

Full Length Research Paper

Career development among young people in Britain today: Poverty of aspiration or poverty of opportunity?

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This paper compares two explanations of the persistent relationship in the UK between young people's social class backgrounds and their rates of participation in higher education: poverty of aspiration and rational action. It is argued that, rather than widening opportunities, successive reforms in education and training have created a series of blind alleys for the (mostly working class) young people who are not high achievers, and that these experiences are the most likely reason for the subsequent strengthening of the weak relationship that exists at age 11/12 between, on one hand, social class backgrounds, then, on the other, pupils' educational and vocational aims. The paper then proceeds to argue that at age 16 to 18 high achievers from working class homes are likely to face equally attractive opportunities to the kinds of higher education that they might otherwise enter.

Key words: Education, labour markets, occupational choice, poverty of aspiration, rational action, youth.

INTRODUCTION

Choice and opportunity

This has been a recurrent debate among UK and other researchers into young people's progress through education then into the labour market. Round one was fought in the 1960s and 70s between, on the one side, psychologists (mainly) who foregrounded the role of choice (and the development of choices) during young people's transitions from education into working life (Daws, 1977), then, on the other side, (mainly) sociologists who stressed the determining power of opportunity structures (Ashton and Field, 1976; Roberts, 1968). However, all agreed that the issues at stake were not either/or but rather of relative importance, and exactly when and how each set of influences operated. Everyone accepted that young people made choices. Indeed, some sociologists have recently stressed that in the 1950s and 60s young people made choices on more occasions than other writers have recalled when contrasting the 'golden

age' of smooth and rapid school-to-work transitions with the present (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005, 2007; Vickerstaffe, 2003). The sociologists' argument at that time was that choices were largely reflections of the destinations that young people were approaching or entering combined with the different kinds of cultural capital that they had acquired from their families (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and, in any case, once beyond education young people's scope for choice was limited by their educational qualifications and the opportunities available in their local labour markets.

To paraphrase Paul Willis (1977), young people who chose to quit school at the first opportunity in order to earn good money in non-skilled manual jobs, found, before long, that they had 'applauded their own damnation'. That said: it was the spread of youth unemployment in the 1970s that closed round one.

Postmodernisation and reflexive choice biographies

Subsequently, following the replacement of much youth

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unemployment with the expansion of some older and the creation of new routes through post-compulsory education and training, and a general prolongation of youth life stage transitions, all associated with the de-industrialisation of western labour markets, sociologists themselves revived the case for choice. It was argued that the weakening of older social structures which had herded then tracked socio-demographic groups of young people towards known occupational destinations from age 14, 11 or even earlier, had not only created new scope for choice, but required individuals to become reflexive and to construct their own choice biographies (Du Bois Reymond 1998; Du Bois et al., 2001; Wyn and White, 1997; Wyn and Woodman, 2006; Zinneker, 1990). The sociologists, Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) were regularly cited in support of the view that the advanced industrial societies had undergone or were experiencing a change of era. However, Beck's risk society was not one in which individuals escaped from the power of family backgrounds and educational attainments to govern their futures, but one in which biographies were individualised by economic, social and technological developments, requiring individuals to become active agents, and to accept personal responsibility for outcomes while the old predictors of life chances remained as powerful as ever (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Roberts, 1997, 2009a).

The clinching evidence seemed to be the stability of relative rates of inter-generational social mobility throughout the 20th century (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008). This signaled the end of round two.

Poverty of aspiration

By then, however, another version of the choice argument had been formulated in a social policy context where it was being claimed that the persistence of youth unemployment despite the new educational and training options that had been created since the 1970s, and the bleak labour market futures facing many 18 to 25 years olds, were due to 14 to 18 years old making the wrong choices. This argument was initially directed at the NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training). Youth unemployment (as an officially recognised and measured state in the UK) had been abolished in 1988 when most 16 and 17 years olds lost their right to register and claim unemployment benefit. Youth unemployment was soon being rediscovered, initially in a South Glamorgan study that attempted to assess the numbers of young people who were 'status zero' (Istance et al., 1994). Connexions, which replaced the Careers Service nationwide in 2001, was given the priority target of reducing the number of NEETs (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). The new service had been set up to fail for before long

researchers were showing that NEET was either a temporary status, affecting up to 30% of young people at some time or another, or that those concerned had multiple problems which made neither employment, education nor training appropriate short-term solutions (Coles et al., 2002; Raffe, 2004).

