

Rhetoric and Reality: Vocational options and current educational policy

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Geoff Stanton discusses vocational options in the light of current educational policy in this transcript of his lecture given in December 2005 as the Centre for Guidance Studies 8th Annual Lecture at Derby University.

Biographical note:

Geoff Stanton has taught in schools and colleges, and has been an FE Teacher Trainer. He was one of the Further Education Unit's first two development officers when the unit was founded in 1977, after which he went on to be Head of Department at Lewisham College and then Vice Principal of Richmond Tertiary College. He was Chief Executive of the government-funded Further Education Unit (FEU) from 1987-95. He is now a Visiting Fellow at the University of Greenwich School of Education and Training, and also works as a freelance consultant, in which capacity he has undertaken projects for both colleges and national agencies. The latter include the Learning and Skills Development Agency, Learning and Skills Councils, the Association of Colleges, IPPR, the British Council, and City and Guilds.

He has served on policy committees of NCVQ and the National Curriculum Council, and on the Council of the Institute of Education. He has given evidence to two Parliamentary Select Committees. He is currently a member of the Education and Training Committees of the OCR Examinations Board and of City & Guilds, the Curriculum Committee of the Association of Colleges, and the Advisory Group of the Nuffield 14-19 Review. He chairs the advisory committee of the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE).

He has published widely on Further Education matters, and conducts research and development projects, with a focus on qualifications policy and curriculum design, especially for vocational education. This has led him into the issues of curriculum planning within travel-to-study areas, as well as within institutions. More recently, he has been involved in projects concerned with the nature of "Research and Development" in education and the ways in which colleges can support local companies.

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1. Introduction

Proudly vocational

Despite some of the things I am going to say shortly, I remain a passionate advocate of good-quality vocational education. I am not one of those who want to do away with the term “vocational”. I realise that in parts of our culture – I emphasise that it is in parts, only – “vocational” has negative connotations. But the implications of this cannot be avoided just by avoiding use of the term. Prejudices need to be faced, and faced down. Just as black people in the USA came to realise that when others claimed to ignore colour and ethnic origins – being “colour blind” – this often meant in practice that minorities were required to fit in with the dominant culture, so we have seen that re-labelling GNVQs as GCSEs or A levels, or even as “specialist diplomas”, puts the vocational at risk of having academic assessment regimes, curriculum designs and even resource requirements imposed on them (Stanton and Bailey, 2006).

So I would argue that just as “Black is beautiful”, so “vocational is vital”. Scotland has always been more inclined to believe this than England, but even in England we have given status to some professionals that are said to have a “vocation”. Priests and doctors are the obvious examples. In being educated for their vocations they do of course need to acquire specific skills, but they also need both specific and general knowledge, and considerable personal qualities.

In France people in jobs of all types will talk about their “*metier*”: car mechanics, post-office staff, and certainly bakers. In this country, real plumbers, for instance, will in effect do the same – without of course using the same word. A senior member of the Institute of Plumbing once said to me that a properly educated plumber should be the kind of person you would elect to the Parish Council with acclamation. They needed the intellectual capacity to diagnose what on earth was wrong with a Victorian heating system, and to plan what to do about it; they needed the practical skills to make an effective and efficient job; and they also worked in your home and needed to respect it – you should be able to entrust them with your door-key.

I find I am getting increasingly sensitive about the

way language is used – and not just about the word vocational. For instance, what are the implications of a government department called “education and skills”? “Education and training” makes sense, or “knowledge and skills”, but “education and skills” seems to be what philosophers call a category confusion. One is a process and the other an outcome. It could of course be that it is being suggested that the most important outcome of education is skills of various kinds. Even this would present some problems, but this is not how it seems the phrase is being used. We are getting perilously close to saying that schools and universities are to do with education, but that colleges and training providers are to do with skills. There is also an attainment dimension to this. As someone has put it, it would be awful if it became education for the best and skills for the rest.

The primary client?

Despite what I have just said about those with a vocation, the 14-19 White Paper (DfES, 2005a) does not give much of a role to such representatives of a trade or profession. We used to talk about the important task of meeting the needs of employment, but now it is the needs of employers that are paramount, and it is “employers” (in the form of Sector Skills Councils) who are to be in the driving seat when it comes to the development of the new diplomas for 14-19-year-olds. In contrast, the recent Schools White Paper (DfES, 2005b) puts parents in the driving seat, and majors on the importance of their being able to choose the right institution for their child.

I do not think that it is merely playing with words to say that actually it is the needs of the learner that matter most, and that for 14-19-year-olds, at any rate, neither their parent nor their current or future employer should have the last word about what and how they learn.

Problems with the training infrastructure

I recently did some work in the Cambridge area with a dozen or so high-tech and often innovative firms (Baker and Stanton, 2004). Most had 50 or so employees, but only one offered apprenticeships. Most of their existing technician staff had been trained by one of two major companies – Phillips and Cambridge Instruments –

both of which no longer existed. Outsourcing and other developments has replaced large companies by networks of smaller ones, few of whom have any knowledge of current education and training systems.¹ And yet the technology and the commercial context are changing all the time. A new approach is needed to lifelong vocational learning.

