

Clearing the jungle

**Hilary Steedman
and John West**
present a manifesto
to raise vocational
education in Britain
to the reputation
that it enjoys in
other European
countries.

Making the case for vocational education is not straightforward. The idea that it has a valuable part to play in the national educational system still seems to need some justification.

At its best, vocational education can be a happy marriage between providing a person with cultural and scientific development and with significant preparation for future working life, while at the same time being educationally valuable in itself. In order to present a credible case for it, however, there are certain corollaries.

For vocational education to play its proper role, it must:

- have a clear relationship with established occupations, trades or professions and with their entry and initial training arrangements, so as to offer the prospect of progression into the labour market;
- consist of educationally respectable material, such that attainment in vocational education can lead to progress to higher levels of education.

From time to time these two requirements will pull against each other. For example, there may have to be compromise between the inclusion of rather more “theoretical” material than those in industry consider to be strictly necessary and of practical experience outside the classroom as part of the course requirements. A vocational system built in a climate where both educationalists and those from industry and commerce respect the traditions and aims of the “other side” is likely to produce more robust results than one that reflects only one set of aims and not the other.

Figure 1 shows (for England) that, in the last two decades, vocational education has been an increasingly common choice amongst young people.

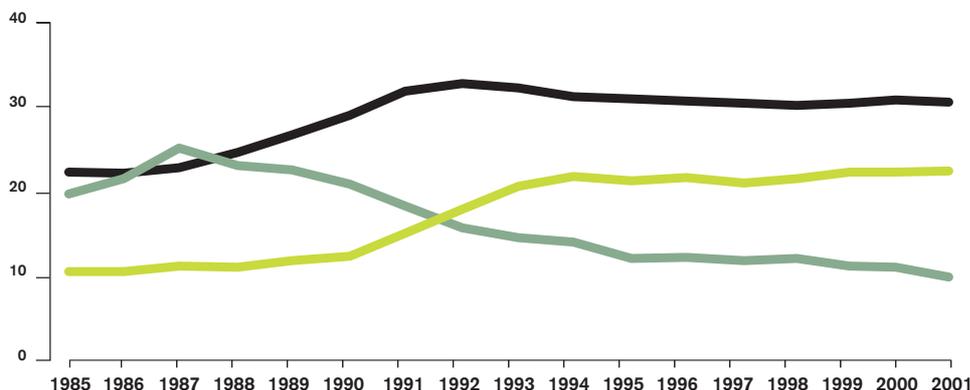
Whereas fifteen years ago only one in eight of this age group was in full-time vocational education, by 2002 more than one in four were choosing this option. In fact, vocational education accounted for a great part of the

increase in full-time staying-on places a decade ago, even eating into the share taken by the full-time academic stream as it supplanted many GCSE re-takes. Considerably fewer entered work-based training. However, if we add the numbers doing work-based training, whether funded by the state or privately by employers, to those doing vocational education, the total is higher than for those undertaking academic studies.

Vocational education is, therefore, a large and growing feature of upper secondary schooling. It is further worth registering the fact that vocational education is an important feature of higher education as well. Established professions, such as medicine and law, in many ways helped to shape the concept of the present day university, but higher education has always had a strong vocational content across a much wide variety of occupations. Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for first and sub-degrees (HESA: 2002, Table 13) show that last year nearly 50% of first degrees and some 70% of sub-degree qualifications were in vocational subjects.

At upper secondary level, the development of vocational education has been a mixture of “hands off” evolution and bursts of very directive policy. The “technical schools” envisaged in the Butler 1944 Education Act never developed as intended. But by the 1960s a pattern of day-release courses to go with apprenticeships had been established in further education colleges, encouraged by a number of the Industrial Training Boards set up under the 1964 Industrial Training Act. These courses, typically provided by City & Guilds of London Institute (CGLI), tended to be fairly “occupation specific”. Similar day release courses were provided in the 1970s by the Business Education Council and the parallel Technician Education Council, which merged in 1983 as the Business & Technician Education Council (BTEC). BTEC courses tended to be rather wider, with explicit elements of general education, and were designed around a principle of progression from secondary to sub-degree level, where its

Figure 1 Percentages in post-16 schooling



Source: “Participation in education and training of 16 to 18 year olds”, DfES 2002. Work-based training is part-time only and includes both government-supported and employer-funded training.

