

Continental Selections? Institutional actors and market mechanisms in post-16 education in England

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Abstract

Recent policies for English technical and vocational education, centred on apprenticeship reforms and the Sainsbury Review, have prioritised employer-led curricula and learning in employment settings. These policies are represented in policy discourse as radical changes that imitate successful European systems, raising new issues about the possibilities and limitations of policy learning and policy borrowing. Useful insights are offered by comparative political economy, which has located skill formation within networks of complementary institutions that shape economic life, rendering problematic the notion of change in a single dimension such as skills. Relatedly, historical institutionalism explains skill formation both as an enduring institution but also as the product of specific historical conflicts over workplace training. Building on these theoretical conceptions, a series of qualitative case studies carried out at key points in the emergence of current skills policies is reviewed, which demonstrates how wider conflicts are reflected in a tension between selectivity and inclusion currently playing out in the implementation English skills policy. The findings indicate the possibility of further stratification in post-16 education, through the process that historical institutionalism describes as ‘layering’. However, possibilities for a more coherent relationship between educational practice and the workplace may also be derived from this analysis.

Keywords: technical education; apprenticeships; historical institutionalism; skill formation; labour markets; political economy

Introduction: post-16 reforms in England and their international context

Ongoing changes to technical and vocational education in England have reframed apprenticeships as employment-based credentials, whilst seeking to locate a significant period of full-time education in the workplace. These changes centre on the introduction of apprenticeship standards (Richard 2012; UK Government 2015) and the qualification and curriculum reform for full-time studies proposed by the Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel on Technical Education 2016). They are widely represented as a fundamental shift from earlier vocational education policies and a move towards the practices of the UK's continental competitors. The Sainsbury Review announced its superiority over all previous reforms precisely in these terms:

These have all been unsuccessful because they tinkered with technical education, and failed to learn from the successful systems in other countries (Independent Panel on Technical Education 2016, 6).

The fundamental nature of these changes is denoted by the revived terminology of 'technical education', which 'is not, and must not be allowed to become, simply "vocational education" rebadged' (23), and supported by such references to competitors as the Review's illustrative vignettes of Danish, German, Dutch, Norwegian and Singaporean systems (88-101). The Richard Review of apprenticeships (Richard 2012), which led to the replacement of qualifications-based apprenticeship frameworks by 'employer-led' standards, drew more cautiously on international models, pointing to these mainly in its recommendations for employer-designed qualifications and rigorous assessment. But it demanded equally fundamental changes, describing earlier apprenticeships as a 'government-led training programme, shaped by training professionals not employers' (4).

These developments have made slow progress. After the Richard Review (Richard 2012) required the existing qualification-based apprenticeship frameworks to be replaced by ‘standards’ that would represent employers more directly, ‘Trailblazer Groups’ were charged with producing the standards and the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) with approving their proposals and ‘end-point’ assessments (EPA), a process still continuing five years after the review was first published (Ofqual 2017). For full-time students, the Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel for Technical Education 2016) resurrected the term ‘technical education’, little used since further education colleges developed broader missions in the 1970s and 1980s. New qualifications reflecting the needs of employers were to be designed by ‘T-level’ panels. (This term for upper-secondary qualifications is a reference to the ‘A’ levels taken by students on general education pathways, denoted as ‘academic’ by the Review.) The most immediately identifiable difference between these and earlier qualifications was the addition of substantial work placements of up to three months in duration. Following extensive placement trials, discussed below, the introduction of T-levels has been confined to three qualifications to be taught from September 2020. Proposals to develop tertiary provision that articulates more directly with these changes were included in the Sainsbury Review but have also been slow to emerge.

This rate of change suggests that the difficulty of the task is greater than the original policy proposals suggested. Those ambitious declarations suggested that, whilst the past was to be set entirely aside, the desirable features of rival national systems could be selectively adopted, in the manner that UK food purveyors offer various ‘continental selections’ to consumers. However, the distinctiveness of vocational education systems even within north-western Europe suggests that homogenisation is far from being accomplished, despite longstanding discussion of a common European

model (Petrini 2004). Greinert (2005) distinguished between the liberal ‘market model’ of the UK, where vocational skills are determined by their use in the market; the ‘school-based’ model of France, delivered by state agencies and less dependent on workplace application; and the ‘dual corporatist’ model of Germany, largely determined ‘by the employer, or organisations representing the interests of groups of employers’ (15). These national systems have certainly experienced shifts in recent years, including aspirations to relocate learning from school-led systems to the workplace (Gehin 2007; Grytnes et al. 2018). But this does not guarantee their transferability to new jurisdictions, as evidenced by critique of the ‘myths and brands’ promoted in the developing world (Heikkinen and Lassnigg 2015). Greinert (2005) associated these models with patterns of development traceable back to the nineteenth century, implying that the distinctiveness of national systems owed much to the very history that reformers propose to put aside.

