
Education, Skills and Social Justice in a Polarising World

Between Technical Elites and Welfare Vocationalism

Bill Esmond and Liz Atkins

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Chapter 1

Technical and further education after COVID

New opportunities or new inequalities?

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Technical and further education after COVID

New opportunities or new inequalities?

Across the developed world, the twenty-first-century's economic and health crises have propelled education and training towards the top of policy agendas. With international bodies favouring those forms closest to labour markets as most likely to aid recovery, policymakers have launched or repurposed an array of training programmes, apprenticeships, and employment-oriented secondary and higher education routes (OECD 2020a; Cedefop 2020; Osnabruck Declaration 2020; ILO 2020; European Commission 2020; House of Lords 2021). Perhaps inevitably, European countries with well-developed technical and vocational systems are in the front rank of such moves; yet the most dramatic conversions have taken place in Anglophone countries, where such routes have long been unfavourably compared to general education. President Trump's first major education reform provided \$1.3 billion of 'Perkins V' to the career and technical education George W Bush once planned to close (Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act 2018; No Child Left Behind Act 2001); community colleges have been central to the USA's post-COVID stimulus. Having prioritised apprenticeship and technical education reforms in the post-Brexit industrial strategy, UK ministers laud further education colleges, once scarcely mentioned at government level, and now designated as sites for both technical and tertiary education and central to the future of national life (DBEIS 2017; Williamson 2020; Johnson 2020, HM Treasury 2021).

From the 1980s, broad-based training interventions have frequently been mobilised as interventions to ameliorate youth unemployment (Bates et al. 1984; Lafer 2002; Pohl and Walther 2007). Yet 40 years of societal change prevent the simple repetition of this recipe. Globalisation, technological change and the growth of service industries have profoundly disturbed, though not entirely overturned, education's former certainties, including valued forms of knowledge and distinctions between different routes, sectors and institutions. The discourses shaping emerging policies seek to strengthen employment imperatives in educational practice; but the imperative to relocate learning into the workplace is entangled with a fracturing of boundaries between vocational pathways and higher education. Countries such as France, Holland and Sweden

have already accommodated work-based routes alongside school provision; now work-based qualifications at higher levels spread across Europe (Deissinger et al. 2013; Bathmaker 2017; Hippach-Schneider et al. 2017; Persson and Hermelin 2018; Köpsén 2020). The pervasive vocationalism of recent years is now complemented by the inscription of these courses' candidates in the vanguard of technological change, with their prospects central to discourses of social mobility. Continuities remain, however: older demarcations between educational pathways, not least the boundaries and barriers with which elite universities resist intrusion, remain intact (Reay et al. 2005; Boliver 2013, 2015; Bahr et al. 2013; Katartzi and Hayward 2019, 2020). The fundamental question addressed in this book is how far emerging policies offer improvements to the experiences and outcomes of students on technical or vocational tracks, or whether their new guise facilitates a deepening of inequalities.

A metaphor deployed in support of such policy shifts depicts an educational hourglass. Its base is supposedly formed from the low educational attainment of many young people displaced by crisis, or otherwise judged unfit for employment; its upper end represents the relentless (and expensive) growth of universities; its slender but too insubstantial neck stands for the apprenticeships and technical courses deemed best to meet the needs of modern business. At moments of disrupted labour markets and fiscal constraint, learning closer to the workplace has attractions for all governments, especially when faced with reports of 'over-education' (ILO 2014; Savic 2019; Habibi and Kamis 2021). However, in Anglophone countries this metaphor is represented as a national peculiarity: Field (2018, 2020) is among those who describe a 'missing middle' of sub-bachelor courses in England. The weakness of postsecondary provision outside higher education drives the US's search for 'alternatives to college' (Symonds et al. 2011; Kolluri and Tierney 2018; Lanford et al. 2015). European administrations have their own anxieties around the decline of vocational routes and the growth of universities, reflected in policy discourses of skill shortages, mismatches and social exclusion (Cedefop 2018; Vandeplas and Thum-Thysen 2019). Echoing the hourglass metaphor, they identify a corresponding problem of dropout from vocational routes (Tanggaard 2013; Cerda-Navarro et al. 2017). Such charges are laid differently in every country, but they consistently imply that education systems, polarised between unattractive basic offerings and universities preparing too many graduates for professional roles, should devote more attention to the skills required by new generations for anticipated mid-level jobs.

