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Thirty years of 14–19 education and training in England: reflections on policy, curriculum and organisation

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This article traces and analyses some of the key features of 14–19 education and training in England over the 30 years since such a phase was first mooted. It does this through an introductory narrative outlining the key policies and initiatives and the development of six themes drawing on analysis of a body of research and policy. The themes are: the waxing and waning of policy in relation to a 14–19 phase; policy imperatives driving 14–19 education and training; curricular commonality, differentiation and unification; pathways and progression; qualifications-led curriculum change and partnership, institutional autonomy and competition. The article concludes by outlining the implications of the analysis for the current political and policy context in relation to education and training for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Keywords: 14–19 education and training; curriculum policy and practice; progression; institutional organisation

Introduction

This article builds upon that by Richardson in this Special Issue by providing an account of more recent developments in 14–19 education and training. In order to complement other contributions to this collection we adopt here a specifically English focus. We also focus upon full-time provision and thus do not include material on work-based learning which is addressed in the article by Fuller and Unwin.

Even with these limitations on the scope of the article, the hyperactivity of English policy and provision for 14- to 19-year-olds over the period covered means that inevitably we have to be highly selective in our review. We take 1982 as the starting point for our analysis since this was when the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) was announced by the Thatcher government. This was significant because it was the first occasion on which the notion of a 14–19 *phase* had been recognised within a governmental programme or initiative. However, although our review starts from 1982 some of the thinking and practice which went into TVEI was influenced by the publication of *A basis for choice* (FEU 1979) which subsequently informed the development of the City and Guilds 365 course and later the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) (courses which were integrated into many TVEI schemes). We trace and analyse developments up to the change of government in May 2010.

As noted at various points in other contributions, the establishment of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government seems likely to mark a distinct break in policy in relation to 14–19 education and training in England. This is not to suggest, of course, that

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the period covered in this paper was one of consistent and coherent 14–19 development. This was far from the case. As we will show, there were long periods within those 30 years when there was no commitment to the idea of a 14–19 *phase*. Indeed the waxing and waning of this concept within policy and educational debates is an important part of the story we tell along with that of considerable turbulence, variation and discontinuity.

This article has three main purposes. First, to provide a brief narrative of some of the main developments in 14–19 education and training during the period 1982 to 2010. This is intended to provide readers with contextual information on some of the key features and developments over the period and to identify sources which they may use to explore specific developments in detail. Our second, and main purpose, is to identify and elaborate six key themes which have run through 14–19 education since 1982. We will show how these have been addressed, or ignored, in different ways and at different times during the period. This analysis then opens the way for our third, and more speculative purpose, which involves considering the salience of these themes to emerging Coalition policy.

Key developments in 14–19 education and training over 30 years

TVEI was explicit in being aimed at 14- to 19-year-olds and as proposing the establishment of curriculum progression for these young people. The aims were a largely unexceptional, although interesting, combination of the instrumental and the progressive (MSC 1984). It was established as a pilot scheme, initially in just 14 local authorities in 1983. Subsequent annual rounds brought most local authorities in England and Wales into the pilot scheme. From 1988 the Initiative was extended to all schools and colleges enrolling 14- to 19-year-olds.

In the context of this paper there are three points to make about TVEI. First, its most novel feature was that it was funded and run by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), a quango under the remit of the Employment Department, rather than through the Department of Education and Science (DES). Second, as TVEI was implemented there was a significant degree of mediation exercised by local authorities and individual schools (Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992; Dale et al. 1990; Yeomans 1998). Third, despite being explicitly a 14–19 programme it never developed a coherent and progressive 14–19 curriculum. Instead the focus was strongly upon 14- to 16-year-olds with provision for 16- to 19-year-olds much more marginal (Barnes et al. 1989; Gleeson 1987). This was to be replicated for other avowedly 14–19 initiatives. We explore reasons for this in the next section.