In 2008 Connexions was duly abolished (though the name is still used) and responsibility for careers education and guidance was returned to local authorities. By then policy-makers were more concerned that large numbers of apparently capable young people were quitting education at age 16, 17 or 18. The assumption was that rational and ambitious young people who were capable of doing so would choose to progress into, then through, higher education. It was known that many young people who appeared eminently capable (on the basis of their GCSE results at age 16) were failing to progress to A-levels then university (Bekhradnia and Bailey, 2008). This attrition was, and remains, related to young people's social class backgrounds. Participation rates in UK higher education remain strongly related to social class origins. In England around three-quarters of young people from the top social class (higher-level managers and professionals) progress into higher education compared with around one-in-five from the working classes. Nearly all young people from the top social class who gain at least 5 GCSEs grades A-C reach higher education compared with only around a half of equally qualified (at age 16) young people from working class homes (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008; Sutton Trust, 2008). One view is that these differential rates of participation can be explained largely, or at least partly, in terms of the poverty of aspiration that is transmitted in lower class families and neighbourhoods, which stunts the progress of their young people (Cabinet Office, 2008).

According to this view, many young people who fail to progress are choosing to act against their own long-term interests, and remedies are sought through a combination of better careers education (information, advice and guidance) throughout secondary schooling, and AimHigher initiatives which seek to widen participation by ensuring that young people in under-represented socio-demographic groups are aware of routes into universities, and how they themselves can progress along them.

The rational action explanation

This diagnosis and related policy mix has opened round three in the choice versus opportunity debate. There are problems with the diagnosis. One is that participation rates in higher education decline step-by-step as the socio-economic ladder is descended. As described earlier, these rates decline from around three-quarters in

the top management and professional group to around 20% in the working class (Department for Innovation Universities and Skills, 2008, 2009). The situation is not one of uniformly high participation rates within a mainstream, with an excluded group lagging far behind. Actually there is little difference in the participation rates in different working class strata. The most blatant exception to the average is the vast over-representation in higher education of young people from the upper middle class. A second problem for the poverty of aspiration thesis is that, at the time when they start secondary school, there is little variation by social class in pupils' educational and job ambitions (Atherton et al., 2009; Croll et al., 2009; Croll and Moses, 2005). There are social class differences in parents' ambitions for their children and views on what will count as success (Walkerline et al., 2001). Also, pupils from relatively deprived backgrounds attach less weight than others in their forward thinking to the jobs that they hope to enter one day (Atherton et al., 2009). Much has changed by the time that pupils are aged 14 to 16 (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; McCrone et al., 2005; Maychell et al., 1998; Payne, 2003), and the changes are reflected in pupils' behaviour, eventually creating huge disparities by social class backgrounds in rates of progression to higher education.

Why does this happen? Do family and neighbourhood cultures where ambitions are modest suddenly invade pupils' thinking while they are in secondary education? An alternative explanation is that aims are subject to circumscription and compromise (Gottfredson, 2002) as pupils make rational assessments of their opportunities, together with the possible benefits and the more easily estimated costs of heading towards different destinations (Boudon, 1973; Goldthorpe, 1996, 1998), and that poverty of opportunity is the principal reason for social class differences in rational assessments and eventual educational and labour market outcomes. We argue further that rather than widening life chances, the UK's lower secondary education (11 to 16), then Post-16 education and training progressively narrow opportunities, especially for young people from working class homes.

UK EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 11 TO 18

Every major change in educational provisions in the UK since 1902 has been announced with the aim, hope or intention of creating better opportunities for those who were previously poorly served. All the major UK political parties have agreed on the principle of equal opportunities, on the desirability of closing the social class gap in educational attainments, and thereby promoting social mobility. Moreover, the successive policy measures intended to achieve these aims have (eventually) achieved cross-party support. Until the 1960s all major reforms of education were preceded by prolonged discussion, and

agreement between the main political parties and other 'stakeholders' (mainly churches at that time). This approach lapsed in the 1960s when the Labour government accelerated with reorganisation of secondary schooling along comprehensive lines without seeking wider agreement. Since then education has been party political in the UK, but changes introduced by one party when in government have always been accepted by subsequent incoming governments. This applied to comprehensive secondary schools which Conservative governments retained, and it has applied to all the later policy initiatives discussed further.

