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**THE ANGLO-AMERICAN APPROACH TO VOCATIONALISM:  
THE ECONOMIC ROLES OF EDUCATION IN ENGLAND**

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## **Editor's Foreword**

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## **About Research Report**

The research for this report was undertaken during a month spent at SKOPE, Oxford University, in April - May 2004. This is part of a projected series on the economic roles of schooling in various countries, following the analytic framework of W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). The author is indebted to a number of individuals for information about the English system including Ken Mayhew, Geoff Hayward, Ewart Keep, and Cecile Deer of SKOPE; Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller of the University of Leicester; Michael Young and Ann Hodgson of the Institute of Education, the University of London; Paul Ryan of King's College London; Judith Norrington of the Association of Colleges; J.R. Pole of St. Catherine's College, Oxford; David Palfreyman of the Oxford Center for Higher Education Policy, Oxford; Ozan Jacquette of Oxford University. Most of the individuals also made valuable comments on a penultimate draft. Neither these individuals nor SKOPE are responsible for the arguments in this report.

## **THE ANGLO-AMERICAN APPROACH TO VOCATIONALISM:**

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#### **INTRODUCTION:**

#### **THE RHETORIC OF THE EDUCATION GOSPEL IN ENGLAND**

In virtually all developed countries, and many transitional countries as well, an orthodoxy about the crucial role of education has emerged. I call this orthodoxy the Education Gospel because it expresses a faith in education as the principal route to salvation — as the source of economic growth and competitiveness, the mechanism of individual advancement, the solution to poverty and social exclusion, the renaissance of countries whose past glory has been dimmed by subsequent centuries. In most countries, as well as the European Union promoting the Europe of Knowledge and the OECD (2001) emphasizing the Knowledge Revolution, the Education Gospel starts from an observation that the Knowledge Society (or the computer revolution, or new technology) is changing the nature of work, presumably in profound and comprehensive ways (Lloyd and Payne, 2002; Keep, 2000). Then the rhetoric of the Gospel in every country has emphasized the development of skills — core skills and key skills in England, *Schlüsselqualifikationem* (key qualifications) in Germany, “higher-order” skills in the U.S., “soft skills” and communications skills and “skills for the 21st century” in many countries (Brown, Green, and Lauder, 2001). In most cases the need for skills then requires an expansion of formal

schooling, particularly in postsecondary education, or what OECD has called Tertiary Education for All (OECD, 1998); and lifelong learning also becomes important as individuals change jobs many times over their lifetimes. Like disciples of religious and secular gospels, its true believers have acted on faith, rather than inviting questions about the empirical assumptions underlying the Education Gospel.

The Education Gospel in England<sup>1</sup> dates from at least the late nineteenth century, when notable Victorians and the National Association for the Promotion of Technical Education blamed education for the loss of Britain's economic supremacy (Sanderson, 1999, Ch. 3). The modern rhetoric dates from 1976, with the widely-cited Ruskin address by Prime Minister James Callaghan. That speech now seems quite benign, at least in contrast to recent reports; Callaghan argued that

the goals of our education . . . are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. . . In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill. Therefore we demand more from our schools than did our grandparents.

Another important expression came from two academics, Finegold and Soskice (1988), who identified England (and the U.S.) as having fallen into a low-skills equilibrium compared to their competitors; the current version of the Gospel similarly notes that productivity in England is low compared to countries like Germany, France, and the U.S. Other laments have focused not only on the current state of England as a “low-ranking laggard European power”, but also on the 150-year decline of England from its heyday in the 19th century — the “workshop of the world”, the greatest producer of manufacturer goods, a colonial power without rival (Sanderson, 1999, p. 1).

From the mid-1980s onwards the Education Gospel gradually became government orthodoxy. Tony Blair initially offered education as part of his Third Way, providing equality of opportunity

rather than the forms of greater equality through taxes and transfers of Old Labour<sup>2</sup>; and he has continued to stress “education, education, education” as the cornerstone of his policies. One consultive paper after another has appeared investigating the skills required to bolster England’s lagging economy, and the language of skills has permeated a series of initiatives: the New Skills Strategy, Skills for Life, the Skills Alliance (Pring, 2004). Government agencies were renamed — the Department for Education and *Skills*, the Learning and *Skills* Councils, the Sector *Skills* Councils, the Sector *Skills* Development Agency — as if reorganization and relabeling (or “rebranding”) could make policy come true.<sup>3</sup> The penultimate report in a long series, *Skills for All: Proposals for a National Skills Agenda* (2000), summarized various reports intended to “help ensure that Britain has the skills needed to sustain high levels of employment, compete in the global marketplace, and provide opportunity for all”. Its agenda was substantial, a combination of hortatory statements (“there must be a systematic and sustained approach”), unattainable goals without clear policies (like halving the rate of low literacy and numeracy in ten years), and reversals of decades of established practice (e.g., “establishing an excellent foundation learning system to include high quality vocational education”). This report was quickly superceded by another: *21st Century Skills — Realising Our Potential* (2003), though its message was similar: “Our economic productivity and competitiveness remain well below those of major competitor nations. One reason is that there are some serious gaps in our national skills base.” Its recommendations were familiar too: working with employers, despite two decades of efforts; revising the qualifications system yet again; promising to improve the effectiveness of Further Education colleges, after a decade of failing to fund them adequately; and promising that different agencies of government would work well together. The latest entry in the joustings, the Tomlinson report (Working Group, 2004), is more varied in its goals for education and calls for “active citizens” and individuals who “share in the cultural heritage of the country” and have a “passion for learning”, but its curricular and assessment reforms still emphasize vocational learning.<sup>4</sup> In many countries including England and the U.S., it seems that reports urging reforms in the name of economic development have become non-stop activities.

As in other countries, the rhetoric of the Education Gospel has been followed in England by efforts to expand formal schooling as the way to develop skills, with only relatively small efforts devoted to skill development in other settings like employment or community-based organizations. (In the mid to late-1980s work-based learning for young people – albeit of a low quality – enrolled a large numbers of the age cohort, but these have since declined as more young people have opted to stay in full-time education.) We have called the emphasis on formal schooling as the primary mechanism of work preparation *vocationalism*, not to emphasize the role of traditional secondary vocational education but to stress to the role of all levels of the education system, from secondary schools to universities, in preparing individuals for vocations (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). Similarly, in the English context Hayward (2004) has defined vocationalism as “the over-promotion of the work-related aims of secondary and tertiary education at the expenses of the civic, aesthetic, and moral purposes”.<sup>5</sup> The word *vocation* in English is the only term that connotes occupations as careers rather than mere jobs, providing personal meaning, economic benefits, continued development over the life course, status and social connections — a less powerful concept than the German *Beruf*, but the only term available. In England the development of vocationalism has included many strands, but the transformation of universities, the expansion of Further Education colleges (or the learning and skills sector), and the many small and evanescent work-based learning and short-term training programmes are among the most obvious.

The emergence of the Education Gospel in England, and the consequent efforts to expand formal schooling as a response, raises a number of questions. One involves the historical origins of the current system, including some reasons for the weakening of the apprenticeship tradition that existed until the 1960s. The following sections trace the vocational pressures on secondary education, the further education sector, and finally the university, which is in many ways the level at which vocational (or professional) developments have been the most obvious (as in the U.S.) Then I examine the convoluted debates over skills in England, debates that have in the end have failed to do much to redirect the nature of competencies taught.

Once preparation for employment in educational institutions is separated from employment itself, there must be ways for schools, colleges, and universities to be connected in some ways to the demands of the workplace. The mechanisms for doing this in England are informal, and have been weakened by recent policy despite rhetoric about cooperation with employers. Similarly, despite rhetoric about social inclusion and equality of opportunity, the effects of recent policy in England have largely been to continue high levels of inequality in levels of education.

The penultimate section wrestles with the question of how well vocationalism has worked in England. In one sense it has worked quite well: schooling has expanded, especially in further and higher education; more schooling leads in general to greater earnings and higher status, as it does in most developed countries, and formal schooling is therefore the dominant method for individuals to achieve adult status. But the effects of past policy on many of the social goals of the Education Gospel in England — particularly on growth, social inclusion, the creation of coherent credentials, and the revival of apprenticeship traditions — are considerably less certain. A good argument can be made that government policy, though driven by the rhetoric of skills, has failed to expand the skills of the English people as much as it could have because of problems in implementation.

The final section describes some of the common elements between England and the U.S. in their education systems, as well as a few marked differences. These two countries — as well as other English-speaking nations like Canada and Australia — have developed in similar ways, one of the many approaches to educating the workforce around the world.<sup>6</sup>

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES:**

### **APPRENTICESHIP, SCHOOLING, AND OXBRIDGE**

Throughout nineteenth century England, apprenticeship was an important form of preparing for work. These craft skills sustained the Industrial Revolution, which relied partly on routinizing

and deskilling work and partly on small numbers of skilled craftsmen. Apprenticeships were regulated by craft unions certifying proficiency — unlike the situation in the U.S., where descendants of the medieval guild system did not survive the trans-Atlantic journey — and continued into the twentieth century as an adequate system of preparing much of the skilled labour force. Despite criticism after 1850, and then again after World War II, apprenticeship persisted into the 1960s as the dominant approach to middle-level craft preparation, with the height of apprenticeship generally thought to have occurred between the two world wars.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, there was no strong tradition of widespread schooling in England, since there was no strong notion of citizenship as a social contract requiring education. As a result average levels of schooling were low throughout the 19th century, and the development of education for the mass of young people was initially left to religious charities, later operating with state financial support. (In contrast, the U.S. developed the common school system over the nineteenth century as a way of teaching the common values necessary for an emerging democracy, creating a relatively high base of schooling.) Elite schooling — public schools for the upper-middle class, Oxbridge for the upper classes — was both limited in scope and focused on the development of leadership. Leadership in turn meant roles in the civil service, in the colonial service, or in the upper echelons of the Church, but what counted was the development of character, not the mastery of “skills” or of vast bodies of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The curriculum of the public schools and Oxbridge was therefore dominated by classical history, literature, and philosophy (particularly in the curriculum called “Greats”), disdaining technical subjects like science and certainly the economic and managerial subjects that might prepare captains of industry. But by the end of the nineteenth century the civic universities were being founded (in cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool), and these often did have strong links to some local industries, and tried to encourage some forms of scientific and technological education.

As a result schooling in England was relatively under-developed, at least compared to the U.S.; an apprenticeship tradition continued; and the dominance of Oxbridge meant that technical and entrepreneurial subjects suffered from low status. One consequence has been relative inattention

(perhaps with the conspicuous exception of science at Cambridge) to technical education, when other countries — Germany, the U.S., and France in the *Grandes Écoles* — developed professional schools of engineering and of science. Another is that the leadership of business was undeveloped: the captains of industry were largely men who learned on their own rather than through formal schooling, and England continued to be wealthy in the early twentieth century on the spoils of colonialism rather than the further development of industry. (In contrast, the surging development of the U.S. in the twentieth century has been attributed, among many other causes, to the development of business schools and the expertise necessary to run large corporations; see Lazonick, 1991.) A third consequence has been a continuing suspicion of formal schooling; as the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction declared in 1882, “the Englishman has yet to learn that an extended and systematic education is now a necessary preliminary to the fullest development of industry” (Sanderson, 1999, p. 1). The anti-educational bias of English culture lives on in at least two forms: one is the widely-cited resistance of many employers to requiring more formal schooling of their workers (e.g., Keep and Mayhew, 2001, 22 – 23); and a second is a widespread antipathy toward schooling, particularly in the working class.<sup>9</sup> Overall, then, the history of English education has not been particularly conducive to the recent rhetoric of the Education Gospel and its insistence on higher skills and more schooling.

Since the 1960s, several major shifts have taken place. One, of course, is the effort to expand schooling and school-based skills, the subject of the next several sections. The other has been a series of contradictory swings in the treatment of apprenticeship. From the mid-1960s, when apprentices comprised about 3% of the labor force, apprenticeship began a steady decline. Part of this was due to a relative decline in the sectors (manufacturing in particular) where apprenticeships had dominated; part was due to the short-term emphasis on profitability of stock-market capitalism, a method of finance that makes employers less willing to invest in apprentices for long-run profitability. The weakening of the Labour Party and the antipathy of Thatcher toward unions and labour in general was also part of this decline. In addition, the government began experimenting with a series of replacements including Youth Training Schemes, intended to cope with rising unemployment; these did not support traditional apprenticeships, but instead

undermined it while borrowing the name (Gospel, 1995). By 1990s apprenticeship as a form of work preparation was seriously weakened, contributing about 1.1% of the workforce (Gospel, 1995; Ryan and Unwin, 2001). What's particularly sad about this development, aside from the fact that a useful tradition has waned, is that apprenticeship was weakened without putting anything in its place for working-class boys — not a revised form of vocational education, not greater access to further or higher education, and not (except in debased form) any substitute for apprenticeship.

