Institute of Education

14–19 education and training in England: The concept of an extended upper secondary education phase revisited

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Executive Summary

The concept of a 14–19 phase of education and training is one that appeared briefly in national policy in England in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, but did not resurface again in official government policy documents until 2002. Its life in this form was short-lived, coming to a close in 2010 with the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. Throughout this whole period and to date, however, the idea of a 14–19 phase as a useful way of seeing the transition between a compulsory national curriculum to a period where student choice and national public examination preparation begins and young people progress from education to working and adult life has been consistently championed unofficially by a range of civil society organizations. Successive national governments in England have taken different approaches to this expanding phase of education, with some making stronger distinctions between academic and vocational curriculum and qualifications ('tracking') and others encouraging more mixing of study and including more common curricular features ('linked'). Civil society organizations have tended to argue for greater 'unification' recognized either through a final grouped award/baccalaureate or a more open modular curriculum accredited through a common credit framework.

In this paper we examine the rationale for the idea of a 'long' or 'extended' upper secondary phase that lasts from the age of 14 to the age of 19, making a distinction between 14–19 curricular conceptions and 14–19 institutional arrangements. We set this within a discussion of the demands of the 21st century, other international upper secondary education systems and the historical and current context of the English system. Alongside this system view we also explore upper secondary education from the perspective of the adolescent, something which has been notably absent in many policy discussions. In reflecting on both system and learner perspectives we highlight the strengths of the 'extended' approach while also noting some of the obstacles that stand in the way of its realization. We highlight, in particular, the recent moves towards a more 'tracked' approach to upper secondary education with a bias towards theoretical learning that does nothing to address the lower status of vocational qualifications. This is compounded through complex institutional arrangements for 14–19 education and training that have developed over time as

successive national policies have added to the provider mix. While there are benefits to choice and specialization, the difference in status between academic and vocational learning and the competition that exists between 14–19 education providers work to the detriment of impartial advice and guidance for young people and their parents/carers. In this context there are clear winners and losers, with some learners (the higher attainers) able to make choices that lead to clear progression outcomes, while others are limited by their attainment at 16.

We argue that the current socio-economic context in England, together with the raising of the participation age to 18, requires a re-examination of the nature of the upper secondary education phase in England. We conclude by suggesting that gradually moving towards a 14–19 curriculum model in which all students have time to progress to their full potential within a more transparent, unified and universal upper secondary education system is the most productive way forward for the future. This does not mean, however, a 'one-size-fits all' approach to the curriculum or a radical move to a new 14–19 institutional base. Rather we argue against early tracking and for more balanced and evolutionary specialization over the phase that keeps doors open. To realize this position it will be important to adapt and extend aspects of the current curriculum and qualifications system to ensure that all young people have access to both theoretical and practical learning with the emphasis on creativity and innovation. Institutional arrangements too will need to serve the demands of this type of curriculum approach. This suggests building on the strengths of the successful institutions now in existence but expecting and incentivizing them to work in a co-operative manner with social partners in their localities to deliver a more comprehensive and cost-effective provision for all 14–19 year olds.

We finish the paper by laying out six practical steps forward:

- A curriculum-led approach
- Increasing the quality and breadth of general education
- Enriching vocational education
- Institutional reform – a collaborative approach

- Committed and effective participation
- A slower and more inclusive reform process involving ‘policy learning’

Each of these six dimensions represents a small step forward for the English upper secondary education system that takes into consideration broader international trends, but at the same time recognizes the power of England’s historical legacy. Arguably, however, together they comprise a powerful strategy for moving towards a more universal and unified extended upper secondary education system in England.

Part 1. Introduction – revisiting the idea of a 14–19 phase

The 14–19 phase as upper second education

This paper revisits the idea of a 14–19 phase in England at a time when the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) to 18 in 2015 has effectively created universal upper secondary education in this country. The question is what type of upper secondary education?

