

Vocational Education. In *Comparing Standards Academic and Vocational, 16-19 Year Olds*. Ed Sheila Lawlor, pp 135-146, London: Politea, 2002.

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Introduction

Britain has never fully come to terms with vocational education. The Government's latest thinking as set out in its 14-19 Green Paper (February 1992) is as muddled as what has gone before. Its aspiration is commendable: "world class technical and vocational education, which offers a positive choice and high standards, and is not a second class fallback". But, because of Tony Blair's unwise commitment to half of young people receiving university-level education, its main proposal is for "clear vocational pathways into higher education". It is true the Green Paper does make some mention of Modern Apprenticeships, but for esteem it wants to bundle them up into "a new overarching award called 'the Matriculation Diploma'".

The Green Paper misses a simple truth, well exemplified by our specialist chapters: the value attached to a qualification depends crucially on what you can do with it. A-levels are valued - some more than others - because they qualify successful students for the course of their choice at the university of their choice. Vocational qualifications in countries like Germany and Switzerland are highly respected because they are clearly related to sought-after employment. Some of the most prestigious qualifications in this country are vocational, like medical and law degrees, because of the doors they open, but most vocational qualifications for 14 to 19 year-olds have no such clear purpose. While there is a well-defined ladder from GCSEs to A-levels to higher education, the steps from school to employment are decidedly shaky. Britain is trapped in its history.

A Brief History

Academic qualifications in schools derive directly from university entrance examinations. During the 1850s the universities of the time, London, Oxford and Cambridge, began setting matriculation examinations to qualify candidates for entry. Some schools turned to these examinations as a *de facto* school-leaving certificate. Sensing a business opportunity, London University introduced awards specifically for that purpose in 1902 and 1905. Their success eventually prompted the government to take action and, in 1917, a Secondary Schools Examinations Council was set up to oversee national certificates.

In contrast, vocational education was left to fend for itself and a diverse collection of awards grew up entirely separate from school education. They were designed to qualify for specific jobs and were often particular to individual employers. The

qualifications of the Royal Society of Arts and City and Guilds, and system of Ordinary and Higher National Certificates (ONCs and HNCs) had a wider currency. ONCs and their diploma counterparts were the forerunners of the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) awards that continue to the present day. Schools were at first excluded from offering them. Those taking such courses usually had not passed the five O-levels for sixth-form education. BTEC moderated, but did not examine. In essence, vocational awards became the route for those who had fallen off the academic ladder.

Not surprisingly, vocational qualifications were said to lack parity of esteem. During the 1980s the campaign for a clear structure (Tolley, 1986) was followed by the setting up of a National Council for Vocational Qualifications in 1986. The remit was to bring together existing awards and introduce new ones where gaps were found. Instead of building on what was there, a quite different way of specifying qualifications was imposed. The upshot is that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are stated in analytic format. Requirements are laid out as a field of expertise broken down into units, which are further subdivided into elements, which are defined as lists of numerous performance criteria against which evidence of competence has to be collected. The qualifications were explicitly designed to be about what people could do, not what had been learned or the degree of skill in the performance.

NVQs were for people in work. No thought was given to constructing ladders from school to work. BTEC awards which occupied this territory were at first overlooked, but from 1991 an attempt was made to incorporate them into the framework as General National Vocational Qualifications. These were to be in the same analytic format as NVQs with the added complication of being disengaged from actual work. Although initially compliant, BTEC began to resist and its certificates and diplomas survive alongside GNVQs, or rather what has become of them.

During the 1990s the Conservative Government addressed the apparent lack of coherence in education 16-19. It asked Sir Ron (now Lord) Dearing to follow his review of the national curriculum with a review of qualifications 16-19. He put three options on the table (Dearing, 1996). There could be three strands, academic, applied, and occupational, with each represented by its own qualifications; there could be an overarching certificate, obtained by achieving a number of passes at an appropriate level; or there could be a baccalaureate-type award which specified particular combinations of studies.

