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## **Liberal Conservatism, Vocationalism and Further Education in England**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Liberal Conservatism, Vocationalism and Further Education in England**

Focusing on vocational learning in the English further education (FE) sector and situating it within its social, political and historical context, this paper provides an overview of English attitudes towards the vocational and its subordinate status in relation to 'academic' education. It outlines the development of FE in England, describing its peculiarly working class heritage, and discusses how the nature of the sector has changed against the backdrop of increasing global competition and the restructuring of the UK economy since the 1970s. The paper goes on to discuss particular forms of vocationalism found in FE and considers some of the limitations of 'progressive' vocationalism and of competence based education and training. Following this, there is a discussion of emerging themes for vocational education and training, and the FE sector in particular, under the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government elected in 2010. Continuities and fractures with established practice are illustrated. The paper concludes by highlighting the social and epistemological limitations of current approaches to vocational education and training in England.

## **Liberal Conservatism, Vocationalism and Further Education in England**

### **Introduction**

The outcome of the UK General Election of 2010 led eventually to the formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government under Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. Whilst coalition governments have been commonplace in Europe and elsewhere, this was the first such arrangement in the UK since 1945. Set in a global context of emerging neo-liberal political hegemony, the late twentieth century was marked by a decisive defeat of the UK Labour Movement by the New Right ideology of a 'Thatcherite' Conservative Party. This regime gave way in 1997 to a 'New Labour' government which, despite differences in style to its predecessor, remained firmly committed to the principles of the market economy. The new Coalition Government appears to have been generally unanticipated; however, its politics and its existence are broadly congruent with the global trajectory of neo-liberalism. Its implications for education, and specifically for vocational education, might seem susceptible to analysis from a perspective situated within conventional readings of globalisation and neo-liberal politics. There are, however, 'local peculiarities' of the Anglo-Saxon context which this paper seeks to explicate by focusing particularly on vocational learning in the English further education (FE) sector.

### **Vocational learning in England**

Richard Sennett's (2008, 8) *The Craftsman* makes an elegant and compelling case for the processes of work, and in particular what he calls 'the skill of making things well', as a form of *Bildung*. Conceptualising 'material culture' as incorporating

concrete things and their making he wants the recovery of 'something of the Enlightenment on terms appropriate for our time.' (Sennett 2008, 269). Using John Dewey as an educational touchstone, Sennett seeks a democracy of self-governing worker citizens enshrined in the philosophical spirit of pragmatism. This is ambitious, and nowhere more so than in England, where vocational education has a particularly unhappy history (Hyland and Winch 2007). It might, however, be thought that an incidental benefit of an era of economic and cultural globalisation would be a shift away from the deep-seated negative attitudes that have shaped vocationalism in England. Yet this has not yet been the case. England is where, more than in other industrialised democracy, the essentially social class basis of the education system is writ large in the independent/state schooling divide; the ideological function of the education system is less obvious, and more insidious, where it is vocational, and therefore explicitly instrumental. Our discussion of this will require some excavation of ideas from the late twentieth century before we move to a consideration of recent political developments which, we argue, represent both a continuity and escalation of established practices rather than a move away from them.

The ground-breaking Weberian work of Archer (1979) stands as a central contribution to our understanding of how educational systems develop and change. Green (1990), in his study of the rise of education systems in England, France and the USA, acknowledged the power of Archer's work whilst recognising the significance of the social functions of the state and its relationships with different social classes. Green (1991, 7) quoted a Parliamentary Select Committee of 1818 stating that '... England is the worst educated country in Europe ...' as well as

Balfour's 1902 claim that '... England is behind all continental rivals in education'.

More than a century later, the Leitch Report claimed

Our nation's skills are not world class and we run the risk that this will undermine the UK's long-term prosperity....without increased skills we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all (Leitch 2006, 1).

Such sentiments can be seen as an extension of longstanding concerns about economic competitiveness and the threat to social and economic well-being posed by overseas competition. Indeed, such notions are deeply rooted in the psyche of the English ruling classes (Musgrave 1970). There are, however, new assertions in the dominant discourse about skills and economic competitiveness. First, there is far greater priority given to such claims. Secondly, whilst earlier concerns about economic performance were primarily in relation to Germany, France and other 'developed' nations, such arguments now focus on the rise of China, India and other 'emerging' economies as competitors in an increasingly global market (Avis 2007).

