

## **The political rhetoric of parity of esteem**

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### Abstract

The vocational and academic routes that make up the English education system have different purposes, for different stakeholders, with different outcomes; they can be complementary routes but are not analogous. Consequently, calls for parity of esteem belie the fundamental intention and importance of each. While these calls have persisted for over 70 years, parity between the two routes has not been achieved. This paper questions whether the term parity of esteem is useful or simply political rhetoric. It argues that parity of esteem is unachievable when one of the routes is regarded without much esteem at all, and that political rhetoric focussing on social mobility through education, specifically higher education as a means to achieving it, actively undermines the vocational route, making parity of the routes a political pipe dream.

**Key words:** parity of esteem, academic qualifications, vocational education and training, social mobility

### Introduction

The term *parity of esteem* is used in UK political vernacular to describe the notion that vocational and academic education should be regarded as equal. In England, it was first officially used in government policy discourse in the report on ‘*Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*’ (Norwood, 1943). The report argued that the purpose of education is ‘to help each individual to realise the full powers of his personality - body, mind and spirit’ (p xiii). This would happen through an improved education system consisting of three different types of secondary education institutions – secondary Grammar, secondary Technical, and Secondary Modern. These three types of schools became enshrined in Butler’s (1944) *Education Act*. The Norwood report was clear that, ‘each type should have such parity as amenities and conditions can bestow; parity of esteem in our view cannot be conferred by administrative decree nor by equality of cost per pupil; it can only be won by the school itself’ (p. 14). Parity of esteem would be conferred by reputation and not by government. However, parity of esteem has become entrenched in UK policy discourse, especially in England, moving from a focus on secondary education institutions to an umbrella term encompassing two routes of education – the vocational and the academic routes (Fisher & Simmons, 2012). Wolf (DfE, 2011) sought to draw a line under the notion that the two routes were somehow equivalent:

*In recent years, both academic and vocational education in England have been bedevilled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is the same as everything else. Students and families all know this is nonsense. (ibid, p8)*

It is important to note that these attempts at parity between the two routes are a peculiarly Anglo-centric phenomenon. In neighbouring Western Europe and Nordic countries, where there are distinct education and training pathways with regulated labour markets and license to practice requirements, achieving parity is much less of an issue (OECD/ILO, 2017); there is recognition that the existing routes – the vocational and the academic – that make up the education system in these countries have different purposes, for different stakeholders, with different outcomes; they can be complementary routes but are not analogous. As such, this paper questions whether using the term parity of esteem is useful given the state of post-18 vocational and academic education in England, which has been labelled as inequitable and inflexible (DfE, 2019a). This paper argues that while the ideal of parity of esteem is a truly

worthy goal it instead has become political rhetoric given the way the labour market in England (and the UK more broadly) functions, with the heavy emphasis on the marketisation of education (Keep, 2018a). The following section provides an analysis of the policy discourse surrounding the goal of achieving parity of esteem including a discussion of the elephant in the room – social mobility – and why certain stakeholders in England are pushing for parity of esteem of the two very different routes. Contrasting the policy discourse with the research evidence, four key factors are identified – the historical class divide in England; qualification development; mass expansion of higher education; and a hierarchical labour market structure – that have hindered the achievement of parity of the two routes. Concluding remarks focus on whether the term ‘parity of esteem’ is little more than political rhetoric; a way of achieving a social compact between the right and left wing political parties by stating that the vocational route will be equally regarded, whilst siphoning off the funding to the academic route.