The future

I should emphasise that I do not see any of this as justifying a retreat into a bunker entitled “only a liberal education matters”. For most of us, finding a vocational niche – or a series of them – is crucial to our growth as mature and capable people. For the first years of our lives our home provides most of the stimulation we need, and as we get older our school provides a wider canvas. But at about the age of 14 many people begin to see school as preventing access to the learning experiences they want, rather than providing them. And one of the things they – and we – want is to have our talents and labour recognised sufficiently that others are prepared to pay for them. More than that, most of us find that our most significant learning experiences come from work, whether this is paid work, such as finding our first job, or unpaid work, such as caring for our first child.

To be positive, vocational education and training has never had a higher political profile. It is increasingly seen as an investment rather than a cost. Yet even this has produced problems. There is lot of rhetoric, from a number of sources, about what is necessary and possible. What is the individual learner to make of this? And who is going to represent their interests? This is, I hope, where you and your colleagues come in, but I do not envy you your job. I hope in what I say to help you find your way through some of the current developments, so that you may be able to provide an appropriate service for your clients. I may be wrong, but I see some of you at least as offering the kind of service that an independent financial adviser might provide in another context: taking full account of the context, and helping individuals meet their own needs within it; sorting the substance from the presentational hype; knowing how to identify the best providers of apparently similar products. But I would like to see you going further than the average IFA and

providing public feedback about inadequacies and misleading claims. Let us see how much of this makes sense.

Scope of this lecture

Logically there are two major aspects to careers education, information, advice and guidance in relation to vocational courses: that which does or should take place before a course is chosen and that which does or should take place within a vocational course. In an appendix to this paper I give some thought about the latter, or education and guidance as part of workforce development. But I shall focus primarily on how an individual can be helped to decide whether a vocational option is appropriate for them, and if so which one.

2. Helping young people considering a vocational course at 14 or 16

I do not envy those with this responsibility at present. I intend to outline seven of the problems I see facing them, and to conclude with some thoughts on a way forward.

Problem 1: Confusion about what is meant by “vocational”

If I had my way, I would legally control the use of this word, just as we do the title “university”. In my view, someone enrolling on a vocational course, or for a vocational subject (an important distinction this – about which more later), has the right to expect that it will be taught, at least in part, by someone who:

- is experienced in the occupation or work-place concerned;
- can themselves perform to work-place standards; and
- has access to industry-standard facilities and equipment.

Some might say that this is vastly over-ambitious, but is it any greater an expectation than those being taught a modern foreign language already have – being taught French (for instance) by teachers who have been to France, are themselves fluent, and work from up-to-date examples of

¹ The Managing Directors of such companies have many roles. Many have had management training – in production management, financial management, quality management – but not in the management of training.

literature, journalism and current affairs?

Strongly and weakly vocational provision²

Within these requirements, it is important to recognise that vocational provision can be placed on a spectrum ranging from the weakly vocational to the strongly vocational. I define the strongly vocational as that which not only gives an understanding of the social and economic context of the trade or industry in question, and the theoretical underpinning of its practices, but also enables the individual to perform intellectually and practically to a level that at least makes them employable as “interns” – to borrow a phrase used by what we choose to call the “professions”. Apprenticeships fit this description, as do some college-based courses, such as those in catering that make use of a fully equipped commercial kitchen to provide meals for the public, and also give their students a placement in the industry. At the other end of the spectrum are vocational “subjects”, such as vocational GCSEs offered to 14-year-olds, which use a vocational focus as a vehicle for general learning. These are weakly vocational in two senses. The content may be very general, but also the subject may be only one of several different ones that make up the whole programme. In the middle of the spectrum are other courses that may not develop full workplace competence but do provide the technical studies required for the occupation, and provide a basis for being a valuable member of the workforce soon after recruitment.

I would counsel against assuming that provision at the weaker end of the spectrum, at least, can be delivered by people with no personal experience of the trade or occupation. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to the effect that such experience in the teacher is required for credibility and learner motivation, whatever the level and “strength” of the provision. But in any case, it is certainly required for provision that will “strengthen the vocational route.”

Unfortunately, not all government rhetoric recognises these variations in the use of “vocational”. Indeed, it often claims that there will be benefits from “vocational” options at the weaker end of the spectrum that realistically could only come from provision that was much more

strongly vocational.

For instance, the recent 14-19 White Paper (DfES, 2005a) says, with reference to the proposed specialist diplomas, that they will:

“provide better vocational routes which equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment” (Executive Summary, p.5).

But also:

“We would expect that as SSCs design these Diplomas, they will often include at least some GCSEs and A levels among the requirements. The new GCSEs in vocational subjects would be prominent among these, as would vocational A levels” (para.7.8).

However, vocational A levels are nowhere near my definition of the “strongly vocational”. Indeed, Ofsted (2004) described them in the following trenchant terms:

“The AVCE is not well designed. It is neither seriously vocational, nor consistently advanced....In some subjects course specifications lack vocational content and are too similar to GCE A level”.

Resources for the new diplomas

The 14-19 White Paper also sets a target of establishing the first 4 of 14 “lines” of the diploma by 2008. These include engineering and ICT, both areas where it is already difficult to attract and retain industry-experienced and qualified staff, even in colleges. What will happen as the deadline approaches if appropriate staff fail to materialise?

