EDUCATION, JOBS, AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

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Introduction

In the last quarter of the twentieth century a state-generated agenda, with a focus on issues of employment and employability, assumed an increasing position of prominence in the comparative education literature. One of the more prominent examples, the 1995 World Yearbook of Education (Bash & Green, 1995), offered a range of perspectives, drawn from commentaries on a diversity of contexts, on the relationship between education and work in addition to some of the more salient issues concerning the integration of young people into society. These included:

- The ramifications of global economic and political change
- The impact of industrial restructuring
- Changing labour markets, lifelong learning, and systems of vocational education and training
- Diversity and equality in the transition from education to work

The above use of vocational education and training necessitates a working definition based on the conventional view that it comprises: ‘all more or less organised or structured activities that aim to provide people with the knowledge, skills and competences necessary to perform a job or a set of jobs, whether or not they lead to a formal qualification’ (Tessarin & Wannan, 2004: 13).

In signalling the developing impact of globalisation the World Yearbook exemplified an expanding narrative which was to reflect, both literally and metaphorically, a growing sense of fin de siècle. There appeared to be little anticipation of the kinds of dramatic political events to come (such as 9/11 and the Iraq War) and the ensuing anxieties concerning the apparent alienation of specific constituencies of the young and perceived threats to national and global security. However, it did make an additional contribution to an approach to comparative education that was to focus increasingly upon the unifying consequences of international economic integration.

To place these issues into perspective it may be helpful to open with some comments which would appear fairly evident to those with only a casual acquaintance with a comparative and historical knowledge of education. First of all, questions concerning its connection with the world of work began only to possess meaning once education ceased to be a minority, elite pursuit. Indeed, the classic elitist approach placed a premium on education precisely because it was judged to be irrelevant to the masses.
Thus, the requirement that those in leadership positions receive an education was itself dependent upon an acceptance that the mass of workers did not – and vice versa. Plato’s view that a liberal education – intellectual, aesthetic, and physical – would provide the necessary foundation for the guardianship of society has persisted over space and time (Plato, 1955, Book 7).

Secondly, however, there has also been a long-standing view that if the masses were not to be educated they at least might be trained in order that they perform their essentially manual labours in an efficient and effective manner. The nature of such training was to be highly prescribed, frequently little more than a process of modelling the tasks to be learned against existing practice: the traditional institution of apprenticeship enshrined in the master–pupil relationship. This institution was to be found in diverse forms but was generally based upon the common notion of mastery, insofar as apprentices were successfully inducted into a ‘guild’ of practitioners. Essentially, there was the expectation that the pupil would defer to the master as the ‘gatekeeper’ to the world of recognised craftsmen. Note also that apprenticeship, as with elite education, was gender-specific, being mainly the preserve of the male sector of the population – and many respects this would appear to remain the case. While, in the UK, the recent renaissance of the system (the Modern Apprenticeship) is apparently open to all, neither occupational stereotypes nor the process of gendered occupational segregation have disappeared (Fuller et al., 2005).

Thirdly, subtle changes begin to occur in the narrative. Thus, the term vocational was progressively incorporated into the vocabulary of those with a remit for policy and practice in respect of the preparation of individuals for specific occupations. While vocation had been previously associated with the notion of a profession which evoked the idea of a calling, its adjectival counterpart came to have a rather more prosaic meaning: that which pertains to skilled jobs, often with a manual aspect, but ranking below those for which a university education was a prerequisite. Thus, the plumber and the electrician might have been in receipt of vocational training while the doctor and lawyer would be expected to have received a university education. In this regard, Wolf (2002: chapter 3) notes that policymakers in the developed world have promoted vocational education and training as a necessarily good thing for national economies while at the same perceived as ‘a great idea for other people’s children’.

The Vocationalisation of the Academy

The apparent rupturing of the boundaries that have conventionally separated vocational training from liberal education signalled widespread changes in the structure and content of work. In addition, it also suggested a more general shift in social relations. In the context of higher education Kazamias and Starida (1992) have identified a process of vocationalisation as opposed to that of professionalisation where the emphasis is on preparation for employment. Here, the focus is the market and thus the necessity for a relatively rapid response to its dynamic. Bearing in mind the competitive nature of the global employment market governments which, in the spirit of free enterprise, had previously taken a somewhat laissez-faire approach have in recent years sought to