This paper seeks to move these discussions beyond the sphere of education policy debate and to discover more general patterns and explanations of shifts in technical and vocational education policy. A more generalised approach is offered by political scientists who have taken a broader interest in skill formation, drawing on varieties of institutional theory. Several influential scholars in this field regard skill formation as central to the differences among nations and their policy choices: these perspectives have provided important insights on skills policy since Finegold and Soskice (1988) compared the ‘high skills’ regime in Germany to the ‘low-skills equilibrium’ in the UK. This does not mean that they regard policy change in this sphere as impossible; but that they regard such changes as enmeshed in broader networks of complementary institutions that sustain patterns of income distribution, welfare provision, legal systems and banking practices that are mutually sustaining at

national level (Hall and Soskice 2001). A historical institutionalist literature has also focused on the way these systems have emerged through contestation and negotiation, whilst retaining important continuities, providing important insights on how these may continue in the future (Thelen 2004; Conran and Thelen 2016).

This paper therefore draws on these approaches to examine the potential for English post-16 education to achieve the transitions envisaged in recent policy documents. This analysis is not based solely on documentary analysis but is extended with reference to data collected during recent studies of contemporary policy change. Emerging apprenticeship practices and the workplace learning now being organised among full-time students are already providing interesting tests of the way current reforms are playing out in educational practice. This paper brings together data from these fields with the theoretical approaches introduced in the foregoing paragraph. The following section provides further background to current policy change and sets out the principal tensions behind contemporary policy. A further section sets out the theoretical basis of the paper, critically reviewing key institutionalist texts that have analysed skill formation. A description of how the empirical data has been collected and analysed follows, leading to conclusions about the future direction and outcomes of current reforms. The closing discussion summarises the threats inherent in contemporary change and briefly suggests possibilities for a more coherent approach to these dilemmas.

Apprenticeship reform and technical education: policies and pathways

Despite the bold tone of key policy statements, the main proposals of apprenticeship reform and of technical education are not visibly radical departures. Both include the shift of curriculum design and certification powers from the awarding bodies who currently approve qualifications to the IFA. However, the apprenticeship Trailblazer

Groups and the T-level panels include both education specialists and representation from interested employers: it is unclear how far this alone would change qualification design. Nevertheless, apprenticeship standards and their implementation have included three important distinctions from the earlier frameworks: the replacement of continuous assessment by end-point assessment (EPA); the shift from low-level awards, mainly at (lower secondary) level 2 to (upper secondary) level 3 and above; and the removal of qualifications from many lower-level awards. The key difference between the T-levels and the residual upper-secondary qualifications is the completion of a substantial work placement at the end of the course. These are different directions of travel but in some ways complementary: apprenticeships are apparently becoming more rigorous and more stratified; T-levels are moving upper-secondary education closer to the workplace.

Yet both are discursively constructed as higher-quality routes that move the further education system closer to the labour market. Key policy documents express this differently. The Sainsbury Review draws heavily on references to the success of international systems more integrated with the labour market. The UK government's Skills Plan (DBIS/DfE 2016), published on the same day, speaks a more direct language of employer control, reproaching colleges and awarding bodies who 'have not provided an effective voice for business' (11). Both approaches echo critique of a widening gap between the Further Education and Skills sector, particularly its publicly-funded colleges, and the workplace. Half a century ago these institutions mainly taught part-time courses to full-time apprentices and were dominated by this technical and vocational provision (Esmond and Wood 2017; Cantor and Roberts 1972). Their missions expanded during the 1970s and 1980s to teach both wider numbers of A-level students and Access students, as well as disadvantaged young people and adults on lower-level programmes in England (Green and Lucas 1999). These highly diverse

institutions came to serve education policy objectives, contributing to the numbers of students achieving qualifications and to international league tables of educational success. More importantly, apprenticeship was substantially replaced by government-led schemes as youth employment fell rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s. This inevitably led to a weakening of the relationship between further education and the labour market, which was already tenuous because of the voluntarist nature of the system. In spite of government policies under all governments that emphasised a leading role for employers, few firms participated directly in the various bodies, such as sector skills councils, that governments established for these purposes. Keep (2007) identified a:

... central paradox: that because of a laissez-faire attitude towards governmental responsibility for employer behaviour, the state has been forced to act as a substitute for employer effort (2007, p.161).

