Academic Drift in Vocational Qualifications? Explorations through the Lens of

Literacy

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Abstract

Retention, attainment and progression have become key issues in post-compulsory education in the UK, as the policy agenda of increasing and widening participation has taken hold. Keeping students in the system, enabling them to gain qualifications and thereby progress to higher level courses is a key educational goal. Yet alongside increasing progression and attainment have emerged discussion of the nature and extent of academic drift within vocational education. This paper seeks to explore these issues in the context of the vocational curriculum in Further Education colleges in Scotland. Using the lens of literacy practices, we explore the ways in which the expectations upon students of the reading and writing associated with learning their subjects can illuminate the nature and extent of academic drift. We indicate evidence to suggest that there is increasing emphasis given to educational rather than occupational relevance in the vocational curriculum.

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Introduction

Retention, attainment and progression have become key issues in post-compulsory education in the UK, as the policy agenda of increasing and widening participation has taken hold. Keeping students in the system, enabling them to gain qualifications and thereby progress to either higher level courses or employment is a key educational goal. As a result, increasing numbers of students have stayed on in post-compulsory education and gained higher level qualification than in previous generations. This would appear to be somewhat obviously a 'good thing'. Yet, as with all policies, unintended consequences can also emerge. This paper seeks to explore the nature and extent of certain unintended consequences in the changes that have taken place in Further Education colleges in Scotland. In particular, it will focus at the level of the enacted curriculum on the issue of academic drift as an effect of the promotion of progression and attainment as educational goals. Academic drift generally is taken to entail the valuing and greater uptake of academic practices at the expense of vocational qualifications and practices. There are obvious conceptual challenges to ascribing all curricula to either the academic or vocational. Indeed, for us, it is perhaps more useful to work with a framework of the educational and occupational and explore whether there has been a drift towards greater relevance being given to educational goals in occupationally oriented curriculum. Conventionally, this would involve exploring the nature and extent of the increased valuing of academic practices within the vocational curriculum, and it is this which is the focus of the paper. Academic drift of this sort challenges many policy incitements

to give more vocational qualifications parity of esteem with more academic qualifications.

There has been extensive research on the issue of academic drift in the curriculum. One aspect of the influential Home International research project conducted by David Raffe and his colleagues within the UK was to explore issues of academic drift and parity of esteem in the post-compulsory education and training systems in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Raffe *et al* 2001). They were particularly concerned with exploring the implications of the unification of qualifications. Unification is taken to refer to the 'extent to which [the four countries] academic and vocational tracks are linked or brought together within a unified system' (Raffe *et al* 2001: 174). At the time of that study, the systems reflected various degrees of unification. They also drew upon data from the early 1990s. Their conclusion was that it was in the most unified of the systems, that of Scotland, that academic drift was greatest. The fact that the most unified of systems manifested the greatest degree of drift is significant, given that one of the rationales for a unified system is to precisely overcome academic drift and lack of parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications. The more unified the system therefore, in theory, the more 'academic drift is discouraged because a student who enters a vocational track has less to lose: there are easy opportunities to enter higher education, or to transfer back to the academic track' (Raffe *et al* 2001: 178). Yet this did not appear to be the result in the Scottish system.

Raffe and his colleagues drew upon the understanding of academic drift from the work of Green *et al* (1999). Here it was identified that drift could be manifested by an

increase in the absolute proportion of the age cohort taking academic qualifications and changes in the vocational track itself. Raffe *et al* examined academic drift drawing solely on data related to the first of these i.e. the proportion taking academic qualifications. However, they did not look at changes in the vocational track, which is our focus.

The study we have outlined examines the situation in the early 1990's. Since then, much has changed, not least the increased unification of the system in Scotland with the creation of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The former is the single awarding body for Scottish qualifications, other than those offered by universities. The latter is a credit framework that embraces all types and levels of learning, including that provided by universities. In a very real sense, the Scottish system has moved towards a more unified system over the years. What then has happened to academic drift?

In this article we draw upon empirical data from the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* (LfLFE, see www.lancs.ac.uk/lflfe) research project, administered by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), to explore the nature and extent of academic drift in the vocational curriculum. To do this, we are exploring changes in the vocational track through the lens of literacy. In other words, we are looking at the types of literacy practices in different curriculum areas to see the extent to which they reflect more or less academically relevant practices and if these have supplanted more occupationally relevant practices.

