

Technical Academies

Academies

Academies are state-funded schools established and controlled by sponsors from a wide range of backgrounds, including colleges, universities, individual philanthropists, businesses, the voluntary sector, and the faith communities. Universities and colleges can get involved in the management of secondary schools by:

- setting up, sponsoring and managing their own academies;
- supporting an academy as a co-sponsor, bringing educational expertise;
- partnering a trust school maintained by the local authority to help it expand or enhance its provision.

At the end of 2008 the DCSF listed 48 universities as committed to being lead sponsors, co-sponsors or educational partners of academy schools. Most of the universities are either co-sponsors or education partners, though there are exceptions such as the University of West of England and University College London.

Further Education College (FEC) involvement in the Academies/Trusts programme has been less extensive than that of universities (Barnfield College, Luton and Manchester College of Art and Technology were the first to sign up as sponsors in April 2006 and a number of other FECs have joined since then). A possible reason for this is that colleges and schools are sometimes in competition over the delivery of the 14-19 curriculum. However, the DCSF in the last government was keen to get FE Colleges (and schools) more involved in the Academies and Trusts programme: Coalition Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's Academies Bill continues and considerably expands this academy policy. On the 15th January 2008 the Department published a new prospectus for FE colleges which is broadly similar to the HE one. At the moment there is no detailed list of FECs who are involved in the programme, although the DCSF claimed that about 30 FE and sixth form colleges had already expressed an interest in the trust schools programme. Seven are already confirmed as trust school partners. New College Durham, for example, is listed as one of Trust Board members of Chester-Le-Street Learning Community Trust.¹

Under 'campaigns' we have now established a special section on the website on Academies www.ucu.org.uk/academies. The website includes a branch circular (UCU/126) and a

¹ DCSF (2008) Academies and Trusts: Opportunities for schools, sixth-form and FE colleges, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/pnattach/1.pdf>

leaflet on 'why universities and colleges should not sponsor academies'. Where your institution is proposing to sponsor an Academy, UCU branches and local associations should establish contacts with local education trade unions and the Anti-Academies Alliance <http://www.antiacademies.org.uk/>.

The new Coalition Academies Bill takes existing academy processes much further: primary schools can become academies, high performing schools (evidenced in OfSTED reports: 2,900 schools are classified by OfSTED as 'outstanding') – as opposed to 'failing' schools under the last government - are targeted for fast-track academy status, the right of the LA to object is removed, as are those of staff, parents and local communities, more power is centralised in the DfE through the funding agreement, parents' rights and accountability are diminished and pupil selection further substantiated.² There will profound implications for funding, especially on schools that do not become academies and on neighbouring FE colleges.

The impact on FE colleges could be considerable:

- FE provides second chance education to young people and adults
- There is essentially a post code lottery in terms of selection at 16. In many parts of the country if a student does not gain 5 A* to C GCESs they will not be accepted into a school Sixth Form, Sixth Form College or academy. This is because academies are in charge of their own selection procedures unless the Secretary of State at the DfE agrees otherwise. If a student without these grades wants to continue to participate in education they will have to go to a FE college where the institutions will be paid 14% less per pupil than schools and presumably even less than academies. This means that those students who need most help get less institutional funding.
- Academies have already begun to hit FE funding. In 2010-2011 there will be no decrease in national funding for 16-19 as there will be with adult learning funding. However, some FE colleges have sustained cuts in 16-19 funding and for some this was because of a new academy in their area. The funding is finite so a new academy means less funding for the other providers, e.g. Preston College lost £500,000 because of the creation of a new academy.
- The arrangements for Local Authorities to commission and plan 16-19 provision after the winding up of the LSC included academies. As the Academies Bill will remove the local authority veto on academies and fast-tracks 'successful' schools, this will generally make nonsense of Local Authority led rational planning at local level, with duplication and waste of both programmes and facilities.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/27/academies-bill-centralisation-not-empowerment>; and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/06/academies-bill-gove-teachers-authorities>; Barrister David Wolfe's legal opinion of the new academies proposed in the Bill <http://www.thetruthaboutourschools.com/2010/06/15/a-legal-opinion-on-the-academies-bill/>

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'Technical Academies' policy re-surfaced in the schools section (page 29) of 'The Coalition: Our programme for Government'³

'We will improve the quality of vocational education, including increasing flexibility for 14-19 year olds and creating new Technical Academies as part of our plans to diversify schools provision'.