While TVEI was a significant, lavishly funded (in its pilot stage) and initially highly controversial programme which continued in its extension phase until 1997 from around 1987/88 its influence in both policy and practice began to wane with the introduction of the national curriculum which saw the resurgence of the DES in educational policy-making. From this point until 2002 there was little focus upon the concept of a 14–19 phase.

There were, however, two developments which helped to create conditions in which the notion of a 14–19 phase might be reborn. The first of these concerned the retreat in both policy and practice from the initial comprehensive national curriculum for 14- to 16-year-olds. We have written about this elsewhere (Higham and Yeomans 2007a) and will not repeat that analysis here. However, by reducing prescription for 14- to 16-year-olds this retreat created some curriculum policy space at both national and institutional levels within which the notion of a 14–19 phase might be revived. A second major curriculum initiative during the period was the introduction of Curriculum 2000. Its primary aim and effect was to broaden, albeit in a limited, sense the A level experience. However, the closer alignment

of post-16 academic and vocational courses which accompanied this was a move towards a more closely linked curriculum and qualifications structure which had the potential to be developed into a fully unified approach (Hodgson and Spours 2003) and, coupled with the reduced scope of the national curriculum, possibly extended downwards to the 14–16 curriculum.

The 14–19 concept returned to the policy agenda with a vengeance from 2002 with a determined attempt by New Labour to establish a 14–19 phase. This was promoted through a series of policy documents (DfES 2002, 2003, 2005a, b) and initiatives including the Increased Flexibility programme (Golden et al. 2005a, b; O'Donnell et al. 2006) and 14–19 Pathfinders (Higham et al. 2004; Higham and Yeomans 2005, 2006). In the midst of this period however, the government rejected a proposal for a more coherent, unified 14–19 qualifications system (DfES 2004).

The developments outlined above were fundamentally curriculum initiatives aimed at 14- to 19-year-olds. A key associated feature of the period was development of a large number of new qualifications. Indeed as we elaborate in the next section a powerful theme was the ever-tightening bond between curriculum and qualifications. Thus while TVEI was weakly articulated with the qualifications system and largely worked with what was on offer, by the end of the period a new qualification, the Diploma, became the main vehicle for the establishment of a 14–19 phase.

This focus upon qualifications had several characteristics. It was largely, but not exclusively, driven by government. It appeared that whenever a curricular weakness was posited governments could not resist developing, introducing and promoting a new qualification. It also focused mainly upon vocational qualifications, although there were also important changes in academic qualifications.

Themes in 14–19 education and training

Having outlined the key developments in 14–19 education and training during the period which is of interest in this article, we now highlight six themes in policy, curriculum and organisation which have been important across the period.

The waxing and waning of policy in relation to a 14–19 phase

In interpreting developments in 14–19 education and training a key distinction can be made between periods in which there has been a national attempt to develop a distinct 14–19 *phase* and those in which there has been piecemeal development affecting different aspects of the system but in which there is no such overall concept.

There have been two main periods during which the establishment of a 14–19 phase was pursued – 1983 to around 1988 through TVEI and 2002 to 2010 through the New Labour reform agenda. The second of these was much more significant than the first. This was because while TVEI was well-funded in its pilot stage it was implemented in only a minority of schools and colleges. Later, when it moved into its extension phase, funding although greater in total was spread much more thinly. In terms of colleges, particularly, TVEI funding even in the pilot stage was a very small portion of overall budgets and provided limited leverage. By 1988 TVEI had also lost its pre-eminence as a curriculum initiative and in curriculum policy terms became little more than a cross-curricular gloss on the national curriculum (Jones 1988). TVEI also exhibited a particular policy imperative which may be inherent within the implementation of 14–19 initiatives. TVEI projects,

perfectly sensibly, focused their initial attention on 14–16 and only began to address 16–19 as students progressed through the initiative. A somewhat similar approach was noted in the early stages of 14–19 Pathfinder projects (Higham et al. 2004). The implication of this is that even avowedly 14–19 initiatives may in practice emerge as 14–16/16–19 projects. The reasons for this were mainly structural, as we elaborate below, but are likely to be exacerbated by time-limited and funding-limited projects where there is restricted scope to plan a 14–19 phase.

