14-19 Green Paper: Mistaken vocations

EDITORIAL

Prof Richard Kimbell

Technology Education Research Unit, Goldsmiths University of London

Five years ago (Summer 1997 issue) I wrote an editorial entitled 'Visions of Vocation', which was in part about the development of GNVQ and its impact on university entrance. Much of the debate at the launch of GNVQ was about the importance of 'equivalence' for vocational studies in the school curriculum. The idea was (and still is) that our traditional curriculum is seriously academic and does not properly regard vocational activity – and that this is a weakness that should be put right. Exactly the same might be said of the history of the R.A.Butler post-war tripartite system of education (grammar/technical/secondary). Again the idea was that these different kinds of school were not to be seen as better and worse, but different – offering academic study to an intellectual elite (about 20% of the population) and an increasingly practical education to the rest. And yet again the same story can be told of the development of GCE and CSE. The development of CSE was premised on the idea that it was not an 'inferior' examination, but rather a parallel and different kind of examination: equally valuable but for a different purpose.

Time after time we have experienced initiatives that reflect the importance of a curriculum for non-bookish youngsters (actually the majority of youngsters), and time after time they get distorted and run into the sand because the 'non academic' is interpreted as inferior; as second rate. Even taking such courses is seen (at least in part) as an admission of one's failure to be able to cope with 'proper' studies.

So it is absolutely no surprise to find exactly the same form of words trotted out in the latest offering from the DfES; '14-19: Extending opportunities, raising standards' (why are these titles so gut wrenchingly nauseating?). Here we find again the desire to 'promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes of study'.

Much has been written about the source of the intellectual snobbery that – in the British context – consigned vocational initiative after vocational initiative to the '2nd rate' bin. The ubiquitous nature of the class system (and its educational counterpart – the public school) underpinned the ethic. Historically, such schools provided an education based on classical studies for young ladies and gentlemen. They did not want to get too close to 'trade' (commerce), and would never be seen dead engaging in anything practical (manufacture) that gets the finger-nails dirty. This highly stratified view of the world created some wonderfully ironic twists. The great barons of the industrial revolution – whose wealth was based on manufacture and commerce (steel/coal/cotton/railways/engineering) – frequently sent their own children to the 'best' public schools to be raised as 'ladies' and 'gentlemen', scornful of the very manufacture and commerce that had generated the wealth on which they lived. In many such families, the policy ensured the rapid demise of the family enterprise, once the founding father had passed on. Correlli Barnett's *The Collapse of British Power* is a really good read on this and related subjects.

But, back to the latest Green Paper, which is all about 'coherence' across the 14-19 age group. It proposes:

- a more flexible curriculum responsive to students' individual needs
- a world class technical and vocational education
- a new Matriculation Diploma (a kind of US-style High School Graduation)
- reliable information and strong pastoral support
- responsiveness to those with special needs
- closer collaboration between schools, colleges and training providers
- flexible access through ICT.

'Our proposals include ways to ensure that all those with an interest can help shape and take forward the 14-19 agenda' (DfES 0154.2002)[1]

Who could argue with such a wonderful set of aspirations? Well I have two arguments; one very specific and one more general.

The specific one concerns the widely debated removal of statutory support for design and technology at Key Stage 4. There are two things to say about this, for the proposal is more interesting (and complicated) than I had first thought it would be. It proposes that there should be a new 'statutory entitlement' for all young people to access design and technology during Key Stage 4. What this means (I think) is that if a student wants to study it, the school ***has*** to provide a way of making it accessible for that student. The Green Paper is (not surprisingly) a little vague about how this might be done, and indeed the conditions under which it must be done. For example, if 10 students in a school opt to do design and technology, and the school decides this is a non-viable option, they nevertheless have to make it 'accessible' by another means (bussing to another school perhaps?). But what if the 10 students want to study 'food', and the school only offers a design and technology group in resistant materials? Is

there still an entitlement to access to the *chosen course of study*, or merely to the subject of design and technology? The devil is in the detail; and the Green Paper has no detail. Watch this space.

My more general argument is about the concept of vocationalism that permeates this document and that has been the source of so much of the aggravation that has shackled the development of a genuinely vocational curriculum in Britain. The problem shows itself in the association of 'vocational' and 'technical'. The document talks of the vocational as if it were naturally technical.

> 'Technical and vocational education should become a positive and fulfilling choice, not a second-class fall-back for the less able or disaffected.'

Later on in the document there is even an explicit reference to 'vocational subjects'.

But what is a 'vocational subject?' In the 1960s, when I was at school in the Medway towns, the local dockyard virtually guaranteed employment for any youngsters with technical interests. We studied metalwork and technical drawing, and for many of my contemporaries it became a kind of technical vocational preparation. The same picture held true throughout the country. Now the dockyard is closed, as are most of the huge manufacturing and engineering enterprises that once absorbed so much of our youth. The 'knowledge economy' that Blair and others are so keen to promote, demands different kinds of skills – not just from a few high fliers – but from all. What, now, is a 'vocational subject'? It is daft to expect a GCSE in engineering to be *vocationally* relevant to anything more than a tiny minority of youngsters.

What they might more likely need is vocational French, vocational maths, and vocational ... just about everything. The challenge of a knowledge economy extends the 'vocational' debate into those subject areas that could at one time sit (in their ivory towers) above the fray of normal life. No longer. Just try ringing a major company – or public service – in Germany or France and make a request in English. They will reply in English. Language is a vital vocational skill. And with retailing and banking absorbing so much employment, what about being able to calculate interest rates, tax, investments and pensions. Not to mention the need to decode the plethora of statistics with which we are constantly bombarded. (Can you spot the 'suppressed zero' in trend charts?)

The real missed opportunity in this Green Paper is that the authors have failed to recognise that we are at a critical watershed – a meeting point of two initiatives that need to be reconciled to the benefit of both. Vocationalism and Citizenship. Citizenship *could be* the new, knowledge economy form of vocationalism – rather than a lame, bolted-on form of social studies. The language skills, science skills, maths skills that are the entitlement of the citizen are also those that ensure employability. On this vision, all subjects are 'vocational subjects' and every student takes them, because every subject exists in more than one form (the music/history scholar *also* takes 'practical maths'). The tired old 'technical vocational' paradigm – and the stigma that went with it – just disappears into the mists of history.

Now that could bring some real radical coherence to the curriculum.

Note

1. Available from DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottinghamshire NG15 0DJ