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'Front-loaded' vocational education versus lifelong learning: a critique of current UK government policy.

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**‘FRONT-LOADED’ VOCATIONAL EDUCATION VERSUS
LIFELONG LEARNING.**

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**‘FRONT-LOADED’ VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
VERSUS LIFELONG LEARNING. A CRITIQUE OF CURRENT UK
GOVERNMENT POLICY**

It seems negative and churlish to complain about the use of a phrase like ‘lifelong learning’, since the attractions of lifelong ignorance are difficult to describe. However, this alluring phrase repays closer scrutiny. It is our contention that its indiscriminating use, particularly when applied to vocational education, carries significant dangers. To be specific, we contend that while vocational expertise continues to grow over a working lifetime, the initial period of vocational education is vital to success in those occupations that require skill, knowledge and judgement. In economic terms, failure to attend to the initial period of vocational education compromises attempts to run the economy as a high-skill equilibrium that uses skilled labour to satisfy a demand for high-quality goods and services (Finegold 1991; Crouch 1999; Culpepper 1999; Brown 2001). In personal terms, young people’s ability to develop their lives in their working environment is seriously compromised. This, in turn, compromises one of the aims of their education, to choose a satisfying and worthwhile life.

Introduction: concepts and definitions

One of the problems with discussions of the relationship between education, training and work is the fluid nature of the terminology employed. In what follows, we attempt to clarify some key concepts and set out the definitions that we intend to apply to them. The term *task* refers to specific activities that someone may undertake, such as sawing wood or

assembling a frame. *Job*, on the other hand, refers to the particular individual employment contract to work for a particular firm. To say that so and so's *job* is to install kitchens is to specify a range of *tasks* to perform as part of their employment contract for a particular firm. 'Occupation' refers to the category of labour that carries out such work; a kitchen fitter will also belong to the *occupation* of carpenter or joiner.

It should be obvious that one could be employed in a series of different jobs, each of which involved an array of tasks within the same occupation, for instance, in the case of a carpenter/joiner as a suspended ceiling fitter, a first or second fix carpenter, a furniture maker, shop fitter, or exhibition erector – to name but a few. It is important not to leap to the conclusion that someone has moved through more than one occupation merely because they have changed jobs on successive occasions. In this sense, an occupation is a formally recognised social category. An occupation has a regulative structure concerning training, qualification, promotion and the range of knowledge, both practical and theoretical, that is required to undertake the range of tasks that fall within it. Occupations such as teaching and medicine are occupations in this sense because their recognition is rooted in the regulative structure of society. Some such occupations gain the status of *professions* for reasons that may have to do with social and political pressure, but which also require qualification at least at degree level.

These distinctions imply three levels of skill. 'Skill' refers to ability based on some permutation of dexterity, practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge and social ability. Skill at a task is the ability to carry out that particular task. Skill in the context of a firm is

the ability to do a particular job as specified by the employer or by a contract to carry out a commission. Skill at the level of an occupation, on the other hand, concerns the ability or potential ability to fulfil all the tasks associated with or negotiated for an occupation. There are different levels of complexity associated with skills in each sense. Although a skill in the task sense may involve theoretical as well as practical knowledge, skill in the job sense often involves an array of skills in the *task* sense. What is more, skill in this latter sense requires a specification of the broader context into which the individual tasks are integrated, together with an awareness of how the job is related to other jobs. Skill at the occupational level on the other hand, involves an awareness of the aims, values and social significance of the occupation as well as a knowledge of the range of tasks involved, the different ways in which these may be organised in different firms and how the occupation may alter as a result of social, economic and technological developments. In other words, skill in an occupational sense entails significant transferability between different jobs. It is also generally skill in this sense that is propagated by employees, it being in their interest to acquire skills of a more long-term nature, to equip them over a working life. Employers, on the other hand, are more interested in skills in the task sense, for the immediate job in hand.

