

COMMENTARY

Reversal reversed? The new consensus on education and training

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Introduction

In January 2013 Martin Allen and I self-published *The Great Reversal: Young people, education and employment in a declining economy*. Like the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) in 2011, we were alarmed at the rate at which changes to education were being implemented by the Coalition Government, sharing ATL's view that at this rate 'by the end of this parliamentary term, the state education system as we know it will have disappeared forever' (ATL, 2011: 1). Our concern reached beyond the schools on which ATL primarily focused to cover also further and higher education. Here the Coalition's tripling of undergraduate fees scraped through Parliament in the face of student occupations and demonstrations. The demonstrators were joined early in 2011 by further education students and sixth formers who were protesting not only against the threat that fees posed to their futures but also against the immediate loss of their Educational Maintenance Allowances.

It is no wonder so many school and college students joined the National Union of Students (NUS) on these protests. They could see that the consequence of tripling fees to push a customer-driven culture in higher education (HE) and to engineer a quasi-market marked the end not only of HE as it had developed since the war but – more broadly – of the whole effort to reform society through education and so to better the condition of successive generations. Thus, the Coalition would close a phase of progressive reform initiated by the recognition in the 1963 Robbins Report of the need to go beyond the limited pool previously considered educable. This contributed in turn to the official introduction of comprehensive schools from 1965 on. These had freed primary schools for child-centred education and prepared the way for the expansion of further, higher, continuing, and adult education, including the polytechnic experiment. The logic of comprehensive reform was carried forward to encompass the inclusion in mainstream provision of children with special needs, a common exam at 16, and a National Curriculum sold to teachers as an entitlement for all, as well as the more recent widening of participation in HE to nearly half of all 18–30 year olds. Now these efforts were to be abandoned as education returned to sustaining existing privilege.

In our booklet we therefore argued that Michael Gove's apparently sincerely held but self-contradictory delusion, that one could provide 'a [selective] grammar school education for all' (as Harold Wilson had deviously presented comprehensive schools in 1964), would not magically restart the limited upward social mobility of the last century. Instead, we saw Gove's policies for

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schools complementing the depressing effect that raising fees would predictably have in reducing applications to HE. So, as we wrote in our introduction, despite their reported mutual personal antipathies, 'Coalition education ministers David Willetts and Michael Gove [were] working hand-in-glove to return English education to the 1950s' (Allen and Ainley, 2013: 1) by imposing much greater academic selection on schools to reduce the numbers who went on to more expensive higher education.

A new consensus

When this prediction did not materialize but – after only a temporary fall in 2011 – more 18-plus-year olds (if fewer 25-plus-year olds) applied to HE in 2012 and subsequently, Willetts accepted the verdict of the market at the cost of losing what Andrew McGettigan (2013) called his *Great University Gamble*, since the government admitted it did not expect to recover more than a third of what will add up to £330 billion in unpaid loans by 2046, when outstanding balances begin to be written off. When the higher education minister eventually jumped before he was pushed by persistent Treasury pressure, and with Gove reshuffled, the new policy and professional consensus that has succeeded them is equally delusional in seeing 'apprenticeships' as, just as magically, creating a productive Germanized economy out of the UK's deregulated and deskilled post-industrial service economy.

The new consensus thus follows Alison Wolf's recommendations in her Gove-commissioned 2011 review of vocational qualifications. Reviewing 25 years of 'vocational pathways' in schools, Wolf concluded that much of current vocational education was both inadequate in content, requiring a greater emphasis on maths and English, and 'worthless' for labour market entry. She proposed vocational learning should be restricted to 20 per cent of the timetable for students before the age of 16, and called for the expansion of apprenticeships. She did not recognize that most employers do not really want or need apprentices for work that is increasingly automated and deskilled if it has not been contracted out at home and/or outsourced abroad. Nor that if employers still require apprenticeships, they run them themselves – though many are not averse to taking government subsidies for in-house training, often of their existing workforce without recruiting new and younger employees. (The supermarket chain Morrison's was the most notorious example of such a scam, as revealed by a BBC *Panorama* investigation (broadcast 2 April 2012), whilst *The Telegraph* also reported that an Asda scheme, accounting for 25,000 posts, was only for staff already employed at the supermarket (Peacock, 2011). See also Allen and Ainley, 2014.)