Despite a rhetoric of market mechanisms and employer leadership, the latter remained absent from the mechanisms by which policy objectives in England were implemented, whether or not they approved of them. These criticisms applied particularly strongly to apprenticeships, which grew rapidly in response to government targets and incentives until a national levy instituted to coincide with the introduction of standards; but which even after the introduction of frameworks remained relatively weak qualifications with passive employer participation. Fuller and Unwin (2009) extended Keep's argument about low employer involvement, arguing that the state was responsible for 'the concentration of apprenticeship types at the restrictive end of the continuum' (2009, p. 412). These earlier discussions of employers and the absence of mechanisms for collective action are vital to any up-to-date assessment of the prospects for the UK government's reforms. As will be seen, collective employer bodies and the role of the

state in certification play central roles in more work-based systems.

By setting aside the discussion of earlier reforms and their limitations, policymakers and analysts risk failing to learn from earlier experiences. In this regard David Raffe (2011) distinguished the approach of ‘policy borrowing, in which “best practice” from abroad is identified and transferred back home’ and ‘policy learning’. Raffe used the latter to mean learning ‘from a country’s own policy history, or from more effective flows... between the contexts of policy and practice’ (2). Hodgson and Spours (2016) described the absence of any understanding of the past as a form of ‘institutional amnesia’ closely linked to a movement for global reform of education, based in turn on ‘the imperatives of competitive globalisation as the only existing order’ (512). The rhetoric of technical education does make reference to alternative systems of skill formation in other countries: those engaged with the workplace, ranging from Germany’s ‘dual training’ system to its school-based imitators (Casey 2013, for example) are portrayed as having already achieved the policy objectives to which UK policymakers aspire. However, brief references to international systems with better links to the labour market address neither the mechanisms that exist in those countries nor the history of skills formation in the UK. We now turn to the explanations that political economists have offered of these systems.

Institutions, policy actors and skills formation

Political economists, concerned with broader patterns and choices of policy, may neglect the specifics of educational policy and practice; but their use of institutional theory makes two key contributions to discussion of skills policy reform. The first locates skill formation as an enduring institution, alongside others that contribute to the durability of national approaches to social and economic policy. The complementary

nature of these institutions produces effects that impede change, hindering the adoption of alternative approaches. The nature of institutions has been defined by Scott (1995) as comprising the regulative, normative and cognitive elements that provide stability and meaning to social life (56). Institutional theory does not readily accommodate change, explaining this in terms of some form of external shock or internal conflict, such as marginal actors challenging institutional norms (Leblebici et al. 1991). To define skill formation as an institution, given the durability of institutions and their resistance to change, is to draw attention to its continuities. Nevertheless, it is precisely accounts of conflict and change, emerging from the historical institutionalism literature, have provided the second key contribution to this discussion.

Perhaps the most fundamental concept of political economy is that policy entails the possibility of choices. A key reason for these scholars' interest in skills is that the collective arrangements, roles and expectations that support German dual training provide a refutation of supply-side economics and deregulation: the liberalised models of the US and UK, strengthened in the 1980s and purported to be the inevitable basis of liberalisation and policy convergence, were refuted by viable European alternatives not easily understood from outside (Streeck 1989). The 'varieties of capitalism' literature drew on a comparative institutionalism which regards skill formation as an institution, occupying a pivotal role amongst inter-connected institutions that determined a broad approach to economy and society: banking, welfare and employment policies meshed together to form coherent approaches that were more-or-less successful as national alternatives (Hall and Soskice 2001). Crouch, Finegold and Sako (1999) denoted skill formation as central to these mutually-reinforcing institutions.