The UK has a long history of reforming education with the stated aim of creating better opportunities for hitherto disadvantaged young people, but in practice, as we shall see, the effects of every change have either been neutral or have created new blind alleys.

Secondary education for all

The 1944 Education Act opened secondary education to all young people, usually in different kinds of secondary schools which were supposed to match the abilities, aptitudes and interests of different types of children, and to lead to different occupational destinations. The system was intended to be tripartite, but in most areas it was bipartite. Around a quarter of all children were allocated to grammar schools and most of the remainder to secondary moderns. The grammar schools offered the traditional long-established form of secondary education. The curriculum was geared to nationally recognised examinations and qualifications: the "school certificate at ordinary and higher levels" until 1951, then the general certificate of education (GCE) at ordinary and advanced levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These qualifications opened the route to higher education or led directly into non-manual employment, including jobs with training that could lead to professional and management grade occupations. Secondary modern schooling led to no qualifications, except a leaving report from the school, unless the schools felt able and wanted to enter some of their pupils for the grammar school examinations. Experience across continental Europe indicates that alternatives to academic tracks through secondary schooling prove acceptable and stable only when securely bolted-on as the privileged routes into employer-based training leading to skilled occupations, from which there are opportunities to advance even further, as from the *Realschule* and *Hauptschule* in Germany which, in the 1950s and 60s, typically led directly into apprentice training.

Britain's secondary moderns led to nowhere in particular. Allocation to one of these schools was experienced as 'failing' the 11-plus. The schools became known for what they were not (grammar schools) rather than the

opportunities to which they led. During the second half of the 20th century the maintenance of technical and vocational tracks through secondary education became increasingly difficult all over Europe due to the decline of employment in manufacturing to which these types of school had often led, combined with a tendency for better-educated parents to seek something even better for their children (Aberg, 2003; Evans et al., 2000; Kohler, 1999; Kuda, 1998; Solga, 2002). However, across most of continental Europe these routes proved more durable than Britain's secondary moderns which were being phased-out in favour of comprehensive (non-selective) secondary schools by the end of the 1950s (Taylor, 1963), and by 1979 roughly 80% of secondary age children in England, and 100% of those in state schools in Scotland and Wales, were attending comprehensives.

Comprehensive secondary schooling, UK style

Surprising though this may seem with hindsight, Britain's comprehensive schools were opened without developing a comprehensive curriculum, thus creating a peculiar, and peculiarly British, version of comprehensive secondary education. The schools have always been dominated by the old grammar school curriculum. Succeeding in the early comprehensive schools meant being prepared for and passing the grammar school examinations, initially GCE O-levels, which could lead to A-levels (or the Scottish equivalents) and higher education. From 1965 there was a parallel set of exams, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which was taken by pupils who were not considered reliable entrants for GCE O-levels. Just as pupils were in secondary modern schools because they were not considered good enough to be awarded grammar school places, within comprehensives pupils were divided into GCE groups and the rest. Allocation to a CSE stream meant that the pupils had failed to demonstrate GCE potential. Since 1988 the former 16-plus exams have been merged into the GCSE (general certificate of secondary education) in which virtually all entrants are awarded nominal pass grades, but in practice only grades A to C, the equivalents of the old GCE O-levels, are regarded as real passes. These are the grades that most schools require before pupils can progress to A-levels, and schools are ranked in government league tables according to the proportions of their pupils who obtain grades A to C. This means that at age 16 approximately a half of all pupils are awarded certificates which prove that they have failed to make the grade. This view of the value of GCSEs awarded at grades D and below is confirmed in the labour market: passes beneath grade C have zero effects on mean earnings (McIntosh, 2002).

