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Does the vocational curriculum have a future?

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Abstract

In this paper, which takes the form of a dialogue, we discuss the possible directions that vocational education might take in the contemporary social, economic and technological context of the early 21st century. Taking account of the unresolved debates around vocational education internationally and future global economic demands for expertise we discuss tensions and dichotomies that continue to shape the character of vocational education by questioning definitions of the 'vocational' historically and in current policy. These include: the relation between 'vocational' and 'academic' pathways and the possibility of their integration, the meaning of technical education, the purpose of vocational qualifications, the role of trade unions and employers, and whether there should be a 'skills route' for 'low attainers'. The principal focus is on the English context, although the discussion draws on comparative examples where relevant, as well as broader factors likely to be significant in any country.

Keywords: vocational; curriculum; knowledge; VET policy; qualifications

Introduction and background to the paper

This paper takes the form of a dialogue between Professor Michael Young (Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education) and Dr Jim Hordern (Department of Education, University of Bath), on the topic of the vocational curriculum and related policy issues. In this dialogue the authors are concerned primarily with England, but draw where relevant on comparisons with other national systems. The paper begins with brief autobiographies of the two authors as they make sense of the similarities and differences in their approaches.

Michael Young graduated in Natural sciences at Cambridge University and after a year as a management trainee with Shell Chemical Company, he taught chemistry for 6 years in London secondary schools. During his time as a school teacher Michael studied part time for a University of London External BSc in Sociology at Regent Street Polytechnic. After one year completing a full time Masters Degree in Sociology at the University of Essex he was appointed in 1967 as Lecturer in Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London where he has remained ever since.

His initial knowledge of the vocational curriculum was acquired largely through his experience as Chair of Governors of Kingsway Princeton College of Further Education where he was fortunate in learning much from the Principal of the College at the time, Fred Flower CBE. In 1986 he was invited to lead the Post 16 Education Centre at the Institute of Education. The Centre was initially funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) through its Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI).

In collaboration with his colleague, Ken (now Professor) Spours, he established three priorities for the Centre in its research, its publications and its programmes

of professional development. One was to explore how the universities might play a greater role in supporting the teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges involved in programmes of technical and vocational education. The second was to develop the Institute's own professional development role in the field. This culminated in the launch in 1989 of the first Masters Degree in Vocational Education and Training at an English University. The third priority was to engage in critical research and debate with those directly involved in design and implementation of the reforms of technical and vocational education in England that began in the 1980's.

The over-riding vision that shaped the Centre's approach was expressed in his and Ken Spours's contribution to the influential IPPR Report **A British Baccalaureate; Ending the division between education and training** (Finegold et al 1991). This vision has continued to shape Michael's view of the vocational curriculum ever since.

In the next decade the Centre's research combined a critical focus on the new competence-based vocational qualifications with developing a vision of a more integrated model. [The authors](#) followed the recommendations of the IPPR Report in developing an approach to bringing academic and vocational routes together on the basis of the idea of 'connective specialisation'¹.

Following the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Centre's role expanded through our participation in a number of cross-European projects, and from 1990, Michael was involved in the development of an education and training system for the future post apartheid South Africa². From the late 1990's he participated

¹ See Michael Young and Ken Spours's contributions to David Guile, Michael Reiss and David Lambert's collection (Guile.D, Reiss.M and Lambert.D 2018)

² Much of his research was in collaboration with South African colleagues and focused on vocational education, in particular with Stephanie Allais (Young and Allais 2013) and Jeanne Gamble (Young and Gamble 2006). [Both Stephanie Allais \(Allais 2020\) and Jeanne Gamble](#)

in a number of projects concerned with vocational qualifications in Pakistan, Ethiopia, Finland and India, and was Research Consultant for the City and Guilds of London Institute, and on a multi-country project on National Qualifications Frameworks for the International Labour Organisation. From 1999, the Post 16 Education Centre was restructured as the Post-14 Centre for Education and Work and Michael [stepped down](#) as Head of Centre.

Jim Hordern has taught in further and higher education for the last 12 years, previous to which he worked for the Learning and Skills Council and for various local authorities in England and Wales. His doctoral thesis studied the implementation of workforce development partnerships between employers, educational institutions and sector skills councils, and the role of the state in the process. Since then he has pursued interests in vocational curricula, particularly in higher and degree apprenticeships, and in the conceptualisation of knowledge and expertise in occupations. He is a member of the Ofsted Research Reference Group for Further Education and Skills, and has an academic background in sociology, public management, politics and educational studies.