Hourglass discourses, like the all-purpose vocationalism that preceded them in several countries, continue to frame policy in economic terms, demanding better integration of education with work. By contrast with earlier policy discourses, however, they conjure visions of technology-driven social mobility, credentialised by employer-led qualifications fit to replace less 'relevant' bachelor's degrees. The OECD's (2014) *Skills Beyond School* summary depicts a Europe with two thirds of jobs at 'technician and associate professional level' as well as a US job market where 'one-third of job vacancies by 2018 will require

some post-secondary qualification but less than a four-year degree' (1). Such exact translations of employment forecasts into specific qualification levels, however, are not the sole origin of the hourglass thesis. Most US community college students already leave with vocational degrees, yet the huge costs and inequalities of the world's first 'mass' higher education system have fuelled an impatience with its liberal traditions (Marginson 2016; Caplan 2018). England lacks US traditions of intermediate (sub-bachelor) qualifications and a succession of reports and inquiries (most recently Augar 2019) has agonised over its limited non-university higher education. These policy turns go beyond economic imperatives, amounting to major political and social projects. Formerly neglected tracks to mid-level jobs, once faintly marked alongside the bright highways to professional careers and broad roads to routine occupations, are increasingly depicted as straight paths to national salvation (e.g., DBEIS 2017). These representations leave extremes out of the frame: neither the genuinely privileged minority, destined for elite education and occupations, nor most young people on vocational programmes, appear on such maps. Yet the prospects of all these groups are bound up together, as technological mobility discourses are deployed increasingly widely. Less than a decade ago, Brown (2013) warned that the doctrine that there is 'room at the top' for 'highly skilled' graduates could 'no longer bear the weight of social and political expectations' (679). A switch to emphasis on 'room in the middle' now conjures new possibilities of mobility, albeit with questionable impact on the status quo.

In the remainder of this chapter, we set out our framework for understanding these developments. In the next section, we summarise the origins of this policy turn with an overview of socio-economic and policy developments. We outline how emerging policies are rationalised in terms of social fractions purported to gain through new forms of social mobility, and those marginalised in this discussion. In the process we seek to define how the education sectors central to our account, and their relationship to the employment sphere, can be understood more broadly, drawing on earlier theorisation of reproduction, change and social justice. Finally, we set out the origins of this study and our plan for the remainder of this book.

TVET in times of crisis: vocationalism and its discontents

The hourglass thesis suggests the transformation of educational routes internationally described as (technical and) vocational education and training (TVET or simply VET) or, in their post-school forms in some Anglophone countries, further education. These routes take different forms across and even within borders: they resist simple definition (Tawney 1931; Moodie 2002). Generalising across different national systems is hazardous, and perhaps a failing of too many 'policy borrowing' exercises (Esmond 2019). Their distinction from general education is, like all educational forms, arbitrary and historically constituted: especially in times of crisis, such administrative boundaries are liable to be cast anew (White 2009; Apple 2004); but they are subject to societal constraints

and historical path-dependencies. They offer policymakers the advantage of supporting their aspirations to strengthen industry skills and social inclusion; but they also suffer lower prestige than higher education or its preparation on general education routes (Billett 2014, 2020; UNESCO-UNEVOC 2018). Vocational pathways have largely catered to young people whose patterns of speech and behaviour position them as ‘outside’ the norms that middle-class children take with them to school: their ‘failure’ or rejection of the standard curriculum has already marked them out for manual and low-status roles (Aronowitz 2002, 113). For some commentators, vocational routes are inherently complicit in social reproduction: Dewey’s (1916) contrast of education for citizenship to training for industrial efficiency, along with Gramsci’s (1996) critique of Italy’s 1920s Gentile reforms, casts a long shadow. If the economic system’s need to reproduce its social classes is achieved by routines that induce students ‘to accept the degree of powerlessness with which they will be faced as mature workers’ (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 265), this is easily accomplished by narrow vocationalism focused on desirable work behaviours. Nevertheless, in the early post-war period, these routes provided access to more advanced forms of schooling for young people from working-class backgrounds, alongside practical techniques for identified occupations. Reflecting broader economic, societal and political changes during the first 30 years after 1945, vocational education expanded as upper-secondary education grew, sustained especially in northern Europe by a long expansion of productive and political forces sympathetic to strengthening the skilled workforce.