From an institutionalist perspective, the model of Anglo-Saxon 'liberal market economies' designated by Hall and Soskice (2001) is primarily dominated by the

economic utility of skills in the market economy. Since market relations dominate, the key concept for skills formation is that of ‘human capital’ (Becker 1964; Mincer 1974). In this regime, the fundamental problem identified by Becker was that of ‘poaching’: one employer is able to gain the benefits of the employee’s training by paying a marginally higher wage to the skilled worker whose training another employer has financed. This inevitably tends to discourage employer investment in training and suggests that the individual augmenting their worth through training should bear the main cost (for example by reduced wages during training). This Anglo-Saxon pattern of individual skills acquisition, through specific employment-based training following general education, may produce greater higher-end skills. It also results in greater inequalities, as there are fewer opportunities for workers with lower levels of educational achievement to access training (Lauder 2001). These notions of economic rationality may have achieved wider international currency under regimes of neo-liberalism, but they remain most strongly entrenched in Anglo-Saxon societies (Hall and Soskice 2003). Here this ‘institution’ of skills formation coheres with shorter-term banking, welfare and policies which are focused on quick returns, as opposed to the more patient ‘corporate’ or ‘collectivist’ approaches of Germany and its neighbours.

The economic arrangements that sustained collectivist models of skill formation have been described as providing ‘beneficial constraints’ on the economic calculations of agents in Germany, leading to high-quality production, high wages, long-term returns on investment and greater social equality (Streeck 1992). German dual training is more comprehensively embedded in the workplace than its neighbours’ school-based systems; but Bussemeyer and Trampusch (2012) have identified four features of skill formation systems held to be common to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands. Firstly, firms have a high involvement in providing skills, including

paying the costs of training. Secondly, employer associations and, in some cases, trade unions, work together in collective bodies. Thirdly, the system leads to the award of skills certification that is nationally recognised. Finally, skills training is located at firms as well as in schools (14-15). These arrangements combine arrangements among firms and labour market actors with the role of the state, leading Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) to denote all these countries as ‘collectivist’, although they note important variations across the five national systems. Central to their analysis is their view of the relationship between collective action by firms and the state:

... the extensive involvement of firms in the provision of initial vocational training depends on a particular combination of beneficial constraints and resources for collective action. In other words, maintaining the autonomy of firms to the largest extent possible does not contribute to the preservation of firm involvement in training because of the numerous collective action problems identified by labor market economists (16).

Each country, then, is deemed to have resolved the ‘paradox of collective action’ (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999, 25), with employer associations playing the central role in pressuring their members to provide skills as part of the vocational system. Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) rationalised the use of the term ‘collective’ over such alternatives as ‘corporate’ or ‘dual’ systems on the grounds that skill formation is essentially a social process where firms, labour market associations representing employers and workers cooperate along with the state in the process of skill formation. This depicts a fragile balance between employer action and the state, which has important implications for the future of collectivist systems, with several important strains identified by European commentators. However, this brief analysis indicates the difficulties of other countries seeking to construct similar systems. In the event, only the fourth of these characteristics, the partial location of learning in the workplace, is visible

in emerging policies in England. As others have observed, the designation of the workplace as a locus for learning does not amount to an English version of dual training (Ryan, Gospel and Lewis 2007). This has implications for the UK government's policy reforms and how matters might develop in the absence of collective bodies to sustain such a model.

However, political economists also address the question how such arrangements arise. Thelen's interest in the evolution of institutions led to her (2004) account of skills formation in Germany and Britain (with shorter discussions of Japan and the USA). In contrast to education-based accounts of policy decisions, Thelen (2004) identified the basis of modern arrangements in earlier conflicts among labour market actors. In Germany, Bismarck's labour laws gave craft organisations power over training and certification, allocating the power to regulate and assess apprentices through the craft chambers. Large-scale employers sought to gain control of industrial training for their own systems, whilst smaller skill-intensive firms sought to engineer an industry-wide system based on skill standardisation and labour mobility. Trade unions in turn engaged in a struggle for a measure of control, achieved only when skill formation was converted into a paragon of social partnership after the 1969 Vocational Training Act. Yet its fundamental features remained intact throughout this period, surviving two world wars and a period of fascism that standardised workplace training, building an alternative to schools weakened by the dismissal of left-wing teachers (237-240). In Britain, the struggle over apprenticeship took a very different form, with employers seeking to dilute the workforce through cheap labour and the efforts of engineering unions directed not to controlling training but to resisting the influx of apprentices. Low wages, long training periods and the stratification of apprenticeships resulted in a much weaker and more fluctuating development up to and after the Second World War (142-

7). Effectively, British apprenticeship remained largely subject to market mechanisms. Relatively weak collaborative developments and state interventions emerged after the Industrial Training Act (Ministry of Labour 1964) but their main form, Industry Training Boards, was suppressed from the 1970s.