The discussion in the paper is set around a series of questions developed collaboratively by the authors in relation to the context and future of the vocational curriculum. The primary focus is on England, but it is our view that the issues have relevance to international debates about the future direction of VET and its curriculum. First, Michael provides [an](#) initial response to each question followed by a comment by Jim on Michael's response and this is then followed in some cases by some further clarification from Michael. We end the paper [with some brief concluding remarks](#).

[\(Gamble 2020\)](#) have continued to undertake important and internationally recognised research on aspects of the vocational curriculum.

What societal and historical developments have shaped the status of vocational education in England and how can we understand the context of the vocational curriculum?

Michael:

Vocational education has had an unfortunate history, especially in England, that was more the responsibility of Governments and employers than the practitioners themselves. Despite a highly regarded tradition of apprenticeship in a number of occupations from the Middle Ages that gave England a leading industrial role in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, later developments were premised on a split between the idea of vocation and vocational education (Deissinger 2004). The idea of vocation which began as a calling (initially to the priesthood) became a rationale for the expansion of the ‘liberal professions’ as a section of the growing and increasingly influential middle class. In contrast vocational education, originally understood as a work based route to a range of occupations came to be seen, with the decline of craft apprenticeships, as a low status alternative to the elitist and highly valued academic route [to the professions](#) for the minority (Hyland 1999; Fuller and Unwin 2011).

The primary cause of the low esteem and poor quality of vocational education (while not excluding notable exceptions in engineering, accountancy and health) has been the influence of social class inequalities and their associated cultural hierarchies. The low status of vocational routes has continued to acquire support from government policy, despite official denials, by two tendencies. One is the persistent preference by the majority of employers for appointing those with academic rather than vocational qualifications, even when the latter might have appeared to be more relevant (Keep and James 2010). The second is the recent

belief by owners of private companies that profits are made through the buying, restructuring and re-marketing of failed companies rather than through a policy led by investing in human resources. These tendencies have been complemented by an approach by governments (of both political parties) that has focused on qualifications as the primary instrument of reform (Payne and Keep 2011). Not surprisingly, the meaning of vocation and vocational education that linked the ‘divine calling to the priesthood’ to a broader definition of vocational education as a preparation for worthwhile work, got lost. Professional education, for those seeking to become lawyers and doctors, changed from being a high status form of work based learning with its origins in the craft guilds to become university-based and increasingly separate from craft and technical pathways (Young and Muller 2014). This was partly a consequence of developments in physics and chemistry which became the basis for transforming engineering and medicine as occupations and, unlike craft occupations, necessitated substantial periods of full time university-based study. The result was a split between professional and vocational education as traditional craft occupations such as blacksmiths and carpenters were assumed not to need the prior study that was located in colleges.

There were other significant weaknesses of the English system of vocational education. One was the reluctance of governments to get involved, let alone provide funding, at least until after [World War 2](#). This led to the proliferation of vocational qualifications offered by competing awarding bodies with limited opportunities for progression between the qualifications that they offered.

Another weakness, despite the success of the early City and Guilds initiative in the 1880’s which led to day release and part time courses in mathematics and the physical sciences for employees [in](#) the new industries, the belief remained among governments, employers and even trade unions that the low esteem, low quality, and failure of take up of vocational qualifications by employers was a

‘supply’ and not a ‘demand’ problem (Payne and Keep 2011). This has remained a deep problem of perception by politicians and policy makers that treats vocational education as another form of schooling, and all too often a form of schooling for those who had previously failed in the pre-16 phase. The error is to fail to recognise that while government has a national responsibility for guaranteeing and improving the standards and the broad direction of policy, the vocational curriculum must be developed in response to the distinctive demands of employers in different sectors. A low level of demand for employees with higher levels of vocational skills and knowledge means that vocational qualifications become treated more as a screening device than as the human resource component of a company’s investment strategy. This will perpetuate what over thirty years ago Finegold and Soskice (1988) referred to as a ‘low skills equilibrium’.

Since the 1981 New Training Initiative, the vocational curriculum has increasingly been interpreted by Governments in outcomes (or competence) terms and become almost indistinguishable from a form of assessment (Young and Allais 2013; Allais 2014). As a consequence, vocational qualifications have increasingly taken on an accountability role, and a vocational curriculum barely exists. This is despite a succession of reports recommending a greater knowledge-based element in the vocational curriculum that would complement a skill based element expressed in terms of performance outcomes (Wolf 2011). Until the educational element of vocational education is given priority through a more explicit vocational curriculum and until employers see that their future profitability involves investing in human resources, vocational education will have as little future as it has had in the past.

