Looking back looking forward: vocational education and training (VET) policy and practice in England and Scotland

Robert Lawy, University of Exeter, England

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Introduction
One of the aims of the labour government since 1997 in the UK has been to increase the level of participation amongst young people in education and training as a mechanism for tackling social, cultural and economic deprivation. The assumption is that the solution to the problems of unemployment, poverty and inequality is to upskill the workforce, provide more education and training opportunities, resulting in higher rates of economic growth, productivity and per capita income. Secondly that social and cultural benefits arising from work will reduce poverty and inequality and increase social mobility. Such intangibles are commonly referenced as ‘the wider benefits of learning’, measured in terms of economic productivity as well as a raft of less tangible but equally important social and cultural benefits including increased social mobility and cohesion. Discussion of these issues has largely been centred upon young people – the group that are seen as being most at risk from the debilitating effects of poverty and social exclusion that arise from non-participation and unemployment (Cabinet Office, 2008). The argument of this paper is that in focusing on the macro issues and concerns, the narrative of VET engagement and practice ignores or silences the voice of young people who are directly affected by policy.

Context
During the last thirty years in the UK there has been a move away from centralised government towards devolution. Scotland, in particular, has asserted its autonomy and independence from the English/British government (Arnott and Ozga, 2009). This has impacted at two levels; a) at a macro political level with the clarion call of the Scottish National Party (SNP) (in office 2007-) for independence from the English government which is seen as London-centric and; b) at the level of policy where there have been policy differences in the areas of health care and education where the devolved government has the power and authority to legislate its own policy solutions. This applies to questions about youth unemployment and disengagement, with calls for a Scottish solution for the Scots people.

In England The Education and Skills Act (Department for Children Schools and Families [DCSF] and Department for Innovation Universities and Skills [DIUS], 2008), is set to increase the age of participation (RPA) for young people from age 16 to age 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015. In Scotland there are currently no plans to raise the participation age (RPA). Here the emphasis has been on creating a ‘Scottish solution’ comprising a coherent and cohesive structure under partnership to make
the existing system work more effectively (Raffe et al. 2007). The intention of ‘16+ Learning Choices’ (Scottish Government, 2010), is to place young people’s needs and interests at the heart of the system and to ensure that they all have suitable educational opportunities and access to advice to make decisions about their future. Working in the context of the ‘More Choices, More Chances’ [MC2] strategy (Scottish Executive, 2006), the Scottish Government has been inviting local authorities, community planning partnerships and other partners, including employers, to undertake a broad range of interventions to reduce the number of young people who are not in employment, further or higher education or training.

*Raising Expectations* (DfES, 2007) set out the rationale and legislative agenda for the RPA. It points to lower participation rates of young people in education and training in the UK compared with its Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) competitors and presents this as the rationale for increasing participation beyond age 16. It argues for a sharp investment in skills as the prerequisite for the UK to retain its prominence in an increasingly globalised economy. The presumption is that this will enable and increase opportunities for ‘successful’ transitions into work with an elusive ‘golden ticket’ to national prosperity wealth and health. The government target is to achieve 90% participation of young people, among 17 year olds, in education or training by 2015 ‘placing the UK amongst the best performing countries in the OECD’ (DfES, 2007, p. 5). This performative and target orientation has had the effect of focusing the narrative upon the cohort of young people not in education employment or training (NEETs) and in low-paying and low-status jobs without formal training (JWT). Notwithstanding this, the proportion of young people that move directly into employment or unemployment with no recognised formal and accredited training programme remains proportionally small at around 220,000 (1st quarter 2009). This comprised 11.3% of the population of young people in the 16-18 age range and included 66,000 (30%) young people taking a gap year, in prison, ill or disabled, or caring for young children (DCSF, 2009).

**Skills and the democratic consensus**

Since 2007 the Scottish government have declined to classify young people as NEET and have instead categorised such young people as requiring ‘More Choices, More Chances’ (Scottish Executive, 2006). Whilst this has removed the stigma associated with being NEET or in JWT, (Lawy et al. 2009), it begs the question whether they have achieved anything other than simply replacing one label with a new one (MC2). In either case there remains, a largely unchallenged assumption of a direct correlation between an educated population and economic renewal. This is underwritten with the assumption, shared across all the mainstream political parties in the UK, that education and the general upskilling of the population represents a sure way of increasing employability and wages and of reducing inequality, acting as ‘a lever to prosperity and fairness’ (Leitch, 2006, p. 3).