At age 12 SAT (a national set of tests) scores are related to pupils' levels of occupational aspiration (Atherton et al., 2009). Primary school SATs (taken at ages 7 and

11 until 2009) have been infrequent and fairly gentle indicators of how well pupils are doing relative to their peers. Such indicators become more frequent and stronger as pupils progress through secondary school, leading to their placement in different sets at least from age 14. Performances in education are related to pupils' social class backgrounds. Ambitions could become class-based as family and neighbourhood cultures of high and low aspiration suddenly and spontaneously became active during secondary education. Alternatively, and in our view far more likely, the development of these class patterns could be the outcome of secondary schooling separating those who are succeeding from the rest. Burton (1960) described how junior colleges in the USA performed the latent role of cooling-out most students' over-heated aspirations. Britain may no longer begin the cooling-out process ahead of an 11-plus, but it appears to operate throughout secondary schooling.

Until the 1970s Britain's school-leavers did not need any qualifications in order to obtain employment. The shape of the occupational structure, with the proportion of non-manual jobs increasing, meant that even unqualified 15 year olds (the statutory school-leaving age until 1972) could obtain such employment if they could convince an employer that they were capable. Girls were recruited into typing pools (which typically required them to acquire keyboard skills in their own time and at their own expense). Boys who were recruited into the non-manual grades were more likely to be employed in administrative office roles which opened-up more attractive long-term career prospects (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Other unqualified beginning workers, mainly boys, were apprenticed in engineering and construction. Most girls who were apprenticed were trained in hairdressing. Other male and female 15 year old school-leavers were employed in occupations for which no prolonged, systematic training was considered necessary, but they had the compensation of moving rapidly towards full adult earnings and usually, at the time, celebrated their good fortune (Willis, 1977). However, large numbers, admittedly mainly males, were given systematic training combined with day release, often augmented by attendance at evening classes.

The prestige qualifications that these beginning workers could aim for were the national certificates and diplomas. An Ordinary National was considered equivalent to A-levels, and Higher Nationals were treated as comparable to university degrees and conferred professional status. Until the 1970s there was more upward mobility along this 'alternative route' than through grammar schools followed by higher education (Hordley and Lee, 1970).

New vocational routes

The collapse of Britain's youth labour markets began in

the 1970s (Ashton et al., 1989). At first youth unemployment was treated as a temporary problem, caused by Britain's temporary economic difficulties. The main alleviating measure of the 1970s, the youth opportunities programme (YOP) which began in 1978, was scheduled to run for no longer than five years by when, it was believed (in 1978), labour market conditions would have returned to normal and the programme would be unnecessary. Before they could enter this programme young people had to serve a qualifying period of six weeks on the unemployment register, and they had to remain available for proper jobs, if required, throughout their six months of work experience (the standard provision on YOP). By 1983, when it lapsed, this special measure was being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of youth unemployment. By then there was a different official diagnosis: the economy was being restructured and 16 and 17 year olds' former jobs were never going to return. Since then youth unemployment has been partly replaced by a series of training schemes and vocational education programmes, and partly transferred into the 18 to 25 age group. Although the crisis in Britain's youth labour markets was clearly due to a jobs deficit, the remedy was said to lie in improving young people's skills and qualifications, thereby keeping job-seekers abreast of employers' requirements.

From young people's perspectives, all the new training and vocational education programmes have shared the same basic design fault as the secondary modern school: they have never been securely bolted-on to the kinds of jobs that would motivate students and trainees. There were never sufficient employers who were able and willing to offer training that led into employment. So firms had to be cajoled to train excess numbers, and extra places had to be created on community projects, in workshops, and in further education colleges, where there was no prospect of long-term employment. Training schemes and vocational courses shared another handicap. They were entered mainly by young people who had previously 'failed' at secondary school. Those who had succeeded usually stayed in full-time education and aimed for A-levels. Employers have consistently preferred recruits with good academic qualifications. The additional qualifications with which most young people have left training schemes and new vocational courses have carried zero weight in the eyes of employers (McIntosh, 2002). Hence young people who have been able to do so have tended to remain on the academic track, progressing through A-levels and towards higher education. Modern apprenticeships (now called just apprenticeships) have been the exception to the litany of failed measures. This government programme which commenced in 1994 has been exceptional in that, up to now, there has been no attempt to provide a place for every unemployed young person. The number of places has been governed by the number of apprentices that

employers have felt they need in order to meet their skill requirements.

