

# Considerations for the future?

*We reprint here with permission the concluding section of Norman Lucas's article 'Mind the gap: the neoliberal assault on further, adult and vocational education', published in Soundings, Issue 70, Winter 2018, pp. 129-148.*

Instead of a return to the past, and a system of central government and LEA control, it is perhaps time to let local communities have a greater say over education and training provision. As part of a local and regional strategy for skills arrangement, education and training could be placed within a public social partnership, and a new balance could be found between the need for strategic planning and local input. Provision organised in the interests of finding a more democratic and locally based system would represent something better than neoliberalism or its predecessors.

One possibility would be to establish comprehensive tertiary colleges focusing upon a wide range of general and academic courses, within environments specifically catering for the learning needs of the 16-19, or perhaps the 14-19, age group. While a comprehensive tertiary system would be politically difficult to achieve in the face of current school sixth-form provision, such a rationalisation may become possible in the longer term. This would rescue schools from trying to maintain non-viable sixth form provision, and allow them to concentrate on the pre-16 curriculum. The further education sector could adopt a more flexible range of provision, including a greater focus on vocational courses and the support required by adult learners, leaving to other institutions the particular structures and provision that the younger age group requires. There may be a need for some regional variation here, but there would be a general presumption that sub-degree work was

the province of further education rather than the university. This would be good for maintaining the distinctive mission of universities, as well as defining the boundaries between schools, further and higher education.

There are similarities and differences between schools and colleges of further education. For example, there is no 'national curriculum' or SATs in further education. The FE curriculum is more indirectly influenced, by the dictates of funding and a focus on employers' needs and 'employability'. The national curriculum is more directly ideological, influenced by the 'top universities' and the consequential importance of academic selection. On the other hand, both schools and further education institutions have had to follow neoliberal logics, with schools, further education and other providers all having to compete against each other. Universities, too, are following market values, with league tables, students as 'customers', and excellence measured against 'outputs' - as a result of what has been called the financialisation of universities (1). All education and training have followed the neoliberal logic of the market.

Throughout this discussion, however, there has been an underlying argument that further education is also politically and educationally marginalised, and strategically adrift. This is partly a reflection of the deep division between academic and vocational education, a division that is longstanding and very deeply rooted. This is something that also needs to be addressed by any future strategy for FE.

Vocational qualifications are still seen as the route for those who cannot succeed in the academic arena. And this divide between vocational and academic knowledge, qualifications and pathways is an explicit expression of the divide of cultural capital and social class. The system serves the elite well, while those who do not succeed either drop out of education altogether, or are marshalled into forms of vocational education that offer no real chance of employment, or into apprenticeships that lack meaningful substance. Does this serve the needs of modern society, when there is a need for more people to engage in knowledge-based employment and higher levels of education and employment? This returns us to the questions considered at the beginning of this article. What is education and training for, and in whose interests should it work? What is the relationship between theory and practice? Should those engaged in practical activities require no theory (and vice versa)? Such questions are not aimed at belittling academic knowledge, but simply make the case that other forms of knowledge are also important.

There have been many ideas concerning the divide between the academic and vocational. For example, in 1990, proposals were put forward by the IPPR to establish a baccalaureate approach whereby learners could mix technical, vocational and academic modules in a 14-19 pathway (2). Attempts have been made to raise the status of vocational qualifications by successive governments, including the present one. These have focused upon curriculum initiatives to develop general vocational courses as an equivalent to the academic - for qualifications such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), Diplomas, Foundation Degrees and BTECs (3). The idea was, for example, that a GNVQ at level three would be equivalent to an A-level qualification. However, curriculum reform aimed at bringing about a broader, more inclusive curriculum has always eventually been politically blocked. This is because of the reluctance to reform A-levels. These remain the 'gold standard' representing entry to the 'top universities', which are firmly rooted in the academic tradition and are explicitly not vocational. In fact the 'Russell Group' universities have never recognised general vocational qualifications.

I see no future in proposing a return to a time pre-dating neoliberalism - i.e. a return to the traditional curriculum (although equivalent expenditure levels would be most welcome). Apart from anything else, the division between

the academic and vocational education and training pre-dates neoliberalism. The future of further, technical and adult education should be discussed as part of a wider debate for education involving local people, employers, schools and universities. The future shape of education is itself part of a wider vision of the sort of society we want, and here a new balance needs to be found between the market, the economy, and the needs of individuals and society. We need a vision that is different and better, and a more generous, inclusive education that takes everyone's learning seriously, as a public good, and not just something for those who are academically able. The left should be developing new ideas around lifelong learning, based on a vision of educational and training opportunities for all in society, throughout their lives, including learning opportunities in the workplace. Such a vision, alongside a deeper democratic system that is far more responsive to local and regional needs, would improve economic, social and individual wellbeing. It would represent a real alternative to the values of neoliberalism.

#### Notes

1. B. Schwarz, 'Editorial: the scandal of contemporary universities', *Soundings* 69, summer 2018.
2. D. Finegold, E. Keep, D. Miliband, D. Raffae, K. Spours and M. Young, *A British Baccalaureate: Overcoming the Divisions Between Education and Training*, Institute for Public Policy Research 1990.
3. BTECs: ie qualifications awarded by what was formerly the Business and Technician Education Council, later renamed the Business and Technology Education Council, that is now part of the awarding body Edexcel, which in turn belongs to the publisher Pearson.