An effort to revive apprenticeships has followed, taking several directions. A number of academic writers have “rediscovered” the virtues of apprenticeship — particularly its ability to provide a well-rounded set of competencies rather than cognitive abilities only, its promise to teach competencies “in context” rather than in the de-contextualized setting of the school, and its hope of developing paternalistic and nurturing relationships between master and apprenticeship (e.g., Fuller and Unwin, 2001; Ainly and Rainbird, 1999; Evans, Hodgkinson, and Unwin, 2002). Much of the new appreciation of apprenticeship has followed the American writers Lave and Wenger (1989) — an odd development because Lave and Wenger over-romanticized apprenticeship, and completely ignored the U.S. history of incomplete training, low-skilled production dominating any well-rounded learning, and harsh treatment of apprentices. Their notion that learning could be (or should be) more contextualized or “situated” was hardly a novel idea, at least in the U.S. with the legacy of John Dewey and his predecessors. Furthermore, their idea of learning via “legitimate peripheral participation” was well-known in the English labour movement, where “following up” referred to learning another job while a worker performed his own job, and “picking up” the skills of another job described a less formal process among individuals in jobs where the likelihood of learning was low (Moore, 1980, Ch. 5 and 6). But — as has happened in the U.S. as well, and in many countries envying Germany its well-developed apprenticeship system — the “rediscovery” of apprenticeship in England has supported several short-lived efforts to revive forms of work-based learning.

There are also plans to make work-based learning an entitlement in lower secondary education, even though there's little information about the effectiveness of existing efforts and no information about whether employers will provide enough positions (Huddleston and Oh, 2004). One of the few relatively permanent programmes has been the development of work experience in schools. Most often, work experience placements take the form of a one- or two-week internship at the end of year 10, or in the middle of year 11. Its location after the school year ends, or after most coursework is completed, means that these experiences cannot serve as material for school discussions, and the short duration of these programs turns them into brief sojourns into the world of work, usually in relatively unskilled positions — hardly the extended period of learning that characterized idealized apprenticeship. It's difficult to take these seriously as examples of work-based learning.

A second development has been the government effort to create Modern Apprenticeships (MA), now being “rebranded” as Apprenticeships.<sup>10</sup> These last on the average only 17 months, and only half the participants receive the qualification (the NVQ3) the programme seeks; the few strong programs are in sectors with a history of apprenticeship like engineering and construction, but in other sectors the rates of earning qualifications at level 3 and above ranges between 12% and 25% (Fuller and Unwin, 2003). While government-supported apprenticeships in theory replicate the combination of production and learning of apprenticeship, in practice most of them have failed to establish connections with general education; despite the rhetoric of being employer-driven, in practice the regulations are too complex for employers to manage and so this has turned into a supply-driven system (Keep and Payne, 2002; Steedman, 2001). While MAs have worked reasonably well in sectors with long histories of apprenticeship, they have not managed to revive the apprenticeship tradition nor to extend it to emerging sectors. They are best understood not as a revival of the long-term, well-rounded apprenticeship, but as another form of short-term job training following Youth Training — and short-term job training has been ineffective in virtually all countries where it has been tried, including England (Ryan and Unwin, 2001; Grubb and Ryan, 1998).

In a third form, work-based learning remains important in England, as in other countries. Many large employers provide continuing training to some of their workers, though these tend to be upper-level managerial and technical employees, not routine production workers or the low-skilled workers who might most benefit from training. Many commentators have noted that the amount of such training is low compared to other countries, as well as unequally distributed among firms and among types of employees (e.g., Keep and Mayhew, 2001), a problem that could presumably be corrected either by a change in employer culture or by subsidies and tax mechanisms to increase the volume of such training. However, aside from political resistance to this idea, such policies could probably not work in the absence of policies to counteract the well-known market failures in firm-based training.<sup>11</sup>

So a useful apprenticeship tradition in England has all but ended, with only pale and ineffective replacements — a development that has strengthened school-based routes into employment. Like the U.S., which has also failed in its efforts to enhance work-based learning,<sup>12</sup> the efforts to revive apprenticeship have not appreciated how much institutional structure and government regulation is necessary to maintain strong apprenticeships, including both strong employer associations and strong unions, government regulation of apprenticeship wage rates, and government creation of a set of iron-clad credentials used by all employers and providers. All of these elements are missing in England (and the U.S.), and until they can be created — in countries hostile to such policies — it's highly unlikely that apprenticeships can be revived in any important way. Instead, in England as in the U.S., the real response to the Education Gospel has been the expansion of education, particularly of tertiary education. The result once again is to strengthen the heart of vocationalism: the preparation of the workforce in educational institutions.

## SECONDARY EDUCATION AND VOCATIONALISM

One of the standard arguments in England is that the Oxbridge tradition, the elite public schools and state grammar schools, and the low status of science and business made technical and vocational education relatively weak. While there is great deal of truth to this, a number of technical and explicitly vocational initiatives developed after 1890 (Sanderson, 1999, Ch. 3). However, they were never consolidated into a national system and were not embedded into state-run schools, and apprenticeship continued to serve the needs of training skilled workers; secondary vocational education therefore continued to be quite weak.

One result was a three-track system in the schools: grammar schools (as well as elite public schools) focusing on academic preparation for the university; a very few technical schools providing vocational education for some of the crafts; and secondary modern schools for the great mass of students, providing a weak general education to students bound for low-skilled work. (Apprenticeships still provided most work-related learning, but with only a little general education provided in day-release courses.) These three tracks were clearly divided by class background, and they corresponded roughly to the division of labour: grammar schools for those headed for the professions requiring university; a small number of technical schools for those heading for relatively skilled working-class jobs; and a large number of secondary moderns for those headed for the mass of unskilled work. This three-track system was similar to one in the U.S.;<sup>13</sup> indeed, it seems like a “natural” division once the major differences in the labour market are recognized.

The formal triple-track system ended by the early 1970s, with segregated schooling replaced by comprehensive secondary schools.<sup>14</sup> As part of this process, the secondary technical schools were allowed to decline even further (Sanderson, 1999, Ch. 6). Many of them were converted into technical institutes providing day-release programs for apprenticeships, and then became Further Education colleges at the tertiary level. The result is that vocational education in secondary schools — never strong to begin with — was further weakened. Currently, most

schools that provide any vocational education to those below the age of 16 have some offerings at Levels 1 and 2, the lowest levels that have been repeatedly shown not to have any positive results in employment, but they usually can't provide Level 3 and above; a great deal of what schools provide these students is about vocations — a form of careers education, in effect — rather than vocational skill development. For those 16-18, the bulk of offerings in maintained schools and sixth-forms are preparation for A levels, while most occupational education is provided in Further Education colleges (Hayward and Stasz, 2004). What used to be secondary vocational education now takes place in Further Education colleges, just as secondary vocational education in the U.S. has dwindled and initial occupational preparation now takes place in community colleges.

However, several other secondary school developments are of interest. One is that there have been periodic calls for reviving vocational education. This argument — like the similar argument in the U.S. — starts from the observation that vocational education can be valuable as a route to general or academic learning, as well as being useful in preparing individuals for occupations. Often more practical arguments emerge, including the observation that there are many jobs in modern economies that do not need university education; that many students do not like conventional academic schooling; and that they would be both more engaged in formalised learning and better prepared for their future work roles if they could attend a higher-quality vocational curriculum. One recent review has proposed national vocational programs, incorporating a “rich mixture” of relevant general education, designed thorough “genuine working relationships with employers”, and making existing programs more coherent (West and Steedman, 2003). There are also preliminary plans from the Tomlinson review of 14-19 education to strengthen vocational education for 14-16 year olds, either in schools or in FE colleges; and the recent report from DfES, *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004), allows for specialist schools, more freedom for secondary schools to direct their own education, and 200 new academies, some of which might have a more vocational focus. But how a new approach to vocational education would be organized, and how it would overcome the historical antipathy to vocational education and the divide between employers and schools, remain

mysteries. The jobs that now exist for students leaving secondary education with GCSEs are generally low-paid, unskilled jobs without much future; as many commentators have noted, it would be necessary to create greater demand for secondary vocational students before this approach could work. Conversely, the best-paid and highest-status jobs now require university education, and a traditional secondary vocational programme that made access to higher education less likely would be avoided by students with ambitions for obtaining a university degree. And England secondary schools, with their weak history of vocational education and ignorance about the pedagogy of vocational education,<sup>15</sup> would — without a great deal of technical assistance and capacity-building, activities that DfEE does not know how to do — find it difficult to develop the kinds of engaging programs that proponents envision. Developing a strong form of vocational education would require developing new practices, slowly and over long periods of time, and that seems impossible given the chaotic and short-term policy-making in Britain.

The difficulty of revising secondary vocational education is linked to a longer discussion about the “parity of esteem” between academic and vocational education. In countries like England and the U.S., vocational education obviously suffers from lower status than does academic education, and establishing parity of esteem — equality of status in the eyes of *students and employers*, not formal parity in qualifications — is a necessary requirement to recreating high-quality vocational programmes. There have been several decades of discussion about establishing “parity of esteem”, from efforts to create vocational qualifications supposedly equal to academic qualifications to enormous amounts of talk about the value of technical education and the need for a variety of skills.<sup>16</sup> However, this long discussion has not succeeded in changing any of the practices that would be necessary to equalize “esteem”: Curriculum 2000 was intended to enable 16 – 19 year olds to mix academic and vocational courses, but few have elected to do this. Vocational GCSEs, which presumably combine academic and vocational coursework, have now been abolished. The legislation that has established, in a formal sense, parity between academic and occupational qualifications has not resulted in such qualifications being treated as equivalent by employers (Robinson, 1996) or by students seeking “esteem” or status. The various efforts to

enhance “parity of esteem” have done nothing to focus novel programs on occupations with higher earnings and stature; they have not succeeded in creating coherent curricula that might be more attractive to students, for example by incorporating more contextualized and applied academic learning along with vocational content, or more project-based (“hands-on”) learning; and they have not focused on how to serve students who want to keep the possibilities of going to university alive. In contrast to the U.S. developments, which have addressed all three of these elements and have begun to create alternatives to the conventional academic curriculum, British practices at the secondary level have not changed much, and the National Curriculum up to age 16 is still overwhelmingly academic. Furthermore, the policies of establishing grant-maintained schools — which in theory could develop specialized schools focused on new technology, or science and math, or performing arts, or a broad range of occupations like health occupations — have largely created highly conventional schools (Finkelstein and Grubb, 2000). So even programs intended to break out of the conventional mold of secondary academic education have failed to do so.

In a different sense, however, secondary schools in England are highly vocational. The desire to get into the best university possible has put enormous pressure on students — at least on those students with university ambitions — to complete high numbers of GCSEs with high grades, and then to earn three A-levels with the highest grades possible, often leading to some game-playing in figuring out which examination boards and which subjects are easiest. There has developed a “bare-knuckled struggle for access to elite schools, colleges, universities, and jobs”, particularly among the anxious middle class (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Many students therefore treat their secondary schooling including A-levels in utilitarian ways, as routes to university and high-paid occupations, not as opportunities for learning in any deeper sense. This is, of course, one of the costs of creating a vocationalized schooling system, in which the ultimate rewards are economic rather than intellectual. This approach can be countered only by persuading students that deeper forms of learning are crucial to their economic futures as well as to their intellectual, civic, and community lives. But, as I will argue in a subsequent section, nothing in the current concern

about skills, core skills, and key skills has made this kind of subtle argument, and so students seeking occupational advancement are justified — or at least rational — in gaming the system.

Secondary schools are vocational in yet another way, in serving as selection mechanisms. Vocationalized education systems typically mimic the inequalities of the labor market, with smaller numbers of students getting to the highest levels preparing for the highest-status occupations, while moderate numbers of student access the middle levels of education preparing for middle-level occupations. While there is no longer a formal tripartite division of schools in England, there is still an informal three-track system. Roughly, the upper third of those at age 16 go on to take A-levels and head for university; the middle third tend to take vocational qualifications for moderately skilled employment; and the bottom third tend not to continue in their schooling and are destined for unskilled work (Payne, 2003a,b). Such a three-track system<sup>17</sup> reflects a parallelism (albeit at a relatively gross level) between the education system and employment. Therefore secondary schools serve as powerful filters or selection mechanisms determining who can go on to A-levels, universities, management and the professions, versus those who end their schooling at age 16 with a high likelihood of unskilled work. The proportion “passing” GCSE’s — getting at least five GCSEs with a grade of C or better — was only 43.5% in 1998-99, and much lower in urban areas like the 32.7% rate in Manchester (Raffo, 2003). Recently the “overall ”pass” rate has increased, from a little more than 30% in 1989 to about 48% in 2000, with pass rates higher for girls than boys<sup>18</sup> — but the rate of completing secondary education among young people age 25 - 34 is still much lower than in other developed countries, and has been dropping over time relative to other countries (OECD, 2002, Table A1.2). This creates an automatic barrier to increasing levels of post-compulsory education — for example, of hitting the target of 50% of each cohort having some tertiary education. The early weeding out of students is consistent with a system of higher education that prepares a small elite, as Oxbridge did in the 19th century; but it isn’t at all consistent with the rhetoric of the Education Gospel and the notion that large numbers of individuals need higher education. The most recent effort to increase GCSE pass rates — the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a series of payments to low-income youth to continue their schooling past age 16 — assumes that the

opportunity costs of additional schooling are the most potent explanation of school-leaving, despite evidence that disaffection from learning and a sense among many student that A-levels are “not for them” may be more powerful explanations (Ball, 2000). Without considerably more attention to the reasons behind this low rate, it’s difficult to imagine that England can substantially budge from its low-skills equilibrium.

