
Vocationalism and the decline of vocational learning in England

Introduction

Over the last thirty years the English Government has undertaken a series of policy initiatives that aimed to improve the vocational learning system and increase participation in it in order to meet the perceived labour market demand for intermediate and technical skills. These policies embrace a number of purposes, are directed at different age groups, and are intended to support delivery of vocational learning programmes in a broad variety of institutions. One consequence is that the English vocational learning system is still in a state of flux, as recent changes in the institutional architecture and new policy initiatives are still being implemented, and new ones, as suggested by the Tomlinson Review, are forthcoming.

In part the current concern with vocational learning can be attributed to the expansion of the education and training system that took place throughout the twentieth century. The ‘education gospel’ (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004) has been one of mass schooling and more education for all. Such expansion has been financed primarily through general taxation, with the justification for this expenditure from the public purse being that the skills and knowledge learnt in schools, colleges and universities would transfer to productive activities outside of educational institutions, especially the workplace. Over the last thirty years policy makers have questioned whether this is happening, or happening to a sufficient extent to warrant the continued expenditure on general education for all. In addition, there is a growing concern over those who leave school with few if any qualifications and, as a result, are at risk of social exclusion. The upshot has been a turn to an instrumental form of Vocationalism, the over-promotion of the work-related aims of secondary and tertiary education at the expense of the civic, aesthetic and moral purposes of education.

Vocationalism is a poorly defined and rather vague term, However, in the UK such developments are typically traced to the Ruskin College speech given by the then prime minister James Callaghan in 1976:

“(...) parents, teachers, learned and professional bodies, representatives of higher education and both sides of industry, together with the government, all have an important part to play in formulating and expressing the purpose of education and the standards that we need. (...) There seems to be a need for more technological bias in science teaching that will lead towards practical applications in industry rather than towards academic studies. (...). Then there is the concern about the standards of numeracy of school-leavers. (...) To what extent are these deficiencies the result of insufficient co-operation between schools and industry? The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip

children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. For many years the accent was simply on fitting a so-called inferior group of children with just enough learning to earn their living in the factory. (...) There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. (...) In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill.”¹

However, Vocationalism is much older than this and there is a long tradition of regarding education as the route to economic success. Ryan (2003, p. 147) argues convincingly that ‘[t]he past century can be termed the century of Vocationalism, an era in which the expansion and vocationalism of school-based education went hand in hand.’ Thus, in the UK the vocationalist imperative can be traced from at least the Samuelson Commission on Technical Instruction (1882-84) to the present day. However, the last thirty years, since the oil crises of the 1970s and the acceleration in the decline of UK manufacturing industry, have seen an intensification of vocationalism. The outcomes of this have been the increasing number of vocational learning opportunities and qualifications at upper secondary and tertiary level in the UK (and to some extent in all developed economies across the world). But to what extent have these reforms been successful in meeting the twin policy objectives of boosting the supply of intermediate vocational and technical skills and increasing social inclusion?

This paper focuses on the impact of these changes on the vocational learning system for 16-19 year olds and argues that both the total quantum of vocational learning has decreased and that the quality of that learning has declined. The paper is divided into four sections. The first sets out the basic framework of qualifications and institutions that deliver education and training for 16-19 year olds. The second focuses on ultimate and proximate policy priorities. The third section investigates changes in the patterns of participation amongst 16-19 year olds over the last twenty years. The fourth, and concluding section, provides a critical overview of the changes in patterns of participation.

1 Qualification Frameworks and Institutions

In England qualifications are a key driver of vocational education and training reform (Stasz and Wright, 2004) and, as we will see in the next section, policy imperatives to increase the skills of the work force typically take the form of setting targets for achieving an increased supply of qualifications at different **levels**. This language of levels is taken from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and for the purposes of this paper we are mostly concerned with qualifications at Levels 1, 2 and 3 in the NQF (Figure 1).

¹ Callaghan (1976).