### Policy discourse and parity of esteem

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction from 1881-1884 attempted to improve the quality and standing of vocational education in England, but it was not until 1944 that policy efforts were made to bring it together with academic education *and* do it through increased access of working-class children to secondary and further education. Butler’s *Education Act* received cross-party consensus and was widely regarded as a progressive reform at the time (Jeffereys, 1984). The Dearing Review (1994) built upon this *Act* advocating for three broad educational pathways in post-16 education and training:

- ‘pathways ‘craft’ or ‘occupational’ - equipping young people with particular skills and with knowledge directly related to a craft or occupation through National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs);
- the ‘vocational’ - a midway path between the academic and occupational - leading to General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs); and
- the ‘academic’, leading to A and AS levels.’ (*ibid*, p. 19)

The review held much promise, also encouraging parity of esteem (although it was mentioned only twice and one of these in an appendix) but as Spours and Young (1996) pointed out the complex and fragmented state of the English education system ultimately proved too difficult for the recommendations to succeed. It is somewhat surprising then, even with Dearing, that the concept of *parity of esteem* took a political hiatus from 1944 until the late 1990s when Tony Blair and the New Labour Government came to power; however, from 1997 it became a policy priority (Hodgson & Spours, 2008). The vocational route was championed, but also implicitly aligned with the academic route:

*there should be much stronger vocational routes to success, which are genuinely valued by employers, and as providing access to higher education. This has been the historic weakness of our education system: not merely that vocational routes are seen by many young people as second class, but also that they are not seen by employers and universities as a sound preparation (DfES, 2005, p. 24, emphasis in original).*

While Blair’s party emphasized parity of esteem they took as ‘axiomatic that you can have equality or equality of opportunity, but you cannot have both’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 379). As such, they tended to focus upon equality of opportunity. Moreover, politicians since Blair

have also realised that you are not able to discuss parity of esteem (equality) and have social mobility (equality of opportunity) primarily because:

*The esteem in which a qualification is held might be expected to come from what its holders are believed from that evidence to know and be able to do. In practice, it derives more from the social origins and general abilities attributed to the students it attracts, and from their likely occupational destinations. (Edwards, ibid., p. 371).*

Consequently, rather than focusing on the output of the knowledge and skill gained through the qualification, particularly vocational qualifications as preparation for the world of work and earning potential, the new Labour government's approach became more about increasing aspiration through HE participation, to improve social mobility; there was only an underlying hint of aiming for *parity of esteem* between qualifications and routes. For example, the Green Paper *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16* (DfES, 2007) laid out the case for young people staying in education until 18, emphasising the need to pursue *qualifications* as a basis for *further learning and work*. Particular emphasis was placed on the benefits of participation in relation to the individual (further qualifications, employment and earnings), society (less teenage pregnancies, less involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour, and less likelihood of going to prison) and the economy (increased productivity). This rhetoric was re-framed in the paper, *New opportunities: Fair chances for the future* (Cabinet Office, 2009) with a focus on potential but still with social mobility as a driving force:

*The decisions a young person makes between the ages of 16 and 25 – the first few years after leaving compulsory education – have a huge impact on their future prospects and, in particular, on their ability to fulfil their potential. This is a key area if we are to improve social mobility and ensure that our businesses and economy have the skilled workforce we will need in the future (ibid., p. 55).*

Moving forward two decades, David Cameron's coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, in power from 2010-2015, retained parity of esteem high on their education policy agenda (Cabinet Office, 2011), and with much the same implicit belief of ensuring the vocational route provided a pathway to higher education rather than a means unto itself. All the while, historical concerns over the lack of skilled labour and insufficient economic competitiveness re-emerged, prompted by the pressures of globalisation and youth unemployment. This led to a somewhat short-lived political fervour for the vocational route as imperative to improving economic prosperity and the life of millions of people (DfE, 2011; DfE/DBIS, 2013; DBIS/DfE, 2016) – a form of tacit social mobility – that was not underscored by investment in the vocational route through resources allocated to further education.