The result has been to create secondary schools that are vocational in student intentions — or more specifically pre-vocational, preparing for A levels and then universities that are more explicitly vocational — even though the curriculum is not predominantly vocational.<sup>19</sup> They also serve to filter the individuals destined for low-skilled work from those who have at least some chance at the jobs associated with the Knowledge Revolution. So, without any explicit attention to the content of the curriculum or to the links between secondary schools and workplaces, England has developed a system of secondary education that students recognize as being crucial to their future work lives.

## **FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES AND THE EXPANSION OF VOCATIONALISM**

Further education (FE) colleges are conventionally referred to as the Cinderella of British education — presumably meaning the over-looked beauty who comes to widespread attention because of her courtship by the prince. Certainly FE colleges are generally over-looked, both in the sense that they receive much less attention than do universities and in the sense that there has been relatively little research and writing about these institutions. But it’s unclear who the prince might be, and policies over the past decade have not done much to raise these institutions from relative obscurity.

FE colleges developed from adult education and training, part-time and voluntary, provided in fragmented and ad hoc ways. These providers, including many mechanics' institutes, aggregated into technical colleges providing day-release training for apprentices and employed individuals. In the late 1960s these were in turn transformed into FE colleges with a broader array of academic, vocational, and pre-vocational offerings. However, this history is not one of steady development; some early colleges became universities, some had origins in specialized institutions, and some emerged out of schools (Pratt, 1999), resulting in a sector that is enormously varied and hard to understand as a "system".

If FE colleges have their own beauty, or special value in the English system, it must be because of their multiple purposes and flexibility. Like community colleges in the U.S. and Canada, FE colleges now carry out an enormous range of activities: post-compulsory vocational education, in an enormous variety of fields; second-chance opportunities for students to re-take A-level exams; higher education courses in cooperation with local universities; occupational courses for 14 – 16 year olds, particularly "new students" who dislike conventional schools and prefer the more adult environment of FE colleges; remedial or basic skills instruction; adult education, including a wide variety of avocational offerings; short-term training efforts for employers; and a variety of other partnerships with local communities. Their multiple purposes also serve the goals of equity and social inclusion, since individuals can find their way back into the mainstream of the educational system through them. While many students know precisely what they want to learn, many others are "undecided" students; as one student mentioned, "A lot of people are in education because it's sort of the done thing and they aren't able to get a job. So . . . time passes them by because they're not really sure what they want to do" (Ainley and Bailey, 1999). FE colleges have some resources for "talking them through" the process of decision-making, but — as in the U.S. context — it's unclear that these resources are adequate. Because of these multiple purposes, there is enormous variation from college to college, and their students are more heterogeneous than those in other institutions.<sup>20</sup>

FE colleges have expanded enormously since the early 1970s (Melville and MacLeod, 2000), as has higher education. In 2001-02, there were about 1.2 million British undergraduates enrolled in HE, and about 1.7 million in FE so that FE colleges — rather than the universities, the (greedy?) stepsisters of the Cinderella story — are responsible for the majority of post-compulsory enrollments (Huddleston and Unwin, 2002).<sup>21</sup> Many commentators think that FE colleges will also provide the bulk of the tertiary education necessary to meet the 50% target. While FE colleges serve many purposes, the core of these institutions has become occupational education, largely directed at the middle levels of the labor market. Of all qualifications that FE colleges grant, about 60% are in occupational areas. These cover an enormous range of occupations, from jobs like hairdressing and crafts that in other countries are the focus of secondary vocational education, to occupations associated more closely with the Knowledge Revolution, like medical occupations and IT. The much smaller of students who are re-taking A levels and the large numbers of re-entry students are also there for broadly occupational purposes, using the colleges as second-chance mechanisms. Furthermore, many FE students have highly utilitarian and credentialist views of their schooling: there's a great deal of talk about the practical side of education over theory, of "hands-on" approaches rather than book learning, and little understanding of key skills and the roles that more general education might play at work (Unwin and Wellington, 2000; Ainley and Bailey, 1999). Some of this may reflect the anti-schooling bias of the apprenticeship tradition, or a lack of understanding of what competencies are needed on the job — a misunderstanding that the behaviorist approach to qualifications in England can only reinforce. But such attitudes get in the way of learning, both because such students avoid any learning that smacks of being "academic" or "not relevant" and because instructors are often unaware of the attitudes their students have.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, then, the constant insistence on "skills" for occupations may have undermined the effort to move away from a low-skill equilibrium and to incorporate a broader variety of conceptual abilities.

The Cinderella image of FE colleges implies neglect, and it's unclear what prince could rescue FE colleges from their neglected status. For the past decade levels of funding have failed to keep pace with enrollments, so that the resources per student have fallen consistently over the last

decade and are probably lower than they are in other developed countries.<sup>23</sup> Currently these institutions are funded on a year-by-year basis; with resources varying from year to year, long-run planning has become nearly impossible — “almost Alice in Wonderland”, as one participant described it. For the 2004-05 academic year, funding levels were still unclear as of late spring 2004, and yet local skills councils were urged to provide adults with Level 2 and (in some cases) Level 3 education. The combination of failing to invest in the capacity of FE colleges, while increasing the expectations of how many students will be served, has undermined the ability of FE colleges to respond to the demands on them. The process of “naming and shaming” colleges, widely used by the LSC, has caused widespread demoralization, and led to many instructors and experienced managers leaving. A series of college failures have imposed their own costs, since the process of students turning to other institutions or the recreation of a college involves time and money costs and reduces education opportunities in the meantime. There’s a widespread perception in the FE sector of a “crisis”, though whether it is a crisis of staff turnover, of overall funding, of competition from other institutions like sixth-form colleges and HE, of a lack of a national strategy since the inception of FE, or of over-regulation by the FEFC and now LSC is not clear (Goddard-Pate and Whitehead, 2000, 2001; Green and Lucas, 1999).

The replacement of the Further Education Funding Council by the Learning and Skills Council has meant that there is no government entity responsible for the well-being of FE colleges. The LSC insists that it funds “skills, not institutions”, and it provides funding on a competitive basis for the entire learning and skills sector, which includes private trade schools and specialized institutions as well as FE colleges. But funding for specific programmes and courses is a poor way to strengthen *institutions*, which depend for their quality on stability, continuity of offerings and of faculty, the development of institutional cultures, the possibilities for continuous development and improvement (Bellah et al., 1991, Ch. 1). It’s a particularly inappropriate way to support multi-purpose colleges, which could be effective in providing bridges between different activities, allowing students to enter with different needs and levels of preparation and then find their way to particular programmes and qualifications. Funding discrete programmes and qualifications does not help an institution be more than a smorgasbord of unrelated offerings;

and it has led to viewing potential FE students as “walking bags of funding units” — individuals valued for the funds they generate — rather than people with more holistic needs. This approach contrasts strongly with the funding of universities, where no one could possibly pretend that Oxbridge is simply a grab-bag of disconnected courses.

Finally, government policy has taken contradictory approaches to the independence of colleges. On the one hand, colleges have been encouraged since they were incorporated as independent institutions in 1993 to be entrepreneurial, to uncover local “markets” and respond to them. On the other hand, colleges are over-regulated in many ways. They are funded only for providing qualifications that are approved by government, including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the new occupationally-oriented Foundation Degrees.<sup>24</sup> But the creation of qualifications in England has been a chaotic process, with no coherent conception of what new qualifications might achieve (as I argue in a subsequent section). The conception of qualifications is a national one, disregarding local needs that FE colleges serve. Many employers are unwilling to accept NVQs, since they are often considered too complex to administer, or low-level; for students, NVQs at levels 1 and 2 are associated with *lower* earnings rather than the higher earnings that might be expected (Dearden et al., 2000; McIntosh, 2004; Wolf, 2003, Figures 2.1, 2.2). The new Foundation Degrees, modeled on Associate degrees granted by U.S. community colleges, were introduced with bright rhetoric from the Education Gospel (“our economy and society are experiencing unparalleled change. New and developing technologies. . . The explosion in information. . . The government must ensure that individuals are able to respond to these new challenges and opportunities”), but without any evidence that they might fill a need; while the numbers of foundation degrees have risen sharply (though from a low base), it is still unclear what role they will play in labour markets — and whether they will become qualifications in their own right, or simply a waystation towards a ‘proper’ three-year degree. The government has consistently forced colleges to adopt its qualifications, therefore, but if these don’t fit community needs or employer demands then colleges are in the impossible position of being entrepreneurial without the ability to offer programmes responding to local demand (Green and Lucas, 1999).

The efforts to make FE colleges operate in a competitive and market-like process is a textbook illustration of the conclusion that markets can be created well or badly. When they are created without regard for the non-market nature of a great deal of schooling, the result is competition on inappropriate dimensions, the rise of entrepreneurship over instructional concerns, an erosion of quality in favor of increasing enrollments, and more utilitarian ways of treating students, instructors, and learning itself.<sup>25</sup> The approach of the LSC has therefore constrained the development of FE colleges in several different ways. These institutions have the potential to respond to the demands for more occupationally-oriented education — including lifelong learning for adult students and training for specific employers, as well as the pre-employment education that is the mainstay of current colleges. The strand of the Education Gospel that stresses flexibility of an education system is particularly well-served if there can be entrepreneurial institutions that respond in different ways to local labour market and community needs. But this requires stability in funding, sensitivity to local conditions, and some attention to institutional development — none of which are part of current policy.

## **VOCATIONALIZING ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES**

In many countries and times, universities serve a variety of intellectual and civilising roles. As the 1997 Dearing report expressed this, universities should “play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society” — while still “serving the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy”. But both the rhetoric and the practices of higher education have become increasingly vocational in the past three decades; the current Secretary of State has suggested that the non-economic benefits are over-rated, and stated directly that “universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of social change” — an explicitly utilitarian conception of the university (Mayhew, Deer, and Dua, 2004).

Oddly enough, nineteenth century Oxbridge was highly vocational in several ways. Attendance was virtually a requirement for the highest-status jobs in the civil service, the colonial service, and the upper echelons of the Church, and a high proportion of graduates found such jobs. Such elite positions required mental discipline and moral character, and the traditional curriculum — especially “Greats”, the study of classical language, literature, and history — was designed to foster both qualities in its students; what appears now to be a liberal education therefore had important vocational purposes. The creation of PPE (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, or modern “Greats”) early in the twentieth century was arguably a curricular shift even more appropriate for members of the civil service. And Oxbridge was vocational in another sense: if political and religious leaders should come from among the most able members of society, then the selection mechanisms necessary to get into Oxbridge presumably chose the best and the brightest from the vast mass of possible students. Ability might have been defined in ways poorly measured by A-level exams or lists of accomplishments, but there was little question that Oxbridge and the other ancient universities selected an elite to become the next generation of leaders. However, the curriculum did not seem to be particularly vocational, and the emphasis on traditional liberal education was part of the general hostility towards technical education, science, and professional education including business education.

Other developments have contributed to the occupational roles of universities. One was the opening of civic universities in the mid-nineteenth century, with many students from industrial and business rather than upper-class backgrounds, and with their curricula closely related to both national and local economic needs (Sanderson, 1999, Ch. 3); these are now many of the “old” universities. In addition, the polytechnics, arising out of Victorian technical colleges, were also overtly vocational institutions; when these were declared full universities in 1992, their vocational (or professional) orientations persisted. Only the “new universities” created in the early 1960s were largely academic in character and (with some exceptions) oriented around the traditional liberal arts; but they too have become increasingly vocational (or professional). Particularly if we count Oxbridge as essentially vocational, the majority of English universities

and its highest-status institutions were explicitly vocational (or professional) in their original purposes.

The most important transformation of English higher education has been its expansion — indeed, this is the clearest vocational response of any part of education and training. One period of sharp increase in enrolment rates, from 5% in 1960-1 to 14% in 1972-73, was accomplished by an increase in the numbers of universities, including polytechnics, “new” universities and technological universities developed from Colleges of Advanced Technology, and therefore more explicitly vocational. The substantial increase in enrolment rates between 1986 and 1997 — doubling from 17% to 34% — came largely from declaring polytechnics full universities, and from the expansion of the former polytechnics (Mayhew, Deer, and Dua, 2004). Thus — as has been true in the U.S. as well — the expansion of higher education and its vocational (or professional) emphasis have gone hand in hand.