Upper secondary education has increasingly become a topic for international debate due to its importance as the phase that encompasses the transition from compulsory schooling to higher education and work in an era when globalization and technological developments are changing the nature and demands of employment. Viewed internationally, upper secondary education is more commonly associated with the education of 16–19 year olds, subsequent to a common lower secondary phase. Here we discuss the concept of a 'longer' or 'extended' upper secondary education, lasting from the ages of 14 to 19, because of the need to recognize how the 14–16 curriculum and the choices and attainment in public examinations at the age of 16 impact on future educational and employment trajectories in the English context. The term 'upper secondary education' is not normally used by policy-makers or practitioners in England. We will, nevertheless, employ the term in this paper because it is a concept which is used internationally and suggests the idea of a coherent system to which many aspire, but which is still to be realized in this country.

Historically speaking, there has never been a strong government commitment to an 'extended' 14–19 upper secondary phase. The idea of 14–19 education first arose in the late 1980s as a result of rapid rises in post-16 participation that irrevocably changed the shape of our education system (Hodgson and Spours, 1997). At the same time there was a desire to 'modernise' secondary education to prepare young people more effectively for life and work, which led to the introduction of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, which had a focus on 14–18 year olds (Pring, 1995). During the 1990s the 14–19 idea was promoted by education researchers; teacher unions and professional associations; education think tanks and opposition political parties as they pressed for a more unified set of arrangements that would encompass all learners and all types of learning with certification at 18+ (Hodgson and Spours, 2012a, 2012b, 2015). The official recognition of a 14–19 phase in England, however, only took place from 2002 in the period running up to the Tomlinson Review (2003–4) and in the aftermath of its rejection in 2005 when a range of measures was implemented. However, the official existence of a 14–19 phase was short-lived, lasting only up to 2010 and the end of the New Labour Government. The approach to this phase was also partial due to the fact that almost all effort was devoted to the development of 14–19 Diplomas and the institutional arrangements to support them, rather than on an overarching framework that would encompass all qualifications and include those on the work-based route and apprenticeships. More recently, the Coalition and now Conservative Governments have used the term '14–19' only in relation to vocational education and therefore for a proportion of learners (Gov UK, 2016). General education, the dominant mode in England, is viewed as two stages: 14–16 and 16–18. The current government does not, therefore, subscribe to the idea of a '14–19 phase' for all learners. Nevertheless, the idea of such a phase continues to be championed by educational bodies, teacher unions and civil society organizations, as has been the case for most of the past 30 years (e.g. Baker [Edge Foundation], 2016; Allen (NUT), 2015; Compass, 2014), strengthened by the impetus that the RPA gives to this position.

System problems

There are several reasons for revisiting the idea of a coherent and universal 14–19 phase, due both to current and future social and economic challenges and well-rehearsed historical deficiencies in the English system. Arguably, current curriculum arrangements beyond the age of 14 do not constitute a sufficiently holistic curriculum fit for the requirements of the modern age and are out of step in terms of breadth and time spent in study when compared with most other high performing upper secondary education systems (Hodgson and Spours, 2017). There is also no sense of a substantial phase because education participation is still seen as two years added on at the age of 16, with those who fail to attain adequately in GCSE effectively given no option to remain on the general education track. Institutional arrangements are highly fragmented and inefficient. Finally, there is relatively low employer engagement in the education of 14–19 year olds in comparison with other countries, resulting in a weak vocational system (Clarke and Winch, 2007).

Aims of the paper

This paper explores why the idea of an extended 14–19 phase might be appropriate in the English context in order to build an upper secondary education system that serves the needs of all learners up to the age of 18/19 and that prepares them adequately for current and future national and global challenges. The paper:

1. locates England's current 14–19 curriculum, qualifications and institutional arrangements in an international context using a range of comparative tools.
2. explores briefly the concept of an 'extended' 14–19 phase in the English context and the different visions and approaches that have emerged in recent years.
3. discusses the key features of the current education and training reforms and the challenges arising from a move to more tracked arrangements.
4. highlights issues related to navigation through the 14–19 phase, learner development and transitions and systems to support effective decision-making.
5. concludes with a provisional discussion of the steps required to move towards a more comprehensive and coherent upper secondary education system in England.