The New Labour 14–19 reforms were a much more substantial attempt to create a 14–19 phase. Since they have been extensively discussed elsewhere (e.g., Hodgson and Spours 2008) we will not labour the analysis here. The reforms were backed relatively consistently in policy and supported by a whole range of levers and drivers. They achieved a degree of resonance in schools and colleges and began to establish some national, local and institutional infrastructure and also commitment by staff in local authorities, schools and colleges.

However, the Coalition Government has so far shown little interest in the concept of a 14–19 phase. The phrase has not appeared in policy documents or speeches. The focus has been on 'toughening-up' constituent parts of the system, especially GCSEs and A levels while appointing the Wolf Review to look at vocational education. The piecemeal approach to 14–19 education and training appears to be back.

The relative ease with which the idea of a 14–19 phase can be tossed aside by policy-makers points to some serious structural problems with the concept in the English context. There are three such issues which have inhibited the development of a 14–19 phase. First, it has straddled compulsory and post-compulsory education – which perhaps makes it ironic that the Coalition is rejecting or ignoring the concept when this structural divide at least, is about to be removed with the raising of the participation age. Second, there is a stark curricular divide between the relatively broad 14–16 curriculum and the narrow, specialised post-16 curriculum. This structural divide was not addressed in either of the periods in which a 14–19 phase was promoted and there is no indication that the Coalition intends to do so. Third, with the exception of a few local areas, there are no 14–19 institutions although there were attempts to build 14–19 partnerships (see below) and some colleges established distinct 14–19 sections (Higham and Yeomans 2010). Interestingly, the Coalition Government is developing a programme of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) for 14- to 19-year-olds, championed by Lord Baker, reprising in many ways his promotion of City Technology Colleges over 20 years ago. The first UTC opened in 2010 with plans for a total of 24 by 2014. However, the UTCs, even by 2014, will constitute only a tiny minority among the institutions providing 14–19 education and training. They appear to represent an example of educational entrepreneurship by Lord Baker in the context of diversity and competition rather than any recognition by the Coalition of the desirability of a 14–19 phase. Overall, 14–19 remains weakly institutionalised. In summary, 14–19 education and training has lacked some of the key characteristics of a *phase* and therefore has been vulnerable to the waning of policy commitment to the concept of a 14–19 phase.

Policy imperatives driving 14–19 education and training

There is a strong sense in which the policy imperatives driving 14–19 education and training over the period have remained consistent, although the means to achieving the desired ends have often varied. The dominant policy discourse has been overwhelmingly economistic and cast in terms of the development of appropriate human capital in an age of increased

international competition and globalisation. Debates within this discourse have had both quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

The quantitative issues have largely revolved around post-compulsory participation rates. In 1983 when TVEI began full-time 16–18 participation rates stood at just under 40%. The participation rate rose from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, at which point it was around 60%. Participation remained at similar levels for over 10 years. There have been modest increases in recent years with provisional figures for 2009 showing 68% of 16- to 18-year-olds in full-time education. These overall figures disguise differences between 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds with participation declining across the age range (in 2009 46% of 18-year-olds were in full-time education and training). There are also substantial local and regional differences (DfE 2010e). However, within the policy discourse there has been consistent agreement that whatever rises in participation have been achieved these have not been good enough. Unflattering comparisons have continued to be made between staying-on rates in England and international competitors.

The qualitative aspect of the discourse has concerned the 14–19 curriculum and will be elaborated upon below. However, within the policy discourse, human capital arguments about the need for higher levels of participation, progression and attainment have been cast in very general terms. There has been much weaker articulation of links between specific forms of human capital developed through different forms of education and training and a highly differentiated labour market. To put it another way the relationships between 14–19 education and training in all its variety and labour markets in all their complexities have been left vague and problematic. The human capital analysis and prescription has acted far more as a political and rhetorical slogan system than as a theoretical and practical basis for the development of a 14–19 phase.

