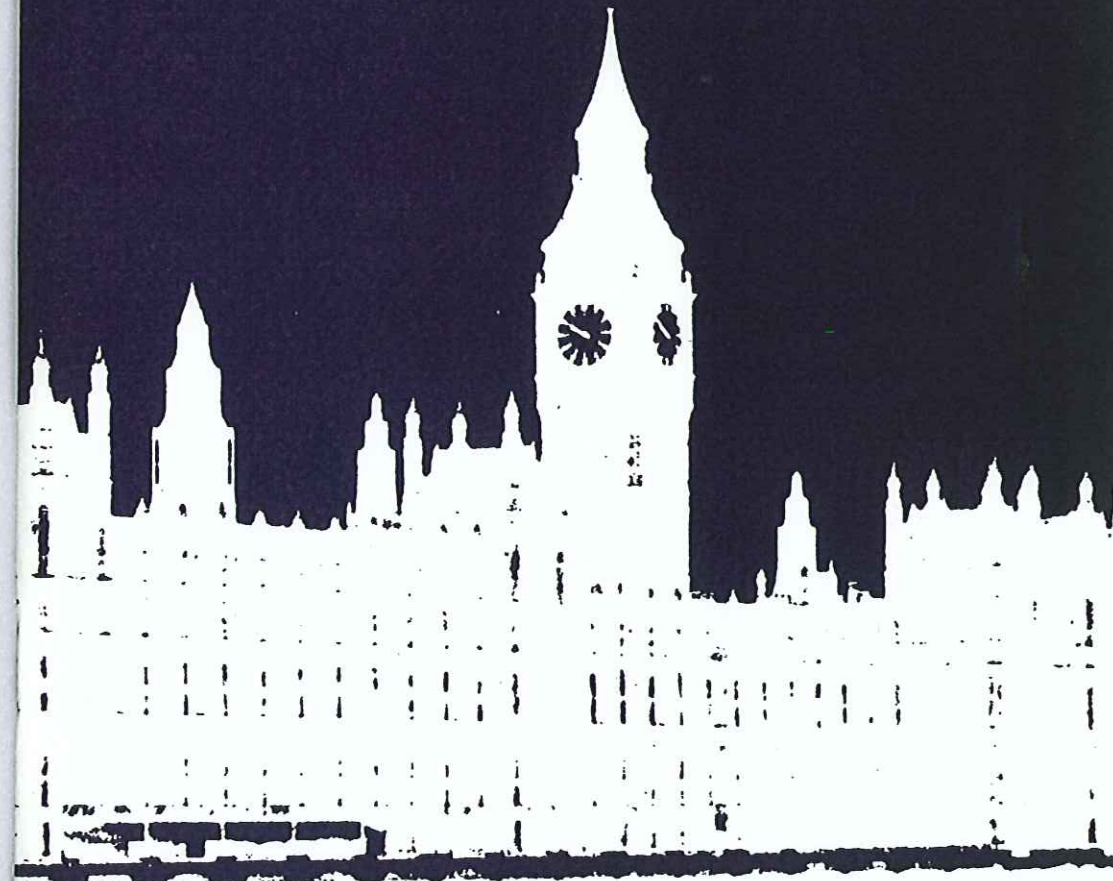




Policy Study No 124

End egalitarian delusion different education for different talents

Peter Pilkington



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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8 Wilfred Street, London SW1E 6PL
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Introduction

In its recent White paper *Education and Training for the 21st century*, the government sets out its admirable intention to encourage vocational education of the highest quality alongside traditional academic education. But the means it suggests for doing so are too vague to be effective. Moreover, the government will have a fight on its hands – with both the labour party and the educational establishment – if it is to prevent its intentions for vocational and academic quality from being transformed into a plan for uniform mediocrity.

The labour party has made clear its intentions to destroy 'A' levels and with them the academic standards which they symbolise. And the educational establishment has indicated its preference for merging academic and vocational courses, possibly by subjecting them both to the same set of agreed criteria. Neither of these alternatives would make for good vocational education; both would greatly damage serious academic education. There is a danger that these, or similar, policies, may creep into the detailed implementation of the White Paper, which will be in the hands of the experts – that is to say, the educationalists.

This pamphlet suggests that, to achieve the principal aim of the White Paper, it will be necessary to use means more radical than those envisaged by the government: to promote distinct vocational and technical schools, courses and qualifications in place of the mingling and overlapping which now takes place. And it argues for caution about proposals (such as those adumbrated in the White Paper) to introduce common principles or qualifications designed to bridge the academic-vocational divide. Will they result, as intended, in enhancing the prestige of vocational qualifications, or will they serve merely to undermine the standards of the academic ones?

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An inner city constituent recently remarked to his Labour M.P., 'we have an educational system that can produce neither brain surgeons nor plumbers.'

To understand how this has come about, and to take steps to see that the future does not repeat the mistakes of the past, it is necessary to cast a

glance at some of the milestones of educational history. The general argument of this paper is that the pursuit of egalitarianism has been responsible for the belief that all pupils are amenable to the same pattern of education. The admirable traditions of the Grammar schools, and the disciplines of the A-level were therefore held to be the model for every boy and girl, whether or not he or she had any academic interests or abilities. Many wrong turnings were taken, of which the Comprehensive system was perhaps the most disastrous of all.

Yet the lessons still appear not to have been learnt by the educational establishment. A- levels are now in danger of making the same descent as the GCSE – being watered down so as to satisfy the demands and encompass the abilities of everyone. In post 16 education in particular, with which this paper is mainly concerned, the needs of pupils are simply not the same. No wishful thinking, no strengthening of the egalitarian straitjacket will make them so. Different courses, different examinations, altogether different paths of education must be followed. The Government must work urgently to produce a framework rewarding for both the academically able and for those gifted in other areas. We do, if we have any sense, need and value both the brain surgeon and the plumber.

