The Limits of Public Policy - affecting change in identity formation in young people

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This paper explores the extent to which identity formation in young people has been affected by public policy developments in education and training. The analysis suggests that the aspirations of policy makers to encourage all groups of young people to reach high levels of initial education and training have been seriously compromised by a tendency to use a limited set of policy levers to determine options or 'routes' in general education and vocational education and training. In particular, the paper argues that a weakening of structures and rise in individualism as a means of explaining and encouraging participation has directed policy attention away from management of key dimensions of the economy and the education and training system. It suggests that these dimensions are managed more directly and successfully in other nation states. It concludes that identity and the tendency to participate in specific routes in the education and training system are deeply enmeshed, and that greater participation in effective preparation for the labour market is only likely to arise if public policy is more highly integrated and co-ordinated.

Agency and individual identity

A conception of the learner as individual actor pervades contemporary educational and training policy. The school improvement movement has emphasised close monitoring of individual learners (DfES, 2001). Flexibility in the curriculum has been advocated as a means of ensuring that both the school and post-compulsory curriculum meets individual needs – and by optimising motivation, encourages maximal attainment (DfES, 2001). The importance of engaging with individuals' 'preferred learning styles' has been promoted as a means of enhancing pedagogy and learning at all stages of education and training. Flexibility in the form of qualifications and certification – for example, modularisation and credit systems – has been promoted on the basis that it allows greater access and less formalised patterns of education and training (DfES, 2001). Lifelong learning has emphasised the importance of individuals 'taking responsibility for their own learning' (Coffield F, 1999). Relaxation of central prescription and an increase in decision-making and financial control at the level of individual schools and colleges has been viewed as a mechanism for improved performance (DfES, 2001). Debates on funding mechanisms for post-compulsory education and training have centred on issues of shifting towards demand-led systems, with consumers impacting on quality through exercising choice in providers and type of provision (Robertson, 1996). The New Deal has at its heart a core value which suggests that people should take greater personal responsibility for participation in the labour market and thus hold greater personal control over their prosperity – a weakening of public support infrastructure and a strengthening of individual agency as a key to personal and societal goods (Wesley, 2001). All of this takes place in a wider commercial and industrial context of shifts to demand-led approaches, greater tailoring and focused marketing of products, all of which feed higher expectations of choice and meeting individual need.

The extent to which policy in each of these areas has been successful is not the focus here. Rather, the focus is on how this pervasive emphasis on individualisation affects the personal identity of learners of 16-19 years of age, and whether this is compromising rather than enhancing participation in vocational education and training.

Policy in the area of post-compulsory vocational education and training manifests deep tensions: policy statements include strong exhortations and ambitious aims - which are accompanied by weak instruments to realise them. The rhetoric is of high participation in vocational options, yet the levers to secure this are distinctly limited. The emphasis on individual agency is pervasive. The policy urges young people to make very specific choices – to participate in continuing education and training provision. But this paper argues that structures of incentives are weak. Study of this area reveals deep ambiguities about where the borders of state control should be drawn, and the precise location of the interface with individual liberty. Successive Governments have failed in establishing a mass-participation vocational route (Judd, 2002) despite strong policy commitments. The failure derives thus not from an absence of a desire to establish this route, but from weakness in policy instruments. Ambiguity prevails; in some areas, state control has been exercised through strong measures. For example, for young people, unemployment ('economic inactivity') has been closed as an option, through

restrictions on benefits. In the academic route, a different view of state control has emerged, delineating a different line between state control/intervention and personal liberty. Here, a rhetoric of personal choice and autonomy in choosing routes and options has been accompanied by more flexible qualifications and curriculum structures (QCA, 2002) – personal autonomy has been bolstered by policy and policy instruments. 'Flexibilisation' of the curriculum and of qualifications has consolidated more open processes of realisation of self, of identity formation (Rohrer, 2000). The new curriculum structures are intended to enshrine personal choice and endorse personal liberty and responsibility in exercising that choice. More people are staying on in education (the exhortation to participate) but in staying on are presented with structures designed to offer greater choice in curriculum options and combinations of qualifications. But in respect of the work-based initial training route, the strong exhortations to participate have been accompanied by very weak policy instruments. This gives a shape to the boundaries of state control like that of the coast of Norway – promontories stretching out where control has been extended, deep inlets where control has been held back. What characterises policy around the vocational route is the strength of the aspiration and exhortation to establish mass participation (Marshall, 1997) versus the reluctance to underpin this with resilient policy instruments.

