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Inclusion or Selection? The 14+ Education and Training Reforms

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ABSTRACT This article provides a chronologically presented overview of policy reforms designed to enhance skill levels via education and training for school-age learners attending post-compulsory education institutions. It is argued that the catalyst for the creation of vocational diplomas is economic rather than educationally based, arising from the Government's perception of the need to improve productivity and flexibility within the United Kingdom workforce. Consideration is given as to whether the reforms enhance inclusive practice or represent a divisive curriculum, young people being partially excluded from the National Curriculum to study vocational diplomas, and invites comment as to whether this represents a covert return to a selective grammar/secondary modern school model. Arrangements for information sharing between schools and colleges presently delivering vocational qualifications and the support available for young special educational needs learners is investigated via a small-scale study of 15 further education colleges and found to be largely inadequate. Further education lecturing staff attitudes suggest they are largely positive about the possibilities the new arrangements can bring to young people's lives but are concerned as to the lack of staff development they have received.

Introduction

The United Kingdom comprehensive school structure reshaped by the Labour Government's policies is a complex arrangement given the variety of models adopted, ranging from specialist schools to the private sector sponsorship of academies. Within this structure it is clear despite the highly contentious nature of league table data that results across the sector are uneven, government statistics noting that in 639 schools less than 30% of pupils achieved five good GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) including English and maths (Eason, 2008). From September 2008, accreditation of study will include the new vocational diplomas, though a significant number of head teachers

appear to be as yet unprepared, with 35% still to enter into formal arrangements with businesses and schools (Shepherd, 2008). Some 56% in the same survey expressed as 'unacceptable' the perception of an increased social services role the change will entail.

This article describes a small-scale study into further education (FE) colleges delivering vocational qualifications prior to the diplomas to school pupils, with an emphasis on groups with additional learning needs as they represent a particularly vulnerable group to investigate and anticipate possible issues arising from the introduction of diplomas, and invite debate as to whether they represent a divisive return to a selection process akin to the grammar/secondary school model or a praiseworthy attempt to meet the needs of young people failing under the present National Curriculum arrangement. Are the diplomas a social construct exacerbating Blandon et al's (2005) findings of decreased UK social mobility with the better off benefiting disproportionately from educational opportunity and will they reinforce Feinstein et al's (2004, p. iii) suggestions that 'differences in the capabilities of families to take advantage of educational opportunities exacerbate social class differences and limit actual equality of opportunity for many' by producing an educational model that is divisive, one route for the academic juxtaposed with one for the vocationally orientated? Or should one perceive it as an inclusive model, matching teaching to learning, vocational and academic programmes to be viewed as having the same status?

The Ideological Context

The Conservative Government's 1992 Further and Higher Education Act created a new framework and ethos for the post-compulsory sector based upon the ideological principles that a market-led, competitive, entrepreneurial environment informed by providers, run as businesses with the flexibility of controlling their own budgets, would raise standards and be more cost-effective than the previous arrangement of a close relationship with local education authorities (LEAs). The approach has been further endorsed by the Labour Government though with a new emphasis upon training and skills geared towards national economic performance concentrated towards, though not exclusively, on younger learners, which has created a new direction. This new strategy to deliver specialist vocational qualifications to young persons has changed the nature and climate of colleges as they attract more and more 14 to 19 year-olds.

The numbers and targets are significant. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004a) departmental strategy noted over 90,000 14-16 year-olds are studying for vocational qualifications in colleges or training providers, compared to a target of just over 180,000 by 2007-08. The aim is to provide specialist diplomas shaped by employers' requirements, replacing the estimated 3500 separate qualifications that presently exist (DfES, 2005a). Nationally, every geographical area is expected to have established a 14-19 partnership led

by the LEAs and the local Learning Skill Council (DfES, 2005b). The same report aims for the number of 14-16 year-olds studying vocational qualifications other than the established GCSEs to increase from the present 25% to 40% by 2013, with the new Diploma accreditation fully implemented by 2008. It is interesting to note tht none of the cited DfES references directly comments as to how young people within special needs categories are to be supported.