From the late 1970s onwards, the shocks of the oil crises, globalisation, technological change and the advent of neoliberal policies rendered youth labour markets fragile and young people’s ‘transitions’ into adulthood precarious. During this period, vocational routes became increasingly focused on social inclusion and securing transitions into work, often entwined with active labour market policies (ALMPs). These processes began in Anglophone countries where neoliberal policies mandated attention to the supply side but also became concerns of international bodies (OECD 2000; Walther 2006; Raffè 2008, 2014). In other countries, earlier forms of technical and vocational education survived in modified forms, as we discuss in Chapter 2. Among the contradictions of this period was their emphasis on learning for work precisely at the time when less work became available; however, this vocationalism fulfilled social and political purposes irrespective of its disconnection from the economic conjuncture. As these policies took hold across the developed world, the OECD’s doctrine of lifelong learning called on the unemployed and unskilled to undertake the learning needed by the market rather than wait for demand-side economic policies, such as those of the New Deal and post-war welfare policies. VET policy and practice became increasingly a substitute for industrial policy and the welfare state, through training interventions and active labour market programmes (ALMPs) designed to encourage young people into work. As Cuconato and Walther observe:

... the concepts of 'lifelong learning' and 'activation' represent the declared need to restructure both education and training systems (lifelong learning) and welfare states (activation) ... legitimi[sing] a shift of public activities from welfare rights towards investing in human capital.

(Cuconato and Walther 2015, 284)

Alongside such broader policy considerations, these interventions produced different understandings of educational practice, which in some Anglophone countries affected not only the whole vocational sphere but school-based education: generic skills, learner-centred pedagogies and competence assessment flourished. Writing in the midst of a vocationalist turn in England from the 1980s, Carr drew on Feinberg's distinction between two paradigms for education, the first conceiving education as enabling:

the participation of an individual in the market through the mediation of skills that possess an exchange value ... primarily concerned with the transmission of technically exploitable knowledge.

(Feinberg 228, in Carr 1993)

Carr (1993) summarised this vocational paradigm as technocratic, meritocratic and guided by the needs of economic regeneration, relevance and enterprise; whilst the second, general education paradigm was democratic, egalitarian, and guided by principles of participation and collaboration. He argued that these distinctions went beyond the selection of curricula:

To employ the discourse of general education is ... to argue that vocational subjects should always incorporate opportunities for reflectively understanding and critically examining the cultural norms and values of the world of work. Conversely, to employ the discourse of vocational education is always to assume that the subject matter of general education should be taught and learned in ways which emphasize its market value.

(Carr 1993, 229)

In policy environments shaped by the subordination of all questions to financial results, vocationalisation not only served to reduce education to its contributions to personal market success and national competitiveness but also provided the means for such modes of thought to be taken for granted (Apple 1988).

In a further twist, the same economic dislocation that placed vocationalism on the policy agenda also undermined the traditional basis of TVET. Manufacturing jobs in Europe and North America, which once provided the main requirement for vocational training, were depleted mainly by skill-based technological change (SBTC), displacing workers whilst maintaining output (Card and DiNardo 2002; Acemoglu and Autor 2011). In place of its skilled workforce, services employment offers relatively high numbers of professional, technical and managerial staff

