
Education's 'Credibility Crunch': the upper secondary years

MARTIN ALLEN

ABSTRACT While the policies of the Coalition Government will divide learners and limit opportunities, education for the upper secondary years will continue to experience a more systematic 'credibility crunch' with schools and colleges facing a crisis of legitimacy and posing major challenges for reformers

Improving education in the upper secondary years (generally given the title of 14-19 education) remained a central component of New Labour policy throughout its 13 years of office. The 'Curriculum 2000' reforms tried to make A-levels more accessible by introducing an AS and A2 modular system with students opting for four, sometimes five subjects in their first year before concentrating on three. Curriculum 2000 also sought to reduce, if not remove the differences in status between academic and vocational education by bringing them into the same framework, the latter being redefined as 'applied' learning. These reforms were part of an attempt at creating a more coherent strategy, but also the first stage of a process of 'lifelong learning'- following the 'foundation learning' in key stage 1-3.

Increasing performance levels was considered essential for economic survival. In the new globalised economy, Keynesian 'demand side' management had to give way, New Labour maintained, to a concentration on the supply side (Ainley & Allen, 2010) and so education literally became the economic policy of the government – or rather the obsession with increasing the supply of 'skills' – certified by qualifications. Education however would, more than ever before be an engine of social mobility. Globalisation, it was argued, offered more opportunities for those with high levels of qualifications, at the expense of those without, as the number of low skilled jobs continued to disappear. Compared to post-war times, globalisation now offered 'more room at the top'.

Judged by its own criteria, in many respects New Labour policy was successful. Pass rates at both GCSE and A-level rose to levels that would have

been previously considered unimaginable, the number of students obtaining 5 GCSEs at A-C grade reaching 67% in 2009 – a 20% increase since 1997. As ‘staying on’ became the norm, A-level entries approached 840 000 with pass rates of 97%. Finally 40% + now participate in some form of higher education. Elsewhere, despite a huge financial outlay, parts of New Labour post-14 policy did not fare so well. The specialist diplomas were an expensive disaster, while whole areas like further education, were largely ignored. Teachers have been plagued by a culture of targeting and performance management and their professional autonomy has been severely curtailed. If it has raised participation and ‘standards’ New Labour was not able to reduce inequalities and education, post-16 and HE in particular, has become a market place.

Conservative Priorities: re establishing the ‘academic’

Though a Coalition, the new government’s policies for education are mainly Tory proposals and it is plans to extend Academies and encourage ‘free schools’ that have received most attention. But if Gove wants schools to be more independent from the LEA, he also wants the upper secondary curriculum to resemble that of private and grammar schools – in this respect he has an enthusiastic follower in ‘free schooler’ Toby Young, who is planning to establish a ‘comprehensive grammar’ in Acton, west London, providing what he refers to as a ‘classical liberal curriculum for all’ (*Evening Standard*, 29 June 2010). The Tories have also hijacked Labour’s Academies programme. Rather than something imposed on underperforming inner-city schools, Academy status will be now be granted on the basis of an ‘outstanding’ OFSTED report. Not needing an external sponsor, only a vote by the governing body, these new style academies have similarities with the ‘grant maintained’ schools promoted by the Tories in the 1990s, but in other respects, though they will not be allowed to introduce selection, they resemble the ‘direct grant’ grammar schools of the post-war period.

Amongst the first to denounce the growth of ‘soft subjects’ at GCSE and A-level as a ‘flight from quality’ (*Telegraph*, 18 November 2008). Gove has continued to insist that under New Labour A-levels and GCSEs have been made deliberately easier so that targets can be met through ‘illusionary’ improvements in performance. While there is no real evidence that the new style exams are less challenging, Gove and the Tories want to revert to more traditional conceptions of standards designed for the few; as the benchmark for the many. Gove’s longer term curriculum objectives will act as a framework for more specific policies, such as increasing the involvement of top universities in the development of exam syllabuses, but also changing the content of subjects like history – where pro-imperialist historian Niall Ferguson has been drafted in to ‘rewrite’ the curriculum. Gove is also encouraging the introduction of alternative ‘elite’ qualifications like the Cambridge International Exams Pre-U and – as announced in the first policy document from Cameron and Clegg – allowing all schools to teach the International GCE (IGCE) a qualification more in common

with the old GCE O level and previously restricted to the Independent sector. However the head of Harrow School (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 9 July 2010) and even more surprisingly, in view of the Pre-U, the admissions director at Cambridge (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 23 July 2010) have pledged support for the AS/A2 modular courses. If elite schools do continue with the current A-level, they will hope that the A* grades, introduced by New Labour, will allow new forms of differentiation between their students and those from the state sector. (50% of current A-grades are achieved by students in independent schools) Nevertheless, Pre-U and IGCE will still constitute the beginnings of a new 'upper track' and a direct route into Russell Group universities.

Redefining the 'Vocational'

Though Gove wants to emphasise the distinctions between academic and vocational learning, his proposals for reforming vocational education and training are relatively under developed; comprising a series of statements on the need to make vocational learning more practical and more specifically related to occupational skills. If Tory fondness for traditional academic education was integral to the New Right education of the 1980s, then this 'hands on tools' approach towards vocational learning, couldn't be more different to the 'Conservative Modernisers' who sat alongside them (Jones, 1989) and sought to use the Manpower Services Commission to create a 'new vocationalism' based around developing a more generic style of learning – an approach that informed more recent vocational initiatives like GNVQ.