The LfLFE project examined the literacy requirements of 13 curriculum areas in four Further Education colleges, two in Scotland and two in England (Edwards and Smith 2005, Miller and Satchwell 2006, Ivanic *et al*. 2007). It also examined the literacy practices of students in those curriculum areas, both in their courses of study and in their everyday lives. The focus of the project was on literacy practices rather than simply individual literacy competencies or skills (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton *et al* 2000). By examining the types of literacy practices in which staff and students engage while teaching, learning and assessing in vocational subjects, we can get some indication of whether changes in the vocational track reflect academic drift within these curriculum areas. Here academic drift can be evidenced by students being required to engage in more extended reading and writing such as essay writing, rather than more occupationally relevant literacy practices. We are aware this is a somewhat crude marker, but for the types and levels of courses we researched, the expectation of extended reading and writing in the occupational arenas we explored is very limited. We are also aware that not all curricula areas fit neatly into either an academic or vocational category. We have grouped them thus on the basis of the vocational having more occupational relevance as curriculum.

We therefore use this lens of the literacy practices within the enacted curriculum to explore the nature and extent of academic drift in the vocational curriculum. In this article, we draw upon data from the Scottish colleges to examine these issues. Given the increased unification of the system since the study by Raffe *et al*, and the conclusions of that study, we might expect academic drift to have increased. Our project indicates there is some evidence of this. The article is in three sections. First, we briefly lay out the aims of the LfLFE project and its methodology. Second we

explore the data from the vocational curriculum areas for whether or not it shows evidence of academic drift. Finally, we point to some of the implications of our research.

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education Project

Academic drift was not the focus on the LfLFE project, but emerged as an issue from the analysis of the data. The LfLFE project researched the everyday literacy practices of students in further education colleges and those that are required for them to be successful in their chosen curriculum areas. Drawing on New Literacy Studies (Barton *et al.* 2000), the project viewed literacy as socially situated. While people's involvement with texts is observable, their engagements are shaped by feelings, values, expectations and histories. An understanding of literacy therefore includes what is done with the text, who is involved with the text, how the text is engaged, and why the text is engaged in this way, leading to questions of power, value and authority. Empirically then we distinguish between literacy events, those instantiated, observable moments of interaction with the text, and literacy practices, the ways of using texts that inform and shape each literacy event. Work in New Literacy Studies explores the diversity of literacy in which children, young people and adults engage (e.g. Barton and Hamilton 1998, Hull and Schulz 2004). This demonstrates the rich variety of practices which are part of people's daily lives, but also reveals that these practices are not always visible to those concerned, nor mobilised as resources within education provision. The task of the LfLFE project was not only to examine both the literacy requirements of different curriculum areas and students' own everyday literacy practices, but also to develop and research the impact of interventions that sought to mobilise everyday literacy practices as resources for learning.

The methodology informing this project was broadly ethnographic. We sought to describe in as much detail as possible the literacy practices required by the study of particular subjects, in becoming a further education student, and those that learners manifest in the diverse contexts of their lives. This dimension is largely descriptive as we attempted to understand the culture and rituals of further education, and the artefacts through which literacy is mobilised. We were trying to obtain 'thick description' from the inside rather than merely act as observers from the outside. For this reason, we were partnering further education staff and students as members of the research team rather than them being simply respondents (Carmichael and Miller 2006). The project was hermeneutic insofar as we recognised the recursive role of interpretation in the understanding of social practices, that is, the ways in which understanding is mobilised through the interrelationships between persons and artefacts and that these understandings help to shape future practices. We were therefore looking to understand as well as describe literacy practices, but from within rather than from outside or above.

This resulted in a mixed method approach to the project as a whole. The project had three phases. This article draws upon data analysis arising from Phase 2 of the project. Phase 2 ran between August 2004 and June 2005. Working collaboratively with 17 FE practitioners we examined the literacy practices and literacy requirements of 32 courses in 13 different subjects. We also worked with between three and nine volunteer students, randomly selected on each of those courses, to explore their literacy practices both in and outside the college, and to discuss their own perspectives on the literacy requirements of their courses. We used visual methods,

class observation, individual and group interviews, the collection of documents and the like to gather data. Students' involvement was shaped by their own enthusiasm for the project. Some students were interviewed on up to four occasions and were in regular dialogue with the research team either through meetings or email contact. Other students were interviewed on at least one occasion across the course of their study. Analysis of different data sources were used to warrant the robustness of our interpretations. The analysis is illuminative from which inferences rather than generalisations can be drawn.