A significant consequence of the economising of 14–19 policy has been an emaciated curriculum debate in which cultural, social, political and personal curricular aims have been neglected. The question of what is 'an educated 14–19 year-old?' has been insufficiently considered (Pring et al. 2009). Further, the human capital emphasis within policy has shown a tendency to construct 14- to 19-year-olds as rationalistic, economic actors thus underplaying the realities of their lives, aspirations and motivations (e.g. Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). This has perhaps been particularly the case in relation to young people 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' who have been homogenised and pathologised as a 'problem' (see Hayward and Williams, this issue).

Curricular commonality, differentiation and unification

Having highlighted two broad policy themes we turn now to three curriculum themes. The first of these concerns the extent to which the 14–19 curriculum should offer common or differentiated curricular experiences. An associated although separate issue relates the extent to which there should be separate, linked or unified curricular tracks for different forms of content – in the English context this has almost always in recent times meant the unification of academic and vocational tracks. In these areas policy and, to an extent, practice has varied greatly over the period. Overall, however, curricular division has been dominant.

The structural division between 14–16 and 16–19 is important in discussing issues of commonality and differentiation and the associated issues of choice and compulsion. Throughout the period differentiation and choice has been the overriding feature of 16-19. The tradition of choice has been immensely strong with students able to choose and to an extent construct their own curriculum. At A level this has involved the (theoretical)

combination of any three or four subjects. Attempts to create some form of common, compulsory core have had little impact. In TVEI this gave rise to the paradoxical concept of the marginal core (Barnes et al. 1989). From the early 1990s attempts to introduce core/key/functional skills have also made little headway (Hodgson and Spours 2003), even when these have been restricted to vocational courses (Bird et al. 1999; Edwards et al. 1997). Evidence has suggested that there was often resistance from students and indifference from institutions.

At 14–16 the high water mark for rhetorical justification for commonality within the curriculum occurred during the introduction of the ten subject national curriculum in the period just before and just after 1988. However, this common curriculum was never implemented and there was a gradual, persistent retreat from commonality (Higham and Yeomans 2007a). The New Labour period of 14–19 reform gave particular emphasis to the importance of choice. The number of main core subjects was cut back and many more vocational options were made available. Interestingly, early Coalition policy shows signs of promoting a particular form of commonality. This, however, has taken a distinctive form. It is not based on legislation, as was the case with the national curriculum, but through the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, based on five traditional subjects, as a key accountability measure for schools (DfE 2010c).

The English Baccalaureate has crystallised debate around commonality and differentiation in curriculum. The Department for Education argues that it is anti-elitist since it potentially exposes all students to core, valued knowledge and, by implication, reduces exposure to other less valid and valued forms of knowledge (DfE 2011b). To critics the English Baccalaureate is a narrow, regressive measure which unjustifiably devalues knowledge not covered by the subjects which are included in the 'EBacc' (BBC Online 2011a; Morris 2011). What is also clear is that despite the introduction of a 'Baccalaureate' at 14–16 this does not signal a move towards a broader, more common post-compulsory curriculum.

A further curricular theme which emerged during the period covered by this article concerned the creation of a unified curriculum structure. This received its first major expression in the proposal for a British Baccalaureat which came from the Institute of Public Policy Research think-tank (Finegold et al. 1990). The proposed British Baccalaureat was aimed at 16- to 19-year-olds but subsequent proposals extended the concept to 14- to 19-year-olds. The aim was to end the division between education and training, or in the later more common formulation, between the academic and vocational. From the 1990s the idea of a unified curriculum which contained a wide variety of different forms of knowledge and, in most proposals, some form of common core, gained a degree of support from practitioners, academics and researchers, but little from government (Hodgson and Spours 2008). There was however some weakening of the strong divisions between different forms of learning and this was encouraged by Curriculum 2000. Mixed academic/vocational provision became more common, although still taken by only around 22% of 16–19 students (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

A historic opportunity to make a radical shift to a unified 14–19 curriculum occurred in 2004 when a group appointed by government to advise on 14–19 qualifications and reform proposed a system of interlinked diplomas which would encompass both academic and vocational as well as other forms of learning (DfES 2004). The proposal gained a good deal of professional and academic support but was eschewed by the New Labour government. The White Paper which followed (DfES 2005a) and subsequent policies reaffirmed separate tracking. Despite this, advocates of a unified curriculum continued to harbour some hopes that the alignment of academic and vocational qualifications within a common framework,

together with local commitment, could edge England closer to a unified system (Hodgson and Spours 2008).