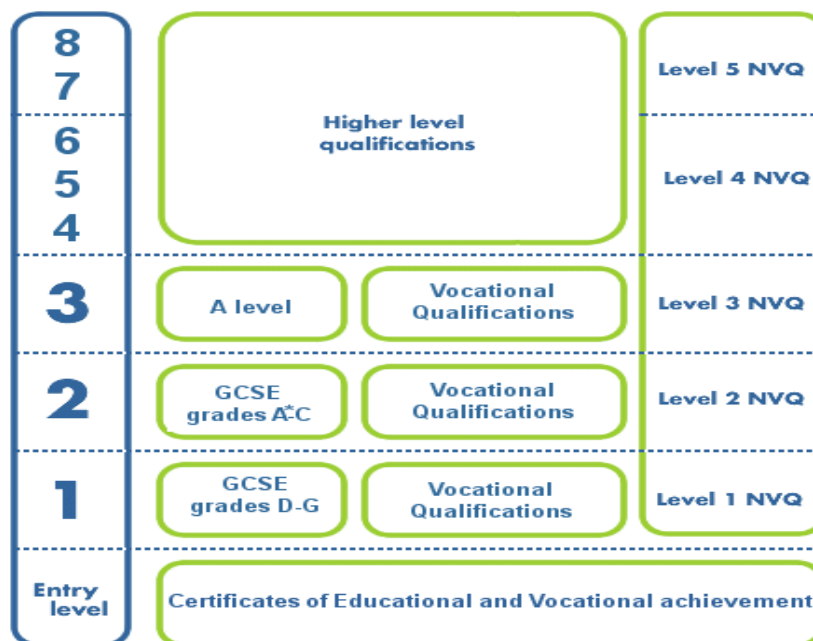


Figure 1: The English National Framework for Recognising Achievement

Qualifications at these levels are loosely grouped into three broad tracks (Figure 1):

- The **general or academic track**, with General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) and GCE AS/A levels. The former are normally taken by young people at the end of compulsory schooling and are graded from A* - G. Obtaining five of these qualifications at grades A*-C is equated with achieving a Level 2 qualification.
- The **general vocational track** contains a variety of different types of vocational qualifications including Foundation (Level 1) and Intermediate (Level 2) General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) and Vocational Certificates of Education (VCE) a Level 3 qualification that replaced Advanced GNVQ in 2000;
- The **occupational track** consists of learning certificated by the award of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

In addition, to the qualifications contained with the National Qualifications Framework there are several thousand vocational qualifications in common use in England that lie outside the regulatory framework, for example vendor qualifications. We know very little about the uptake of these qualifications (see Hayward, forthcoming; Unwin et al., 2004).

The end of compulsory schooling in England occurs at the age of 16. At this juncture young people need to decide whether to stay in education or training or to leave, typically to enter the labour market. For those who decide to stay there are a number of different ways of participating in 16-18 education and training:

- A school² sixth form can offer both academic and vocational courses
- Sixth form colleges
- Tertiary and General Further Education (Further Education) Colleges
- Work-based learning including government supported apprenticeship programmes with or without day release. Such study can be overseen by either an employer (about 5% of apprentices) or by a private training provider which can be either a Further Education college, a group training provider, a community provider or a private for profit organisation.

Participation in vocational learning in Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges is usually undertaken on a full-time basis. Most students in Further Education colleges now participate on a full-time basis though there are still a proportion of 16-19 year olds who participate on a part-time basis through, for example, day release from apprenticeship programmes. Using this framework as a background the next section sets out the policy aspirations for the 16-19 phase.

2 Qualification supply and skill demand

The ultimate goals of the further expansion of the vocational learning system in the United Kingdom are economic growth, to be achieved by raising productivity, and social inclusion to be achieved through increasing the employability of those with few if any qualifications. Of particular public policy concern is the perceived deficiency in intermediate vocational skills in the UK economy. For example, the National Skills Task Force (DfEE, 2000) reiterated a long-held belief that the UK was deficient in the area of intermediate occupations (technician and higher craft level) whilst the LSC's (2003, p. 17) *Skills in England* report commented that 'basic literacy and numeracy, and intermediate vocational and technical skills, may account for the UK's comparatively low productivity compared to its competitors.'