Dearing reported in 1996 and his recommendations were put out to consultation by the Blair government when it came to power in 1997. This led to Curriculum 2000 with A-levels and GNVQ repackaged to the same shape and size and graded on the same scale, though with GNVQs still assessed mainly by portfolios of course work. GNVQs have gone through several rebrandings since, becoming briefly Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education before being designated as A-levels in their own right.

Not only qualifications, but also institutions have tended to be remodelled as academic. Technical and secondary modern schools from the 1960s became comprehensives offering, in the words of Harold Wilson as leader of the Labour Party in 1963, “a grammar school education for all”. Technical colleges became further education colleges and they now have more A-level students than schools. At the tertiary level, first the Colleges of Advanced Technology and then the polytechnics became universities.

The Blair Government seems to have got caught up in, and to be accelerating, the process of academic drift. It is increasingly attempting to turn the vocational into the academic. Blair himself at the Labour Party conference in 1999 declared the target of 50 per cent of 18-30 year-olds to proceed to higher education by 2010. The purpose of GNVQs has been progressively re-defined to become part of a much broader academic ladder to higher education. Universities which have traditionally specialised in passing on the bodies of understanding necessary to professions like medicine and law, and taking academic subjects to their limits, now find themselves under pressure to be vocational. They are responding by creating vocational education in their own image with practical activities, like managing golf courses or grooming horses, being turned into three-year courses full of essays. They do this because most have neither the facilities nor the expertise to provide practical education how it should be.

It is true that the Blair government has been looking for ways of putting the training back into vocational education and has been developing foundation and advanced modern apprenticeships for post-16 students. But, as yet, these are not rooted in school education, and as they are centred on NVQs and GNVQs they suffer from their weaknesses. But as regards a shape for secondary education the government seems to have given up. It has embraced diversity as an end in itself. So long as a school has a distinctive ethos it doesn't seem to matter much what that is and there is seemingly little attempt to ensure an adequate range of provision in any locality

Lessons from Other Countries

Continental Europe has a markedly different educational history. For a number of different reasons France and Prussia developed distinct rigorous vocational education after the Industrial Revolution (Barnett, 1986). In Britain, by contrast, even successful industrialists placed higher value on academic education. In consequence, European secondary education has a definite shape with well-defined vocational routes. While some qualifications may be more valued than others there is not the damaging gulf between the academic and vocational that there is in Britain. Neither is vocational education seen as unduly narrowing; rather the practical focus becomes the incentive to achieve high general educational standards.

Our chapters on the education and training of electricians, chefs and nursery nurses illustrate what this means in detail. The four European countries often differ from England, New Zealand and the United States. New Zealand, like

much of the world, had the British model imposed on it and it has continued in that vein even to the extent of developing its own NVQs. The United States has vocational tracks through high school, but the programmes are more about general preparation than licensing to practice. From the contrasting accounts, it is possible to infer that respected vocational education and training systems have at least four characteristics:

- qualifications that qualify;
- setting and maintaining standards through credible assessment;
- developing particular skills in the context of general education;
- clear and accepted routes through the education system.

Qualifications that Qualify

What comes through from the detailed consideration of preparation for the three fields of employment is that the engine driving vocational education in the European countries is that the qualifications are embedded in the structure of work. As Lutz says in relation to Switzerland, “the possibilities for employment in the field of Electronics are very limited without the necessary vocational leaving certificate...qualification as a Meister is required for self-employment.” Even the United States has been moving in that direction. Our chapter on nursery education and childcare reveals that Florida in 1999 passed legislation requiring “childcare and education programme directors/administrators to have a credential as part of the minimum licensing standard.”

In Britain, on the other hand, many vocational qualifications stand in an ambiguous relationship to the world of work. Even though National Vocational Qualifications operate to standards set by employers and are, in the main, delivered and assessed in the workplace, they are often regarded as part of the employee’s self-development rather than as a basis for rewardable work skills. Trainees who labour to achieve an NVQ often find that it does not put them in a better position to get a job nor are they more likely to be paid more or promoted if they already have one.

