

‘Heavy fog in the Channel: Continent cut off’ - reform of upper secondary education from the perspective of English exceptionalism

Paper for consideration by the European Educational Research Journal

Abstract

Recent international studies in upper secondary education (USE) have highlighted the importance and complexities of this phase as it becomes a more universal experience. Here we examine recent trends in USE to provide a context for discussion of the English system, which has been moving from a 'linked' to a more 'tracked' approach since 2010 through a combination of factors that make it 'exceptionalist'. We suggest that this change has not been adequately captured in cross-national studies because of its recent nature and because analysis of USE systems has not sufficiently appreciated the multi-dimensional character of this phase of education as it expands. We argue that the wider global trends and pressures in USE are towards integration and unification rather than segregation and tracking. In this context we explore a four-dimensional integrated/unified model for the English USE system that might bring it closer to other systems in the UK and in Europe, thus reducing its exceptionalism and dispelling the 'fog in the Channel' [1]. We conclude the paper by arguing that as USE systems expand and become more universal, they require a multi-dimensional analysis and the model discussed here may be appropriate more widely.

Introduction

Building effective upper secondary education (USE) systems [2] has risen up political agendas in developed and developing countries primarily because of increasing international competition for high skilled labour in what Brown and colleagues (2005) referred to as the 'Global Auction'. However, international comparative studies of secondary education and USE e.g. Le Metais (2002), Sahlberg (2007), UNESCO (2005) and World Bank (2005), have suggested that as access to this phase of education expands, there are a wider set of personal, social and societal aims and purposes that it is required to fulfil. This in turn has raised questions about the nature, organization and governance of secondary education and its relationship with primary education, higher education, the labour market and lifelong learning opportunities, as well as its role in building the kind of inclusive and democratic societies that living in a globalized world demands.

In this context we examine recent reforms in English USE and attempt to answer three broad questions:

1. What are the major international trends and inherent tensions shaping USE systems and how might we locate the English system within these?
2. What model of USE might be appropriate for England in the current political and economic context?
3. Might a multi-dimensional, analytical framework for USE designed for the English context contribute to international debates about European USE systems?

The paper is based on a range of both national and international policy literature and cross-national reports on secondary and upper secondary education systems, as well as specific policy and academic sources on the 14-19 education and training in England. We are aware that these sources have different purposes and origins, but consider that in bringing them together it is possible to juxtapose international and national policy and academic debates in new ways. We also draw on concepts and empirical findings derived from a number of substantial recent national research projects, e.g. *The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training* (2003-9); *The impact of policy on teaching learning and assessment in the learning and skills system* (2003-7); *New Directions in learning and skills in England, Scotland and Wales: recent policy and future possibilities* (2008-10), and on-going local/regional studies on 14-19 education and training in England. The policies and practices examined in these studies have been reported on elsewhere. The prime function of this paper is to use them in making a conceptual contribution to debates about the nature of USE systems and their governance arrangements.

The paper comprises four parts.

Part 1 analyses international trends, tensions and approaches in USE and the ways in which national systems are currently conceptualised in cross-national studies. As a result of this over-arching discussion we develop two frameworks for analysing USE systems. The first comprise four variants on a continuum – (1) Tracked (2) Linked (3) Unified and (4) Common - that helps in distinguishing between different approaches to the organization of general and vocational learning. The second illustrates the important governance issues that lie behind USE systems - state, markets and the distribution of power between the central and the local.

In Part 2 we use the main features of these frameworks to locate the English USE system and its reform trajectory. We suggest that it has developed a particular type of tracked system that is less integrated than has been appreciated in recent international commentaries. We also argue that the English system is at the extremes of what Sahlberg (2007) described as the Anglo-Saxon model of secondary education.

Part 3 of the paper utilizes these frameworks, together with lessons from international literature, to explore the potential of a more unified approach to USE in England. Proposals for this type of system have played an important but subordinate

role over the past two decades, but, in practice, have largely been absorbed into policies that have introduced linkage features into a divided system. We will suggest that a more holistic and unified model is now called for, which would make a break with division while, at the same time, recognizing the need for diversity of experience and specialization in USE.