What happened in the case of GNVQs was that the qualifications were designed to match the available resources in schools, rather than designing quality qualifications and insisting that the right resources were available before offering them. As a result, such value as GNVQs acquired was as an alternative route to HE. Providing this route to HE is also a requirement of the new diplomas. Not only does this ask them to ride two horses at once, it also provides a convenient

² For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Stanton (2004).

escape route from the rigours of being strongly vocational. It is crucial that they do not take it. I shall argue later that those involved in providing young people with information and guidance could have a role in this.

Problem 2: The problem of the regulatory body

One reason why GNVQs became distorted, and more weakly vocational than the provision they were intended to replace (such as BTEC Firsts and Nationals) was that they were designed by the then regulatory body, NCVQ. Not only did this produce a conflict of role (how can the same organisation design the qualifications it is in place to regulate?) it also meant that the process was unable to resist considerable government interference. This resulted in assessment regimes and content that were not fit for purpose, and the whole scheme going live before pilot schemes had even concluded.

The White Paper says, with regard to the diplomas, that “Employers, through Sector Skills Councils, will lead in their design and higher education institutions will also have an important role to play”. In practice, not least because SSCs have little or no expertise in qualifications design, the QCA – the current regulator – has been put in charge. This raises two potential problems:

- (a) When the time comes, will the Authority have the courage or ability to challenge the government’s own prejudices about what the diplomas should be like (of which plenty can be found in the White Paper) or to insist on appropriate facilities and staff expertise before centres can offer them?
- (b) Do those involved have the necessary expertise? The track record of “nationalised” qualifications designed by the regulatory body proving fit for purpose, or proving popular in the market place, is not good (think of NVQs, GNVQs, Key Skills or Curriculum 2000) (Stanton, 1997).

Indeed, the Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005c) provides evidence for this, in an incautious moment. After examining the problems caused by the fact that at levels one and two NVQs appear to provide no advantage to their possessors in terms of increased wages, the document admits that, on the other hand:

“BTEC First Diploma, RSA First Diploma and City and Guild Crafts all give positive returns”.

With almost a charming naivety, the White Paper goes on to say:

“This may suggest that improving the NVQs could achieve better returns”.

Presumably this improvement would be best done by learning how best to design qualifications from the awarding bodies, or – even better – allowing them to do the designing in the first place, and restricting agencies to their original regulatory role.

In other arenas, the government is all too aware of the danger of nationalised industries and services following their own agendas and failing to be responsive to “clients”. Even LEAs are to become commissioners rather than providers of education. So why is it so intent on doing away with the successful qualifications designed by vastly experienced awarding bodies such as OCR, Edexcel and City and Guilds – or so reluctant to call on their expertise? These organisations would have gone bankrupt if they had performed as inadequately as the state agencies have in designing and implementing new qualifications. And if the government is so confident that its new diplomas will be so much better and attractive to employers than other products offered in the qualifications market place, why does it find it necessary to say the following:

“We will progressively move to a position where we fund only those qualifications consistent with the programmes and Diplomas described in this document” (DfES, 2005a, para.7.6).

Problem 3: The problem that what employers say does not match what they do

The 14-19 White Paper states that:

“Crucially, we intend to put employers in the driving seat, so that they will have a key role in determining what the ‘lines of learning’ should be and in deciding in detail what the Diplomas should contain. That is essential, because these qualifications will only have real value to young people if they are valued by employers.

We will therefore put the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in the lead” (ibid., para.6.13).

However, a very able labour market economist of my acquaintance insists that:

“You should not listen to what employers say, but watch what they pay for”.

What do employers pay for in terms of qualifications? Table 1 is adapted from the Technical Annex of the Skills White Paper

Table 1: Wage premiums (%) from obtaining level 3 qualifications

	Men	Women
A level	17%	19%
ONC/OND or BTEC National	10%	8%
Level 3-5 NVQs	6%	5%

GCSEs at grade C or above give a 21% wage premium for men and 19% for women. NVQs at the same level give no significant wage premium for either sex.

It is important to realise that NVQs are already based on occupational standards as defined by employers’ organisations, the predecessors of the SSCs in fact. In other words, NVQs were produced by a process very similar to that proposed for the new Diplomas. Despite this, employers pay significantly less for them than they do for BTEC qualifications at the same level, and very much less than for the academic qualifications over which they have no influence.

To be fair, the Skills White Paper does indicate some circumstances in which NVQs can be of more financial benefit. These include obtaining them in the workplace. This flags up the important difference between qualifications used in order to gain access to employment and those of value if you obtain them once recruited (this distinction is often blurred in policy documents). It remains the case that when recruiting, employers are likely to give priority to those with academic qualifications rather than vocational ones, level for level.

We can guess at the reasons for this. They are after the most able applicants, rather than any particular work-place skills. They assume that the former are the ones who have taken the academic route, and that they as employers can provide the specific skills later. Young people know this, and so those who can take academic qualifications. The ones taking the vocational options therefore tend to be of lower attainment or motivation, and so the employers’ expectations become self-fulfilling.

No amount of employer involvement in the design of qualifications will counter these labour market signals. Rather than asking SSCs to take on the responsibility of designing vocational qualifications, government would do better to ask them to:

- persuade companies to pay more for young people who gain them;
- provide vocationally qualified and experienced staff to teach on the new courses, as part of their sector skills strategies; and
- search out good quality work experience placements, and/or help equip schools and colleges with industry-standard facilities.