In so far as the Coalition Government were clear on how their policies should promote social mobility outlining their strategy for achieving better social mobility in the paper, *Opening doors, breaking barriers: A strategy for social mobility* (Cabinet Office, 2011), they did so with little reference to parity of the vocational and academic routes. In this paper there are 246 mentions of *social mobility* but parity of esteem is not mentioned once, although was alluded to in the desire for a fairer and more effective system whereby a key component was: *reducing the gap between vocational and academic routes, ensuring that both enable young people to progress* (ibid., p. XX)

In each of these papers social mobility is promoted as the way to achieve success, in education, in the labour market, and in life. Aiming to move into the next class rank is

believed to be the goal because politicians do not know any better; their close friends and relatives are all in the same social class, and they believe that others would want to join them in their type of privileged lives. Important to note is that while policy papers promote social mobility, what is less discussed is the corollary of social mobility. Because of the way the labour market is structured with a finite amount of jobs, particularly in occupations and professions where upward social mobility would be aimed for, there must be downward social mobility (Goldthorpe, 2016). Moreover, Buscha and Sturgis (2017, p. 22) show that, ‘the odds of an individual born into the highest social class group being in that class at the age of 30 were approximately 20 times higher than an individual born into the lowest social class group.’ Even though elite occupations make up only 17.7% of occupations (Friedman & Laurison, 2019, pp. 12-13) they are overwhelmingly taken up by people within the elite class, and where there is downward social mobility the types of occupations entered certainly are not the ones at the bottom of the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). As Goldthorpe (2016, p. 105) makes clear: ‘[i]f relative mobility rates are to become more equal—if odds ratios are to move closer to 1—this means, as a mathematical necessity, that downward mobility has to increase just as much as upward mobility.’

So, while Blair, Cameron and other Prime Ministers and Members of Parliament have been keen to promote social mobility, and talk of trying to aim for and achieve parity of esteem between the academic and the vocational routes, they never do so in the same breath, as they are counter to each other for political reasons. Having a route – the academic route – for young people to aspire to needs another (seemingly lesser) route to make it look more desirable. The vocational route is still singled out as the less desirable one, the focus of a political rhetoric that enables an implicit, disingenuous settlement between the left and right wing parties because while it is aspirational, it is immeasurable allowing politicians to kick the can down the road. It is for these reasons that overcoming vocational prejudice is difficult (Chankseliani & James, 2016) particularly when social mobility and raising aspiration as part of political discourse is ultimately a more powerful one compared to parity of esteem.

In so far as it would be simple to argue that the reforms and associated policies were just political rhetoric ultimately leading to policy failure there are other fundamental and far-reaching elements at play that make achieving parity of esteem elusive. Brockmann and Laurie’s (2016) work on the impact of the vocational-academic divide on apprentice identity identified three factors preventing *parity of esteem* from being achieved – the historical class divide in England; a degrading policy discourse; and a hierarchical labour market structure. Building on these findings, and drawing on other research evidence, a contrast to the way the goal of parity of esteem is portrayed in the policy discourse is presented, emphasising the reality of the outcomes of the education and training system and the labour market.

### ***Historical class divide***

The Tripartite System, introduced through Butler’s (1944) *Education Act* institutionalised distinct academic and vocational pathways whereby students were streamed at the age of 11 into the three different types of secondary schools – grammar, secondary modern and technical schools. Yet, the technical schools were never developed to the level originally envisaged (DfES, 2005), setting up a system that was in disrepute because of the two tiers it created (DfE, 2011). The term itself, perhaps unintentionally, points to the seemingly intractable nature of this issue: ‘esteem’ can be an estimation, opinion or judgement or an observation of account, worth or reputation (OUP, 1989) and is often a favourable opinion. In the context of academic and vocational education it is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that parity of esteem is so difficult to achieve, given its dependence on subjective judgements that are liable to changes of perception through time (Watters, 2009, p.12); even Norwood in 1943 left the measure of esteem to the reputation of the school (see introduction above) and is

ultimately a matter of student (and parental) opinion and choice. In addition, employer recognition (or not) of vocational qualifications as entry into the labour market is an important measure (discussed further below). This subjective judgement is compounded by the way the class system in England still operates (Elliott Major & Machin, 2018) and the way in which middle-class and upper-class parents perceive of their children attending the academic route rather than participating in the vocational route (Wolf, 2002). For over 50% of young people, it is clear that the strong preference is to pursue school (A levels) or college based courses (primarily A levels and, to a lesser extent, BTECs) as opposed to employment-based qualification routes (NVQs and apprenticeships), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Pupil destinations in England after age 16 in 2017/18 (state-funded schools)