In public policy the lack of workers with intermediate vocational skills is usually equated with a lack of people with Level 3 vocational qualifications. Using this metric, Steedman et al. (1998), for example, argued that an inadequate supply of people holding intermediate vocational qualifications was the main cause of the poor productivity record in most sectors of the UK economy. There is some evidence to support this view. For example, rates of return analyses consistently find a positive return for those holding Level 3 vocational qualifications relative to those holding no qualifications. By contrast, there is no measurable return for those holding Level 2 vocational qualifications compared to those holding no qualifications. This suggests that holders of Level 3 vocational certificates have skills which increase their productivity and for which employers are willing to pay a premium. In terms of meeting policy objectives to increase the supply of intermediate skills the vocational learning system must, therefore, deliver an increasing number of people with Level 3 qualifications. For

² There are a wide variety of school types in England with a large and influential private sector of public schools. In this paper we are only concerned with Maintained Schools which are publicly funded.

example, the final report of the National Skills Task Force predicted that by 2010 70% of all workers would need a Level 3 qualification in order to meet the growing demand for intermediate vocational skills. However, this begs two questions of importance for this paper: what are intermediate vocational skills and how do qualification levels in the National Qualifications Framework relate to such skills?

2.1 What are intermediate vocational skills?

Two main categories of intermediate occupation are identified by Mason (2001: 8):

- **higher intermediate:** for example, technicians in manufacturing or ‘associate professional’ occupations in service industries (typically requiring high-level vocational qualifications and training which nonetheless fall short of degree standard);
- **lower intermediate:** for example, craft-level occupations typically requiring an apprenticeship (or equivalent) training.

This classification alerts us to the difficulty of producing a definition of intermediate level vocational skills that could be applied across the whole economy: the definition will vary between sectors and occupations. This problem is implicitly recognised in the specification of National Vocational Qualifications which, at the same level of qualification, vary in both size and demand depending upon the industrial sector and the occupation. In some sectors, Level 2 qualifications may suffice to meet demands for intermediate levels of vocational skill. In others, the need may be for people holding qualifications intermediate between current Level 3 qualifications and a degree, a need that Foundation Degrees are intended to meet.

Thus, equating an increased supply of people holding Level 3 vocational qualifications with meeting the perceived intermediate skill needs of the UK economy is more problematic than it seems.

2.2 Technical and generic skill demands

In addition, it is necessary to consider not just the level but also the type of skills in demand in the labour market. On the one hand, employer skill surveys consistently identify major skills shortage vacancies³ resulting from the inadequate supply of craft and technical skills to meet replacement demand in sectors such as engineering and construction. Such skills have traditionally been produced through apprenticeship, which allows for the long learning process needed to develop the requisite level of competence in skilled craft occupations. Skills gaps⁴, on the other hand, are predominantly the result of a perceived lack of generic skills, such as communication and customer handling skills (Mason and Wilson, 2003). The available evidence suggests that such generic skills are both context dependent and difficult

³ Skills shortage vacancies are vacancies that employers find hard to fill for skill related reasons.

⁴ Skill gaps are defined as occurring when employers regard some of their staff as not being fully proficient to meet the requirements of their job role.

to deliver and certify via a school based VET system (Hayward and Fernandez, 2004; Stasz et al. 1996).

Thus, the distribution of skill shortage vacancies and skills gaps across different sectors of the economy suggests that the vocational learning system should be focusing on developing high levels of technical and practical skills in some areas, for example construction and engineering, but devoting greater attention to generic skills in other areas, such as the retailing and hospitality sectors (Hogarth and Wilson, 2004; Mason and Wilson, 2003; LSC 2004a).

The next section of the paper relates how far changes in participation in different types of qualification and in different types of institution over the last twenty years have met these policy goals.

3 Participation 16 –19

This section examines broad trends in participation in order to characterise the current 16-19 education and training system in England relative to the position in the mid 1980s and to other OECD countries.