Part 2. The global rise of upper secondary education – tensions and possibilities

Universal upper secondary education – a phase with inherent tensions

Cross-national studies suggest that there are three prime reasons for the increasing interest in upper secondary education – the move towards universal primary education leading to a demand for an expanded secondary phase; the need to ensure that young people become active and productive citizens; and the new knowledge and skills demands of the global labour market (e.g. World Bank, 2005; UNESCO, 2005; Sahlberg for OECD, 2007).

While most countries would recognize these challenges, there is far less consensus over the most effective model of upper secondary to meet them.

According to World Bank (2005) tensions arise because:

- upper secondary education is both an end-point for some (those who will exit to the labour market) and a preparatory stage for others (those who will want to progress to tertiary or higher education).
- in many countries upper secondary education still encompasses both compulsory and post-compulsory aspects, thus raising questions about the nature of regulatory frameworks and the degree of compulsion to be used.
- there is a need to consider the balance between a common curriculum and greater specialization and the balance between uniformity of experience for social cohesion and diversity to address the needs of a much broader population.
- within all of these concerns, upper secondary education also needs to reconcile the demands of society, the economy and the individual.

These tensions within upper secondary education are played out in countries with different levels of resource and views about universalism. In some countries it is still rationed, creating not only a bottleneck for entry into further or higher education, but also, as Lumby and Foskett (2005) assert, making it a focus of social contestation because this is the stage where young people's future life chances are increasingly determined.

International trends in upper secondary education – four developments

Four broad trends in upper secondary education, which attempt to address the tensions and contradictions discussed above, can be identified within recent cross-national studies. The first and most obvious is a move towards greater participation (e.g. Le Metais, 2002; World Bank, 2005; UNESCO, 2005), which potentially changes the purposes of the phase and creates new tensions that pose questions about the need for reform. Second, there has been a gradual increase in the coming together of academic and vocational learning (UNESCO, 2005; Sahlberg, 2007; Wheelahan, 2013) to create opportunities for flexibility within more integrated systems (Dufaux, 2012) that has also resulted in a process of 'academic drift' in several countries (Green *et al.*, 1999; Bosch and Charest, 2008). At the same time, there has been a general interest in the reform of vocational education and training because of its new relationship with general education and changes in the global economy (Larsonen *et al.,* 1999; Burdett, 2012). Third, there has been a move towards what could be seen as the Anglo-Saxon global model – centralization of accountability (Burdett, 2012; Lawn, 2013) and assessment (Dufaux, 2012) and greater reliance on competence-based approaches to curricula and qualifications, with a focus on key competences (Halasz and Michel, 2011) or 21st century competences (Burdett, 2012). These types of changes are seen by Sundberg and Wahlstrom (2012) as part of a broader global discourse and set of practices around 'standards-based curriculum reform' that is driven by international assessments, such as PISA, and influences political debates on the state of national education systems. Finally, Sahlberg (2007) and Halasz and Michel (2011) highlight a concern about 'quality' and advocate a renewed focus on pedagogy, resulting both from the expansion of upper secondary education and the potential of new information and communication technologies.

One reflection on the development of universal participation is the length of upper secondary education. For most systems it is now a distinct phase with durations normally between three and four years. Figure 1. – a Europe-wide comparison – shows that the most common pattern of official participation is four years – 15–19 – or three years 15–18 and 16–19. There are a few instances of a longer phase of 14–19, but only two cases of a short duration (16–18) – the UK and Spain. Amidst these different patterns, there is a dominant feature and that is the extension of secondary education up to age 19 in most European system cases.

