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# Qualification Reform and the Decline of Vocational Learning in England

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Over the last thirty years the English Government has undertaken a series of policy initiatives intended to improve the initial vocational learning system for 16 and 17 year olds. These initiatives have had two main purposes: to renew the national skills base and so engender higher rates of economic growth and to promote the social inclusion of lower attaining pupils. Achieving the first purpose is typically associated with increasing the proportion of the workforce with Level 3 qualifications, especially those related to intermediate and technical skills, the latter with increasing the participation rate of lower attaining learners in post-compulsory education and training (PCET).

To achieve these outcomes two major types of policy instrument have been used. First the reform of vocational qualifications and frameworks: the introduction of new full-time vocational qualifications such as the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and Vocational Certificates of Education (VCE) for use in FE colleges and schools; the successive elaboration of core, then key, skill qualifications; and several reforms of the work-based training frameworks. Second the development of a learning market in which money followed the learner and different types of educational institution (and employers) actively compete for 16 year olds. This market provides the inducement for the entry of new players to provide vocational learning, notably Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges. The question addressed here is the extent to which these policies have been successful in achieving the aims of skill renewal and social inclusion. This is undertaken through the examination of the changing patterns of participation of 16 and 17 year olds in post-

compulsory education and training who lack a level 2 qualification. This issues paper focuses on policy for the latter group.

## Types of Vocational Qualification

Exactly what constitutes a vocational qualification (VQ) is currently the subject of much debate. VQs differ in regulatory status, level, size, content and mode of assessment. Currently, learners in England have access to several thousand different types of vocational qualification which cover a spectrum of learning experiences. These experiences, and their associated qualifications, can be arranged along a spectrum that ranges from weak to strong definitions of vocational learning (Brown, Corney and Stanton, 2004).

Strong vocational programmes are those where the expressed intention is to ensure that young people develop the necessary skills and knowledge needed to enter the vocation in question. Such programmes would include traditional forms of apprenticeship, with their explicit commitment to off-the-job training and the development of technical knowledge, and integrated programmes of vocational learning associated with certain qualification, such as BTEC National Diplomas and Certificates. The delivery of such programmes requires considerable investment in both resources and staff with the necessary occupational skills and knowledge of industry standard equipment to support the learning of young people. Such provision is close to occupational training.

Weaker vocational programmes are ones that raise awareness of particular occupational areas and the world of work, with the emphasis being on the application of knowledge in a vocational context rather than forming a solid preparation for work in a particular vocational area. Such programmes can be delivered with far fewer resources and less specialised staff. Qualification such as Applied GCSEs, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) and the Vocational Certificates of Education (VCE) are associated with this form of vocational experience, the latter qualification being criticised by the education inspectorate as resulting in learning that is neither very advanced nor very vocational (Ofsted, 2004).

## Patterns of Participation

Following a rapid increase in the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds participating in education and training in the late 1980s and early 1990s, participation rates amongst this age group in PCET have been static over the last decade. There have been, however, a range of more subtle shifts in participation over the last ten years. First, there has been a sharp decline in participation in Government Supported Training (GST) and Employer Funded Training, such as apprenticeship. This decline has been offset at least to some extent by increasing participation in full-time education and training in schools and

colleges. Nonetheless, the decline in the work-based route means that fewer young people are on vocational programmes today than in 1988 (Payne, 2003).

Second, overall participation in full-time Level 3 programmes, both GCE A level and the vocational alternatives, amongst 16 year olds more than doubled from 20.7% in 1985 to 45.3% by 2002. Some of this increase occurred during the period of expansion between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s. However, over the last decade, when overall participation rates have been static, participation in Level 3 programmes amongst 16 year olds increased by nearly 16%, primarily as a result of improving GCSE results. The majority of these new Level 3 learners opted to study for A levels in Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges rather than for vocational qualifications.

Third, whilst the majority taking Level 3 vocational qualifications are in Further Education and Tertiary colleges, there has been significant growth in the proportion taking Level 3 vocational qualifications in Maintained School and Sixth Form Colleges over the last decade – participation quadrupled in Maintained Schools and tripled in Sixth Form Colleges. By contrast participation rates in this pathway increased by only 10% in Further Education and Tertiary Colleges.

Fourth, following a period of growth in the early 1990s, the proportion of sixteen year olds taking Level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications has fallen. This decline has occurred primarily in Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges rather than in Further Education and Tertiary colleges. In Maintained Schools, for example, the proportion of sixteen year old learners on Level 1 and 2 provision has declined by nearly 70% over the last decade, whereas in Further Education and Tertiary colleges this proportion has declined by only 1%.

All of these trends are indicative of a system of education and training still in a state of flux. But to what extent have these changes resulted in an improved vocational learning system that meets the twin aims of renewing the nation's stock of intermediate and technical skills, and promoting social inclusion?

**The Skill Renewal Agenda**

The growth in participation in Level 3 vocational provision should be welcome news for policy makers. However, the extent to which this growth has qualified young people for jobs (Green and McIntosh, 2002; Fernandez and Hayward, 2004) by providing them with the skills needed in the labour market needs to be assessed.