Part 4 suggests that while the current dominant policy trend will continue English 'exceptionalism', the multi-dimensional unified approach that is proposed in the paper would bring England closer to its European counterparts and begin to dispel the 'heavy fog in the Channel', while also potentially contributing new insights into what have been termed 'unified' USE systems, Sahlberg (2007).

Part 1. Upper secondary education – trends, tensions and approaches

It is no surprise that a recent European Commission document, *Education and training in a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe*, highlighted aspects of USE in all four of its strategic priorities, EC (2012: 13-15). As the articulator between school and work or higher-level studies, USE has become a prime focus of policy attention internationally as well as across Europe, e.g. World Bank (2005), UNESCO (2005) and Sahlberg (2007). Cross-national studies have suggested that there are three prime reasons for this increasing interest within both developed and developing countries – the move towards universal primary education leading to a demand for an expanded secondary phase; the need to ensure that young people become active and productive citizens; and the new knowledge and skills demands of the global labour market. While most countries would recognize these challenges, there is far less consensus over the most effective model of USE to meet them, given the very different political and historical contexts that pertain to individual national systems. It is this issue that sits at the heart of the discussion in this paper, as we examine the inherent tensions and global trends within USE systems and possible directions of development.

Tensions and contradictions within USE

In its extensive cross-national study of secondary education systems, which also encompasses our definition of USE, the World Bank (2005) identified a number of inherent tensions or contradictions that this phase of education has to reconcile as it becomes increasingly universal. It has to provide both an end-point for some and a

preparatory stage for others; in many countries it still encompasses both compulsory and post-compulsory aspects; it needs to consider the balance between a common curriculum and greater specialization; consider uniformity of experience for social cohesion with diversity to address the needs of a much broader population; and to reconcile the demands of society, the economy and the individual. These tensions within USE are played out in countries with different levels of resource and views about universalism in this phase of education. In some countries USE is still rationed. This not only creates a bottleneck for entry into further or higher education, but also, as Lumby and Foskett (2005) asserted, make it a focus of social contestation because this is the stage where young people's future life chances are increasingly determined.

International trends in USE

Four broad trends in USE, which attempt to address the tensions and contradictions discussed above, can be identified within recent cross-national studies. The first and most obvious is a move towards greater participation in USE, e.g. Le Metais (2002), World Bank (2005), and UNESCO (2005), which potentially changes the purposes of the phase and poses questions about the need for reform. Second, there has been a gradual increase in the coming together of academic and vocational learning, e.g. UNESCO (2005), Sahlberg (2007), El-Kogali (2012) and Wheelahan (2013), to create opportunities for flexibility within more integrated systems, Dufaux (2012), that has also resulted in a process of 'academic drift' in several countries, Green *et al.*, (1999), Bosch and Charest (2008). At the same time, there has been a general interest in the reform of vocational education and training both because of its new relationship with general education and changes in the global economy, Lasonen and Young (1998), Burdett (2012). Third, there has been a move towards centralization of accountability, Burdett (2012), Sundberg and Wahlstrom (2012), Lawn (2013) and assessment, Dufaux (2012) and greater reliance on competence-based approaches to curricula and qualifications, with a focus on key competences Halasz and Michel (2011) or 21st century competences, Gordon *et al.* (2009). These types of changes are seen by Sundberg and Wahlstrom (2012) as part of a broader global discourse and set of practices around 'standards-based curriculum reform' that is driven by international assessments, such as PISA, and influences political debates on the state of national education systems. Finally, Sahlberg (2007) and Halasz and Michel (2011) highlight a greater concern about 'quality' with a renewed focus on pedagogy, resulting both from the expansion of USE and the potential of new information and communication technologies.

Conceptualising different approaches to USE

While these trends and discourses may be common, there are still notable variations in the ways that different countries organize USE, with several commentators attempting to find the means of broadly categorizing these differences for the purposes of comparison.

Le Metais (2002) divides USE systems into two main types in terms of their institutional arrangements: 'integrated', where schools offer general and pre-vocational education within the same institution, and 'segregated', where schools normally offer one type of education and vocational education is offered in separate specialist institutions or the workplace.