This analysis has contributed to a sustained development of historical institutionalism, examining how institutions change over time. In addition to the analysis of historical processes, with long-term contests and negotiation over their content and form, writers in this field have begun to develop accounts of strategies for institutional change (Conran and Thelen 2016). Thus Thelen's (2004) account of German skill formation is described as the 'conversion' of institutions, in which different actors assume the leading role over time, as the balance of power shifts, and others await their opportunities to strengthen their position. Several other possibilities are canvassed, of which the most interesting for our purposes is 'layering', where a further set of arrangements added, which in turn change the nature of the existing institution (Shickler 2001).

Each of these two analyses is open to critique. The distinctions in the 'varieties of capitalism' literature, between 'collectivist' and 'market' systems, are in many senses idealised: they can neglect the diversity of provision even within Germany or Britain, to say nothing of the rest of Europe. The idealisation of the German system can neglect its many difficulties, which include firm-specific schemes whose learning is only recognised inside the organisation, identified as 'segmentalism' on Japanese lines (Thelen and Busemeyer 2008); these are linked to growing numbers of academic-route students accessing apprenticeships and the decline of opportunities for social groups that traditionally take this route (Kupfer 2010).

Similarly, accounts of an institution contested and negotiated among industry partners neglect the role of educational actors: Lassnigg (2015) preferred the notion of policymakers ‘muddling through’ (Lindblom 1959), with other social actors, such as educators, distorting or frustrating their intentions. The recent history of skills formation in England has also deviated from an unstoppable march towards a market model. Gospel and Edwards (2011) have compared the relatively slow dissolution of the corporate arrangements of the early post-war years during the 1980s, compared to the determined strategy with which Thatcherite ministers set about reshaping industrial relations. The Manpower Services Commission directly intervened in the labour market, albeit conforming to the government ethos of the time (Evans 1992).

Nevertheless, it is argued that institutionalist approaches provide useful perspectives for understanding how collective skill formation can provide improved transitions to the labour market, whilst historical institutionalism provides important perspectives for understanding the prospects for policy change. In this paper they are used to assess the prospects for current reforms. The following section describes the methodological basis of the discussion presented here.

Methodology

In its broadest sense, the study described here constitutes what historical institutionalism terms a case study: a single case of how policy development and political conflict are shaped by institutional context. Institutions are not viewed as the sole cause of outcomes but they provide a useful concept to counter the simple notion of participation in labour markets. Moreover, they act as intermediate variables, structuring conflicts and mediating their outcomes (Thelen and Steinmo 1992). And, whilst many forms of institutionalism such as the well-known sociological neo-institutionalism of DiMaggio

and Powell (1983) focus on continuity, or the ‘non-plasticity’ of institutions, the focus here is on the way institutions change (Conran and Thelen 2016). By contrast to the identification of material interests in rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism has studied the way that ideas motivate actors at different times and in different settings, with a historical focus on how actors behave rather than a materialist focus on their interests. This suggests an emphasis on the long-term development of skill formation rather than identifying ‘critical junctures’ (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) at which there are greater opportunities to make decisive choices. Methodologically, this implies the use of ‘qualitative and comparative methods to study how processes that unfold over long periods impact distributions of power and policy outcomes’ (Fioretos, Falleti and Sheingate 2016, 4).