A shift from the current emphasis by both employers and government policy makers on vocational qualifications as measures of outcomes and towards a vocational curriculum **which focuses** on inputs is a necessary first step in what

might be called the ‘de-schooling’ of vocational education. Instead of a national policy decided by needs perceived by government and a curriculum stipulated nationally on the model of the school system, an improved system of vocational education and its curriculum must be led by the distinctive demands of occupations in each sector, albeit within broad national guidelines. However, a vocational curriculum on its own can do little until employers come to see work in their sector as a value in itself, regardless of the level of qualifications of the majority of employees. In other words, work itself, and not just professional work, needs to be treated as a vocation - or even a calling, to go back to an earlier era, rather than as a job and as a mechanism of filtering, stratification and selecting ‘the best’. Unless there are indications of such a shift, provision of vocational education will remain for many a provision for those who find themselves failing the academic route for whatever reason.

We are a society that is changing but it has to change to survive as a democracy, in ways hardly recognised today. That inevitably means that governments and their policies in shaping the division of labour and the vocational curriculum will have to change. One sign arising from the widespread admiration for the role of the NHS in response to the recent [Covid 19](#) pandemic has been the celebration of **all** NHS staff, not just doctors and nurses, and their work. Whether this becomes the basis of a more universal appreciation of all the work our society depends on remains to be seen.

Jim:

You raise a number of important points, not least about the role of employers and the limited educational character of the vocational curriculum in England. It could also be argued that there are substantive difficulties with encouraging employers to play a leading role in determining the curriculum. First of all, there is the issue of a lack of interest in the specifics of vocational education amongst many employers: how can that be changed? Secondly, there is the

issue of large employers dominating discussions about the curriculum. How can we ensure that occupationally-orientated curricula are genuinely representative of the views of all relevant employers including small and medium-sized enterprises (Bishop 2012; Bishop and Hordern 2017)? Thirdly there is the issue of how the ‘future’ is conceptualised when we consider vocational curriculum design. If what young people access in terms of education in their teenage years and early adulthood is supposed to prepare them for life, then what use is it preparing them for occupations which may cease to exist in the not too distant future? It could be argued that it makes sense to maximise the more ‘general’ components of the curriculum on the grounds that we are unable to accurately predict the future of work or innovation. Such a thesis might suggest rather less employer involvement than you seem to indicate.

The recent move in England towards apprenticeship standards as opposed to the previous frameworks may present a further iteration of the problematic issues you raise about the vocational curriculum, despite greater attention to an occupational basis for the curriculum and efforts to involve employers. These standards aim to relate apprenticeships more specifically to distinct occupations, by describing ‘*what someone who is competent in the occupation normally does*’ including ‘*duties*’ and ‘*knowledge, skills, behaviours (KSBs) required to carry out these duties competently*’ (IATE 2019). It could be argued that the standards maintain the essence of an outcomes-based approach to the curriculum as in many cases they are comprised of lists of discrete knowledge, skills and behaviours without a theory of how these integrate to enable progress towards higher levels of expertise (Hordern 2020). However, one element of the reform has been the introduction of an independent synoptic ‘end-point assessment’. This offers the potential to move away from a narrow assessment approach based on observable task-based competence and to conceive of vocational expertise more holistically, although some apprentices have raised

concerns about the relevance of [End Point Assessment](#) (EPA) to their work (IAC 2017). The emphasis on employer leadership in the development of the standards could also be interpreted as a concerted effort by the state to [stymie the influence of educational organisations in the development of vocational programmes](#).

**What is the relation between the ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ pathways?
Could these have parity of esteem?**

Michael:

Vocational /academic divisions, for such are dominant relations within and between occupational sectors and pathways, are no longer fit for the purpose of vocational education in the future. Even their best elements are left overs of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century that have less and less relevance in today’s society. If we define ‘vocational’ to mean ‘preparation for valued work that relies on both skills and knowledge’, some of the strongest academic programmes are the most vocational, and many of the vocational programmes have become little more than an expression [often attributed to Frederik Ebert](#) (General Secretary of the German Social Democratic Party before World War One), who suggested that [whereas vocational courses are best understood as the ‘general education’ of the working classes, it is general education that is ‘vocational’ for the middle classes](#).