Fisher and Simmons (2012, p. 38) have suggested that the parity of esteem, ‘between the vocational and the academic [...] has never been effectively addressed [...] because it is so deeply seated in institutional divisions and peculiarly English cultural attitudes.’ The fundamental issue remains: it is impossible to have parity of esteem when one route has no esteem in the eyes of parents and students, and we can see this reflected in the take-up of vocational qualifications, especially in terms of peer effect (Battiston, 2020). The many government reports from the 1950’s and government-sponsored training initiatives introduced between 1965 and 1994 have added to the turmoil of understanding surrounding vocational qualifications. Instead of enhancing the standing of vocational training schemes and qualifications, the opposite effect was felt; these ‘schemes became associated with cheap labour, social engineering and the massaging of unemployment statistics’ (Ryan & Unwin, 2001, p. 99). A key example of this was the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Raffe’s (1990, p. 63) accurate prediction that YTS ran the risk of ‘being stigmatized as a scheme for the less able, the less motivated and above all else the less employable, and thereby being sucked into the vicious circle of low status’ rang true. The plethora of unrelated VET initiatives were strongly criticised for failing to add up to an overall national strategy or system of vocational education (Ainley, 1990), and for lacking an effective interface with formal schooling and the workplace in terms of sound preparation for an occupation.

Of course there are success stories but these are few and far between, and generally work along the same class lines mentioned previously. To illustrate, David Beckham<sup>i</sup> is, arguably, the most famous person to come out of the vocational route in England (Elliott Major & Machin, 2018) although admittedly his success has little to do with his vocational qualification. He signed a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) contract with Manchester United Football Club in 1991.<sup>ii</sup> His other Man United colleagues, such as Ryan Giggs, that make up the Class of ’92 follow closely. A further contender would be the Queen’s nephew, Viscount Linley,<sup>iii</sup> who completed a course in woodworking at the School for Craftsmen in Wood at Parnham House between 1980 and 1982 effectively becoming a carpenter (who went on to build a successful furniture business). In all actuality, even though his SOC of carpenter would indicate downward social mobility, making and selling furniture that sells from £5,000 a piece would suggest otherwise. The point here is that David Beckham is in the 3.3% of people from working class origins to move up into (sporting) elite occupations (based on earnings) (total n=17.7%), while Viscount Linley is in the 6.2% of Professional or managerial origins (for want of a better descriptor for the Royal Family) to move into working class occupations (total n=32.6%) (Friedman & Laurison, 2019, pp. 12-13). Infinitely longer though is the list of famous people to come from the academic route *remaining* in their class of origin; one only has to look at Parliament to get a sense of the scale (The Sutton Trust, 2019). Indeed of the 57 UK Prime ministers, 46 went to University and 48 of them attended

private secondary schools.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, The Sutton Trust (ibid.) showed that while the 2019 cabinet under Prime Minister Boris Johnson had less privately educated members than previous Conservative Cabinets – John Major’s was 71% in 1992 and Margaret Thatcher’s was 91% in 1979<sup>v</sup> – it is still disproportionate to the general population that attend private schools, which stands at approximately 9% of adults (Kynaston and Green, 2019 p. X). Figures for the senior civil service are not much different: 48% attended private school; 29% a grammar school; and the remainder comprehensives at 23%. At university, 51% attended Oxbridge, 38% attended the UK top thirty institutions, and a small minority (7%) other UK universities (Kirby, 2016, p. 2, elaborated on pp. 22-24).