This hierarchy of complexity in the sense of 'skill' is important because the more the concern with skill formation in the occupational sense, the more there is to learn that is non-task specific and independent of the context of the particular task in hand or even of the particular job for which one is employed. It follows that initial skill formation is likely to be a very different process according to whether one is concerned with task, job or occupation. In what follows we will use the term 'initial skill formation' to refer to skill in

the occupational sense. This is because any form of skill formation that is undertaken partly outside the workplace and that has as an outcome some form of socially recognised qualification is inevitably going to be concerned with a context broader than that of the individual task or job.

A Low-skill Equilibrium

This issue is important for the UK as the evidence suggests that important sections of our economy are run as a low-skill equilibrium in which low-skill labour is locked into producing goods and services for low-wage consumers. While running large parts of the economy as a low-skill equilibrium may produce profits in the short to medium term, it is not a viable long-term option for a developed society (Keep and Mayhew 1995, 1999; Ashton and Green 1996; Brown et al. 2001). Neither should the human cost of low levels of interest and satisfaction at work be ignored, not to mention low levels of pay and low quality of output. Running an economy as a low-skill equilibrium also makes nonsense of attempts to persuade young people to increase their take-up of education, as it knocks away one of the major incentives for incurring the opportunity costs of prolonged study. When a significant part of the population is poorly educated, the chances of their continuing to learn during their adult lives are also diminished (Bainbridge and Murray 2000, 91-92).

The two issues of success in compulsory education and the possibility of high skill-oriented initial post-compulsory education are intimately connected. On the one hand, good vocational education requires relatively high levels of numeracy and literacy, together with a continuing disposition to learn. On the other, motivation at the secondary

level requires the prospect of training for satisfying and well-paid work. Policies for schooling, for vocational education and for economic development are interdependent, since the economic demand for skills has implications for the supply of those skills and their prerequisites (Ashton and Green 1996, Winch 2000). In other words, failure to develop post-compulsory vocational education will compromise economic development (Prais 1995).

Initial Skill Formation

In dealing with the issue of ‘front-loading’ of vocational education (where most of it takes place before work, rather than during employment), it is most important to make a distinction that is too often ignored. *Initial skill formation* concerns the preparation of young people for work in a particular occupation or industry, like engineering, construction or teaching. It involves: building on school-based education; the acquisition of a range of knowledge and abilities that are transferable within an occupation or industry, together with an inculcation into the aims, history and values associated with that skill area or industry. Such initial skill formation assumes that young people will enter the labour market and spend the greater part of their working lives within a certain industry or a closely related one.

The two traditional forms of initial skill formation in Europe have been forms of apprenticeship or traineeship on the one hand and professional education on the other. With increasing emphasis on applied theoretical knowledge, the nature of apprenticeship, particularly in continental Europe, has altered considerably. The theoretical element has

become much more significant, often involving extended block release from the workplace. While learning in the workplace continues to be an important part of the process, it is now integrated in a complex structure that includes work simulation and practice and supervised operational performance in the workplace. An alternative to apprenticeship is *alternance* (Green, Wolf and Leney 1999), which also involves periods in a college or institution of higher education together with work-based experience, but where the student is not an employee. Finally, college-based further education provides both theoretical knowledge and simulation within the college environment, though with relatively little or no opportunity for supervised operational performance. It can be seen that the 'front-loading' model includes a variety of practices, some of which provide more opportunity for broad-based skill formation than others.

Training, on the other hand, in the work context, involves the acquisition of job-specific or firm-specific skills and knowledge. While training may take place as part of skill formation, when, for example, students are taught generic occupation-relevant skills, in the context of employment it tends to be job-specific.

Initial skill formation is thus necessarily a front-loaded affair, since it is a preparation for *entry* into an occupation or rather an industry. *Training*, however, carries no such connotation. Although formation and training are mutually complementary, they have different roles in preparation for work.