Iannelli and Raffe (2007), while still offering two broadly similar categories, distinguish between the purposes of USE systems, suggesting that one type has a more 'educational logic' and the other a more 'employment logic'.

Work by Hodgson and Spours (2011a), that builds on earlier concepts developed by Raffe *et al.*, (1998), suggests that general and vocational learning in the four national systems of the UK, could be categorized according to whether they are:

Tracked - separate curriculum, qualifications and assessment systems.

Linked - tracks are retained but with some common curricular or qualification elements, such as key skills.

Unified - different pathways or combinations of study with a single certification and assessment framework.

Sahlberg (2007) also uses three categories to capture the main institutional distinctions between different national USE systems:

Divided USE systems in which education is offered in either general or vocational schools.

Unified USE systems in which education is organised within one school offering different programmes.

Parallel school-based and work-based USE systems, which are organized into school-based general and work-based vocational education options.

The World Bank, which takes a global rather than a European perspective, suggested three different 'Scenarios' for secondary education, World Bank (2005: 93), El Kogali (2012). These Scenarios are constructed mainly around the type of curriculum strategy and the timing and extent of selection and specialization:

Scenario 1 - highly specialized, selective and streamed with early tracking; an emphasis on traditional disciplines in academic tracks and alternative vocational options that focus on job preparation.

Scenario 2 – deferred specialization and selection until the end of lower secondary education; internal differentiation through electives; vocational education only offered from the age of 16 but vocational elements offered within a general curriculum; a focus on traditional subjects with some interdisciplinary approaches.

Scenario 3 – deferred specialization and selection until the end of USE; internal differentiation through electives; post-secondary vocational education, but vocational elements in a general curriculum; a core of mathematics and English with the rest of the curriculum delivered through skills, projects and cross-curricular themes.

The World Bank Scenarios appear to suggest that the more divided the institutional arrangements are, the more possible it is to retain a traditional academic subject-based curriculum for some and a stronger work-based and employment-focused education for others. Conversely, the more unified the system, the more diverse the curriculum needs to become to cater for an increasingly varied student population, with a movement towards the use of 'skills-based, project-based and cross-curricular alternatives' to accompany traditional discipline-based courses.

Thus far we have mainly focused on curricula and institutional organization, and indeed the analytical models within many of the cross-national studies also primarily consider these two dimensions. Hidden behind national countries' approaches to curricula and institutional organization, however, lie different positions on the role of the state, professionals and the labour market that also have a powerful shaping

influence on the nature and development of USE systems, Sundberg and Wahlstrom, (2012), Hodgson and Spours (2012) and Lawn (2013).

In an international analysis of secondary education, Sahlberg (2007) suggested that three global models have emerged during the neo-liberal era, which influence different national organizational solutions to USE:

Anglo Saxon (e.g. US, England, New Zealand, Eastern Europe and now Africa) – markets, choice and competition; standardisation of teaching and learning and test-based accountability.

Pacific (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and now China) – authoritarian/conformist; high levels of parental/social support for education; didactic teaching methods; high expectations and normative behaviours.

Nordic (e.g. Finland) – a high status education profession; high trust relationships; devolved responsibilities within broad national frameworks; an emphasis on links between education, social services and localities linked to school improvement.

While these models are useful in broad terms, as Ozga (2011:305) argues it is important to consider the “local meanings” and “governing narratives” within each national system’s response to globalising education policy. She highlights, for example, the differences these make to education policy within the UK by examining the cases of England and Scotland.

Bringing the approaches together – towards a comprehensive model

Using this range of conceptual distinctions we attempt to build a more comprehensive multi-dimensional model for conceptualizing USE systems in two stages. In stage 1 we bring together a number of factors that affect the relationship between general and vocational learning in USE systems (Figure 1).

(Figure 1. about here)

Figure 1 draws on the work of Raffe and colleagues (1998), Le Metais (2002) the World Bank (2005) and Sahlberg (2007) to distinguish between four system

categorisations - tracked, linked, unified and common - and three dimensions – curriculum and qualifications, institutional organization and professionalism – which affect the relationship between general and vocational learning in USE systems. Given that the four system categorisations are ideal types it is possible that the different dimensions of each national system will be located in more than one category, although it is likely that the overall balance of dimensions will permit its location broadly within the tracked, linked, unified or common paradigms.