The English inheritance

Legacy of the nineteenth century

(i) Examination systems

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the leading role in secondary education was played not by governments but by independent and voluntary bodies — by the ancient grammar schools, the public schools, and the universities (i.e. Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, and London). The examination system which had and has an enormous influence in English education emerged to satisfy the needs of these bodies. The London Matriculation Examination, the Oxford Local Examinations and the Cambridge Local Examinations were first held in 1858. The Local examinations of Oxford and Cambridge were originally designed to meet the needs of what were then termed 'middle class schools'. Even the recommendations mooted by the School Inquiry Commission in 1868, for the establishment of a statutory council for examinations in secondary schools, were dropped in favour of leaving examinations in the hands of the private, self-funded boards. The Headmasters Conference set up in 1869, which at first looked with favour on government involvement in examinations, in the end invited the co-operation of Oxford and Cambridge. The Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board was established in 1873 and the Higher School Certificate Examination was begun in 1874 (the ancestor of A-levels) and the Lower Certificate in 1884 (the grandfather of school certificate, O-levels and GCSE).

The London Matriculation Examination, for which very large numbers of pupils in secondary schools were presented, was in origin an examination for entrance to London University. It gradually came to be used as a leaving examination in secondary schools by many pupils who were not going to university. These examining boards and others which developed had an enormous influence on schools and education. But, designed as they were to satisfy the needs of universities and to cater for pupils wishing either to enter university or follow a professional career, they failed to satisfy the demands of large sections — indeed of most — of the population. Educational policy was devised and led by those who thought first and foremost of the pursuit of academic excellence.

(ii) *Technical Education*

Down to the beginning of the nineteenth century technical education (such as it was) was conducted mainly through the system of craft apprenticeships as defined by statute in 1563.¹ The establishment of large factories in industrial conurbations during and after the industrial revolution led to the decline of this system. Development of machinery made old craft skills unnecessary for many of the new tasks. Dangers were seen in a continued reliance on apprenticeship. Here again the initiatives mostly came from voluntary bodies, and from industry and business, rather than from government. By 1850 there were 610 mechanics institutes in England but, apart from the establishment of a school of design in London in 1837, the government took no action with regard to technical education until the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1852 a Department of Practical Art was organised under the Board of Trade and in 1859 was organised as a branch of the Education Department. In 1873 the Royal Society of Arts instituted examinations in technological subjects and these were transferred in 1879 to the City and Guilds of the London Institute, a body composed of representatives of the Corporation of London and certain Livery Companies.

In 1881 a Royal Commission was established to consider Technical Education, which recommended that charities and local authorities should be enabled to set up Technical Schools. The consequent Technical Instruction Act of 1889 allowed local authorities to levy a penny rate for technical instruction and the Excise Act of 1890 allowed a share of the whisky tax to be used for technical education. A further Royal Commission on Secondary Education of 1894 was sympathetic to technical education, recommending that a place should be given to training.

After the 1870 Act many local authorities had organised Higher Grade Schools with a technological or scientific bias, and there were also a number of specifically technical schools. Thus, by the 1890s, thought had been given (and action taken both by voluntary bodies and by government) to promote technical education along a fairly wide front. Many valuable steps had been taken to cater for the needs of those who did not want to follow a purely academic programme. It had been found that a considerable number of children remained in school beyond the legal age of 13. Ex-standard classes were accordingly organized for these

¹ 5 ELIZ Cap. iv., *An Act Touching Divers Orders for artificers, labourers, servants of husbandry, apprentices.*

children with a strong scientific and technical bias. Sheffield established in 1878 a Higher Central School and the course of instruction included Physics, Chemistry, Machine drawing and construction. There were similar developments in many other areas.

But the 1902 Act (or at least the regulations issued after the Act) neglected technical/vocational education, and many of our present problems stem from this fact.

The 1902 Act and its aftermath

(i) Failure of technical and vocational training

The 1902 Act established State secondary schools in England and Wales. Until then post primary schools of various types had grown up without co-ordination. These were higher grade schools which had a strong scientific bias and day schools in Technical Institutes which had strong vocational or technological courses. The new secondary system inaugurated by the Act was given form in regulations issued by the Board of Education. In 1904 the Board abolished all grants for individual subjects (which had often given impetus to technological or vocational courses) and provided a main single grant for approved courses. The principal subjects were to be English Language and Literature, Geography, History, at least one other language than English, Science, Divinity. A regulation stated 'where two languages other than English are taken and Latin is not one of them, the board will require to be satisfied that the omission of Latin is to the advantage of the school.' In the 1938 report, Spens wrote this of the Board's policy,

'The most salient defect in the new regulations for secondary schools issued in 1904 is that they failed to take note of the comparatively rich experience of secondary curricula of a practical and quasi-vocational type which had been evolved in Higher Grade Schools, Organised Science Schools and Technical Day Schools. The new regulations were based wholly on the tradition of the grammar schools and public schools.'

But it is scarcely surprising that the Board of Education neglected the needs of those who would benefit from a technical/vocational course, since, as we have seen, educational policy up to 1902 was dominated by those who thought of education almost entirely in terms of academic attainment. The independent sector had not shown any marked interest in teaching in technical and vocational subjects (with the exceptions of a few individuals like Thring, and a few schools like Oundle). In primary education the religious denominations had taken the lead and in secondary the Board was prepared to accept the pattern developed by the independent grammar and public schools.

