I spoke earlier about top-ups – both Higher National Diplomas and foundation degrees provide the necessary grounding for a student to progress to Level 6 and complete their full degree, should they want to. That is because universities were typically very closely involved in the design and development of Level 5 qualification, ensuring they created meaningful pathways to further achievement – pathways that students were keen to take advantage of.

The academic/vocational hierarchy

The second thing that would need to be true is that all university qualifications would need to be non-vocational and non-technical – in other words 'purely' academic.

Now I think that even the most cursory tour of our own course offering shows that that is simply not the case.

And I will add that in my experience the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications is an ideological one, not a pedagogical one.

Defenders of technical and vocational education talk about technical education as the application of knowledge to real-world problems, as compared to ‘mere’ academic and theoretical knowledge, of no practical use.

They frame their definitions in this way in the hope of rebalancing an established intellectual hierarchy between conceptual and theoretical knowledge, and practical skills and competencies – the mere undertaking of tasks.

As an example, if you look at Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain, which dates back to the 1950s, the taxonomy is hierarchical, with analysis, synthesis and evaluation ranked above application. The presumption is that application of knowledge is a relatively mechanistic, rather than a creative process.

To be generous to Bloom, perhaps that was the case in the 1950s workplace and industry, with fixed, traditional roles and hierarchies. It is certainly not the case today, where organisations operate in a global context, are more likely to adopt a matrix than a hierarchical structure, where freelancing is common and where technology is changing the way we work at a pace greater than anything we have seen in the past.

In the 21st century it makes much more sense to think about the domains for the practice of knowledge creation and application. Think about the doctoral qualification – in the UK we have the conventional PhD, the professional doctorate and the practice-based doctorate. All are equivalent and signal competence in research and a significant contribution to knowledge. But the domain for the research varies between a subject discipline, a professional field and creative practice. We should apply the same logic to thinking about academic and vocational qualifications.

But this persistence of hierarchical thinking creates ongoing challenges. Bluntly, the problem is not that there is a lack of professional and technical education on offer, it is that professional and technical education, when not delivered in an elite setting with middle-class young people who can demonstrate excellent performance at Level 3, is not valued.

As an example, we have seen the persistent under-resourcing of Level 3 provision in further education colleges. Likewise, influential policymakers and media from both sides of the political spectrum are prone to sneer at ‘ex-polys’ – universities that were formerly polytechnic institutions – and accuse them of delivering ‘mickey mouse’ qualifications. The persistence of this kind of thinking does not lead me to believe that had the UK retained its polytechnics that we would be anywhere different than we are now, except that we would in all likelihood be desperately underfunded, and less able to operate in a global marketplace.

You can see the opposite side of the problem of the academic/vocational hierarchy in the development of apprenticeship standards. One of the real challenges with apprenticeships has been the development of standards relating to particular occupations. Because these have been employer-led with limited engagement of higher education providers, the quality of the published standards has been very uneven, sometimes applying more to a firm’s culture than to an occupational requirement, varying widely in assessment practices and competency expectations.

I think that the history of work-based learning shows the merits of engaging with higher education expertise in the formation of qualifications, and believe the apprenticeships agenda would benefit from deeper involvement of universities from the outset.

It’s a feature of the problem I’ve just identified – believing that universities are not the right bodies to develop work-based learning qualifications, because our knowledge is abstract and not applied, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Cost of education

The third thing that would have to be true is that provision of alternative forms of technical education would have to be cheaper than education delivered in a university.

Which makes me question how that could be. A reduction of the quality of the learning environment, the qualifications and expertise of teaching staff, and range of learning resources would be one way. Fewer opportunities for students to undertake enrichment and personal development outside the confines of the formal curriculum would be another. A third would be for those providers to have fewer demands on them relating to compliance with a quality infrastructure or provision of data to regulators. Or indeed, for those courses to be less engaged with employers, and provide less opportunities for workplace engagement, which would surely be self-defeating.

Return on investment to HE

The fourth thing that would have to be true for the argument that there are not enough alternatives to university, is that the return on investment for university students would have to be poor. And the reverse is the case. The graduate premium – the lifetime earnings a graduate can command compared to someone with only a Level 3 qualification – is £100,000. Of those in work 3.5 years after graduation, 84 per cent are in professional employment. University education may be expensive, but it continues to be one of the best investments you can make.

Critics of this position are increasingly pointing to a new dataset in the UK – Longitudinal Educational Outcome data, which matches up individual student identifiers with tax data to make it possible to see the salary of higher education graduates and break that down by subject, institution of study and demographic factors.

Unsurprisingly, the return in salary terms to higher education is variable, depending a great deal on subject of study. Though we must remember that this is lag data, and is probably not a very good indicator of future

earnings for current students making choices about which subjects to study.

But the main finding from this new dataset is that your socio-economic background is a major determinant of your long-term salary, as is your gender. So we should be wary of simple equations between subject areas, institutions and salary returns to higher-level qualifications.

Employer skills needs

As an associated point, the fourth thing that must be true is that employers must be experiencing significant skills shortages, which would evidence that universities – and other providers of technical and vocational education including further education colleges – are not addressing national skills needs.

And to some extent, there is evidence of a skills deficit. In reforms to technical education at level 3, including the introduction of new post-16 'T-level' qualifications aligned to fifteen defined occupation routes, the Government cited research by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills on employers' skills needs as evidence of the need for reform.

In fact, I am not especially critical of those reforms, especially as I anticipate that the new T-levels will provide fresh pathways into our degree courses and into higher and degree apprenticeships. There is an opportunity here with the fresh focus on technical pathways for universities like this one to evidence our value.

But to return to the skills deficit.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills undertook a survey of employers in 2015, with several key findings:

6 per cent of employers identified skills shortage vacancies, with 23 per cent of all vacancies attributed to skills shortages, equating to over 900,000 skills shortage vacancies in the UK.

14 per cent of employers identified staff who were not fully proficient in their roles, representing 5 per cent of the total UK workforce.

But the main skills shortage vacancies were in machine operatives and skilled trades – occupations that do not command the same salary return as a professional occupation.

And the main skills deficits were also among machine operatives – ie a low or semi-skilled occupation, rather than a technical occupation.

Where employers considered that their staff were under-utilised in their role – ie that they were over-qualified for the role they held – the most prevalent reason for this was that the staff member in question was not interested in taking on a higher-level role, at more than a quarter of responses.

While there is a clear shortage of specific skills, the other finding that jumps out is that in around half of cases the skills identified are not technical or occupational, but generic soft skills such as teamwork, workload management, setting objectives and priorities, solving complex problems, and sales and customer management. Skills that I believe can reasonably be expected of graduates of higher and degree-level qualifications.

So the problem, in my view, is not that we have too many people doing degrees and not enough doing other kinds of qualifications, but that we still have work to do to ensure that our higher and degree-level qualifications are equipping graduates with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace – notwithstanding 95 per cent of UK employees are judged to be proficient in their roles.

As an example of how the University of Bedfordshire is tackling this challenge, we have rolled out year-long placement options for all our courses. We have introduced new credit-bearing optional employability units giving students a grounding in skills like entrepreneurship and public speaking.

Over the next three years we are introducing a requirement for all curricula to address public policy challenges. We will continue to roll out our higher and degree apprenticeship offer. And we are partnering with two regional colleges in an application for a new Institute of Technology to address some of those identified technical skills shortages for our own region.

My point, in conclusion, is that in addressing the challenges of providing work-based learning opportunities that meet the needs of employers, drive productivity and open up opportunities for those least likely to progress in education, universities like this one are not the problem. They are the solution.

Thank you very much for listening and I look forward to your questions and comments.