In Stage 2, we address a set of wider factors – balances between state, markets and the distribution of power - that provide the governance relationships for USE systems internationally. These can be conceptualised along two intersecting continua – centralised/devolved and state/markets, derived from Newman (2001) and Lundgren (2002).

(Figure 2. about here)

In addition to the degrees of distinctiveness in USE that arise primarily from the relationship between general and vocational learning, Figure 2 permits a discussion of approaches to the governance of USE systems. The state/market axis allows a distinction to be made between those systems that are more publicly owned and those that are more privatized. The centralized/devolved axis introduces the possibility of discussion about the extent to which national governments regulate USE systems and the degree of space afforded to other levels of governance – regional, local or institutional – as well as to education professionals and wider social partners.

Using both diagrams, it is possible, for example, to distinguish more subtly between different types of divided USE systems. In the first, such as Germany or Austria, while there is a strong academic/vocational divide, vocational education is accorded high status as a result of state regulation of the labour market combined with devolution of power to regions and social partners, such as employers and employer organisations; an organized or planned division that has led to large apprenticeships systems and relatively low levels of youth unemployment compared internationally, OECD (2013). This can be contrasted with the division between academic and vocational learning in England, for example, that arises from deep-seated historical and social features that privilege the first and are exacerbated through centralized policy levers and competing, privatized institutions, with little space for the

professional voice or wider social partners. In this type of system, we argue, vocational education ends up as marginal and low status, which significantly contributes to the 'exceptionalism' of English USE. Moreover, a 'flexible labour market' approach in England has resulted in the widespread loss of 'youth jobs' and a very small apprenticeships system involving young people, Allen and Ainley (2013). Thus the wider economic context and the condition of the youth labour market operate as highly influential factors in relation to both Figures 1 and 2 because they either facilitate or restrict opportunities for work-based learning within upper secondary education and for transitions from education to employment directly following this phase.

Part 2. The English approach to upper secondary education

Characterizing English USE

We would suggest that the way that the English USE system has been characterized in cross-national studies, e.g. Le Metais (2002), World Bank (2005), Sahlberg (2007) and Dufaux (2012) is not entirely accurate, partly because there has been an assumption that curriculum and institutional setting are more integrated than they are in reality and partly because the system has been undergoing considerable change, with a specific new direction of travel that has emerged since 2010 under the UK Coalition Government.

English USE can be viewed as 'exceptionalist' because of a unique combination of system factors and the degree to which it is influenced by the market and the concept of choice, both in terms of curriculum and institution. Until recently there have been no mandatory subjects to be taken from the age of 16, with the most common advanced level programmes comprising three or fewer subjects. As Higham and Yeoman's (2011: 221) commented 'differentiation and choice has been an overriding feature of 16-19 education'. It is partly because of this ability to specialize and make choices that the English system lacks the underlying universal aims for the USE curriculum that almost all other systems possess Pring *et al.*, (2009). England has also experimented extensively with an active education market Ball (2007), with an increasing range of autonomous USE providers within a highly centralized national accountability framework. This is shown most clearly in the relationship between selective schools, academic qualifications for 16-19 year olds and competition to access research intensive universities, all reinforced by publicly

accessible institutional performance tables and national inspection. Given these factors, the English USE system can, since 2010, be located towards the divided end of the continuum in Figure 1.

However, it is not formally divided in the organizational sense with vocational schools and early vocational specialization, although some political forces want to take it in this direction e.g. Baker (2013). It is more culturally and systemically divided due to the domination of USE by particular qualifications, particular schools and particular universities that emphasize academic learning. One noticeable outcome has been a reduced role and lower status for vocational education and those institutions associated with it, such as further education colleges, Wolf (2011).. Moreover, the proportion of 16-19 year olds on apprenticeship programmes has remained remarkably low at well under 10 per cent, Dolphin and Lanning (2011) so the work-based route cannot be seen as playing a major role in English USE.

Despite this exceptionalism, England is not immune to the major global debates surrounding the development of USE systems. Issues of curriculum content and design, 21st Century competences, the certification of academic and vocational learning, participation up to 18 years of age and the role of different contexts for learning are being interpreted in particular ways by English policy-makers and by professional counter-arguments in wider civil society.