There is little sign of such requirements in the 14-19 White Paper. There is a recognition of the importance of employer involvement, but then a timid acceptance of the voluntary principle:

“For many young people, real contact with real employers is an important motivation. And for employers especially those facing skills shortages it provides a means to train and attract the next generation of skilled employees.... We therefore want to challenge employers to become more involved in providing opportunities to learn in a work setting.... *Quite how much employer engagement there is will of course depend both on the local employment market and on employers’ willingness to get involved.*” (paras.7.15-17) (my emphasis).

Problem 4: The problem of variability in the availability, nature and quality of apprenticeships

The same issue of voluntary employer involvement affects apprenticeships. There can be no guarantee that an apprenticeship will be available in every occupational area and in every locality. This emphasises the importance of strongly vocational alternative provision being available in colleges.

Apprenticeships also vary in their nature and quality. Most no longer match the image that the general public probably have of them: being given employment by a stable company and put in the charge of an experienced supervisor, with day-release to a college for the theory and practice not easily learned on the shop floor. Many schemes are now heavily dependent on the part played by what is called (somewhat oddly, I often think) a work-based training provider. Some such providers are really excellent. I visited one in the north-east of England that provided a first year of training for engineering apprenticeships in workshops that were equipped with equipment so state-of-the-art that local companies visited to see it demonstrated.

But many are much less good. And this is not just a matter of private providers. Colleges also find it difficult to deliver quality in “work-based learning” (WBL). In his annual report last year, David Sherlock, the Chief Inspector for the Adult Learning Inspectorate, reported (ALI, 2004) that:

“Two years ago my inspectors found that a staggering 60% of organisations offering work based learning were inadequate: the vast majority of learners’ needs were simply not being met. In 2002/3 that figure dropped to 46% and this year it is 34% and still falling. Indeed, I see no reason why, with sustained effort, that figure should not reach 15% in a few years.”

Earlier this year in the final report of the Apprenticeship Task Force, it was stated that:

“The proportion of leavers who fully complete their Apprenticeships frameworks has risen (from 24 per cent in 2001-2) to only 31 per cent in 2003-4. This raises the question as to how long Apprenticeships can be presented to

employers, young people and their parents as a high-value programme” (Apprenticeship Task Force, 2005, para.50).

Research conducted by John West for the Task Force suggests that drop-out is not necessarily because participants fail or become disenchanted. Many of them continue with the same employer, presumably because the employers signal that the skills they have already acquired are sufficient for present purposes. But what of the longer term interests of the trainee? (West, 2005)

The design of apprenticeships

The LSC website says that apprenticeships are “high quality, work-based training programmes for young people who want to develop their prospects and career”. But it also says that: “The amount of time you spend studying varies. It can be anything from 100 to 1,000 hours over the course of your apprenticeship, depending on your chosen profession” (LSC, 2005).

Of course, the circumstances of different industries are different, and apprenticeships should not be “one-size fits all”. But can this degree of variation really be justified? Does any other country offer a “quality” programme at the bottom end of this range?

I emphasise my view that, at their best, apprenticeships can be magnificent opportunities for young people. But as we have seen, at present this can by no means be guaranteed. How are potential applicants to choose between them?

Problem 5: The problem of reaching the unmotivated

The problem for vocational education is not that it cannot reach some people who were not successful in conventional schooling: it is that this is expected to be a major *raison d’être* for vocational options. There is an oddity here. In higher education it is expected that applicants for vocational degrees in areas such as medicine or architecture have to be especially motivated, as well as very well qualified academically. Why is it then that at lower levels vocational options are thought to be especially appropriate for the disenchanted?

To an extent this is an historical accident. When our current education system was being formed, only the highest attainers stayed on after 16. As a result, we have never produced a properly designed route for those who are below the average level of attainment (and whatever targets are set, there will always be something like 50% of the population in this group!). In fact, it is still the case that we make everyone take GCSEs in the May of their fifteenth year, “ready or not”, even though some may need another few months or a year of study if they are to do their best at this level. If they fall short, as we now define it, we then make no provision for their continuing on a general route, unless they are prepared to retake GCSEs.

If they wish to avoid this option, with its horrendously high failure rate, the only alternative level one and two courses available are vocational. There are at least two negative consequences. Firstly, the vocational thus becomes associated irretrievably with lower attainment. Secondly, those offering level 2 courses find themselves catering for a proportion of learners who are not sure why they are on that particular course. Colleges have to re-motivate those who have not been allowed to stay on with their peers in their school sixth form, but are not allowed to design appropriate curricula and assessment regimes. Employers report a stark difference between the attitude of those recruited in May, who applied because they were keen on the motor trade (for instance), and those recruited in September, who are there because they cannot find anything better to do.

None of this is to say that vocational courses cannot help under-achievers to show their true potential (though they probably cannot help those who are really alienated). We need to examine some of the reasons for their success in this, and see what lessons could be learned for other non-vocational provision post-16.

One of the reasons for vocational courses being successful for some learners is their curriculum design – as integrated courses rather than a selection of disparate subjects. I shall now discuss this distinction.