Our focus in this article is on the data analysis of the vocational subjects within the Scottish colleges – Anniesland and Perth. The curriculum areas we are working with are Social Care, Multimedia, Accounting, Hospitality, Music and Construction. Within each of these curriculum areas we have examined two units at different levels. It is from analysis of tutor, student and documentary data that we draw in this article.

Academic Drift through the Lens of Literacy

In exploring academic drift through the lens of literacy we have to be sensitive to differences that might be explained by other factors. Variations between the two colleges could be explained by the different geographical locations and also the particular institutional cultures, curriculum and student groups that were prevalent in the individual colleges. On another level the different subject curriculum areas have their own culture and roots in their occupations and academic subject areas. Another important factor is the particular preferences and professional identities of the lecturers. Some have more of an allegiance to academia whereas others are more deeply embedded in the vocational area. The student body is also an important factor

to consider. It is important to note that student preferences do impact on what pedagogic strategies lecturers employ in teaching the curriculum (Bloomer 1997).

To say that there is or is not academic drift in the vocational curriculum is inevitably to simplify as there may be shifts over time in different directions and there can be differing perceptions of the significance of those shifts. Perspectives on this are neither consistent nor straightforward. By listening to how lecturers perceived the changes that had occurred in terms of the literacy practices involved in teaching, learning and assessing their courses, and by looking at the literacy practices engaged in by students and lecturers, we can get some idea of whether there is a process of academic drift occurring in their subject areas.

Some lecturers felt there had been more a process of dumbing down in vocational areas, although other identified a process of academic drift. Dumbing down was associated with both a narrowing of the curriculum and assessment driven practices. In relation to academic drift, many of the lecturers felt this process had been initiated by the SQA and then taken up by some lecturers who thought that courses had more status if they were more academically orientated. This feeling seemed to stem from aspirations towards students moving on to higher education, which was seen as having more esteem and prestige than entering employment for both students and staff. Thus the value placed on differential progression routes – higher education or employment – impacted upon the offering for students. There was, however, a tension between teaching for academic progression and teaching for occupational purposes. As James and Biesta (2007) also found, a number of lecturers were very concerned to ensure the vocational validity of their courses and were actively trying to preserve

this. However, they were aware also that it was necessary to keep options open for those students who wish to go on to higher education courses. This pedagogic approach would appear to derive from a tense dual desire. On the one hand, there is the desire to maintain retention and achievement statistics for the unit and therefore safeguard its future. On the other hand, there is the desire to help students achieve success through obtaining the relevant qualification that they need to pass onto the next stage of education or move into the workplace.

As with other studies of further education (Torrance *et al*. 2005), the data in this project suggests that the writing students do at all levels on the whole seems to be largely about preparing for and producing assessments. The focus of the lecturers is often to ensure that their students are provided with the content they need to pass the assessment, which can take various forms, some more relevant to the occupation than others. This in itself can be problematic however, because it assumes if we give the students the content they will be able to produce any kind of text. It does not recognise the complexities of genre and practices with the production of text – those mediations through which learning is represented.

This can be exemplified by one lecturer's insistence that the PowerPoint he used to teach a unit gave the students all the information they needed to pass the assessment. The lecturer was used to dealing with students who had negative prior educational experiences and was very conscientious in terms of coaching the students through the relevant material so that they could pass the assessment and succeed. Before participating in the project he had designed workbooks for this unit which so successfully did this that students could not see the point in coming to college. They

thought they had all the information and exercises in one place in the booklet and could work through them on their own. The lecturer of course had not really designed them with this in mind, as he considered the classroom interactions to also be of importance in getting the students through the assessments.

It was also noted that often the reading and writing that the students did as part of the learning within the classroom was very different from that which they have to do in the assessments. Some lecturers were not aware of the complexities of changing information from one genre into another. It is not necessarily the case that students can take information taught in one way and then transform the same information into a different genre without considerable support to enable them to do so (Ivanic 1997). This process requires the teacher to make explicit the sorts of things that need to change. The use of a text – e.g. genre, audience, purpose - is as important as the complexity of its content (Barton *et al*. 2000). This involves diverse tasks, for example, making links between the curriculum and the task, and relating back to practice to give purpose and encourage ownership.

