The post-war education project has come off the rails

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The prolonged crisis in post-war education is essentially the result of changes in the economc conditions that supported it. Since the post-war period, education, particularly post-compulsory and higher education, has continued to expand. Yet by comparison, genuine labour market opportunities for young people have receded. Current 'high stakes' education is a consequence of this.

Eighty years on

2024 marks the eightieth anniversary of the momentous 1944 Butler Act, considered a triumph for progressive reform. Times may have changed, but many post-war assumptions about education remain. First, that for economic growth to continue and keep pace with other countries, greater levels of 'human capital' are needed to provide new skills for the economy (even more so, it's argued, in the age of AI). Secondly, just as in the post-war years, where there were chances for a significant minority of working-class children to move up into new 'white collar' jobs, education continues to be the main agent of social mobility. Both these assumptions fitted well with arguments for comprehensive education - supported by reformers and large numbers of employers, even many Tories recognising that 'mobilising talent' wouldn't take place under Butler's rigid tripartite secondary system.

It will be argued that both of the above assumptions are now increasingly unrealistic, but another key aspect of post-war education crucial to understanding its apparent success (and its current, continued crisis) is generally ignored. Secondary education was extended in England and Wales (it already existed in Scotland), but in reality significant sections of the post-war working class, despite progressive changes in the curriculum, saw little immediate benefit in formal schooling. Till the mid-1970s, for example, over 40 per cent of young people left school without qualifications, but made relatively smooth transitions into employment, invariably through local recruiting networks but including 'time-serving' apprenticeships (mostly for boys). With the jobless rate around 1.5 per cent until the 1970s, you could be 'out of one job on Friday and in another on Monday'.

But during the last quarter of the 20th century, as governments found it increasingly difficult to ensure 'full employment', working-class school leavers also found it harder to move into 'youth jobs'. Disillusioned with youth training schemes which offered only training without jobs, they voted with their feet, returning to and participating in full-time education for much longer. It took another 30 years until the 'participation age' was officially raised to 18, but by the end of the 20th century, 'staying on' was increasingly the norm.

The rise and fall of vocational education

Though officially designed to improve and develop (both generic and technical) skills required for a changing world of work, which working-class school leavers were said to lack (and thus to be considered not 'work ready'), the rise of full-time 'vocational' courses, particularly in school sixth forms, should be considered a response to these new groups of students, offering education without jobs, designed to disguise what would have been unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment and a lengthening labour queue. Reminiscent of earlier 1944 tripartite divides, this also represented a reversal of comprehensive ideals.

But employers continued to prefer young people with academic qualifications, and as participation in HE rose, they found they could recruit graduates (many of those with vocational qualifications used them to enter HE). To improve their standing, vocational qualifications, which initially emphasised a 'learning by doing approach' increasingly took on some of the characteristics of academic ones - with more emphasis given to written assessment and exams.

Nowhere was this more apparent than with the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) - the most prominent of the new vocational certificates, which was later relaunched as a Vocational (then as an Applied) A-level, part of New Labour's modularised 'Curriculum 2000' reforms. In addition, evidence showed that the 'middle jobs' (white collar and technician level) that vocational qualifications were often associated with, were declining, due to increased automation. Rather than embodying real skills, vocational certificates were reduced to 'credentials'. And second-rate ones at that.

Yet attempts to secure a vocational pathway continue. Despite T (Technical)-level qualifications not yet establishing themselves, new Higher-Level

certificates are being introduced, to be delivered in FE colleges and designed to close an (illusionary) deficit in technical skills. But it is probably the failure to reintroduce apprenticeships as real alternatives to HE that is a more significant reason for the creation of T-levels. Even though there are some very good ones, only a small minority of 18-year-olds start apprenticeships, and evidence shows funding being used to finance management trainees on MBAs.