Problem 6: The confusion between vocational courses and vocational subjects

GNVQs began life as vocational courses, derived to some extent from others such as BTEC Firsts and BTEC Nationals. Through a series of government initiated changes, un-resisted by the regulator, they became within a few years just another subject to be taken alongside other GCSEs or A levels (though with a seductively high point score in the school league tables). Reasons for this included the power of the academic paradigm in our culture – so powerful that policy makers do not even realise that they are acting on it – but also the misapprehension that it was the *content* of vocational courses that mattered for learner motivation.

Only recently I heard a very senior government adviser arguing the case for vocational options in terms of the way in which they developed and rewarded “the co-ordination of the hand, the eye and the brain”. This area of learning is of course very important, and perhaps relatively neglected since the coming of the much more “two-dimensional” national curriculum. But there is nothing especially vocational about it. Vocational courses for accountancy technicians do not do much of this. Non-vocational lessons teaching people to play musical instruments, make pottery, play sports, or even conduct laboratory experiments, do much more.

What does work for many learners is the integration of learning from various disciplines – practical and theoretical – around a common theme that interests them. Primary-school teachers know and use this in their project work, but for teenagers the theme will often need to be vocational rather than a project on dinosaurs. In primary schools the various components are integrated and adapted to individual progress through the professionalism of a single teacher. In the post-16 context a coherent and manageable course team is required. I learned when dealing with courses for the young unemployed in the 1980s how powerful this approach can be with people who do not regard themselves as good learners within a secondary-school subject-based curriculum structure.

There is of course no reason why this approach cannot be adopted for a course of general as

opposed to vocational education. There were moves towards it at the time of TVEI, but the lessons learned were ignored by the National Curriculum. The best baccalaureate schemes also have something of this approach.

Problem 7: The problem of selection at 16, and the funding of the other half

I have already said that our system is still organised mainly for the benefit of those who do best at the end of compulsory schooling. Most people still regard sixth forms as the norm for full-time 16-19 provision, unaware that most 16-year-olds, and an even greater proportion of 17-year-olds, now attend colleges. The Prime Minister even managed to forget to mention colleges at all in a key speech last year:

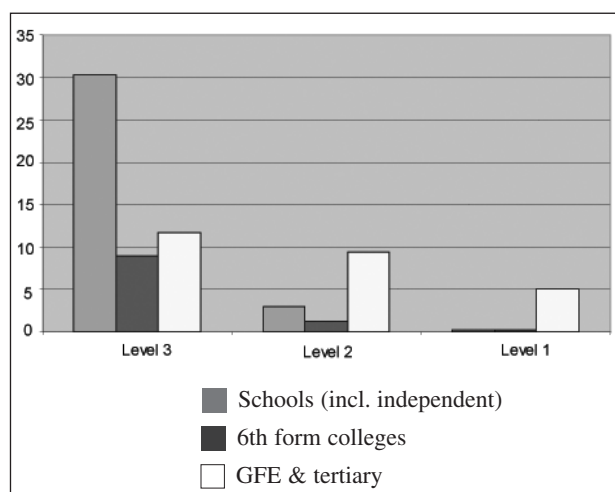
“No dropping out at 16, every young person either staying on in the sixth form or on a modern apprenticeship or job-related training leading to a good career”
(Labour Party Spring Conference, April 2004).

The government policy, as expressed in the DfES Five Year Strategy, is to create more sixth forms:

“There are areas where there is not a good enough choice of successful school sixth forms. Schools without a sixth form already have the right to submit proposals to create one. We will strengthen the presumption in favour of agreeing such proposals... We will also make this strong presumption for approval where participation or achievement at 16-19 is low in an area, even if there is no particular shortage of sixth form provision” (DFES, 2004).

However, almost all those obtaining five or more GCSEs at C or above already stay on in full-time education, and as Figures 1 & 3 show, most sixth forms do not cater for those with lower GCSE scores.

Figure 1: Who participates where? (% of 16-year-old population)



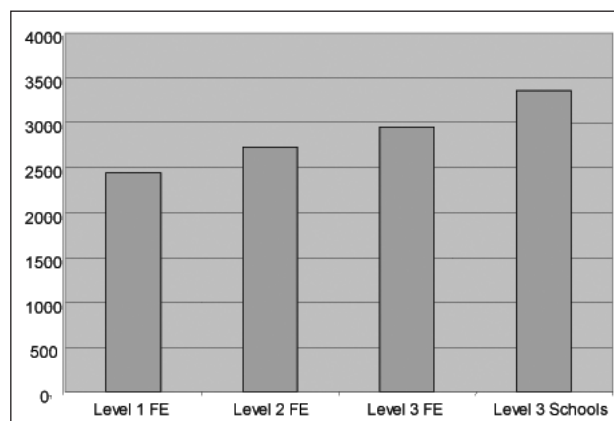
Source: DfES (2005d)

School sixth forms are also disproportionately populated with the children of the more socially advantaged. The recent Foster Review of FE Colleges (DfES, 2005e) pointed out that:

“Colleges have more learners (both 16-19 and adult) who are relatively disadvantaged compared to the population as a whole – 29% as opposed to 25%. The proportion for sixth forms colleges is 25%, whilst for school sixth forms it is 19% . Universities have 20%.”

Despite – or perhaps because of – this, colleges receive less funding than do schools for the same work; and within colleges, the lower the level of the course, the lower the level of funding.