The plans are ambitious and will certainly change the 'feel' of what constitutes the climate of a post-compulsory provider. The experience of study for adults could possibly be undermined or tempered by the numbers of young people attending. The change also raises complex issues as to the role of post-compulsory providers and whether skills and training constitute the same pedagogy as education. Smith (2002) voiced a familiar concern that vocational programmes will not be perceived as having the kudos of traditionally viewed academic qualifications, a point perhaps endorsed by the reluctance of the Government to fully implement the *Tomlinson Report* (DfES, 2004b), which resulted in maintaining the distinction between the two paths. It is unclear too how many lecturers welcome the changes and the impact this will have on their working lives. It is a fair presumption that many have opted for the post-compulsory environment as a career preference to school teaching. Linked to this is a serious question as to how well equipped many lecturers will be to change their approaches to accommodate the varied needs of young learners. A small amount of evidence hints at disquiet, Whittaker (2006a) reporting on concerns felt by some lecturers as to young people's disruptive behaviours. The extent to which providers can meet the needs of young people with special needs also remains unclear; Golden et al (2003), reporting on the *Increased Flexibility for 14-16 Year Olds Programme*, noted that 67% had no provision for special educational needs (SEN). Of the population studying on the programme they found that 6% had a statement of special educational need and 27% were recognised for 'school action' or 'school action plus', higher figures proportionally than in the whole school sector populace. This specific area will be explored in detail later.

Including increased numbers of young learners in post-compulsory establishments would seem, therefore, to create a new set of challenges. A positive aspect is the range of facilities available, few schools being able to boast of what is standard in colleges, such as hairdressing salons, motor vehicle workshops, construction departments, catering facilities and so on. Clancy (2004), reporting on Bedford College, notes the principal's enthusiasm for their *Way to Work* programme, noting how successfully they accommodate school 'refusenicks'. Whittaker (2006b) outlined how the Kingswood Partnership in Bristol is 'beginning to bridge the divide between vocational and academic subjects.' The then Schools Minister, Jacqui Smith (Nash, 2006), enthused at the numbers of highly motivated 14 to 16 year-olds she saw at the College of North East London.

Perceptions and views of the reforms are therefore inevitably varied, an unsurprising observation given the extent of the change they will provide. The next section explores the reasoning behind the policies with a brief overview of the Green and White papers and related research.

Overview of Reforms

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the changes to the post-compulsory sector is the emphasis upon the acquisition of skills, thereby enhancing employability. The concept espoused by such humanistic pioneers as R.S. Peters as education and training to be two separate entities has been replaced by a more pragmatic approach. Ironically, the new model is not dissimilar to the function of the early founders of further education, the Mechanics Institutes, designed to provide education for the newly established working classes. Hall (1994) records that there were 610 such establishments catering for 600,000 members in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Royal Society of Arts in 1856 being the first examining board. There was a need for accreditation of study by employers to assess competencies and skills, such measures of performance sometimes including enhanced remuneration.

The Government's reforms are arguably equally based on economics and the perceived requirement to further enhance nationally work-related skills to improve the competitiveness of British industry. The executive summary of *Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances* (DfES, 2006, p. 1) has this as its first point: 'Our future as a prosperous nation depends on our education and training system', though it later does acknowledge that the changes should also include 'personal fulfilment, community development and the love of learning.'

The economic argument for change is strongly stated. Two points taken from *Developing Workforce Skills: piloting a new approach* (Public Enquiry Unit, 2002) illustrates the Government's position:

- 1.4 There is a well established relationship between improvements in skills and increased productivity, supported by both theoretical and empirical research. Growth theory suggests that human capital is one of the prime determinants of labour productivity. Human capital is increased by formal education and training and by learning-through-doing. Growth is centrally driven by the accumulation or stock of human capital, which also, through the embodiment of technical knowledge, provides the basis for innovation.
- 1.7. Research examining the causes of international productivity performance suggests that differing levels of skills play an important role. For example, estimates have been presented which suggest that between half and all of the UK productivity gap with Germany can be explained by skills differences.