Ever since the start of this programme, most apprentices have been given employee status and salaries throughout their periods of training, and completion of the training has boosted their earnings (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills/Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; McIntosh, 2007). The 'price' has been an insufficient supply of apprenticeships to accommodate all would-be apprentices. Decent academic qualifications have normally been an entry requirement. An outcome of the additional stages that have been added to young people's routes towards working life is that many now experience a series of failures, first in secondary school where they are judged not up to standard (at least 5 A-Cs in GCSE), then simply by participating in training schemes and courses which signifies that no employer will give them a real job, and they are considered incapable of gaining heavyweight academic qualifications. Progress along the new routes has often been interspersed with periods in temporary and part-time jobs. By the time that they are in their 20s, any earlier lofty vocational goals are likely to have been thoroughly cooled, scaled down or comprised, maybe into a willingness to accept 'anything better than the dole'. Social class origins are good predictors of whether the high aspirations with which young people may commence secondary education will survive as they progress along the academic route, or whether the young people will adjust their aims as they encounter a series of rejections and failures.

All modern education systems eventually rank young people into a hierarchy, or place them in different metaphorical queues leading to different kinds of employment, but Britain's system is unusual in having so many, successive blind alleys.

The knowledge economy

True enough, in all countries all routes through education and training end in the labour market where there may be insufficient jobs in total, or not enough good jobs. However, optimists claim that we are in the age of the knowledge economy in which an unlimited number of high-level jobs will be created provided the workforce is suitably qualified (Cabinet Office, 2009; Leadbetter, 1999; Reich, 1991). Meanwhile, it is claimed, technology is eliminating low-level jobs. Unfortunately, this totally misreads the real trends. In Britain there has certainly been strong growth in 'lovely jobs' in management and the professions, but also in 'lousy jobs' in retail, and in business and consumer services – security guards, cleaners, call centres, care homes, supermarkets, hotels, restaurants, gardening and nannying (Goos and Manning, 2003). Employment has declined most sharply

in the intermediate grades where skilled manual jobs have been lost in manufacturing, and office technology has reduced demand for lower-level office staff. Britain may not be facing the 'economic horror' of an incurable job deficit (Forrester, 1999), but only at the cost of creating swathes of low-paid and otherwise menial work (Bowring, 1999). All countries are currently finding it impossible to create good jobs for all. Fast-developing countries such as Brazil, China and India cannot absorb all their populations into their modern economic sectors. Even strong economic growth in ex-communist countries has been unable to replace all the full-time, permanent jobs that were destroyed along with the old system (Roberts, 2009b).

Employment in the west has been threatened by new information and communication technologies which have left leisure and other consumer services as the sole reliable source of new jobs. Meanwhile, the globalisation of markets has heightened competition from lower wage countries for the production of all goods and services where the work can be exported. Otherwise workers from poor countries move to where wages are higher (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). How countries' workforces have been affected depends partly on how strongly their labour markets are regulated by law or collective agreements between employers and trade unions. In some countries the gap has widened between conditions of employment in regulated and unregulated sectors, creating a workforce division between insiders and outsiders – the classic dual labour market. Where all employment is regulated there are risks of jobs being exported wholesale and rising unemployment at home. Britain has Western Europe's least regulated labour market which results in insecurity and downward pressure on terms and conditions of work spreading throughout the entire workforce, alongside a relatively buoyant demand for very cheap, casual labour (Bernadi and Garrido, 2008; Buchholz et al., 2009). This is the future labour market segment for which Britain's less successful 11 to 18 year olds are simultaneously being prepared and trying to avoid.