In many countries the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by a shift from liberal education to more explicitly occupational curricula. The vocational drift of English universities is best seen by examining the fields of their graduates. In 2000-01, 67.6% of all degrees were in occupational areas rather than academic subjects, an increase from 55.4% in 1980.<sup>26</sup> These included many fields that have been the subject of mordant jokes: leisure studies, suburban studies, even (within the category of creative arts and design) a few degrees in beauty and hairdressing. (In contrast, the proportions were 47.9% at Cambridge and 16.5% at Oxford, and no doubt further analysis would reveal the proportion of occupational degrees allied roughly with status rankings.) So the majority of English universities are vocational (or professional) in at least two senses of the term: students intend to use them as a means of entry into an occupation; and the curriculum is differentiated according to professional fields. Whether two other criteria apply — that is, whether high proportions of those earnings degrees in a specific field find related employment, and whether professional degrees are required for many areas — is unclear from the data available. But there is little question that higher education is now substantially vocational, and any expansion that takes place in the future is likely to take place in

the more highly-vocationalized institutions — the former polytechnics, as well as FE colleges offering higher education courses — rather than the more academic components.

England has in effect followed the U.S. in the ways that post-compulsory education is structured. In both countries, a first tier of universities — the Russell Group and the “old” universities in England, the elite research universities and some private liberal arts colleges in the U.S. — are highly selective; they have relatively high completion rates; they provide access to post-graduate education; and — because some students take professional education after their first degrees — they are more likely to focus on conventional academic subjects. The earnings of their graduates are also higher than graduates from the former polytechnics. The second tier is composed of “modern” universities, the former polytechnics;<sup>27</sup> they are much less selective; their students are more likely to be “new students” — working-class and minority, more often encumbered by family and employment responsibilities, creating the “work-family-schooling dilemma” (the problem of being stretched to accommodate responsibilities to family, work, and schooling simultaneously).<sup>28</sup> Their students are sometimes referred to in terms (“the unwashed”, the “dark forces of the masses”) indicating that they are not really “university material” (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003). These institutions have lower completion rates — partly because of the economic status of their students, as well as lack of familiarity with higher education and feelings of cultural isolation — and are more obviously professional in their programs and degrees (Furlong and Forsythia, 2003). Their graduates also have lower earnings, even after controlling for variation among students. Since the difference between first- and second-tier universities in England is now based on reputation rather than government policy,<sup>29</sup> there is considerable debate about the status ranking of various universities. But with the widespread perception that these reputational differences matter a great deal in providing access to employment, the competition to get into the best university possible has become increasingly intense.

Finally, the third tier of tertiary education is comprised of unselective FE colleges and U.S. community colleges, preparing individuals for lower and middle-level jobs that, while sometimes

well-paid and stable, are much less likely to be professional. The post-compulsory systems of both countries have therefore come to mirror the major gradations in the labor market.

Despite the enormous expansion of university-going in the last three decades of the twentieth century and the world stature of the elite universities, there are some serious problems in British higher education. In particular, the expansion of enrollments and the coming of mass higher education was not accompanied by similar increases in funding. Costs per student in real terms are about half of what they were in 1980-81; expansion has taken place largely in the lower-quality and vocationalized second tier; and the continuing practice of taking a single subject is unlikely to foster a broader education. Such trends are consistent with a utilitarian and vocationalist conception of the university, but they are not likely to foster a “democratic, civilised, inclusive society”.<sup>30</sup>

## **THE BREADTH OF SCHOOLING AND THE DEBATE OVER KEY SKILLS**

Wherever the occupational purposes of education emerge, there usually follows a debate about the breadth of schooling versus its specificity. This is often a debate about whether an individual should be prepared for a range of related occupations, including those which he or she might move to after a period of experience, or only for a narrowly-defined occupation, particularly entry-level work. A broader version of vocationalism is usually associated with upward mobility and the mastery of certain academic or conceptual content, while a narrow version is often associated with immediate employment and job-specific skills. A common example has been traditional secondary vocational education, which was always accused of providing too narrow and job-specific skills, both in England and the U.S.

In the English tradition, the nineteenth-century debates created a distinction between *education* — the kind of broad Oxbridge education for high-level occupations, with a curriculum divorced

from overtly occupational concerns — and *training*, or preparation divorced from academic education for lower-levels jobs. Apprenticeship, the most common form of preparation for craft work, originally lacked any general or academic education, and was therefore a form of *training*. A concept of vocational education incorporating both general education and vocational skills was missing; the practices on the continent, where apprentices and vocational students still took a good deal of general education, were also uncommon. These patterns were the precursor to the current problem of the enormous divide between academic and occupational education (Green, 1997). *Training* was also associated with the short-term vocational programmes in the New Vocationalism following the Ruskin speech, short-term programs like the Youth Training Schemes of the 1980s, the training that firms provide for their employees, and preparation in proprietary trade schools. The possibility of creating an intermediate form of schooling combining both academic and occupational content has been largely ignored, making “parity of esteem” all the more difficult

However, the rhetoric of the Education Gospel revived questions about the breadth of training in new forms. The rhetoric about “new skills for the 21st century” took the form in England of a search for the “core skills” required in new workplaces, with a great deal of discussion of competencies like the “core skills” of communications, problem-solving, application of number, information technology, working with others, and improving one’s own performance. This debate can be interpreted as an attempt to revive general education for workers, and in theory this debate might have resulted in attempts to broaden existing forms of training, including vocational education, by incorporating broader competencies associated with a variety of work. Another idea underlying the notion of key skills is that “academic” abilities might vary substantially depending on the context of the work — that mathematics might take different forms in carpentry and construction than it does in metalwork and milling than for electronics technicians, and that standard school-based form of mathematics and other subjects — “school skills” — might not be the same as the competencies required on the job — “work skills”.

In practice, a set of broader competencies was degraded into simpler skills. The program of liberal studies for City and Guilds qualifications became the more practical Communications Studies; the social and life skills for the Youth Opportunity Program became the Certificate of Pre-vocational Education and the Diploma of Vocational Education; and the wide-ranging discussion of core skills evolved into a focus on “key skills” including communications, problem-solving, information technology, application of number, and the ability to improve one’s own learning and performance. Then the need to develop simple assessments of these skills — rather than assessments of their use in context, which would have demanded expensive methods — led to the development of simple multiple-choice tests. The assessments for Application of Number look like conventional, de-contextualized math tests, and those for Communications Skills resemble conventional comprehension tests with short reading passages followed by questions and answers. IT skills are similarly assessed, at the lower levels, by answering questions about the simple facts of computers.<sup>31</sup> Two other key skills — problem-solving and improving one’s own learning — are not formally tested though they are supposed to be included in all occupational programs and assessed by instructors. Consistently, therefore, complex competencies have been degraded into much simpler skills, and key skills have become an impoverished form of general education (Green, 1997). At the end of the day, a long debate about broader and more sophisticated competencies has created a pair of math and reading tests, as academic and de-contextualized as anything in the curriculum, and certainly unworthy of the high-flown rhetoric about the “workforce of the 21st century”. The earlier target of “key skills for all” has in practice degenerated into relatively small number of qualifications, “ghettoized as a qualification for further education colleges and lower achieving students” (Hodgson and Spours, 2003; Hayward and Fernandez, 2004).

The tendency to convert broader conceptions of skills into narrower ones has also taken place in the enactment of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The central idea behind the NVQs is that what ought to count in employment is whether an individual masters the skills required on the job, and that these could be assessed by examining performance rather than, as in conventional school settings, taking paper and pencil tests (Jessup, 1991). What followed was the

development of hundreds of NVQs, at skill levels ranging from 1 to 5, in about 9,000 occupations. However, as has happened in many other countries including Canada and especially Australia, the development of NVQs took an approach widely known as task analysis, or competency-based (CB) assessment, or the behaviorist approach (Hyland, 1993, 1994a and b; Senker, 1996; Jessup, 1991; Burke, 1995; Levy, 1992; Levy, Mathews, Oates & Edmond, 1989). This starts with task analyses, in which a job is broken into the specific tasks necessary for successful performance; these tasks then become the competencies taught in instruction.<sup>32</sup> CB instruction is sometimes an advance in emphasizing the competencies used in work, rather than abstract theory; but it often leads to narrowly skills-based instruction because the competencies identified tend to be long lists of specific sub-skills and specific behaviors, neglecting deeper forms of understanding including the mental models that distinguish experts from novices. Modularization contributes to this problem, since workers taught in a modularized system are likely to have a random combination of fragmented skills, rather than a coherent knowledge of the job (Heidegger and Rauner, 1996). Competency-based instruction may also reinforce a static view of work, because it starts with a task analysis of a specific job at a particular moment. But in a world where multi-skilling is increasingly common, old job categories are becoming obsolete, and competencies change rapidly — as least as alleged by disciples of the Education Gospel — the focus on specific jobs reinforces the age-old problem of keeping up to date.

In practice, the development of NVQs has, if anything, undermined the acquisition of skills in Britain. The numbers of NVQs granted has increased, simply because FE colleges and other providers in the Learning and Skills Sector have been required to adopt them. But NVQ levels 1 and 2 are usually below the levels required by workers, so individuals have been able to qualify without additional training; many employers have resisted using NVQs because they fail to address sectoral needs and because workplace assessment has proved expensive and bureaucratic; the economic benefits of NVQs 1 and 2 have been negative. Many observers feel that the NVQs encourage skills-oriented teaching (Hyland, 1994a, Ch. 4). For engineering technicians, for example, NVQs reflect old forms of Taylorist production, with clearly-delineated occupations and narrowly-defined skills, but they are ill-suited to flexible production with

multiple skills and fluid boundaries; therefore many employers prefer using older qualifications rather than the overly functionalist NVQs (Senker, 1996). NVQs have been adopted much more in lower-level clerical, secretarial, sales, and personal services — hardly sectors associated with the Knowledge Revolution — and much less in professional, technical, and craft occupations (Robinson, 1996), suggesting again that these credentials have been less appropriate to employers in high-performance settings.

The development of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) has taken a different path, but it too has failed to increase broad occupationally-oriented skills. While these were intended to be occupationally-oriented programmes, providing both general and occupational education and a distinctively different route from GCSEs into either employment or higher education, they quickly moved closer to conventional academic curricula, losing direct business involvement and strengthening external testing (rather than assessment through portfolios and competence). They found a clear niche, though not as a mechanisms bridging the “parity of esteem” between academic and vocational education, as their designers had hoped; instead they became an alternative route into higher education for students whose GSCE grades were not high enough to enter conventional A-level programmes (Wolf, 2002, Ch. 3). And, as always, they were quickly replaced by Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education and then phased out (Huddleston and Oh, 2004). And so the difficult task of bridging the academic-vocational divide — a task that would under any circumstances require sustained efforts over a long period of time and a different culture of education — failed once again.

The failures to encourage the development of broader competencies, consistent with the rhetoric of the Education Gospel, can be traced to several features of English policy. The development of centrally-determined credentials that then guide curricula is inconsistent with the notion that the competencies required at work are both local, varying from firm to firm, and contextual, dependent on the specifics of a particular workplace, its technology, work rules, and authority relations. The idea of developing competency-based qualifications (rather than seat-time requirements) seems attractive, but these efforts have consistently under-estimated the difficulty

of assessment. The use of task analysis as the foundation of identifying skills has misunderstood the nature of modern occupations, as has the use of discrete and de-contextualized key skills exams and NVQs. And English policy-making has been almost completely divorced from the pedagogical issues involved in teaching such complex competencies as communications and problem-solving because of the long inattention in England to pedagogical issues of many kinds (Simon, 1981), particularly in vocational education itself (Achtenhagen and Grubb, 2001; Young 2004). The result has been that policy and assessments have consistently encouraged teaching methods that replicate narrow skills approaches. A broader construction of competency is certainly possible, particularly for jobs associated with the Knowledge Revolution, but not within the current assumptions underlying English policy.

## **CONNECTING SCHOOLING AND EMPLOYMENT**

One feature of vocationalism is the shift of work preparation into formal schooling, with its removal (partial or total) from employment itself. But then the danger arises that the competencies taught in schools will become divorced from those needed on the job — by being overly “academic”, or out-of-date, or simply (as in the problems with competency-based instruction) remaining ignorant of the real demands of the job. Therefore education systems and employers have tried to develop mechanisms to link schooling and employment, in the interests of closing this potential gap. In general, three mechanisms have dominated: efforts to make students themselves knowledgeable about the labor market, so that they could better understand the “skills employers want” and the effective forms of work preparation; efforts to create partnerships of employers and educational institutions, so that direct information about work requirements might influence formal schooling; and credentials or qualifications. Unfortunately, all three mechanisms are currently functioning poorly in England so that — with a few exceptions — there are no strong ways of connecting schooling and employment.