3.1 Overall participation rate

Between 1986 and 1993/94 the rate of participation in the 16-19 education and training system in England increased rapidly but participation rates have now remained more or less static for a decade (Figure 2). Participation rates for 16 year-olds are highest, and range between 80-90% of the cohort. Rates for 17 year-olds increased more sharply, from about 58% to 80% by the early 1990s, declining slightly by 2002. In 1985, only 40% of 18 year-olds participated, a rate which rose steadily until 1993 to about 60% and subsequently levelled off. Provisional figures for 2003 indicate that in England 87% of 16 year-olds, 80% of 17 year-olds, and 60% of 18 year-olds were participating in some form of education and training during the course of that year (DfES, 2004). Over the entire 16-18 age cohort this means that 75% were involved in some form of education and training, 16% were in employment without formal training leading to qualifications and 9% (about 177,000 young people) were not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The 16-19 system in England appears, therefore, to have reached a new equilibrium position in the early 1990s, with increased rates of participation amongst all age groups. However, rates of participation still remain below those found in most other OECD countries (Table 1). Thus, the system still cannot be characterised as being a high participation one. This is primarily due to the progressive loss of learners between the ages of 16 and 19 resulting in a medium participation system with a high rate of attrition.

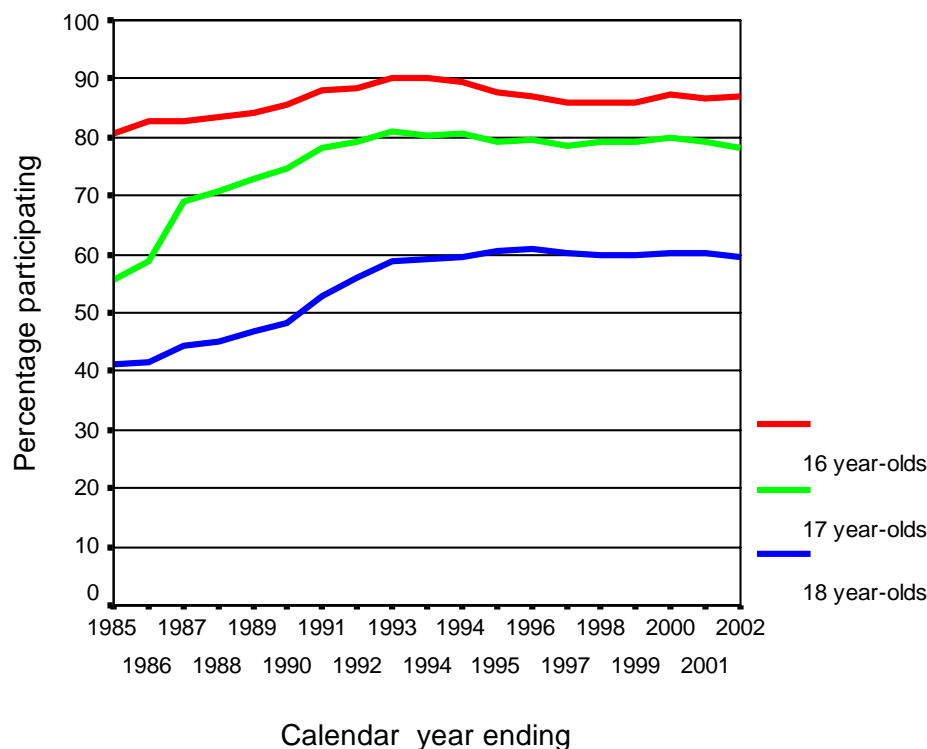


Figure 2: Total participation in education and training by 16-18 year-olds in England: 1985-2002.

Table 1: **Enrolment rates of 15-19 year olds in OECD countries: 2001. (Full-time and part-time students in public and private institutions)**

Country	Percentage of 15-19 year-olds enrolled	Country	Percentage of 15-19 year-olds enrolled
Australia	81.1	Luxembourg	78.1
Austria	76.9	Mexico	41.0
Belgium	91.0	Netherlands	86.2
Canada	75.0	New Zealand	73.0
Czech Republic	87.8	Norway	85.3
Denmark	82.9	Poland	85.5
Finland	85.3	Portugal	73.3
France	86.6	Slovakia	74.6
Germany	89.4	Spain	80.1
Greece	77.0	Sweden	86.4
Hungary	79.0	Switzerland	83.3
Iceland	79.2	Turkey	30.0
Ireland	80.9	United Kingdom	74.7
Italy	72.2	United States	77.6
Korea	79.3	Country Mean	77.7

Source: OECD (2002) *Education at a glance*. Paris: OECD.

