

Beyond Comparative Institutional Analysis: a workplace turn in English TVET

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Abstract

Vocational education analyses often compare national patterns seen to favour industry-based training, state schooling or personal investment in skills acquisition: these are increasingly offered as ‘templates’ to new and established industrial economies. Institutional scholarship has correspondingly foregrounded skill formation as key to national policy differences; in particular historical institutionalism has focused on the role of labour market and state actors in negotiating and contesting arrangements for skill formation. Whilst paying relatively little direct attention to educational practice, these approaches provide theoretical tools to understand policy differences and to identify possibilities, limitations and strategies for change. This paper draws on their application in England, where apprenticeship and technical education reforms are periodically represented as relocating skills formation to the point of production on the model of collectivist systems: case study data is examined for evidence of institutional change strategies within emerging educational practices. Whilst the absence of engaged labour market actors renders the adoption of a substantially different model improbable, contestation over knowledge, control and educational roles is nevertheless evident, indicating the deployment of strategies for significant change. Their outcomes will determine the availability of transitions, with a layering of selective opportunities threatening to diminish the opportunities available to others.

Keywords

Comparative VET; historical institutionalism; workplace learning

Bibliographical notes

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1 Introduction

National ‘models’ of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are recognised widely in Europe. Greinert (2005) distinguished between liberal-market, state-regulated and dual corporate systems, associated respectively with Britain, France and Germany, whilst additional patterns are evident in Nordic countries (Jørgensen et al., 2018). These patterns have largely withstood historic and recent pressures for convergence (Scott and Kelleher, 1996; Petrini, 2004). More recently the best-known features of particular countries have become magnified into national ‘blueprints’, marketed by national bodies: the ‘myths and brands’ identified by Heikkinen and Lassnigg (2015). These then drive notions of policy transfer and policy borrowing, which are taken in turn to imply the possibility of significant change to established national patterns of TVET, despite longstanding evidence of the difficulties of transferring particular models into, or out of, new international contexts (Deissinger 1997, 2015.).

Alongside the education-based studies cited above, broader analyses of political economy have theorised both the basis of such differences and the basis on which change has taken place. In terms of national differences, political economy scholars denoted institutionalised skill formation as central to mutually-reinforcing social policies, including employment, welfare and banking (Crouch et al., 1999). These accounts denied the universality of arrangements in liberal, Anglophone jurisdictions, which assign responsibility for human capital to individual investment (Becker 1964; Mincer, 1974): the latter were instead identified as characteristics of ‘liberal market economies’ that were only one more-or-less successful ‘variety of capitalism’ (Hall and Soskice, 2003). But, they argued, the Anglo-Saxon model was not the inevitable basis of liberalisation and policy convergence: a refutation of supply-side economics and deregulation was identified in the collective arrangements, distinctive roles and expectations of social actors that support dual training in Germany and are not easily understood from outside (Streeck 1989). Adding neighbouring countries, Bussemeyer and Trampusch (2012) defined ‘collectivist’ skills formation by the high involvement of firms in providing, administering and paying for vocational training; the role of intermediary employers’ associations and, varyingly, trade unions in collaborative bodies; the provision of certified skills that are recognised nationally; and the location of VET in firms as well as schools (2012, 14-15).

These perspectives are useful for analysis of education policy discourses, which often suggest convergence around internationally ‘agreed’ models despite evidence of differences (Clarke and Winch 2015). Their focus is on labour market and other actors who shape the ‘institution’ of skills formation,

rather than on educational practice, necessarily since skills have to be applied in the workplace,. Yet skill formation overlaps with broader educational systems that include academic and school- or college-based routes; and plays out in different approaches to educational practice. Thus, whilst both France and Sweden have moved from largely schools-based VET to more employment-based transitions, students in these settings retain important school and college protections (Grytnes et al., 2017). Pilz's (2016) international typology of VET arrangements includes mapping of educational practice and relationships between teaching institutions and the workplace are not free of tensions even in countries where workplace learning is strong (Ertl and Sloane, 2004; Fischer and Brauer, 2004).