Green (1991) explained England's educational under-development by reference to religious divisions and, crucially, structural obstacles in the form of economic complacency and aristocratic opposition to educational advance. The former he argued was a product of post-imperial stupor, the latter of pre-industrial anxiety. The industrial revolution (c. 1760-1830) was a central factor, both chronologically and in terms of the way it failed to produce a truly vocational social culture. Arguably much of the economic complacency that characterised nineteenth and early twentieth century England had its roots in the imperial mentality, which was itself enmeshed with the sensibilities of a decidedly English and essentially patrician ruling class

which had culturally infected the *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs and 'little masters' that emerged from the economic energies of the machine age.

Silver and Brennan (1988, 18) summarised the various cultural '... stigmas and dichotomies ...' which have cross-penetrated the English education system. The strongest antipathies to the vocational were found within the great English universities which have for centuries held sway over the country's intellectual climate. In contrast, higher education in the USA embraced technocratic knowledge (Manicas 1993). Arguably, the applied and instrumental nature of vocational education runs contrary to the ethics and liberal traditions of the English university as viewed by John Stuart Mill, Newman or, more recently, Oakeshott (Williams 1989). Rather than providing students with the 'gift of an interval' in an 'exalted place apart' where ideas may be pursued without regard to their utility, a vocational curriculum invites learners to apply themselves to the acquisition of skills which, at least within capitalist economies, will 'oil the wheels' of commerce. Whilst, in theory, vocationally qualified students acquire high levels of employability and earning potential, in England, this has generally not been the case, especially in relation to those undertaking their studies in the FE sector. UK employers, and particularly those offering more prestigious and well paid forms of work, have traditionally preferred to recruit graduates with a broad and traditional academic education – prizing especially young people with qualifications from 'elite' universities (Hyland and Winch 2007).

## **The English Further Education Sector**

The FE sector in England is both large and diverse. In 2008/09 there were 4,756,600 learners participating in further education provision funded by the Learning and Skills Council (DBIS 2009). Although private and voluntary organisations are increasingly important providers of FE in England, much of this activity takes place within the public sector in specialist institutions known as FE colleges. Although FE colleges are very diverse in nature and international comparisons are not straightforward, these organisations share some characteristics with community colleges in the USA, and the technical and further education institutes in Australia. Traditionally, most FE students have been engaged in education and training courses preparing them for the workplace - whether this is on the construction site, in the engineering workshop or, as is more commonplace nowadays, the various parts of the service sector which have grown to replace the UK's diminishing industrial and manufacturing base. Illustrating the traditionally working class nature of FE, Simmons (2010, 363-4) has pointed out that

Few policymakers have direct knowledge or experience of further education and, for most of its existence, FE suffered from significant under-funding and received little attention from central government. Richardson (2007, 411) argues that, in class-conscious England, FE colleges have often been regarded as something better suited to 'other people's children'. Despite this, over recent years, further education has become the focus of government attention and series of centrally directed policies, strategies and initiatives have radically altered the nature of FE. These reforms, it is claimed, will simultaneously 'up-skill' the workforce, increase economic competitiveness, and promote social inclusion.

Introductory and intermediate vocational education and training for those above the minimum school-leaving age of 16 can perhaps be described as the 'core business' of the FE sector. The range of learning that takes place within FE colleges is,



however, highly varied and ranges from provision for people with learning difficulties to degree level courses. In England, at the start of the twenty-first century one in 10 higher education students was located in FE colleges (Parry and Thompson 2002) – the majority of whom are engaged in vocationally-orientated courses, such as foundation degrees. HEFCE (2009, 8) stated that ‘The volume of HE provision in colleges during the last decade is variously quoted as forming between 9 and 11 per cent of all higher education...’. The work of FE also overlaps with that of schools, especially with regard to collaborative provision for those 14-16 year olds deemed more suitable to focus on ‘practical’ skills and vocational training rather than the academic subjects that dominate the school curriculum.

The genesis of FE can be found in the ‘mechanics’ institutes’ and technical training schools of nineteenth century England. In response to the demands of industrialisation, these establishments focused mainly on scientific and technical education for adults, and were often established by philanthropists, industrialists or charitable bodies. By the close of the century, however, most of those that had survived had become municipally-funded. Whilst some would provide the basis for polytechnics, and in some cases universities, most became FE colleges. The early decades of the twentieth century saw a significant growth of further education across England; many municipal authorities were committed to increasing the availability of technical and vocational education and the inter-war period in particular saw the construction of a number of ‘showcase colleges’ (Richardson 2007 p. 387). However, at this stage, such initiatives were essentially voluntary and, as a consequence, many parts of England, including some of its major industrial towns and cities, were left without any meaningful FE provision (Bailey 1987, 52-55). Municipal involvement

in further education effectively became mandatory when *The Education Act 1944* placed a statutory duty on local education authorities (LEAs) to provide 'adequate facilities' for FE; consequently, the years after the end of the Second World War saw a huge growth of FE across the country. The notion of adequacy was, however, open to interpretation and, in practice, FE colleges operated under differing regimes of control and support according to the priorities and peculiarities of individual LEAs [see Richardson (2007) and Simmons (2008) for a historical overview of post-war FE].