It would seem from our data that the focus on teaching to assessment does not vary across different levels but that the range of literacy practices required for assessment does. This points to a second issue, which we might refer to as the literacy careers of the students. The lower and intermediate level units across all the subject areas used a wider range of text and required more diverse practices of reading and writing than the higher levels. One reason given for this was that it made units more interesting and stimulating for the students. However, it also required them to engage in a wide

range of literacy practices. They therefore received complex messages about what was necessary for them to succeed.

As they progress to higher level units, the literacy practices become more straight-forwardly academic in the sense they tend to require more extended reading and essay writing. There is thus a more consistent message to students about appropriate forms of reading and writing. They therefore receive a clearer trajectory for their literacy careers. There is a definite difference in emphasis between the levels. The lower down the levels of qualifications, the more practical activities are built in to the programmes and more varied the literacy demands are. At the higher levels, students are provided with a focused access to more academic literacy practices in the classroom. They are treated more formally and expected to do more homework. This oversimplifies, but points to the ways in which lower level courses may be more challenging to students from a literacy perspective than higher level courses. This confronts common sense understandings that the higher the level the more challenging the practices.

The use of texts that the students can relate to from their own experience seems to help them engage with the reading tasks more enthusiastically. These are mostly utilised in the lower level courses. For example, in one of the Childcare courses the lecturer used fashion magazines to select appropriate clothing and makeup for going on placement. This was extended to the use of magazines for discussion of issues of healthy eating etc. However, such texts would be deemed less appropriate in higher level units, as the literacy practices take on more academic forms. One Childcare lecturer remarked in an interview that the Higher National Certificate (HNC) has become more academic over time with less emphasis on practical occupationally

relevant experience and more of representing practice through academic style assignments. However, she was also adamant that the HNC in her faculty was still very vocational and that they were trying to keep it that way. However, she did think that courses had become more academically orientated generally and that there is a tension between vocational and academic practices in the classroom. This range of views by a single lecturer points to the volatility in the sector over trends and directions.

At the Higher National (HN) level lecturers appeared to feel more constrained by course descriptors. An HNC is supposed to be equivalent to the first year at university. There seemed to be a notion held by some lecturers and students that creative literacy practices are not credible at this level. In particular, the use and creation of images rather than texts was positioned as in some ways more 'childlike'. This indicates that progression tended to be associated with certain more conventional academic literacy practices, which involve extended reading and the writing of texts devoid of images. Higher level courses are assumed to be more academically relevant, thereby supporting some aspect of the argument regarding academic drift. Vocational courses therefore would seem to become more like academic courses, the higher the level.

The HN Music students we studied were mixed with first year degree students. It was suggested by some of the HN students that perhaps the course is made more academic in terms of tasks and assessments set for the benefit of the students who are on a degree programme. The students and the lecturer were able to identify a tension between what one needed to know to be a musician and what one needed to know to

become a graduate. One of the Music students remarked that often it was difficult to see the point of writing an essay or analysing a particular perspective when you just wanted to become a musician. HNC and HND students were tracked separately from the degree students studying Music. They did have certain classes in common, but the degree students were also given separate, more academically orientated classes. If an HND student wanted to transfer on to the degree programme, they had to do a bridging course which specifically taught academic skills such as analysis and theory. Many of the HN students did not progress onto the degree course and the tutor suggested that one reason for this could be that they were put off by the use of academic language and academically orientated assessment practices. It was remarked that SQA liked to make the courses academic in terms of the language used for assessments which consist of writing essays.

The music lecturer observed that many students 'switch off' when he starts talking about *analysis* and *criticism* in relation to academic texts. It was found from the data that many students read for pleasure about music in various ways, such as music magazines, biographies written by famous musicians or just novels that have some element of the Music industry as a theme. By contrast, the reading that students were required to do for their courses at HNC or HND level tended to consist of referring to text books which were in the library and then writing academic style essays. This had suggested to the lecturer that there may be a way of making course reading less 'dry' by bringing in more mixed genres of readings to which the students could relate. He had found that this could help students cross the bridge into using more academic literacy practices for the purpose of study. The focus then tends to be at higher levels

towards inducting students into more academic literacy practices whatever the curriculum area.