The major difference between then and now is that the middle class is far larger and the working class far smaller than it was in Ebert’s time.

Parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways is an unrealistic goal because esteem in western capitalist societies is not primarily based on education but on the destinations that particular educational pathways lead to. The two pathways lead to different types of work which are valued differently in society and offer students or apprentices very different likely futures. It is

possible that by improving the quality of the general education that is included in vocational pathways that the present lack of parity could be reduced and opportunities for transfer between pathways made easier. Many initiatives supported by the European Commission have been devoted to such aims. However, movement across pathways is a complex matter – for example, syllabuses and modes of assessment in different pathways are likely to be very differently organised.

It is possible to envisage a society in which there was no difference of status between different occupations despite the pathways to them being different. However, such a society is more like a utopia than a practical or even long term reality. In his early work with Engels, Karl Marx envisaged a future society as a form of ‘primitive communism’ in which no one:

“had an exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes.... (such a) society (would) make it possible...for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon and rear cattle in the evening and to criticise after dinner without ever becoming a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd or a critic (Marx and Engels 1845/1976, p.47)

However, Marx did not return to such a possibility in his later work.

Jim:

It could also be argued that the terms ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ are themselves deeply problematic and often misleading as your comments earlier in the discussion indicate. Wouldn’t it be beneficial to use a notion that bridges or even dissolves the divide? One such notion might be ‘practice’, at least in the sense used by philosophers such as Macintyre (2007), Hager (2011), or Addis and Winch (2019)? It could be argued that all education is about preparation for

and engagement in normative practices, whether those are nominally ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’. And this entails developing an appreciation for the ‘internal goods’ of the practice and seeking to contribute to these goods according to the ‘standards of excellence’ or criteria by which performance of the practice is evaluated (Macintyre 2007; Addis and Winch 2019). Education can be viewed as an engagement with various forms of know-that, know-how and acquaintance knowledge (Winch 2010), and this could be said for physics as much as for carpentry or hairdressing. The differences are in the arrangement of the knowledge within the different academic or vocationally orientated practices, and in the dynamics of participation. Using such a ‘bridging notion’ to expose similarities and differences might help with resolving the perennial problems of parity of esteem.

Michael:

The problem with using the concept of ‘practice’ in the philosophers’ sense is that in trying to find a universal category that bridges the academic/vocational or theory/practice divide, it loses the emergent features of knowledge (or theory) that make physics different from carpentry. All that is emergent in carpentry is implicit for skilled craftsmen and craftswomen and this is why practice does not progress. For example, $E=MC^2$ had to be discovered by the practice of Einstein building on previous emergent physics. However, through the physics community it became emergent and independent of any practice of physicists and could be used in their practice to generate new emergent knowledge; there is no equivalent for carpenters. **This implies that the theory/practice divide cannot be overcome.** If you don't have the divide you don't have knowledge.

What is the relation between the ‘vocational’ and ‘technical’? Why have we seen a growing interest in ‘technical education’ amongst policy makers?

Michael:

Technical education in most countries is largely a form of vocational education which is based on mathematics and/or the natural sciences (STEM subjects) and aims to prepare students for occupations in the engineering and manufacturing sectors (and increasingly, specialist occupations generally). Policy makers want to expand technical programmes for several reasons:

- Industrial policies are assumed to be geared to expanding sectors that will demand more technically qualified applicants.
- Government reports have identified a shortage of technical qualifications among those applying for jobs in every sector
- Governments tend to assume more people with technical qualifications will gain employment even in non-technical occupations because employers assume that these qualifications are more demanding and therefore those with them will be better qualified.

What the policy priority given to technical education often fails to take account of is firstly the development and expansion of the new cultural industries which demand people with a combination of technical and arts related qualifications. A second issue is that in some of the new industries, such as synthetic chemistry and bio-technology, the demand is for more people with technical qualifications but only those at graduate and postgraduate levels. Some of this demand could be met by apprenticeships when combined with qualifications at degree level (Bell 2017; ABPI 2019).