The Robbins Report (1963) paved the way for an expansion of higher education in the UK but also reverberated on FE (Fisher 2010). As well as creating a set of totally new institutions as universities, Robbins recommended that certain large colleges concentrating on 'advanced' technology be awarded university status and ten leading colleges of advanced technology (CATs) were granted university status in 1966. The 1960s saw other developments that would have far-reaching consequences for FE – the formation of the polytechnics. *A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges* (DES 1966) announced the intention to establish 28 (later 30) polytechnics across England. These new institutions were created from over 50 colleges from across 31 local authorities (Simmons 2009, 294); they were generally regional institutions which had substantial and long established HE provision (Robinson 1968). This effectively cemented a 'dual system' of higher education in England: the 'independent' universities funded directly by the state and the polytechnics under municipal control (Pratt 1997, 8). There were, however, always considerable tensions between the polytechnics and the LEAs. At the end of the 1970s the creation of a National Advisory Board reduced local authority control over

the polytechnic sector, and following the 1988 Education Reform Act all polytechnics were fully removed from LEA governance. Subsequently, the 1992 *Further and Higher Education (F and HE) Act* allowed the polytechnics (mostly former technical colleges) to be renamed universities, although the commonly used term 'post-1992 universities' betrays their working class and vocational roots. The story of both the CATs and the polytechnics represents notable examples of the 'academic drift' that has affected FE for much of its existence (**Pratt and Burgess 1974, 23**). This shift away from the practical and the technical towards the academic and the general is closely associated with the desire for increased status and prestige which typifies English education (Ainley and Bailey 1997, 2).

Against a backdrop of increasingly global competition and the UK's relative economic decline, from the 1960s onwards, traditional, bureaucratic forms of municipal governance began to give way as both stronger central control and greater independence from LEAs became the norm for FE colleges (Fisher 2010). After a lengthy period in which local authority governance was steadily whittled away, the 1988 *Education Reform Act* (ERA) significantly reduced the strength of LEA control both through increasing government direction of FE and by empowering the governing bodies of individual colleges, especially in relation to financial matters. The F and HE Act finally removed all FE colleges from the jurisdiction of local authorities. This process, known as 'incorporation', accelerated changes in the management, funding and organisation of the colleges. From this point onwards, FE would become dominated by quasi-markets and competition engineered and controlled by the state (Simmons 2009).

Following incorporation there was a significant increase in workloads, especially for teaching staff, institutional restructuring and a series of redundancies which triggered a period of industrial unrest (Simmons 2008 and 2009). When New Labour took power in 1997 it inherited a FE sector in crisis (Robson 1998). The Governments of Blair and Brown were less overtly aggressive in their stance towards FE than their predecessors and, from 2001 onwards, New Labour provided the sector with increased levels of funding. This can perhaps **be** explained by its vision of FE in which the sector was seen not only as boosting the economy through enhancing the skills of the nation but also as a vehicle for promoting inclusion and creating social justice (LSC 2005). Finlay et. al. (2007, 141) highlight the multiple meanings that could be seen in New Labour's FE policy. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on individual entitlement but this was combined with an ideology of 'responsibilisation'. Indeed, there were certain continuities between the project of Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 and that of New Labour (Hodgson and Spours 2006). This is perhaps unsurprising; both operated within a neo-liberal polity in which the working class rather than capitalist economic and social relations were seen as the problem to be solved.