Coalition policy, however, seems likely to entrench curricular divisions and emphasise academic/vocational distinctions. Prospects for a unified or even more closely linked 14–19 curriculum model seem to be off the agenda for the moment.

Pathways and progression

Progression is closely connected to both the policy imperatives and the issues of commonality and differentiation discussed above. Both have brought issues of progression to the fore. Despite its ubiquity in policy documents as Spours et al. (2009) have argued progression is often poorly or narrowly defined and difficult to measure. In the context of this article we focus not upon progression *per se* but upon approaches and mechanisms for its facilitation.

A key justification for the establishment of a 14–19 phase has been that it will improve progression, both within the phase and beyond into higher education, supported through Aim Higher, and into work. A main means of achieving this has been through constructing progressive curricula. There have been two main potential approaches to this, although many intermediate positions are possible. The first is to construct a series of curricular pathways which young people opt for at age 14 in the hope and expectation that they will follow this pathway to the age of 19 – preferably emerging with a level 3 qualification, and thus contributing to the achievement of national targets. The alternative approach is to eschew pathways and build instead a unified curriculum structure with varying balances of common and optional elements and varying opportunities for specialisation. The Tomlinson proposals (DfES 2004) were of the second type as were various other baccalaureate-style proposals. The emphasis on personalised learning towards the end of the New Labour period (DCSF 2008b) also seemed to promise increased flexibility for learners. The former approach, however, has been dominant. Its simplest manifestation has been as a three-track system comprising broad academic, vocational and occupationalist pathways. In practice the number, breadth and rigidity of the pathways has varied considerably across schools and partnerships which have taken this approach (Higham and Yeomans 2007a). However, the notion that directing learners into pathways at age 14 will improve retention, achievement and progression has achieved support within schools and colleges being seen as a means of catering to different abilities and aptitudes (Harris and Burn 2011; Higham and Yeomans 2006).

Whatever approach to curricular progression has been taken there has been consensus that effective Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is key to successful learner progression. IAG has been both a great hope and great scapegoat within 14–19 education and training. First the hope: typical of statements expressing this are those in a DCSF policy document; 'Critical to making the right choices is high quality and impartial IAG'. The document went on to outline how this would be achieved (DCSF 2008a, 7) and asserted that every young person will have 'the right information to want to stay on in learning and achieve through high quality and impartial Information, Advice and Guidance' (41). The idea of 'making the right choices' is crucial since this and many other policy documents assumed that a key requirement of a successful 14–19 policy was ensuring that the right students were on the correct courses. Thus when participation plateaued, drop-out continued, success rates were variable and NEET numbers stubborn, IAG made an obvious scapegoat. Announcing the latest of numerous 'shake-ups' in IAG the Coalition Government described IAG as 'patchy' (a description which has frequently been applied to IAG

over 30 years) and Michael Gove made a rather curious comparison between the 'ineffective' IAG offered through Connexions and the 'wide range of services and advice' offered by independent schools (Shepherd 2011).

We do not have space to refer to all the changes in the organisation and provision of IAG over the period covered by this article but some of these include the emphasis shifting from schools to external agencies and back again, the privatising of careers services, differing conceptions of and relations between IAG, careers advice and careers education. Through all of this IAG and careers specialists both inside and outside schools and colleges have continued to bemoan lack of resources, training and status for their activities (Cleaton 1993; McCrone et al. 2009; NICEC 2006).

