


The Relative Successes and Failures of the UK VET System

Professor Ewart Keep

Deputy Director

ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and

Organisational Performance,

School of Social Sciences,

University of Cardiff

E-MAIL: KeepEJ@Cardiff.ac.uk



THE LIGHT AND THE 'DARK' SIDES OF PROGRESS

Many of the successes carry with them potential problems, not least because E&T distributes access to a finite supply of good jobs. It is a positional good.

This means that rather than win/win it often creates winners and losers.



THE BIG SUCCESSES

- Far better school pupil achievement
 - Huge expansion of post-16 participation
 - Huge expansion of higher education
BUT the long-term effects of this are unknown
 - Reduction in skill shortages
-



MORE BIG SUCCESSES

- High levels of labour market participation
- Massive improvement in information and data on labour markets and E&T
- E-learning and new learning media

UK's 'skills crisis' is a thing of the past.



AND THE FAILURES?

Failure to create a high status vocational route outside of HE.

Top 50% = HE

Bottom 50% = non-HE

Bottom half of bottom half = low waged employment



THE PERSISTENCE OF LOW WAGED EMPLOYMENT

On EU definitions (60 per cent or less of median wage), about 25 per cent of the UK workforce is low waged.

In the USA the figure is about 23.5 per cent.



THE SPECTRE OF LABOUR MARKET POLARISATION

In many developed economies (including US and UK), there is job growth at the top and bottom ends of the labour market.

Low paid employment is expanding, and there will be many new jobs that offer little in the way of:

- ❑ Intrinsic interest and job satisfaction
- ❑ Task variety
- ❑ Discretion and job control
- ❑ Pay and working conditions
- ❑ Opportunities for training and development
- ❑ Opportunities for progression

Once in these jobs, getting up and out can be hard!



THE MESS THAT IS NVQs

The failure to create vocational qualifications that are widely valued by employers continues to cause massive problems and to occasion ongoing 'permanent revolution/reform' within vocational qualifications system.

14-19 Diplomas (applied not vocational)



RESEARCH ON RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

All the research available suggests that for jobs in the bottom 50% of the employment spectrum, particularly some service sector occupations, the role of qualifications in R&S is very limited, often minimal.

Low returns to many lower level vocational quals may simply reflect their lack of purchase on R&S decision making.



RECRUITMENT RESEARCH

Overall, employers are less demanding of technical skills, considering them trainable, if candidates exhibit employability and soft skills, and positive attitudes.

There is a much greater emphasis on soft skills... often measurement is based on employers' perceptions of their interaction with candidates at interview.



AND.....

Qualifications do not appear to be important for a large number of employers and jobs, consistently ranking beneath characteristics and soft skills in recruitment frameworks.

Overall, the evidence suggests that a focus on qualifications would not appear to contribute to an individual's labour market outcomes, due to the low emphasis on these in recruitment.

DWP literature review, 2005.



Go Skills SSC – SKILL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- “very few people in the passenger transport sector either possess or are working towards any of the industry specific qualifications identified by Go Skills
 - 96% of taxi drivers not involved
 - 52% of bus companies
 - 82% of driving instructors
 - 84% of aviation industry
-



APPRENTICESHIP - STILL WAITING FOR THE BUS

The failure to create a mass, high quality apprenticeship system is a major weakness.

The vast bulk of English apprenticeships would not be recognised as such elsewhere in Europe.



PLATEAUED POST-16 PARTICIPATION

Despite much twiddling with curriculum and qualifications, post-16 participation has been stuck for the last decade.

EMAs have small participation impact, no very great achievement impact

The PROBLEM is with labour market incentives and jobs with no training



GOODBYE LIFELONG LEARNING, HELLO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

1. Learning for work
2. Learning for the rest of life

Many social and citizenship problems can be tackled through the wider benefits of learning, BUT.....



AGAINST THIS BACKDROP.....

The policy response has been to see
‘skills’ not broader LLL as the answer.

“Nothing makes for more social impact and
more social justice than people getting
employed and better skills” – Sir Andrew
Foster



THIS IS BECAUSE.....

There is no LLL strategy for England, so it has been easy to slide from adult learning to workforce development without anyone in power acknowledging the impact on wider learning objectives (as there are none).



WHAT IS BEING LOST

Adult leisure learning: 'from leisure and pleasure to learning and earning', or 'less pilates and more plumbers'.

Provision for those with learning difficulties

Any notion of what employer should pay for – NSTF and 'task specific skills for adult workers'.



ENGLAND v SCOTLAND

“Lifelong learning policy in Scotland is about personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion”

Life Through Learning; Learning Through Life, Scottish Executive, 2003.



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE 'BLUNKET VISION'?

“As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship....It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings”.



THE DECKCHAIRS HAVE WHEELS

Institutional and programmatic instability undermines the comprehensibility and functioning of the E&T system.

Transaction costs are massive.

Ceaseless 'reform' comes at a price, albeit one not paid by the 'architects' of change



DISCONNECT BETWEEN PUBLICLY-FUNDED E&T AND EMPLOYERS' EFFORTS

Another huge weakness is that what employers do within their companies is more or less invisible to public policy.

2 parallel systems – one publicly-funded, one privately-funded, with little synergy between them.



HAVING CREATED SKILL, NO ONE SEEMS FUSSED HOW OR IF IT EVER GETS USED

Rather than worry about skills supply, perhaps more attention is needed to usage of existing skills and to work organisation and job design.

UK is almost unique in N. Europe in not having a public programme to help employers improve work organisation and job design



SKILLS AS A DERIVED DEMAND

“Skills are a derived demand...for the supply of skill to turn from merely potential change in performance into a tangible increase in productivity, the available skills of the workforce have to be effectively utilised. People need to be in jobs that use their skills and capabilities effectively”.

Leitch Review, Interim Report



LINKING E&T TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Our biggest weakness of all is our failure to link E&T more closely to economic development policies. A 'build and they will come', 'fire and forget' strategy.

c.f. Scotland

Australia's Skills Ecosystems projects



MORE SKILLS IS NOT ENOUGH

The dangers of political disillusionment

New Labour's big blind spot may be that plenty of jobs do not automatically mean plenty opportunities.....we can't allow New Labour's aim of a society where everyone has an opportunity to realise their full potential to become a façade that hides the lives of most workers stuck in low-paid jobs....The Modern economy is creating a layer of jobs which offer little in the way of income, and little training, personal development or longer-term security.

John Denham MP, 2004