on the one hand and large numbers of low-skilled staff on the other. The service economy includes further variations: Wren (2013) distinguishes between internationally tradable professional services which offer higher rewards (and tend to expect higher qualifications) and personal services, which are sheltered from competitive pressures but correspondingly less profitable and poorly rewarded. Job polarisation has been most pronounced in the US (Autor et al. 2006) and the UK (Goos and Manning 2007) where manufacturing employment has fallen to 10% of the workforce, although it has also been documented across west European economies (Spitz-Oener 2006; Goos et al. 2014). The result of these economic processes has been a weakening of the very technical and vocational routes at the heart of the hourglass thesis: those now called on to lead upskilling, and to alleviate unemployment and exclusion. Their difficulties, indexed by relative numerical decline alongside university growth, thus appear to be products of economic change rather than its cause. The mid-level occupations associated with TVET have reduced in number, most dramatically in those countries that have undergone the greatest transition to services. Yet the thesis of hourglass education provides an ideological foundation for a new duality in the shape of a new, if drastically reduced, group of mid-level occupations.

Enter the technical elites

The skilled manufacturing jobs that once provided TVET with most of its students no longer dominate employment in developed economies. Yet manufacturing activity remains at a high level in developed countries (OECD 2020b) and mid-level occupations remain, including in manufacturing. If a material as well as an ideational basis exists for the hourglass thesis at all, it may lie in the nominally highly skilled jobs paid at mid-level wages found by Holmes and Mayhew (2012), suggesting that workers have taken on additional responsibilities as automation replaced their traditional roles. McIntosh (2013) found that UK pay for mid-level occupations had not declined, suggesting that whilst SBTC had reduced job numbers they have grown in responsibility. Holzer (2015) notes that ‘mid-level’ jobs can be defined by wages or by qualification levels, each perceived differently across industrialised countries, raising questions about how far the growth in ‘mid-level’ occupations reflects changes to job titles. These complex changes are borne out by broader patterns of income distribution, with growth at the extremes suggesting higher numbers of professional, technical and managerial roles, contrasting with a continuing demand for unskilled workers. This distribution not only represents economic change but an extension of social inequality as wage compression reduces, which is associated with the decline of trade union influence and collective bargaining (Baccaro and Howell 2017).

An important shift in the focus of educational research has been the move from compliance with social positioning (e.g., Willis 1977) to the ways that advantaged social groups maintain and justify their wealth and privileges by

manipulating educational systems. Weberian notions of elite reproduction were already evident in Collins's (1979) account of credentialism and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1979) work on social and cultural capital; today they emerge in critiques of the agentic moves of more advantaged social groupings. 'Meritocratic' claims, that education rewards 'natural abilities' or offers social mobility to those who study hard, support those able to manipulate its systems and resources to preserve their social advantages (Lawler and Payne 2018). Whilst the manoeuvres of middle-class parents have attracted substantial attention (e.g., Ball 2003), the question now arises as to whether more privileged sections of the working class achieve relative advantages under new arrangements. By placing the 'differentiated and differentiating' experiences of learning at work (Sawchuk and Taylor 2010) at the heart of technical and vocational education, emerging policies aim to create selective mechanisms that this group can access without the expense, or cultural dissonance, of university education.

Renewed emphasis on the workplace as the dominant locus of learning returns questions of the employment relationship to the top of the educational agenda. If inequalities of gender and ethnicity have become more salient in sociological research, and social class is submerged by discourses of mobility, class remains the primary determinant of educational inequality (Avis and Atkins, 2017; Reay 2017; Thompson 2019). As vocational pathways move back towards the workplace, the relationships of employment assume renewed importance. Whilst policy discourses sustain the upskilling narratives discussed above, low-skill strategies suggest that accounts of deskilling retain some validity in service economies. These contradictory processes recall Marx's assertion that, whilst labour power is ultimately reducible to unskilled labour power, reproduction includes the 'accumulation of skill, handed down from one generation to another' (Marx 1954, 538). Between human capital theories and labour process theory, skills polarisation continues the history of some workers garnering rewards from the higher productivity of new technologies, whilst others are displaced (Brugger and Gehrke 2018).