By 2002 more than one in four were in full-time vocational education

HNC was established as a “technical” qualification. BTEC also developed full-time courses on the same pattern, classified as Diplomas. Thus, by the end of the 1980s, it could offer a system of full-time vocational education, ranging from the First (level 2 equivalent in the national qualifications framework), through the advanced level National Diploma, to the Higher National Diploma (HND), all delivered by colleges of further education and - in the case of the HND - also at polytechnics. The Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board (RSA) also developed probably the most widely used secretarial and office-related courses, taught both in further education colleges and in private secretarial schools. In the late 1980s, RSA also developed a popular Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) qualification. All of these qualifications still exist, both for adults and for young people.

Though durable, however, these courses did not add up to a unified system of vocational education. They differed substantially in design principles and size. Though each body had its own system of progression, these did not equate. Neither, with the exception of BTEC, did they have any real purchase within higher education. Each consulted differently with industry over curriculum content – and with differing effectiveness. The extent to which the qualifications were recognised by employers became even less clear with the phasing out of almost all of the Industrial Training Boards in the 1980s.

Superimposed on all this in the 1980s and early 1990s came a bewildering number of government initiatives:

- In 1982, came the Technical & Vocational Employment Initiative (TVEI). In its “pilot” phase, this was intended to develop dedicated pathways of largely vocational education for non-academic young people in “the 15 to 85 percentiles of the ability range” (quoted in his book by Clyde Chitty). The aim was that programmes stretching from age 14 until 18 would create a distinctly vocational track. However, after its national extension in 1986, TVEI drifted from the original vision to a much more general infusion of employment-related aspects into a largely general curriculum.
- In 1985, the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) recognised the trend for young people, who might have progressed to apprenticeships, to stay on at school and college for a year after the end of their compulsory education. It aimed at introducing students to the skills that would be needed in employment and to an understanding of the world of work. The CPVE was an early example of a government orchestration of a national post-16 syllabus, requiring the three vocational examining bodies to act jointly.
- Then National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were introduced, following a review of vocational qualifications (MSC/DES: 1985). NVQs were not originally intended to apply particularly to vocational education. Indeed they sought to encourage work-based training as something of an antidote to classroom teaching. The NVQs saw

vocational education courses and qualifications as having merely a contributory role in raising overall occupational competence. However, NVQs did become taught in full-time courses in further education colleges. Moreover, their underlying philosophy of a syllabus based on standards of performance (outcomes) and an assessment regime typically consisting of observations and recording of performance in the workplace (or in simulations of it) became a template for the next phase of qualifications development. In addition, the NVQ initiative brought national recognition to a considerable number of specialised bodies concerned with the awarding of certificates in particular sectors of industry.

- Taking the CPVE initiative further, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced at three levels (Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced), via the three main vocational awarding bodies. Though without an HND equivalent, GNVQs were clearly meant to supplant BTEC qualifications and did so in a number of areas. They were aimed at young people who wanted to keep their career options open and so were not ready to embark on specific NVQs. But the new GNVQs were also supposed to relate to the NVQ framework, to make it easier for people to progress quickly to occupationally specific qualifications. However, there was early doubt as to whether they could provide satisfactory substitutes for the many quite specialised vocational qualifications on offer that had not been converted into NVQs. The impact of GNVQs was reduced by the number of changes to the scheme within a short space of time, relating to grading, external testing, and the “de-coupling” in 1999 of key skills in numeracy and communication and information technology.
- In 1993, the creation of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which took over the funding of FE colleges from local education authorities, resulted in a largely unintended further spur to the creating of vocational qualifications. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act limited the FEFC to funding courses tied to “approved” qualifications, or to “courses which led to them”. The FEFC decided that these contributory courses should themselves carry a certificate, to aid accountability and performance measurement. This led to the conversion of previously uncertificated courses into ones with awards, validated by the Open College Network and other new bodies.
- In 1996, the DfEE reported that: “Too many young people find school boring, particularly in the final compulsory years. ... The additional stimulation of learning some basic skills in a work setting may be just what these people need to reawaken their interest and motivation.” This paved the way for the introduction of expanded vocational education and training for 14 to 16 year olds, particularly for the least able and the most “disaffected”. At first this was developed at the margins of the requirements of Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum. However, subsequently “disapplication” became a frequently used method of creating the space for these