This paper departs from more typical discourse in the philosophy of education in order to explore the mechanisms which might better underpin policy exhortation. The analysis is focused on highly pragmatic management of financial mechanisms. However, exploration of the interface between personal liberty and the state, and the oughts and rights of measures to deliberately channel or constrain identity formation in young adults run beneath all lines explored here.

The world of people of 16-19 years of age has undergone substantial change in the last 50 years, and with this, the way they see themselves (Wardeker, 2001; Donnelly & Millichamp, 1999). Structural changes in the family have been accompanied by increases in pressure to perform well in education (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997; Evans, 1999), alongside an increase in industry targeting youth markets. The question of personal identity is crucial to the choices of route, behaviour and engagement which young people make (Meijers, 1998) during initial education and training. These choices shape both the attainment levels achieved at the end of compulsory schooling and the objective and perceived 'route options' which they have on exit (SocEU, 1999). High attainment levels in academic qualifications are strongly correlated with greater prosperity and participation in continuing education and training (SocEU, op. cit.). In the mid-1990s, approximately 50% of British adults in the lowest social class had not participated in any education or training since the end of compulsory education. In contrast, the same percentage of the highest social class were participating currently or had done so in the previous three years (Sargent et al., 1997). Within this, identity plays a significant role: key reasons for non-participation by 'long-term non-learners' centre on feelings of alienation from learning settings, and concern that they do not have sufficient ability to participate (La Valle & Finch, 1999).

Although largely unsupported by empirical evidence (Unwin & Wellington, 2001; Ashton & Green, 1996), rhetoric proclaiming accelerating change in the nature of labour markets has permeated recent education and training policy (SocEU, 1999; DfEE, 1999; CEDEFOP, 1998). Government has mobilised this in arguments exerting pressure on young people to prolong their participation in education and training - principally in full-time education:

"...as we move into an economy based more on knowledge, there will be ever fewer unskilled jobs. For this generation, and for young people in future, staying on at school or in training until 18 is no longer a luxury. It is becoming a necessity...."
(Tony Blair in *Bridging the Gap*. SocEU, 1999)

It is certainly the case that on most measures - and certainly in successive reports from OECD (OECD, 2001) - England has lagged behind other comparable nations in respect of post-16 participation rates. What is distinctive about the English policy response to this challenge is the emphasis on expansion of higher education - a target has been set for 2010 of 50% of 18-30 year olds participating in higher education (DfES, 2002). Against this backdrop, this paper argues that the full time work-based route is underdeveloped as a pathway in the education and training system. It argues that despite the fact that this pathway is consistent with styles of learning and learning settings which are highly congruent with many young peoples' sense of themselves and their aspirations, it remains of low social status and suffers from low participation rates. The analysis presented in this paper suggest that the causes of these problems seem to lie in a failure of public policy surrounding the full-time work-based initial training route.

Action and identity in an uncertain world

The portrayal of uncertain, volatile futures in a changing labour market (Hollinshead, 2000) has impacted on identity formation of young people, who no longer expect a 'job for life' (Unwin, 2001). Evans represents this as a 'sea of manufactured uncertainty' (Evans, 1999) – where young people are '...crossing and recrossing a number of boundaries in their navigations both during and after compulsory schooling: between school and part-time work, full-time work and college, work and social life. Yet, it has perhaps been overlooked that, although it is certain that such busy navigation is occurring, these young people are still hoping to find firm land on which to rest for part of the time. They are aware of the fragility of the labour market....but, we suggest, they should be entitled to some

stability during their formative years as young adults' (Unwin, 2001). The pressures on young people to be consumers, workers, learners, adult, self-supporting are significant. Finding direction in an increasingly diverse education system only contributes to the problems of overall identity formation and rational decision-making regarding progression (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

Identity and context: sociocultural analysis

The drive towards individualism marks a specific attempt to encourage a 'more responsive' education and training system which engages with the way in which people see themselves, with the intention of unlocking hitherto constrained abilities and aspirations (DfES, 2001). But this strengthens a conception of individual identity as something purely personal, a thing originating in and determined by the individual, with unclear relations to historical and social conditions. The relation between public policy and personal identity is thus cast as one where public institutions (education and training systems both compulsory and post-compulsory) are seen as needing to respond to personal identity rather than be formative of it. This paper suggests that this is a very serious error. But it is an error reproduced from the history of conceptualisation of identity within psychology. Erikson's founding work located 'identity' as: '…a sense of inner identity. The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he (sic) has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and expect of him…' (Erikson, 1968). The notion of 'self-chosen and positively anticipated future' (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) which is embedded in this is consistent with notions of individual agency as crucial to decision-making and action in lifelong learning in England (Coffield, 1997). 'People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities' (Holland *et al.*, 1998).