This study, unlike historical institutionalist case studies that present long-term developments *a posteriori*, examines unfolding policy changes and their practical outcomes for educational institutions and actors. It draws on a series of case studies, each of which examined the impact of policy changes on practice. The first of these studies examined the workplace learning of full-time students. A series of case studies of the work-based learning which level 3 students have undertaken during ‘study programmes’ following the Wolf Report (2011) was carried out in anticipation of the more substantial placements proposed by the Sainsbury Review (Esmond 2018). This study examined work-based learning in four vocational areas using case study methods, primarily documentary analysis, individual and group interviews. Data collection was carried out in both college and workplace settings, participants including students, teachers, work placement staff and representatives from the employment settings. Full details are given in the earlier publication (198-200). Further evidence of the shape and outcomes of work placements emerged when the author took part in the evaluation of

pilot placements organised during the 2017-18 academic year. These extensive qualitative studies covered 21 providers, each visited three times for interviews during the study with additional meetings and interactions organised in between the interviews. Samples varied across each case study, also based primarily on interview and documentary research; in this case, whilst students, curriculum staff and employer representatives were interviewed during the study, senior staff and work placement staff were interviewed most frequently. A substantial report of the study was published by the Department for Education (DfE) (Newton et al. 2018), although this is strongly focused on organisational approaches for providers organising future placements, rather than a critical evaluation of this experience. A study of apprenticeships in England was carried out initially through interviews of apprenticeship practitioners who are now expected to move beyond the traditional roles of ‘assessors’ (who in England and in other competency-based systems are expected to examine but not contribute to student learning) into more training-based roles (Esmond, in review).

The first and third studies, led by the author, were guided by an ethical review process that examined in detail how to engage with participants in ways that would respect their rights and minimise any possibility for harm. Documents have not been attributed to authors or institutions; interview participants have been anonymised in all outputs. Interviews were tape-recorded, stored anonymously and transcribed in full. These and other processes were approved by a university ethics committee that follows the BERA code and other widely-recognised codes of practice. The same approaches to data collection were used in the second study, carried out on behalf of the DfE. However, not all interviews were transcribed: researchers wrote summary reports which were shared, supplemented by discussion among researchers. To conform to DfE

directions, none of the data collected in that study is quoted directly, protecting participant identities, albeit at a cost of missing valuable details.

In data analysis, interview data and documents have been coded according to pre-designated categories relating to emerging arrangements for educational practice. For the purposes of this study, however, these categories have been reviewed and data re-examined in relation to historical institutionalist analyses of policy emergence. A key concern has been the extent to which data indicates institutionalist constraints shaping the choices of participants in emerging practices. An additional area of interest has been whether possibilities for change are evident in emerging arrangements around new forms of learning based in the workplace. This analysis includes a search for evidence of strategies for change discussed above, including conversion (Thelen 2004) and layering (Schickler 2001). Key findings of this analysis are set out below.

Findings

The first key theme through which to interrogate the data was whether recent policy changes were being supported by frameworks that provide access to labour market opportunities. From an institutionalist perspective, collective action by labour market bodies to provide and regulate training is an important requisite of success. In the case of these studies, this equates to the provision of work-based learning opportunities, whether placements on a technical education model or apprenticeships. This is not simply a matter of practically securing the target numbers of apprenticeships or T-level placements to meet government targets but of developing systems to provide appropriate training in widely-recognised skills. Financial incentives to employers and performative pressures on providers have served to increase the number of apprenticeship registrations until recently; but this remains a voluntarist system for which there is no collective industry pressure on individual firms.

The immediate outcomes of this system were seen to play out in the study of work-based learning opportunities available in colleges following the Wolf (2011) Review. Without any incentive or sanction from collective industry bodies, schools and colleges have been obliged to take the lead role in organising placements. In college-based and workplace interviews and observations, significant differences emerged among the opportunities available to students. In traditional male occupational routes associated with high levels of technical skill and more theorised programmes, including engineering and professional construction, employers perceived a need to select a highly-skilled future workforce. Here employers seeking to avoid future skill shortages and to select the most capable students offered high-quality, well-organised placements. A professional construction employer described the development of selected technical specialists on the lines of US ‘career academies’: an employer body supporting students met regularly to discuss industry and curriculum developments, organising visits, mentoring experiences, placements and specialist projects. By contrast, the college placement co-ordinator explained that the need to provide opportunities for all students took more homogenised forms in relation to manual construction trades. Rather than hosting individual visits, employers would visit the college to give lectures on such topics as punctuality and attendance. As the college representative put it, ‘The numbers are huge... how much can we ask from employers?’ (Esmond 2018, p.202).