A second, emerging but important, institutionalist contribution has been its more theorised account of the way that institutions change over time. (By its nature, a focus on institutions emphasises their enduring, autonomous and 'non-plastic' [Conran and Thelen 2016, 52] characteristics.) The key empirical account has been Thelen's (2004) study contrasting the formation of England's skills regime, a struggle between employers introducing high numbers of young people as cheap labour and engineering unions seeking to resist them, to the foundation of collectivist skills formation in Germany. Here Bismarck's labour laws instituted chambers controlled by craft organisations (Handwerkskammern) to regulate apprenticeship, which became the focus of struggles by large-scale industry and by labour organisations for control. By contrast with earlier 'varieties of capitalism' literature, with its rather functionalist assumption that particular arrangements flourished because they worked, historical institutionalist approaches to change share the view that institutions are '(a) the legacy of concrete historical processes and (b) the object of contestation' (Conran and Thelen 2016, 60-61). The compromises that lead to every institutional settlement entail both winners and losers, who do not go away (Thelen, 2004, 295).

Here too attention to educational perspectives can supplement the focus on labour market negotiations and contests: universities contribute to the erosion of 'dual training' in Germany through 'segmentalist' firm-based higher education provision, in contrast with nationally-certified initial VET (Graf, 2018). Lassnigg (2015) noted that political decisions were implemented by schools and teachers unevenly in Austria, although this account characterises VET development as largely a process of 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959). As education becomes more enmeshed in economic policy, it can become the impetus for more change initiatives, although the relationship among these aspects of policy is complex (Keep and Mayhew, 2014).

This paper therefore draws on the theoretical insights of historical institutionalism to review a recent turn by the UK government to create additional elements of post-school learning in England within the workplace, and with a more employment-driven curriculum. Two key developments have taken place: the first in apprenticeships, where qualification-based ‘frameworks’ are being replaced by employer-led ‘standards’; and the second the addition of substantial work placements to school- and college-based learning for full-time students of vocational (and now ‘technical’) education. In the case of apprenticeships, the Richard Review (Richard, 2012) also led to the replacement of continuous competency testing by ‘end-point’ assessment and the institution of an employer levy as the basis for a target of three million apprenticeships. For full-time students, the Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel for Technical Education, 2016) proposed the addition of substantial work placements of up to three months for courses designated as ‘technical education’ (a term little used since further education colleges developed broader missions in the 1970s and 1980s). In each case new arrangements have been entrusted with the mission of better representing skills valued by employers: the ‘Trailblazer Groups’ who produce the apprenticeship standards; and technical education ‘panels’ designing ‘T-levels’ (upper secondary technical education qualifications: the term is a reference to the ‘A’ levels taken by students on academic pathways).

These arrangements on their own hardly constitute the remodelling of TVET on the lines of collectivist skills formation: learning in the workplace does not alone constitute a replica dual training system (Ryan, Gospel and Lewis, 2007). It is not difficult to see the references in key policy texts to European workplace learning (Independent Panel for Technical Education, 2016, pp. 88-101; Casey 2013, for example) as somewhat wishful or rhetorical; but such a judgement would not serve to dismiss all questions about the nature of current changes to institutional arrangements in England. The hypothesis of this paper is not that TVET in England is being transformed on the lines of an alternative continental model but that, following the dissolution of relatively corporatist post-war arrangements during the first three post-war decades, the changes now emerging have the potential to lead to a range of different outcomes, depending on how these changes are negotiated and contested. Historical institutionalism suggests useful tools in terms of possible strategies for change, including ‘conversion’ (Thelen, 2004; Conran and Thelen, 2016) with different actors assuming the leading role over time in substantially continuing arrangements; and layering (Schickler, 2001) by which an additional set of arrangements can be added, which then influences the operation of the existing system. Beyond most historical institutionalist accounts, however, the paper specifically looks for evidence of these strategies in emerging patterns of learner transition and educational

practice. The basis of the paper is therefore the analysis of data collected from sites at the forefront of this turn. The following section sets out the methodology of this analysis, including both the theoretical basis of the study and the specific methods of data collection that have provided its findings. A summary of key findings follows, prior to the conclusions of the paper.