The shifting culture and function of FE partly derives from the changing nature of employment and the decline of much of the UK's traditional industrial base. The stream of 'day-release' apprentices and craft technicians that characterised much of FE's intake in the decades following the end of the Second World War has now almost totally dried up; nowadays both the nature of the curriculum and the make-up of the student body is far more diverse than under the 'golden years' of LEA control (Simmons 2008). Arguably the removal of FE from LEA control was necessary to

allow colleges to operate more flexibly and to innovate in a changing environment. However, incorporation was also closely associated with the neo-liberal social and economic philosophy that has held sway in the UK **more than thirty years**. This is underpinned by a number of notions including the belief that market forces are inherently superior to traditional forms of state bureaucracy (Simmons 2010, 366). The effects of the changing nature of FE – for staff, students and other parties - have been widely discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Ainley and Bailey 1997; Hyland and Merrill 2003; Smithers and Robinson 2000). Whilst there are different views about the desirability or otherwise of such changes, a key question now relates to the unresolved future of vocational education within the peculiarities and contradictions of the English context.

### **Progressive Vocationalism: a dead end?**

Some twenty years ago Avis (1991, 138) discussed the way in which 'Progressive education has come to be seen as a teaching technique...'. Hickox and Moore (1995) subsequently argued that differentiation between progressivism and traditionalism, together with the consequences of post-war educational expansion and credentialism, had provoked a legitimisation crisis for liberal-humanist education. Analysing 'New Right' critiques of education, Hickox and Moore (1995) identified a strategic alliance of forces of which vocationalist modernisers were but one (if powerful) strand. Noting the ironic resonance of vocationalism's anti-academicism, 'relevance', and focus on experiential learning with some forms liberal-humanist progressivism, and its consequent populist appeal they saw a potential for vocationalism to,

Conceivably replace the more contentious and less prestigious forms of liberal-humanist education at the lower levels, thus

stabilising the system, while preserving intact an elite academic pathway...the relationship of the new, ex-polytechnic university to the traditional sector in higher education is already suggestive of such a bifurcation. (p. 55)

This analysis is perhaps even more pertinent today than it was in 1995. Moore (1987) analysed a range of curricula associated with the (then) 'new vocationalism'. His study revealed a concentration on 'behavioural occupationalism' (p.227), the consequences of which, he argued were, firstly, a limiting of the possibility of the acquiring potentially critical knowledge; and, secondly, the presentation of production processes in a particular ideological form. The 'hidden curriculum' of the 'new vocationalism' in the 1980s was, Moore argued, the expression of possessive individualism in market economies.

The problem of 'parity of esteem' between the vocational and the academic in English education is deeply entrenched and, despite much rhetoric both from educationalists and policymakers, has never been effectively addressed. Perhaps this is because it is so deeply seated in institutional divisions and peculiarly English cultural attitudes. Indeed, successive governments have firmly resisted ongoing pressure to create a unified system of qualifications which attempt to bridge the academic-vocational divide. New Labour's rejection of **the** Tomlinson Report's (DfES 2004) recommendation that separate academic and vocational qualifications for young people should be abolished and replaced by a single, overarching 14-19 diploma encompassing both strands of learning is a notable recent example. Also see, for instance, NCE (1993) and *A British Baccalaureat* (Finegold, Keep, Miliband, Raffe, Spours, and Young 1990).

Young (1993, 213) acknowledged that the idea of post-Fordism was contestable whilst recognising a shift from systems of mass production towards ones based on *flexible specialisation* making new demands on employees. The implications of this for the curriculum were interpreted as the need for an emphasis

...on new and innovative kinds of connectiveness between knowledge areas and different forms of specialised study interwoven with a generic core of knowledge, skills and processes...

In advocating the term *connective specialisation* over that of flexible specialisation Young evoked a context where individuals would have the capacity to make links between their ‘...knowledge and skills in the curriculum and wider democratic and social goals...’ (p. 218). The supplanting of traditional forms of divisive specialisation by connective specialisation was seen as making possible (and necessary) the transition towards a curriculum which would encapsulate flexibility and breadth; strong links between specialist and core studies, and academic and vocational learning; progression facilitated by credit transfer; and a clear direction (Sedundary 1996). Avis (1993a; 1993b) has, however, argued for caution with regard to the emancipatory possibilities arising from any analysis based on notions of post-Fordism.

The English education system has grown out of a very particular context of economic and political circumstances which incorporates both rapid industrial expansion and economic crisis, both high imperialism and the demands of a multi-cultural society. The post-war period has seen, especially since the early 1960s, a technology focused ‘modernisation’ agenda at the centre of most government inspired visions of education. Educational institutions, and perhaps especially FE colleges, have

exhibited the features which Lyotard (1984) has seen as symptomatic of performativity. Meanwhile, the mass re-designation of polytechnics as universities in 1992 can be seen as emblematic of the stigmas afflicting the vocational. It is within this context that vocational education in FE in the new era of Coalition Government must be placed. The appearance of a new party political alignment serves to highlight that, in practice, little has been done to create the cultural shift which would enable a re-conceptualisation of the vocational curriculum.