Figure 1. Duration of upper secondary education: a Europe-wide comparison

Country	**Duration**
Austria	14–18
Bulgaria	14–19
Croatia	15–19
Czech Republic	15–19
Denmark	16–19
Finland	16–19
France	15–18
Germany	16–19
Greece	15–18
Hungary	14–19
Iceland	16–20
Ireland	16–19
Italy	14–19
Latvia	16–19
Luxembourg	15–19
Netherlands	15–18
Norway	16–19
Poland	16–19/20
Portugal	15–18
Slovakia	15–19
Spain	16–18
Sweden	16–19
Switzerland	15–19
UK (England, Wales and NI)	16–18

Source: European Union (2016) *The Structure of the European Education Systems 2016/17 Schematic Diagrams* Eurydice: Brussels.

Conceptualizing different approaches to upper secondary education

While these trends and discourses may be common, there are still notable variations in the ways that different countries organize upper secondary education according to a number of conceptual distinctions.

We briefly discuss each of these five conceptual tools/frameworks here in order to locate English upper secondary education within these international debates.

Educational or employment logics - Iannelli and Raffe (2007) distinguish between the purposes of upper secondary education systems, suggesting that one type has a more ‘educational logic’ (e.g. predominance of full-time participation) and the other a more ‘employment logic’ (predominance of apprenticeship and the work-based route). Most European systems operate according to an educational logic, the exception being the Germanic countries with large apprenticeship systems, although these too are now having to move closer to the education logic as the youth labour market changes (Kuhlee, 2015).

Integrated or segregated institutional arrangements – Le Metais (2002) and Sahlberg (2007) distinguish between upper secondary education systems according to their institutional arrangements and their relationship to the curriculum. There are ‘integrated’ or ‘segregated’ institutions. Integrated institutions are those which offer different types of programmes – general, pre-vocational and vocational education within the same organization. ‘Segregated institutions’, on the other hand, exist when general education is offered in schools and vocational education in separate specialist institutions or the workplace.

Tracked, linked and unified curriculum, qualifications and assessment systems – work by Hodgson and Spours (2011), building on earlier concepts developed by Raffe *et al.,* (1998), suggests that general and vocational learning in the four national systems of the UK, could be categorized according to whether they are tracked, linked or unified.

> *Tracked* – separate curricular, qualifications and assessment arrangements for general and for vocational learning.
>
> *Linked* – the main tracked features are retained, but with some common curricular or qualification elements present in both academic and vocational tracks, e.g. 16–19 Study Programmes, mathematics and English.
>
> *Unified* – a common core of learning with options for specialization beyond this; a single form of certification at the end of the phase (e.g. baccalaureate) or/and a common accreditation framework that covers all types of learning.

Three scenarios of selection and specialization in upper secondary education have been constructed mainly around the type of curriculum strategy and the timing and extent of selection and specialization by those wishing to compare systems internationally (e.g. World Bank, 2005: 93).

> *Scenario 1* – highly specialized, selective and streamed with early tracking; an emphasis on traditional disciplines in academic tracks and alternative vocational options that focus on job preparation.
>
> *Scenario 2* – deferred specialization and selection until the end of lower secondary education; internal differentiation through electives; vocational education only offered from the age of 16, but vocational elements offered within a general curriculum; a focus on traditional subjects with some inter-disciplinary approaches.
>
> *Scenario 3* – deferred specialization and selection until the end of USE; internal differentiation through electives; post-secondary vocational education, but vocational elements in a general curriculum; a core of mathematics and English with the rest of the curriculum delivered through skills, projects and cross-curricular themes.

These scenarios appear to suggest that through more divided and specialized institutional arrangements it is possible to retain a traditional academic subject-based curriculum for some and a stronger work-based and employment-focused education for others. Conversely, the more unified the system, the more varied the curriculum needs become to cater for an increasingly diverse student population. There can also be a movement towards the use of 'skills-based, project based and cross-curricular alternatives' to accompany traditional discipline-based courses.

