

The Great Divider: Why Vocational and University Learning Remain at War

By Bea Groves-McDaniel, July 2026 Research Assistant: FAYE-9000

My original Facebook post:

"The whole 'technical versus university' learning schtick is not new. It has been around for a very long time. I should know: I've taught in both sectors and not too long ago was significantly involved in the 'T-Levels' initiative. (Remember that?)

So why hasn't anything really changed?

Firstly, because the underlying attitudinal position is still that going to university brings more social kudos. The 'better' the Uni, the bigger the brand superiority.

Secondly, because of learning being treated as a 'token' for work, rather than a transformative process. The best learning makes you different. The change in maturity and cognitive discipline enables the person to take on challenges, both in work and life. The qualification is simply a guarantor/sign of that change, but it has no significance in and of itself.

I got a 1st class honours degree in education back in 1997. I was an adult student. But the reason I got the 'first' was because I didn't consider the degree a passport to a job. For me, it was a process by which I could exercise my mind. And it bloody well did. And it was far easier than I thought. And it changed me in more ways than I can count.

I think that's intrinsically the issue. Our learning systems fail because of our insistence that it's the 'signifier' and its social advantage that matters. Not its experiential content."

Now, read on...

Every few years, the machinery of education policy produces a fresh announcement. A new qualification is designed, a new framework is launched, and a new rhetoric is deployed to tell us that this time, vocational learning will be treated with the respect it deserves. The announcement is greeted with genuine optimism by those who work closest to the problem, followed by a gradual, often painful, recognition that nothing has actually shifted.

T-Levels were the most recent example. Rolled out from 2020 after years of consultation and design, they represented the most serious attempt in a generation to place technical education on something approaching equal footing with its academic counterpart. The response from employers, colleges, and students was, at first, cautiously positive. Here at last was a structure that recognised the value of sector-specific vocational study, that gave it time and substance, and that carried a nationally recognised credential.

And then the familiar dynamics reasserted themselves. Numbers of enrolments remained stubbornly below government targets. Universities continued to function as the default destination for school-leavers of any academic ability. Employers, when pressed, reverted to degree requirements for roles that did not genuinely need them. The great divider had moved no one.

The pattern is not new, and it is not uniquely British, though Britain has particular reasons for playing it out with unusual rigidity. The binary opposition between "academic" and "vocational" education, between knowledge and skills, between thinking and doing, is one of the oldest and most durable cleavages in Western educational philosophy, and it reflects assumptions that are far more deeply held than any individual policy initiative can easily reach. From Plato's Academy to the mediaeval guild system, from the Victorian public schools to the grammar schools of the twentieth century, the same hierarchy has expressed itself in different institutional forms: the liberal arts for those who rule and the practical arts for those who serve. **What changes is the language. The underlying structure does not.**

Those assumptions begin with status.

Going to university, especially to a university with a recognised brand, carries an immediate social kudos that no technical qualification has ever been able to replicate. This is true even when the vocational route offers substantially better employment outcomes, genuine earning power, and a more direct pathway into a skilled trade. The sociologist Anthony Giddens, in *Sociology* (8th edition, 2019), notes that educational credentials in Britain function less as reliable signals of specific competencies than as markers of social class and cultural capital. What a degree signifies is not simply that its holder has completed a programme of study but that they have moved through a particular social experience in a particular institution, among a particular stratum of their peers. This is why the Russell Group universities continue to attract applications regardless of the subject studied and why an apprenticeship in engineering, however rigorous and well-paid, rarely commands the same dinner-table prestige as a 2:1 in Media Studies from a campus university.

The second and deeper problem lies in how we conceptualise learning itself. The dominant model, at university and in the workplace, treats education as a token: a credential that functions as a passport to the next stage, whether that stage is employment, further study, or social recognition. The token has exchange value, but it is understood to be separable from the person who holds it. You have the qualification; therefore, you are qualified. The qualification becomes the thing that matters, and the process that produces it becomes secondary, almost incidental.

This is a profound misunderstanding of what genuine learning does. The best learning is not additive. It does not simply deposit knowledge into an empty vessel and produce a credentialed version of the same person. **It transforms.** It changes the structure of how someone thinks, how they encounter difficulty, how they hold uncertainty, and how they bring their mind to bear on problems that did not exist when they began.

The philosopher John Dewey, writing in *Experience and Education* (1938), argued throughout his career that genuine education is always a transaction between a person and their experience, not a transaction between a person and an institution. What a university or college can offer is an environment conducive to that transformation. But the transformation itself happens with the person, and it cannot be guaranteed by the credential alone. The qualification is evidence of that process, not a substitute for it.

I know this from the inside. I earned a First Class Honours degree in Education from Sunderland University in 1997. I was an adult student; I had been in and out of unemployment, I had worked in the civil service, I had taught before I ever sat a single university exam. I was not there for the credential. I was there because I wanted to exercise my mind at the highest level I could reach, because I wanted to understand education as a discipline, not just as a practice. I found the work easier than I expected, not because I was especially clever, but because I had stopped caring about the outcome and started caring about the process. The degree did not change what I could do in the world in any simple, measurable sense. What it changed was **who I was** as a thinker, as a reader, as someone who could hold a complex argument and extend it. That change persisted long after the credential was framed and hung on my wall.

This is the issue that our systems consistently fail to grasp. We have built an architecture of education in which the signifier is treated as though it were the thing signified. We have confused the certificate with the transformation, the brand with the learning, the passport with the journey. And so long as that confusion persists, no amount of structural reform will make any real difference. T-Levels, apprenticeships, foundation degrees, higher technical qualifications: each has been announced as a breakthrough, and each has been gradually absorbed back into the established hierarchy, not because it lacks value but because we lack the willingness to examine what we actually think learning is for.

There are signs of hope, though they are seldom celebrated. The growth of degree apprenticeships, which allow people to earn while learning and to apply theoretical knowledge directly in the workplace, represents a genuine attempt to collapse the binary. Employer-led trailblazer groups, which design apprenticeship standards for specific occupations, have in some sectors produced rigorous and well-regarded credentials that carry real weight. But these innovations remain marginal. They have not challenged the centre of gravity. The centre of gravity is still the three-year full-time degree at a campus university, and it will remain there until the culture that surrounds it (the assumptions that parents and employers and the media all reproduce) is itself changed.

The question worth asking is not how to make vocational routes more like university routes, nor how to persuade university graduates to look more favourably on their technical peers. **It is whether any of us, policymakers and parents and employers and educators alike, are prepared to treat learning as a process that changes people rather than a transaction that rewards them.** Until that question is answered honestly, and answered at the level of culture rather than legislation, the great divider will continue to do its work. And it will do it quietly, without any announcements at all.

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