3.2 The Demography of the 16-18 Age Cohort

Interpreting changes in percentage participation rates alone can obscure the fact that there were considerable changes in the size of the 16-19 age cohort between 1985 and 2002 (see Figure 3). The importance of this demographic change should not be under-estimated as an institutional driver in a marketised education and training system where money follows the learner. The educational policy framework and institutional incentives established by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, combined with the changing size of the age cohort, provide strong institutional incentives to change recruitment processes and criteria. Comparing figures 2 and 3 it is clear that overall participation rates increased at the same time as the size of the age cohort was decreasing. Put crudely, this suggests that, as the size of the age cohort declined, institutions could not afford to be as selective if they were to maintain student numbers and the associated levels of funding. As student numbers rose again in the mid 1990s, with an increasing proportion of 16 year-olds achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs, institutions could afford to be more selective.

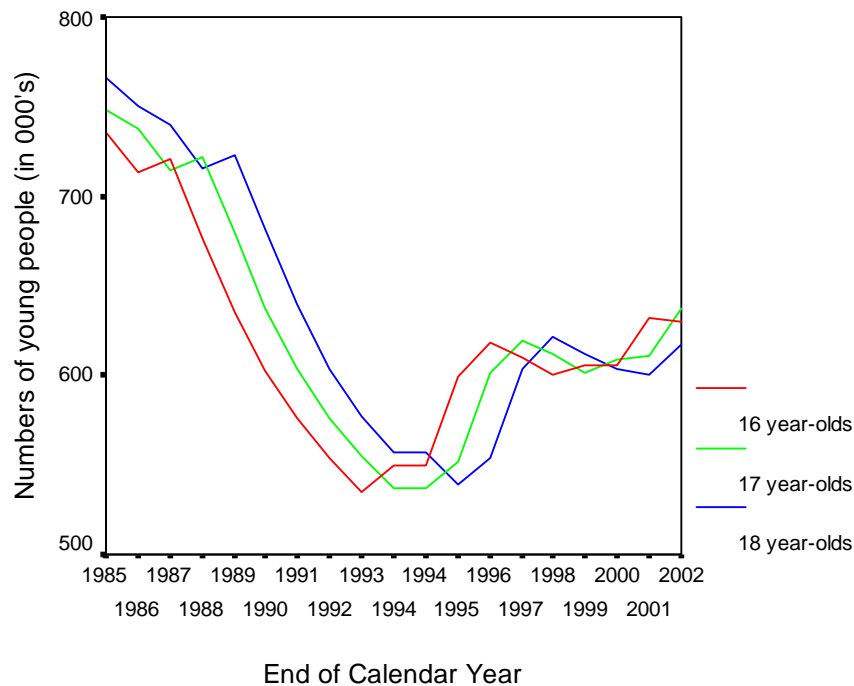


Figure 3: The number of 16-18 year-olds: 1985-2002.

An additional implication of the increase in the size of the age cohort since the mid 1990s is that, despite static participation rates from the early 1990s, institutions providing education and training for 16-19 year olds will have experienced an increase in the number of learners from 1994/5 onwards. Thus for these institutions the situation over the last decade will have felt like one of growth rather than one of stasis.

The mode of participation has changed over the last decade

In the early 1980s, the UK was characterised by the OECD (1985) as having a ‘mixed’ model of post-compulsory education and training. Such a model was intermediate between the ‘dual system’ of the German speaking countries and the school⁵ based model of most other OECD countries. ‘In the mixed model, schools represent the largest form of provision but participation is low; schools are complemented by a less formal sector of mainly work-based education.’(Raffe, 1999, p.39)

The validity of this categorisation is confirmed by examining participation data from the 1970s. For example, in 1975/76⁶ only one quarter of 16-18 year olds in the UK were attending either school or college full-time. Of the remainder, 65% were employed (with a proportion of these attending further education colleges on a part-time basis) with 8% unemployed. The collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s and early 1980s resulted in both an increase in unemployment and an increase in participation in post-compulsory education and training, primarily through Youth Training. Thus, by 1984/85 27% of 16-18 year olds in the UK were participating in full-time education, 42% were in employment, 18% were unemployed and 10% were in Youth Training programmes. This is the epitome of the mixed model:

- low overall participation in post-compulsory education and training with most of that participation concentrated in schools and further education colleges;
- backed up by a more informal sector represented by Government Supported Training, such as the Youth Training Scheme, and a declining apprenticeship system, which emphasised on-the-job learning supported by some day release to further education colleges.