Lifelong Learning and the Flexible Labour Market

The advocacy of lifelong learning represents a pragmatic response to the alleged fact that the average worker may have to change his or her job perhaps six times in a working lifetime. To train someone for a career as, say, an engineer when in the real economy engineering jobs may no longer exist is, it is argued, futile and wasteful: better to provide training and counselling when it is needed or, alternatively, training in the skills required to search and be selected for a job (Robinson 1996, p.10). In this rapidly changing and contingent world the progression of workers from one job to another, together with their associated training, is conceptualised as a *learning career*, involving successive but not necessarily cumulative learning experiences, each dependent on the varying employment pattern of the individual concerned (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000 – this is the one that I need to check out and which I suspect gives the reference to learning careers).

This *postmodern* version of lifelong learning has powerful attractions compared with the traditional concept of training for a lifetime in one industry. But does it correspond to the needs of individuals, firms or the economy as a whole? Three key premises are that: 1) in contemporary economic conditions the structure of work is changing ever more rapidly; 2) more work is being carried out on a non-permanent basis; 3) employees are having increasingly to change not only their jobs but also their skill area or industry. These are essentially empirical claims that require evidence before they can be accepted. Even if proven, they may anyway simply represent a response to reliance on a narrow low-skill base rather than an inevitable feature of the labour market. They also beg the questions: ‘Should these changes occur?’ and ‘Can societies regulate this kind of change?’ (Cousins 1999).

Since the 1970s, employment security in some sectors has certainly declined. This is associated with the weakening of trade unions and employment legislation; structural changes involving high unemployment in some areas; and change in the international division of labour, leading to over-capacity in some sectors (eg. motor vehicles, textiles). Employees have become much more aware of the experience of unemployment, and lower skilled workers are less organised and more vulnerable to unemployment. Indeed, those who have experienced a period of unemployment are more likely to have repeat experiences (Gallie et al. 1998, Chapter 5).

The premise that more work is being carried out on a non-permanent basis, sometimes known as the *core-periphery* theory, holds that a relatively secure, permanent and skilled workforce is supplemented by a numerically increasing, lower-skilled, temporary and part-time workforce that can be 'stood down' as economic conditions dictate (Atkinson and Meager 1986). Evidence for the UK contradicts this picture. Between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, the overall proportion of temporary and part-time employment remained stable (Robinson 1999). Furthermore, temporary workers tend to be relatively young, suggesting that temporary employment represents a specific early career phase. A contrast should be drawn between the use of temporary workers (who tend to be concentrated in certain sectors) and part-time and short-term temporary workers. The latter tend to experience greater job insecurity, more intense work pressure, fewer opportunities for training and fewer opportunities for career progression.

While the experience of unemployment has had an increasing impact on the workforce and there is little doubt that since the early 1990s some categories of employee previously little affected have now had experience of unemployment, there is little sign of the kind of job, let alone occupational mobility, that is posited as one of the driving forces behind 'lifelong learning' (Gallie 1998). Insofar as these tendencies do exist, they do so within the low-skill, short-term, temporary and part-time workforce, rather than within the workforce as a whole. Indeed, stability is vital in areas where high skill levels are deployed, not only for the effective use of skills but to allow for their further development. The evidence also suggests that there has been a long-term tendency for skill levels within the workforce to rise over the last fifteen years (Gallie 1998; Crouch 1999; Brown 2001). As Gallie comments:

Our evidence indicates that employers responded to increasingly rapid technological change and to more intense market competition primarily by raising skill levels and by job enrichment rather than by the degradation of work. The most striking feature of our data is the very extensive upskilling of the workforce. (p. 55)

The suggestion is that employers are investing more in their workforces and hence showing more commitment to retaining them. Thus, aggregate data have tended to mask sectoral differences and, in particular, to bring to the fore the extensive occurrence of low-skill work among certain categories of the workforce. The initial level of skill formation is not expanding to any significant extent, so that anyway raising skill levels depends largely on job-specific training rather than on a broadening and deepening of skills and knowledge. This means that one has to qualify carefully the sense in which the UK is

developing as a high-skill economy. It is possible to upgrade skill levels to an extent through training without prior initial skill formation, but there is a limit to how far that process can be taken and its effectiveness. The Gallie data is, then, compatible with a partial move towards upskilling without a fundamental change in orientation towards a high-skill equilibrium. In the absence of evidence of an increase in initial skill formation, it seems reasonable to assume that this is what has been taking place in the UK. However, to term this process 'lifelong learning' is to dignify it with a title much grander than the reality implies.