The DfES (1993) report, *The Cost to Industry: basic skills and the UK workforce*, set the agenda, which estimated the cost to industry to be annually £4.8 billion in loss of productivity. This informed the landmark *Moser Report* (DfEE,1999a), *A Fresh Start*, which estimated that 7 million adults in England have difficulties

with literacy and numeracy, a bigger proportion than in any other Western country apart from Poland and Ireland. The report initiated the national *Skills for Life* programme which includes learning difficulty and/or disability categories. A later study (Feinstein, 2003) further developed the Moser Report investigation's concern about inequality of opportunity and employment prospects by following through the 1970 cohort study which complements a previous study (Feinstein, 1999) evaluating pre-school education inequalities. It would seem the argument to enhance skill levels to transform society to a more equitable and fairer model is overwhelming but it is worth noting that Feinstein's work also explored social contexts, injustices, and attitudes as contributing variables, factors further detailed in Feinstein et al's (2004) study into inter-generational transmission of educational success. However, though the Government did acknowledge to an extent the social factors arising from inadequate skill levels, the drive was arguably still economic-led and the DfEE (1999b) *Learning to Succeed* paper argued for a new approach to post-compulsory learning compounded by the DfEE (2000) *Skills for All*, whose drive was to raise skill levels to meet the estimated 65-70% of employment opportunities requiring a level 3 qualification by 2010. It noted that only 41% of UK 25-28 year-olds had such a qualification in 1998 and for 19-21 year-olds it was 43%. But, the Moser Report aside, arrangements for special needs or disability categories appear to be secondary, largely ignoring Meager et al's (1998) findings that disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to work in manual and low-skilled occupations. Burchardt (2005) reinforces such inequalities, with disabled young people compared with non-disabled at age 16/17 being twice as likely to be out of work, at 18/19 nearly three times as likely and at age 26 four times as likely to be unemployed or involuntarily out of work.

Reports continued to flow. *In Demand: adult skills in the 21st century* (Strategy Unit, 2001) was followed a year later by *In Demand: adult skills in the 21st century – part 2* (Strategy Unit, 2002). They are detailed and comprehensive papers containing ambitious targets to increase the numbers achieving National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 or equivalent, with the intention to further address basic skills need and increase the numbers involved in modern apprenticeships. The central tenet is framed on page 1 of the latter, again in economic terms, 'Our vision is that in 2010 the UK will be a society where Government, employers and individuals actively engage in skills development to deliver sustainable economic success for all.' It is worth reiterating the earlier point of a continuing absence of references to special needs or learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Dovetailing with the above reports outlining the need to develop further skill levels, the Green Paper, *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards* (DfES, 2002a), gave rise to *14-19: opportunity and excellence* (DfES, 2003a), which encouraged a higher level of collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based training providers and indicated that all Key Stage 4 students will undertake some form of work-related learning, DfES (2003b) *Work-Related*

Learning at Key Stage 4 formalising the intent. With *Success for All* (DfES, 2002b) sandwiched in between, perhaps the skill reform strategies had largely been decided without the need for continuing consultation. The Green Paper stated, 'The 14-19 phase must become more responsive to those with special educational needs' (1.23) though the National Autistic Society (2002, p. 1) noted, 'there is little information in the rest of the Paper on how this will be achieved. As the purpose of the Green Paper is to create employable adults, the fact that no mention is made of the specific education and training of young people with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities and their need to find employment represents a serious missed opportunity.' NIACE (2002) responded cautiously and wondered whether community education could play a role and also bemoaned the lack of reference to family education, an interesting point given the lack of reference to the SEN transition plan and how this would function in the new arrangement (Maudslay, 2003). Taubman (2000) wondered whether the new arrangements organised and overseen by the then new Learning and Skills Councils would create a 'dumping ground' in further education for the less academic. Ainley et al (2000) saw the changes as creating pathways of learning shaped by social groups defined by ethnicity, class and ability, an observation having implications for special needs categories given that their numbers are likely to be disproportionately high (see Golden et al, 2003, above). Mackney (2002) wondered whether a tertiary tripartism was being created: 'tertiary grammars (6FCs); technicals (CoVES); and moderns (General FE).' These concerns hint at selection and again raise concerns of parity and equality for all pupils and for special needs groups in particular, and invite comment as to whether these changes represent a divisive curriculum model or one in which needs are being best met.