Two points arise from this reflection upon IAG in the context of the growth of choice and pathways in 14–19. First, policy-makers may have consistently over-estimated what IAG can realistically achieve. Various studies have shown that its impact in terms of learner choice is often limited (e.g., Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Croll, Attwood, Fuller 2010; Fuller, Macfadyen, and McCrum 2009) although there is evidence that schools in terms of broader influence have a greater (not necessarily benign) effect (Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe 2008, Lumby and Foskett 2005). Second, the policy debate around IAG has been markedly circular rather than progressive. Coalition policy is to place responsibility largely in the hands of the schools. Both Aim Higher and Connexions are being abolished and, while a new national careers service for all ages, will be established the focus appears to be strongly on the responsibility of individual institutions to provide IAG. As we noted above the government also appears committed to a rather rigid pathways approach. Neither of these policies offer much prospect of change.

Qualifications-led curriculum change

A central feature of the period under review is the way in which curriculum has become subservient to assessment, and assessment has become equated with qualifications. This has become a pervasive feature of education in England, closely connected to the growth of external accountability. Attempts have been made to recover a more educational role for assessment through the promotion of assessment for learning although this has also tended to be incorporated into the discourse of accountability and performativity (Wiliam 2009).

At the start of our period, however, this focus upon assessment and qualifications was far less prominent. TVEI was essentially a curriculum development project which made use of existing forms of assessment and qualifications. Some of these such as Records of Achievement and CSE and later GCSE Mode 3 examinations were seen as being particularly responsive to curriculum developments.

To critics, these approaches, and cognate developments such as the growth of coursework-based programmes such as BTECs, lacked the reliability and legitimacy needed to support the emerging accountability mechanisms. Thus from the late 1980s assessment and associated qualifications came to dominate curriculum. The question was less: What should students learn? but rather What learning can be reliably and validly measured (although reliability often trumped validity)?

These tightening assessment bonds had rather different effects on the different sides of the academic/vocational divide. On the academic side the focus has been largely upon maintaining GCSE and A-level standards through defending against the 'dumbing down' which critics claim largely explains rising examination results over two decades (Asthana 2007; Elliott 2009). Thus while there has been some reformulation of GCSE and A level syllabuses

these examinations remain recognisably similar to what they were in 1988 when GCSE examinations were first taken.

In contrast to the continuity on the academic side, vocational qualifications have been subject to constant review and change. Thus successive governments promoted the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), Applied General Certificate of Secondary Education (Applied GCSEs), Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) and the Diploma as antidotes to the alleged weakness of vocational education. The latest incarnation, the Diplomas, which was the New Labour flagship 14–19 policy, look dead-in-the-water given Coalition lack of enthusiasm and withdrawal of workforce funding support (DfE 2011a).

Perhaps what this hyperactivity in relation to vocational qualifications exposes is continuing lack of clarity as to what they are for. Their structural position as middle-track qualifications between the academic and the occupational has meant they have been pulled in one direction or the other. The persistent attempts to establish parity of esteem with academic qualifications, largely through the promotion of frameworks of equivalencies have contributed to a process of academic drift in relation to vocational education. Many have argued that middle-track qualifications are unlikely to flourish within a divided system because they will always draw adverse comparisons with academic qualifications (e.g., Hodgson and Spours 2007). Some unnamed post-16 vocational qualifications were described in the Wolf Review as being 'low-level vocational qualifications, most of which have little to no labour market value' (Wolf 2011, 7).

The resilience and increasing popularity of BTECs (Wolf 2011) perhaps shows that middle-track qualifications can achieve a degree of success within a divided system. ASDAN qualifications have also become widely adopted with over 6000 registered centres (ASDAN 2011). Some practitioners have suggested that had GNVQs been persisted with they might also have been able to sustain themselves within the curriculum (Higham 2003).