Recent developments in English USE – a more extreme Anglo-Saxon model?

The previous Labour Government (1997-2010) introduced several 'linkages' features into the English USE system, intended to provide bridges between academic and vocational tracks. These included key skills and broad vocational qualifications to encourage the 'mixing' of general and vocational study together with early engagement with the labour market and specialization for some learners. This government also encouraged and funded institutional partnership working, mainly in relation to the offer of vocational education, although these collaborative arrangements remained relatively weak, Hodgson and Spours (2006); Higham and Yeomans (2010). In addition, there was an attempt to promote more common professional preparation for teachers in all types of education institutions, but through a highly centralized system of standards with little room for the professional voice, Lucas (2004). Overall, therefore, the English USE system between 1997-2010 could be broadly described as 'linked'.

Current Coalition Government strategies are moving the English system towards the tracked end of the continuum, illustrated in Figure 1, by removing its linked curriculum and qualifications features and the mild institutional partnership arrangements inherited from the previous Labour Government. In terms of increased tracking, general qualifications – General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and General Certificates of Education (GCE A Levels) taken at 16 and 18 years respectively - will have a greater focus on core knowledge with a linear rather than modular structure and terminal examinations rather than a mix of coursework and external tests, DfE (2010). This will make these qualifications more selective and less like their vocational counterparts. In addition, the current government has emphasized the importance of discipline-based, theoretical learning through its promotion of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), DfE (2013a). The EBacc is a performance measure for schools that privileges the attainment of high grades in five traditional GCSE subjects (mathematics, English, science, history or geography and languages) at age 16, with corresponding relegation of other forms of knowledge and applied learning. Similar reforms are taking place at A Level for 16-19 year olds with a focus on ‘facilitating’ subjects (traditional disciplines) as a means of accessing prestigious research-intensive universities, Gove (2013). There is a greater emphasis on remembering facts, didactic learning and the correct use of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

The role of vocational qualifications has been reduced, particularly for 14-16 year olds as part of the drive for more academic learning, DfE (2011) and for 16-19 year olds priority has been given to those explicitly recognized by employers, DfE (2013b). A major focus has been placed on reforming and promoting apprenticeships, DfE (2012). As a result of the weak economy in the UK, the emphasis has been on late vocational specialization and engagement, although there is an active debate within government about the increased role for specialist vocational schools, known as University Technical Colleges, DfE (2013c) and Studio Schools, DfE (2013d) that would also move the English USE system closer to the tracked end of the continuum. Put another way, general education is becoming more academic and the vocational curriculum more narrowly conceived, with fewer opportunities for linkages between the two. The interpretation of 21st Century competences has also been narrow with the focus on achievement in key subjects such as English, mathematics and science. Discussion about the importance of including wider skills and competences has been almost entirely absent from government policy documents.

While general and vocational USE courses are taken at both schools and colleges, a new division of labour is emerging, with schools concentrating more on academic qualifications and further education colleges and work-based learning providers focusing on more remedial and vocational learning. A limited amount of partnership working takes place between providers, but it is the result of voluntary institutional market-based decision-making rather than of government policy, Higham and Yeomans (2011), Hodgson and Spours (2013a). At the same time, there has been a move towards a two-tier professional preparation for general and vocational learning with the requirement for a good honours degree to enter teaching in a school, but the removal of a requirement for a teaching qualification for further education colleges or work-based learning, where the majority of vocational learning takes place, BIS (2012).

Regarding the role of the state, markets and the distribution of power, the major emphasis since 2010 has been to accelerate the privatisation of schools, with a strong push from government for 'academies' and 'free schools' that do not come under the jurisdiction of local authorities, Gove (2012). This can be seen as an extension of the Anglo-Saxon model of devolution of power to schools and colleges as part of a market approach, but within a strongly centralised accountability framework. Not only has the role of local authorities been further reduced, but there is little opportunity for professional or social partner input into policy-making at the national level, something which is in sharp contrast to the systems in Wales and Scotland, Ozga (2011).