Whatever the concerns expressed, the momentum for change continued at a rapid rate. Skill attainment was reiterated as central to self-development and necessary for economic sustainability exemplified in DfES (2003c), *Realising Our Potential*, with the DfES (2004) *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* culminating in the DfES (2005a) *14-19 Education and Skills Act* accompanied by the DfES (2005b) *Implementation Plan* and DfES (2005c) *Collaborative Arrangements to 14-19 Provision.* It was a breathless year of change and now the arrangements and the Government's policies had been formalised, ratified by parliament and agreed. The final affirmation of government policy was encapsulated in the Leitch Report (2006), *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – world class skills,* which among a string of recommendations supports the 14-19 reforms, though it is hard to find any clear reference to disability unless one includes basic skills as a category. In addition to the 14-19 Education and Skills Act was the LSC (2004) paper, *Guidance for FE Colleges Providing for Young Learners*, an invaluable and perhaps long overdue document given the numbers of young people already studying in post-compulsory centres. It emphasises the imperative of collaboration, information sharing and continuing professional development, and bullet points a series of good practice points including (p. 13): 'For young learners who are statemented as having special educational

needs, provide a copy of their most recent statement.' It is this document that provides the fulcrum for the small-scale research project outlined below.

Study of Support Available for Young SEN Learners of School Age Attending Post-compulsory Institutions

The small-scale study was conducted in late 2007 with the permission of senior management staff and involved 15 further education colleges. Seventy-three lecturers delivering vocational programmes to 614 14+ year-old learners completed the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher. Confidentiality was assured. Two only requested clarification, both querying *statement of special educational needs*, as they were unfamiliar with the term. The findings were as follows:

- Of the 614 young people studying, only 29 were formally notified to lecturers as having additional needs, the information being provided by the school. All 73 lecturers, however, felt their groups included a range of learning difficulty categories, challenging and disruptive behaviour being the most commonly cited. Only 8 lecturers knew who the school special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) was. Contact with him/her was described as 'occasional' and 'infrequent'. These 8 lecturers had seen statements; the other 65 had not. This raises real concerns as to whether the SEN statement was being adhered to (a legal requirement) and how this was being measured.
- Including the above 29, 42 lecturers had received some information from the school before studies commenced. This varied from a detailed profile (two) to general information gleaned from informal contact with the school; 24 had received no information whatsoever. Overall, information sharing was identified as: excellent – 2, good – 4, satisfactory – 27, poor – 16 and non-existent – 24. The two lecturers who had SENCo contact were the ones in the 'excellent' category and represented two colleges only.
- Formal contact with the school (defined on the questionnaire as 'minuted meetings') varied. Two had weekly contact, 5 fortnightly, 26 monthly, 34 termly and 6 had no formal contact at all. However, 29 lecturers had on average informal weekly contact by telephone, all noting the conversations were mostly referring to disciplinary issues. Generally, informal contact was not an established pattern and was usually only made if a difficulty had arisen.
- Only 19 lecturers received from the school classroom support in the college setting. Nine respondents described it as 'ad hoc', 4 'regular' and 6 as 'full time Teaching Assistant' (TA). Interestingly, of these 6 with a TA, only one was from a college with SENCo contact.
- Fifty-one lecturers viewed the arrangement as a 'dumping ground' (term taken from Taubman [2000]) and even with the concerns the above data suggests, they were mostly positive about the benefits to the young people.

> The majority felt that the young people were gaining new skills, and past experience suggested that up to 80% of the young people would join the colleges on leaving school and continue their studies on a full-time basis. They were accruing basic vocational qualifications and achieving in new areas unavailable in schools. All but two felt they were insufficiently involved in the selection process in the schools and young people were frequently changed by the college to different pathways more akin to their particular interests and learning needs. All 73 lecturers conducted their own initial assessments or were forwarded simple screening tests by college support colleagues. Disruptive and challenging behaviours were cited as the most challenging aspect of teaching these groups. Only seven had experience of working in schools. Most lecturers described themselves as 'ill equipped' to efficiently perform their new role and several were resentful that managers had timetabled them, without consultation, into this specialised area. Nine colleges employing 47 of the sample had delivered in-house staff development, mostly on the legal requirements though all 73 lecturers felt they would benefit from more sessions.

It must be emphasised this is a small study but it is clear that a number of difficult issues are highlighted. Across the sector, practice may be better than found here and it might be more profitable to note the issues discovered as a means of evaluating what should be happening and how it could be achieved. A summation follows highlighting the consequences of the findings and how they can be resolved.