Correspondingly, the nature of placements varied significantly across subject areas and the job roles for which students were being prepared. In the inquiry into ‘study programme’ placements, childcare and education emerged as an area providing a significantly weaker learning experience, despite the long tradition of workplace learning in this field. Students complained of routine tasks through which they learnt

little; mentoring was unstructured; placements appeared to emphasise behavioural norms for the students:

... getting them to put a uniform on, respect the uniform, no trainers, just the respectful side of things, and the wanting to be together and not be split up. The language as well: the terminology: ‘Oh, the kids...’ (nursery manager, Esmond 2018, p.203)

The focus on behavioural issues in this predominantly female, low-status vocational area and its contrast with the placements in professional construction, and to a lesser extent engineering, suggested a differentiation based on the status of occupations. This contrasts sharply with those systems where apprenticeship and other work-based programmes offer a substantial learning programme, including weekly school attendance, irrespective of the differences in the status of the occupations for which students are being prepared. One irony here is that the students receiving the most highly-developed learning programmes were those unlikely to leave college directly for the workforce but, like most professional construction students, were likely to progress to higher education programmes.

Similar differences emerged during the early trials of work placements carried out for T-levels during 2017-18. In spite of its generally optimistic tone and emphasis on practical guidance, the final report refers to students who ‘felt frustrated if there were restrictions on the activities they could do, or if activities continued at low skill levels and became repetitive’ (Newton et al. 2018, p.14). Whilst safety and other regulatory constraints affected some placements, the routine nature of much placement work in some occupational fields echoed, on a larger scale, the routinised experience of some ‘study programme’ students. Nearly a quarter of students in the trials did not complete their placement and the final report notes that ‘non-completion tended to focus on

learner dissatisfaction with placement content' (15). The areas of difficulty appear to correspond to the status of occupational areas, with the highest drop-out rates in fields which included substantial amounts of routine work: agriculture, environment and animal care, along with education and childcare. By contrast, areas with more fulfilling work such as media, engineering and digital had low drop-out rates, even though it was difficult to find placements in some of these areas (101). Much of the report deals with how placements might be organised: a key issue is how they might be prepared and organised as learning experiences, rather than as routine activities to be endured with good behaviour.

A useful explanation for these differences is the voluntarist nature of the system and the absence of genuine equivalents of the chambers or training agencies of collectivist systems. Thelen and Busemeyer (2008) argue that 'collectivist systems typically train "above need" and rely on the participation of a wider range of firms' (7). But on 'study programmes' and in the T-level pilot placements, providers were driven by the market mechanisms typical of skill formation in England. Lacking the means to compel placements, providers used educational charities to organise and monitor placements, providing the documentation through which providers could claim funding. Lacking industrial roots and detailed understanding of industry expectations, these charities were little able to provide opportunities for learning genuine industry skills. Significant numbers of students organised their own short placement through family or personal connections. Placements of this type inevitably reflect the objectives of some individual employers, directed less to the collective needs of industries than the selection of suitable future employees, or even the need for 'an extra pair of hands' at busy times. This experience was repeated on a larger scale during the 2017-18 pilots. A national charity was commissioned to design placement types but also provided support

to some of the providers, brokering placements with local employers. Despite links to national organisations, its representatives also lacked access to local networks, detailed industry knowledge, or any role in compelling participation by employers. The next round of ‘pilots’ during 2018-19 left the task of designing and organising placements to providers (DfE 2018). The difficulties of organising placements have contributed to the slow progress of T-levels, which have been scaled back to 55 providers in 2020, teaching three courses in digital, professional construction, and education and childcare. The scale of change envisaged for technical education appears to have diminished already from the wholesale replacement of existing vocational education to the addition of a partial alternative.

The problems of T-level development which flow from this relate less to its practical difficulties than to its possible emergence as a more selective pathway than the remainder of vocational education. A differentiation between transitions into more highly-skilled, technical occupations and socialisation into service and care roles may emerge not from the intentions of policymakers and their advisers, but from the basis on which skill formation in England has come to rest, a voluntarist system in which employers playing a generally passive role in the absence of collective action. Thus, employers seek to meet their private needs for recruitment and selection; only providers seek to meet pressure to provide opportunities for wider layers of young people.