Ball (2008, p. 5) suggests that such policy discourses ‘work to privilege certain types of topics and speakers and exclude others … making particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and “true”. Drawing upon the Gramscian notion of hegemony, Avis (2009, p.10) suggests that this new educational settlement has sought to ‘organize common sense in a manner that is compatible with the interests of capital’. Whereas the post-war social democratic settlement emphasised full
employment and universal welfare provision, the new neo-liberal discourse of workfare is individualised and emphasises competition and markets. Under this schema social responsibility has become ‘nannying’ as each individual is ‘empowered’ to make their own decisions and choices. So, rather than affirming the responsibility of governments to ensure employment the issue has been deconstructed to one of employability (Simmonds, 2009; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006) where each individual is afforded the opportunity to take advantage of the opportunities available to them to increase their employability - the corollary of this being that those who compete most effectively in the marketplace will achieve jobs. This linguistic shift away from the language of employment and unemployment towards employability has been constructed as an individualised/individuated disposition or orientation towards employment that can furnish young people with a ‘golden ticket’ to inclusion and prosperity, measured in terms of improved health, wealth and security (Feinstein et al. 2008). Here, social responsibility and individual responsibility have been elided and presented as ‘a form of liberation that will allow creativity and passion to flourish unhampered’ and as a meritocratic ideal allowing ‘an escape from old social divisions that subordinated talent to social status’ (Ball, 2008, p. 17). All of this has been manifested in the ‘activation’ policies and schemes of the European Commission with a focus is upon increasing employability (EC, 2006, p.137).

In the next section the focus is switched from external and larger macro concerns of policy to the micro concerns of young people, emphasising the mismatch between the claims of policy makers about young people and their education and training needs and aspirations.

**Shifting the focus - researching young people**

Over recent years there has been a shift away from strictly policy orientated work concerned with targets outcomes and outputs towards broader and often contextual studies that are concerned with the full and complete lives of the young people. This provides a very different view of the position of young people in relation to policy and practice – one where they are not always or necessarily competing for high skill jobs but are seeking to work for a variety of social or cultural reasons. In exemplifying these issues, I draw upon findings from a longitudinal study that comprised interviews with young people who were in JWT at the outset of the research. The work was conducted in the South West of England in 2007 and 2008 and comprised in-depth interviews with 13 young people, supported with 155 telephone interviews, a focus group session with three young people, and a participative research seminar with 25 key stakeholders (Quinn et al. 2008).

Since the 1980s there has been increasing fragmentation and seriality of work, with the casualisation of the workforce, with short term and temporary contracts without the securities and wage-rates associated with full-time and permanent employment. Many of the young people in the study moved from one job to another and into and out of employment. It was not unusual for a young person to have undertaken two or even three jobs during the research period and to move into and out of NEET into employment. Indeed, 18% of the sample moved out of the JWT category into formalised training during the period of the research, and 17% slipped into NEET, representing a churn of 35%. Gail, for example, was interviewed by telephone at the age of 18 years, two years after leaving school, and again six months later. Upon
leaving school, she did not immediately move into work, rather she attended her local FE college, and moving from one job to another with periods of unemployment interspaced between each job. Her experiences included shop and office work.

Asked to describe herself she said:

*Outgoing, open, honest – I say what’s on my mind – opinionated, friendly, hyper. I also have good practical skills and I am a fast learner. Although I like to work on cars in my spare time, this is just a hobby and I wouldn’t want it as a job.* (Gail)

Gail did not conform to the stereotype of a feckless and witless young woman in JWT or NEET, rather she seemed happy and perfectly at ease with herself, her friends and with her circumstances, holding what seemed to be realistic aspirations for her future:

*I would like to find my dream job … working in a friendly company in an important position, such as a manager. I want to be useful to the company.* (Gail)

Moreover, the policy narrative of young people in need of more schooling, training and support was not borne out by the evidence:

*They didn’t want no trainees. You just go in, you train as you do the job. I thought that sounded good. I like doing that sort of work because studying I never got the hang of, cos textbooks and that, it doesn’t really register in my brain that much. …*

*I love working in bars most, it’s something probably I am better at than anything … Well out of all the jobs I have been in the bar one is the one I’ve done best… I always used to dread working on a bar … Well not on a bar but working with customers. Because the public being what they are, but working on a bar like how I was, and getting all the respect I was getting and all that.* (George)