Patiar contrasts British laissez-faire with the clear relationship in other countries between qualifications and work in the hospitality and catering industry. It is unthinkable in our European examples that someone can present themselves as a skilled worker whether they have any qualifications or not. This not only affects the perceived value of the qualifications, but impinges on the quality of life. The hazards in Britain of employing a plumber or builder without a personal recommendation are a staple of reality TV. But more generally, as Prais has shown through an impressive series of studies at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (Mason et al, 1990; NIESR, 1990), disregard for attested skills adversely affects productivity, workmanship and service.

A possible way forward for Britain in fields where the public is directly dependent on the skills of a practitioner would be to set up registration schemes based on the possession of relevant vocational qualifications. The Institute of Plumbers and the National Federation of Hairdressers for example, like their professional counterparts in medicine, law and accountancy, could be encouraged to establish formal registers. Given the British suspicion of anything that appears to act as a restraint on trade, these registers would not license to practise. It would be possible to continue to work in those fields. But the registers would be available to the public who would have recourse to the trade body if the work were not of an acceptable standard. In time, it is likely those registered would be able to charge a premium for their services and it would follow that they would be pleased to advertise themselves as fully qualified.

More generally, the role of employers is pivotal. Whenever they have been asked to contribute financially, as with the levy-grant system that Patiar describes, they have found ways of backing off. Vocational education tends to be strong, as we have seen, where employers participate fully in the content of vocational education and training and contribute substantially towards its funding. It tends to be weak where there is a hiatus between school and work. In the United States, for example, where there are restrictions on the extent to which young people under the age of 18 can engage in employment, vocational education in schools is about exploring careers and learning basic skills. Like Britain, the USA is experiencing a drift away from the vocational education.

The future of vocational education the Britain is in the hands of employers. If they really want it, it would be possible to organise a system of ladders and bridges which meets their needs and also, by extension, those of the wider community. If they merely pay lip service, it will remain in the unsatisfactory state in which it is.

Standards through Assessment

When qualifications are for something, people will strive for them. In Britain vocational education has been regarded too often as the province of those who find they cannot cope with academic study. The secondary modern schools were for those who failed the 11+, GNVQs tended to be for those who had not done well enough at GCSE to do A-levels, and the new 'vocational' courses at university are for those with the poorer A-levels.

The fact that in Britain vocational qualifications are seen more as a means of awarding credit to people who have failed at other things than as achieving standards for employment is reflected in the mode of assessment. Our chapters show that in countries like Germany and Switzerland where vocational qualifications are highly regarded they are awarded on the basis of searching final practical and written examinations. But in Britain and New Zealand examinations - that is assessment on standard tasks under standard conditions - tend to be downplayed in favour of more personal approaches. Candidates gather evidence

to show they can meet certain performance criteria. If it is not enough, they are sent away to get more.

While this approach may appear to have advantages in terms of tailoring, flexibility and motivation, it does give rise to doubts about the reliability and rigour of the awards. As our chapter on nursery education and childcare illustrates, there is an attempt to introduce some comparability through a system of internal and external verification, but it can only have limited impact. It is also time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic.

Where people are pressing to become qualified it is possible to have tough assessment procedures. Passing where others have failed confers prestige. Vocational qualifications like this do exist in Britain. Accountancy is a good example. The challenge is to grow something similar for skilled work generally. Registration schemes like those advocated could over time create the demand to enable the assessment procedures to be beefed up into real tests of practical skills. Similarly, vocational qualifications that were genuinely part of the fabric of work would - out of employers' self-interest if nothing else - come to be assessed with sufficient rigour to guarantee standards.

Breadth

The nature of the assessment determines the preparation for it. Our specialist chapters illustrate that where there are rigorous practical and written examinations there are specified training programmes usually lasting several years. The assessment also determines the breadth of studies. Where there is formal examination there is usually also proper regard for general education.