Thus, new mid-level occupations, albeit employing relatively few, are now central to discourses that summon images of skilful, prosperous and socially mobile employees, sketched on unfolding canvasses of the post-pandemic world. Alongside the hypermodern discourses of automation associated with Industry 4.0 (Schwab 2017), their outlines are already providing templates for competing visions of society and learning. Iversen and Soskice (2018), in their portrait of a resurgent immobile and democratic capitalism, depict clusters of 'highly skilled workers' as its protagonists: these networks of IT-adept professionals in successful, highly-developed regions feel little solidarity with communities in left-behind localities, or poor families reduced to welfare benefits. Yet the right (especially vocational) educational opportunities can provide deterrents against excessive inequality (Iversen and Soskice 2018, 250–2). In a more Anglicised vision, Goodhart (2020) calls for attention to manual and care workers excluded from these heartlands of the knowledge economy, noting the way that degree

qualifications have become the exclusive route to administrative roles to which skilled workers could once aspire. Goodhart's preferences broadly match those of recent UK governments, which have revived the language of 'technical education' from half a century earlier: talk of technicians, apprentices and craftsmen references a lost age of manufacturing dominance and few universities, notwithstanding concerns to broaden curricula at that time (Venables 1955; Ministry of Education 1956, 1961). This terminology recalls both pre-1970s 'technical colleges' and the 'technical schools' of the UK's meritocratic post-1944, pre-comprehensive 'tripartite' schooling (Mandler 2020). Yet if both accounts call attention to technical and vocational routes, and if Goodhart's (2020) analysis aligns with UK policymakers' preferences, Iversen and Soskice (2018) may reflect a more accurate empirical truth: competition for graduate jobs is increasingly mediated by university degrees.

Such representational figures offer aspirational templates to young people interested in privileged learning but apparently uninterested in the sacred sites of elite academia, preferring progression to 'higher technical education'. As Jin and Ball note of Chinese meritocratic schooling, these students are not offered transcendence of class but a new form of distinction and exclusion, becoming 'distanced from their working-class localities and histories, while ... remain[ing] outside of the middle-class sensibilities that they aspire to' (Jin and Ball 2020, 64). If they are summoned by technical education discourses to a position of privilege, this is only exercised relative to other vocational students. The authority of having acquired 'the skills employers want' may fall foul of its discursive positioning or, to recall Carr's (1993) characterisation, its inferior market returns. This ironic position recalls an earlier moment when rising production and social change had led to suggestions that a new technocratic class, referenced as a managerial or technical elite, might through their expertise replace older privileged hierarchies in the leadership of industrialised countries (Gould 1966; Burnham 1941). Dismissing such notions, Pierre Naville (1963) observed that older 'consecrated' elites had maintained their position over centuries through some 'transcendental value' with which their privileges had long been associated: 'hereditary status, monopoly of culture, intelligence or prestige' (27). This sacred value, Naville observed, had increasingly taken the form of education or, more specifically, the educational pathways through which the most privileged groups justified their status. Notwithstanding the possibilities of technical routes for educating wider numbers, they would not threaten the privileged positions of the 'consecrated elites'. As beneficiaries of policy relative only to vocational others, today's technical elites may sustain the position of the most privileged groups by their contribution to illusions of mobility, rather than sustain great personal advantages.

As well as regarding the portraits of idealised productive citizens described above as over-optimistic, we argue that they do not capture the full range of outcomes emerging from contemporary policy. In the following pages we unpick the fabric of these images, examining how they are interwoven with

broader economic and social projects to attenuate or perpetuate inequalities. The most persistent form of polarisation in education remains that between general education routes leading directly to university study and the various technical and vocational pathways that constitute its Other. This divide, fortified with tracking, curricula, barriers and diversion, is linked to the world's multiple polarisations of employment, income, status and wealth. Not only is the sustained creation of middle routes unlikely, as we discuss further in Chapter 3, but any upward social mobility achieved by students on STEM routes is by definition achieved in relation to downwardly mobile others, such as young people preparing for services and care work, induced by their training to accept lower rewards. We discuss these groups further in the next section.