Jim:

Your point about the nuanced sectoral nature of demand for technical knowledge is important, and sometimes overlooked in debates about vocational

education. It can seem as though technical occupations are perceived amongst policy makers and others as a higher strata of vocational occupations, irrespective of the specific context of the work. What Avis (2018) identifies as the socio-technical imaginary of the 4th Industrial Revolution may be fuelling a form of policy panic, leading to an indiscriminate prioritisation of STEM-based technical occupations in a range of countries internationally. There is a risk of overlooking some of the complexity of workplace demands (Keep and James 2011), including within the technical occupations and a devaluation of those occupations which are somehow considered non-technical or increasingly redundant, according to whatever currently is in vogue as a prediction of the future. Yet it could be argued that successful workplace practice in technical occupations relies as much on pedagogical and project management capabilities as it does on STEM knowledge alone (Addis and Winch 2019).

In England T Levels are being introduced as a Level 3 post-16 vocational qualification, and the majority of programmes on offer in the initial phases are ‘technical’ in orientation, in that they draw primarily on forms of recontextualised STEM knowledge to support vocational practice (e.g Design and Surveying for Construction; Digital Production; Building Services Engineering; Healthcare Science), although there are exceptions (Education and Childcare, and in later phases Human Resources and Legal) (HMGOV 2020). An important question will be whether that recontextualised STEM knowledge proves to be useful for those students as occupations inevitably change in the future.

Should vocational education always be defined by its relevance to current occupational requirements? What should define vocational pathways?

Michael:

How vocational education is defined depends on how occupational requirements are defined and which occupations are expanding and which are contracting. If vocational pathways are narrowly defined they are unlikely to provide for occupational demands that will endure. There are possibilities that students might make different choices and these could become more numerous. For example, some students might be unwilling to follow an academic course but would take a vocational one. They might later be able to enhance their vocational skills and knowledge or transfer to another qualification. Again, it is hard to generalise about different vocational pathways; much depends on how they are defined.

Jim:

I would differ somewhat here and argue we need to consider the value of two forms of vocational education: the first that is predominantly but not exclusively based on study in vocational colleges and is informed by sectoral rather than specifically occupational requirements, and the second an apprenticeship based upon preparation for a specific occupation, but including some elements of education relevant to sector and the organisation of work. I think both are potentially valuable forms of vocational education (or education for industrial and occupational practice), and there is value in integrating features between them and also in integration with a more general educational pathway so that students can move between them or bridge across pathways. Current occupational requirements would be therefore more pressing for an apprenticeship model than a vocational college-based approach, but those following a college education could prepare for entry into an apprenticeship too and thus may be increasingly concerned with current requirements. But what matters above all is ensuring that all types of vocational education are *educationally* valuable (Shalem and Allais 2018) and do not exacerbate the

disadvantage faced by specific groups of young people (Wheelahan 2008). This entails a consideration of vocational education as involving an appreciation of the inter-relation and *co-existence* of ‘formal and situated knowledge’, while maintaining a commitment to the ‘intrinsic value’ of education and to sustaining meaningful work (Shalem and Allais 2018). A considerable part of the vocational curriculum should therefore not be derived from the specific tasks found in a workplace, but aim at offering access to various forms of specialised knowledge, often in more generalised (rather than generic) forms, in addition to substantive workplace experience.

Michael:

I think that opting for two forms of vocational education would tend to perpetuate the academic/vocational divide and this would mean it would remain harder for those on the work-based routes to move to programmes based in colleges. One of the persistent features of vocational pathways in England is the small numbers who manage to progress from level 2 (roughly equivalent to GCSE) to level 3 (roughly equivalent to A levels) so in effect vocational routes tend to be divided into two forms already (Wolf 2011). Again this suggests more research is needed in two areas. One is into vocational pathways supporting improvements in a broader industrial policy. This supports my earlier argument that the reform of vocational programmes should begin with reforms of the labour process in different sectors and the changes in human relations policies that it is hoped this would encourage. Employers have to learn that a strong ‘educational approach’ to management is vital not only to the future possibilities of those they employ but to the success of any new industrial strategy (Zuboff 1988). The second area of research that could be important and follows directly from Zuboff’s research is a focus on management strategies and

what kind of approach might allow and encourage more flexible movement of employees within workplaces and between workplaces and colleges.

What is the role and purpose of vocational qualifications?

Michael:

Vocational qualifications have a number of roles and purposes in existing societies. They should:

- represent the skills and knowledge that a representative employer group envisages will be needed in that occupation (or sector).
- be guarantors of accessible standards across a sector.
- act as guides to colleges in developing their curricula for vocational programmes
- be so defined as to enable those who qualify to be able to transfer to another pathway at a later date.
- provide guides and incentives for students to follow
- provide evidence to governments of the adequacy of the provision.