Spens said in a later comment:

'the Board took the existing public schools and grammar schools as their general cadre or archetype for secondary schools of all types. The further development of post-primary schools with traditions somewhat different from the grammar schools such as Higher Grade Schools, Organised Science Schools, was definitely discouraged and new secondary schools were in effect compelled to take as their model the curriculum of the existing Public and Grammar Schools.'

That was not a recipe for technical and vocational education. The failure of the 1902 Act to address the needs of children who either left school at fourteen for direct work, or served an apprenticeship, was its greatest and fatal fault.

It is true, on the other hand, that the Act did develop the great academic traditions of the former grammar schools which enabled many able pupils from poorer backgrounds to benefit from a sound, academic education. In 1904 there were only 575 Grammar Schools containing 94,698 pupils but, by 1936, there were 1,397 Grammar Schools containing over 484,000 pupils. It is now fashionable to criticise the 11+ examination and the grammar schools but these figures show the immense service they did to talented children from many classes. They also developed a coherent philosophy of the values of good discipline and hard work.

(ii) Developments in technical and vocational education after 1902

There were, particularly in the London area, a number of Trade Schools for boys. The first of these was a trade school for furniture and cabinet making founded at Shoreditch in 1901 with a three year course. The Trade Schools received grants as Day Technical Schools from 1904-5. It soon became apparent that there was a distinct demand for such schools, particularly in London. Regulations were issued by the Board in 1913 with regard to these schools. These stated that school hours were to cover not less than thirty hours a week and no pupil was to be admitted except with a certificate from a parent that he intended to enter the employment for which the school provided preparation. Practical work was required and, whenever possible, an advisory committee should be appointed containing representatives of employers and employed. There were also Modern Schools which educated 14+ and 15+ children and were run in a similar way. These initiatives were not developed and in 1937 there were

only 26,513 pupils in Junior Technical schools compared with 484,000 in the grammar schools.

These developments have had an enormous influence on the debate over educational policy and still influence the debate on post-16 education. The record of the grammar schools led them to enjoy overwhelming prestige; in the absence of similar success for technical education it came to be believed that everyone, including those who could not benefit from academic education, had best be incorporated into the grammar school system.

False dawn: The Spens Report and 1944 Act

We have seen how, by the time Spens published his report in 1938, secondary education had come to mean grammar school education, with little being done for children who would not benefit from that type of school.

In their evidence to the Spens Commission the Association of Education Committees affirmed that it was desirable 'to regard the education of all children from the age of 11+ to the age of 16 or thereabouts as belonging to one general organisation designed in its different parts to meet the requirements of children falling within these age limits.' The County Councils Association suggested that the 'high esteem which the Grammar School holds ... has tended to lead in some areas to a disproportionate development of that type.' The Association of Education Committees added 'notably is this the case in the disproportionate development of Grammar Schools as compared with other types of school particularly those providing courses leading up to work of advanced technology.' The Association went on to suggest that 'we are however strongly of the opinion that there is room for a considerable development of Technical High Schools.' The controversy between those who believe, and those who do not believe, that the one and only viable course for children in secondary education is one designed for the academic thus harks back to 1938. It still bedevils educational policy today.

Spens's answer was to recommend that in 'the three types of secondary school over the age of 11 which we have named Modern Schools, Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools ... pupils should be recruited at the age of 11' but they added 'that there should be a further review at about the age of 13 of the distribution of children among all schools in the secondary stage.'

The Report also stated that:

'if schools providing secondary education of different types are to be made equally acceptable to parents and opportunities for entering the type of school which can best develop their particular abilities are to be made equally

available to all children, the establishment of parity between all types of secondary school is of fundamental importance.'

The Spens proposals would have worked had they been implemented flexibly. It was the first attempt by the English government to deal with the lack of any technical/vocational education while preserving the academic traditions of the grammar schools.

The Spens (and Norwood) recommendations were supposed to have been implemented by the 1944 Act but their underlying ideals were never fulfilled. In particular, no parity was established between the different types of secondary schools. In part, this was due to the reluctance of the Right to consider any imaginative revision of the 1944 Act about technical and vocational education, in part due to the conviction of the Left that the whole Spens edifice ought to be reconstructed in the interests of equality.

In the end, the educational system was reconstructed on a Comprehensive pattern in the 1960s. So complete was this change that many believed (and still believe) that this pattern should govern any scheme devised for post-16 training.

It is worth analysing the reasons for the Comprehensive 'triumph' in that they clearly illustrate the forces which still govern educational policy and could lead to a worsening of our problems. The Left dominated educational establishment thought throughout the 'sixties and 'seventies and firmly believed that society could be transformed through a change in the organisation of English education. The Right was divided; many giving only lacklustre support to the academic traditions of the grammar school, feeling that as Eton and other public schools had included pupils of all abilities so should the state system.

Unfortunately the traditions of the independent schools are a poor guide to national policy. Technical/vocational education had never had a high priority in the independent sector.

But the decisive factor in the adoption of the Comprehensive system was the English confusion about egalitarianism. A general sentiment was abroad after 1945 that efforts should be made to produce a fairer society. Many both on the Left and on the paternal Right believed that area comprehensive schools would provide unity and equality of opportunity. The American neighbourhood schools also influenced thinking, though the advocates of the area comprehensive in England failed to point out that the American system demands an elaborate and expensive post-18 pattern of training and longer time for a university degree.

Such was the pressure for Comprehensive education that no thought

was given to refining the 1944 tripartite system by altering the methods and age of selection, and investing more money in technical and secondary schools.