Underlying the overall increase in participation seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Figure 2) was a large increase in the proportion of young people choosing to follow the full-time education route. This was accompanied by a decline in participation in work-based training routes sponsored by the government and employers (Figure 4). Consequently, the mode of participation in post-compulsory education and training changed radically as participation rates increased, so that the system shifted towards a more school based model.

⁵ School is used here in a wide sense to include both schools and various types of further education college.

⁶ At this time data was presented by academic year, i.e. from September in one year to the August of the following year.

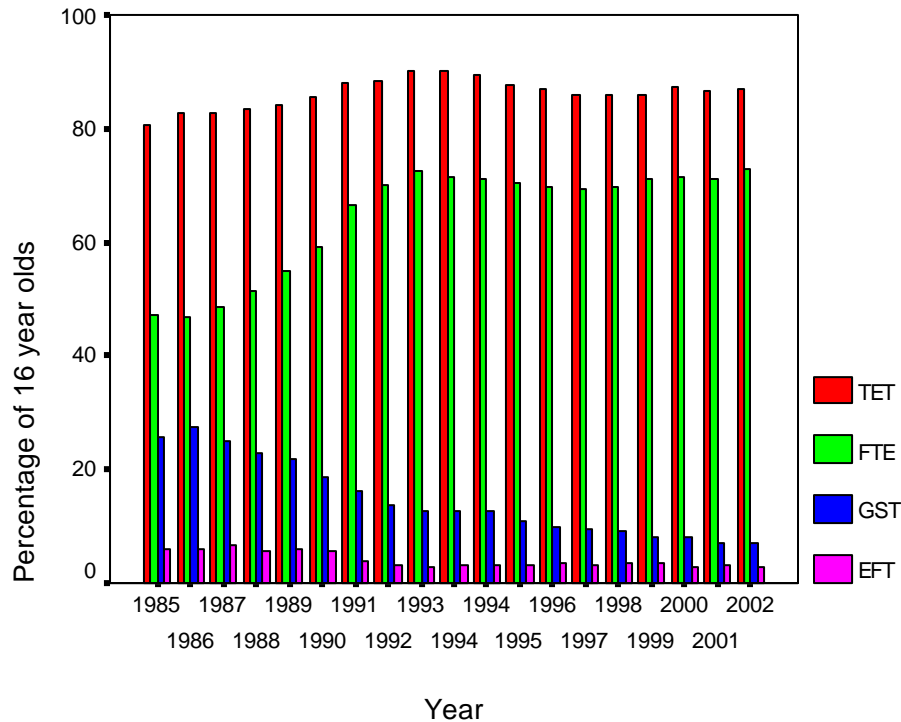


Figure 4: The percentage of 16 year-olds participating in different modes of education and training. TET = Total Education and Training; FTE = Full-time education; GST = Government-supported training; EFT = Employer-funded training. Source: DfES (2002, 2004)

The provision made for government supported training⁷ for 16 year-olds changed several times over the time period, for example from Youth Training to National Traineeships, the introduction of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) and then Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (FMA)⁸. However, none of these policy reforms and revamping of provision has completely halted the decline in the proportion of 16 year-olds participating in Government Supported Training, which fell from a quarter of 16 year-olds in 1984/85 to just under 7% in 2002/03. There is some evidence that this proportion is currently increasing, albeit slowly.

Institutionally, England has moved towards a more school based 16-19 education and training model. 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 implications of this for the type of vocational learning experienced are potentially quite profound, as

⁷ Now called Work Based Learning for Young People.

⁸ In England, FMAs were renamed Apprenticeships and AMAs Advanced Apprenticeship in May 2004. In addition to apprenticeship programmes a variety of other work-based learning opportunities exist in England including Entry to Employment (E2E) and NVQ Learning. In addition, there are active labour market policies such as the New Deal for Young People which also provide access to learning opportunities.

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 (Stanton, 2004).