Despite their pre-election hostility, the Tories are unlikely to abolish the specialist diplomas, particularly those more vocationally specific – but priority funding and the new 'academic' lines in humanities, science and languages will be withdrawn. Whether there is a direct link between what is learnt in vocational courses and what employers 'need' in the workplace is another story (Allen & Ainley, 2007), but Gove's proposals can only increase the Cinderella status of vocational learning. Gove has already shown his contempt for vocational qualifications – saying that school league tables should not include them. The Tories have also pledged to 'treble the number of Young Apprenticeships and lift the cap on schools offering this valued course' (speech by Michael Gove to Centre for Policy Studies, 6 November 2009). The clearest example however, of how vocational education will become a separate and more distinctive activity can be seen in the support for Kenneth Baker's University Technical Colleges – referred to as 'technical academies'- in the May 20 Cameron/Clegg policy statement and representing a return to 1944 ideas about separate schools for different types of students.

The Tories say little about FE. Despite 16-19 funding being 'ring fenced', this sector will continue to experience dwindling resources and be forced to reduce staffing levels. Already becoming 'tertiary modern' institutions, FE colleges will remain a dumping ground for increasing numbers of working class

students falling foul of Gove's new school system. While Gove will likely make it easier for 'non academic' students to transfer to college, schools being given greater powers to suspend and expel students can only intensify the poor relationship of FE as many of these students could also end up there. In the absence of any serious take up from employers, FE will continue to compete with private training providers to run 'apprenticeships without jobs' where – as with the 1980s YTS – young people spend most of their time in college simulations, rather than being in the workplace.

Education: a growing crisis of legitimacy?

Rolling back New Labour's reforms the Coalition's policies will make education more unequal and less accessible, but like New Labour the new government will be faced with a much more serious, systemic crisis as education experiences its own 'credibility crunch'. At the centre of this is the declining purchasing power of qualifications in relation to what they can buy in the future – in other words the mismatch between what it is assumed a young person with a particular set of qualifications can look forward to and the stark realities of the labour market. Unfortunately for many young people facing an increasingly uncertain future, learning has become a largely instrumental activity and the education system like moving up a downwards escalator, where you have to run faster and faster simply to stand still. (Ainley & Allen, p. 73) With a third of graduates considering they are over qualified for their jobs and as graduates are forced to move into 'non graduate' jobs, then for those with lower levels of qualifications it becomes a race to the bottom. The economic downturn has intensified these developments, but it is not the cause of them. They are the consequence of longer term changes in the labour market and in the relationship between young people, educational qualifications and employment.

New Labour was not able to use education as the agent for the social mobility its leaders craved for. Declining rates of mobility are as much to do with changes in the occupational structure as they are the education system. While there has been an overall increase in white collar work, the new managerial and professional opportunities that globalisation was supposed to provide have not materialised – statistics show that in recent years the opportunities for absolute social mobility have declined. (Ainley & Allen, p. 79) Thus, rather than the post-war occupational pyramid being replaced by an expanding 'middle' and becoming 'diamond shaped' the middle has hollowed out and the class structure has gone 'pear shaped'. (Ainley & Allen, p. 81) The supposed shift towards the 'knowledge worker' has remained a fantasy in most work places and there has been an overestimation of the number of high skilled jobs that will be required. For example, one quarter of all jobs are now paid at less than two thirds of the average wage and since 2005 the richest 10% have enjoyed a 45% increase in the weekly wage, while the bottom 10% have experienced a £9 fall. (Ainley & Allen, p. 82)

The inevitable consequence of the trend towards underemployment has been the increase in youth unemployment – again, intensified by the recession, but not caused by it. At the time of writing, 17% of the 18-24 year olds classified as ‘economically active’ are unable to find a job – over 25% having been out of work for a year (for 16-17 year olds the figure is over 30%). The new government has already announced it is to reduce support for the young unemployed by discontinuing the Future Jobs Fund – a scheme where employers, generally in the public and voluntary sectors, received subsidies for taking on unemployed youth.

As a result, in increasingly difficult economic times, it is understandable that young people will continue to sign up in large numbers for higher education. There continues to be debate about just how much of a premium graduates will enjoy however, for while the relative advantages of being a graduate might hold up in the job queue, the ratio between graduate earnings and graduate costs will fall as the balance between well-paid permanent employment and casualised ‘Mcjobs’ continues to tilt. With so many new customers, however, it would be irrational from a business point of view for the government not to raise fees. In response to a 10% rise in UCAS applications Labour agreed to fund up to 20,000 additional higher education places for 2010. The new government reduced this commitment to 10,000. With the number of applications even higher this year, thousands of students have been forced to take an unplanned ‘gap year’.

New Strategies are Needed for Young People and Education

Weighed down with student debts, or unable to afford to leave the parental home, then if not being the ‘lost generation’ the media likes to brand them, young people, despite being the most highly educated ever, are increasingly aware they are ‘stuck’. Not able to make a proper transition to independent adult life. A situation where education is in danger of losing its legitimacy provides huge opportunities for radicals and organisations like the NUT and UCU to promote new types of curriculum in opposition to both New Labour’s ‘conveyer belt’ learning and Michael Gove’s cultural elitism. A curriculum which is both intellectually challenging and relevant to the needs of young people at the start of the 21st century, also necessitates new sorts of working relationships between teachers and their students, where learning becomes a more collaborative rather than a competitive activity. Part of a real learning society, in which schools and colleges are not only democratically accountable to the communities they serve, but also central to their wellbeing.

Note

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References

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MARTIN ALLEN is Vice-Chair of the NUT Secondary Advisory Committee and a part-time teacher in the sixth-form of a west London comprehensive school. He is co-author with Patrick Ainley of *Lost Generation? New Strategies for Youth and Education* (Continuum Books, 2010). Correspondence: mar.all@btinternet.com; www.radicaled.wordpress.com