(Figure 3 about here)

Figure 3, which has been created by taking the central features of Figures 1 and 2, allows us to illustrate the direction of travel of the English USE system within its governance framework. England thus still lies within the Anglo-Saxon model, but appears to be moving from a 'linkages/integrated' approach towards a more 'tracked/segregated' model. While national government continues to play a very powerful role through its centralised policy-making and accountability, the marketised logic of the system appears to be deeply influencing institutional decision-making and behaviour.

This trend, however, does not apply to the rest of the UK, where devolved national governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are developing features of

linked and unified USE systems with a greater role for social partners and professionals, Ozga (2011); Gunning and Raffe (2011); Hodgson and Spours (2011b). These combined features move them closer to Nordic systems and away from England.

Part 3. Exploring a unified approach from an English perspective

Future possibilities

The current trajectory of the English USE system does not tell the whole story and the course of development is not inevitable even though the landscape will be very different in 2015 (the date of the next General Election) than it was in 2010. While the current trajectory is built on deep-seated historical features within English education, the specific policies that are now driving the system are associated with the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. An administration of a different political complexion is possible in 2015. Moreover, there are three other factors that could begin to push English USE in a different direction.

In England there has been a long-standing subordinate discourse around greater 'unification' of USE. This originated with proposals for a unified British Baccalaureate, Finegold *et al.* (1990), which was followed by a large number of similar proposals from civil society organisations and opposition political parties (Labour and Liberal Democrat), culminating in the establishment by the previous Labour Government of an independent commission into 14-19 curriculum and qualifications reform, known as the Tomlinson commission, Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004). This reported in 2004, recommending the gradual development of a single unified diploma system for all 14-19 year olds in full-time education. The proposals, which were widely supported by education professionals and social partners, were rejected by national government in 2005, and a 'linkages' rather than a unified approach was pursued (see Baird *et al.*, (2011) and Ertl and Hayward (2010) for detailed empirical accounts of the features and effects of education policy during this period).

However, the broad concept of a more unified USE system remains very much alive and numerous proposals that support this approach have continued to emerge over the recent period and are documented in Hodgson and Spours (2012), the most

recent being the final report of the Labour Party's Independent Skills Taskforce (2014). In addition to these national debates, there are the international trends and pressures already discussed (e.g. the need for a broad set of competences and a closer relationship between general and vocational learning) and 'home international' examples (the unified credit framework in Scotland and the Welsh Baccaalaureate in Wales) of countries of the UK which have adopted a more unified approach to USE, Gunning and Raffe (2011). The current trajectory of English USE is, therefore, not assured.

Problems with the English system

Those who argue for a more unified USE system in England also identify major problems within current arrangements. The approach to general education is narrowly focused on grade attainment, particularly at the top end, and on traditional subject knowledge. Virtually no attention has been paid to the wider competences and diverse forms of knowledge and learning that are required for more effective economic and societal participation. Moreover, an exclusionist approach to general education co-exists with a low status vocational education that has been described as a 'siding into which weaker pupils can conveniently be shunted', Bosch and Chalest (2008: 445). The present government has placed its policy emphasis on USE at two ends of a spectrum – at the high performing academic pole and at the apprenticeship/work-based pole - both of which involve a minority of the cohort. The remainder of young people have been characterized as the 'overlooked middle' that benefited to a degree from the linkages approach of the previous government, but are now neglected (Hodgson and Spours (2013b). Interacting with and reinforcing this partial and divided curriculum and qualifications approach has been the increased competition between providers that continues to segregate learners on the basis of social class and race, Gibbons *et al.* (2007). Finally, driving all these changes has been a swift-moving and highly centralized approach to policy-making and reform, resulting in the marginalization of the professional voice and wider social partners, Ozga (2011), Hodgson and Spours (2012).

Moreover, recent USE policy has begun to have a negative effect on system performance – rises in examination attainment have been arrested, although this has been welcomed by some as a sign of greater rigour and upholding standards, Bright, (2013). There has also been a plateauing of those participating in full-time post-16 education and training, DfE, (2013e). A large number of 18-25 year olds are unemployed, HoC Library (2013), but more young people are now applying for a

university place after a temporary dip in 2012 when increased university fees came into effect, UCAS (2013).