Welfare vocationalism and social in/justice

Alongside those students designated as technical elites, the larger numbers of vocational students preparing for service occupations acquire skills that have lower societal esteem and limited exchange value in the labour market (Keep 2005, 547–8). Despite successive policy interventions and sustained rhetoric, Keep's argument that much vocational education is more likely to lead to transient, low-pay, low-skill 'bad'-quality jobs (e.g., Keep and James, 2010, 2012; see also Atkins, 2010) remains pertinent. We argue that much vocational education also has limited exchange value within the education system itself, given the difficulty faced by young people wishing to change track in moving to a different form of occupational training. It is significant that such outcomes are heavily classed and gendered, issues we address later in this book. Educational outcomes such as these, and the life chances they confer, differ considerably from those enjoyed by their more affluent peers who progress to higher education, or, indeed, many of those young people destined to form part of the new technical elites. Where outcomes are understood as a failure to enable young people to transition to adult lives in which they can engage with secure and sustainable employment, these forms of vocational education can only be seen as education for social *in*justice in which the young person is not enabled to fulfil their personal potential and contribute to the common good of their community. Further, it also represents a failure in human capital terms, given the limited economic potential of young people so educated. We describe the more limited learning opportunities of these students as 'welfare vocationalism', partly in recognition that many are being prepared for personal service roles in the welfare state, not least the care roles to which the pandemic called attention (Avis et al. 2021).

The injustices experienced by students of 'welfare vocationalism' are echoed in digital and creative fields. Despite the emblematic position of IT workers in the 'new economy', many of these students will experience work as a series of precarious commissions, so that 'work-based learning' has limited meanings. In the ill-defined shapes of creative and technical workers in the 'new economy'

and in the cultural sphere, we see those for whom hourglass prescriptions least fit, much as their commissions in working life are so often defined by a precarity that itself appears to require a perverse form of socialisation (Smith and Neuwirth 2012). In summary, we suggest that, whilst notions of hour-glass education call attention only to the technical elite, a broader range of characterisations, along with the knowledge and experiences deemed appropriate to each, provides the basis for new forms of educational stratification that already stalk the English educational landscape and are discernible in other jurisdictions.

As Thompson (2019) has argued, inequalities in education are directly related to the distribution of both material and cultural goods: therefore, in this context, discussions around inequality ‘must ... be located within broader debates on social justice’ (4). This argument raises significant questions about policies which constitute a further mobilisation of meritocracy discourses, building on those that sustained government skills policies across a generation (for UK examples, see DfES 2006; May 2016) but which have consistently failed to acknowledge the inequalities deriving from a ‘divided and divisive’ education system (Tomlinson, 1997, 1). The belief that, ‘You can do anything if you really want to’ is, as Sandel (2020, 25–26) argues, a ‘double-edged sword’ which congratulates the winners whilst pouring scorn on the losers. In this respect, little has changed since Castells (2000) pointed to the ‘sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales’ (165; see also Atkins 2009).

In our review of contemporary reforms, we draw on concepts of ethics and the common good, which we understand as pertaining to the ‘equality of condition’ (Sandel 2020, 226, drawing on Tawney 1931 and Adams 1931) that has the potential to arise where ‘certain general conditions [are met] that are in an appropriate sense equally to everyone’s advantage’ (Rawls 1971, 246). In this context we consider an aspiration to the common good to be one which moves beyond notions of meritocracy, which, as Sandel (2020) argues, result in ‘winners and losers’ whose educational outcomes are determined by poverty or affluence rather than skill or ability. However, we also acknowledge the contention that ‘the common good is accessible to us only in personal form: it has its ground and inspiration in a social ontology of the human’ (Christians 2013, 155). It is a notion that is primarily a value, the obligation of us all to apply ‘moral principles to the systems and institutions of society’ (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011, 474). Thus, it is a concept underpinned by moral and ethical considerations about what it means to be human, but one which has political, social, and economic dimensions (for an extended discussion, see Atkins and Duckworth, 2019). It is also a concept which has been mobilised over time across a broad range of ideological perspectives, and is thus referenced across a range of policy documents (e.g., DfES 2006; Green Party 2013; DBIS/DfE 2016; Labour Party 2019). For this reason, and for purposes of clarity in relation to the ensuing discussions, we interpret social justice in the context of this book as referring to particular social and human values about equity and the way in which they are enacted in relation to the common good.