**Creating Sophisticated Consumers:** In a world without occupational choices, where sons succeed their fathers and daughters become mothers and homemakers, there are few occupational decisions for young people to make. But as occupational possibilities expand, and as occupational preparation moves into schools and colleges, occupational choices began to take place within educational institutions. Then, unless occupational choices are to be random, or coerced by parents, or (as in authoritarian countries) coerced by labor market needs, there needs to be some way to develop ways to inform young people about their occupational choices and the schooling routes into employment. Ideally, this would enable them to make the right decisions about how to acquire the competencies necessary for their desired employment, linking schooling and employment through rational consumer decisions.

There are several ways that schools and universities can prepare their students for such decisions — by giving them “practice” in making decisions, by introducing them to the world of work through work experience programs or internships, or through programs of career information and guidance (CIG). In the recent past, England developed what has been widely considered an excellent system of CIG in the Careers Service.<sup>33</sup> Counselors in free-standing Careers Centers provided a range of services from simple information to more intensive counseling, to a variety of internships to enable young people to learn more about employment in direct ways. They were specialists in career-oriented information and guidance, rather than being dominated by academic agendas as is true in most school-based counseling. Because of their free-standing status they were not beholden to one type of education or another, in contrast to the counselors in particular institutions with their built-in incentives to tout their own programs. And because they were open to all individuals, those who had left the schooling system — those who hadn’t passed GCSEs, for example, or who had failed to complete FE college or university — were still eligible for their services, in contrast to the situation in many countries where individuals out of school are left with no source of CIG at all.

However, the Blair government subsumed the Careers Services within Connexions, a more comprehensive program that focuses on the students at greatest risk of social exclusion (the so-

called NEET group, Not in Education, Employment, or Training). While a new focus on this group may be desirable, it has also undermined the most effective aspects of the Careers Service. The extent of careers information and guidance to non-NEET students has been seriously eroded; the specific focus on careers advice has been weakened, in favor of personal counseling and social services; and the former status of the Careers Service independent of schools is being ended, and will likely result in a school-based career guidance system that in practice is limited to keeping students in school (Watts 2001, 2003). What England will probably end up with is something close to what the U.S. now has: a weak system of guidance and counseling, focused on academic and personal counseling rather than connections to employment, and linked closely to particular schools and colleges. The result in England (as in the U.S.) is that the large mass of students in secondary schools have almost no access to CIG, at precisely the point when they are making the educational decisions — which GCSEs to take, whether to continue in their schooling, what programs to consider — that are effectively occupational decisions. Students in FE colleges and universities also lack the external source of advice that they earlier could access, and England might anticipate greater numbers of “undecided” students in FE colleges and second-tier universities in the coming years. The transformation — effectively the demolition — of the Careers Service has therefore weakened what has been a relatively strong connection between schooling and employment.

**Partnerships between education and business:** Another way to connect educational preparation with workplaces is to create direct relationships between the two in partnerships of various kinds. Examples include school-business partnerships, advisory committees, co-operative education where schools and employers jointly prepare workers, and customized training in which colleges provide training for specific firms. Implicitly, such connections acknowledge that an educational system aspiring to prepare people for occupations should be more directly linked to workplaces. Indeed, the rhetoric of the Education Gospel in England is full of references to such partnership; as the Secretary of State noted in 2003, “a major priority is the building of new relationships with employers. . . Change in this area is crucially important to

our future economic success” — although there had been almost three decades of fruitless efforts to establish such relationships (Gleeson and Keep, 2004).

While it is often hard to know what partnerships are supposed to accomplish, in theory they can help reconcile the needs of employers with the preparation provided by educational institutions. (Unfortunately, this runs the contrary danger of employers specifying too narrowly the content of education programs and undermining the elements that have distinguished *education* from *training*.) Indeed, such partnerships do exist: many FE colleges have established partnerships with local businesses (particularly to provide training to employees); some universities have created multiple connections with local businesses; and the Sector Skills Councils in fields like engineering and construction appear to be quite active in creating connections.

However, with these exceptions the partnerships in England appear to be relatively weak. A serious problem is that the central government has developed a practice of first creating employer associations for particular purposes,<sup>34</sup> and then demolishing them and replacing them with different groups: Industrial Training Boards superceded by Non-Statutory Training Organizations (NSTOs) followed by Industry Training Organizations (ITOs), leading to National Training Organizations (NTOs) and then Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), all within a twenty-year period. In the realm of job training, Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), which had considerable employer participation, were abolished in favor of Learning and Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies, where support from employers is particularly fragile (Ramsden, Bennett, and Fuller, 2002). Quite apart from the arrogance of the government dictating to employer associations what they can or cannot do, the process of abolishing and re-creating these associations every few years means that establishing connections to schools, colleges, and universities has been constantly interrupted. Those sectors with a longer history of employer associations have been able to use the government sponsorship of sectoral councils to strengthen their own efforts, as in engineering. But overall the instability of national policy has been detrimental to the formation of partnerships, and most NTOs were incapable of having much influence on their member’s decisions (Keep and Mayhew, 2001, 18).

In the U.S., and certainly in the German-speaking countries, the strongest partnerships have formed around the provision of work-based learning, in co-operative education in the U.S. and the dual system in German-speaking areas. For example, in the Cincinnati area, settled by Germans, co-operative education has become well-established (Villeneuve and Grubb, 1996). But while this existence proof suggests that strong partnerships can emerge, even in countries without the strong government regulation of Germany and Austria, there have been no comparable efforts in England despite the outpouring of support for work-based learning. The Modern Apprenticeships are debased forms of short-term job training; the work experience activities in secondary schools are short and disconnected from the schooling component.

The result, of both recent policies and the historical lack of employer involvement with education, is that two decades of efforts to develop stronger bridges between schooling and employment have failed. Employers have been reluctant to provide work experience; relatively few of them manage Modern Apprenticeships, which are dominated by private training providers; and the financial contribution of employers to education and training has been negligible despite suggestions that all beneficiaries — employers, students, and the state — ought to contribute (Gleeson and Keep, 2004). The constant turnover in employer associations works against creating any long-run relationships. The development of strong partnerships between education and business is not impossible, then, but it requires practices that are now routinely undermined by English policy.

**Credentials and Qualifications:** A third way to link educational institutions and employers is to create credentials or qualifications. When an educational credential works as intended, it creates uniform expectations among all participants. Employers can specify the competencies they need; education and training programs can use credential requirements to shape their curriculum and motivate students with the promise of employment; and students know what competencies they must master to become marketable. This is the positive sense of credentials: they are market-making devices that coordinate the activities of employers, of education providers, and of

students, giving consistent incentives to all participants. However, credentials cannot be set by the invisible hand of the market. They require considerable institutional effort to create and to enforce, particularly three distinct elements: (1) competencies or standards must be established; (2) a method of assessing competencies must be created; and (3) a mechanism for policing the process must be developed. Each of these elements is complex and potentially controversial, and can be implemented in many different ways ranging from informal to formal, from laissez-faire to highly bureaucratized. But if any of these three are inconsistent with the others, then the value of a credential becomes uncertain, and “credentialism” takes on the negative connotation of educational requirements not rationally related to employment requirements (Collins, 1979).

England has become qualifications-mad. At every turn the government has created new qualifications: NVQs and GNVQs by the hundreds, Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education, now Foundation Degrees mimicking the two-year community college degree in the U.S. These have joined pre-existing qualifications so that there are now 2,015 vocational qualifications for those under 18, another 675 that aim to incorporate some general education as well as vocational skills, given by 45 different awarding bodies (West and Steedman, 2003). Just as some of the new degrees have been widely derided, the various vocational certificates include some that seem plainly silly, like a certificate in cake decorating or in ear piercing. The hope that a new set of qualifications could clear up the “qualifications jungle” — the thicket of qualifications too dense for students or employers to penetrate — has been dashed by adding to the impenetrability of the jungle.

More seriously, very few individuals, and certainly no government agencies charged with developing qualifications like the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA), appear to have any theory of action or conception of why qualifications should have an intended effect.<sup>35</sup> The government has apparently hoped that developing new competency-based qualifications would stimulate employers to require them in hiring, replacing lower levels of demand for skill with higher levels and thereby enhancing the “skills for the 21st century”; but the government has systematically kept employers out of the process of developing qualifications, has created

qualifications that employers have chosen not to use, and has created qualifications like the key skills exams that focus on low-level, de-contextualized, and academic competencies. Employers have not shared the government's obsession with qualifications; in one survey three-quarters of employers in the London areas did not specify any minimum academic or vocational qualifications for their new hires (Gleeson and Keep, 2004), so that the explosion of qualifications has not been matched with demand from employers.

Another apparent hope has been that the replacement of apprenticeships based on the amount of time served by competence-based testing would enhance the levels of skills, but then in practice many of its assessments have stressed low-level skills. The conception of skills embedded in most qualifications is essentially behaviorist, a conception arguably appropriate for routinized production-line work but certainly not for the more complex “jobs of the 21st century”. Even if government pronouncements about “skills for all” make sense, operationally the development of qualifications has failed to link employers and educational institutions, and may have even contributed to declines in skills.

Overall, each of the three mechanisms linking educational institutions and employers has been weak, and many of them have been recently weakened by government policy. The result has been an *education system* that is increasingly regulated — by a National Curriculum in elementary-secondary education and its related tests and inspections, by the imposition of qualifications in the learning and skills sector including FE colleges with both fiscal and inspections-related controls, and now by the QAA to regulate universities — and therefore coherent, at least in the sense of following regular and highly institutionalized (if not high-quality) practices. But — as in the U.S. — there is not yet a coherent *education and employment system*, in which the transition into employment can be smoothed by such mechanisms as internships or partnerships between educational providers and employers. Until it becomes possible to develop such a system, inconsistencies between formal schooling and employment are likely to continue.

## EQUITY THROUGH SCHOOLING IN AN INEGALITARIAN COUNTRY

One strand of the Education Gospel in England has stressed the value of education in promoting equity. Callaghan's Ruskin College speech stressed the value of Ruskin College as a "second chance adult residential college", and cited Tawney as saying "What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children."<sup>36</sup> The title of *Skills for All* had an egalitarian ring, and promised everyone "equitable opportunities to gain the skills they need for continuing employment". Under Tony Blair, one strand of New Labour has emphasized equality of educational opportunity as the route to social inclusion, de-emphasizing the provisions of the welfare state — the nanny state, as Thatcher derided it — as Old Labour did.

But these are checkered approaches to equity. Social inclusion, in theory a powerful ideal stressing the rights of all citizens to participate actively in economic, political, community and cultural life, says nothing about the extent of inequality that will be tolerated as long as some level of participation is assured. The emphasis on equality of educational opportunity in Blair's Third Way has come in place of the greater equality of incomes through tax and transfer policies, union strength in wage bargains, a generous welfare state, and public enterprises that was the policy of Old Labour. Inequality of income in Great Britain has been markedly less equal over the period of 1969 – 1999, in part because of the polarization of jobs, and in part because of the staunch anti-union efforts, privatization, and welfare changes of the Thatcher-Major administrations.<sup>37</sup> So while a particular form of equity through education may be newly important — equality of educational opportunity, a particularly slippery concept — equality in its old form seems to have become less important.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, educational policies have had contradictory effects on equity in education. On the one hand, under Blair there have been substantial investments in early childhood programs, to provide children from lower-class backgrounds with the preparation that

would enable them to start schooling more nearly equal to their middle-class peers. The effort through accountability mechanisms to improve the performance of students on Key Stage 4 exams, at age 11, led to sharp increases in passing rates, though leveling off since 2000 — and there is in any event a question whether the rise was due to the non-comparability of tests over time, teaching to the tests, or other artifacts (Olson, 2004). There have also been a series of small initiatives to increase the completion rate of GCSEs, which has risen to nearly 50 percent. The most recent in this series, the Educational Maintenance Allowances providing up to £40 per week to low income students if they stay in school after GCSEs, is too recent to measure its effect, though it assumes that the opportunity cost of attending schooling past 16 — rather than antipathy toward schooling, or a lack of belief that additional schooling provides any advantages — is the reason for low rates of continuing. More generally, the government seems to assume that the problem of 14 – 16 years olds and low GCSE completion can be attributed either to the curriculum or to the assessment system;<sup>39</sup> but this ignores the labour market with its polarization of jobs and economic returns, the poor quality of many schools at the local level, and the anti-intellectualism and dislike of “swots” among many working-class students. The most important policies over the past twenty years aimed at working-class youth have been a series of short-term training programs — the Youth Training Schemes, Youth Opportunities Programmes, culminating in Modern Apprenticeships — that, like most such efforts in developed countries, have not led to sustained benefits, and have not in any event been institutionalized (Ryan, 2001; Grubb and Ryan, 1997). As Ryan has noted, “Labour market programmes come and go. Institutions develop, adapt, and for the most part endure.”

Over the same period a number of inegalitarian policies have also emerged, particularly under Thatcher and Major. Grant-maintained schools were instituted, which in practice allowed middle-class students to be segregated away from lower-class, minority, disruptive, and special-needs students. The practice of “naming and shaming” has identified a series of working-class schools as failing, not only causing demoralization in such schools but also leading to reconstitution, a practice that invariably hampers the improvement of such schools.<sup>40</sup> Overall, there hasn’t been a sustained or particularly effective commitment to equity, and evidently this

series of efforts has not worked well: the rate of “passing” GCSEs is still only about 50%. This virtually precludes half of all students from higher education, where the real economic rewards of schooling are to be found and where the vaunted jobs of the Knowledge Revolution are.