The reason these figures in particular matter is because the politicians and the policymakers that are setting the education and training agenda (Taysum, 2020) are potentially replicating advantage and disadvantage through the education policy decisions that are being made by them and their litany of consultants (Gunter et al., 2015). If one is making decisions about the type of education and training system that should be available to all students, then it is likely the default will be to their own experiences. This process is similar to recruitment and selection decisions in elite professional service firms, whereby people recruit in their mirror image even where a commitment to social inclusion and diversity exists (Ashley & Empson, 2017). With the decisions about vocational education and training being made by politicians, policymakers and civil servants that have little or no experience of the vocational route – it is for other people’s children (Wolf, 2002) – the historicity of the class divide is perpetuated. As such, it is not surprising that the policy discourse is degrading to the vocational route, and that parents and students do not see it as a viable option.

### ***The nature of vocational learning and qualification development***

The legacy of the academic and vocational divide formalised in school education from 1944 still resonates strongly in both compulsory and post compulsory education and training. Moreover, for at least four decades, various government interventions have attempted, and mostly failed, to make the vocational route more attractive. A social stigma attached to vocational qualifications could not be overcome by merely introducing a new type of vocational qualification or claiming parity. Some of these new vocational qualifications had the direct purpose of establishing parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications, such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). These were to be school- and college-based qualifications studied alongside academic qualifications with some work experience and assessed through projects and assignments. However, as Edwards (2008, p. 371) points out, the GNVQ,

...was intended to inform both employers and university admission tutors that its holder had reached, through a different and more applied learning experience, the same 'level' of educational performance as an applicant with traditional A-level passes. But in a system in which 'practical' studies have been regarded for so long as suitable only for the second best, it was not surprising that most of those qualified to take the academic route did so, or that many less obviously 'suitable' students did so too. In so far as the two qualifications competed for the same students, they did so on very unequal terms.

Rather than bridging the academic-vocational divide reforms have led to an “academic drift” within vocational learning where, in order to achieve ‘equal standing’, qualifications become more like those with which they seek parity’ (Raffe & Spours, 2007, p. 42- 43). Trying to improve VET by making it more like academic qualifications, reinforces the underlying

assumption that an academic education is superior rather than focussing on the qualification as a good preparation for the world of work, which clearly GNVQs were not.

The most recent qualifications – T-Levels – have been introduced as the equivalent of A-levels for technical education (see DBIS/DfE, 2016; DfE, 2017). There will be 15 career pathways and occupational families incorporating a mandatory element of work placement that should enable stable careers for the qualification holder. This quality workplace route is imperative to enable young people to build the skills and knowledge necessary to face the challenges of ever-increasing complex work environments. However, the workplace element of T-Levels was reduced before they were even implemented into the qualification system to make it more equitable to academic qualifications. Even BTECs, once the preserve of technical education, were misappropriated: ‘Higher rates of progression for BTEC students have helped transform the perception of the qualification as being primarily a route to work to primarily a route to higher education...’ (Kelly, 2017, p.4). Attempts to equate vocational and academic approaches to education are fundamentally flawed because the learning involved in each is structured differently (Spöttl, 2013). This is unsurprising, given that they have different signalling purposes and currency in the labour market (Méhaut & Winch, 2011). The implication is that the academic approach is highly systematic whereas the vocational approach far less structured, focusing, *in extremis*, on just those areas needed to perform practical tasks. These are, to a greater or lesser extent, caricatures because engineering, medicine and nursing, for example, are all in higher education with a mix of practice in real world settings (Billett, 2009) and while more characteristic of the vocational approach, are afforded a higher esteem because of the institutions in which the qualification is earned (Keep, 2018a).