Conclusion

Several contentious issues arise from the study, the most significant, perhaps, being whether colleges are meeting their legal requirements. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 part 4 and the *Code of Practice Post 16 COPP 16* (July 2002) require that schools and colleges do not subject students with disabilities to less favourable treatment and should accordingly make reasonable adjustments. It could ironically be argued that the SEN groups are not receiving a less favourable service than their peers given the apparent general lack of coordination, information sharing and communication between the schools and colleges indicated by this study. This, though, is a pedantic and overly simplistic interpretation in that it does not recognise the learning needs and act accordingly. A particular concern is the lack of specific information from the schools, especially with regard to the statement of special educational need. The Learning and Skill Council's (2004) guidance (see above) notes that a copy of the young person's most recent statement should be available, which this study suggests was not the case. This questions whether parity of learning experience between disabled and non-disabled learners was achieved and therefore whether the Act's requirements had been fulfilled. Part of the Learning and Skills Act

2000 has a section explaining that every school leaver with a statement of special educational need should have a written assessment of their needs, and one wonders, given the scenario uncovered in this study, about the extent to which this is being applied nationally.

The majority of the difficulties the study highlights could be easily resolved by information sharing between the two sectors, which fell into categories of 'poor' or 'non-existent' is a concern. A term used by one respondent as the classroom situation having an 'integrated model' might just be a loosely applied term or could be a reflection of the approach favoured from the 1970s to the mid-1990s which is merely a social model of practice. This has been superseded by a more inclusive paradigm as described earlier and the Learning and Skills Council (2005) *Through Inclusion to Excellence: a summary and consultation document* begins to address the issues of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and includes reference to the influential Tomlinson Report (FEFC, 1996). A new DfES (2007) report proffers a new 'person-centredness' approach via consultation and collaboration between agencies to support learning difficulties and/or disabilities groups in post-compulsory provision though there is only a small section on 14-19 provision which is surprising.

Linked to the inclusion agenda, the arrangement between schools and colleges questions the very nature or philosophy of inclusive practice. Does the splitting of the academic and non-academic and by implication sections of special needs categories match learning to need or is it a form of division or selection? This study shows that the lecturers, whilst expressing concerns of support and expertise, felt the majority of learners were benefiting. This is a difficult and contentious issue. Defining inclusion is problematical in that it is a multifaceted concept but a common theme is the recognition of rights, the previously noted *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) being a strong starting point. Given this study's findings, it is difficult to recognise the implementation of point 1 of the statement urging governments to, 'give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve the education system to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties.' The scenario rather appears to be that schools have identified groups of young people who they perceive as benefiting most from vocational programmes as opposed to designated 'academic' studies and with little coordination with colleges they are being taught largely unsupported. Such a finding also calls into question the status of the transition plan:

> The transition plan should draw together information from a range of individuals within and beyond school in order to plan coherently for the young person's transition to adult life. (Section 9:51 Special Educational Needs [SEN] Code of Practice [England], 2001)

The timing of the plan should arguably be earlier as the direction of learners' study becomes a *fait accompli* if they are studying vocational options before the plan is formulated.

As noted above, only seven lecturers had experience of working in schools, and though no appraisal of qualifications was conducted, it is a fair assumption that the other 66 did not have any recognised school-level teaching qualification. This again raises concerns of parity and equitability of delivery across the two sectors and whether those young people that stay in school experience different approaches to teaching and learning compared to those attending a college. It is possible that lecturers have as a career choice chosen post-compulsory education as a preferred option but now find they are acting as school teachers on a lower pay scale. The study clearly shows an expressed need from all of the lecturers involved for more training.

To conclude, sadly the findings of this study suggest there are concerns to be addressed as to whether young SEN learners are being provided with a supportive and learner-centred educational experience presently within the new 14+ framework, a format to be firmly established by the new diplomas in 2008. Information sharing between schools and colleges seems to be insufficient and coordination arrangements ad hoc. Staff in colleges are motivated but express concerns as to their level of expertise in meeting the young learners' particular needs. It could be argued that the new 14+ arrangements create possibilities for a new way of addressing learning needs and begin to equip identified groups with new skills, providing them with employable skills. On the other hand, perhaps cynically, the arrangements reflect schools safeguarding their league table status. Certainly, there are now new opportunities to gain hitherto unreachable qualifications at an earlier age but it all leaves an uneasy feeling that schools, unable to provide an inclusive ethos and reach certain groups of young people, particularly SEN categories, have adopted an official government initiative as a means of indirect exclusion by covert selection procedures. Whatever the arguments, this study suggests that present arrangements are not conducted in a fair and equitable manner necessary to meet perceived developmental needs.

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