The Comprehensive disaster

By the 1960s schools for the academically gifted had become far more successful than any others – and the gap between the two was becoming wider. On top of this traditional apprenticeships were declining, and still are. In 1964 there were 240,000 apprentices and 148,900 in other kinds of manufacturing training. By March 1988 there were 55,700 apprentices and 37,600 in other training. The area comprehensives failed to provide an alternative when the traditional patterns collapsed. In 1987/88 62,000 children left school with no qualifications.

Even sadder was the failure of the Comprehensive system to satisfy the needs of able academic children from poorer backgrounds. The essence of the former grammar schools was that they drew from wide areas of the community. In the 'forties in my home town of Newcastle-on-Tyne there were around ten grammar schools (either local authority controlled or direct grant) drawing from the whole city. Comprehensives draw pupils from specific areas; though the system is now more flexible there is still a tendency for schools to reflect the character of their neighbourhood. It has proved hard in poor, inner-city areas to provide the academic courses available in the grammar schools. If a school is to sustain subjects like Higher Mathematics, or two modern languages other than French, Latin or Greek, it needs to gather sufficient pupils who have the interest and ability to benefit from such courses. It is hard for one school to teach the whole spectrum from technical to academic courses – and especially difficult if the school is tied to an area of a defined social pattern. Some Comprehensive schools have overcome the problem but, as a national system, it cannot be said to be the most effective.

The idealists of the 'sixties believed that these schools would break a perennial problem of English education loosely called 'upward drift'. For over a century the traditional academic courses had enjoyed such prestige that other courses tried to imitate. The statistics quoted above suggest that the Comprehensives failed to alter this drift in regard to training and vocational courses. The high truancy rate in certain areas is further evidence of this failure. Those who need courses other than academic look upwards and are not fed.

Yet some still maintain that the answer to post-16 education and training is a unitary system in which A-levels and technical/vocational

courses are united. The GCSE has shown the difficulty of producing one single examination for all the ability range. Would a unified 16-19 pattern for all really stimulate the academically able and produce effective vocational training?

It is true that the Comprehensive experiment was attempted during a time when progressive methods were triumphing, structures of discipline were collapsing, teacher militancy was rising. Yet, even if the times had been kinder, could this possibly have been a good solution to the deep-seated problems of English education. Spens may have been more perceptive than Anthony Crosland and Circular 10/65².

2. The circular directing local authorities to implement a comprehensive system.

Can we learn from Europe?

It is sometimes suggested that our society is so different from that of continental Europe that the educational systems in France or Germany could never satisfy the needs of English society. In fact, much that is effective in their educational patterns could well be imitated in England.

France

The situation in France in many ways has mirrored that of England in so far as greater prestige is attached to the academic lycée than to other areas of the educational system. However, greater efforts than here have been made to remedy this. As early as 1919 the Loi Astier was passed and its preamble stated:

'in the light of the new needs of industry it is proper for the State to take the place of private associations in the task of providing professional education for pupils. Industry and commerce are the main sources of a country's wealth. All employed youth up to the age of eighteen must attend courses for at least four hours a week.'

The law's ideals were better than its implementation; but by about 1940 there were 40- 50,000 students trying for Certificates of Professional Aptitude - twice as many as in England.

In French state education today all pupils at the age of 11-12 attend a neighbourhood school called a *Collège d'Enseignement Secondaire*. These are mixed ability schools like an English Comprehensive, but classes are streamed and pupils who fail to reach the right standard are made to repeat a year. At fourteen some leave for a *Lycée Professionnel*, though parents can demand that their child remains in the Collège. At the end of the fourth year some pupils go to the *Lycée* and do the traditional Baccalaureat course. The *Lycée* may be a continuation of the Collège or a separate institution. The rest go to the *Lycée Professionnel* to take the *Baccalaureat Professionnel* (a technical/vocational examination which combines education with work experience). Thus, post-16 there are two routes open to pupils - either to follow the traditional route to the Baccalaureat (37% of pupils in 1980 gained their Baccalaureat in 1987) or else to go to a *Lycée Professionnel* and gain one of the many

technical/vocational qualifications under the umbrella of the *Baccalaureat Professionnel*. At present vocational education in France is undergoing considerable change and development. In essence the *Baccalaureat Professionnel* is being developed as the major vocational qualification in France. The *Brevet d'études professionnelles* still exists and is taken by some, but increasingly the *Baccalaureat Professionnel* is becoming the principal vocational route. However, when France talks of 86% hoping to take the baccalaureat by 2000 it must be noted that there are two systems and the technical/vocational route is separate from the academic baccalaureat. The traditional baccalaureat has been expanded to include more technology, etc. (Bac E concentrates on Mathematics and Technology). There are some *Lycées Techniques* whose object is to provide courses with a technical bias for the *academically* able. It is important to stress that these *lycées* do not prepare pupils for the *Baccalaureat Professionnel*. There are about 24 possible groupings in the academic baccalaureat and some enjoy greater prestige than others.

If we were to take the French pattern as our model children would be in the same school until sixteen (though streamed and regularly tested). Post-sixteen they would follow either an academic or vocational route, each having its distinct college curriculum and examination.

West Germany

West Germany has refused to abandon a system which divides pupils according to their ability and intelligence - there are only 249 comprehensive schools (*Gesamtschulen*), 154 of which are in only two States. Altogether German education is the most complex yet also offers the greatest flexibility.