Political and social terms readily associated with the late twentieth century include Thatcherism, communitarianism, postmodernity, post-Fordism, globalisation, and neo-liberalism. Specifically, in the sphere of education, it has been argued, a key but under-recognised concept has been the term *vocationalism* itself. Within vocationalism there has been a clear trajectory towards a model of a strongly defined strain of curriculum which is best characterised as Competence Based Education and Training (CBET). Basically, this mode of curriculum focuses primarily on what individuals can do rather than on what they know. It is instrumental to the particular needs, usually employment based, which are used to define individual competencies; in other words, it supposedly serves the economy in a direct and uncomplicated fashion. Research on vocational education and specifically to CBET grew considerably towards the close of the twentieth century. Bates (1995) saw much of this work as focusing primarily on issues of implementation rather than on academic enquiry of the kind which questioned fundamental issues. She suggested that a 'significant absence' in the debate had been a

...consideration of the broader purposes of post-16 and adult education, for example social and political education, or education for citizenship, in the context of escalating economic and social change. (Bates 1995 p. 9)



Notions of CBET do not sit easily with liberal, progressive, critical, or even traditional conservative conceptions of education. CBET does, however, both through its prevalence and its mechanisms, constitute a system which can be easily represented as one of regulation - of society and the person - and as a form of 'surveillance' demonstrating a parallel with conceptions of empowerment derived from human resource management, and the economic and political shift towards individualisation, self-'responsibilisation' and self-regulation. Avis (1995) suggested that in 'the learning society' the most dispensable of commodities would be knowledge itself through,

a model of technological change that is echoed in post-Fordism and indeed has an affinity with forms of post-modernism that challenge foundational knowledge. There is a move towards viewing knowledge as relativised and being situationally specific. Within such a context all one is left with is the ability to learn. It is this capacity that is accorded some sort of transcendental quality as a result of knowledge and skill losing their fixed nature (p. 63).

**Meanwhile, whilst the discourse of skill has become pervasive, the term skill itself has lost any definite sense of meaning (Warhurst, Grugalis and Keep 2004). The nature of much employment has altered significantly through a combination of tighter managerial control, increased job insecurity, and the application of new technologies in the workplace. Traditional craft skills have been systematically dismantled over the last thirty years, with established conceptions of skill emphasizing the unity of knowledge and action largely abandoned. Effectively skills have become replaced by competencies based upon discrete performance related tasks (Ainley, 1999: 92-93).**

Liberal education and progressive vocationalism both place emphasis on 'skills' rather than content, on student-centred learning rather than the teacher, on group based learning and co-operation rather than competitive individualism, on an integrated curriculum rather than traditional subjects, and on 'real world' relevance rather than abstraction. There has also been a rhetorical commitment within the new vocationalism to the notion of equality of opportunity. A further similarity is that radical educators, seeking to dissolve established hierarchies of labour, stressing the unity of mental and manual labour, something which new vocationalists also espoused in the light of modes of production dominated by information technologies. It is interesting to note that Marx shared with Adam Smith the conception of the mental component of labour as the prior planning of work activity (Winch 1998).

Sedunary (1996, 374), in a discussion of the new vocationalism in Australia, which shared much with the English variant, argued that the connections between progressive and vocational education at the conjuncture of modernity and postmodernity created organic common features which were a response to '...an era impelled by the primacy of intellectual practices and the growth of technologies of social extension'. In this context, both radical progressives and new vocationalists were seen to reject the subject-based curriculum as a form of 'grand narrative' (Lyotard 1984). Since the early 1990s there has been a political consensus regarding the need to raise the esteem and improve the quality of vocational education in the UK. This has resoundingly failed. The key statement of the 1979-1997 Conservative Government was set out in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991). Both major opposition parties at the time outlined their concern for this hitherto relatively neglected area of

educational policy and investment (Labour Party 1990 and 1991; Liberal Democrats 1990). Now, following a period in which New Labour (1997-2010) also proved unable to elevate the status of vocational education, the Coalition Government faces a similar challenge – **although with additional restraints deriving from aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2008, coupled with their desire to eliminate the UK’s budgetary deficit. Either way, this lack of progress is despite the UK’s longstanding membership of the European Union (EU) and its participation in various EU initiatives related to vocational education, the creation of a ‘knowledge-based’ Europe, and the promotion of labour mobility within the EU (OECD 2010).**