The most sustained response to the claims of the Education Gospel has been the expansion of tertiary education. Arguably such efforts have contributed to equity by expanding the access of “new students” — working-class students, those whose parents did not attend university, minority or immigrant student — into tertiary education. Indeed, between 1940 and 2000 the proportion of students from the bottom three social classes attending university increased from 1.5% to 18.2%. But the proportion from the top three social classes increased from 8.4% to 47.8%, so the absolute difference in attendance rates (though not the relative difference) increased over this period; in this sense the steady expansion of higher education has benefited higher classes substantially more than lower classes (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003, Table 1). In practice most of these “new” students have entered FE colleges and second-tier universities, aiming at lower levels of the labour market than the first-tier universities. Their reasons for choosing colleges are highly utilitarian, and include proximity to homes, keeping child care and transportation costs low, and having a racially diverse student body, but the quality of institutions as reflected in League tables concerns them much less. Funding per student dropped by 29% between 1976 and 1989, and a further 38% between 1989 and 1999, as more students were squeezed into existing institutions without increasing funding correspondingly. Completion rates in these institutions are also lower: after 3 years only 23% have completed degrees, another 41% are still enrolled in some form and may still drop out, and 3% have already dropped out, with a great deal of intermittent enrollment; many of these students will be left without any qualifications (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003). Thus the differentiation of tertiary education that accompanied its expansion has undermined equity, even as expansion may have increased it.<sup>41</sup>

The combination of low rates of successfully completing lower secondary education, and the expansion of tertiary education has left the English schooling system relatively unequal. One

might say that inequality begets inequality: high levels of inequality among parents generates high levels of inequality among students in their learning and educational attainments — at least in the absence of strenuous and consistent efforts to provide greater equity — and then high inequality in the children's generation. And vocationalism makes it much more difficult politically to intervene in these inegalitarian patterns, since middle-class parents protect the occupational prerogatives of their own children — as in the efforts to revive the old grammar schools, and the recent efforts of some parents to establish A+ grades on A-level exams that might distinguish their children for university admission. Overall, in England as in the U.S., the practices of vocationalism have served to continue patterns of inequality, despite the egalitarian rhetoric of the Education Gospel.

Of course, equality of educational opportunity is not the only policy related to equity; the policies of the welfare state and of Old Labour are other approaches. But here too the developments of the past thirty years are not encouraging. To be sure, the welfare state in England did not collapse as badly as it did in the U.S., and welfare benefits prevented the poverty rates from increasing during the 1990s, when inequality and poverty were increasing substantially. But England's welfare state is still relatively weak and relatively market oriented (Esping-Anderson, 1990), and both the conservative government of Thatcher and Major and the New Labour approaches of Blair have served to weaken the egalitarian policies of Old Labour. In effect, the direct approach to greater equity — tax and transfer policies, public ownership of basic sectors, public health and public housing, the strength of unions and their roles in establishing better wages and working conditions — have been replaced (as in many countries) with a more laissez-faire state, unable or politically unwilling to correct inequalities directly. This has left equality of *educational* opportunity as an equity policy of growing importance. But this proves to be an impossible approach since schools and colleges have to contend with greater inequality among the children they serve and a greater lack of preparation for schooling. Finally, vocationalism itself exacerbates inequalities in schools, colleges, and universities rather than providing a politically acceptable argument for mitigating such differences.

## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VOCATIONALISM AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY**

Given the pressures, in England and many other countries, to respond to the rhetoric of the Education Gospel, an obvious question is how well the various responses have worked. In one sense vocationalism in England has been quite successful. The underlying promise to individuals — that continuing in formal schooling longer and earning higher qualifications will lead to more stable employment and higher earnings — is generally true. Most of the major qualifications — O levels and GCSEs, A-levels, first degrees, HNCs, HNDs, BTEC higher, nursing and teaching qualifications for women — do enhance earnings, and for women more than for men — even though many of the lower-level qualifications and the qualifications promoted recently by government have zero or even negative returns (Dearden et al., 2000; McIntosh, 2004; Wolf, 2003, Figures 2.1, 2.2). These individual advantages are sufficient to generate pressure for access to more education, adding the voices of parents and students to the claims of the Education Gospel, though they certainly do not support the unthinking creation of new qualifications (like Foundation Degrees and the lower-level NVQs) that fail to consider the nature of demand.

In addition, government policies over the past three decades have been successful in expanding access to formal schooling. The proportion of students “passing” GCSEs has increased from a little more than 30% in 1989 to about 48% in 2000 (Payne, 2003), a substantial rate of expansion; this has also been beneficial to equity and social inclusion, particularly as a series of government policies (as in the U.S.) have rejected the notion that poverty inexorably leads to low levels of learning. Enrollments in Further Education and higher education have expanded substantially, and higher education in particular has become more overtly vocational (or professional) through increases in occupationally-oriented degrees. Some of these may seem frivolous, as the constant jibes at Beach Management and Leisure Studies attest, but there’s little question that expansion — a process true of many countries following the logic of the Education

Gospel — has provided a greater fraction of the population access to more formal schooling, including access by many who would otherwise not have gone on to higher education. Some new routes to tertiary education have developed, particularly the popular GNVQs (at least until their abolition and replacement), and — like community colleges in the U.S. — FE colleges are now in practice (if not in theory) routes into higher education, particularly by giving higher education courses and Foundation Degrees. And the expansion of FE colleges have provided the English system with the kind of flexible institution that can provide a great variety of programs, responding to the needs of the economy and society — including lifelong learning, a staple of the Education Gospel everywhere, as well as occupational education in several forms and second-chance opportunities for NEETs, immigrants, and others.

It is less clear that the quality of education has increased or that its nature has changed in response to the rhetoric of skills and the Knowledge Economy. The inspections mechanisms in England have always been attractive ways of enhancing the quality of teaching, though their use to enhance teaching rather than to demean educators has varied over time and levels of schooling (Grubb, 1999, and Cullingford 1999 in general). The inspection of providers of work-based training by the Adult Learning Inspectorate and the LSC has resulted in the partial elimination of the worst providers. But the efforts to enhance the quality of schooling through qualifications doesn't seem to have been successful. The rapid expansion of further and higher education, accompanied by reductions in spending per student, has surely not contributed to the enhancement of quality, quite apart from skepticism that subjects like Leisure Studies are worthy degrees. The constant articulation of targets — 50 percent of the cohort receiving higher education by 2008, 28 percent in Modern Apprenticeships by 2006 — clarify that quantity rather than quality is the government's goal, and such targets pressure institutions into accepting more students than they should. And the failure of the long discussion over key skills and core skills to re-orient education to broader conceptions of competence, and to change the nature of assessment and teaching, is yet another indication that quality has not improved. It is much easier to increase the quantity than the quality of education, but over time this may only create more

educational inflation rather than to remedy the low-skills equilibrium of which both England and the U.S. have been accused.

Furthermore, the public benefits of more formal schooling are not as clear, particularly the Gospel's claim of effects on economic growth and competitiveness. As Wolf (2003) has pointed out, the claim that more schooling leads to higher growth assumes that private benefits from schooling are reflected in social benefits, which is demonstrably not true; that differences among individuals in their earnings (or wage rates) reflect differences in productivity that will remain true when schooling as a whole increases; that education works by increasing the skills of individuals, rather than by sorting the able from the less able; and that education leads to growth, rather than growth leading to greater expenditures on education. In looking at the international evidence, many developing countries have spent a great deal on formal schooling but have not increased productivity and growth, and conversely some of the major success stories — particularly the Asian tigers — grew for many reasons unrelated to their education systems. And the case of the U.S., whose education has come under sustained criticism even as its growth during the 1980s and 1990s was particularly strong, again indicates that factors other than education are responsible for growth.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, the evidence linking education to growth has emphasized those potential contributions that can be measured, and emphasize technological change and education in particular; but those contributions to growth that cannot be measured have not been similarly considered. A different tactic for examining growth has been a micro-economic approach, examining a variety of factors (Harberger, 1998; Topel, 1999). For example, Landau, Taylor, and Wright (1996) explain the growth of industrialized societies in terms of national governance; the socio-political climate including its stability; macro-economic policies (fiscal, monetary, trade, and tax policies); the institutional settings including financial, legal, and corporate institutions; structural and supportive policies including education, labor relations, science and technology policy; regulatory and environmental policies; and factors specific to particular industries as well as company-specific issues. In such a framework, education is only one of dozens of influences

on growth, and its influence may be contingent on other policies. Consistent with the micro approach, Sanderson (1999, Ch. 3) has shown that the growth and decline in different British industries around 1900 — the source of the earliest versions of the Education Gospel in England — were not systematically related to formal schooling, and Aldcroft (1982, 1992) has argued that Britain’s slow growth after 1960 compared to its competitors was due to low rates of investment, problems in fiscal policy, high levels of public expenditures particularly in defense, excessive taxation, and too many “sleeper” managers and entrepreneurs. Evidently, in England as in the U.S., a range of government and business policies aside from education have been responsible for periods of high and low growth.

A further complication involves the *kind* of growth that has taken place in the advanced countries. Unequal growth, which fails to improve the well-being of the poor, immigrants, or other groups outside the mainstream, is at best an ambiguous benefit. Barro (2000) has shown that while growth tends to decrease inequality for countries with low levels of output, it *increases* inequality in more developed countries. Furthermore, countries emphasizing primary and secondary education end up with *lower* inequality, while relatively higher enrollments in post-secondary education, as in England, *increase* inequality. So the claims that the expansion of education in England, to enhance the skills that can contribute to “equitable opportunities for continuing employment”, at best over-state the role of education relative to a variety of other policies, and at worst mask unequal growth and the substantial increase in income inequality over the past three decades. What advanced countries like England require for growth is a high base of education, a system sufficiently flexible to respond to the changing demands of economies buffeted by business cycles, international competition, and sectoral uncertainties, and — if they are to be technological leaders rather than consumers — an excellent research sector, rather than the kind of overall expansion envisioned by the Education Gospel.

A third question is whether a basic premise of the Education Gospel — that there are shortages of skills that must be corrected by “education, education, and education” — is correct or not. Contrary to this kind of rhetoric, many advanced countries have been plagued recently by *over-*

education, not under-education.<sup>43</sup> In England, there is approximate balance between the supply and demand for the highest skill levels; but at middle-skilled levels supply exceeds demand by about 41%, and these individuals therefore have to find unskilled work where demand exceed supply; by these measures there is no evidence of under-education, and instead about 18% of the labor force is over-qualified for the work they do. By another measure, asking workers if their qualifications are necessary on the job, 28.6% of those with qualifications were over-qualified (Felstead, Gallie, and Green, 2002, Table 3.6, 4.7). More recently there has been great concern that universities are churning out more graduates than the labour market can absorb, with about 40% of university graduates in jobs intended for non-graduates (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). All this has been accompanied by alarmist newspaper stories about the university as the “fast-track to nowhere”, describing graduates working as cashiers (Massy, 2004).

As part of the question of whether there is a pressing need for more skills, another exaggeration of the Education Gospel should be examined. The assertion that jobs are changing, and requiring different types of skills, is of course true, particularly over the long run of the past century. Many sectors that used to be prominent — coal-mining, steel, shipbuilding — have virtually disappeared, industry has a whole has diminished sharply while services have increased, and the fraction of the population employed as professionals, managers, and technical workers has increased substantially, to 29.1% in 1984 and 36.6% in 1998 — most of these in familiar positions as doctors, teachers, and solicitors. But this leaves two-thirds of all individuals in positions that don't require much advanced schooling — while most service jobs are relatively mundane positions as postmen and health care assistants, checkout clerks and restaurant servers (Wolf 2003, Ch. 2 and Table 2.2). “Skills for All” is stirring and egalitarian rhetoric, but the current state of the English economy doesn't support the need for such skills.

A final question, particularly given the many commission reports stressing the need for skills in England, is whether the government policies of the last three decades have in fact increased skills, and increased the capacity of the education and training system to provide the skills that might be required. On the one hand, expansion of further and higher education, and increased

GCSE pass rates, are evidence of the effectiveness of policy. On the other hand, one could point to an equally long list of inadequacies including low levels of completing secondary education; the weakening of apprenticeship mechanisms, and their replacement with the ineffective Modern Apprenticeships; the demise of Secondary Technical Schools, labeled by one observer as “one of the most harmful developments of the post-war years” (Sanderson 1999, p. 81); the constraints on FE colleges, potentially the most flexible elements of the entire system; the confusion and inefficiency of the qualifications “jungle”, exacerbated rather than simplified by government initiatives; the constant efforts to create short-term job training schemes, which are almost always ineffective;<sup>44</sup> the weak participation of employers despite a long series of revisions in education-business councils; the inability to bridge the academic-vocational divide, or to adopt effective versions of “key skills”; and the tendency to replace effective programs with ineffective ones — the Careers Service by Connexions, the institutional emphasis of the FEFC with the adversarial and market-oriented approach of the LSC.