In Britain there is a widely held view that while academic education broadens the mind and widens choices, vocational education narrows both. In seeking to develop a national system of awards the challenge was to develop employment-related education which incorporated skill training, but also provided for flexibility, adaptability and progression. Both NVQs and GNVQs have failed to measure up. NVQs at first emerged as qualifications based on what people could appear do without regard for their understanding, and subsequent attempts to bolt on knowledge and understanding have not been entirely successful. GNVQs, on the other hand, have neglected practical skill training almost entirely to become assemblages of written evidence.

Our chapters show that in continental Europe vocational preparation includes general education as well as the specific skill training. Lutz describes how in Germany and Switzerland a dual system operates whereby apprentices spend four days a week in a company or business and the other in a vocational college. Here, in the case of electricians, they learn and are examined in arithmetic and technical theory and other vocational subjects such as technical design and construction, but also German, English and political and social studies. Patiar cites the chef's qualification in France. It consists of a four and half hour practical examination in kitchen production and eight hours of written papers in applied technology and

understanding industry complemented by general subjects such as French (also a 20-min oral exam), mathematics and economics.

Prais (Prais and Wagner, 1986; Prais and Beadle, 1991) has shown that the great advantage of this approach is that through the incentive of the skill training young people often achieve much higher standards in the mother tongue and mathematics than they would have through academic studies alone. Britain belatedly woke up to the importance of the general element in vocational education, but it has been formulated as key skills in the same analytic mode as NVQs and GNVQs. As such, it does not meet the essential purpose of providing a platform of learning for succeeding in the world of work however it might turn out to be. Not surprisingly, key skills are not highly regarded, but there is reluctance to go back to the drawing board. The proposed new foundation and advanced modern apprenticeships offer an opportunity to think again about training programmes.

Clear Routes

Most countries have clear routes of vocational education either within separate schools and colleges as in Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands or different tracks through the same institutions as in the United States. Britain is almost alone in being unwilling to face up to differences in abilities, interests and aspirations. In its latest expressions of policy the Blair government emphasizes diversity and individual tailoring. The White Paper on Schools (DfES, 2001), currently the basis of a bill going through Parliament, favours as many different types of school as possible, with more specialist schools, faith schools and city academies being added to the existing array. The Green Paper on Education 14-19 (DfES, 2002) envisages obscuring, as far as possible, the distinctions between academic and vocational qualifications in pursuit of parity of esteem.

Now while this may appear to be a clever way round its problems – for example, allowing the Labour Party to side step its ideological dilemma over selection – it does run the risk of secondary school qualifications, and the schools themselves, losing all shape. This may not seem to square with the policy for diversity in schools, but it does. The science schools, for example, like the other specialist schools will only be able to select a small minority on ability. They will be expected seamlessly to teach the research scientists of the future alongside the technicians and those who want to do other things but are in the school because it happened to be the nearest. The merging of GNVQs into GCSEs and A-levels does not provide a basis for developing respected ladders from school to work, but merely reduces what were intended to be vocational qualifications into second class academic qualifications as means of entry into the less popular universities.

If vocational education is to achieve its proper place in Britain there need to be clear routes through the education system into work. These have been advocated, by among others, Halsey et al (1991) and Dearing himself (1996). But there is a stronger case than ever before for a system of three inter-connecting pathways from age 14 onwards, distinguished by their organising principles: the academic,

the technical and the vocational. The different organising principles demand different designs.

- The *academic* – essentially about particular ways of making sense of the world - would derive from existing GCSEs combined into a diploma based on a core of English, maths, science and a modern language plus other subjects as options.
- The *technical* pathway would seek to develop talents for making things, designing things and being good with people. It would centre on honing up practical skills in the context of general learning. It would therefore need to be based on the same core subjects as the academic pathway, but with a different cluster of options. These would be mainly applied studies, including those like motor vehicle maintenance which have been swept up in the academicized technology that has emerged in schools.
- The *vocational* pathway would be similar to the technical one but would involve greater specialisation in the work that the young person might move into. It would take place in a combination of educational and work settings with interested employers being paid to participate.