Figure 2: Annual funding 16-19 FT (pounds per head per annum)



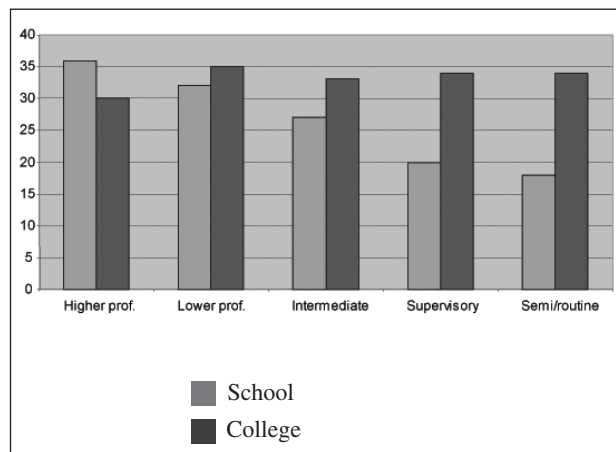
Source: Fletcher and Owen (2005)

This is not a lecture about school and college funding, but the relevance to vocational provision is, of course, that most full-time vocational courses are provided in colleges. Partly as a result of the funding gap, college staff are paid less. Also – unlike school and university staff – they do not have national conditions of service. This means that if their college runs into financial difficulty, they are more likely to be made redundant or to not have recommended pay rises implemented. There is little consolation for them in the fact that, in general, the staff of private training providers are even worse off.

The relevance of this to the task of recruiting staff to teach strongly vocational provision is obvious, particularly since education and training is competing for such staff with the industry itself. Indeed, because of the entry policy and/or curriculum offer of some sixth forms, some young people who are not at the top end of the GCSE performance range might not have the choice of participating in the better-funded provision.

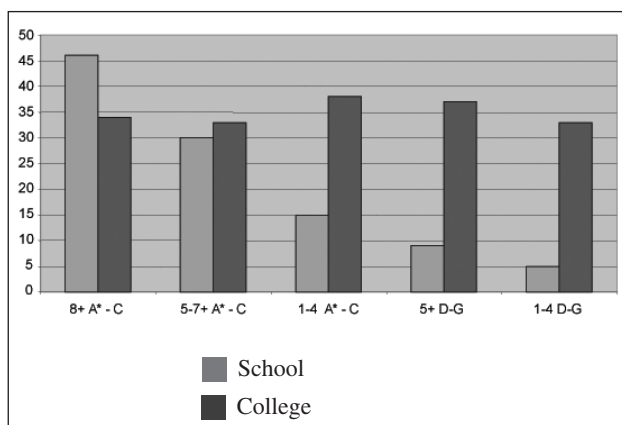
There is also a social class dimension to this.

Figure 4: Participation at 16, by social class



Source: DfES (2005d)

Figure 3: Participation by GCSE score



Source: DfES (2005d)

3. Conclusion

I have spent some time describing a number of problem areas for vocational courses and potential applicants to them. I recognise that this might seem to add up to a counsel of despair. But I want to end on a constructive note, and to make what might, with apologies to Jonathan Swift, be called a “modest proposal” about how professionals responsible for careers education and IAG could help.

I really do believe that good-quality vocational education can be life-enhancing to individuals as well as beneficial to the national economy. However, I do not believe that inadequate vocational education is better than nothing. Actually it is dangerous, in many senses. If participants think that what they are getting is truly “vocational”, they may be put off such provision for a long time. Employers and other users will judge by what they find, and this may confirm an existing tendency to prefer academic qualifications. Finally, an inadequate “qualification” in something like plumbing is genuinely dangerous in a way that an inadequate qualification in history can never be.

Nor do I believe that the necessary quality can be developed by “talking it up”, trying to achieve something called “parity of esteem” by exhortation, or misrepresenting what is on offer. In other areas this would be regarded as mis-selling.

Of course, if provision could only be called “vocational” if it met robust criteria, then there might be a shortage of courses in the short term. But would that be a bad thing? In our culture, a course that is difficult to gain access to, and can therefore be selective, gains status; also, those learners that did benefit would become excellent ambassadors for what was possible.

Another contributor to quality would be the development of a genuine market in education and training. This would need to be driven not by employer demand or parental demand but by a client group educated in the true nature of what is on offer and where they will be welcome.

The analogy that strikes me is that of the

Independent Financial Adviser. These advisers have access to background research, performance tables, and so on, that enable them to act professionally. They are also, of course, paid by the client, not by the producers of goods and services. This raises important questions about the funding and governance of IAG.

Another analogy is that of the magazine produced by the Consumer’s Association, *Which?*. The analysis this provides can contribute significantly to quality improvement.

The necessary background research does not all have to be original. Some of it could draw on intelligence already possessed by those offering IAG, if problems of confidentiality could be overcome. It could draw on inspection reports, labour market information, regular surveys such as the Youth Cohort Study, and the annual DfES Statistics for participation and qualifications. But these sources would need to be independently interpreted, with the aim of advice to learners in mind. Most of it is currently structured so as to help government to monitor and manage the system, and the way in which it is summarised for the media can leave much to be desired.