George drew great satisfaction from his bar job, even though it required little training and benefited from having left school where he had been labelled a failure. In the outside world he was judged against a broader set of criteria (other than academic achievement and behaviour) where his work status was but one aspect of his identity. Green and White (2007) have noted that young people’s work opportunities and their attitudes are shaped by their social networks and attachments. Indeed, their choices are constrained by their ‘opportunity structures’ (Roberts, 1968) which inevitably limit their possibilities for action. Employment opportunities were limited and often seasonal and lacking job security:

*Oh yes a lot of tourists come down here, but it’s not very busy the rest of the time,…they always try to get some extra staff then they’re dismissed as soon as summer’s over.* (Jo)

*They (the building work agency) said they doesn’t want to keep me ’cos I was the last one on wasn’t I?* (Dave)
Simply, getting to and from these jobs was not an easy matter. Public transport services were inadequate and consequently mobility and the capacity to take up employment or training were inhibited:

*I had to take two buses to get there.* (Tamara)

*I’ve got to figure out a way how to get there by 8.30 am tomorrow and there’s no trains or buses that go directly there.* (Liz)

Although the young people did not value formalised learning they were not work-shy lazy or feckless. They valued the opportunities it gave them to learn even though the work was invariably low-skilled:

*I’ve got a practical mind… give me a book to learn, I can’t learn it, tell me to do something, if I do it wrong, I know what I’ve done wrong straightaway, I can fix it like that.* (John)

*Things at home that came to pieces, I could put them back together again.*
(Draco)

But they did not want to learn in a classroom:

*I like to learn at work without teachers.* (Andrew)
*What I’ve learnt, I’ve had to teach myself.* (Rick)

They also took pride in their work:

*I love my job it’s really varied and I like being outside, it’s practical and every day is different. I like the animals too.* (Ben)

What is represented is a picture of ordinary young people whose interests and aspirations have been misunderstood and misrepresented (Lawy et al. 2009) with VET presented as a panacea - something that can provide a resolution to individual problems and a way out of poverty for those young people willing to work hard.

**Conclusions**

I began by outlining some of the differences in the UK between the policies in England and Scotland in terms of the way in which policy is being articulated. Despite some differences in Scotland and England, for example in the English government’s legislation to raise the participation age, and in the Scottish government’s refusal to countenance the NEET label, the approach in both countries is underpinned by the same set of Europe-wide rhetorics of globalisation and the need for general upskilling (see Drucker, 1966). The neo-liberal logics of increased employability flies in the face of contradictory evidence from the UK where there are high numbers of low-skill jobs, and from developing nations which are demonstrating increased capacity for competition in high value production. It is not that VET is unimportant – everyone should have the right to training and education, rather that more importance should be afforded to work itself (and the social and structural conditions of non-working and unemployment), given that it continues to serve an
important social function providing a sense of shared experience, status, identity and collective experience (see Jahoda, 1982).

The narratives concerning young people and VET can be seen as operating at two levels. They comprise a discourse that has furnished the government with a rationale for its ‘activation’ policies with the diagnosis of VET as a problem of employability where individuals can be equipped with an appropriate and individualised set of high-value tools and resources so that they can compete effectively in the market for jobs. This first level approach is ends-orientated since it locates a problem and identifies a solution to that problem without ever questioning whether the patient has been properly diagnosed. A more theorised reading of the same issues sees the VET discourse as constituent of a broader set of linked narratives about skills and globalisation, which represent a particular hegemonic configuration of neo-liberal interests. These discourses obfuscate the reality of the experiences of the population (including young people), by appealing to commonsense narratives about work and employment. These are slippery and comprise a suite of linked but separate narratives about employment and employability, high-skills and basic-skills as well as a countervailing discourse about the dispositions of young people that has enabled it to survive intact through the current recession (April 2010).

Although there are some nuanced differences of approach between the English and Scottish approach to VET policy and practice the fundamental basis of the policy rhetorics is the same. This has closed down important issues and questions that have not been addressed let alone resolved. There is, for example, a raft of class-based, and gendered questions in relation to access, opportunity and social inclusion that have barely been touched upon. Moreover, there is the question of whether the narratives of individualisation and of self-help and activation, which are part of the mainstream discourse, certainly within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and beyond, answer or even address questions that are central to the interests of young people. This begs the question whether these are errors of omission or commission and what the implications are in either case.

References

*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 30 June 2010*