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WHAT SHOULD A NEW GOVERNMENT DO ABOUT THE SKILLS AGENDA IN EDUCATION POLICY?

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Clearly, an educated and skilled population is a ‘good thing’, socially, culturally, democratically, and economically. Why then is it a mistake to define education as a process justified by – and organised around - the inculcation of skills? The answer is that people cannot learn fully from skills taught in a vacuum. At best they have a half-knowledge of what to do – and at worst, they are have forgotten - which means that later they have to learn the same skills all over again.

This state of affairs leads employers to snort: *‘I can’t think what students are taught in schools/Colleges/Universities’* and ministers to promise ever more skills-training. But it is not working, because, from the best of intentions, the teaching processes have been deformed and are not delivering properly.

Labour meanwhile tinkers with the governmental command structure. In June 2007, out went the Science/innovation office within the Department of Trade & Industry. And out went the Further and Higher Education section, within the Department of Education & Skills. In came a merged new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). But in June 2009, lo! all-change again. Suddenly, the DIUS and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) were subsumed into a mega-Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Depressingly, the term ‘Skills’ persists throughout the upheavals, while terms such as Education or even Science sink below the froth.

Vocational education faces similar upheavals. In 2008, the current Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES) merged the old Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the National Employer Panel. Again ‘Skills’ are trumpeted from on high. But if no heed is paid to the need to learn and develop these attributes within a framework of knowledge on the job, then the mantra, however often repeated, can’t work successfully.

What is to be done? My answer is: ask the educators who actually do the job. And then free them to teach not lists of abstracted Skills, which are forgotten, but a range of developmental capacities in the content and context of a deeper Knowledge, which works.

In this context, please see also [CorfieldPdf/16](#)