3.3 Participation in full-time vocational learning

At the end of compulsory schooling young people who decide to stay on in full-time education and training have to choose the level and type of programme they wish to follow and the institution in which they wish to study. It is the exercise of this choice that has produced the greatest changes in patterns of participation amongst 16 and 17 year olds in the last decade. Overall participation in 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 (Figure 2), participation at Level 3 amongst 16 year olds increased by nearly 16 percentage points.

At Level 3 three quarters of sixteen year olds studying full-time are taking GCE AS/A levels. The majority taking vocational qualifications at this level are in Further Education and Tertiary colleges. However, the proportion of sixteen year-olds studying for Level 3 vocational qualifications in Maintained Schools has quadrupled in the last decade to almost 13% of 16 those on Level 3 provision by 2002. The proportion of sixteen year olds participating via this route has also tripled in Sixth Form Colleges to 17% of those on Level 3 provision. By contrast participation rates in this pathway have increased by only 10% in Further Education and Tertiary Colleges to 60% of those on Level 3 provision.

Participation rates in Level 1 and 2 programmes amongst 16 year olds also increased at the time of expansion, from 10% in 1985 to nearly one quarter of 16 year olds by 1995. There was a particularly sharp increase in the proportion of 16 year olds taking Level 1 and 2 programmes in 1992/93 following the introduction of Foundation and Intermediate GNVQs. These qualifications substituted in part for academic GCSE retake provision, with the result that the proportion of 16 year olds taking GCSEs in the first year of post-compulsory education declined steadily, from 11% of the age cohort in 1991 to slightly more than 2% by 2002. However, the proportion of sixteen year olds taking Level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications also fell from the mid 1990s, reaching 16.6% of the age cohort by 2002.

This decline in the participation rate in Level 1 and 2 programmes amongst 16 year olds 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%. This is largely the result of the proportion of 16 year olds on Level 1 and 2 vocational provision in Further Education and Tertiary colleges remaining relatively constant

compared to Maintained Schools, where the proportion of such learners has halved in the last ten years.

Underneath the apparently static post-compulsory participation rates since the mid 1990s there has been, therefore, a range of more subtle shifts in participation taking place in England. These have included

- a shift to a more school-based model;
- an increase in participation at Level 3 with a concomitant decline of participation at Levels 1 and 2, which is symptomatic of both increasing GCSE attainment and the ongoing challenge of attracting less well qualified learners to participate;
- an increasing proportion taking Level 3 vocational qualifications, particularly in schools and sixth form colleges following the introduction of Advanced GNVQs;
- a growing division of labour between Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges on the one hand and Further Education and Tertiary Colleges on the other with, in particular, Level 1 and 2 vocational provision becoming concentrated in Further Education and Tertiary Colleges;

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?

4 Performance against policy targets

This section considers the current performance of the system against the twin policy targets of increasing the supply of intermediate and technical skills and increasing social inclusion.

The skilling agenda

The growth in participation in Level 3 vocational provision should be, at first sight, good 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 that 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.

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 and programmes associated with certain qualification such as BTEC National Diplomas and Certificates. The delivery of such programmes requires considerable investment in both resources and staff, who must have the necessary occupational skills and knowledge to support the learning of young people. Weaker vocational programmes are more associated with learning about a particular occupational area, which can be delivered with far fewer resources and less specialised staff. Qualification such as General national Vocational Qualifications and Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education take this form, the latter qualification being criticised by the education inspectorate (Ofsted) as being neither very advanced nor very vocational (Ofsted, 2004).

In addition, the Foundation and Intermediate GNVQs provided an alternative to GCSE retakes. This provision could be implemented relatively cheaply because its weakly vocational nature meant that only a moderate investment was needed in new plant and staff development. Consequently practically all of the growth in Level 3 Vocational learning in Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges involved these new qualifications though, as we have seen, the popularity of Level 1 and 2 vocational provision has subsequently declined in these institutions. As the number of 16 year olds increased from the mid 1990s onwards (Figure 3), Maintained Schools and Sixth Form Colleges have increasingly focussed their attention on Level 3 provision, leaving Further Education and Tertiary colleges to offer the bulk of Level 1 and 2 vocational provision.

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 stronger vocational programmes at Level 3 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 and technical level vocational 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 VCEs⁹. Across all types of VCE award IT is 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 in 2002/03 (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 – business, health and

⁹ VCEs come as either 3 unit (AS), 6 unit (A level) or 12 unit (double) awards.