kind of work-related and vocational options. In 2001/2 one third of schools were using this facility to exempt some 5% of all pupils from up to two national curriculum subjects. Conscious that, in practice, “disapplication” is widely perceived as remedial education and such work-related learning as an inferior alternative to general study, the DfES now proposes that the new GCSEs in vocational subjects will be relevant particularly for this age group and that money will be made available to support 14 to 16 year olds’ study at a college or with a training provider for one or two days a week throughout Key Stage 4.

- Responding to a recommendation in 2000 from a Skills Task Force that there should be “separate assessment of underpinning knowledge and understanding through related vocational qualifications”, the government has announced that modern apprenticeships will include “technical certificates” for taught part-time courses concentrating on the theory behind the apprenticeship trade involved. These would be very much on the model of the old City & Guilds courses, which might thus be “re-absorbed” into the government-recognised constellation.

This turbulent history has resulted in a very wide range of courses, awards, institutions and - importantly - different rationales for vocational education. Each initiative, while purporting to rationalise the existing “jungle”, has in fact tended to make it worse. In all there are now 2,015 different approved vocational qualifications for those under 18. Of these, some 1,000 are NVQs, which are not intended for full-time delivery in college (even though some are delivered in this way), and a further 200 are key skills qualifications. Leaving these aside, we have 42 Vocational A levels, 39 of which can be taken as a double award and 12 of which can be taken in the half award format of an AS. There are 27 GCSEs in vocational subjects, with 77 GNVQs at Foundation and Intermediate levels. In addition, there are 130 qualifications classed as General/Vocationally Relevant and 441 as Vocationally Related.

One effect of this fragmentation of qualifications is that it is easy for young people to enter for the wrong one, both in terms of the occupation in question and of the level of difficulty and style of learning. One study (Payne (2001)) found very high levels of non-completion of post-16 qualifications, where in many cases apparently unsuccessful students had switched to and successfully completed a different qualification (sometimes at a higher, rather than a lower, level).

It would seem from Table 1 that up to a third of those who do not complete a vocational qualification are in fact capable of completing a different one. One could, of course, criticise poor advice, but with the range of different qualifications on offer it may be difficult for even the most experienced advisor to work out what would be best for a student.

A further feature is the “fall off” after 17 on the vocational route, as illustrated by DfES regular statistics for 2001.

Table 1. Successful switching rates

| | % terminated early or failed | of which % successfully completing a different qualification |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| GNVQ Advanced | 43 | 26 |
| GNVQ Intermediate | 41 | |
| BTEC First | 44 | 31 |
| BTEC National | 34 | |
| City & Guilds | 72 | 34 |
| RSA | 58 | 35 |
| NVQ (full time education) | 49 | 16 |
| NVQ (work-based) | 38 | |

Source: Payne, J, Student Success Rates in Post-16 Studies, DfEE, RR272 (2001)

Table 2. Fall off rates, aged 16 & 17

| | % of age group | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Age | 16 | 17 |
| A Level | 38.0 | 33.9 |
| Full time vocational education | | |
| Level 2 | 18.1 | 8.3 |
| Level 3 | 12.1 | 14.9 |
| Total | 30.2 | 23.2 |

Source: DfES

Table 3. HE entry qualifications, 2000 (%)

| | HND | Degree |
|---------------|-----|--------|
| BTEC | 16 | 7 |
| Advanced GNVQ | 23 | 6 |

Source: UCAS

The A level reduction is four percentage points. On the face of it, the vocational reduction is nearly double that at seven percentage points. But, when we look in more detail, we see a massive ten point reduction at level 2, offset by a rise for level 3 vocational courses. Clearly some people are progressing from level 2 courses at 16 to level 3 courses at 17. But clearly, also, large numbers are leaving the one year level 2 courses at 17 and not progressing any further. This raises the question whether it is sensible to present self-contained one year level 2 courses, particularly if they are not clearly linked to potential successors at level 3.