But many of those working to further refine Erikson's underpinning (Marcia, 1966) – including work on vocational identity - have focused on the extent to which individuals have progressed through various stages of identity formation. This has been criticised for locating analysis within issues of individual choices and agency rather than the interaction of the individual with the socio-political context in which they are situated (Waterman, 1988; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Indeed, Erikson's work emphasises the importance of changing context within adult identity formation (Erikson *op. cit.*). Contemporary commentators have developed a more sociocultural approach to issues of identity formation, theorising the cultural tools which individuals appropriate in order to construct and communicate identity within social settings (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). If young people see themselves and their futures in particular, historically-bound ways, and these representations both use and fuel conceptions located in contemporary culture, just what should we look at to understand the extent to which identity is, and might be, shaped by public policy in respect of education and training?

Widening the scope: social, economic and political determinants

The analysis in this paper goes beyond the work suggesting that proximal cultural influences are crucial in identity formation in young people. It suggests that an understanding at the level of political economy and legislative control are necessary to fully understand how young people conceptualise their options and opportunities.

The images of working life which are presented in guidance and in policy emphasise constant change, uncertainty and impermanence (DfES, 2001; Dearing, 1996). In the rhetoric of the knowledge economy (DfES, *op. cit.*; SocEU, 1999), work and labour markets are characterised as unstable and susceptible of constant change, with workers and employers entering into shifting relationships as specific skills and knowledge initially have high market value but swiftly become redundant (Hollinshead, 2000; Ladipo, 2000):

Labour as:			
raw material	human capital	resource	individual agent
to be used	to be measured and used carefully	to be developed	to be contracted with
commodity	commodity	changeable asset	unpredictable partner
pre industrial revolution	fordism	human resource development	learning careers
and industrial revolution	1950s and 60s	1980s and 90s	1990s on
words us and them(working) class	workforce training	human resource development	lifelong learning
images Germinal Hard Times Tess of the D'Urbervilles	I'm All Right Jack	The Cleese videos Educating Rita	The Navigators

The notion of a flexible, changeable labour market promotes the currency of qualifications with a wide exchange value – general qualifications (general credit) rather than qualifications which apparently limit movement to limited pathways (specific credit). For any young person who is uncertain about which direction they want to take, who wishes to defer choice and keep options open, staying in general education and accumulating general rather than vocationally-specific qualifications appears to be a very rational choice. Vocational qualifications suffer from two problems which consolidate this tendency. Firstly, they are typically taken by those young people who have lower educational achievement (NCVQ, 1995) – this is recognised by students in schools and college and present in the way in which young people describe their own groups and contrasting groups (Coles, 2000). Secondly, they are narrow in content (Prais, 1995). The German system, with 13 occupational fields and 370 different apprenticeships, appears from the outside to be narrow and restricting – but in practice over 40% of apprentices after completing their schemes find employment in an occupation other than the one for which they have trained (Prais, *op. cit.*). This results from the confidence which employers have in the quality of the nationally-agreed schemes, the long-duration nature of the training (3 years minimum), and the fact that the curriculum includes wider general education elements such as maths, foreign languages, etc.

The academic-vocational divide

'I didn't know what an A level was – you feel pressured to do it. There's all these people telling you you're smart, you'll do well. It's a big step to rebel if you've been hearing this since you were little. All these expectations. You don't want to fail.'
(Coles, 2000)

In contrast with England, in Germany (Steedman H, 1998; QCA 2000) only 13% of 18 year olds are in university education, while around 60% of 16-19 year olds participate in the Dual System apprenticeship route. In England, despite attempts at modernisation and marketing, only around 4.4% of 16-21 year olds are on workbased programmes akin to the German system (Steedman H, op cit; Unwin L 2001).