'Technical Academies' are the Coalition government's enthusiastic adoption of and re-naming of a 2009 proposal to create over 100 'University Technical Colleges' (UTCs) made by Lord Baker, the former Conservative education secretary, to the then Secretary of State at the DCSF Ed Balls. Lord Baker's proposal was and is the creation of 'technical schools' for pupils aged 14 to 19, supposedly the first development of vocational schools since the 1950s but in fact the latest version of the new Labour government's academy programme.

Lord Baker initiated the proposal "to forge a partnership between vocational education and universities, FE colleges and employers"⁴ with the late Lord Dearing early in 2009, gaining senior labour ministers support and latterly, support from senior Tories and now the Coalition government. This cross-party near agreement on UTCs and/or 'Technical Academies' is unsurprising when put into a wider 14-19 policy context: UTCs, and now 'Technical Academies', are the latest spin on the drive to turn secondary schools into academies.

The first new 600-pupil school will be opened in September 2012 in the West Midlands, sponsored and run by Aston University. 14-19 year old students will take GCSEs in core subjects including English, mathematics and science along with practical courses such as engineering and manufacturing. Lord Baker (also the chair of 'Edge', the vocational education lobby group) and now supported by Sir Mike Tomlinson, wants government to "set up a national network of 100 UTCs in the next four or five years", claiming that other universities including Wolverhampton⁵, Salford, Bradford, Hertfordshire, Leicester and Loughborough were considering backing similar schools.

³ http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/aug/30/government-plans-new-technical-schools>

⁵ Wolverhampton University's involvement appears to be well advanced, as is that of Walsall College, in the creation of a 'regional UTC'. See Walsall Council Cabinet minutes, 3 February 2010, at <http://www2.walsall.gov.uk/CMISWebPublic/Binary.ashx?Document=8201>

According to the Aston University website⁶, "Students will have the opportunity to work with Aston University engineering staff and students as well as local and national industry. The Academy will work closely with further education colleges including Birmingham Metropolitan College and secondary schools across Birmingham to create clear progression routes to further and higher education or directly into industry."

The Baker Dearing Educational Trust argues that in addition to engineering UTCs will specialise in product design, sport and health sciences, construction and building support services, land and environmental services and hair and beauty. The Trust defines the role of HE and FE sponsors as "curriculum development, helping in teaching and guiding suitably qualified students to foundation and full degrees".

The latest on 'Technical Academies' is that following a meeting between Lord Baker and the Secretary of State for Education on 16 June the Coalition government will identify twenty 'failing schools' and turn them into UTCs ⁷(Baker is hanging on to his name for them). This is alongside the twelve added since the Coalition government, each one being sponsored by a university and FEC, with three more to open before 2012 following the Birmingham and Walsall institutions already mentioned opening in September 2010.

Thirty-two HEIs, including Cambridge, Warwick and Bristol universities, have evidently already expressed an interest in sponsoring a UTC.

History and Comment

Lord Baker itemises several models that have informed the notion of UTCs.

The Academy Programme.

Baker initiated City Technology Colleges, a network of schools set up in the late 1980s specialising in computing and technology, forerunners of New Labour's privately-sponsored academies championed by Tony Blair.

UTCs will operate under the academy programme, so each UTC will teach the Key Stage 4 (KS 4) core curriculum (English, maths, science) and offer KS 4 foundation subjects (ICT, PE, Citizenship) alongside a specialist curriculum in vocational/applied subjects, including one or more of the new academic/vocational Diplomas, that have so far been unsuccessful in recruiting target numbers of 14-19 students across all levels of the Diploma curriculum offer.