The most critical point is that in comparisons across different European countries the levels of initial skill formation and training and the existing skill of the workforce in the UK are inevitably found to be lower (e.g. Clarke and Wall 1996 and 1998a; Crouch et al. 1999; Brown et al. 2001). In construction, for example, job insecurity and mobility are higher in Britain compared with other countries, suggesting that these are themselves characteristics of a low-skill equilibrium. At the same time, the quality of the final product and productivity levels appear to be lower in the UK (HM Treasury 2000). The implication is that there is no absolute relation between a job or occupation and the level of skill, and that further encouragement to learning on the job at the expense of initial skill formation may actually serve to continue to prop up a low-skill equilibrium.

In the British construction industry the reasons for the association between low skills and job insecurity can be clearly pinpointed. Casual and self-employment of the majority of the workforce, low levels of initial training and the reliance on the goodwill of individual

contractors – many of whom do not even employ labour directly – to take on trainees, all serve to reinforce a generally low level of skills and to militate against their further development (Clarke and Wall 1998b). In these circumstances learning on the job is often the only way to acquire skills, unlike in other countries with comprehensive and intense programmes of initial skill formation covering almost all new entrants into the industry and taking place in colleges and workshops and on sites. The result in Britain is that skills remain job or firm specific and difficult to transfer, unlike for those with a broad-based initial programme of skill formation, who are well versed in the more abstract skills of, for instance, mathematics, able to set out, plan and control their own work, to read drawings and to carry out work without supervision (Steedman 1992; Clarke and Wall 2000; Lauder 2001). The question posed, therefore, is whether life-long learning is synonymous with learning on the job and at the expense of initial skill formation.

There is, in fact, little evidence to suggest that the ‘learning career’ model is an appropriate way of conceptualising the training patterns of most of the workforce. And the tendencies towards upskilling the workforce point to the increasing importance both of initial education or skill formation and of post-compulsory vocational education in securing a place in the labour market. We now need to consider the extent to which the current vocational education system in Britain meets these needs.

Current Government Policy on Training

Introduction

The Learning and Skills Act.

The Learning and Skills Act, based on the White Paper 'Learning to Succeed', is the current government's attempts to rationalise and reform the voluntarist post-16 system set in place by the previous government. The new policy allows us to evaluate the degree to which there is a coherent model of vocational education available to address the problems of a low-skill equilibrium in Britain.

The key administrative issue that the Act addresses is the split in funding provision, on the one hand through the Training and Education Councils (TECs) and on the other through the FE colleges (funded by the FEFC). Not only were many of the TECs thought to be inefficient, but a dual system led to duplication of effort. On the one hand, there was an employer and government demand-led system run via the TECs and, on the other, a government and student demand-led system run through the Further Education colleges. The requirements of all three are now channelled through the Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs).

Employers will not be a majority on the LSCs, but they will be the largest single group (40%). This will give them considerable influence on the policy of the colleges as well as of private training providers, so their influence will hardly be diminished. Despite the proclaimed Third Way reliance on the market (eg. Giddens 1998), the model the

government is adhering to – though recognising that there are problems with skills provision on this basis – remains the classical one. In classical and neo-classical economic theory, including the Austrian variety, the market is regarded as an information-transmitting device that allows knowledge about demand to become available to potential suppliers and knowledge about supply to become available to potential customers. Deals can then be done at the market price. One of the main functions of the LSCs is to act as market-substitute, information-clearing organisations. The idea is that changes in employer demand (‘job skill shortages’) will be rapidly identified so that the supply side can be brought on stream to deal with them. The intention is to tailor the system to a presumed demand, on the assumption of a tight fit between skills and jobs. Does this not therefore simply imply job-specific, short-term training to meet immediate requirements rather than the long-term development of a skill basis adaptable to change, with skills potentially transferable from one occupation or industry to another? In other words, can a programme of upskilling, based on a presumed mechanical match between skill supply and job demand, succeed? Is the problem a mismatch between supply and demand or related rather to the existing nature and level of both?

