



Warminster School in Wiltshire

THE HEADMASTER

## VOCATION: A NEW DEFINITION

**Mark Mortimer**, head of Warminster, explains why apprenticeships are no longer a dirty word

**T**he Canadian ice-hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, said: 'Success comes not from skating to where the puck is, but to where it will be.'

That's our challenge. We are all prisoners of our own experience and prejudices, but what if the accepted standards and norms no longer make sense? The pace of change is frenetic in work and learning. People fixate on the fact that many future jobs are yet to be invented, but what about the demise of existing ones? Reports suggest that up to 45 per cent of them will be lost to automation by 2030: Many of these are cognitively and manually routine but not all; robots can out-perform a surgeon in precision. A study on the future of employment rated the chance of judges being replaced by robots as 40 per cent. So radical is this transformation of the labour market likely to be that the very word 'career' may become a misnomer.

Consequently, the emphasis must be on preparing children for creative, non-routine jobs and skills, the demand for which is always growing; equip pupils with cognitive capabilities that are hard to automate so that they are as unlike machines as possible.

The problem is that our educational system remains dominated by an inflexible, knowledge-based curriculum, constantly assessed by standardised testing. GCSEs and A-levels are about the acquisition of information and its regurgitation, rather than interpretation. Knowledge is no longer power – that now lies in its smart consumption and application. Does this approach really

prepare children for the new workplace? Are we not using outdated, rigid routines to prepare pupils for a world which is fast-moving, flexible and non-routine?

We also need to revalue our educational currency. Plumbers and electricians will always be needed, but we must expand the meaning of the word 'vocational', so that it isn't just linked to a hard hat. Snobbery persists. Too many parents look down on vocational training, nodding vigorously at the idea of encouraging it, while thinking 'not for my child' (*Other People's Children*, by Barnaby Lenon).

The Chambers Dictionary defines the word 'vocational' as 'an occupation or profession demanding dedication and skill'. The government is introducing T-levels – technical study programmes – next year. Warminster School offers the International Baccalaureate Careers-Related Programme (IBCP) at sixth form (alongside A-levels and the IB). More schools follow; Bryanston is starting IBCP.

Don't get me wrong, the traditional university route works for many school leavers, but it's not the only one; and no longer always better than other pathways.

We have a similar need for apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships are the school leavers' equivalent of the IBCP and their blend of higher and vocational training is helping to change the view that apprenticeships are second-class options for those who can't access university. I look to a future where professional apprenticeships are considered viable alternatives to top universities – but they need our support.

The 21st-century job market is global and competitive. To succeed, we need to develop people who can think differently, intelligently break convention, challenge assumptions and possess a curious, flexible mindset. We, as parents, policy-makers or educators, need to do the same. IBCP, T-levels, apprenticeships, vocational training... Whichever attempts are made will not succeed until there is a change in mindset. Vocational and academic are not, and should not, be seen as incompatible or mutually exclusive.

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