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. Thus, even though participations in Level 3 vocational learning amongst 16-19 year olds is increasing it is not doing so in a way that is likely to satisfy labour market needs or remedy the long standing shortage in intermediate and technical skills.

Research also indicates that young people pursuing these weakly vocational options at Levels 1 and 2 may be doing so in order to provide themselves with a general education rather than through any particular commitment to the vocational area they are studying (Wahlberg & Gleeson, 2004). For those requiring a second chance learning opportunity at 16 arguably what is needed is a purpose built programme of general education to enable the development of, for example, literacy and numeracy skills. Without the development of such skills there is little chance of progressing to and being successful at Level 3. Yet all that is on offer (in the main) are Level 1 and 2 vocational programmes which have no discernible return in the labour market (Dearden et al.,).

For those studying at Level 3 there is also the welcome opportunity to use these vocational programmes as a stepping stone to Higher Education rather than using the qualifications as a means for entering the labour market at 18 years of age. Indeed to reach the 50% Higher Education target will, on current performance, require every person achieving a Level 3 qualification of whatever type to progress into Higher Education. This would result in a hollowing out of the skills profile with an increasing proportion educated to Level 4 and another group with Level 2 qualifications and below. This suggests the possibility at least of an acceleration of the trend for intermediate and technician level positions being filled by graduates (see Mason, 2001; Keep and Mayhew, 2004).

The social inclusion agenda

The full-time 16-19 vocational learning system has become more inclusive as the range of provision has diversified (Hayward et al. 2004). Nonetheless, 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. An indicator of low efficiency is that the system still has difficulties retaining learners as they age. In addition, the post-compulsory vocational learning system still appears to be relatively ineffective at attracting the least well qualified. Substantial improvements in participation at 16 amongst those with the poorest levels of academic attainment and with weakened learner identities will, therefore, be needed to meet the various targets and public sector agreements 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 this 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 training¹⁰. 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, whilst 30% were in a job (either full- or part-time) without formal training leading to qualifications and 22% were in not in education, employment or training. By contrast, participation rates from those with 5+ GCSEs at grades A*-C consistently exceed 90% throughout the time period.

5 Conclusion

The descriptive analysis presented above demonstrates that over the last twenty years England has witnessed a major restructuring of the educational careers of 16-19 year olds. Participation rates increased sharply from the middle of the 1980s to the early 1990s and then stabilised. Underlying this overall trend was a large increase in the proportion of young people choosing to follow the full-time education route. This resulted in a continuing decline in participation in work-based training routes sponsored by the government and employers. Further Education and Tertiary Colleges continue to be the main providers of vocational learning opportunities at all levels.

Participation in vocational learning at Level 3 in full-time education has increased. However, three quarters of 16 year-olds who choose to stay on and pursue Level 3 qualifications opt to study for GCE A/AS levels rather than vocational courses. Furthermore, the decline in participation in the work-based routes means that fewer learners were engaged in vocational learning in 2002 compared to 1989 (Payne, 2003).

The evidence also suggests a significant shift in the quality of vocational learning being undertaken. The increase in participation in vocational learning is mainly due to an increased proportion of the age cohort studying for weakly vocational school-based Level 3 vocational qualifications. Such qualifications map very poorly to the distribution of skills shortage vacancies in the English economy. The more popular full-time vocational qualifications do, however, reflect the growth in employment in certain sectors of the English economy, notably the service sectors. However, these sectors primarily identify generic skills as their major skill need and the extent to which weakly vocational qualifications develop these skills is also open to question.

¹⁰ These data come from analysis of the Youth Cohort Survey.

The decline in the work-based learning route has differentially affected those with lower attainment at the age of 16. Many of these young people now enter the labour market at 16, taking jobs that seem to offer little if anything in the way of training. The effect of thirty years of vocational education and training policy in England, spurred on by the rhetoric of new Vocationalism, has not strengthened vocational learning or offered a meaningful vocational education for lower attaining students. Rather the outcome has been the development of a largely school based system of weak vocational learning which serves its clients and the economy poorly. Time will tell if the new reforms proposed by Tomlinson will have any impact on this sad state of affairs.

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