Will the new proposals change the labour market situation?

In one sense, by making information about demand and supply more transparent, the LSCs may have a positive impact. The idea is that *need* will translate into *training*, which will in turn translate into *skills* and hence into *jobs*. But just providing information will not necessarily lead to the provision of high-skill jobs or high-skill labour to do them. Employers locked into a low-skill equilibrium are pursuing a business strategy that is

rational for them, there being little point in training workers, especially if there is a risk that someone else will recruit them. The costs of training have to be spread so that individual employers do not bear excessive financial risk in training. Modern apprenticeships are partly funded by employers, partly by government, but the risk that skilled workers will be recruited by rivals remains. Only for the construction industry is there a statutory training levy to compensate training firms for the opportunity costs involved in training rather than doing something else.

The main problem with the model proposed is over-reliance on employer demand and an assumption that provision of job skills through training is what is required rather than skill formation for an occupation. Work organisation is based on available skills and employers will tend to base any assessment of skill requirements on this. Their requirements are also necessarily short-term and job-specific, to fill an existing place rather than to develop a long-term skill base for society. Their interest is not with training as such, but with its outcome. It is employees rather who have a greater interest in long-term processes of skill formation and on being equipped with skills transferable across a range of occupations.

The model proposed in the Learning and Skills Act is a *reactive* one. It is not a major part of the plan either to *anticipate* skill needs, to raise existing skill levels and to change the nature of skills or to create new and/or transferable skills. Nor are policies under consideration: 1) to deal with the free-rider issue of firm-specific training; 2) to regulate the labour market through a licence to practice, thus obliging firms to employ properly qualified labour; 3) to involve employees to a greater extent in vocational education

organisations through more tripartite structures; 4) to direct resources towards activities of national priority; and 5) to establish a coherent, comprehensive and broad-based system of initial skill formulation. The new policy will not do any of these things, so that it is fair to regard it as an extension of the previous government's voluntarist and employer-based policy.

Initial Skill Formation Policy

In relation to initial skill formation, the expansion and reform of the Modern Apprenticeship programme is the most significant new development in the government's programme, with the provision of £30m for expansion. The intention is to rationalise the qualification structure and provide for two levels of Modern Apprenticeship, the Foundation Modern Apprenticeship and the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (the latter leading to a qualification that allows progression to courses in Higher Education). Take-up is contingent on young people and on the individual employer. A new set of theoretical Vocational Qualifications is being developed that is designed to address the gaps in theoretical knowledge endemic in the NVQ qualification (DfEE 1999). Even the expanded Modern Apprenticeship programme still leaves only a small proportion of young people in the 16-24 group engaged in work-based learning or other training, the lowest level in the whole of the European Union (European Commission 2000, p.23). About 40% are in training – less than half of these in work-based training, compared with about 60% in Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands. In 1999-2000, the number of young people in England and Wales starting on work-based training was 260,000 (of whom one-

third were on Advanced Modern Apprenticeships and one-third on Foundation Modern Apprenticeships), much the same as a decade ago (DfEE 2000, Table 1).

The problem is that the scale of the remedy is not appropriate to the seriousness of the situation, including the fact that the productivity gap between Britain and other European countries appears to be widening rather than decreasing. Labour Productivity Growth rates in percentages per annum between 1973 and 1996 were: UK 2.22; France 2.79; German 2.56; US 0.77. These figures refer to the increase in labour productivity per worker, rather than per worker hour, and so are probably an underestimate of the underlying differences in performance (HM Treasury 2000, p. 5, Chart 1.2). There is strong evidence that productivity is closely linked to vocational education in the broad sense and that increased and better quality training is a necessary precondition of improved productivity (Bainbridge and Murray 2000, p.121). Properly trained workers are individually more productive, autonomous, committed, capable of varied and complex operations and able to undertake new tasks than untrained ones.