Modern Apprenticeship participation rates 2000/1
Starts 2000-01 Advanced MAs and Foundation MAs combined = 3.8% of the 16-21 cohort (of 3,646,800)
In training March 2001 Advanced MAs and Foundation MAs combined = 4.4% of the 16-21 cohort (of 3,646,800)

Background data: DfES

The work based route persists in being unattractive to young people in England. Higher education has assumed the position of a high status, 'reified' progression route (Morris, *et al.*, 1999; Deer, 2001). This reification has been consolidated by very dominant influences. For example, in justifying its move to student loans, the Conservative Government highlighted the greater return to those holding a degree - with an assertion that the increase in earnings over a working lifetime more than compensates for the costs incurred by the individual. The publicity highlighted the superiority of a degree as a high earning, job-related qualification. Notably, there was little examination of the fact that:

- the return figures were based on historical data from a time when far fewer 18 year olds were in HE, thus a degree was a rarer commodity;

- the figures were averaged; not all degrees have equal currency in the labour market, with some of the most popular courses having significantly lower return.

But the overall effect was one of highlighting the degree as a desirable labour market qualification. This was further reinforced in the policy community by studies showing greater return to academic qualifications, in contrast to vocational qualifications (Robinson, 1997). In addition, despite TVEI, the success in some schools of Advanced GNVQs (now AVCEs) and an emphasis on 'education *and* training' in Government policy statements, the perception in the majority of schools and amongst young people is that academic qualifications are of high status and vocational qualifications are of significantly lower status (Spours, 1997). The vocational-academic divide is a potent one (Hillier & Oates, 1997). Young people's accounts of their experience in education and training continue to emphasise both the differences in status between the (high status) academic route and the (low status) vocational route. In particular, learners in all routes emphasise the pressure which is placed on them to stay in general education:

'They don't tell you enough, it's all by qualifications these days, you've got to have A levels, you've got to have a degree, and you've no chance if it's a dead end job at 16.

'When doing A levels they tried to persuade me to go to university, until they realised when I said 'no', I meant it, and wasn't going to let any one change my mind that I wanted a job.
(Pye & Muncie, 2001)

During 1995, as part of NCVQ's evaluation of GNVQs, GNVQ learners who were asked about the status of the GNVQ relative to A levels were clear about the perceived lower status of the qualifications, but they recognised that the styles of learning were distinctive and more suited to the way in which they preferred to learn. This had figured in their decision to take the qualification. That the learning styles were indeed distinctive was established through further empirical study of classroom interactions (Meagher

et al., 1996). The differences were not simply located in a different balance of learning styles. They included an increase in autonomy, which brought positive gains in terms of identity as adults and 'responsible people' but also problems in terms of teacher-student conflict when work deadlines were not met in a context of lower close supervision of work. Alongside this, a different social dynamic obtained in the learner groups (Bates, 1998):

'GNVQ is more hands-on. You get out of school. With course work you can take more time. People give you more respect, trust you. It makes you feel more mature and adult'.

Students who do retakes and GNVQs are more down to earth. They think A level students have 'communication difficulties'. The 'A-star nerds' need to do something more than achieve academically. They were admired for their achievement but seen as 'sad and limited'.

'In GNVQs you get assignments and it's up to you'. 'It's the way you work – whether you want to do it'. 'Basically you are your own boss'. ' It shows you've got the confidence'. 'If you need help, there's friends to talk to'. 'With GCSE and A level you've just go to get your head down – study, study, study. That's not very helpful for someone like me who gets distracted…'. '…if you don't do so well first time there's always another chance. With GCSE there's only one chance – unless you want to do it again…'
(Coles, 2000)

In the 1995 evaluation, the students were clear that the assessment processes in GNVQs (then, predominantly coursework assessment) had been a very strong attraction of the course. However, they also stated that the only way that they could see of increasing the relative status of GNVQs was to '…put in exams…make it like A levels'. This contradiction has been played out in policy as well as in the students' views of parity of esteem – the Dearing review of qualifications for 16-19 year olds (Dearing, 1996) and subsequent development of the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education to replace the Advanced GNVQ took the curriculum design of GNVQs towards the established A level model. Students had expressed how GNVQs had provided them with a clear alternative to A levels; an alternative which was motivating, and closer to their preferred learning styles and aspirations. They identified with the form and purpose of the provision and had a clear commitment to the difference of GNVQ – the styles of learning, the assessment modes, the closer proximity to the working world. However, they were clear that the qualifications carried the stigma of low status precisely because of this difference, and because they were particularly attractive to those who had become disenchanted with education (Hillier & Oates, 1997). With the stigma of low status hovering over the qualifications, progression statistics showed a very interesting picture. In terms of progression to HE, students on Advanced GNVQs were slightly more likely to receive HE offers than UCAS applicants in general:

GNVQs and Offer-Making 1994-1997				
Year of entry	1994	1995	1996	1997
Numbers of GNVQ applicants	905	9555	19353	22853
Numbers of GNVQ applicants with one or more offers (percentage of total)	772 (85.3%)	8525 (89.1%)	17721 (91.6%)	21393 (93.6%)
UCAS offer-making - all applicants	76%	86.5%	88.4%	92%

Source UCAS

Not content with the objective success of GNVQs in securing progression into HE, policy-makers' efforts to achieve parity of esteem for GNVQs (Dearing, *op. cit.*) have been directed towards 'pushing qualifications…towards 'sameness', through using current common conceptions of high status qualifications as a principle for structuring the overall system of qualifications' (Hillier & Oates, *op. cit.*). Despite the calls for an alternative route, the vocational alternative has assumed the form of the dominant qualifications, particularly in respect of assessment. Many schools who had used GNVQs as an alternative route have since substantially contracted their GNVQ/AVCE offering – as a consequence of a reduction in demand, a concern at the constant change in the qualifications and/or a recognition that the qualification no longer offered anything particularly distinctive (QCA, 2002).

The history of GNVQs is thus one of a qualification developed as an alternative, in order to appeal to the distinctive identity (in terms of learning, of aspiration, and societal status) of a specific group of learners. Complimented by researchers as part of a genuine effort to construct a full time, high status vocational route (Steedman et al., 1998; Spours, 1997), participation flattened off (at approximately 47,000 in 1988/9) at the point at which the qualifications were being more closely aligned with A levels.

Apprentices in England - determined young people

GNVQs and their successor, the AVCEs, were developed as vocational qualifications to be delivered in full time education settings. Modern Apprenticeships have been developed as a full time work-based route, combining on- and off-job elements. There are two very distinctive features of Modern Apprenticeships. Firstly, it is perceived by those young people on it as a high quality scheme, in contrast to schemes such as YTS which preceded it (Morris et al., 1999). Secondly, those young people who make their way onto Modern Apprenticeship have frequently done so in the face of parental opposition, against the advice of educational providers, and in the face of peer opinion that vocational training is for the less able. The contextual pressures regarding identity are stacked against participation. Apprentices frequently cite how a range of people tried to dissuade them from taking the work-based vocational route, and to stay in general education. School teachers were cited as the most common negative influence.

'...yes everyone (tried to put me off) really. Well my careers advisor advised me to stay on doing A levels, because of my predicted grades, and my parents weren't that keen, because where it was, because I used to live very close to school, so it was so handy to stay on, but no one really persuaded me to, you know, go for it, but my parents supported me, they'd have preferred me to do A levels, but you know they supported me with what I wanted to do, so it's like my choice...'
(Unwin, 2001)

Studies have established that young people's recognition of the need for qualifications as a requirement for entering the labour and for increasing returns has increased in the last decade (Morris et al., 1999). At the same time, the amount of part time working undertaken by full time post-16 students has increased significantly, as young people's consumption patterns have changed (Richards & Oates, 2001). Unwin's work with young apprentices suggests that there is a strong desire amongst them to combine job, pay, training/studying, and qualifications: '...the combination reflected the fact that young people looked to the workplace as a fresh site for learning, somewhere that would be different from school and somewhere that could unlock their potential...' (Unwin, 2001). The importance of provision within the education and training system of routes with different approaches to learning was also emphasised

throughout evaluations of GNVQs (NCVQ, 1995; QCA, 2002). Apprentices on Modern Apprenticeship seek to continue with learning but also want to enter the adult world. They wish to make a managed transition into the labour market, a transition that marks a complex rite of passage with significant pressures and tensions in relation to identity (Beach, 1995).