The record of English policy-making over the last three decades, since Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech put vocationalism on the agenda, has therefore been distinctly mixed.<sup>45</sup> At least some of the problems can be traced to the policy-making process itself, which has articulated the need for more education and skills at the same time as the implementation of such policies suffers from consistent problems:

- There has been an enormous amount of policy “churn”. Endless reports and White Papers are published, leading to new policies that are implemented only to be abandoned a year or two later (Keep, undated).<sup>46</sup> The speed of change means that no policy is fully implemented before being undone; no policy is in place long enough to be carefully evaluated, with potential correction rather than abandonment. As one school head described the current situation, “teachers’ confidence in private and public sectors has been shot by a succession of changes” (TES, April 26, 2004). A great deal of “initiative fatigue”, in schools and colleges in particular, undermines the enthusiasm of those responsible for implementing new policies. Furthermore, each report and White Paper contains dozens of recommendations — too many to even think of

implementing. A better approach — particularly given the intrinsic difficulty of such reforms as bridging the academic-vocational divide, or recreating roles for employers — would be to develop stable long-run policies, concentrating on a small number of important changes.

- Government policy has worked largely by creating mandates, promoting market-like incentives and disincentives, engaging in “naming and shaming” of individual schools, abusing the teachers who are responsible for improvements, and fear-mongering — but it has invested very little in the capacity of education and training institutions to respond.<sup>47</sup> But some institutions need external help if they are to improve, or better-trained teachers and administrators; many need stable resources and policies in order to respond over a period of time. A balanced attention to incentives (including accountability and market-like mechanisms) *and* capacity-building might create stronger educational institutions.

- Particularly under Thatcher and Major, there have been many market-oriented initiatives, and of course vocationalism with its emphasis on the market value of education and training lends itself to market-like policies. The rhetoric of choice and consumer-driven outcomes has been part of this market orientation. But education is not a commodity appropriate for markets, particularly at the lower levels of the system where students are unsophisticated consumers and the suppliers secondary schools, FE colleges, second-tier universities, NGOs) are not particularly strong institutions, and many of these market-like policies have worked poorly (Finkelstein and Grubb, 1999; Finkelstein, 2000) and provided very little effective choice (Hodgkinson, Sparkes, and Hodgkinson, 1996). Market-like mechanisms are particularly poor ways to build the capacities of weak or failing institutions. A better approach would be to recognize the possibilities but also the limits of market-like mechanisms, and to use them only under circumstances — with sophisticated and well-informed consumers facing competent and dedicated education providers, with well-known outcomes from the education process — that foster efficient and equitable markets rather than market failures.

- The extent of consultation with those outside government is often scant despite a formal consultation process. The lack of contact with the business community — indeed, the efforts in some policies (including the development of qualifications) to shut out the business community — is detrimental, given the rhetorical commitment to “partnership”; the frequent distrust of the education community is self-defeating, since policies in the end must be implemented by teachers and administrators. English policy-makers might instead look to the tripartite planning mechanisms of such countries as Austria, where all stake-holders are represented in policy-making and consensus rather than imposition of government policies is the norm.

- The single-minded view of government that education should emphasize economic and occupational goals has carried over to students, who have highly utilitarian and credential-oriented views of schooling (Unwin and Wellington, 2000). But such attitudes undermine learning as students come to see courses passed and credentials earned as the central goal, rather than the competencies that credentials ought to represent. A better approach would require articulating consistently, at all levels of policy as well as in classroom practice, the reasons for broad rather than narrow conceptions of vocationalism.

- Government policy since Thatcher has been increasingly centralized, particularly given her government’s antipathy to local government. But centralized governments work poorly when labor markets are local, as they tend to be at the middle and lower levels, and national policies with little room for local modification have constrained what education and training programs can undertake. In an apt and visually wonderful metaphor, Keep (2003) has described government policy as the “elephant in the phone box”, filling every available space so that there is no place for other participants including business, no wiggle room for educators to develop their own solutions, no latitude for anything but responding to central policies. Surely a better balance between national goals and local initiative would improve the ability of England to enhance the quality of education for both vocational and non-vocational purposes.

## THE ANGLO-AMERICAN APPROACH TO VOCATIONALISM

There are, of course, a number of differences between the education systems of the U.S. and England, and between the approaches these two countries have taken to vocationalism. Perhaps most surprisingly, given that the U.S. is such a young country, it began the process of vocationalizing its schools and universities much earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century with the development of public universities dedicated to the “liberal and the practical”, and with the reorientation of secondary schools toward broadly occupational purposes in the early twentieth century; this process did not take place in England until the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, England obviously has a much more centralized government than the U.S. does, particularly in the last 25 years when local government has ceded much of its power to the national government; in contrast policy in the U.S. about most of education is made in the 50 states, with enormous variation in effectiveness but without the damage that can be done by a centralized government. A third difference is that England has gone, from an American perspective, qualifications-mad, generating formal standards and qualifications for every corner of the education system; in contrast the tendency in the U.S. has been to use “informal” credentials, established by educational institutions (sometimes with the advice of employers) rather than externally-defined qualifications. Finally, the rhetoric in the U.S. related to equity has been more sustained than it has been in Britain — not necessarily more effective, to be sure, particularly as the modal levels of education have risen to tertiary levels with its vast “structure of inequality”. But equality of educational opportunity, controversies over inequality (particularly racial inequality), and visions of the American Dream of getting ahead through schooling are more persistent concerns in the U.S., while these issues have been more muted in England, with the possible exception of discussions about social exclusion.

But there are a number of similarities as well, creating a kind of Anglo-American approach that extends in many ways to other English-speaking countries:<sup>48</sup>

- The rhetoric of the Education Gospel has been prominent, particularly in official policy pronouncements, and has created a familiar narrative that in turn has justified policies.<sup>49</sup> However, this rhetoric is badly exaggerated. In England, the proportion of jobs requiring university degrees rose from 10 % in 1986 to 17% in 2001, but the increase in non-degree professional qualifications increased modestly (from 10.5% to 11.9%), so only 29.2% of the workforce required a professional qualification — a far cry from the 50% government target. Similarly in the U.S., only 28.8% of jobs in 2000 required more than a secondary diploma, rising only modestly to 30.5% by 2010. These patterns make a mockery of Tertiary Education for All and the more far-fetched claims of the Education Gospel.<sup>50</sup>

- Both countries have steadily weakened their older forms of work-based learning and apprenticeships — the U.S. since the nineteenth century, and England since the post-war period. Employers have few responsibilities for occupational preparation, and their own training of employees is generally scant (at least relative to other countries), firm-specific, and focused on upper-level employees. At the same time, neither country has managed to develop an effective form of short-term job training, particularly for those who have had trouble entering the labor market through conventional schooling routes. As a result, the broader *education* system in both countries has become dominated by formal *schooling*.

- Both the English and the U.S. systems have weak forms of vocational education at the secondary level, and the periodic efforts to strengthen such programs — with the justification that many students neither need nor want academic education — have not been particularly successful.<sup>51</sup> Instead this level of occupational preparation has shifted to FE colleges and community colleges, both of which can provide more sophisticated and varied forms of occupational preparation, but which have been hampered by low status, low funding, and (in England) inconsistent central policy.

- Both countries suffer a substantial divide between academic and vocational education, one that has been especially difficult to bridge at the secondary level. However, at the university and

post-degree levels, *vocational* education becomes *professional* education and has much higher status and the majority of enrollments. If the integration of academic and occupational education is to be found anywhere, it occurs at the upper levels of the educational system.

- Both countries have high rates of failure to complete secondary education, about 50% in England and 25% in the U.S. These individuals are destined for poorly-paid and intermittent work in low-skilled jobs, and the large number of non-completers makes a mockery of Skills for All (or College for All in the U.S.) and the notion of moving from a low-skills equilibrium to a high-skills equilibrium.

- Despite the replacement of tripartite secondary schools in England and the end of a good deal of formal tracking (or streaming) in the U.S., the effect of family background on students' educational attainments remains high. Equity in schooling evidently requires much more strenuous policies than the elimination of formal streaming related to vocational goals; practices throughout the educational system need to change.

- Tertiary education has expanded substantially in both countries, particularly in second-tier universities and in colleges. The target of 50% of each cohort with tertiary education in England, and the rhetoric of College for All in the U.S., have promoted these changes. But the expansion of tertiary education while non-completion of secondary education remains high, and the pattern of expansion in a differentiated tertiary sector, means that the distribution of formal schooling is becoming more and more unequal, contributing to higher levels of inequality and unequal growth patterns.

- Both countries have tried to develop short-term job training programmes, to resolve problems of low skill, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. But these have been relatively short-lived, with a succession of desperate efforts at improvement; they have been disconnected from the education system, where the real benefits lie; and they have been largely ineffective in

enhancing employment and earnings. In the end, they seem more like symbolic efforts than serious attempts to enhance skills (Lafer, 2002).

- While the rhetoric of the Education Gospel argues that under-education is pervasive, there's substantial evidence of over-education in both countries. In England, where employers are notoriously indifferent to the skill levels of their front-line workers, the continued attempt to increase the supply of educated individuals without efforts to increase demand exacerbates over-education, which has already emerged among recent university graduates. In the U.S. as well, the steady increase in education over the twentieth century has not been matched by increases in demand, since a great of de-skilling has taken place alongside a smaller amount of up-skilling.

- Both countries have weak forms of consultation with those who benefit or suffer from education policy — employers, prospective students, education and training providers. This is particularly the case in comparison to European states with strong employer associations and unions, tripartite planning bodies, and decision-making by consensus rather than by the powerful imposing decisions on the weak. The result is that education policies are often ineffective, since neither the providers who must implement policies nor the employers who make hiring decisions have been consulted.

- Both countries, with only minor exception, have promoted supply-side policies — increasing the levels of education and skills — and ignored almost completely demand-side policy,<sup>52</sup> despite evidence that many employers do not value high levels of schooling and that many individuals either don't value formal education or don't know how to access it. In both countries the Education Gospel suggests that education alone is the solution to various social and economic problems. This, as well as the historical commitment to laissez-faire policies, makes it particularly difficult to intervene directly into labour markets to stimulate the demand for skills, to regulate efforts to provide apprenticeships, or to ensure the use of more highly-skilled workers.

- Both England and the U.S. have high levels of inequality in income, high levels of inequality in schooling, relatively laissez-faire and under-funded welfare states (particularly in the U.S.), and a recent emphasis on work requirements in welfare policies. This means that schools, colleges, and universities must cope with the differences among students caused by various inequalities without being able to counter those inequalities themselves, and without being able to rely a strong welfare state to provide health care, housing stability, family support, income support for “new students” in colleges and universities, and other policies necessary for all individuals to take advantage of the opportunities provided. Indeed, the emphasis on education, and the rhetoric of equality of educational opportunity, mean that education has increasingly been offered as an alternative to the policies of the welfare state — as in the replacement of Old Labour by New Labour — rather than the two being considered complements.

Overall, the Anglo-American model is strong on rhetoric and on educational expansion at the tertiary level. But it hasn't been able to create high-skill economies because the demand for skills is often weak, because high average levels of schooling mask serious inequalities, because high fractions of the population continue to have minimal skills, because alternatives to schooling as forms of work preparation have been weakened, and because laissez-faire approaches to policy and to the welfare state are inadequate to making any real progress. If either England or the U.S. is to make good on the promises of the Education Gospel, it will be necessary both to moderate the claims made for education and to develop alternative approaches to developing the competencies of the populace.

## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> An analysis of vocationalism in the United Kingdom rather than England would be broader, of course. But Scotland appears to differ substantially from the English practices, and the Scottish developments are not the subject of as much published research and commentary. The differences in Wales and Northern Ireland seem slighter, but again they are inaccessible except through extensive experience. I have therefore chosen to focus on England alone.

<sup>2</sup> See Wood (1999) for an analysis of New Labour and the role of education in the Third Way.

<sup>3</sup> In the U.S. and Australia, but not as much in England (except Moore, 1980), there is a widespread discussion of the term “skill”, with its connotation of a narrow, discrete, individual, and context-free competency, in distinction to broader conceptions of abilities, competencies, or “intelligences”. The persistent language of “skills” in England is testimony to the dominance of behaviorist conceptions; see also the discussion of assessment mechanisms and task analysis in the section on key skills. In the U.S. there is more substantial literature stressing that many “unskilled” workers still have formidable skills (e.g., Rose, 2004). One consequence of vocationalism, then, is that individuals who are not *schooled* are often unfairly considered to lack *skills* (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004, Ch. 7).