The position of apprenticeships complements these developments. Young people on this route are already in employment, so are not dependent on negotiated placements. Yet apprenticeships also experience tensions between learning institutions and work. An empirical study of ‘assessors’, education-based staff employed by colleges and training providers to assess the progress of apprentices at work explored their move into training

roles following the introduction of 'standards'. Here the weak relationship between education and the labour market emerged in the reports of difficulties practitioners faced in negotiating suitable environment for learning in the workplace. In the absence of generally agreed arrangements, or even a shared conception of what is entailed by a training environment, what might have been agreed in advance between education and industry bodies became a matter for individual negotiation.

Yet these problems were mainly reported in service industries, in such areas as hairdressing and beauty therapy that mainly recruited young women at lower levels of study, in a further manifestation of hierarchical differentiation. With less theoretical content, these courses could be offered through workplace training more readily than technical occupations which required classroom-based study. In lower-paid sectors such as health and social care, employees were not always able to obtain time, nominally 20% on apprenticeship standards away from work. In such industries as engineering and construction, both theoretical concepts and practical skills were taught in colleges, leaving apprenticeship staff to focus on behavioural expectations. A further gap in apprenticeships has emerged between higher levels with qualifications and lower levels where standards are entirely based on short summaries agreed by trailblazer groups. These differences were reflected in the difficulties reported for apprentices progressing from work-based programmes to college-based courses with a greater knowledge content and requiring academic literacy.

These complementarities between the two cases, of technical education and apprenticeship, are indicative of the way educational practices are constrained by the institutional nature of skill formation. Conclusions to this generalised picture are discussed in the following and final section.

Conclusions

The findings of the study do not suggest that work-based routes cannot be developed in English post-16 education, nor that these cannot contribute to young people's transitions. What they do suggest is that, in the absence of labour market actors engaged in a negotiated process, they will not provide opportunities to experience meaningful and fulfilling learning at work for substantial numbers of young people. The outcomes may contribute to some upskilling of industry and recruitment into technical roles but this appears increasingly likely to be confined to a fraction of the age cohort. Neither labour market actors nor the state, whose key role in certifying qualifications valid at industry level is central to collectivist systems, are actively engaged in developing collective approaches that would broaden the basis of skill formation. This rules out the kind of 'continental selection' suggested in policy discourses. The implication of the Sainsbury Review that existing forms of vocational education would be superseded by an all-embracing technical education appears to be rapidly eroding.

The immediate consequence appears to be that opportunities from workplace learning will be unevenly distributed, threatening a narrowing of the skill formation system, rather than the creation of new opportunities for the whole range of young people. This may seem a premature judgment, with apprenticeship standards only now emerging and technical education at the pilot stage. Yet in the absence of institutional constraints the emerging hierarchicalisation of apprenticeships is likely to be followed by a similar experience in technical education. The location of skills in a competitive market remains the principle of skill formation in England, with the lack of any contest among labour market actors enabling the dissolution of the collective arrangements that existed briefly during the post-war years. Political economists sometimes point to the dangers of 'segmentalism' for collective systems. Large firms in Japan, for example,

develop in-house training systems for their own needs to a high level but do not participate in a collective system; many German companies collaborate with universities to provide specialist programmes outside the collective system.

However, institutionalism offers a further, bleaker possibility: the ‘layering’ of a new system onto the old, with the effect of altering the existing institution. Technical education and higher-level apprenticeships may become attractive opportunities for an elite of students and their partners, which draws in resources currently available to the broader vocational education system. Rather than a binary divide, the development of exclusive, elite routes would necessarily leave the remainder of vocational education further adrift from the body of (‘academic’ and ‘technical’) post-16 education. Its students, whose work experience would be limited to routine preparation for repetitive, low-skill tasks in service and care roles, would be further marginalised. This would be almost the polar opposite of systems that aim to create inclusive opportunities and generalised high levels of skill.

Achieving such a system, then, is clearly a matter of more than organising work placements, in the hope that beneficial learning will result. Nor is it a matter of adjusting educational practice to the needs of competitive labour markets, which operate to the benefit of those groups already advantaged in educational settings. Workplaces are better able to support learning through suitable environments, planned activities and staff with training capabilities. Educational institutions and educators, currently expected mainly to meet targets and prepare students to behave during placements, will also play a more effective role if they engage directly with workplaces in the development of a more inclusive and equitable skill formation system.

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