

# Education, qualifications and skills: a critique

**Martin Allen comments on points made by David Ridley in his PSE 111 article 'Expensive machines', available as a PDF on our website <http://post16educator.org.uk>. Part 2 of David's article follows on p5 below.**

Does gaining educational qualifications really improve performance and productivity in the workplace? For crude versions of what has become known as human capital theory (HCT) this is indisputable: for the economy as a whole, increasing levels of university attendance will inevitably lead to economic growth, while for the individual, investing in more education brings higher wages and so on. HCT has had significant influence on education policy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it's been the main driving force.

University student numbers continue to increase. In the academic year 2021/22 there were almost 2.9 million students at UK institutions, most full-time on first degrees, with the majority coming straight from school sixth forms or colleges. But this increased participation has not been reflected in increased economic growth or productivity - these grew consistently during the Blair years, but both have been sluggish and erratic since the 2008 financial crash. GDP is just 11 per cent higher today than its pre-crisis peak in 2007-08. And now, it's predicted the UK economy will, at best, flatline - being the worst performing economy in the developed world.

There are also significant differences in the 'graduate premium' - returns on different subjects studied. It's claimed that returns from arts, humanities and social science (excluding economics) courses are lower because they contribute lower rates of value. But there are also differences across universities. According to the Government-created Office for Students, 75 per cent of entrants at 22 universities will go on to professional employment or further study shortly after graduation, but at the other end of the scale, in 25 universities less than half of students will. So the Government has decreed that 'poorly performing' institutions must provide courses that are directly 'vocational', or lose funding.

This has led to claims from the political right of young people being 'overeducated' or that there are too many graduates. So, the Tories have launched a new skills agenda that emphasises the importance of 'intermediate' and 'technical' skills. New qualifications are being created: T-levels at post-16 and then Higher Level vocational/technical qualifications, designed to be delivered through FE rather than HE. Arguably these have little to do with skills development. Instead, it's another attempt to divert young people away from an over-congested university route.

Left-wing critiques of HCT argue that alternative economic policies are needed first, creating the high skilled jobs that lead to increased demand for the education (particularly higher education) these require. Also, that in a planned (and more balanced) economy, the 'value' of creative arts, humanities and social sciences degrees would be restored, as they would provide 'proper' labour market return for students.

It's important to emphasise the primacy of macro-economic policy, but we need to go further in challenging the relationship between skills and qualifications. While the former have a material basis, in that they allow a job to be carried out efficiently and 'value' to be added, the latter are social and ideological constructs. Completing a course of study in a school, college or university merely creates a 'credential' with an 'exchange value', rather than any intrinsic (or 'use') value in the labour market.

This is not to deny that particular credentials contain occupational skills and knowledge - this is unquestionably the case with medicine and scientific qualifications - employers in these areas would expect them to! But generally, workplace skills continue to be learnt 'on the job' - in this respect

even medical knowledge needs to be 'applied'. Surveys might tell us that young entrants to the labour market 'lack skills' - part of a wider employer 'moaning' about young people. But it would be unlikely anybody could start new employment completely 'oven ready', without a period of induction.

In the absence of real knowledge about potential recruits, particularly as a result of the breakdown of local labour market transitions, employers use educational qualifications as 'proxies'. But, knowing little about educational practices, let alone classroom pedagogy, employers will make decisions about recruitment based on what are generally considered to be 'high status' qualifications.

Qualifications awarded by elite institutions, particularly 'ancient' degrees from Oxbridge, provide cultural capital, greatly increasing their holders' chances of entering a variety of top jobs. In sharp contrast, credentials more relevant to occupational areas are invariably not considered to be so by individual employers. The raft of classroom-based vocational qualifications grouped together under a 'business studies' umbrella, for example, do not lead to high salaries in the City.

Even when credentials are directly related to workplace attendance, they can assume a 'timeserving' role - for example the apprenticeships undertaken by young UK males in the post-war years. Completing the apprenticeship provided an unofficial 'licence to practice' and was supported by trade unions representing skilled workers. Likewise, in professional occupations, credentials perform a gatekeeping role, used to regulate entrants and protect the market position of current job holders.

The main problem in the majority of developed economies isn't a shortage of skills, or a skills 'mismatch' but that the rate of credential expansion has increased far more than the number of equivalent jobs, so, rather than being 'over educated' (can anyone ever be?) many young people are 'overqualified'. Education as it is currently organised is not the 'social good' many think it is. Because young people increasingly compete against each other for top grades, it's a 'zero-sum good'. Rather than promoting learning, practitioners 'teach to test', spending hours practising examination techniques.

In the context of the 'information age' (often referred to as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution') the continued use of artificial intelligence, unless it is heavily regulated, will likely see the further elimination of

professional work - note the growing panic about the effects of chatbot technology amongst those in 'safe' media, journalistic and educational occupations. But decreases in the number of 'high skill' jobs can only lead to greater competition - with even more credentials required to get them (though not to do them!). Education has been likened to running up a downwards escalator, where you have to move faster and faster just to stand still. This can only intensify.

The primary way to increase output (productivity) per worker is by introducing machinery, not by more intensive schooling. Marx himself argued that the increased application of science and technology to the production process (as a result, increasing the organic composition of capital) would reflect the growth of the *General Intellect*, though this is difficult to square with the arguments above about job loss and the deskilling of individual workers (as Patrick Ainley tried to do in *PSE 110*).

In capitalist societies, both old and new, education has always been primarily concerned with social control - more explicitly, the reproduction of social and economic inequalities. In short, the credential system reflects the alienation of young people from the production process rather than preparing them for it. During times of economic downturn or stagnation, credentialism also performs an essential 'certifying' role, keeping young people in full-time schooling or providing 'education without jobs'.

We should junk all versions of HCT if we want a more meaningful and satisfying education for young people, with students able to make choices based on their interests, rather than on responses to labour market signals. But we also need to develop alternative forms of labour market transition that guarantee economic security for young people. Central to this could be an alternative system of apprenticeships, where entitlement to workplace training is combined with classroom learning about all aspects of the world of work.

But for those still in mandatory post-16 education, there should be a 'good general education' for everybody. This does not mean simply abolishing the vocational pathway, let alone creating new ones: but also redesigning the current academic curriculum and assessment.