The normal pattern of secondary education is the tripartite one of *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*. In 1986 an average of 38% of children attended the eighth class in the *Hauptschulen*, 29.2% *Realschulen*, 27.6% *Gymnasien* and 5.2% the Comprehensives. The *Hauptschulen* can be compared to the Secondary Modern Schools of the 1944 Act and are designed for those pupils with an aptitude for practical occupations; there are also opportunities for work experience. After five or six years (entry is at 11-12) pupils who complete their last year satisfactorily receive a certificate which qualifies them for attendance at a vocational school. In 1986 285,200 pupils gained a leaving certificate but 43,000 left without a qualification, and certain German states are attempting to deal with this problem through their vocational schools. The *Hauptschulen*

teach a foreign language and give more attention to arithmetic.

The *Realschulen* have no real equivalent in English education. They are an intermediate school biased neither to further studies nor employment. At the end a leaving certificate qualifies for vocational schools or technical colleges. On the one hand these schools prepare pupils for practical functions demanding increased technical, industrial and social responsibility (for middle level jobs) and on the other hand pupils can transfer to more advanced vocational or general training, i.e. upper classes in the *Gymnasium*.

The *Gymnasium* compares with the English grammar school and at year 13 pupils usually aged 18-19 take the *Abitur*, which qualifies a successful candidate for a university place. Pupils are allocated a place in any of these three types of school on the basis of continuous assessment in the last years at primary school. As in France there is streaming and testing and the need to repeat a year if standards are not achieved. There is more flexibility now with regard to transfer from school to school, and in many states there exist continuation forms in the *Realschule* to which talented pupils from the *Hauptschule* can transfer.

Vocational schools have a long tradition in Germany and experienced rapid growth in the nineteenth century. State vocational schools developed out of Church Sunday Schools and in many places differentiated vocational schemes were created. In the 1920s the Weimar Republic made it a general obligation that boys and girls should attend a trade school. The roots of these schools lie deep in the culture of the small city states of pre-Imperial Germany as well as the practical needs of the old Prussian state.

The most admired feature of the German system is still its vocational training and around 60% of young people aged between 15-18 make use of the facilities provided. It is a highly differentiated system, organised in a great variety of schools, with a whole range of specialisations. However, it almost always involves work experience combined with attendance at a part-time or full-time vocational school. By a mixture of exhortation and pressure industrial firms have become supporters of these training schemes and in 1987 the supply of training places exceeded demand for the first time. In 1986 1,857,200 pupils were in part-time vocational schools, and 318,700 in full-time schools. The full-time schools give more specialist training in certain skills and do not have such a large element of work experience.

It is almost impossible to envisage a return to 1944, but the lessons of

German vocational training pattern must be learnt for any post-16 programme in Britain. Certainly, both France and Germany devoted considerable energy and funds to improving technical/vocational education in the 'sixties, thus providing the foundation for their effective post-16 educational programmes. In particular, both countries have provided a much more imaginative programme for those who want work-training rather than a university course. The distinction between the academic and vocational routes seems to have been effective, particularly in enhancing the prestige of the vocational course.

Technical and vocational provision in England

In France and Germany vocational provision has prospered as a result of there being institutions concentrating solely on vocational training and a national qualification which is universally respected. This is not the case in England. The Secondary Technical School suggested by Spens never really developed. Gary McCulloch in a recent book said this:

'on the one side the Ministry of Education sanctioned an official line ... that reflected an optimistic but vague notion about the future prospects of the schools. On the other hand local circumstances, curriculum, examinations and public attitudes ... combined to ensure that such schools failed to achieve a coherent or distinctive rationale.'³

The result is that even today the range of vocational/technical courses offered within institutions and to school leavers is not well co-ordinated and exists alongside A-level courses, etc. Further Education Colleges were established to overcome some of these difficulties but few now concentrate solely on vocational training as in Germany. Many offer A-level courses and are also encouraged to provide adult training.

The Comprehensive ideology of no distinction between the academic and vocational has governed thinking in this area, and thus weakened both vocational and academic provision. An inspection of Wirral College in 1986 found it sound in many respects but also lacking clarity in its purposes and structures. In view of the many purposes these colleges are supposed to serve this is not surprising. Above all, England suffers from the lack of one national and prestigious vocational qualification which could give purpose and direction to all involved in this training.

The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was set up in 1986. It recognises five levels of competence, of which Level V is assumed to be equivalent to a pass degree. In an article, S. J. Prals said this when comparing NCVQ's qualifications (NVQ) with continental ones:

'the number of accredited training-occupations and the

3. Gary McCulloch, *The Secondary Technical School: A Usable Past*, p.73, Falmer Press, 1989.

number of associated vocational qualifications, is limited on the continent, to about 400 (a little above in Germany, a little below in France and the Netherlands); in England, under the NCVQ arrangements which give priority to the views of the employers, much larger numbers of approved qualifications are likely to emerge - perhaps running into thousands.'

He goes on to say,

'while closely tailored specialisation may encourage British employers to provide training facilities and encourage them to contribute to the finance of training, it is not obvious that carrying the process to such an extreme promotes an adaptable economy nor is it in the long term interests of employees, who wish to change their choice of work'⁴

As can be seen from Professor Prals's comments, the weaknesses of NVQ lie in the fact that there are too many courses designed for specific trades. The construction and electrical industries have recognised weaknesses in the procedure. There is no agreed national examination as in France and Germany where external bodies validate practical and written tasks. There are possibilities within NVQ but it is important to take note of Professor Prals's criticisms and to evaluate the Continental examples.

The British *Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC)* was set up under the Department of Education in 1983. It developed courses focusing on the needs of post-16 students and designed to combine study and work experience. It was to meet local needs. BTEC validates courses and sets out to make sure that institutions offering the courses have the necessary expertise. It also claims to moderate and monitor courses. Again, there is a weakness in that BTEC neither examines nor sets papers. Here again, there is a great difference between its procedure and that followed in France and Germany. Long negotiations have been necessary to achieve any co-operation between BTEC and NCVQ. NCVQ disliked internal examining and BTEC was not happy with the manner in which NCVQ geared its courses to the needs of particular employers. This

4. S. J. Prals, *Vocational Qualifications in Britain and Europe: Theory and Practice*, University of Warwick, March 1991.

illustrates the confusion and lack of cohesion in these vocational qualifications.