THE UNIVERSITY ROUTE

Narrowing participation

Contrary to the slogan, the trend in the UK is not towards 'widening participation' in higher education. The undergraduate student population is now more solidly middle class in origin than in the mid-20th century. The proportion of students who are from 'non-traditional' families (no parent with higher education) has declined, not risen. These trends are due to changes in the shape of the class structure and the gradual expansion of university enrolments from less than 3% of 18 to 20 year

olds in 1945 to around 35% today. The proportion of the workforce in non-manual jobs rose steadily throughout the 20th century from around 30% at the outset to around three-fifths a hundred years later. As far as we can tell, there has been no change in the relative chances of young people from different social class backgrounds attending university. A constant differential in social class participation rates combined with a larger middle class as a proportion of the workforce adds up to a trend towards a more overwhelmingly middle class student population. Working class students are a minority at almost all English universities. As the proportion of parents with degrees rises, then, all other things remaining equal, so does the proportion of students with university-educated parents. Participation in higher education has become more common for young people from all social class backgrounds. This is a straight-forward outcome of the expansion of the university system.

In 2006 to 2007 there were 1,082,000 full-time undergraduate students at UK universities compared with just 553,000 in 1990 to 1991. More young people have been progressing along the academic route via A-levels (or equivalent) to university. The reasons are a combination of push and pull: more higher-level jobs to aim for, more parents who are keen for their children to attend university, and the bleak labour markets awaiting earlier entrants. So more young people from working class homes are now entering higher education than ever before, but the social class differential in participation rates has not narrowed, and the overall student population has become even more overwhelmingly middle class in origin.

The stratification of higher education

British higher education has always been stratified. Oxford and Cambridge, the country's oldest universities, have always been pre-eminent. From the 1960s until the early-1990s there were Oxford and Cambridge and then other universities, but also Polytechnics, Colleges of Higher Education, and other students were engaged in higher education in further education colleges. Since 1991 the system has become more unitary. By 2006 to 2007 the UK had 124 universities, most former Polytechnics and Colleges of Higher Education having been upgraded, but there were still another 45 higher education institutions. The universities themselves, and other commentators, construct various league tables – by the qualifications of entrants, research income and ratings, the jobs obtained by graduates etc – but the same universities are always at or near the top, in the middle and below. The universities also differ in the social class backgrounds of their undergraduate students. All the 'top 20' Russell Group universities draw over 80% of their students from the middle classes. In particular

universities, most notably Oxford and Cambridge, there are unusually high proportions of students who attended private secondary schools. A limited number of additional universities, mainly in Southern England, attract privately-educated undergraduates who do not achieve the grades required by, or who prefer not to go to Oxbridge.

Bristol University appears to be their next choice. Those with lesser qualification also cluster – at Plymouth and Bath Spa among other universities (Shepherd, 2009). In the university system, like tends to stick with like! This applies to the privately-educated and also to Britain's ethnic minorities who are now all over-represented in higher education, but are clustered in a limited number of (lower ranked) universities (Owen et al., 2000; Pathak, 2000).

Degrees of difference

All recent UK governments have claimed that a main, if not the main or even the only purpose of higher education is to prepare young people for high-skilled, high value-added, high-paid jobs. In practice, however, graduates' labour market prospects depend on which universities they attend as well as on the subjects that they study and their own academic records. There is not a perfect match, but there is a clear association with other university rankings. Nowadays researchers recognise four bands of graduate jobs (Purcell and Elias, 2004). Overall, a university education still looks like an excellent investment, boosting lifetime earnings by around 25% (Bonney, 1996; McIntosh, 2002; O'Leary and Sloane, 2005; PricewaterhouseCooper, 2007). However, the largest boost to earnings is enjoyed by graduates from the 'top quartile' universities (Hussain et al., 2008). In 2006 the typical UK graduate of three years previously earned an annual salary of around £22,000, less than average male earnings at that time (National Centre for Social Research, 2007). Twelve months later the average salary of graduates from three years before had risen to £24,500 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2009). However, in both of these surveys the averages were skewed upwards by a minority of very high earners.

Graduates and their employers both complain about each other. Employers complain that too many graduates are deficient in communication and team-working skills, and that too many lack the expected standards of literacy and numeracy (Archer and Davison, 2009). Around a third of graduate employees complain that their managers stifle initiative, that their opinions are under-valued, and that their employers have not delivered on their promises (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2009). University education no longer guarantees 'glittering prizes', and working class graduates are unlikely to be among the minority of subsequent high-achievers. Furlong

and Cartmel (2005) followed-up a sample of students in Scotland who, untypically given their disadvantaged backgrounds, progressed through higher education. They were more likely than other students to attend local, lower ranked universities and to have remained home-based. They worked longer hours (for pay) than other undergraduates, yet incurred heavier debts, and obtained inferior jobs following graduation. Poverty of aspiration and debt aversion are possible explanations of decently-qualified working class 16 to 18 year olds failing to progress into university. However, rational action provides an alternative explanation. Well-qualified 16 to 18 year olds have alternatives, and these include apprenticeships.