Thus, following the 2012 Richard Review of Apprenticeships commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (DBIS), 'There has been a drift towards calling many things apprenticeships which in fact are not', because an apprenticeship in an old job is 'on the job training. There must be a job and the job must be a new one' (Richard, 2012: 5). Under the Coalition, 'apprenticeships' often existed in name only and were certainly not the legally binding indentures of yesteryear guaranteeing employment on completion, because again, employers, benefiting from a surfeit of applicants – including many graduates – do not require such 'time serving'. According to the influential Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2014, for example, more than a fifth (22 per cent) of British work roles require only primary-level education to carry them out, while other studies have repeatedly shown that large numbers of graduates are unable to secure 'graduate jobs' and employer surveys (UKCES, 2013) report that many workers are not required to use their skills at work. It could have been foreseen, therefore, that when DBIS responded to Richard by promising to 'put employers in the driving seat', numbers of apprenticeships would actually decline.

Martin Allen's research (in Allen and Ainley, 2014) concluded that apprenticeships are *Another Great Training Robbery* rather than a *Real Alternative for Young People*. Yet the 3 million apprenticeships promised before the election by David Cameron were matched by Ed Miliband's equally empty pledge to 'rebalance' apprentice numbers in line with the approximately two million undergraduates. Indeed, with the raising of the compulsory participation age to 18 this year, all the austerity parties, as they came to be known during the election campaign, shared only the real intention of offering all 18-plus-year olds just two options: to be a student or an apprentice. The former role sees universities as 'the power stations of the knowledge economy' (Byrne, 2014: 9), while the latter would 'plug the young unemployed into the global economy' (Chuka Umunna on BBC *Newsnight*, broadcast 18 June 2014) but on a reduced Training Allowance in place of Job Seekers' Allowance. Similarly, the Conservatives propose withdrawing housing benefits from under-25s, though it can be estimated that this would raise only £85 in funding for each of the 3 million apprenticeships promised.

Consensus on this new parting of the ways from 14 onwards (as recommended in Dearing's 1996 review of the National Curriculum) was emphasized by Gove's successor, Nicky Morgan, who promised to double to 100 the number of University Technical Colleges (UTCs), a rebranding of Kenneth Baker's City Technical Colleges. Linked to universities that are desperately competing to attract science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) students (who attract central funding), these STEM schools had previously languished under Gove's drive for universal grammars, to which they were presented as an alternative *Vision for Secondary Education* by Baker (2013) and his Edge Foundation. (Baker is also Chair of the Baker Dearing Education Trust.) Now UTCs enjoy royal patronage, with *UTC News* on 10 December 2014 reporting that 'Duke of York Awards' were presented to 17- and 18-year old UTCers by the eponymous Prince. The website also featured Lords Baker and Adonis (a former 'New Labour' grandee), with Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, Tristram Hunt, opening a new UTC on 15 December 2014. Indeed, Hunt proposed a Technical Baccalaureate for the half of all 14-plus school students who failed to make it onto the academic route, rebranding FE colleges as 'Institutes of Technical Education' with new part-time, two-year 'Technical Degrees' reinventing Foundation degrees. This bipartism could have brought back secondary technical schools and polytechnics!

The new student experience

In conditions of mass downward social mobility that have in this century succeeded the limited upward social mobility of the middle of the last century (Bukodi *et al.*, 2014), education continues to reinforce social differences through selection via academic exams that function as proxies for more or less expensively acquired cultural capital. Its main lesson (as under Gove) is to teach people their place, while proffering illusions that more education will enable them to leave it. To this delusion has now been added yet another attempt 'to rebuild the vocational route'. Consequently, from childhood on into 'prolonged youth' (Bynner, 2005), pupil-students face a series of hurdles that mark divergences between bifurcating pathways. Without necessarily realizing it, they can get locked into one or another of these tracks so that recovery from inferior options (defined both by subject and institution), while not impossible, becomes cumulatively harder.