The pioneers of vocational training, the *City and Guilds*, with over 500,000 candidates a year and *R.S.A*, with more than 900,000 continue to offer qualifications in this area. The City and Guilds set examinations on the Continental pattern and form a model on which improvements could be built.

The field of vocational training is shared between the Departments of Education and Employment and there is no single qualification. The whole area needs more cohesion and the establishment of a single qualification which is seen as having value within the community.

In 1983 *TVEI* was launched. This was to be a pilot scheme in technical and vocational education. The original idea behind the initiative was to create vocational courses like those provided for German pupils between 14-16. The whole scheme was weakened by the determination of many LEAs and the educational establishment to stop it from being narrowly vocational. It was made to cover the whole ability range and not be vocationally specific. In many areas it moved into vague schemes such as applying Information Technology to history teaching, and many consortia saw their main reason for participation as being access to extra funding. It has in no way fulfilled its early ideals. Again, comprehensivisation weakened what could have been a useful advance.

Some schools and colleges offer a Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education. In theory this is a course designed to give pupils experience of practical work. It is organized by schools and LEAs with some participation by local employers. Some City and Guild courses may be taken but there is no pass or fail for the course as a whole. Often pupils will do some computing, social science, English and mathematics. However, there is no national recognition of this course and in no way can it be seen as real vocational training.

This plethora of courses has not led to more young people remaining in post-16 training. Too many still go into direct work in unskilled jobs. Apprenticeship is a decaying mode of training. The only path that really works is A-level, and this is only suitable for the academically gifted.

Possible Solutions

The same again – Comprehensive to 19

Any reformer of the present chaos is faced with the legacies of the past - Comprehensive education pre-16, a common examination for the whole ability range at 16 (GCSE), existing schools and colleges which cater for both vocational and academic courses, and the low esteem of vocational training. As in the 'sixties, some argue the answer to the problem is to create a unitary system in which academic and vocational courses are combined.

Professor Dick West⁵, in a lecture at Gresham College, suggested one version of a unitary system.

'... by far the biggest problem is the lack of any credit accumulation and transfer arrangements between vocational and academic courses... what we need is the creation of a system that validates and accredits a unified structure of academic and vocational courses all of which meet criteria such as gaining appropriate knowledge and understanding; gaining that knowledge in appropriate contexts; being able to demonstrate competences; demonstrating the mastery of generic and specific skills and acquiring appropriate attitudes and values. Schools and Colleges would be required to develop courses designed to meet these criteria. Courses would be approved by regional bodies and the quality of teaching and assessment monitored on a regular basis by teachers and others working in local consortia of schools and colleges.'

This view seems alarming for those who value the academic values of A-level and the need for external examinations.

A more moderate version of the same ideology is the idea of a modular structure of examinations covering both the academic and vocational.

In their consultation document on the Draft Principles for GCE Advanced Supplementary and Advanced Examinations:

5. National Power Professor of Science Education (Open University).

'SEAC drew attention to the need for a clear system of post-16 that embraced and linked advanced level and *other levels of study* (my italics).'

In particular, the Council noted the improved scope for satisfying the needs of more students that could be gained from a system of examinations and qualifications where the process of credit accumulation and transfer created links between the various constituents.

They seem to be arguing for a common system which preserves the integrity of its parts, i.e. A-level and vocational qualifications. The only way SEAC's ideal could be realised is by a modular structure, that is subjects would be divided into modular units and it would be possible to study modules drawn from A-level and vocational subjects and so qualify for a national certificate. Some argue that this would not destroy the academic value of the A-level course as it would be possible for some students to draw their modules purely from the academic side of the spectrum. This proposal gains some support from those who feel that A-level would benefit from a modicum of vocational and practical skills in individual subjects or into the balance of subjects. That is, that the so-called core skills of communication, problem solving, personal skills, numeracy, information technology and modern languages should influence all syllabuses.

The dangers in such a development are obvious. Its vagueness hides the real problems. It would be necessary to establish parity between academic and vocational modules. There would have to be a massive syllabus revision as it would not be possible to split up the present A-level syllabuses into modular structures without alteration. GCSE has shown the dangers that can occur when traditional academic subjects undergo this procedure. Many are far from satisfied that academic rigour has been preserved in the teaching of many subjects following the syllabus revision which preceded the introduction of GCSE. Experience in certain academic American schools (where the modular structure is common) has shown that division into modules can destroy the academic heart of the subject. The belief that A-level standards would be preserved might become a pious platitude (like so many others in our educational history).

It is doubtful if such a plan would assist vocational training. In France and Germany this problem was solved by giving this training status in its own right and not by combining it with the Baccalaureat or *Abitur*.

Reform within the System

In his book, *Missing Links*, Stuart McClure asked:

'are the changes' (i.e. a better vocational route, broader A-levels, etc.) 'easier to negotiate by means of a big bang or by building incrementally on developments which are already in hand? My own preference is for the latter for reasons which are practical not ideological. I am highly sceptical about revolutionary change in education given the limited pace at which individuals and institutions can respond.'