But the problems with the Modern Apprenticeship go deeper. First, the low take-up of the scheme is closely connected with defects in the way in which the employee status of the apprentice is handled, leading to poor financial incentives for the employer to take on apprentices. Second, it is not based on a carefully devised initial skills formation scheme, including block release in college and simulated work experience in workshops combined with monitored periods at work; indeed, employers can simply send apprentices to college for one day a week, or even train them purely on the job, as they did in the 1950s. Third,

many employers are dissatisfied with the academic standards associated with NVQ Level 3 (Gospel and Fuller 1998). And finally, there are difficulties in progression onto higher education courses with NVQ Level 3, making it a relatively 'impermeable' qualification and therefore less attractive to both employers and employees.

Current policy on initial skill formation represents a patching up of an unsatisfactory situation rather than the result of a measured consideration of what is required to develop a skilled workforce. The whole issue of the mix between the work-based, simulation and theoretical aspects of vocational qualifications needs to be thought through. Doing so involves the government, employers, colleges and the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) working together to produce a vocational education scheme and a work-based qualification that combines practical experience with academic credibility.

How will current government policy meet more abstract skill requirements?

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in considering policies to meet the need for more abstract and transferable skills, particularly for those aged 18 and above: 1) the provision of an appropriate level of applied theoretical knowledge; 2) the integration of knowledge with practical experience; and 3) the provision of 'permeable' qualifications that allow progression into higher education. The 18+ route to these opportunities through full-time education is reasonably well established through degrees and HNDs. However, the HND has become markedly less popular in recent years, one of the reasons being that it, too, has limited permeability, since upgrading of the HND to a degree level qualification is not always easy without losing credit already gained through achieving a HND. The

part-time route is even more fragile. This is important, because a failure to develop the skill and knowledge levels of workers who have already made a commitment to an industry threatens to deprive that industry of the talents of some of its most experienced practitioners, as well as demotivating them by closing down career opportunities (the permeability problem also occurs with the HNC, the part-time equivalent of the HND).

As well as the ‘poaching’ problem, the other critical issue is the provision of qualifications that allow for progression onto courses where theoretical demand is greater. NVQ Level 3, although formally aligned with the A-level standard, is in fact very different, because its award relies on the ability to practise in a limited number of situations rather than on the ability to apply knowledge acquired. For example, someone may achieve NVQ Level 3 without displaying significant mathematical knowledge (Steedman 1992). Yet in many occupations, progression to HNC or HND is contingent upon a reasonable standard of mathematical ability.

The theoretical vocational qualification seeks to address the lack of theoretical rigour in NVQs at Level 3 and below. However, the issue for vocational qualifications is whether or not they are capable of ensuring the *integration* of theoretical and practical elements. An additional qualification does little or nothing to address this issue, which would involve a much more radical restructuring of the vocational education qualification structure.

A closely related issue concerns the *permeability* of qualifications and whether or not they leave open routes to more advanced qualifications (see Green, Wolf and Leney 1999 for

European comparisons). This is compromised by the lack of theoretical rigour up to NVQ3. If work-based qualifications cannot lead to progression to qualifications at higher technician and graduate level, their value as a form of career development is going to be severely limited. This shortcoming constitutes another reason why fundamental reform of the NVQ system needs to be undertaken.