2 Methods

The data discussed here constitute together what might be described in historical institutionalist terms as a case study: one in which institutionalist arrangements are subject to policy change. It should be said at this point that the set of arrangements supporting skill formation is normally considered as the ‘institution’ in historical institutionalist analysis, notwithstanding that social actors involved in negotiating and contesting their form (employer bodies, government etc.) can also be described as institutions, as can education providers. But this data is drawn from a series of four smaller case studies of settings where changes are currently being implemented or tested.

The case studies include both apprenticeships and work-based learning for full-time students: they were conducted using documentary analysis and interview data, analysed to present a picture of how changes to apprenticeship and the introduction of technical education are giving rise to a new institution of skills formation. The first study of workplace learning by full-time students, at a time when their placements were organised under the earlier policies introduced following the Wolf Report (2011), was conducted in order to illustrate the challenges facing young people and providers following the Sainsbury Review and was published earlier (Esmond 2018). Data was collected both at college and workplace locations and included interviews with placement students, their tutors and employers. Further evidence of these developments is now emerging during an ongoing evaluation of pilots for this policy. The first study of apprenticeships was conducted among apprenticeship practitioners who are now assuming roles as trainers, rather than as assessors of workplace competences as in earlier models of work-based learning in England. The second was based on studies of practice at apprenticeship providers, with documentary study and interviews among providers and employers.

All of these studies, based on interview and documentary research, were qualitatively based. Sample sizes varied across the case studies according to the possibilities of each setting but their main significance is that each case study focused on a field where contemporary policy changes are being implemented. All interview data was transcribed in full and coded for thematic analysis. All of these studies and their methodologies were approved by university ethics panels following detailed consideration of the

possibilities of harm. Each study has focused on emerging educational practices relating to policy reforms but for the purposes of this study, the coded data has been further reviewed in relation to concepts developed in historical institutionalist scholarship, in particular to what extent change could be seen as the product of conflicting forces; and in relation to the ‘strategies’ for change discussed above: conversion (Thelen, 2004) as power balances change, and layering (Schickler, 2001) with new arrangements affecting those already existing. The applications of these concepts in data analysis has provided the basis of the discussion that follows.

3 Results

The first important theme to emerge from the data relates to whether these reforms have called into being new arrangements for organising and certifying workplace learning. Until now apprenticeships and any elements of workplace learning for full-time students have been organised on a fairly voluntarist basis, albeit with substantial funding incentives for recent apprenticeships. The case studies provided evidence of providers developing systematic networks that would support placements for full-time students although these were only able to generate large numbers of high quality placements on courses with a few, high-level candidates (Esmond 2018, 201-02). Other providers made use of third-sector support to generate and monitor placements and this has been a feature of placement trials for technical education, which have supported small numbers into more substantial placements. But there is so far little evidence that these might command participation on the basis that employer bodies might achieve in more collectivist system. The voluntarism of the English model appears effectively unchanged, in the absence of such arrangements as the chambers through which German dual training is supported, or the systematic support that the school-based system in Holland enjoys. The continuing absence of labour market actors, then, would at first sight seem to imply the persistence of the national model and the ‘stickability’ of institutions; that because there is no enforced requirement for social partners to play a full role in regulating youth transitions to skilled work and that the kind of ‘conversion’ discussed by Thelen (2004), with different actors assuming dominant roles in processes of negotiation and conflict, is ruled out in England.

But evidence of negotiation and conflict, which is evident in the policy literature, also emerges in the data. An important example is the recognition of qualifications: both the Sainsbury Review (2016) and the Richard Review (2012) discuss the need to replace varied national qualifications with authoritative, widely recognisable industry standards, in an echo of the state’s role in Germany and neighbouring states. Yet in the case studies it became

clear that, far from the achievement of portable industry qualifications, apprenticeship standards increasingly lack recognised certification and this makes progression difficult. Apprenticeship practitioners reported the gap emerging between higher-level qualifications, designed to compete with degrees, and low-level qualifications that carry no qualification at all. These difficulties were for them reflected in the challenges of progression from work-based programmes at earlier levels to more knowledge-based courses taught in colleges. These distinctions, keenly noted by apprenticeship practitioners, have the potential to emerge in work placements for full-time students.