He then suggests that the present pattern of colleges and schools providing both academic (A-level) and vocational courses should continue. He feels there should be greater rationalisation of vocational qualifications and that the present division between the Department of Employment and the Department of Education should be ended. He also advocates a system of training vouchers - i.e. students should be credit holders. However, essentially the system remains as at present. On page 25 he says:

'all students and trainees should continue in education and training to eighteen. This would mean that there would be:
two routes for 16-18 (academic and vocational)
two modes (full-time and part-time)
overlapping qualifications (A-levels and NVQs)
two sets of destination (higher education and work).'

He goes on,

'For historical reasons, if for no other, it would be necessary for some programmes to continue to be offered both in school and in FE college ... the overlap offers the individual more choice'.

Even with his hopes of rationalisation through one training authority and use of credits, his ideas of gradual change within the system carry dangers. In particular it neither faces the need for maintaining high A-level standards nor provides a prestigious vocational route. In the end there would be pressure for a single unified examination. Schools and Colleges already complain of the complexity of running two systems as

6. Stuart McClure, *Missing Links. The Challenge to Further Education*, Policy Studies Institute, 1991.

they did when faced with O-level and CSE. The comprehensive revolution might be completed by sap rather than storm. Stuart Maclure presents a poisoned chalice, outwardly attractive but lethal.

The Radical Solution

Much thinking on educational development post-sixteen assumes that the changes of the 'sixties are written on tablets of stone. This feeling lies behind SEAC's plans and Stuart Maclure's gradualism.

In his article (Vocational Qualifications in Britain and Europe: theory and practice), S. J. Prais said this of German and French qualifications:

'The *Berufsschulabschluss* and *Baccalaureat Professionnel* are as widely understood as say O-level passes were recently in England.'

This is not the case with English vocational qualifications. A-levels are respected and provide an accurate assessment of the ability of a candidate for a degree course. The main weakness post-sixteen is the lack of a recognized vocational qualification. In the same lecture, S.J. Prais argues for a rational, national system of vocational qualifications and puts forward criteria that should govern such a scheme. He concludes his lecture by saying:

'perhaps in the light of experience the authorities of this country will yet reconsider what are the right principles governing a national system of vocational qualifications and that European experience will be judged to provide important and relevant lessons.'

It is crucial that we should create a single vocational qualification which would command the highest respect and be understood by everyone. BTEC and NVQ offer possibilities but they must offer examinations (practical and theoretical) which are externally set and externally marked. In Germany about half a dozen papers are involved and the practical examination may take one day and is externally marked by three examiners who are not permitted to know the candidate. The French use of the term *Baccalaureat Professionnel* shows a possible method of giving vocational training greater prestige. It might be useful to call the new qualification by some such name as a professional or technical A-diploma. Above all, it must be freed from purely internal testing.

None of these ideals will be realised without there being institutions devoted solely to technical and vocational courses. F.E. colleges and the courses they provide ought to have been modelled on the German

Berufsschule (part-time vocational school) and the *Berufsfachschule* (full-time vocational school designed for the technical and vocational training of pupils aged 16-19). Local firms should be encouraged to co-operate with these colleges and provide training courses on the German or Netherlands model where training is combined with teaching. In Germany part-time courses with nine lessons a week are given and it is possible (in some vocations required) to do a foreign language. The central government could move F.E. colleges in this direction by directing funding towards technical and vocational courses. This was done in relation to Polytechnics by Keith Joseph even when local authorities provided most of the funding. It might also be worth considering funding of pupils on a voucher basis. A- and AS-level should be taught in separate institutions as is the Abitur and Baccalaureat in Germany and France. It might even be necessary to label post-sixteen Colleges Technical or Academic. Vocational education will only gain prestige and status if there are distinct institutions devoted to this training.

These proposals will arouse the wrath of egalitarians and educationalists who believe that any separation of the vocational/technical and the academic is an insult to the human personality. It is this thinking which produced the comprehensive disaster and has made such a muddle of post-sixteen training. Germany and the Netherlands show that within a differentiated system more people fulfil their potential and society gains.

Pre-sixteen opted out schools should be allowed to select their pupils by academic criteria if they wish and some students allowed to specialise more in the technical/vocational route after fourteen, though still being required to do core subjects. Opted-out comprehensives would be encouraged to specialise in academic or vocational courses and compete with the Colleges for a share in post-sixteen training. If there was a full post-sixteen voucher system students could choose between schools, F.E. Technical Colleges or Academic Sixth Form Colleges, while some might opt for part-time courses. By this means some of the weaknesses of the present Comprehensive system could be mitigated and schools could specialise in meeting different needs. Market forces may not be sufficient by themselves instantly to transform the educational system in England. But willing bodies and institutions can be encouraged to convert existing buildings into several different types of school, giving rise to a rapid increase of choice. Here again, the allocation of funds can be used to move schools in certain directions, as was done after the 1902 Act.

Certainly market forces could help to break the virtual Comprehensive monopoly pre-sixteen if opted-out schools were allowed to develop different styles and methods of selection. English parents, like the West German electorate, are well aware of the imperfections of the Comprehensive system.

A-levels

A-levels grew out of the Higher School Certificate which was designed as a test for university entrance. They are, as at present constituted, a suitable examination for around 20% of the ability range. They have proved a good prognosticator of ability for a degree course in view of the very small 'drop-out' from English universities. In France the Baccalaureat is taken by around 37% of the ability range, of whom around 28% go to university, with about 18% completing a degree. It seems that whatever system is followed around 18-20% of an age group are able to complete a traditional degree course – for which A-level has been successful in assessing suitability.

It is attacked as being too narrow, particularly when compared with the French Baccalaureat. In part, its narrowness issues from the short English university degree (three years). A survey in France estimated that a high grade in A-level Chemistry was equivalent to the standard reached between the first and second year of a French degree course.