### **The Coalition, Vocationalism and the Role of Further Education**

The current UK Coalition Government brings together certain strands of educational thinking based upon neo-conservative and neo-liberal philosophy, although set against a particular backdrop – that of hostile economic conditions and the desire to greatly curtail public spending. This cocktail is perhaps best illustrated in the Coalition’s higher education policy with its emphasis on ‘priority subjects’ such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics; its enthusiastic embrace of the recommendations of the Browne Review (HM Treasury 2010), particularly the creation of a marketised and increasingly privatised university sector; and the swingeing cuts made to the higher education budget in the new Government’s 2010 ‘Comprehensive Spending Review’. The intention is that, from 2012, public funding for HE teaching will be dramatically reduced, and effectively abolished for arts, humanities and social science subjects. As well as creating a more ‘diverse’ marketplace of HE provision these developments are also likely to make HE more

unequal and less accessible for many (Allen 2010a). In contrast, there has, so far, been less focus on FE and at present the Coalition's proposals for vocational education and training are relatively undeveloped. It is nevertheless possible to identify broad themes within Government thinking in these areas. Broadly, these consist of prioritising 'practical learning', institutional reform, and an emphasis on financial economy.

Although the cuts in public expenditure planned for FE will be less severe than for HE (25 per cent rather than 40 per cent over four years) their level is nevertheless unprecedented and includes scrapping all public funding for those studying Level 3 qualifications over the age of twenty-four, and ending the entitlement for people over the age of twenty-five to take a first Level 2 qualification free of charge. Another part of the cuts package is the abolition of Educational Maintenance Allowances for young people in full-time education between 16-18 years of age. Currently, nearly 70 per cent of those in receipt of this means-tested benefit attend FE colleges (Waugh 2010, 14).

At the 2009 Association of Colleges (AoC) Conference the future Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, warned that

A dose of realism has to be our starting point. We have to do more for less. And that is not a party political point because whoever wins the next election will face the same empty coffers and the same fiscal crisis.

(Willetts 2009)

Whilst the potential impact of the planned cuts in expenditure should not be underestimated, in some ways Coalition policy also offers FE a glimmer of hope. At

the same AoC Conference Willetts promised increased freedom and autonomy for colleges when he stated

Our first principle is college autonomy. One of the things that always strikes me when I visit colleges is the long and proud history that so many of them have - for example, as local mechanics' institutes serving the needs of local employers. The Conservative in me is attracted by the idea of strong local institutions acting as glue in the local community. This is what incorporation was all about, as I know myself having served on the corporation of Havant College in my constituency for six years...So I confirm that we will set you free.

(Willetts 2009)

Willetts (2009) also argued that colleges needed to be more flexible and responsive to employer and individual needs and, advocating significant reductions in bureaucracy and systems of governance and inspection, explained that 'Our ultimate goal is one funding body, one audit regime and one improvement body' (Willetts 2009). However, he also stressed the need for increased competition for students and resources among FE providers. Mirroring the current penchant for private sector involvement in the delivery of public services, it will also be easier for private training companies to receive public funding. **Mr Willetts' notion of freedom is likely to result in increased levels of competition between colleges, as well as with other providers of education and training in ever more competitive markets.**

In his foreword to DBIS (2010a) John Hayes, the current Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, cautioned against '...an implicit divide between learning that is useful and learning that is useless.' and referred the task of 'rediscovering craft' (4). Building an 'internationally competitive skills base' (5) would support the Coalition's 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office 2010) vision. Choice for both individual learners and employers would be facilitated through the provision of

information about the quality of providers. There was recognition of the need for credible vocational qualifications and a strong commitment to work-based learning through apprenticeships. Lifelong Learning Accounts were seen as a key to encouraging engagement with the education and training system. A related consultation document (DBIS 2010b) set out the Coalition's intention to simplify funding in the context of '...average real cuts of around 25 per cent over four years from 2011-12 financial year' (2). The document related to post-19 learners but also had clear implications for younger people too. Placing 'trust in colleges and training organisations that, in a market driven system, will need the flexibilities in budget and management to meet demand...' (5) the system would give both colleges and training organisations '...the ability to award qualifications'. (5). Colleges able to attract private investment would generate matching public investment.