In England the challenge is exacerbated by the fact that many vocational qualifications contain so little theoretical knowledge, particularly those below Level 3 (Winch, 2011), which is meant to be equivalent to A-Levels. As a consequence, the two routes are more polarised than in some other European countries, for example, Germany and the Netherlands. The underlying issue is that a very narrow concept of skills formation based on the ability to complete specific tasks, rather than occupational capacity, has been maintained emphasising outcomes rather than on understanding that is based on knowledge and skill (James Relly, 2020). The problems arising from this approach are manifest in England’s apprenticeships. In setting competency standards at the minimum acceptable level they often failed to provide the stretch needed for further development in all but the most rigorous schemes. Their academic ‘equivalency’ is further undermined by the wide variability in knowledge content between the different apprenticeship frameworks at each level (Fuller & Unwin, 2012) and by assessment regimes that do not compare with the increasingly rigorous focus on external summative assessment for academic qualifications (Baird et al., in press).

One avenue by which parity of esteem was to be established was through the publication of standards-based linkages, which provided official tables of equivalence between different types of vocational and academic education qualifications (Shields & Masardo, 2018). In the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) vocational qualifications are accorded a general equivalency to academic qualifications: for example, an intermediate apprenticeship (Level 2) is given declarative equivalency to 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C and an Advanced Apprenticeship (Level 3) equates to two A levels. While no doubt intended to make these routes more attractive, in reality this does not stand up to scrutiny. The desire for equivalency stemmed from the proliferation of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) since the 1990s – over 142 countries have now developed a framework (Allais, 2017, p. 458). In particular the English NQF, was an attempt to unify vocational and academic qualifications into a single qualifications framework to consolidate the three track system – A-Levels, GNVQs and NVQs – that had developed from the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training*



*for the 21st Century* (DS/ED, 1991). NQFs were designed ‘to address perceived challenges such as the lack of transparency, inflexibility and fragmentation of qualifications and qualifications systems, the irrelevance of education and training to labour-market and social needs, or the need to enhance access and progression’ (Raffe, 2013, p. 143). It is important to note that although the English NQF was uniquely based on the development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), these vocational qualifications were never intended to be the basis for a comprehensive NQF for all qualifications (Young, 2011, p. 259). Subsequently, and disturbingly given the NVQ basis, the English NQF had an important effect on the development of many qualification frameworks not only in Europe but around the world (Allais, 2010). CEDEFOP (2015, p. 6) believed such frameworks can be ‘a force for social equity’ and ‘are able to add value to a learning process and support access to employment’. Even so, many commentators point to such qualification frameworks lack of success in these areas (for example, Pilcher et al., 2017). Even with the new Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) it was not clear that it was enabling employers, parents and students the opportunity to understand the transparency between qualifications, potential pathways for progression (Evans & Kirsch, 2017), or preparation for the world of work.

### ***Mass expansion of higher education (HE)***

Where once HE was the preserve of a chosen few, after Blair’s Labour Party conference speech in 1999 where he ‘set a target of 50 per cent of young adults going into higher education in the next century’, HE became a goal for many. Holmes and Mayhew (2016) signify three phases of expansion. The first was in the late 1960s following the Robbins Report when new universities were created such as University of Essex (1964-65) and the University of Stirling (1967). The second was when all polytechnics were awarded university status in 1992. These authors note that the third phase was more gradual ‘and involved the likes of teacher training colleges and agricultural colleges becoming higher education institutions (HEIs)’ (ibid., p. 492). As a consequence, institutions in the HE sector now offer a widely dispersed range of subjects and degrees, many of which are vocational from Level 3 upwards to Level 6 - the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree or higher. A good example is in the newer universities (e.g. Middlesex), which were previously Polytechnics and seem to be more in tune with local labour markets’ needs, combining the vocational and the academic. Middlesex University has developed degrees in partnership with local employers, sharing in the development of the degrees and in the teaching on them, and with practical work in the firm included (with close relation to the theory back in the university site). Moreover, ‘to achieve greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic credentials, and to achieve greater global competitiveness, new ‘elite’ centres for vocational education, known as University Technical Colleges, were announced’ (Atkins & Flint, 2015, p. 36) in 2010 with a University as the main sponsor often in conjunction with a major employer and/or FE college. The UTC in Derby is a good example where Rolls Royce is the employer partner. There are currently 49 UTCs operating in England.