However, alongside its positive image and the strength of commitment of the young people on the programme towards following a work-based route, Modern Apprenticeships have been troubled by poor completion and by poor attainment of qualifications requirements (Level 3 NVQs plus key skills, in the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship), and by the low overall percentage of the cohort (around 13%) which participate in the scheme. In Germany, 60% of 16-19 year olds progress into the Dual System of apprenticeship, with only 13% participating in Higher Education (28% in England) (OECD, 2001). The apparent specialisation of the 370 separate apprenticeship 'lines' is offset by the reality of 40% of apprentices gaining employment in occupations other than the one for which they trained. This is partly the result of the breadth of the curriculum, which includes three components – learning through working, training in the workplace, and an off-job component in colleges. The general education element includes foreign languages, social studies, physical education and pedagogics. The trainees express strong attachment to the Dual System whilst acknowledging the higher status of the academic route (Woodward, 2002). The feature of the Dual System which contrasts so strongly with the English scene is the level of participation (60% in the German Dual System, 10% of the cohort in Modern Apprenticeship in England) and the employer commitment to funding the initial vocational training system – the Government funds only the off-job element. By contrast, employer commitment has been elusive in the UK, with levy systems being discredited during the 1960s and 1970s (Finegold, & Soskice, 1988), and all forms of apprenticeship decaying dramatically during the industrial restructuring of the 1980s (Steedman et al., 1997). In Germany, there has frequently been an excess of training places – something completely alien to the English training scene.

The key to high participation and employer funding lies in a complex set of relations between the quality of the scheme, the culture which has arisen around it (and its congruence with young people's aspirations and self-image), the internal scheme funding arrangements and labour market regulation. It is management through public policy of these relations which drives home a stark contrast with public policy directed at 14-19 year olds in England.

The Dual System in Germany - supporting robust pathways

The Dual System operates on the basis of a balance of incentives for all participants – employers, young people, and the state. The internal funding relations within the

scheme contribute towards stimulation of employer commitment and participation. An apprenticeship typically is three years long. Trainees tend to be less productive than an experienced worker for the first half of this period, but in the latter half of the scheme reach experienced worker productivity levels. This might suggest that the training is inefficient, since it continues after the point at which the learner has reached experienced worker productivity levels. YTS and YT were structured as 6-12 month schemes since this was considered the shortest time in which people could reach standards appropriate to entry in the labour market. However, the longer duration of the Dual System holds the key to the successful internal funding of the schemes. Since experienced worker productivity levels are reached during the second half of the training period, this pays for the first half. This plays a crucial role in the willingness of employers to make places available, and to train people who they may not ultimately employ. However, the only reason that this relationship obtains is that the training rate is held to 60% of the fully-qualified worker rate (although rates do vary somewhat in different occupational areas). In England, trainee worker rates rose during the 70s to be on average 90% of the fully-qualified worker rate. At this level, the positive relation regarding return over the period of training would evaporate, reducing employers' propensity to make training places available and to train those who may find employment elsewhere at the end of their training.

What this does not explain is the trainees' willingness to participate in the programmes. If the training is of long duration, includes general education components, and offers only 60% of the qualified-worker rate, why do young people simply not go straight into the labour market? The answer is that the labour market is strictly limited in respect of 'licence to practise'. Very few jobs exist which do not require trainees to be formally qualified. Legislation also states that no one who is unqualified can employ workers. The question of whether the Dual System is accepted by young people and is consistent with their emerging aspirations, perceived needs and self-image is not the leading factor; these follow from the system rather than lead it – all the incentives and levers are carefully lined up in order to strongly encourage mass participation.

It is this public policy approach which contrasts so strongly with the position in England. The importance of a vocational route was highlighted in the 1980 New Training Initiative (MSC, 1980), but policy has since then focused on stimulating higher levels of training through direct funding and provision of new forms of qualifications (Westerhuis, 2001). Concern at the consistent failure to increase participation and completion has led principally to constant revision of the curriculum shape and content of government-funded schemes, all within fundamentally the same government-subsidy oriented funding arrangements. One objective of the New Training Initiative was to remove 'time serving' from initial vocational training. This was a central doctrine – that long-duration training was inefficient and that the time taken for a young person to acquire a level

appropriate for entry to the labour market could be reduced. This led to short schemes (such as Youth Training) which contrast sharply with the shape of Dual System provision. The internal funding mechanisms present in the Dual System cannot operate within short duration training of this kind, leaving the schemes dependent on being popular with employers only on the basis of the level of subsidy they receive from the Government. This compromises stability in the supply of training provision in the medium- and long-term, fails to encourage mass provision of large numbers of training places, and fails to create conditions where employers feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in terms of structural provision of initial vocational education and training. The English system is thus driven by Government funding – remove direct subsidy and the levels of training are liable to contract (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). This very different set of relations which obtains between employers, Government and learners is exemplified in the reaction of individual employers:

'...He'd been made redundant so he rang us up and said would I give him a position. I said I wasn't really sure about this, I didn't want anybody. However, he had previous experience for about a year with another sign company, so you think to yourself, well, right, he must have some basic skills. So I said I'd think about it, and then I rang him back about a week later. I said I've had a thought, if you can get onto New Deal I will take you on. If you can't, I won't, because I don't need anybody at this particular moment...' (Williams, 2002)

Although systematic studies of the German system have featured in transnational comparative work for a considerable time (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Prais, 1995; CEDEFOP, 1984) the qualities of the provision have begun to be picked up in the popular press (Woodward, 2002), but with an interesting twist. In a report on Conservative shadow education spokesman Damian Green's visit to study the German system he has stated:

'(whilst being impressed by the provision) ... the bad thing on the evidence of what we've heard is the degree of micro-regulation from the government, in particular the idea that if you want to teach something it has to be a recognised profession...if we introduce a reformed system into Britain I'd certainly want it to be much more flexible, much more fast moving and much less under the detailed control of a central government apparatus...' (Woodward, 2002)

But this entirely misses the point in relation to the co-ordinated policy on curriculum structure, funding, wage control, and labour market regulation on which the success of the provision depends. A failure to recognise this reproduces the shortcomings of strategy on vocational and work-based provision from the New Training Initiative (MSC, 1980) onwards.

This analysis may seem remote from the issue of youth identity; but the links are important and profound.

Expanding the limits of public policy

Young people in Germany are presented with much more limited choices and those choices are deliberately limited by public policy. German policy moves slowly (Woodward, 2002). However, the range of options which they are presented with are clearer and more widely understood by parents, young people, employers, etc. who benefit from the stability of arrangements. Furthermore, those options offer clearer progression in the system, and even seemingly-limited vocational options provided by occupationally-specific apprenticeships allow for considerable labour market mobility. By contrast, English 14-19 year olds experiencing complex issues of identity formation are presented with an array of choices, a story of uncertain and volatile futures, a polarised high status-low status academic-vocational divide and apparently flexible but essentially weak set of structures in the work-based training route. The greatest impact of this is on marginalised groups (Kerda, 1998) where identity includes receptivity to work, but where current incentives do not result in high pressure for participation in full time long duration initial training (Yueh, 2001). Morris' 1999 study found: '...young people on the margins of society display the most negative attitudes to employment, in terms of their chances of gaining work, and the support and guidance they receive. No evidence was found, however, of an 'underclass' of young people, socialised into unemployment as a way of life; studies suggest that the vast majority of young people want to work' (Morris et al., 1999).

The English Government's policy relating to 'welfare into work' is a confounding factor in relation to development in England of the same kind of regulation-based policy which drives mass participation in the German system (Williams, 2002). The policy of encouraging all groups into work and creating a larger number of work opportunities - including processes whereby excluded groups move into more marginal forms of employment (part-time insecure work contracts) - requires liberalisation of labour rates and labour markets. This is in strict tension with the type of regulation which creates mass participation in the Dual System.

The need for policy apparatus which matches policy objectives

Current Government strategy is to promote the full-time education route through scheme revision, provision of recognised qualifications and marketing (La Valle & Finch, 1999). Increased emphasis on the full time vocational route is to be welcomed. But simply making young people more aware of the provision and increasing curriculum demands is unlikely to increase participation significantly. Young people's stories about their feelings and self-perception when faced with choices of route at 14 and 16 are full of angst and uncertainty (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997; Coles, 2000; Evans, 1999; Unwin, 2001). Flexibilisation increases rather than decreases uncertainty and choice. How much part time work should a young person do when they are studying full time before they compromise their examination grades? (Richards & Oates, 2000; Manning, 1990). Should they give into pressures to try for the higher education route even though the work based route provides the adult world which they are anxious to enter? (Nyyssola, 1999). With uncertain personal aims, in a context of rising and uneven graduate unemployment (OECD, 2001) should they just try to aim for the highest qualification possible irrespective of subject?

In the English context, the policy of increased flexibilisation and diversity in education and training provision provides a mass of routes with weak incentives and ambiguous cultural labels, in which marketing and guidance are insufficient to diminish young people's uncertainty or guarantee robust and informed choice. Analysis of the operation of the German system demonstrates how public policy can be developed to maximise participation and encourage provision of a high volume of training places. If policy aspirations to increase participation in high quality training are to be realised and identity formation in young people better supported, then the nettle of more co-ordinated and wide-ranging policy mechanisms may need to be firmly grasped.

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Note

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