There may be fewer than in the past, but there are still decently-paid skilled jobs for non-graduates – in construction, car production, oil refineries, transport, TV and computer repairs etc. There are still 'traditional' vocational qualifications and an 'alternative route' to the upper levels of the occupational structure. Working class young people and their families are not necessarily irrational if they feel better able to use their own social and cultural capital to negotiate the alternative route. There are risks in investing in higher education for entrants who lack the qualifications that open access to the top universities, and who are not part of social networks that will assist their ascent into the top graduate jobs.

Conclusions

Young people with the qualifications that will admit them to top universities have to decide which university and which course. Other young people have to choose between a lesser-ranked university, possibly an apprenticeship, or a job with training and prospects out with the government programme. Careers information and advice can assist these young people. The real problem group for career services is those whose choices are between blind alleys. The crux of the NEET problem has never been the fact "that", so much as "what", the young people have been refusing. As noted earlier, the UK economy generates a great deal of poor work, but this may be a lesser problem than the alternatives. Regulating it out of existence might simply replace poor work with unemployment. Squeezing the number of poor jobs could deepen the workforce division between insiders and outsiders. The UK has a high employment rate by European standards which it will wish to retain and improve upon, and poor work need not be a career-long sentence. Pendulum migrants will accept poor work. So may individuals who have retired, or more likely who have been retired, from their main career occupations. The jobs may be welcomed by young people who regard themselves as in life-stage transition, continuing their education, or seeking stop-gaps. However, for poor work to be absorbed in these ways beginning workers must be

aiming, before long, for something better, and employers must regard the young people as trainable and potentially skilled workers.

None of this applies when 20 year olds have been down a series of blind alleys. It is these blind alleys, not a home- and neighbourhood-based culture of low aspiration that depresses young people's horizons. In 2004 a UK government working party issued a report, the Tomlinson Report, which recommended replacing all existing 14 to 19 qualifications with a new diploma which all young people would work towards up to age 18/19 (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). There would be academic and vocational routes to the diploma, which would be available at three levels, and anyone who had not reached level 3 at age 18 would, in principle, be able to continue working towards it. If implemented, this proposal would have eliminated a swathe of blind alleys. However, the government's initial response was that the existing academic qualifications (GCSEs and A-levels and the Scottish equivalents) would continue to be available, and the diploma would be introduced for vocational subjects only. Thus the new diploma, like the pre-career vocational qualifications that it replaced, would instantly become residual, taken only by young people who were considered too weak to attempt the academic route. In other words, the diploma would be at the end of another blind alley.

Later, in 2007, the government decided that the diploma would be introduced in vocational and academic subjects, and would initially operate alongside existing qualifications, leaving 'the market' to decide which, if any, qualifications were dropped. In Britain the educational 'market' is usually structured at and then from the top. If the leading independent schools stick with academic qualifications, they will be followed by the remaining grammar schools (approximately 160 of them across England), then the 'good' comprehensives. If GCSEs and A-levels were abolished, the top schools could turn to the International Baccalaureate or some new qualification that could be introduced by universities that regarded the diploma as an unsatisfactory indicator of suitability. It has often been said that the education and vocational preparation of Britain's academically capable young people are not a problem – eventually they get good jobs. Hence successive reforms have been aimed exclusively at other young people's education and training. The privileged route from Britain's top independent schools into the top universities then into the best jobs that the country can offer has remained intact since the closing decades of the 19th century. The price of this, and of other schools, parents and their children who are able to do so 'following the leaders', has been not just the preservation but the repeated re-invention and multiplication of blind alleys for other young people.

This, not a pre-ingrained poverty of aspiration, is the crux of Britain's persistent youth education and labour

market problems.

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