The ambiguity of terms used for assessment and classroom literacy practices further complicates the issue. An example of this is an Intermediate two Childcare unit (SCQF level 5) where students did many practically based activities in the classroom and also for assessment. However, even at this level the literacy practices asked for in the assessment activities involve academic-type language e.g. *discuss*, *evaluate*, and *research*. However, what is asked for and what is actually expected by tutors is not always the same. Literacy practices associated with academically orientated study are alluded to in course specifications and assessment instruments but in practice are not actually explicitly taught or even expected. The danger here is that students become used to seeing these terms but do not really understand what they mean. Similarly teachers take for granted that their students know what these terms mean when they are applied at higher levels. Students have not actually had to address these terms sufficiently at the lower levels to understand what is required at higher levels. This in itself suggests that academic drift can be described but is not necessarily enacted in the forms of writing produced by students – a well know distinction between the described and enacted curriculum (Bloomer 1997). Insofar as students are not able to do what is expected of them as they progress, so the charge of dumbing down can also take hold.

There is thus a dynamic interplay of factors in relation to academic drift. For instance, in an HNC unit on the Internet, students were asked to write an *essay* of 750 words describing the personal, professional and commercial uses of five internet services

such as e-mail and the World Wide Web. Although students identified it as problematic to write an essay of this length on the range of topics prescribed, they nonetheless felt it an appropriate genre of writing for an HN course. Both students and tutor felt an alternative way of tackling the task based on filling out a box chart would be inappropriate for their level of work, although the assessment task itself of describing uses does not actually require an essay format to provide adequate answers. Another example of tension between the described and enacted curriculum at HNC level was provided by a Childcare course where there was much emphasis on preparing the students for writing academic style essays in their assessment with Harvard referencing systems. However, when the assessment was observed it became apparent that actually it was a report that was required, which was divided into sections. The lecturer started using the terms report and essay interchangeably so that it would appear to the students that they were the same thing or at least the distinction was not made clear.

The lecturer for a Professional Chef course described the folios that the students needed to do for the Gleneagles Patisserie award as being a way of seeing if the student was able to do their own research on a topic and present the information in a professional manner. The unit was assessed by a practical exam in the kitchen, and the process of researching the ingredients used in patisserie cooking and presenting the information in a folio was seen to be a very important component of the course by both lecturer and students. They prepared something that they could take to interviews to demonstrate their ability to put together high quality presentations. The lecturer linked this to the ability to present oneself and one's cooking in a workplace context rather than to any specific academic values. We see here the language of 'research'

coming in even for a relatively low level course which one might consider to be very practically based. The point here is that the lecturer linked the literacy practices of research involved in the activity to the workplace rather than to the academic.

The new framework for HNC level courses in Professional Chef and Hospitality, which were introduced in 2006, had tried to make the courses more streamlined. Cross assessing between units had been cut because the industry liked the courses to be able to stand alone. The courses were highly linked to the industry. All courses were linked to the industry for work placements and some courses were directly linked to industry for teaching, and assessment purposes. The kitchen in the college was the centrepiece for this subject and functioned as a commercial kitchen that had real customers everyday. This goes one step further than a simulation as the kitchen, although used for training, also has a commercial agenda and has to be cost effective. Perhaps it is because the courses get their prestige from their relationship with industry that academic drift is not so necessary to enhance the prestige of the course.

Concluding Comments

The focus for this literacies project was not the issue of academic drift. However, as we came to analyse the data, it was clear that at the level of the enacted curriculum, the literacy practices of students could be drawn upon to illuminate this further issue. The above data points to the complexity of the issues and diversity of literacy practices that are engaged in across the subject areas and the different possibilities for academic drift to be at play within the curriculum. There is no single conclusion to be drawn from this data. There is evidence of academic drift in the literacy practices of higher level vocational courses, where extended forms of reading and writing become

more of the norm and we take this to be a sign of more educational than occupational relevance as a set of practices. This may be inherent in progression, but also raises questions of the occupational relevance of those practices to the person learning them. Also of concern is the lack of occupationally relevant literacy practices in terms of progression to the workplace for the more academically orientated courses. In terms of the argument for parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications, it appears that while academic literacy practices are being developed in the vocational track the reverse is not the case.

We have been able to highlight some of this complexity through the lens of literacy practices. From our data there would seem to be a move in parts of the vocational curriculum towards more educational literacy practices. What this suggests overall is that notions of parity of esteem between qualifications look somewhat optimistic, when one follows the practices in play within the vocational curriculum. The sheer amount of translation between the prescribed, described and enacted curriculum, and the variety of literacy practices engendered suggests that we will be discussing questions of academic drift for a long time to come, and that perhaps it is one of the structuring binaries of educational debate, at least within Scotland and the UK. It also points to the need for more research on the enacted curriculum and on occupationally relevant literacy practices.

Note

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