When all these indicators are taken together, system performance looks relatively static following several years of growth; the USE curriculum remains narrow; the gap between top and bottom has widened both in social and attainment terms and there is a heightened sense of competition for scarce jobs, high-status apprenticeships and places at prestigious universities. The problems facing the system are thus multi-faceted and interrelated, which suggests that the proposed solutions also have to be multi-dimensional and co-ordinated.

Lessons from international experience

Those proposing another approach to reform in the English system need not only to understand current national change, but would also benefit from acknowledging key messages emerging from international studies.

Sahlberg (2007), for example, suggests that USE systems should have what might be described as an entitlement-based and open approach focused on all young people having a motivational and productive experience of education in order to avoid drop-out; being able to change direction between pathways; making informed decisions as a result of professional and impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance; and having the opportunity to access good quality jobs and tertiary education.

The UNESCO study (2005) offers similar advice regarding flexibility within a comprehensive framework, while emphasizing 'a solid foundation of knowledge in a cluster of essential generic competencies and non occupation-specific practical skills' and the importance of 'increased intellectual and social maturity and greater inter-cultural understanding and tolerance' (p. 13).

Raffe (2013: 1) adds a further dimension to the discussion by laying out five conditions for successful reform of vocational qualifications in England that might be applied more broadly to the reform of USE systems:

1. The processes of reform are as important as the content of those reforms – the role of policy learning.

2. The importance of considering institutions at the same time as qualifications because of the effects of 'institutional logic'.
3. The need to be clear about the purposes of the reform and the new qualifications.
4. Direction of travel should be towards coherence and to 'coordinate diversity rather than impose inappropriate uniformity'.
5. Attention should be given to the international and home international contexts.

A multi-dimensional and co-ordinated approach to change

Given the weaknesses in the English system discussed earlier and the key messages from both cross-national reports and the England-specific empirical studies mentioned at the beginning of this article, in this section of the paper we put forward principles and proposals for the development of a USE system in England that is based on more democratic values.

Our proposed model for USE in England is based on a philosophical premise and an educational aspiration – a belief that the human condition is rooted in the fundamental relationship between thinking and doing and that this relationship should be reflected in all types of education and for all learners, focused on developing all human capacities throughout the life-course, but particularly in USE. In this fundamental sense, the model can be considered as 'holistic', 'unified' and 'connective'.

The case for this conception of education is also supported by the increasingly networked social economies that have emerged over the last 30 years as part of globalization, Murray (2010) and the capacities required to address the major challenges facing humankind, Coffield and Williamson (2012). A unified reform of USE would thus need to be underpinned by a strong set of values and purposes Pring *et al.*, (2009), something that is currently lacking in the England system.

Taking into consideration the preceding analysis, we now outline a four-dimensional integrated/unified model of USE (see Figure 4). This comprises the three major factors that affect the relationship between general education and vocational education and training in a phase of increasing specialization, together with a set of governance relationships that affect the roles of education professionals and wider social partners. We hope that this multi-dimensional model provides some pointers

to what is required to address the specificities of the English context, but might also offer a broad framework for understanding the development of USE systems more widely.

(Figure 4 about here)

Applying this model in the English context we would propose that the respective dimensions in Figure 4 have the following broad characteristics:

1. *A unified curriculum and qualifications framework* for all young people that:
 - focuses on the relationship between general and vocational education rather than on their separation;
 - broadens general education by relating disciplinary, subject-based knowledge and wider 21st Century competences;
 - contains strong and enriched vocational programmes and pathways underpinned by relevant general education and 21st Century competences;
 - provides for early engagement with working life (from age 14) but delayed vocational specialization until age 16 and entry to the labour market after the age of 18;
 - comprises flexible programmes of study at inter-connecting levels thus building a ladder of progression within USE;
 - leads to a multi-level, overarching baccalaureate award at 18/19 as the means of transition to further/higher education and working life.