An issue remains though and that is while these institutions all have university status, within them they are ranked and institutional status still matters (Keep, 2018a), which impacts on the types of subjects, courses and degree levels offered, and subsequent labour market outcomes (discussed below). Williams and Filippakou (2010) hypothesised that mass higher education is more like a series of concentric circles in which elite institutions remained at the centre, with the increasingly wide band of universities and colleges offering HE, whether considered academic or vocational, moving outward. In 2019, participation in HE stood at 50.2% (DfE, 2019c), the goal of Blair having been reached even if it was not formal policy any longer.

This massification, in essence, is exacerbating the problem. As Keep (inter alia) has pointed out, we do not need more graduates but more people qualified at intermediate (sub-degree) levels 4 and 5. The focus on graduates in England has meant a hollowing of the workforce trained at these levels that has not been seen in other OECD countries, or even in Scotland where ‘sub-degree courses have remained a much larger component of post-compulsory activity’, and which prior to the recession in the 1980’s England had a lot of: ‘Alongside apprenticeships, large employers such as the BBC, the National Coal Board, British Steel, BP, ICI, PO telecoms, British Rail and the electricity boards all offered HND/HNC technician training via day or block release or night school’ (Keep, 2018b). While some predicted a hollowing out of these occupations due to technological advancement and emphasis on a knowledge economy, the need for intermediate level jobs has not abated, and even though research shows that qualifications at level 4 and 5 have higher rates of return than at level 6 (Bachelors degrees) (Espinoza & Speckesser, 2019), young people’s options become more academically focussed due to the emphasis on HE through government rhetoric, as the subsequent viable entry route into the labour market.

### ***Labour market structure***

Within this complex arena of qualifications, the worth of vocational qualifications is ultimately dependent on employers buying in to their currency in labour markets; a measure of their esteem. At present, many occupations in England lack stringent license to practice legislation, outside of the professions where in many cases their HE degree is seen as such, and where required in certain occupations it is underpinned by health and safety legislation, such as for electricians and gas fitters. Lack of professional licenses to practice has long been criticised as it fundamentally undermines vocational qualifications and provides little incentive for employers to support VET schemes (e.g. Mazenod, 2016). In turn, this perpetuates the reputational divide created between academic and vocational qualifications hindering achievement of parity of esteem.

Consequently, with more and more young people encouraged to enter HE, whether it is the right path for them at that point in time or not – as opposed to encouragement to enter a high quality apprenticeship or higher vocational/technical qualification – the labour market becomes flooded with graduates. The cascade down the occupational hierarchy that occurs when graduates enter non-graduates jobs is problematic (Tholen et al., 2016). With a larger number of graduates looking for employment in a labour market with a finite number of traditionally graduate jobs, those young people looking to move into jobs that were traditionally accessed through the vocational route become overlooked. From an employer’s perspective this is a rational move. When faced with the option to recruit and select a graduate versus a non-graduate, the perceived capability that HE signifies is vast (Keep & James, 2010). What this does is create a system of unequal opportunities particularly where good quality vocational options are now swallowed into HE, making all else residual and seen to be of lesser value.

Moreover, in addition to research showing over-qualification and skills mismatch in the graduate labour market due to the occupational hierarchy cascading downward (Holmes & Mayhew, 2016), individuals with vocational qualifications achieved worse outcomes on a number of levels. Furthermore, those learners who enter higher education through a vocational pathway achieve lower grades, even when controlling for a number of socio-economic factors (Shields & Masardo, 2018) and that some academic qualifications continue to provide greater rates of return than vocational qualifications (Bibby et al., 2014). While there are positive associations between the achievement of vocational qualifications at Levels 3 and 4 and labour market outcomes (Patrignani et al., 2017), and pockets in which people with higher level vocational/technical qualifications in STEM subjects have rates of return

significantly above those of many degree holders (Espinoza & Speckesser, 2019), the currency of a vocational qualification is generally seen as lesser than academic qualifications.