Both BTEC national qualifications and GNVQs offer the prospect of entry to higher education. Table 3 shows the proportion of higher education entrants holding these qualifications in 2002.



Each initiative has tended to make the jungle worse

The rates of entry to HND courses are healthy. But, given the fact that nearly 50% of first degree courses are vocational in nature, there ought to be a greater potential for penetration into higher education by these "top notch" secondary vocational education qualifications. Since no other vocational qualifications carry much prospect of entry into higher education, we also have to note that a third of 16 year old full-time vocational students are on courses which cannot lead, directly or indirectly, to higher education even if they excelled at them.

A second – and very damaging – feature of the fragmented state of vocational education is that employers have little confidence – or indeed knowledge – of the awards whose main purpose is to prepare young people for entry to their businesses. A scan of job advertisements rarely, if ever, reveals reference to recognised vocational qualifications, except for nurses and accountants. This is understandable, when we reflect on how frequently English qualifications have been subject to change of name, awarding body and so on. This lack of recognition means that issues about esteem become acute and vocational education that does not lead to higher education becomes something of a "waiting room" before a young person pitches into the labour market with no very solid qualification to his or her name. In many comparable countries, the basic identity of vocational qualifications has not changed for more than fifty years, leading to common recognition and valuing by students and employers.

Many of the features that are to be found in apparently more effective vocational education systems overseas are also present in this country. We have apprenticeships, admittedly at a lower incidence than Germany and Denmark, but in larger numbers than France, Finland or the USA. We have a clear university-bound A level track paralleling the German *Abitur*, Danish *Gymnasiet* or French *Bac Général*. We also have full-time substantial vocational education programmes, in the shape of the BTEC First and National, the intermediate GNVQ and the option of taking a double vocational A level (previously advanced GNVQ).

However, the English system is singular in the following respects:

- attempting to promote vocational education both as a distinct and substantial pathway and as a "mix and match" facility interspersed with academic options;
- having little articulation, in terms of well laid out progression routes, between full-time vocational education and either apprenticeships or higher education;
- having such an array of vocational education qualifications with so little articulation between them;
- seeing vocational education not just as for those of less than the highest academic ability, but also for those who are struggling with any kind of schooling;
- refraining from including general education within vocational options, relying instead on the new "key skills" element to perform a function which combines both incul-

cating wide "integrative" skills and continuing education in maths and English;

- viewing lack of parity of esteem both as a major problem and its achievement as an attainable goal.

It is essential for the future of vocational education that there should be a consensus as to its purposes. Lack of such a consensus over the past twenty years has resulted in the present large array of only partially compatible initiatives.

In our view, vocational education should be a substantive pathway for young people not able, or not wanting, to undertake the highest levels of academic study. It should be based on the concrete disciplines which occupations represent, but should also encompass continuing general studies. This strand is represented by the early notions behind TVEI, by the BTEC and by the Advanced GNVQ before it was "reformed".

If this vision is to be realised, we need a substantial vocational programme at Level 3 as the centrepiece of the system. This programme would:

- have as its core vocational knowledge and such skills as are teachable within a full-time, off-the-job environment that relate to a broad occupational area. This would mirror GNVQs, BTECs and the practice in Sweden. Experience indicates that there might be 15 to 30 variants in all;
- embrace "relevant" academic knowledge, broadly interpreted. For example, aspects of sociology and psychology might feature in an award in retail; maths and science in engineering awards; economics in business and administration; or biology in health care. Each programme should include two or three such "subjects". (Some countries make an unrelated strand of general education common to all vocational education programmes, but we think it would be better for these general education units to be related, so far as possible, to the vocational discipline being studied;
- take as a minimum two years to complete, with the academic elements taking at least two thirds of available curriculum time over those two years.