A 'Great Reversal'

With 800,000-plus entries, A-levels' popularity has continued to increase. Michael Gove, taking over as Education Secretary in 2010, considered they had become too easy and effectively limited numbers that could attain top grades. But despite assessment procedures being narrowed and with new specifications now resembling the grammar school certificates of the past, teachers were able to coach their students through these new sets of hoops. A-levels, once taken by a tiny percentage of 18-year-olds, are now a qualification for the masses and still the main avenue to HE.

If attempts to create a new academic and vocational division have met with limited success, efforts by both major political parties to impose new divisive types of differentiation between schools have been more effective. While prevented from overt academic selection and continuing to see themselves as 'comprehensives', Academies and Free Schools were given greater autonomy over who they admitted and what they taught. Both Tory and then New Labour governments argued this would 'raise standards'.

Other assumptions behind post-war education began to be challenged. The 1944 Act provided free secondary schooling for all, but now thousands of aspiring parents continue to fork out money for the 'extras' required to attend a 'good school' - even sometimes moving house. Thousands more pay for out of hours private tuition to increase their children's examination chances.

Mass higher education

Meanwhile, as secure and well-paid employment has become more difficult to get, approaching 40 per cent of school and college leavers opt for higher education. This has probably been the most significant challenge to the post-war system, but has also exposed its real contradictions. University attendance was once an activity enjoyed by a minority of - mostly middle-class - students, paid for by working-class taxation. Though the post-war reformers were in favour of widening opportunities, did they ever consider that such attendance could operate in any other way? On the one hand, Tory politicians publicly endorse the increases in opportunity that have been created - but on the other there is plenty of right-wing indignation about 'universities not being like they used to be', combined with half-baked theories about too many young people being 'overeducated'. But for individual school leavers the decision to continue to higher education at great personal expense is entirely justifiable given current economic uncertainties. Even though it doesn't guarantee a 'graduate job', young people are only too aware of the significant differences in pay and career opportunities that having a degree represents.

Tory ministers wrongly assumed that the introduction of the £9,000+ fee, financed by loans, would 'price out' many students. Also, ministerial ignorance about declining graduate salaries led to large numbers of graduates never earning enough to pay back their debts during their working lives. Repayment thresholds have been lowered and the time length over which a loan can be repaid has been increased. The Tories now plan to police higher education numbers in other ways - drawing up 'value for money' criteria for those universities with poor course completion rates and a failure to place students in 'graduate jobs'.

Education: a crisis of legitimacy?

A fundamental assumption underlying the post-war years was that every generation would be better off and more successful than the previous one. But rather than education producing upward social mobility, for many there are growing fears that mobility will be downwards. Navigating the education system is like trying to run up a downwards escalator, where you have to go faster simply to stand still. Rather than education being considered a 'social' or 'collective' good, young people now pursue qualifications for 'positional' reasons - to get ahead of others in the labour queue. Meanwhile, practitioners spend huge amounts of time 'teaching to test', drilling students for exam requirements. Rather than 'adding value' it's more appropriate to define this as a 'zero-sum' activity.

However, 'high stakes' competitive schooling takes its toll, with unprecedented levels of mental illness amongst not only those who 'fail' in the school system, ending up NEET, but also amongst debt-laden university students anxious about their futures. Recent UCAS data show a fall in university applications from home-based students, meanwhile secondary school absences and 'home schooling' continue to rise. After years of trying to encourage greater participation in education, practitioners and reformers face growing disillusionment.

Conclusion: broader policies are needed for young people

Lack of funding, privatisation of services and the reimposition of traditional curriculum ideas have contributed to the great reversal in education policy, with disastrous consequences for teachers and students. But, as argued above, the post-war education project started to break down because of major economic and labour market changes, not because of a 'failure' of education itself. Since the post-war period, education has expanded but real labour market opportunities for young people have contracted. Right-wing ideas about selection and competition have attempted to deal with this contradiction, but they are not the cause of it.

We should continue to campaign for alternative education policies, but these must be part of a broader set of policies (or a new 'settlement') for young people. But as long as education - or rather the stacking up of qualifications, as education has now degenerated to - is considered by young people to be the main way of 'getting on', there must also be alternative policies for employment and the economy.