These crunch points intensify in frequency with age: they come only once every four years after initial testing in primary school, but then in secondary school guided 'option choices' are made after three years, and followed two years later by the first critical juncture at which five A*-C GCSEs are sought. From then on, whether on the academic or vocational route, modularized assessment (reduced by Gove) avoids the trauma of end-of-course examinations

but breaks down individuals' scores into a running total (like GPAs in the United States), which there is incessant pressure to maintain. If these add up to three 'good' A-levels, application can be made to the hierarchy of higher education. Yet, such is the current competition between higher education institutions for students, recovery is still possible – since all degrees are supposedly equally valued. As long as you pass the first year, that is – even with a 'fuck-it 40', as Cheeseman's Sheffield undergraduate interviewees put it (2011; see also Ainley, 2008). Returning to 'the student bubble' for two more years of semester module tests hopefully adds up to avoiding 'a deadly Desmond' (2:2). Otherwise, you have lost your fee/loan investment and might as well have stopped participating at 18 for what employment you will be able to find – with or without 'apprenticeship'.

Especially with such high fees and maintenance costs, this risk is more significant the less you can afford to take it, so that a lack of confidence in their ability afflicts many students from poorer and minority parental backgrounds. They therefore often choose to 'play safe' at a seemingly less demanding, local, new university, with people like themselves – a powerful attractor up and down 'the endless chain of hierarchy and condescension that passes for a system [of higher education] in England' (Scott, 2015). The odds are on their side, however, since a 2:1 or first-class degree is now achieved by around 70 per cent of graduates, as compared with around 20 per cent before the expansion of participation, and enables entry to Masters courses, which nowadays last usually only for one year (whereas 'real higher education' – as is often said – begins, in the USA, with two-year Masters study), if not to endless internships.

This is the real 'student journey' that is so much celebrated and regulated at universities – and it is an increasingly long one! It represents the extension of what Phil Cohen (1997: 284) called the 'career code' that used to be adopted by the minority of grammar-school or privately educated young men, traditionally middle class, joined by a growing proportion of young women in making what became in the 1960s and 1970s an institutionalized transition from school to work and from living at home to living away via residential HE. This code has now been largely accepted also by 'aspiring' parents and their children in the new middle-working/working-middle class of contemporary society. Only a minority are today diverted to the once male-majority but second-best vocation code of 'apprenticeship', where the majority of apprentices – as of undergraduates – are today also female (Allen and Ainley, 2014: 7), and take on mostly office work, health and social care, or retail. As Cohen warned, 'this is not just the material effect of youth unemployment on school transitions; it is about changes in the codes of cultural reproduction' (Cohen, 1997: 233). Along with the comparatively better opportunities that a 'good degree' affords for the secure, semi-professional employment most graduates seek, this is another reason vocational options are not so easily revived.

Moreover, the career code provides a coherent scaffold for young people's lives that is comprehensible to them and their parents but which, like most occupations, is subsidiary to their more immediate social concerns – so merely a tedium to be 'performed'. This is what Lave and McDermott (2002) call 'alienated learning' in which, without any real community of practice in which acquired knowledge and skills can be applied, the identity of learners as demonstrated in their behaviour then becomes the object of (ex)change independent of any use value. Honed in the endless 'presentations' students are encouraged to undertake throughout school, college, and on into university, as well as in the relentless self-presentation necessary for interviews and in CVs, as well as on Facebook, insofar as these performances of 'interpersonal' and 'soft skills' have any retail value, it is in the self-regulated and stereotypically feminine customer care of the service sector. This creates a situation where learning (increasingly restricted to behavioural training) becomes an end in itself – and a dead end at that! The result is profoundly alienating for teachers and students alike as education, from primary to postgraduate schools, turns into

its opposite through a tyranny of transparency that dictates to student-consumers exactly what to do when, so as to turn their outcomes into comparable commodities for audit if not for sale. This behavioural training in 'Component Education' (McArdle-Clinton, 2008) effectively reduces rather than raises standards and is of decreasing intrinsic interest, let alone enlightenment!

