

# Prospect

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### The training illusion

#### **Britain's obsession with vocational training is wrong-headed. It has produced only one clear winner-the CBI**

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In education and training policy, Britain's new cross-party consensus is complete. Both main parties trumpet the importance of education for economic growth. Both distrust most teachers and all local authorities and believe in central control of qualifications and the curriculum. Both defer to the ideas of business, and neither party recognises that the self-evident truths of the late 1990s rest on about as much evidence as the despised progressive orthodoxies they replace.

We are so used to discussing education in terms of economic relevance that any other reference strikes us as curious. It is not only Cardinal Newman or von Humboldt who sound like voices from another world. To read Crowther on upper secondary education in the 1950s, or the 1960s Newsom report on education for the less academic, is to realise how much our policies are dominated by economic panic.

British politicians have convinced themselves, as have their US and European counterparts, that unless we increase our training and graduation rates, we will face economic decline. The past 15 years are thick with pronouncements by commissions, quangos and politicians making this point.

At one level the links between education and prosperity are obvious. We could not run our societies if we were all, or mostly, illiterate. The technical progress on which our wealth depends is the product of a complex web of schools, universities and research laboratories. The German engineering and chemical industries of the 19th century had the same symbiotic link with higher education as information technology companies have with top US research universities today. Unskilled workers face a bleak future as fewer jobs depend on muscle power alone.

So far, so good-but no further. To argue that there is a simple link between education and growth is to prefer faith to evidence. Compare one developed country with another and the self-evident truth vanishes. There is nothing to suggest that among rich countries-or, indeed, poor ones-particular levels of wealth are linked with particular levels of education, or that pumping more money into education will produce

measurable benefits.

On the contrary: much of the explosion in education spending is best seen as consumption-following growth rather than creating it. Postwar Japan is a good example; so is late 20th century western Europe. Most of us know that, for an individual, more education makes very good sense. Graduates earn much more than non-graduates. But this has more to do with selection and competition than with productivity. Employers use qualifications as a proxy for ability. The qualifications required for jobs constantly increase. But studies show that this reflects a rise in the supply of "qualified" people rather than any changes in job requirements.

Politicians, however, preach a different (although equally simple) equation. Japan has higher university participation rates than we do, Japan is richer, so we need more university students. Germany trains more craftsmen than we do, Germany is richer, so we need more vocational training.

Britain's current panic is characterised by a particular enthusiasm for policies designed to yield "skills" of direct relevance to the workplace. To this end ministers preach the need for "parity of esteem" between vocational and academic education. The result has been a policy of enormous wrong-headedness, whose victims are the least successful members of society. Our need for more graduates may be far from obvious; but our societies do demand the traditional content of academic schooling-high levels of literacy and mathematics. To use a word processing package or a spreadsheet properly, you need good written English and an ability to think symbolically (as learned in algebra). The IT skills then come quickly enough.

We know (from some of the best longitudinal studies in the world) how poor English and mathematics blight people's lives. Men who have trouble with reading or numeracy at the age of 21 usually end up in lower paid jobs or unemployed; women are more likely to become teenage mothers. Yet it is precisely those with poor basic skills who have been channelled into "vocational" training.

Ministers' own children, meanwhile, along with their more successful contemporaries, ignore the rhetoric and continue to behave rationally. Twenty years into employment, adults with a degree have average earnings which are almost twice those of contemporaries with no formal qualifications. Those with a basic vocational award can expect only 9 per cent more than if they had no qualifications at all.

Young people are also anxious to keep their options open. More and more people choose "mixed" A-levels which cut across arts and science subjects. This is sensible. The British (like the US) labour market is one in which young people typically hold a wide variety of jobs throughout their 20s before settling into longer-term employment.

Given this labour market, and rapid technological change, politicians' belief in vocational training as a passport to national prosperity or individual success is curious. Yet they have held to a vocational crusade for over a decade now, devoting huge resources to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

Rarely can an educational programme have received so much political support, so much criticism from professional observers, or been so comprehensively rejected by its main target group. NVQs are tightly specific qualifications. The programme has added qualifications such as "water distribution (mains laying)" and "plastics processing operations (polymer compounding)" to more traditional vocational qualifications such as engineering assembly or hairdressing. NVQs require candidates to perform practical, job-related activities, but they do not include general education components.