These programmes should be drawn up by joint curriculum groups comprising representatives of the industries in question (to ensure compatibility with their recruitment criteria and articulation with apprenticeships in their sectors), teachers of cognate higher education programmes (to ensure articulation with their programmes) and relevant secondary vocational teachers (to ensure that the programmes are deliverable). National accreditation by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority would be geared to ensuring that the different occupational programmes were of the same type of standard; that there had been genuine agreement between the parties; that sufficient academic material had been included; and that there was not proliferation of different titles for similar qualifications.



Assessment for the award should be a mixture of examinations (for the main related academic subjects and for knowledge of the vocational area) and of teacher assessments (for necessary skills). Though examinations might be staggered through the programme, there should not be public examinations to mark intermediate levels of attainment.

Further requirements for the award, though not necessarily part of the programme itself, should be:

- a minimum attainment at Level 2 in maths and English, whether through GCSEs at C or above, or through Key Skill units. (These could be gained before entry and individual programmes could make higher achievement in one or both of these subjects an essential requirement for academic studies);
- a substantial period of work experience – perhaps three months – relevant to the area in question, including a project based on it, or a specialised taught option.

This second feature is in order to introduce a choice towards the end of the programme. Those wanting to enter higher education would be well advised to undertake relevant work experience. Those intending to enter work, whether through an apprenticeship or directly, would clearly have less need of work experience at this point and would take a specialised taught option. This might very well be a relevant "technical certificate", which is needed as part of an Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMA). In this way graduates of the national programmes could enter an AMA with both the required key skills and the technical certificate. This route would thus lead naturally into the "accelerated option" for the AMA suggested by the 2001 Cassels committee report on modern apprenticeships.

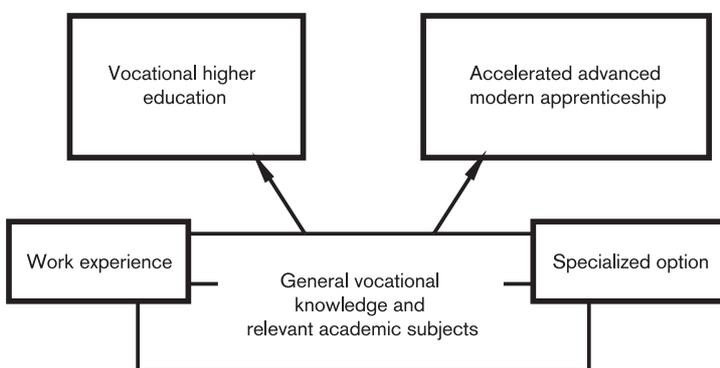
Students with strong GCSEs at 16 (four or five at C+, including maths and English), who were committed to studying a vocational area, might move straight on to such a programme and complete it at 18. However, if the experience of other countries is anything to go by, it is more likely that students with weaker grades at 16 would form the bulk of entrants. They would be best advised to undertake a one-

year preparatory programme at the intermediate level, both to begin to become accustomed to the vocational knowledge and related academic disciplines and to gain the higher grades of maths and English that they will need. They could do this through something approximating to the current key skills at level 2, or by re-taking the GCSEs concerned.

Because of their evident transfer value, we see merit in maths and English at level 2 being certificated by means of separate qualifications, rather than being subsumed in the syllabus of the main vocational award. We would not envisage that a public examination would be taken by young people at the point that they completed this introductory programme. It might well be that the institutions running these programmes would want to set assessments to motivate young people to learn and to give them recognition, as well as to satisfy themselves that students were ready to move into the advanced stage of the programme. However, there would be no merit in awarding a public qualification at this stage; it would be costly to run and might give young people the impression that they had reached a recognised end point of their education.