The final section of this chapter explains the origins of this book and summarises the remaining chapters.

Structure of the book

Our study has its origins in empirical studies carried out in England during recent apprenticeship and ‘T Level’ reforms: several of the above features will be recognisable to readers familiar with the recent English experience. Within the UK, the wider significance of these reforms for political and societal change appears to have been significantly underestimated. After 40 years of liberalising measures, recent apprenticeship and technical education reforms (UK Government 2015; DBIS/DfE 2016) attracted scepticism from providers cautious of policy churn and practical obstacles, fuelling repeated predictions of their withdrawal (e.g., Elliott et al. 2018; Burke 2018). Controversies over an apprenticeship levy drowned out discussion of a stratification of apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin 2017; Patrignani et al. 2021). Yet the continuation of these policies under three Conservative-led governments indicates their centrality to the project now presented as ‘levelling up’ post-Brexit Britain (Johnson 2020; HM Treasury 2021). These developments might also be regarded as expressions of English particularism, part of a post-Brexit social project, or products of a populism so far restricted to a minority of developed countries. Yet our account cannot be understood independently of international experience, and we argue that it has resonance far beyond UK shores. The hourglass discourse aligns with the isolationism and ‘re-shoring’ that characterised the Trump presidency and has echoes in other Anglophone countries. Meanwhile, the general education elements that underpin broader forms of TVET have already come under pressure since the 1990s, even among Europe’s most successful skills systems. These countries are unlikely to prove immune to neoliberalism’s latest variants.

The following two chapters therefore provide an international context for the study, whilst deepening its theoretical perspectives. Chapter 2 examines the fundamental problems of vocational education’s relationships with learning at work and with social justice. We focus on two distinct approaches that have served as alternative models of TVET yet have come under increasing strain in recent years. Firstly, the ‘dual training’ embedded in Germany (and imitated by several neighbours) has attracted both the admiration of policymakers seeking to replicate its links to employment and researchers drawn to its relatively egalitarian outcomes. Secondly, the relatively egalitarian traditions of Scandinavian provision have been based on its location in universalist welfare states, including comprehensive schooling. Both models have been eroded during a period of neoliberal ascendancy which has gathered pace since the 1990s. We find in their theorisation important clues to the intensifying tensions on VET. In institutionalist accounts of the German systems, we find alongside the expansion of

opportunities which in some ways transgress the general-vocational education divide a problematisation of employer roles and a narrowing of opportunities for working-class young people excluded from these routes. In the erosion of universalist welfare states said to underpin Scandinavian VET, we find dualisation and activation policies that characterise welfare reform and are increasingly reflected in VET. We move on to discuss in Chapter 3 the responses of higher education, particularly in countries with internationally successful systems, to the aspiration of millions of young people to study higher levels. We note the complementary effects of barriers and boundaries constructed around older forms of university, leading us to characterise contemporary developments as alternative ‘diversionary’ routes for students whose identities, experiences and qualifications are systematically denigrated in popular and even policy discourses.

In Chapter 4 we move on to examine the peculiar development of education for work and post-school education in England. We discuss how its early industrialisation led directly to a polarisation of skills, as well as the neglect of any systematic education in technical fields until almost the end of the twentieth century. We show how attempts to catch up the UK’s education and training systems in the early post-war years were halted during the 1980s, leading to eviscerated educational forms that allowed educational expansion at the expense of its reduction to elementary preparation for working life. Finally, we show how recent policies, purported to reverse the weak links between education and work, have laid the basis for deepening divisions within post-school education.

In later chapters, we examine how these policies have been translated into unfolding educational practice, reporting directly from primary research carried out at sites where educational practice is shifting to meet the latest requirements. The empirical data in Chapters 5 to 8 provides a detailed analysis of the transition types described above, as well as a discussion of a central question for all education systems: what kind of professional educators are emerging as a consequence of these policies? This discussion returns us to the fundamental questions of our study, and we summarise our conclusions in the final chapter.

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