The problem with regard to A-level change is that the term 'broadening' is used in two ways. Some would like to see a broader system but wish to maintain the present high academic standards. Others interpret broadening as meaning widening the system, either to cater for 35-40% of the ability range, or even to create a common examination for all, including academic and vocational subjects.

If the last course was followed A-level would cease to exist in the form in which we have known it. If the first course was followed and A-level was modelled on the French Baccalaureat around eight subjects would be studied and Mathematics would be a compulsory part of most combinations. The national curriculum shows the influence that pressure groups can have on curriculum. Many would expect an English Baccalaureat to contain Mathematics, a Science, a language as well as the chosen specialisations. Some would argue for compulsory History. Such a pattern would certainly mean a lengthening of university courses, at least in certain subjects. French teachers who have visited England find the atmosphere of the sixth form more relaxed and co-operative than for

similar years in France. In particular, many French students resent being forced to do subjects they find unattractive to such an advanced stage. A longer teaching day is usually necessary and it is hard to find time for non-academic activities like music and games.

Probably the best route to a broader range of subjects at A-level lies through a combination of A- and AS-levels. Able pupils could either take 3 A-levels and one AS-level, or two A-levels and two AS-levels. Only the conservatism of certain university admissions tutors prevents the full development of this style of broadening. But there is an important caveat. There must be no pretence that AS are of the same standard as A-Levels. AS on their own would not provide the same standard as A-level and it would be wrong to consider five AS as providing the same depth as A-level. A-level has already become somewhat easier. To take an example, the prescribed texts for Greek A-level have been cut from a norm of two complete plays, perhaps of 1300 lines each, to extracts from two plays of about 400 lines each. The linguistic demands are significantly lower, generous help being provided with vocabulary, and shorter passages being set for translation. This means that there is more scope for AS-levels to be taken in addition to A-level. In this way, breadth can be offered without too great a sacrifice of depth. The A-level core needs to be retained in its own right and AS-level should share in that core, to the extent that the same linguistic proficiency or powers of historical analysis should be sought.

There remains the problem of those who fall between the rigorous demands of A-level but who do not feel committed to the specifically vocational course. In Germany these pupils' needs are met in the *Realschule* and the two-year, full-time vocational school (*Berufsfachschule*). In these vocational schools courses are offered in Business Management, Accountancy, Office Technology Organisation/Data Processing, and many more disciplines. Up to the 1960s the old system of articles met these needs. Some suggest that there should be an examination on the style of the Scottish Higher. Again, the Germans' way seems better and if we were to evolve full-time vocational colleges (with vocation seen in its broadest terms) this problem could be overcome.

If A-level were so reconstructed that it could be available to around 35-40% of the age group, as is the *Baccalaureat* or *Abitur*, the French and German experience suggests that such an expansion would lead to a much greater fall-out of students from British universities than now. This would be massively expensive for the British taxpayer since, unlike other

European governments, it subsidises students who live away from home. Large sums of public money would be spent on students who did not complete their course. Further an examination of this type would necessitate longer degree courses as in Europe and Scotland.

Yet the main debate in English education must not be seen as principally concerning decisions about which course is most suitable for the ablest students. Our real problem lies elsewhere. The difficulty is not so much to do with A-levels as with the lack of any respected alternative.

Conclusion

This paper has taken it as axiomatic that the preservation of A-level standards, for all pupils of academic ability and interest, should lie at the heart of government policy on secondary education. It is important to understand why they are now being threatened; the reasons are not dishonourable ones, but they do stem from confused thought, endemic in English education, about the place of egalitarianism.

No government would be supported which was content to relegate the great majority of children – as much as 80% – to an education which was inferior in esteem. It was this reluctance which led to the demise of the grammar school, and the elevation of the Comprehensive. A mingling of all abilities – academic and practical – in a single school would be fairer to all children, and lead to a fairer society. So it was thought, and not only by the Left.

But it was this which led, slowly but inexorably, to the lowering of standards, so that now the A-Level itself is in danger of erosion. The way to escape from this predicament, this confusion about equality, must be considered *ab initio*. In particular, the paths followed by those pupils over 16 who wish to develop their academic gifts, and those who wish to pursue their practical ones must be clearly signalled as different altogether: no path deserving of more esteem than another, but different.

Several initiatives that this government has taken – TVEI and BTEC – seem at first sight to point the way. They do not go far enough and they are too scattered and ill-co-ordinated. More than this, there is a great reluctance to make these courses specifically vocational. It is still seen as wrong to make too sharp a distinction between academic and vocational courses. Urgent attention must be given to a national vocational qualification on the Franco-German model. Colleges of Further Education must be encouraged to provide training and support for this qualification. The standards of A-level must be retained even if a wider range of subjects is taken. As in France and Germany A-levels must be taught in schools or sixth form colleges. The structure must provide for the option of two paths post-sixteen so that each can fulfil his particular potential. We must learn from the failures of comprehensivisation and not base 16-19 provision on the mistakes of the past.

Only by a great effort, involving not just government but (more importantly) individuals, voluntary institutions, industry and business

can this be achieved: our vocational training improved beyond measure, our academic standards rescued from their present peril.

The Government's White Paper puts forward many constructive suggestions. However, if it is to be truly effective it must be more precise regarding the pattern and organisation of vocational examinations. It is also crucial that there are separate institutions devoted to academic and vocational training. Only in this way will the standards of an academic education be guaranteed and vocational training given parity of esteem. By maintaining two distinct routes within the same structure the White Paper would make it easy for a future Labour government to create a Comprehensive system post-sixteen, combining academic and vocational in one examination. In this way the disastrous changes of the 'sixties would be repeated.

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