However, inevitably the actual role of vocational qualifications is much more complex and sectorally diverse as Allais and I (Young and Allais 2013) and many others have argued. There is also an issue of governments over-emphasising [the](#) significance of vocational qualifications in the interests of control, especially in workplace productivity. Our research suggested that changes in vocational qualifications (in the example of them being part of a National Qualifications Framework), regardless of the hopes attached to such a reform, had remarkably little significance in workplaces.

Jim:

There is a further issue of public confidence in qualifications and of the extent to which educators and the state should have a role in determining the structure of qualifications. While many would agree with the main arguments of Wolf (2011) and attempts to reform vocational qualifications in England, the underlying problems of the logic behind vocational qualifications in England have persisted. In other words, vocational qualifications still rely on the prevailing conceptualisation of preparation for occupational competence through a set of discrete tasks and duties that has held sway in the policy discourse for the last forty years in England (Young 2006), rather than drawing on an underlying theory of expertise (Addis and Winch 2019), brought together within a normative practice framework. Successive attempts to introduce new forms of upper secondary technical and vocational qualifications have struggled (e.g. the 14-19 Diplomas – Hodgson and Spours 2010; Issacs 2013, [and the AVCEs and Advanced GNVQs – Wellings, Spours and Ireson 2010](#)), because of confusion as to the purpose of the new qualification and a lack of confidence in them on behalf of employers, educationalists and the public. The latest attempt at reform in England, the T Levels, may face the same uphill struggle for recognition by these different stakeholders.

Michael:

The lesson for the future may be that if the priorities are to increase the productivity and [employment](#) mobility prospects of employees, then more focus needs to be given to the labour process itself and less to external attempts to shape it, like qualifications. A coherent system of vocational qualifications undoubtedly has a role. However, it may be more modest than governments and international bodies assume.

What is the role of employers and trade unions and their input into and interest in vocational education?

Michael:

Employer representatives in the private sector and senior management in the public services should with trade unions be key partners involved in the design and delivery of vocational education and be represented on the Governing Bodies of Colleges (public and private). Governments of both major Political Parties, but particularly the Conservatives, have encouraged employers to take a bigger role, and tried to involve them more directly in decision making about vocational qualifications (Payne and Keep 2011). The problem is that most companies who do get involved in the design of vocational education programmes are the large companies with substantial Human Resource Departments. This means that vocational education policy tends to be geared to the needs of large corporations, when they are far from employing the largest proportion of the workforce. The majority of employers in the UK are small companies and they rarely have the time for their key staff to become involved in the inevitable round of meetings. No government in England up to now has succeeded in finding ways of encouraging a greater involvement in vocational education by small employers.

From the late 19th century, trade unions played a major role in the development and implementation of vocational qualifications, especially in the engineering sectors. However, their role was associated with arguments against what was called 'provider capture' by the Thatcher Governments of the 1980's.

Furthermore, their role remains unevenly spread across sectors. There are divided views on this. I take the view that a more collaborative workplace is one which will be more productive and willing to support innovation. This takes the view that, provided trade union officials and workplace representatives have adequate opportunities for continuing education and development, they should

be involved with employers in the design of vocational programmes and qualifications, and decisions about the recruitment and selection of employees.

On the other hand, the pattern of employment in different sectors, old as well as new, is most uncertain, and we need to remember that trade unions emerged out of an earlier phase of industrial development when large group of workers doing similar jobs were brought together in factories, mines and ship yards. It may be that in the future we need to think beyond the traditional concept of a trade union and think in terms of community associations and producer cooperatives in linking paid work to other forms of activity.

Trade Union membership has significantly declined recently, and is now largely concentrated in the public sector in England. This may reflect an important cultural difference between England and, for example Germany and the Nordic countries. In the UK trade unions have restricted their industrial role to work conditions and wage bargaining- at the same time they have adopted an overtly political role in their association with the Labour Party. This has given them, at times a more antagonistic relationship with employers; they have therefore placed more emphasis on electing a sympathetic government with the capacity for political change. In contrast, German trade unions have adopted a more collaborative and less overtly political role with employers and been actively involved in industrial strategies. These two trends are not to be exaggerated but I mention them because they point to rather different futures in different countries.