An associated strand within this story of qualifications was the rise of competence-based education and training. This arose from the reform of work-based learning qualifications following the 1986 De Ville Report which led to the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). NVQs focused upon what learners could do (in a behavioural sense) rather than on what they knew. Knowledge was subservient to skills or competence. Gilbert Jessup, the principal architect of the approach, argued that it could be adopted for all forms of education and training (Jessup 1991). GNVQs were derived from this model, although in a watered down form right from the start (Raggatt and Williams 1999). The competence-based model came under increasing challenge, even in its occupational heartland, and made limited impact on full-time vocational courses where knowledge continued to be of importance. The model though has possibly had some lasting influence through the greater focus on learning outcomes in many courses, although these outcomes are drawn more widely than the behavioural outcomes in the original NVQ formulation. This focus on outcomes accorded well with the tighter assessment focus and also drew upon older objectives-based models of curriculum.

Comments from the Coalition announcing the review of the National Curriculum in 2011 and 2012 suggest that the focus on 'skills' which flowed partly from the competence-based approach is a thing of the past (at least as far as academic learning is concerned) (DfE 2011c). The remit for the review contained no references to skills to be acquired by learners. The emphasis was very strongly on subject knowledge, content and even 'facts' (BBC Online 2011b). This marks another major break from previous thinking which rhetorically at least claimed to place 'skills' at the heart of the curriculum (Waters 2011).

Partnership, institutional autonomy and competition

We noted above the hyperactivity in relation to curriculum and qualifications. This has been matched in relation to the governance and organisation of 14–19 education. This includes the ways in which it has been organised at national level. Thus responsibility for 14–19 has often been divided between different government departments and agencies, for example, between the DES and the Employment Department operating through the MSC at the time of TVEI. This type of division continues in the Coalition Government with responsibility for different aspects of 14–19 divided between the Department for Education and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

In this section we focus on organisation at institutional level in relation to those schools and colleges which are responsible for the provision of full-time education and training. We referred above to the absence of dedicated 14–19 institutions, although interestingly the Coalition Government is backing Studio Schools, introduced by the previous government, which will cater for 14- to 19-year-olds as well as the UTCs. The overall pattern of institutional provision for 14–19 has been of substantial local diversity with different mixes of 11–16 and 11–18 schools and colleges of different types. In some areas with middle school systems there were various models of upper secondary schools although these have tended to reduce in numbers over the period. Some areas also moved to tertiary systems in which all post-compulsory provision was concentrated in tertiary colleges and there were no school sixth forms. Moves towards tertiary systems have been halted for many years and under both New Labour and the Coalition policy has favoured school sixth forms.

Institutional diversity has increased over our period of study reflecting the increased emphasis on parental and student choice. There is now a bewildering choice of types of institutions. Some such as Grant Maintained schools have come and gone and the important specialist schools programme has been 'mainstreamed' by the Coalition Government (DfE 2010d). Coalition policy favours even more diversity. In addition to University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools the government is greatly expanding the Academies programme (DfE 2010a) and introducing Free schools (DfE 2010b). An increasing number of schools are likely to be directly funded through the DFE and to be outside local authority control.

Given this institutional diversity, which to an extent reflects historical and local circumstances, but which has also been explicitly promoted by different governments, a key theme concerns the extent to which institutions are encouraged to collaborate or compete.

There have been two main periods in which partnership has been emphasised. The first of these was during TVEI. This was introduced during the early Thatcher period before institutional competition became a favoured policy (Callaghan 2006). TVEI schemes were developed and managed by local education authorities and it was they who contracted with MSC. Some schemes gave considerable emphasis to collaborative working and in the TVEI extension this was encouraged by the MSC. As TVEI lost influence and funding became more thinly spread collaborative working declined. Under the later Thatcher and Major governments competition became the favoured policy. Thus, for example, GNVQs were largely implemented by individual institutions.