## Conclusions

Over recent years, it has been suggested that we move away from attempting to achieve parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications (Sainsbury et al., 2016). Pring et al. (2009) contested the term a decade ago:

Perhaps the search for parity of esteem [...] is not so much a false as a meaningless aim. There are different kinds of learning experience, different kinds of courses. [...] rather than pursue parity of esteem in a highly divided system (with all the fabricated equivalences which that entails), the basic structure of the qualifications system has to be addressed. (p. 7-8)

Moreover, Goldthorpe (2016) has suggested that policymakers focus their effort on reducing social inequalities of condition rather than trying to use education policy as a silver bullet for social mobility; ‘Rather, a whole range of economic and social policies is needed...’ (p. 107).

While the structure of the labour market and the qualification system, and an outdated class system confound parity of esteem, the primary issue that comes out of this analysis is that there is still a far from universally accepted view of the purpose of VET and where it should fit into the English educational system. Hodgson and Spours (2008) argued that government efforts to raise the status of vocational education and qualifications have unfortunately not only failed to make the system more accessible and well-regarded but have rather added confusion about the structure and purpose of VET, particularly in relation to an expanded higher education sector through its massification. Their point is echoed in the Wolf Report (DfE, 2011, p. 21, emphasis in original) arguing that the failures of the VET system were,

not despite but **because** of central government’s constant redesign, re-regulation and reorganisation of 14-19 education. [...] This is in spite of unprecedented levels of spending; and after thirty years of politicians proclaiming, repeatedly, their belief in ‘parity of esteem’ for vocational and academic education.

The huge numbers of young people and adults who pursue vocational schemes deserve better: good quality vocational qualifications are good for society in terms of individual levels of achievement, self-worth, and agency (Winch, 2014). Consequently, calls for parity of esteem of the two routes (Elliott Major & Machin, 2018, p. 181) while a worthy goal, belie the fundamental intention and importance of each, and as Wolf (DfE, 2011) pointed out, everyone can see through it. The Government in 1944 could not confer parity of esteem on secondary institutions, leaving it to the population to vote with their feet based on reputation, and governments more recently have certainly not achieved it; vocational education and training needs to first be understood, given purpose and resource, and then meaningfully integrated into a wider system of education and workforce development, thus giving it genuine esteem in its own right.

Moreover, in these times of uncertainty England’s future economic prosperity rests on more young people choosing to pursue vocational routes to higher levels. The recent reforms in vocational and technical education outlined in, *Post-16 technical education reforms: T level action plan* (2017) emphasised that,

The reforms will help Britain make a success of leaving the European Union. They will support young people and adults to secure a lifetime of sustained skilled employment and meet the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy, contributing to improving individual's social mobility and economic productivity (BIS/DfE, p. 4).

The worth lies in making the vocational route valuable to young people, their parents, and employers through investment in quality, higher-level vocational and technical education and training in well-resourced vocational institutions as Augar recommended (DfE, 2019a). Only then will the vocational route be given the esteem it deserves.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Beckham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Beckham)

<sup>ii</sup> Class of '92 is a documentary movie about six footballers who joined Manchester United football club at the age of 14, and who later went on to take the club to many victories:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVloytikOBk>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Armstrong-Jones,\\_2nd\\_Earl\\_of\\_Snowdon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Armstrong-Jones,_2nd_Earl_of_Snowdon)

<sup>iv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom\\_by\\_education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Prime_Ministers_of_the_United_Kingdom_by_education)