Jim:

The difficulties of involving small employers is an issue that has been discussed by (for example) Bishop (2012) and also Bishop and Hordern (2017), who identified the marginalisation of small employers in the development of the

degree apprenticeships. Bishop (2012) suggests that we need to conceptualise the learning processes differently in smaller employers, recognising that they cannot be expected to develop and access formal training in the same way as larger organisations. It may be that bespoke solutions are needed for groups of small employers, cognisant also of the specific sectoral contexts. The Group Training Associations³ may also be an important element of this in England, but this doesn't get around the issue of the definition of Apprenticeship Standards being dominated by larger employers.

On the trade unions, your analysis and future prognosis may be accurate, although it could be argued that Union Learning Representatives could be given a greater role in ensuring that those in work can access appropriate vocational education, and unions could also be involved more centrally in apprenticeship design and the organisation of VET. As Kuczera and Field (2018) point out, the apprenticeship system in England lacks the means to ensure that apprentices are offered sufficient opportunities to learn in the workplace. It could be argued that unions are ideally placed to monitor the implementation of work-based learning for apprentices and to counterbalance the employer interest, while prompting employers to work towards more expansive learning environments (Fuller and Unwin 2003). It would take a concerted effort to build capacity within the unions to do this, but a future social democratic government in England might be prepared to introduce policies that foregrounded the union role here. Arguably this could in turn broaden the perceived role and value of unions in the eyes of workers and result in increased membership.

Michael:

³ Group Training Associations are public-private learning partnerships and training providers. They offer the opportunity for employers to pool resources to arrange high quality training at scale (GTA England 2020)

The issue of employers and trade unions in vocational education is a much wider issue that relates to the future of western capitalism and a strategic rather than, as now, a competitive (and often antagonistic) relationship between them. There are important lessons to be learned from several of the continental European countries, Germany and countries that follow the German tradition. It is difficult to imagine any policy that focuses only on vocational qualifications and does not tackle the labour process of industry and commerce in this country, not following the pattern of previous reforms.

Should there be an alternative ‘skills route’ for low attainers?

Michael:

As many students as possible, including those labelled as ‘low attainers’ should be involved in mainstream provision of vocational courses. However, there will always be some students who for different reasons will need special courses planned for them- especially in areas such as literacy. This does not mean that such courses need to be a ‘skills route’ as this would make progression for these students even harder than it currently is. It does mean careful design by specialists that focuses on encouraging such students to develop their confidence as ‘thinkers’ as well as ‘doers’ is necessary.

Alternatives for ‘low attainers’ must be part of a broader reform strategy. If they are not, as was the case of previous initiatives such as NVQs, they will continue to be seen as confirming the low esteem of the qualifications achieved by the ‘low attainers’ and the low esteem they have of themselves.

Jim:

There is a risk that people are labelled as low (or high) attainers as a consequence of their background or prior educational experiences. This also

extends to the problematic labelling of students as ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’, and indeed to the use of deeply flawed ideas about learning styles (Coffield et al. 2004) which often reinforce prejudices. Unfortunately, the labelling is often about the placing of people into categories or boxes to suit the logistical requirements of institutions. A genuinely educational approach would seek to support individuals and recognise their potential, while acknowledging that processes of learning require efforts from all parties within a pedagogical relation, broadly conceived.

Michael:

Yes, I think it is potentially possible to recognise the acute lack of work-related skills and knowledge of many of those seeking (and often obtaining) low wage employment and at the same time providing them with day release and other opportunities to address those weaknesses even if this is not demanded by the jobs they are doing. This comes back to [the sorts of](#) funding and flexible labour market strategies that encourage employers to recruit but not develop such workers.

Is an integrated model of the upper secondary curriculum still a viable proposition in the contemporary industrialised world? Such models might lead to a baccalaureate qualification that incorporates ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ elements.

Michael:

Integrated models have been developed in other European countries and there were isolated examples in this country that arose from TVEI in the late 1980’s and 1990’s (Gleeson and McLean 1994). However, they depended on temporary

and not long term funding, and did not in most cases survive the end of TVEI. Any decision to support such models needs to learn from the TVEI experience and be part of a longer term and national reform strategy that tackles the factors discussed in earlier sections that inhibited the scaling up of promising local developments. Scaling up is probably the major problem that any reform strategy has to give priority to.

As I indicated in my initial response to these questions, the reform of vocational education towards a more **integrated model** cannot begin with vocational education itself in isolation from tackling the wider contextual issues and the long held views of many of the key groups involved.