Thus the three pathways differ essentially in the clusters of studies around a prescribed core. In each case there would be rigorous testing of the standards attained, including written examinations and, where appropriate, tests of practical work. Pupils and their parents would choose the pathway to be followed with the help of both advice from teachers and external assessments at the end of the first three years of secondary schooling. There would be ample opportunities to move between the pathways, though in switching it might take longer to reach the qualification.

Despite changes to allow for a common curriculum to age 14 with opportunities to specialise thereafter, there is still no clear shape to secondary education. It could be argued that the tailoring foreshadowed in the Green Paper (DfES, 2002) is more sophisticated in that it leaves the precise combination of studies up to the individual. But treating all subjects alike loses the distinctive organising principles. And too much choice at a young age – especially across an undifferentiated system - can be as inhibiting as too little. It seems more reasonable to ask young people and their parents to decide between equivalent pathways which are explicit about where they lead.

The present pursuit of uniformity, paradoxically through policies for individually tailored courses, will in any case prove futile, if only because young people will have to be educated in groups and those groups will have to be identified in some way. Meanwhile, instead of working with employers to develop high quality education and training which meets their needs, vocational education is in danger of becoming lost in the general mix.

Conclusion

Qualifications in Britain continue to be out of sync with the opportunities of the workplace. While plumbers, for example, are as important as academics, and can earn a lot more, they like those in most other practical occupations are not supported by a clear and valued qualification structure or training system. Our chapters on the three vocational fields in seven countries offer some strong pointers as to what this could look like: qualifications that qualify; standards ensured through fair tests; vocational education that broadens horizons rather than narrowing them; and clear vocational routes.

One would have hoped that a Green Paper on education 14-19 in the year 2002 would have squarely addressed the transition from education to work. But perversely it seems to take the view that vocational education can best be strengthened by glossing over differences. For each of our pointers it goes in the opposite direction. Rather than working with employers to secure qualifications that qualify for employment, it seems intent on turning the vocational into a route into higher education. It has nevertheless retained for them the less respected portfolio assessment so inevitably, whether they are called A-levels or not, they will be seen as second best. There is no attempt to broaden horizons through embedding practical education in general learning; rather it is to become bowdlerised as academic education. And, as for clear routes, the Green Paper pursues the impossible dream of an individually tailored programme for each pupil. There is some reference to a vocational route based on modern apprenticeships, but these are left dangling at age 16 with as yet nothing in education 14-16 to support them.

It could all be much simpler if the Government were to face up to what it evidently finds unpalatable. People can be broadly grouped according to their abilities and interests and that needs to be reflected in educational provision. Parity of esteem is a nonsense. Qualifications attain their value on their merits. Not all A-levels are equally regarded. Some vocational degrees are valued more than their academic counterparts. Instead of trying to bundle up everything together in the hope the differences will not be noticed the Government should be promoting qualifications that work in their own terms.

What this means in practice is recognising that the academic, the technical and vocational have different organising principles and purposes, which need to be reflected in the content and design of the courses. They need, as it were, to come off as different branches from the trunk of the national curriculum. Adopting the tree as a metaphor (with the twigs and leaves being life's various opportunities) offers the prospect of a clear shape for both qualifications and the educational system itself. Within a clear structure of this kind, vocational education and training, appropriately supported by employers (the energy to draw the water up through the tree), could earn the respect it deserves.

The under-valuing of vocational education in British culture and lack of clarity about its purpose has impoverished both the education of the young and the

quality of life of the nation. Young people suffer by not being able to develop their talents to the full; the country suffers because it does not have access to their practised skills. The Government should draw on the experience of our European neighbours, as we evidence in this report, to enable the practical to achieve its proper place alongside the academic.

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