In another departure, Willetts has also proposed that 'prestigious' university degrees should be made available via FE colleges. Advocating collaboration between FE colleges and 'elite' universities, he envisaged a future role for FE in delivering HE at a reduced unit cost to new constituencies of students in local settings (Willetts 2010). Whilst it could be argued that one of the **effects** of such a policy may be to further diminish the chances of working class people actually attending prestigious universities, whatever the advantages or drawbacks of such arrangements, such proposals are far from new. FE colleges have a long tradition of providing higher education, often in collaboration with universities. Recent years have seen the growth of the vocationally focused and relatively low prestige foundation degrees, in partnership mainly with post-1992 universities; but until the creation of the polytechnics at the end of the 1960s and the mass expansion of student numbers

within the English university sector from the 1980s onwards, many students undertook London University external degrees at their local FE college (Ainley and Bailey 1997, 2).

The current Government's proposals for explicitly vocational learning in FE are less well formed but appear to be dominated by Conservative views centred on increasing the number of apprenticeships and making vocational education more 'practical' and relevant to the workplace. Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has commissioned Professor Alison Wolf of King's College, London to carry out a review of vocational education - although this will be an evaluation of its effectiveness and overall structure rather than a detailed examination of the content of vocational qualifications (Allen 2010b). The review will not, however, take account of employers' demands for skills - although Wolf herself has already argued that many lower level vocational qualifications offer virtually no labour market returns to those undertaking them (Wolf 2002).

Despite UK employers' constant complaints about poor skill levels they, in general, neither understand nor value vocational qualifications. It is often argued that globalisation has created increased opportunities for those with higher level qualifications, and it is true that the proportion of managerial and professional work has increased over the last two decades. There has been a continued decline of skilled manual and craft employment, as well as the replacement of much 'white collar' administrative work through the application of new forms of information technology. Meanwhile, there has been a significant growth in unskilled and casualised forms of labour at the lower end of the service sector (Allen and Ainley

2007). The Coalition's proposal to create another 50,000 apprenticeships in England overlooks the reality that few UK employers make significant skill demands of their workforce (Atkinson and Elliott 2007 p. 37). Without the stimulation of employer demand for skills, which runs against the prevailing climate of neo-liberal ideology and 'employer-led' demand, the reality is that opportunities for workplace apprenticeships are likely to remain limited. Mirroring the experience of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) of the 1980s, apprenticeships may end up taking place mainly in FE colleges and private training providers with young people spending most of their time in college simulations, rather than the workplace (Allen 2010a). **As such, the main effect of the current drive to increase apprenticeships may well be a twenty-first century version of what Finn (1987) famously described as *Training Without Jobs* (Ainley and Allen 2010, 24-26).**

Alongside the desire for a more differentiated curriculum, current Conservative thinking stresses the need for different sorts of learning to take place within different types of institution. This can be seen in the proposal to create up to 40 university technical colleges (UTCs) across England, with at least 12 in the first term of office. UTCs, serving 14-19 year olds will offer technical education alongside academic qualifications in English, Mathematics, Science and IT. Key technical areas have been identified as engineering; product design; sport and health sciences; construction and building support services; land and environmental services; and hair and beauty. There is intended to be a more practical hands-on approach and students will also participate in sport and learn about finance and business start-up. UTCs will be sponsored by either a university or FE college and will be established on a similar basis as the schools academies programme. Use of the already



debased term 'University' is clearly intended to lend credibility but risks confusion and simultaneously seeks to revitalise the title 'Technical College', a nomenclature from which FE fled from the 1960s onwards. John Hayes has a brief to work on the establishment of UTCs but the *éminence grise* in this 'new' thinking on vocational education is Baron Baker of Dorking who, as Kenneth Baker, was Conservative Secretary of State for Education from 1986 to 1989 and architect of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Together with Lord (Ron) Dearing (1930-2009), the former civil servant and author of a series of influential educational reports (Dearing 1993, 1996, 1997, 2001), Baker established the Baker Dearing Educational Trust to promote UTCs. He is also chairman of *Edge*, an 'independent' education foundation, dedicated to raising the stature of practical and vocational learning, which seeks to challenge 'snobbery' and argues that 'vocational and practical education should be valued just as highly as academic choices' (Edge 2010).

Despite aims such as those promoted by *Edge*, key Conservative thinkers within the Coalition seek to reassert 'traditional' academic values and to separate the academic from the vocational. Whilst, as discussed, New Labour rejected Tomlinson's (DfES 2004) proposal to formally break the academic-vocational divide through the creation of integrated diplomas, its period in power nevertheless resulted in some 'blurring' between vocational and academic learning. This occurred, for example, through the redefinition of General National Vocational Qualifications as 'applied' GCE A-Levels and GCSEs, and through promoting the combination of academic and vocational study at 16+ following the reforms of 'Curriculum 2000', albeit with limited impact. In contrast, Mr Gove in particular favours the introduction of more rigid divisions and increased exclusivity in academic education; for example, through allowing schools

to 'filter out' pupils identified as less academic at an early stage and transfer these young people to FE colleges. This, alongside granting schools greater powers to suspend and expel students, is likely to increase the flow of less able students into FE and to further cement vocational learning's subordinate status in relation to academic education (Allen 2010a).