2. *A strongly collaborative local learning system* that involves all local stakeholders and uses a social partnership approach to improve USE and its relationship with tertiary education and the local economy. This would mean:
 - creating a powerful forum for institutional collaboration, partnership and planning of the curriculum and progression pathways on a local and sub-regional basis;
 - bringing together schools, colleges, work-based training providers, local regeneration agencies and higher education with the aim of developing 'high opportunity and progression eco-systems', Hodgson and Spours (2013c);

- providing the basis for the greater participation of social partners in developing a life-long learning strategy for the area;
 - developing linkages between education, training, the social infrastructure and the local economy;
 - agreeing an area-wide education and training plan supported by local government.
3. *An expansive and collaborative culture of professionalism that:*
- provides the context for a greater role for the professional voice and a move towards a high trust approach to change;
 - emphasises increasing quality in teaching, learning and assessment;
 - brings different professional cultures together to develop new communities of practice that are able to address complex local issues;
 - provides an infrastructure for continuous professional learning and the development of wider collaborative capacities at the local, regional and national levels;
 - promotes effective peer-to-peer support for institutional and local system improvement;
 - encourages democratic and horizontal forms of accountability that lead to new relationships with local communities.
4. *A devolved governance process, led by strong democratic values that:*
- sees the role of national government as upholding equity and national standards without the need for micromanagement at the levels below;
 - promotes regional networking to support skills eco-systems, Hall and Lansbury (2006) and 'Career Cluster approaches', Hamilton (2012);
 - facilitates the formation of new participative collaborative forums (see 2 above) that have powers to deliver change;
 - empowers local government to effectively co-ordinate local services; to be the champion of vulnerable learners and marginal communities and to encourage greater community involvement in education and training.

Given the deep-seated and uniquely divided English USE system based on the combined effects of historical divisions and neo-liberal policy that is taking the Anglo-

Saxon model to new extremes, it will be important that the four dimensions of the model work together as part of a comprehensive and gradualist approach to system change in England,...

We do not underestimate the challenges of operationalising the principles and proposals outlined above. However, from our reading of the national and international literature on USE and the empirical studies referred to earlier, there are many aspects of that already form part of other national systems and can even be seen at local level in England. We are also aware that it would be important to consider the possible tensions that may arise from integrating different epistemologies and reform trajectories. However, if the English USE system were to develop in this way in the future it would bring it much closer not only to its neighbours within the UK, but also to many of its European counterparts. Overcoming English exceptionalism will perhaps begin to dispel 'the heavy fog in the Channel'.

Part 4. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that as USE systems expand and become more universal, they also become more complex and multi-dimensional as they attempt to include all learners and balance the movement from general learning towards specialization, including the experience of vocational education and training.

In the English context we have proposed the development of a multi-dimensional analysis that is capable of appreciating the relationship between the following shaping factors – curriculum and qualifications; institutional arrangements; the development of education professionalism; and the governance landscape that encompasses the roles of national government, localities, education professionals and social partners, the ways in which policy is formulated and enacted and the wider economic and labour market context. Further research and debate is needed to challenge and refine these proposals and the tensions inherent within them.

It may be regarded as ironic that researchers from England should be calling for a more shared system analysis of USE given our exceptionalism and relative isolation.

In fact, it is precisely because of this characteristic and because we have suffered from a 'systemless system', Lawn (2013) that we are so interested in this form of analysis.

Furthermore, it appears from the international literature that USE systems more generally are under pressure to further develop 'systemness' by linking and even integrating these types of dimensions in order to provide a more inclusive and equitable experience for all learners and to keep open a range of education progression opportunities for as long as possible. How these dimensions manifest themselves and operate in each national system will depend, as it always has done, on historical and cultural factors and political preferences.

However, given what can be seen as a unifying logic, we suggest that a multi-dimensional analytical approach as outlined in this paper could facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how countries are linking and integrating the different dimensions of their USE systems in order to meet the needs of individuals, changing economies and the new societal pressures facing young people, particularly since the onset of the global recession in 2008.

Notes

1. 'Heavy fog in the Channel, Continent cut off' is taken from a Times headline on 22 October 1957. 'This English headline about a seemingly temporary weather condition in the English Channel has become an iconic quotation by all who are discussing a united Europe and English attitudes towards Europe and the European continent', <http://politicalquotes.org/node/19094>.

2. By 'upper secondary education' (USE) we mean the final phase of secondary education involving young people between the ages of 15 and 19. See OECD (2003) for definitions.

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