However, no large-scale rethink of these lower and intermediate qualifications seems to be currently considered. Without such a reform, the appeal of the HNC and HND is likely to remain more limited than it need be. The proposed new Associate Degree will compete with the HNC and HND in the market for higher vocational qualifications, with the crucial advantages not only of the degree title but of highly permeable access to full degree status. The existence of a suitable route for technical workers is, in other words, being threatened without ensuring that there is anything adequate to put in its place. The problems with the HND/HNC route can be addressed if lower level qualifications are reformed. Even if this is not done, the Accredited Prior Learning (APL) value of these qualifications can be clarified and spelled out, so that higher education institutions can give proper credit to a HNC/HND diplomate, allowing individuals to make more rapid progress to degree status. In relation to the associate degrees, there is no guarantee that such courses will have the robust practical, vocational and work-based content currently offered by Higher National qualifications.

The larger issue here is that of ensuring a post-compulsory, continuous and permeable set of qualifications that allow young people to continue to accumulate qualifications while

pursuing vocationally oriented education, either while working or on a full-time course, or some combination of the two. It should be possible to leave school with a mixture of vocational and non-vocational GCSEs, to continue to a Level 3 qualification (preferably one that integrates theoretical and practical elements in one package), then on to HND and finally to accumulate sufficient credits at HND level to be able to proceed to a degree.

Given current concern about participation rates in post-18 education, a permeable vocational track that can be followed in both full- and part-time modes would seem most suitable to those who wish to develop work-relevant knowledge and skills and, at the same time, increase their level of personal education and their place in the labour market.

Non-front loaded initiatives: the University for Industry and Individual Learning Accounts

The government has introduced two initiatives that promise to cater for those who either do not wish to undertake significant amounts of initial vocational education or who wish to continue upgrading their skills on a short-term basis.

What relevance do these have for the learning career outlook? There is little doubt that on-line learning of a highly specific nature, such as is envisaged by the University for Industry (Ufi), has a valuable role to play in occupation-specific reskilling or upskilling. Its effectiveness presupposes, however, the prior acquisition of skills in the relevant area, so it can be no substitute for initial skill formation. The most that can be said about Individual Learning Accounts is that they may make a contribution to the kind of reskilling described above. The sums of money involved, however, do not begin to match the needs of any

serious form of skill formation. Need to say something about their demise. (See FT last week, 15th or 16th I think)

Combining Initial Skill Formation and Life-long Learning

In certain important respects, government policy does propose a front-loaded approach for young entrants to the labour market through Modern Apprenticeships. This is why it has attracted the criticism of ‘postmodern’ vocationalists. However, there are insufficient elements of *skill formation* in current proposals and practice, and too much emphasis is placed on non-transferable *job-specific training*. From the point of view of an employer in a low-skill environment, the decision whether or not to train for occupational level skills can be seen as a ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’ type of co-ordination situation (Varoufakis and Hargraves-Heap 1995). The dominant strategy of an employer where there is not a strong skill-driven occupational labour market is *not* to train. Training one’s employees poses the risk that they will be employed by someone else who has not incurred the training costs (thus enabling them to offer more favourable terms of employment), while not training allows an employer to adopt the converse strategy vis à vis other employers who do train. When none train, no loss is incurred. Where the others do train, on the other hand, non-training employers have the opportunity to use their saved non-training costs to employ the workers that others have trained at favourable rates. We are not claiming that a compulsory training levy is the only route out of the Prisoner’s Dilemma, but that some form of centralised state initiative that provides incentives and removes disincentives to employers to ensure that they have an interest in training their employees is required in order to develop high levels of occupational skill.

The current reluctance to introduce an initiative that ensures that training costs are shared, increases the tendency of employers to protect their investment by training in non-transferable skills. The government approach to vocational education issues shares a crucial assumption with the postmodern vocationalists about the current and future state of the labour market: that the future will involve matching the skills of people to jobs. These jobs are then seen to exist for such short periods of time that workers can expect to change their employment frequently in a working life. Even were this the case, it would imply an even greater necessity for highly transferable skills and a thorough grounding in a particular industry.