In the mid-1980s, politicians expected young people to forsake full-time classroom-based studies for NVQs. In fact, most young people see "training" as a dirty word. The narrowness of NVQs is inappropriate for both young people and the adult unemployed. Moreover, studies of how NVQs are delivered have found inconsistent standards and instructors' time dominated by paperwork rather than teaching.

Over the past decade, fewer and fewer young people have allowed themselves to be steered on to vocational training. But for those who have, this has meant NVQs. Promoting NVQs remains the main concern of the country's 79 Training and Enterprise Councils. The Industrial Training Organisations responsible for standards continue to generate their paper mountains at public expense; and NVQs retain centre stage in the "education and training targets" by which successive governments judge their success in "skilling" Britain.

Why has so criticised a programme survived largely unscathed? The answer lies partly in the economic panic which spawned it; and partly in the reluctance of politicians to admit failure. But it also lies in another pillar of cross-party consensus: a deep-seated suspicion of organised professional groups and "whingeing" academics, plus a susceptibility to business opinion and, more specifically, the Confederation of British Industry.

The CBI has been the main non-governmental proponent of vocational education, and the staunch defender of NVQs against any attempts at reform. Indeed, CBI influence has been so pervasive that we might easily forget that it is a lobbying organisation, and one which represents one section of business only: the large corporations.

Nor is the CBI shy about its role. In a document urging on the government a "crusade" for lifelong learning, it boasts about its earlier policy successes: the establishment of

"national targets for education and training," the development of "competence-based qualifications" with their emphasis on "the core skills which we all need."

These policies have indeed been adopted; but the self-congratulatory tone is not justified. The "competence-based qualifications" refer to NVQs. The "national targets" are less well known. They set targets to be met by the year 2000, such as the proportion of young people to have completed vocational or academic qualifications at a certain level. As with other numerical targets, what has come to matter is quantity, not quality. In any case, as the year 2000 approaches, it is clear that many of these targets will not be met.

The core skills to which the CBI refers are central to the plans for 16-19 education developed by Ron Dearing under the Tories and now endorsed, almost unchanged, by Labour. The CBI's core skills are: working with others; application of number; improving one's own learning and performance; communication; problem solving; and information technology.

The list has a motherhood-and-apple-pie air; but it is useless as a guide to practice. For example, "application of number" sounds like maths; in fact, it is about "using arithmetic and statistics" in the course of doing plumbing, healthcare and so on. Teachers have found core skills a nightmare to deliver. They have not known what standards to apply, and have been unwilling to fail students for poor performance. The contrast between the back-to-basics approach in primary education and the ideology of core skills could not be more marked.

That British "business" should have become the legitimiser of vocational training is curious. After all, the origin of the campaign for such training was the perception that growth was lower than in other developed economies: business was not delivering. Why entrust reform to the people who are responsible for the mess in the first place?

The reasons are clear enough. Once politicians accepted the claim that education is linked to growth, it became difficult to see educators or civil servants as preferable to employers as curriculum designers. Had Margaret Thatcher not taught us that businessmen are repositories of expertise and efficiency?

There is another reason: the CBI's enthusiasm for a policy role. A century ago, a similar economic panic led to a Royal Commission on training. Businessmen gave evidence to the commission; but having advocated the need to upgrade education and increase its science content, they left implementation to educational professionals.

Why are they not doing so today? Self-interest. The CBI had good reason to monitor government training policies because of the possibility of compulsory training levies

and related interventions. Thanks to its activist policies-the promotion of NVOs, the development of training targets-it has seen off the threat of compulsory levies.

Give a business lobby de facto policy-making power and it will defend its interests. The effects on growth may be unclear, but the effects on subsidies are certain. In late 1990s Britain, large businesses have unprecedented access to subsidies for their own in-house training programmes. A decade of muddled training policies has produced only one clear winner.