All the indications of likely trends in the occupational structure point to more radical reforms than those discussed in this paper. These will depend on a deeper recognition of the urgency of the problem of developing a green industrial strategy and its implications for vocational education. It will also involve examining the implications for vocational education of the new technologies (not only in IT) that offer the potential of transforming work – its distribution and content. However, these issues require a study of their own before we can be clear of their implications for vocational education. One thing that is increasingly clear is that vocational education reform cannot be seen in isolation or as a solution to welfare, delinquency or poverty alleviation problems; it needs to be seen as an element in a broader educational agenda that points to an as yet un-specified future.

As to whether vocational education itself has a future, the answer in any foreseeable future is yes; young people are going to continue to leave school ill-prepared for existing jobs and adult employees are going to find that their knowledge and skills have become redundant. What kind of future will depend on the extent to which this and future governments develop an industrial

strategy that relies less on the market and more on a long term approach to investment and the potential of new industries and services.

Jim:

I would add that it could be argued that an integrated model, going beyond the ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ tracks, may benefit from a greater understanding of the linkages between the types of knowledge and practice that underpin academic disciplines and occupations. There is currently insufficient understanding of where there are commonalities in terms of knowledge requirements, and how differences can be bridged and interrelated, although the work of Muller (2009) and others provide a starting point. This is also arguably an issue for how ‘interdisciplinarity’ is conceptualised in academic research. But to make progress this insufficiency needs to be recognised as a problem in itself by practitioners, employers and policy-makers, and for that to be followed by investment in theorising and developing the types of curriculum that could be genuinely integrated, without losing the opportunities for students to gain the platform for developing advanced expertise in particular disciplines or occupational areas.

Michael:

I sympathise personally with your suggestions. However, to go back to my earlier remarks, the reform of the vocational curriculum is not solely an ‘educational’ issue. Without a better understanding of the political and economic context in which vocational education is located, and their human resource implications, reforms will face similar constraints to those facing TVEI in the 1980’s and the attempts in the mid 2000’s to introduce a more integrated system.

Concluding remarks: Does the vocational curriculum have a future?

Michael:

My prediction is that the vocational curriculum in its present form will disappear. In schools efforts are being made to replace it by an academic curriculum for all students with its formally sequenced and stipulated knowledge. However, resources will not be made available to make such a curriculum relevant or the conditions for success to apply to more than a minority of students. As a consequence, it will lead to growing complaints by teachers concerning its lack of relevance and by employers for a growing proportion of school leavers lacking appropriate knowledge or skills.

The future of the college-based vocational curriculum is less certain. T levels are an attempt to introduce a technical version of an academic curriculum on the assumption that such a curriculum is demanded by employers. However, even if successful a significant proportion of students will continue to leave school or college with qualifications that lack either academic or vocational currency.

There are few signs that the changes in both attitudes and funding necessary for what I have called an educationally strong vocational curriculum to emerge will be realised. For any more optimistic scenario to be realistic, employers will need to become 'educational' in their approach to management as they focus on preparing their employees for the new knowledge and skills that any new industries and services will need. Such an outcome will in effect be a more integrated curriculum, with the principles of integration being derived from the demands of the new green industries and services that are created. This is a

highly optimistic scenario that depends on a re-educated stratum of managers as well as better educated employees and of course a government and trade unions with a more radical and future-oriented vision. The political changes required if such a scenario is to be realistic are considerable and difficult though not impossible to envisage as we come out of the [Covid 19](#) pandemic.

Jim:

There is good reason to suggest that the vocational curriculum will not disappear, but that it should have different guiding principles that can help better realise the potential of all young people. It is worth considering ideas that can take us beyond the old ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ labels, at the very least to develop a better understanding of the relations between the two. To do this we can examine occupational and subject practices and their constituent elements (and types of knowledge and experience required) as a basis for the curriculum. Some practices are more orientated towards work than others, and constituent elements that are common across multiple practices (such as those that relate to maths or sciences or technology) may be recontextualised in different ways in those practices (Hordern 2014). Gaining a better understanding of constituent elements of a practice provides a basis for an education accessible to all young people that offers breadth and depth, allowing all in education to more fully grasp connections and distinctions. A vocational education should incorporate substantial workplace experience that offers critical engagement with the work that is relevant to the practice under consideration (Avis 2014). One useful development that could facilitate this would be longer term educational partnerships between employers and educational institutions that provide a basis not only for forms of apprenticeship but also for [an appreciation of the co-existence of formal and situated](#)

knowledge within what Shalem and Allais (2018) term *educationally* valuable vocational education.

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