In preparation for this lecture, I trawled through the DfES and Connexions web-sites as if I was a potential learner looking for information. What I was told (Connexions, 2005) included:

- that I had a choice between GFEs, SFCs and school sixth forms – but with no indication that two out of the three kinds of institution would almost certainly select on the basis of GCSE scores;
- that AVCE was a vocational course alongside BTEC Nationals and City and Guilds – but no mention of the Ofsted verdict on them; and
- that service-level agreements were in place with employers and training providers that ensured a high level of quality in their training – but no mention of the current very low rates of completion.

There is also information to which I believe learner clients, or their advisers, should have right of access, but which may not be available at present. This would include the admission criteria operated by different school sixth forms, and the

industrial experience of vocational staff teaching on specific courses in colleges. Comparable retention and value-added data should also be available.

Could guidance and advice services be developed so as to create this educated demand? Could it also directly encourage quality and deter misleading rhetoric by providing public comment and feedback? Could access to rigorous research and analysis be made available? What are the implications for funding and governance?

Perhaps we could at least start a debate along these lines. Could the following provide the opportunity:

“We want to explore how we might give further impetus to the quality and impartiality of IAG by expressing these expectations in a set of quality standards, on which we will consult” (DfES, 2005f).

Appendix: Some additional remarks on (a) the role of government and (b) career education as part of vocational courses and workforce development

The role of government

As can be seen from my biography, a key part of my career was spent at the FEU. Although the organisation was funded by the government, it was a “Quango”, and as Chief Officer I was responsible to an independent board of management. Unfashionably for today’s world, the FEU was focussed on the development and review of the curriculum - not just what makes for valid and worthwhile aims of learning, but also what we know or can learn about the process of teaching and learning. In contrast, over the past decade or so the emphasis has been on assessment. Important though qualifications are, much of the debate seems to have assumed that the real problem is identifying and measuring outcomes, as if the process of enabling people to achieve these outcomes was not problematic, or as if all problems with achievement were caused by a mere lack of effort. This view has also changed the assumed audience for educational quangos.

It seems extraordinary now, but when FEU was formed in 1977 it was taken as read that no government should have control over the curriculum. This would be politically dangerous, since we had seen what the effects of this could be in totalitarian regimes of various kinds. Also, curriculum development – encompassing as it did a process of learning that involved not just a relationship between the individual and some learning objectives, but also involving interchanges between teacher and taught and between learners and learners – was something in which practitioners had to be central. Policy makers could help or hinder this, but were not in a position to do it themselves and just “pass it on” to others to implement. Despite the current rhetoric, learning cannot be just a contract between a “customer” and learning “provider”.

These days it is assumed that the “client” of various quangos is primarily the government that funds them. It is usually overlooked that organisations such as the QCA and the LSC have governing bodies, and that their officers are meant to be responsible to them rather than to the

funding department. Only the BBC seems to be sticking with the original model - despite some difficulties. Given the fickleness of governments of all stripes, having them as clients gives the quangos a turbulent life. The FEU existed for 18 years. Ten years ago it was replaced by FEDA, which was in turn replaced by LSDA, to which was added the LSRC, and both are now in the process of being superseded by the QIA (Quality Improvement Agency) and the Learning and Skills Network (LSN). That is 3 incarnations in 10 years.

Workforce development

For older learners and potential learners it is no longer the case that – even if they are employed – they can or should rely on that employer for their ongoing vocational education. When I was a lad in Birmingham, getting a job at the Austin, or in the Municipal Bank, was not just a job for life: it was a career – with prospects of ongoing training and promotion. Both have now gone, of course, yet much official policy in the skills area still seems to be based on a model that assumes that companies are providing a stable basis for both planning, funding and implementation, and that individuals only have one job – and therefore one employer – at a time.

IAG and careers education for those in employment

Some people might see the arrival of an individual on a vocational course as marking a successful outcome for, and therefore the end of, the guidance process. This is most likely to be the case if the programme is work-based, with the individual being already employed. Nevertheless, if the course in question involves college attendance, the individual will, in theory at least, have access to advice and guidance services. However, most employers would probably not welcome their staff receiving advice on how to check on alternatives to their present job.

How far careers education is planned in to the curriculum itself – and if so, what its scope should be – is usually unclear. The recent practice of deriving qualifications from occupational standards and designing courses just to prepare for these qualifications leaves no room for such content as a study of the place of certain trades or

industries in the national or global economy, or the likely future trends in employment.

New unskilled recruits

A particular feature of the UK economy is the number of young people who take jobs that have little or no education or training linked with them. Such young people are also likely to have not done well at school. This is not a new problem. 25 years ago a government scheme – called Unified Vocational Preparation (UVP) – was created for them. It only ever operated on a pilot basis, before being washed away by programmes aimed at the rising number of unemployed school leavers (NFER, 1980). But before they disappeared, some of these schemes broke important new ground with regard to personal support. Many had short residential periods, often only for a long weekend, but of immense value. Many of the young people concerned had never been away overnight from their home district, and although they appeared brash and streetwise, they actually limited their career ambitions in order to avoid feeling vulnerable. Many of the boys, in particular, could not cater for themselves or even make a bed. Moving to a job in a place that required independent living was unthinkable.