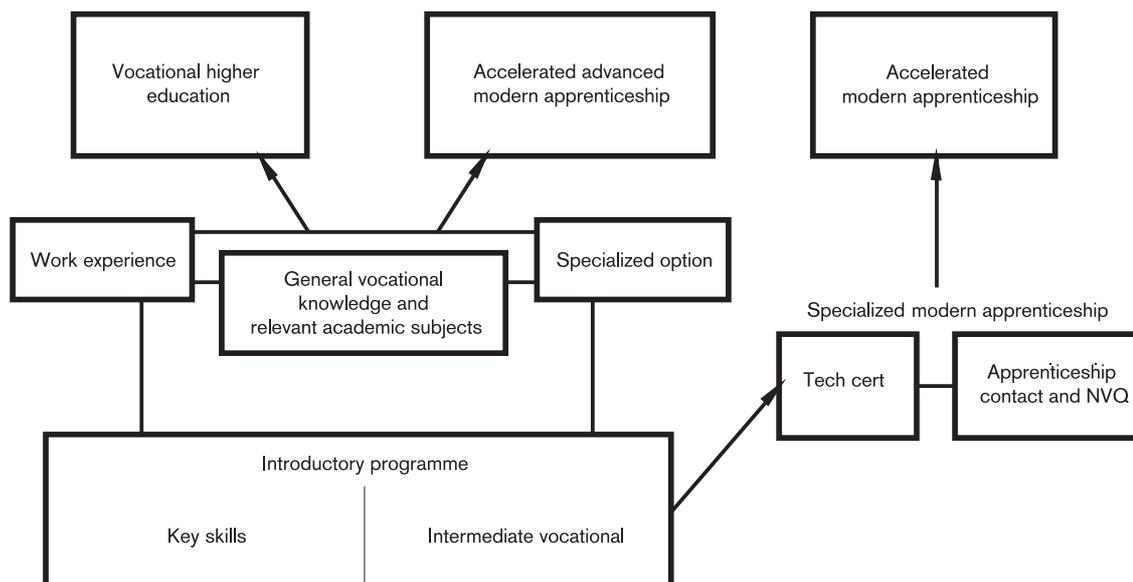
Though the expectation would be that the majority would continue with the advanced level programme, we accept that some will either not wish to enter the next stage or might not be capable of doing so. It is important, therefore, that there should be a recognised exit point that leads to a different form of development. For such young people the obvious route would be to take a Foundation Modern Apprenticeship. They could start on this while in full-time education by taking the "technical certificate" required for a given apprenticeship, followed by an apprenticeship contract with an employer with whom they would undertake the relevant work-based NVQ. They would then have the possibility of going on to the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship, achieving the important Level 3 through the work-based route. This gradual transition from full-time education to apprenticeship is very much what the Cassels committee had in mind in their recommendation for a "programme-led apprenticeship".