⁶ <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/about/news/releases/2010/march/engineering-academy/>

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/baker-tells-gove-he-wants...>

Technical schools

The proposal also harks back to Technical Schools, opened alongside grammar schools and secondary moderns under the 1944 Butler Education Act that created the tripartite secondary education system which the comprehensive reforms of secondary education replaced. Although grammars and secondary moderns quickly became established, technical schools proved unpopular and few were opened.

Vocational secondary education in Germany

Lord Baker has likened his UTC proposal to German vocational education: “the most popular schools in Germany are now the technical schools – they are more popular than German grammar schools”.

Lord Baker’s admiration for German technical schools (*Realschulen*) is commendable but overtaken by events. Many German Lander (Regional state governments) have already scrapped their technical schools or are considering doing so under pressure from parents, merging them into a more comprehensive system due to the low status of the German equivalent to secondary moderns (Hauptschulen).

Education Trade Union Comment on UTCs

John Bangs, NUT Head of Education, speaking at NUT’s recent conference in Liverpool, said that UTCs, like Academies, would effectively lead to selection by the back door:

“There is a real fear about a move towards selection by division, selection by direction and selection by assumption, with these routes being mapped out for kids for evermore”.

His view was amplified by Baljeet Ghale, former NUT president, who was equally alarmed about “the separate paths which students are being channelled into at the age of 14, either vocational or academic...going back to an already discredited policy which we had decades ago can only lead to a difference in value between different types of institution”.⁸

After the 16th June announcement about the creation of twenty new UTCs the NUT reiterated their criticism, NUT GS Christine Blower arguing that: “Attempting to separate ‘technical’ or ‘vocational’ education from mainstream schools will lead to a two-tier system with technical schools being seen as the poor cousin”.⁹

⁸ www.telegraph.co.uk/education/.../Technical-schools-will-fuel-divisions.html

⁹ Independent, as Footnote 7.

Analysis

This version of Academies becomes a much bigger issue for UCU, given that UTC development, although led by local authorities, who now - at least for the next couple of years - have 16-19 commissioning powers, requires close local and regional HEI and FEC involvement in the 100 projected UTCs. Although Aston University has the lead role in the proposed Birmingham UTC, for the regional UTC proposed for Walsall, Walsall College is the lead sponsor, Wolverhampton University the 'co-sponsor'.

Initial plans for both the Birmingham and Walsall UTCs have proposed that HE and FE academic and academic related staff will all be working alongside secondary schoolteachers in UTCs on curriculum development, teaching and learning and progression to HE, with no discussion of staff conditions, pay, training and development and little attention paid to quality oversight or governance.

Part of the appeal of UTCs to the last New Labour government was that they offered a single institution within which the faltering Diploma initiative would have been a central aspect of the curriculum offer. To date, Diplomas have had below target, low and uneven enrolments, with very little interest amongst prospective students at a Level 3 equivalent.

The appeal of UTCs/'Technical Academies' to the Coalition government and Michael Gove probably stems from Lord Baker's original scheme to create City Technology Colleges (CTCs) when he was Secretary of State for Education: the creation of independent CTCs would help to cause local education authorities to 'wither on the vine' and break the education unions stranglehold on education by concentrating power centrally in the Secretary of State, then with CTCs and now with UTCs/'Technical Academies'.

UTCs will have very high start-up costs as they will concentrate on subjects which require specialised, modern and expensive equipment. These costs compound the fact that the curriculum offer in UTCs will compete with that of most general FECs, raising the possibility that both capital investment and recurrent funding of existing curriculum areas offered by FECs could be diverted away from them to UTCs.

In a keynote speech at the recent Compass Conference (12 June) NUT GS Christine Blower urged schools and governing bodies to jointly scupper Michael Gove's academy policy, wherein "centralisation of power completely flies in the face of the coalition Government's stated intention to involve local communities in schools and other public services"¹⁰.

Overall, 'Technical Academies' or 'University Technical Colleges' add over-determination of the curriculum on offer to 'non-academic' 14 year-olds, further substantiating the

¹⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/teachers-declare-war-on-academies-1998321.html>

differentiation by class and housing status and location that already exists in the academy policy.