These distinctions in curricula are seldom well-defined in workplace learning: apprenticeship standards are defined in two-page documents and work placements for full-time students generally lack any specific curriculum unless negotiated briefly between provider and employer. Correspondingly, challenges of workplace learning contrast with relatively clear expectations of school-based teaching roles and of the Meister in German apprenticeship. There is much uncertainty about the extent to which work-based assessors in England will move effectively into teaching roles and, as full-time students come to spend more time in the workplace, many if not most providers appear unwilling to allow full-time teachers opportunities to support their workplace learning.

In this respect, also, a degree of differentiation is evident. For established 'trades' or skilled occupations, courses providing established routes to well-paid jobs, were mainly taught in classrooms (and most frequently to young men). Even within the workplace, apprenticeship staff reported reasonable opportunities for off-the-job training. These routes contrasted with pathways to less well-rewarded work, more often for young women, which could be adapted more easily to workplace teaching and which is obliged to put up with its distractions. For lower-ranked employees, time away from work appears often to create problems despite a nominal 20% time off-the-job on apprenticeship standards.

Despite the repeated emergence of differences across the case studies, the possibilities of apprenticeship and workplace learning are by no means entirely negative. Learners, educators and industry representatives alike offered valuable illustrations of how curriculum knowledge could be applied in the workplace, or practical experience could enrich classroom-based study. But these opportunities appear unevenly distributed, with the higher levels of apprenticeship and workplace learning offering the greatest advantages. The following section discusses the implications of this generalised picture, drawing on institutionalist insights.

4 Conclusions

At first sight the data appears to confirm a widespread scepticism of policy change in England. Re-orientation of the country's 'FE and Skills sector', even of its name, has continued unabated for a quarter century since Further Education colleges became corporations in 1992. Claims about the significance of apprenticeship changes and of technical education have been met with substantial scepticism. In this analysis the dominance of established national patterns appears confirmed by the absence of German-style collective employer bodies and chambers, or at least the systematic support for a school-based system as in Holland. Long-established national patterns appear to be confirmed irrespective of the strategic negotiation and contestation discussed above.

However, historical perspectives indicate the way that institutional arrangements are emerging nevertheless. In the post-war period in Britain, the state began to provide more systematic technical education with employers and unions drawn into corporate arrangements which reached their height after the Industrial Training Act of 1964. These relatively weak corporatist arrangements were subject from the outset to employer pressure for more liberal arrangements for skill formation, leading to the abolition of all but the Construction Industry Training Board by the 1980s. Renewed pressure from short-termist employer groups is also evident in contemporary demands for an end to the recent apprenticeship levy, in pressure to end the 20% off-the-job training and in a fall in apprenticeships as employers offer fewer opportunities to replace low-quality schemes recently abolished. Indeed, employers and government often sharply criticise, for failing to represent business, bodies that were earlier privatised in order precisely to serve employer need, such as the Awarding Organisations (AO)s that certificate learning, or college and private providers. Thus, even without the full participation of collective employer and trade union bodies in Trailblazers or the corresponding 'T-level' panels, there is evidence of conversion, with new conflicts over such fields as the content and certification of learning.

The data in the study, however, suggests that a substantially different strategy is being pursued. A layering of skill formation appears to be under development, with selective opportunities becoming available for a minority of students. These are evident in the kind of opportunities that young learners on engineering and professional construction routes accessed in the first study of full-time placements, or on the more privileged higher apprenticeships. This implies that, as one route provides more selective, the remaining routes can be deemed 'inclusive', open more widely to students, but also more marginal, with fewer opportunities for young people who have rejected or

been deemed unsuccessful in academic education allocated fewer resources. This remains a chronic problem for vocational education across the UK, which is widely seen as a means of providing opportunities for young people who have rejected or been deemed unsuccessful in academic education. Ironically, technical education and higher levels of apprenticeship have been proposed as a remedy for its marginalisation. It is not yet clear that the results will not be to reinforce institutional arrangements which exclude substantial numbers of young people from meaningful transitions to rewarding employment.

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