<sup>4</sup> It’s also notable how repetitive of earlier initiatives the Tomlinson report is. It aims to provide a unified framework of diplomas, replicating earlier and failed efforts to streamline the qualifications “jungle”; a curriculum reform stressing “core” learning (the subject of a prior debate over key and core skills) as well as “main learning” in specific subjects; and a resurrection of vocational learning

<sup>5</sup> The New Vocationalism of the 1970s and 1980s also assumed that young people lacked the skills to make them employable, but the policy initiatives were mostly short-term training efforts like the Youth Opportunities Programme. See also Ryan’s (2003) analysis of vocationalism in Britain, France, and the U.S., stressing the individual returns from schooling and training — which are only one of many consequence of vocationalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Just as there are varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001) and of welfare states (Esping-Anderson, 1990), there are various approaches to vocationalism. Our long-run ambition is to develop a clearer understanding of how the varieties of vocationalism are related to forms of capitalism and welfare states.

<sup>7</sup> On apprenticeship in England see Elbaum (1991), Gospel (1991) and (1995), and Ainly and Rainbird (1999). For the U.S. see Rorabaugh (1986) and Douglas (1921), summarized in Grubb and Lazerson (2004), Ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Simon (1981) on the 19th century curriculum, and how it fostered not only a disdain of technical and entrepreneurial subjects but also of pedagogical concerns — since teaching cognitive abilities was not what mattered in either the public schools or Oxbridge. See also the update by Alexander (2004).

<sup>9</sup> See *Skills for All*, p. 30, where the two major reasons for adults not learning are that “I prefer to do other things” (48%) and “I’m not interested in learning” (32%). On working-class resistance to schooling see especially Willis (1977). The analogue in the U.S. has been the claim that black students (especially males) resist schools because they do not want to appear to be “acting white”; see Fordham and Ogbu (1986). However, resistance to schooling in the U.S. appears to be less intentional than it is in the U.K., partly because the ethic of getting ahead through schooling is so powerful in the U.S.

<sup>10</sup> In the familiar process of policy churn, the government announced reforms to MAs in May 2004, with a great deal of re-labeling, branding, marketing, and optimistic rhetoric but no discernable difference in understanding when apprenticeships might work.

<sup>11</sup> On the market failures in firm-based training see especially Stern and Ritzgen (1991).

<sup>12</sup> The effort to develop work-based learning in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 has ended with very little to show for it; see Hershey et al. (1998) and Stull (2003).

<sup>13</sup> However, the three tracks in the U.S. (academic, vocational, and general) were tracks within comprehensive secondary schools, while three tracks in England took place in separate institutions.

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<sup>14</sup> Now it seems that comprehensives are to be replaced by a system that allows more variation in schools including specialist schools, foundation schools relatively free of government control, and city academies to replace struggling schools; see “Clarke reforms signal end to comprehensives”, *The Guardian*, July 8, 2004, and the government report *Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, DfES, July 2004. To an outsider this looks like another in a long list of failed reforms, with too many changes to absorb, too little understanding of why schools fail, too little technical assistance in building capacity at the local level, and too little additional funding — once again “sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

<sup>15</sup> In writing a review article on the pedagogy of vocational education, Achtenhagen and Grubb (1999) searched the British literature and found virtually nothing; see also the paltry results in Hayward et al. (2004), especially section 3.4. The pedagogical discussions in English are most alive in Australia; the literature in German is extensive.

<sup>16</sup> The comparable U.S. discussion usually starts with the dignity of all labour and the value of every occupation in the sense of a vocation or calling (or *Beruf*), but fails to grapple with the enormous differentials in pay, status, stability, and working conditions of highly unequal economies like the U.S. and the U.K.

<sup>17</sup> There’s a different description of a triple-track system as academic A-levels, broadly vocational GNVQs, and then occupationally-specific NVQs; see Wolf (1997) and Payne (2003a,b). However, this division ignores the enormous numbers of students who do not go beyond age 16.

<sup>18</sup> See Joan Payne’s data for “Pathways after Compulsory Schooling” (Nuffield College, May 5, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> In our analysis of what it means to be vocational, there are at least four different conceptions: student intentions, as in English secondary schools; a vocational curriculum, as in many FE college programs; a high rate of related employment, as happens in many health fields; and an absolute requirement of a specific curriculum, as in the professions that required medical degree or law degree before practicing (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004, Ch. 5). Any form of education is completely vocationalized only if all four criteria are met; if only one or two criteria are met, as

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in English and U.S. secondary schools, there is likely to be disagreement among participants about the purpose of schooling.

<sup>20</sup> See Huddleston and Unwin (2002), and Smithers and Robinson (1999), especially Gravatt (1999) and Stanton (1999). On the role of FE and community colleges as multi-purposes institutions, particularly compared to technical institutes in other countries, see Grubb (2004). The “undecided” students in England, sometimes called “experimenters” in the U.S. context (Manski, 1988; Grubb and Associates, 1999, Ch. 1), is a substantial group that is not widely recognized and not always well-served.

<sup>21</sup> These are enrollment figures rather than full-time equivalents, and may therefore be misleading.

<sup>22</sup> This is a complex argument made for the U.S. community colleges by Cox (2004), based on ethnographic research. Given the pervasive description of FE college students and the “new students” in second-tier universities as practical and utilitarian, this argument merits careful consideration in the U.K.

<sup>23</sup> Overall, U.K. spending as a percent of GDP on tertiary education in 1999 was 68 percent of the OECD average. While it is currently impossible to disentangle FE spending from HE spending, FE education is much more restricted than is education in other non-university institutions like community colleges in the U.S. and Canada, the *Fachhochschulen* in Austria and Germany, the state colleges in Norway, the IUTs in France, and polytechnics in Finland (Grubb, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Of students in foundation degree courses in 2002/03, 81.6% were in occupational subjects; [www.hesa.ac.uk/press/pr73/pr73.htm](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/press/pr73/pr73.htm).

<sup>25</sup> See Huddleston and Unwin (2002) for many of these criticisms. See the discussion of “strong” versus “weak” markets in education in Grubb and Lazerson (2004), especially Ch. 6 and 9.

<sup>26</sup> See IER (2001), Table 8a. These figures exclude combined degrees, which are difficult to allocate; the occupational areas include medicine, subjects allied to medicine, veterinary science, agriculture, computer science, engineering, architecture and related fields, law, business, librarianship, education, and creative arts and design which appears to be dominated by

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occupational specialities rather than fine art. The 1980 figures are from *University Statistics 1980*, Universities' Statistical Board, Table 19.

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps they should be called mainstream universities, after the Campaign for Mainstream Universities that has organized 33 of them.

<sup>28</sup> Chevalier and Conlon (2003) refer to three tiers of universities: the Russell group, old universities, and the modern universities created from the former polytechnics. However, between 1990 and 1995 the old universities became quite similar to the Russell group in their selectivity and their earnings benefits, while increasing their distance from the former polytechnics. This suggests that the division among first-tier universities, second-tier universities (the former polytechnics), and FE colleges is correct.

<sup>29</sup> This is true with the ending of the formal distinction between polytechnics and universities, though of course historic differences live on. In the U.S. the public second-tier institutions are often structured by state policy to be subordinate to the first-tier research institutions.

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed and vituperative account of the decline of higher education in England see Trow (2004).

<sup>31</sup> Sample tests can be seen on the QCA's website at [www.qca.org.uk/qualifications/types/6445-6480.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/qualifications/types/6445-6480.html).

<sup>32</sup> For a brief analysis of the history and range of task analysis see Achtenhagen and Grubb (1999).

<sup>33</sup> For an analysis of CIG in many countries concluding that the Careers Service had many advantages over systems in other countries, see OECD (2004).

<sup>34</sup> There's an argument based on market failure for government stepping in to create employer associations: if employers in a sector are small and scattered, then high transactions costs may prevent employers from forming associations on their own, and government could help in the initial process of formation might be justified. But there's no justification from market failure for the government continuing to dictate the agenda of these associations once formed. The U.S. pattern has been somewhat different, though government action has been no more effective: many employer associations have formed on their own despite transactions costs, while the

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government efforts through the National Skills Standards Board to develop such organizations around skills standards and assessments have been failures. The recent British pattern of establishing and abolishing employer associations may be destructive to employers' own efforts to organize.

<sup>35</sup> A theory of action in the U.S. context is a conception of why a particular policy action should have an intended effect; without a clear and empirically reasonable theory of action, any policy intervention will have its intended effect only by accident (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Malen et al., 2002). In a non-random and limited survey of individuals while I was visiting SKOPE, no English policy-maker or researcher to whom I spoke could outline a coherent theory of action for qualifications, and there is no conception in all the published government documents. See also the comment in Unwin et al. (2003): "there is an absence in the literature of any coherent theoretical view with regard to the role of vocational qualifications".

<sup>36</sup> In the U.S. this quote is widely attributed to John Dewey, and used to precisely the same egalitarian purpose!

<sup>37</sup> See data on the distribution of income from the Luxembourg Income Study, [www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/inequitable.htm](http://www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/inequitable.htm). The Gini coefficient has increased in Great Britain from .267 to .345, a higher increase than for any other country. England is second only to the U.S. (with a Gini of .368 in 2000) among developed countries in the extent of inequality.

<sup>38</sup> This is one area where the U.S. departs substantially from England. In the U.S. there is a long history of debate over various forms of political, economic, and educational equity, detailed in Pole (1978), Gutman (1987), and many different books on the American Dream including Hochschild and Scovronik (2003). It would be difficult to write "The Pursuit of Equality in English History" because the commitment to equality and equity has been much weaker. In addition, Pole, Gutman, and a long series of writers since the 1960s clarify how many different and conflicting approaches there have been to the conception of equal educational opportunity.

<sup>39</sup> See the Tomlinson report, Working Group (2004), and the new Nuffield project on 14 – 19 year olds.

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<sup>40</sup> See Goddard-Pate and Whitehead (2000, 2001) for evidence on this problem for FE colleges and more generally Parson (2002).

<sup>41</sup> This pattern is again reminiscent of the U.S., where the enormous expansion of tertiary education after 1960 was accomplished largely in second-tier universities and community colleges with lower funding and completion rates; see Grubb and Lazerson (2004), Ch. 2.

<sup>42</sup> See also the skepticism of Mayhew, Deer, and Dua (2004), and Grubb and Lazerson (2004), Ch. 6, on the evidence for the U.S.

<sup>43</sup> See especially Daly, Buchel, and Duncan (2000), Table 1, the review in Hartog (2000), especially Tables 1 and 2, and the special issue of *Economics of Education Review* on over-education, Vol. 19 (2000).

<sup>44</sup> Here too the English record is parallel to the U.S., with a series of ineffective job training initiatives; see Grubb and Lazerson (2004), Ch. 4, and Lafer (2002).

<sup>45</sup> See also the evidence in Raggat and Unwin (1991), that Britain's policies failed to increase intermediate vocational qualifications between 1979 and 1988, while France increased theirs by 25%. See also Sanderson's (1999) more general argument that the lack of education contributed to the decline of Britain since the nineteenth century. See Trow (2004) for a lengthier, more detailed, and more critical review of policy toward higher education in England.

<sup>46</sup> The process of "churn" seems to have lasted throughout the 20th century: Sanderson's (1999) history of the economic purposes of education is full of references to initiatives and institutions that were never consolidated, particularly around 1900 and between the two world wars.

<sup>47</sup> The classification of the instruments of government policies into mandates, incentives and disincentives (including funding), capacity-building, and system-changing (including market-like mechanisms) is due to McDonnell and Elmore (1997). The evidence that external policies cannot generate the intended results without capacity-building is mounting in the U.S. (e.g., Carnoy et al., 2003), though this argument has not been developed in England.

<sup>48</sup> Several earlier authors have distinguished two different approaches to vocational education, one typified by the German opposition-based system and the other by the Anglo-American school-base system

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<sup>49</sup> Policy is often driven by narratives, or widely-accepted “stories” about why certain programs are worthwhile. The creation of such narratives typically takes a considerable period of time and many participants. Once widely accepted, policy narratives like the Education Gospel, or human capital, are resistant to change, and subtle empirical evidence — the results that research can generate — is not usually enough to modify or complicate a policy narrative. See, for example, Roe (1994).

<sup>50</sup> Critiques of the Education Gospel in the U.S. are so far rare aside from Grub and Lazerson (2004), although Levin and Rumberger (1987) pointed out a long time ago that occupational change is slow and modest. In England there is more critique than in most countries, much of it from SKOPE including a series of articles culminating in Keep and Mayhew (2004); see also Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004), and the review of the sceptics in Lloyd and Payne (2002) as well as their efforts to articulate demand-side policies.

<sup>51</sup> A partial exception might be the secondary programmes in the U.S. that integrate academic and vocational learning; this approach is now widely known but not widely adopted.

<sup>52</sup> A small exception in England is the report of the Cabinet Office’s Performance and Innovation Unit, *In Demand: Adult Skills for the 21st Century* (2001), which acknowledged the need to increase the demand for skills by both employers and individuals. While there has been no parallel report in the U.S., some state-level planning units have articulated the need to enhance demand through economic development while enhancing the supply of skilled labor through education and training.

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