The government's and the postmodernists' failure to distinguish between initial skill formation and training leaves them in a curious position. On the one hand, if lifelong vocational learning consists of nothing but repeated episodes of *training*, then the postmodernists are right and front-loading is unnecessary. But the embarrassing conclusion for both must be that the labour market will be even more dominated by low, non-transferable skills, as it is simply not possible to have repeated episodes of initial skill formation leading to many years of vocational education in a working lifetime of no more than 49 years. What one can have, of course, is a period of initial skill formation followed by periodic further training in specific aspects of a chosen occupation. Ironically, the better and the more universal the initial skill formation, the less the requirement overall for further training. Experience in other European countries has also shown that the higher the degree of initial general and vocational education, the more episodes of job-specific

training a worker is likely anyway to have. In other words, the more highly skilled initially, the more the further training received. The fact that skilled workers operate in occupations with rapid changes in technology and market conditions accentuates this tendency (Bainbridge and Murray, 2000, 89-92). For the UK this involves more attention being paid to initial skill formation than is currently the case.

Neither the low-skill equilibrium issue nor the need for *integrated* front-loaded vocational education is tackled. Young people not on apprenticeship schemes have to second guess the labour market. It is not surprising that many of them forego the risk of spending a couple of years pursuing a course that may not lead to a job in favour of going straight into paid employment if it is available. Front-loaded vocational education that does not include a work-related element is neither skill formation (it does not induct young workers into an industry, as with an apprenticeship) nor training (it does not equip them with skills that are directly applicable in a particular workplace).

In this context an assessment can be made of the proposals of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) concerning the learning career and future working lives of young people now entering the labour market. The movement suggested, from one unrelated job to the other, is characteristic of the situation of the unskilled, casually employed and those who have not yet settled on an occupation. There is little empirical evidence to support the idea that this is the employment pattern of the future, except in some limited areas that employ a high proportion of short-term contract workers. The kind of learning career path advocated by Hodkinson et al. is the fate of those who cannot or do not wish to settle into an

occupation. The kind of uncertainty exhibited in the research of Foreman-Peck suggests that this is the result of poor knowledge by young people of their own potential and of what are realistic labour market choices. Advice given by career advisers is very often inadequate (Foreman-Peck 1999). In other words, young people often lack detailed knowledge of labour market conditions and lack the skill to make wise decisions about their futures. But they cannot make such decisions without the existence of a coherent initial skill formation scheme and reasonably stable occupational frameworks that provide a genuine choice on which to base long-term decisions. The kind of 'technical-rational' approach to decision-making, whereby young people audit their current skills, specify career aims and outline the learning programme by which these are to be achieved, is not available for most young people (Foreman-Peck, op.cit.). But this does not imply that there cannot be a pragmatically rational approach that combines elements of self-knowledge of aptitudes and interests, specialist knowledge of the labour market and culturally influenced preferences. Such an approach is quite capable, given the necessary support of others, including parents, career advisers, interested friends and experienced adult workers, of allowing young people to make rational decisions about their long-term future, provided that there are reasonably stable conditions in the labour market.

Conclusion

Given the unregulated nature of labour market entry and the disorderly qualification system in this country, young people need occupational structures and well-established and reasonably secure routes into the labour market through vocational education if they are to make choices that result in obtaining a satisfying and continuing job. As we have seen,

most people wish to work in permanent, interesting and reasonably remunerated occupations. The VET system recognises the need for initial qualifications, but fails to provide the articulations between economic development, forms of vocational education that integrate theoretical and practical elements, and a well-designed qualification structure. That many young people still drift from one low-paid, low-skilled job to another is not something to be applauded or encouraged, but is symptomatic of a waste of economic resources and personal futures. The solution is not to abandon 'front-loading' in vocational education, but to provide structures and qualifications that combine theoretical, simulatory and practical elements within a scheme that apportions a proper division of labour between college and workplace. All this needs to be done within a coherent qualification structure that pays due regard to applied theoretical knowledge, the mastery of skills and their application. This cannot be done on its own. The government needs to integrate such a VET system with a programme of economic development that identifies the sectors to be developed and provides the infrastructure for their coherent development. Current government policy, including the Learning and Skills Act, conspicuously fails to do this.

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