Avis (forthcoming) provides an account of the relationship between Coalition and Labour education policies. The rhetoric of the Coalition and its dramatis personae ostensibly suggest a strong commitment to vocationalism and to FE. **However, vocational learning is still viewed as a firmly second class option in comparison to academic education. This is illustrated by Prime Minister Cameron's views on UTCs, which mix hyperbole with a discourse of deficit.**

**The next great poverty-busting structural change we need – the expansion of University Technical Schools – offering first-class technical skills to those turned off by purely academic study (Cameron 2010).**

The evolution of the Coalition's politics and its ideological affiliations are likely to lead to similar initiatives to those that flowed unabated throughout Conservative and Labour administrations from the 1970s onwards, except from now on there will be both fewer resources and intensified competition.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of flexible and highly automated production processes, fluid labour markets, a complex service sector, and the rapid pan-global transfer of capital continue to affect patterns of culture and consumption. This has important implications for the vocational curriculum around the world. The consequences of the new modes of production, modes of information (Holub 1992), and the consequent

new industries for the vocational curriculum have, however, not been articulated in a way which moves beyond the formulations of traditional and liberal-progressive visions of education to fully accommodate what by the end of the twentieth century was already a radically transformed cultural context (Raffo, O'Connor and Lovatt 1996).

The vocational curriculum in England has since the early 1980s embodied most of the characteristics associated with the progressive model. This has, in a sense, been part of the problem in relation to vocational programmes achieving parity of esteem with 'academic' courses such as GCE A-Levels. Epitomising traditional values, these qualifications remain widely respected and durable despite annual accusations of grade inflation. **However, it must also be noted that the recent curricula reform of A-levels, alongside the now intensively competitive nature of progression routes for students thereafter, mean that these qualifications are increasingly becoming 'cramming' courses whereby students are required to demonstrate largely literary competencies.** Nevertheless, both the **traditional** and the popular perception of A- Levels fit with received notions of what might constitute the preparatory stage of an education which could conceivably lead to the production of some form of 'intellectual'. The term intellectual is not one which can be used with conviction in relation to the aspirations of the vocational curricula at any time in the development of such education in England.

The processes of technologisation, globalisation and the production of new cultural forms have created new dimensions to the debates surrounding culture, ideology, hegemony and education. Relations between the vocational and the academic have

become more complex in potentially fruitful ways. The power of both work-based and informal learning could now be realised through information technologies, **indeed learning through cyber communities has powerful transformative potential (Avis and Fisher 2006; Fisher and Fisher 2007)**. Young (1998) pointed to the **parallel between Dewey's conception of a 'liberal vocationalism' and Gramsci's idea of work being an educational principle through which individuals would be able to '...understand the context of their work and the economic, social and cultural implications of their skills' (55)**. The always false dualism that has separated the vocational and the academic could and should now be abolished. However, the proposed 'hands on tools' approach of UTCs and the utilitarian vocationalism championed by Michael Gove and colleagues will surely exacerbate such divisions. The notion of parity of esteem is inherently flawed because, like the Liberal Conservatism which now advocates it, it elevates difference at the cost of recognising that there is a shared epistemological base. The greatest error, Gramsci warned, was seeking to distinguish between. '...the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities...have their place...' Gramsci argued that '...the worker...is not specifically characterised by his manual or instrumental work, but by performing this work in specific social relations' (Gramsci 1971, 8).

**It is, of course, unsurprising that the educational rhetoric of Liberal Conservatism in the UK today mirrors values and contradictions implicit in the logic of capital. Some of the policies arising are ostensibly progressive, but a long-term problem for the UK economy has not been that there has been some permeation of liberal values, but that its inherent conservatism is so deeply**

engrained. This latter point was made by Gamble (1981) thirty years ago. Despite the continued and powerful homogenizing processes of globalization, the historical and cultural peculiarities of English social class based educational dispositions, and the specific characteristics of the educational hierarchies that arise from them, will ensure the continued low status of vocational education in the UK for many years to come.

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