The second major period of partnership working in relation to 14–19 occurred during the New Labour reforms from 2002. The focus on greater choice and diversified curricula was seen as requiring partnership working (DfES 2003, 2005a, b). This approach reached its height with the introduction of Diplomas which were only approved for implementation through the gateway process where there was evidence of effective partnership working (Hodgson and Spours 2007; O'Donnell et al. 2009). New Labour was, however, ambivalent in its approach to partnership and competition and kept in place most of the policy levers

and drivers introduced by Conservative governments which promoted institutional competition. This led Hodgson and Spours (2006) to describe the system as weakly collaborative/strongly competitive. We, and others, have argued that collaboration and competition are not necessarily binary opposites (Higham and Yeomans 2010) but clearly, at particular times and in particular places, one tendency or the other is likely to be predominant.

At this stage there is no evidence that partnership working plays any part in Coalition thinking other than in a remedial sense in which 'excellent' schools support or even take over 'failing' schools. The focus on Academies and Free schools emphasises competition and institutional autonomy while local authorities which had regained some influence in the later New Labour period (DfES 2005b) have an uncertain but apparently limited role within 14–19 with the increase in the number of schools outside their control.

Concluding comments: whither 14–19 under the Coalition Government?

There is a strong sense in which the history of 14–19 education and training since 1982 has been 'one thing after another'. Expecting or looking for coherence and consistency is likely mistaken. We have written elsewhere about the loss of policy memory and the absence of policy learning (Higham and Yeomans 2007b). The early indications are that this condition will afflict the Coalition Government as it has its predecessors. Despite this our review has enabled us to identify some common themes and unifying policy imperatives that drive and define the shape of the curriculum for 14- to 19-year-olds in England. The analysis highlights problematic contradictions that may be hindering innovation, and future developments may well hinge upon public debate and a re-orienting of the policy drivers of 14–19 education – a tall order no doubt, but one worth positing.

The themes in policy, curriculum and institutional organisation which we have identified can be viewed from the policy perspective as attempts to reach vertical and horizontal coherence in the educational system, i.e., in terms of providing both a more unified approach and clearer progression pathways, to raise quality and to ensure quantity in terms of participation. While such policies were not necessarily successful we can see the rhetoric regarding a 14–19 phase not only as a construct but as a general, albeit stuttering, move towards coherence across and within this phase of education. Attempts to raise quality have been sporadic and perhaps overshadowed by a focus on quantity which has been driven largely by wider economic and political drivers concerning international competition and measurable outcomes for system accountability.

So, where are these policy drivers likely to take us in the context of the Coalition Government? Where we seem to be heading is on a trajectory of deregulation, accompanied by a continued use of assessment and league tables which provide government control at a distance, alongside market forces that continue to shape education policy. The institutionalisation of 'choice' also plays a key role in supporting this system and the continuation of the fissures in 14–19 education which we have surveyed. Choice is of course a key import from market models which have had increasing influence and dominance in 14–19 education where choice has supported greater institutional diversity and an expansive range of certification options. Underlying the proliferation of institutional and qualification options is an assumption that greater choice will improve upon quantity, i.e. participation rates. However, choice of this type may not be what students want or what is best for them or for our society as a whole. Issues of quality have been sidelined and coherence now appears to be an increasingly unrealistic goal as institutional diversification continues apace.

The policy drivers directly impact those on the ground, so to speak, such as teachers and students, who are faced with a contradiction that is inherent in the competitive aspect

of global and local educational markets, which are promoted alongside cursory nods to collaboration and partnership. Such contradictions complicate the implementation of qualifications and the enactment of curriculum and also establish the market system as the driver of educational practice, not only of educational policy. Arguably, there are more appropriate drivers of educational practice, such as the rounded development of young people aged 14–19 and the quality of the learning experience.

A final problem or concern that our analysis raises and which relates to the policy drivers is the opportunity for public debate over education of 14- to 19-year-olds, in terms of purpose as well as strategy. Following the current trajectory, debate is restricted in ways that avoid big questions. Only when we unpack some of the underlying assumptions and purposes of such a phase can we have hope for the coherence, quality and quantity that is desired, at least in policy rhetoric. Rather than market forces dictating the trajectory of educational reform, we might push forward reform that is developed through a dialogue across interests and issues, combining an individual and societal perspective.

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