Figure 2. Advanced programme



We see merit in maths and English being certificated separately

Figure 3. Introductory programme and link to foundation apprenticeship

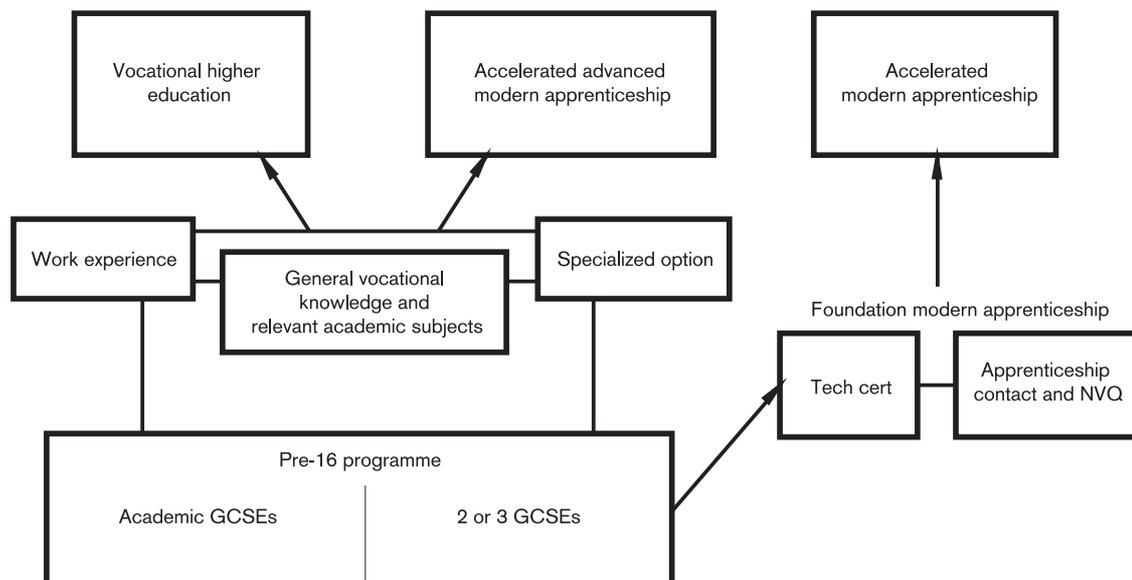


It would be possible for vocationally committed young people to undertake such a programme before they were 16, probably taking maths and English GCSE rather than key skills. However we would expect that this would be comparatively rare; in other countries young people tend not to focus on a vocational area at such a young age. Instead we would see a preparatory programme with an opportunity to sample two or three vocational areas, combined with taking a limited range of conventional GCSEs. Again, the programme could lead to a foundation

apprenticeship in the selected occupational area, as well as to the advanced programme.

It may be said that this pattern of vocational education is little different to what exists currently. Indeed one could construct a programme on the model of, say, Figure 2 by recommending a BTEC First or Intermediate GNVQ accompanied by Key Skills, followed by a double award vocational A level, perhaps supplemented by two academic AS awards. But there are several reasons

Figure 4. Pre-16 Programme



why we do not think it would be sufficient just to have a "loose" system, where it is left to individual students to put together programmes.

- We doubt that there is sufficient careers advice in schools and colleges to cope with devising individualised programmes for everyone.
- There is bound to be an element of irritating overlap, or damaging lack of articulation, in courses coming from different stables.
- Both industry and higher education will find it difficult to engage with a large number of different awards.
- Multiple awards "stitched together" to create a coherent programme will nevertheless tend to be over-assessed and will give young people the impression that the gaining of each award is sufficient in itself, leading to damagingly early "exits" from the system.

We see our vocational programmes – through the two preparatory routes – being suitable for all but perhaps the bottom 10% of the ability range. Other countries tend not to use their mainstream vocational education programmes to cater for young people with real learning or behavioural difficulties. Nevertheless exposure to work and vocational material can help motivate such young people and there is a strong case for using work-related activities in an individualised manner in programmes, such as the "Entry to Employment" development recommended by the Cassels committee. But the aim of such vehicles – like their equivalents in other countries – should be the positive one of re-inserting their students into mainstream options.

All countries offering a range of vocational programmes outside the workplace struggle to offer the full range in each locality, particularly where they wish to keep upper secondary education distinct from continuing education and training for adults. In this country, we think that in practice most school V1th forms would be able to offer vocational programmes relevant to the service sector. Larger V1th forms and V1th form colleges would no doubt be able to offer the more popular manufacturing and engineering programmes too. Construction (which needs considerable facilities) and more specialised options might need to be constrained to colleges of further education.

It is of the utmost importance that the voice of industry – unions as well as employers – is brought to bear on the construction of vocational programmes. It should not be the sole driving force, but the programmes must, so far as possible, meet labour market needs. We must recognise this as a significant weakness in the present system. Industrial training organisations have been in constant flux for four decades and another re-arrangement of the deck chairs is another underway even now. It must be the last one for a very considerable time. The new Sector Skills Councils must be allowed to get to know their sectors in depth, including the related professions and linkages with higher education.

It will no doubt be objected that these proposals erect a distinctive vocational track and do nothing to promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic studies. We would make three points.

- Vocational subjects have a long and prestigious pedigree in higher education. Opening up opportunities for vocational students to access higher education, which is one of the main aims of our proposals, would do more for parity than anything else.
- There are considerable dangers in resorting to devices to make vocational programmes "equivalent" to academic ones – mimicking academic content, delivery and assessment conventions, losing touch with labour market realities, cutting off opportunities for the less able students – and little prospect that they would, in any case, be successful.
- Our own history and international experience would seem to indicate that there is an inevitable difference in kudos between general and vocational studies in upper secondary education. Most countries accept this, and attempt – in many cases successfully – to increase the esteem in which vocational studies are held. Vocational programmes may not be regarded as "highly" as academic ones, but they are nevertheless esteemed, which is what matters.

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