The development of a more school/college based model of vocational learning, and the pattern of differential growth in Level 3 vocational learning across institutions, can be attributed in part to the introduction of GNVQs in 1992/93. These new qualifications provided Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges

with a weak vocational pathway at Level 3 which they could offer to young people who had attained some GCSEs at A*-C by the end of compulsory schooling, but not enough to progress onto an academic A level programme. This provision could be implemented relatively cheaply because its weakly vocational nature meant that only a moderate investment was needed in new resources and staff development.

Within Further Education and Tertiary Colleges Level 3 vocational provision based upon GNVQs/VCEs has always been less popular than provision based on stronger vocational qualifications such as BTEC National Diplomas and City and Guilds certificates. However, there has been only a 7% increase in participation in these programmes over the last decade. Thus, whilst participation in Level 3 vocational learning amongst 16 year olds has increased, it has been primarily in the weaker vocational programmes offered in Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges. The extent to which this sort of expansion in Level 3 vocational learning will meet the demand for intermediate vocational and technical skills in the labour market is open to question.

This becomes even more obvious when we examine the proportion of 16-18 year olds taking different VCEs1. In 2002/03, across all types of VCE award IT was the most popular subject with, for example, 58% of entries at VCE AS, 33% in the six unit award and 20% in the double award (DfES, 2004). However, the four VCE subject areas that map most closely to the sectors in the labour market reporting skills shortage vacancies – construction, engineering, manufacturing and science – accounted for only 3% of entries amongst 16-18 year olds in the six unit award and 6% of entries in the double award. By contrast the 4 subject areas that map to service sectors which reported few if any skill shortage vacancies at this level – business, health and social care, leisure and recreation, and travel and tourism - accounted for 56% of all entries to the six unit award and 60% of entries to the double award in 2002/03. This is not to decry the value of these programmes, or the achievement of young people, but merely to highlight that there is not a good match between the subjects being studied on these weakly vocational courses and the actual pattern of skills shortage vacancies in the labour market.

**The social inclusion agenda**

Substantial improvements in participation at 16 amongst those with the poorest levels of academic attainment are needed to meet the various targets set by the English government. However, reducing the size of the key target groups, those that leave the system at 16 and 17 years of age, seems to be a difficult policy objective to realise. Despite several reforms and initiatives, the proportion not in education or training at 16 and 17 actually increased between 1992 and 2002, largely as a result of the decline in the popularity of Government Supported Training.

The effect of the decline in the popularity of Government Supported Training on system performance is most acute for those with the lowest levels of academic attainment at the end of compulsory schooling. For example, in 1989 55% of those who achieved 1-4 GCSEs at grades D-G were in some form of post-compulsory education and training – 14% in full-time education and 41% in government supported training2. By 2002, only 47% of such youngsters remained in education and training after the age of 16, 32% in full-time education and 15% in Government Supported Training. By contrast, participation rates for those with 5+ GCSEs at grades A*-C consistently exceed 90% throughout the time period.

The full-time education system has not been able to take up this slack, with young people preferring to enter a tightening labour market rather than stay on in PCET. Certain groups of young people – boys, those with less skilled and less qualified parents/guardians, and white young people – remain significantly less likely to participate at 16 and 17 years of age despite repeated attempts to provide a meaningful full-time vocational education for them.

**Conclusion**

Institutionally, England has moved towards a more school based model of initial VET. The work-based route still exists, its virtues are still actively promoted by government policy, and it is clearly important as a means of participating for some 16-19 year-olds. However, viewed in the long run, its popularity has declined considerably, whereas the popularity of participating via the full-time route has continued to increase. The result has been a decline in the amount of vocational learning being undertaken by 16 and 17 year olds over the last fifteen years. In addition, the implications of this for the type of vocational learning experienced are potentially quite profound, as young people increasingly engage with weakly vocational school-based programmes, such as GNVQ and AVCE, rather than stronger forms traditionally associated with, for example, apprenticeship and BTEC National Diplomas. As a consequence the hopes that the introduction of new types of vocational qualifications and new apprenticeship structures would lead to an increased supply of those with intermediate and technical skills remain unmet. Furthermore, the continuing expansion of Higher Education means that practically all of those with Level 3 qualifications, including vocational ones, will need to proceed to Level 4 qualifications. This is likely to lead to a hollowing out of the skills profile, with jobs requiring intermediate and technical level skills increasingly being filled by graduates (Keep and Mayhew, 2004). This is not necessarily a poor outcome (Mason, 2001) but it does raise the question of the correct balance of graduate and intermediate level skills needed to produce an efficient economy for the future.

In terms of social inclusion, the vocationalist agenda also appears to have failed. A smaller proportion of lower attaining learners remain in some form of

education and training today than was the case ten years ago. In part this is because the labour market continues to offer such learners a range of poorly paid and unstable employment opportunities, which are nonetheless attractive for those seeking to construct more adult occupational identities. Further qualification reform is unlikely to have more than a marginal impact on the participation rates of such learners. Perhaps we need to consider labour market regulation, in the form of licences to practice and requiring employers to provide training for 16 and 17 year olds, to achieve the aim of increasing participation in vocational learning amongst this group of young people.

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