However, it is important to reaffirm that the progressive reforms to education from Robbins onwards that were outlined in the introduction allowed room for innovations and challenges that sustained the momentum of reform even after the economic conditions that enabled them had altered. So a return to an education system that serves to keep a lid on aspiration while still officially encouraging it requires prolonged structural adjustment and monitoring. For this reason, even though university fees can be regarded as paperless vouchers, the wilder fantasies of Gove's voucherite supporters were always, and still are, unlikely to be realized in schools. Although, following on from measures implemented by the New Labour Government but with many more schools 'free' from LA control and run instead in chains, financed from the centre, or delegated to arbitrary new regional commissioners, Gove had set up the conditions for such an experiment, this marketization would be too hazardous now that state schools have become so central to social control over youth. His successor, Nicky Morgan, has explicitly ruled out allowing schools to be run for profit, which Gove had wanted to include in the Conservative manifesto. It would also paradoxically bring private schools into the state system, as parents could discount their vouchers against fees there. However, this would mean the state subsidizing the private sector at a cost that even Sir Keith Joseph realized would be prohibitive. (See Denham and Garnett, 2002: 432.) Instead, if it ever became possible to abolish the charitable status of private schools (perhaps in Scotland!) but it transpired that doing so involved an extensive legal minefield, there would need to be at least a policy for restricting their 'placement' powers compared with state schools. These powers have become notorious over all aspects of public life as symbolized by Cameron and his Cabinet, and persist in close links between 'the Great Public Schools' and particular Oxbridge colleges.

Confronting the crisis of legitimacy in education

In readiness for the general election, the National Union of Teachers produced a *Manifesto for Education* (NUT, 2014) which, going beyond habitual rhetoric about education's importance in securing national economic survival, highlighted themes from reforming the curriculum to restoring local democracy. Yet one group that continues to be missing from such education campaigns is students themselves, although to an extent this reflects a situation where there is no major national youth organization able to articulate their demands. As a result, professional groups seek to maintain their influence over educational projects, such as the latest new consensus that has succeeded the Coalition's failed imposition of a *Great Reversal*. Derided as 'The Blob' and suffering their cruellest blow in the losses inflicted upon university education departments of what had become teacher training (see Whitty, 2014), the architects of this new consensus see the major problem as being that education policy has been hijacked by right-wing or neo-liberal forces. These have had a disastrous effect on 'our schools' and the life chances of children for whom access has been blocked and to whom it must be restored, once again by a vocational route with the 'parity of esteem' that has previously eluded it. In other words, professional politics seek closure around education as a social project that is presented as a continuation of post-war assumptions about education's reforming and levelling role. Such an approach ignores the changed relationship between education and the occupational order and is committed to promoting learning for its own sake in an education that encourages young people to participate in society.

In themselves these are laudable aims, but emphasizing a 'love of learning' at the expense of everything else does not meet the student experience outlined above of prolonged participation in education, which results from the collapse of the post-war model of transition and the disappearance of 'youth jobs'. The real crisis therefore is not at the level of policy, but is a crisis of legitimacy for education. Rather than enabling young people to *get on*, even highly qualified young people find it increasingly difficult to *get by*. For young people and their parents, education and employment are closely related and a failure to guarantee the latter limits what can be achieved by the former. The professional politics of education refuses to recognize this relationship and for this reason its latest vocational consensus will never gain assent from defrauded youth.

Meanwhile, England for the foreseeable future is stuck with a one-track government that knows only the crisis measures with which Margaret Thatcher responded to the 1970s crisis of capital accumulation. Deregulation of all public services with privatization of provision on the contracting-out state model is seen as the solution to every problem and is a part of the motivation for those who seek to leave the overly regulated European Union. A small state in a free market is the narrow-minded ideal, but it reflects more than poverty of imagination in response to the global challenges that threaten to overwhelm humanity. As Karl Polanyi wrote towards the end of the last war, to find the origins of fascism in reactions to the same neo-liberal economics,

the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness.

(Polanyi, 1944: 3)

This is the reality that once again confronts civil society.

Notes on the contributor

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