Several UVP schemes provided discussion periods with youth workers or careers staff in which participants could reflect on their early experiences of the workplace. I recall a story about a young man who turned up to such a session sullen and withdrawn. After some coaxing he blurted out that he was thinking of leaving his job – a routine assembly operation – because his supervisor and some of his workmates had a down on him. It transpired that the young man had gone down with ‘flu. He failed to inform his workplace that he would be away, but when he did turn up a couple of days later he brought a note from his mother confirming that he really had been ill. He had of course failed to realise that whereas his school had continued operating in his absence, his presence was far more important in the workplace. His unannounced absence had delayed the start of the production line, and hindered the earning power of his mates on piece-work. He was completely misinterpreting the cause of their irritation.

In many cases, because the job in question itself

required little skill, no-one took the time to explain how it fitted in with the work of others or the general workplace context. This lack of contextual understanding meant that it was difficult or risky for the individuals to show any initiative – something for which they were then criticised. An initial “briefing” on the work of the company was far too classroom-like to be taken in. But there were some imaginative alternative approaches. In one local government office, a new recruit was given the opportunity to “track” the progress of a letter from a member of the public – from the mail room, to the photocopy centre where duplicates were made, to the desk of someone who drafted a reply, to the office of a manager who checked and signed it, to the filing area, and finally back to the mail room for despatch. This gave a real insight into the workings of the office.

Although these examples come from an earlier generation, I do not believe that the needs have changed. What has changed is the ability to offer such potentially important learning processes. The emphasis has switched, to some extent necessarily, to an emphasis on the outcomes of learning. But I believe that we need to revisit the issue of processes of careers education for those already in employment.

Those in mid-career

I was recently involved in a project (MIP, 2005) that aimed to help those whose careers had, in their own eyes, somewhat “stalled”. They were invited to prepare an individual action and learning plan, and if this was persuasive they were given a financial bursary that enabled them to purchase the necessary learning opportunities from wherever seemed most appropriate. It was a small-scale project, but there were some fascinating individual stories – such as that of the man who had been languishing on the night shift, never meeting members of the senior management team since he was leaving the building as they arrived each day. The firm had a graduate entry policy for more senior posts, and our man had no degree. His potential first came to the firm’s attention when he asked to transfer from the night shift in order to continue his learning. In the next four years, he availed himself of a range of opportunities, including taking a GCSE in maths, courses in time management, diagnosis of and help

with dyslexia, and visits to other firms using similar manufacturing processes. He finished with a first-class degree in engineering, and this together with his credibility on the shop floor enables him now to fill the post of a maintenance engineer, something that the firm had been finding it difficult to do via advertisement.

Other stories were less dramatic, but a common factor was the need for and value of what the project called a “mentor”. Such help was needed in the very first instance, in order to draw up a realistic action plan for presentation to those awarding the bursary. This required an understanding of the previous learning history of the applicant, their current context and ambitions, and also the type and level of learning opportunities available. A single standard course was rarely sufficient, but the mentors were also crucial en-route. Plans had to be changed in the light of experience or of changed domestic circumstances. Not all firms were supportive, even though they were getting staff trained for nothing. One training officer made it clear that the job she had most difficulty in filling was the one currently occupied by the bursary holder – and she had less interest in increasing his skill level than he did. Another firm – with 500 staff – showed no signs of making use of the recently acquired skills and knowledge. When the bursary holder was encouraged by his mentor to bring the matter up at his next appraisal, the response was: “What appraisal?” The firm had no such scheme. Even a university tutor involved in the scheme came to realise that his conventional tutoring was very different from mentoring. His job as a tutor was firstly to recruit people suitable for his course, and then to help them succeed on it. Previously he had spent little time diagnosing their needs more widely.

A factor affecting most of these people in mid-career, as they were, was that their requirements fitted no single level or type of study, but often required a combination. The fact that some of them need to broaden their skills at their current level, or even to acquire new ones below the level they had earlier reached, meant that they did not fit with the assumptions made by government schemes or funding mechanisms.

Nor did they support the presumption that the country’s future skill needs will always be best

met by making schemes employer-led – as opposed to employment-led. Of course, employers’ needs should be understood – and individuals are very keen to do this, for obvious economic reasons – but they will sometimes be more ambitious for themselves than their employers are, and more willing to take a longer-term view. The “employer-led” rhetoric also fails to cope with the increasing phenomenon of “virtual” companies, comprising networks of the self-employed.

Some employers have a very good record of training their employees and of ongoing career development. But the government is proud of the fact that businesses are comparatively unregulated. It suggests that this is the reason that our economy has prospered and why unemployment is half the rate of other European countries. The other side of this coin is that many companies have used their freedom to decide – rightly or wrongly – that training is not central to their business plans. Their short-term prosperity and share-holder value may be better served by other means: tailoring their product to the available skill-level; bringing in people from other countries who are already trained; focussing on job-specific or even task-specific training rather than vocational education (in relation to many countries we often compare ourselves with, fewer jobs here require a “licence to practise”).

Despite some of the rhetoric in White Papers, training is rarely the driver for change. Without complementary changes in workplace organisation, the newly gained skills remain under-used. It is far more likely that innovation will produce an increase in the demand for training, rather than the other way around. Of course, if those entering the labour market or changing jobs knew which companies offered them ongoing development, and which on the other hand coped with changing technology by changing the workforce, then the labour market might function so as to reward the former. But do individuals have this information. Who might keep them informed?

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