Whole-system characteristics – hidden behind national countries' approaches to curricula and institutional organization lie different positions regarding the role of the state, educational professionals and the labour market that also have a powerful shaping influence on the nature and development of upper secondary education systems (Sundberg and Wahlstrom, 2012; Hodgson and Spours, 2012a; Lawn, 2013). In an international analysis of secondary education, Sahlberg (2007) suggests that three broad global models have emerged during the neoliberal era, which influence different national organizational solutions to upper secondary education:

> *Anglo Saxon* (e.g. US, England, New Zealand, Eastern Europe and now many African countries) – markets, choice and competition; standardisation of teaching and learning and test-based accountability.
>
> *Pacific* (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and now China) – authoritarian/conformist; high levels of parental/social support for education; didactic teaching methods; high expectations and normative behaviours.
>
> *Nordic* (e.g. Finland) – high status education profession; high trust relationships; devolved responsibilities within broad national frameworks; an emphasis on links between education, social services and localities linked to school improvement.

This kind of global system analysis suggests that it is important to understand not only curricular and organizational factors, but also the role of the state and the governance of education, leading to a more rounded system understanding.

Situating English upper secondary education – a comparative overview

Seen from these perspectives, English upper secondary education demonstrates a particular combination of system features.

a. ***Educational and employment logics*** – it has developed an overwhelmingly educational logic due to high levels of full-time participation in education institutions with relatively few opportunities for work-based education and training for 16–19 year olds.

b. ***Institutional organization*** – from an international perspective, the English system is more integrated than segregated due to an increasing emergence of ‘mixed economy provision’ in schools and colleges, largely as a result of competition for learners and the desire to be able to offer both academic and vocational courses. However, the development of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and Studio Schools could be viewed as part of a segregated logic, albeit a mild one.

c. ***Curriculum and qualifications*** – the English system, as we shall see has vacillated between a 'tracked' and 'linked' approach over the past two decades, but could now be described as essentially 'tracked' (greater distinctions have been made between 'academic', 'applied general' and 'technical' qualifications) but with some linked features (e.g. Study Programmes).

d. ***Scenarios of selection and specialization*** – the English system can be largely situated in Scenario 2 – a 'middling' selection and specialization system. This is mainly due to the continuing impact of specialization at 16+, but relatively little official selection at 14. However, recent education reforms could be seen as pushing towards an early selection and specialization scenario (e.g. 14–19 institutions and the impact of the English Baccalaureate measure on learner stratification at Key Stage 4).

e. ***Global models of education*** – the English system, unsurprisingly, follows the Anglo Saxon model and is becoming a more extreme version of this due to the direction of education reform (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). Interestingly, the other countries of the UK see themselves aspiring towards a more Nordic approach, whereas the Conservative Government in England has been interested in fusing into the Anglo Saxon model some aspects of the Pacific approach, notably the focus on mathematics teaching in Shanghai and the 'hard work' ethic.

Viewed through these five analytical dimensions, the English system might be characterized as having a combination of a 'tracked', 'educational logic' with a 'selective and specialist' orientation together with a predominance of 'integrated' institutions. On the surface these features may seem to offer choice and flexibility but in fact upper secondary education in England delivers this for a minority of the 14–19 cohort. Moreover, as the changes in assessment within academic and vocational qualifications take effect (linear courses, more external examinations, the move to numerical grades in GCSEs that have a strong effect on English and mathematics results), it is likely that a greater proportion of 14–19 year olds will fail to gain the grades they require to progress to the full range of post-16 options. As importantly, the English system has failed time and again to develop a strong, vocational or work-based system and offers a narrow curriculum for all 16–19 year olds, with the exception of the small minority who take the International Baccalaureate or gain places on a high quality apprenticeship. Moreover, current reforms appear to be locking the system into the Anglo-Saxon model which has not succeeded in the past.

Given this rather gloomy prognosis, the need for English 14–19 education to tackle these historic issues and to rise to the challenge of developing a future-proofed, universal and inclusive upper secondary education system, there is a strong argument for the system not remaining where it is. Arguably there are two options for future development. First, there could be a move more decisively in a track-based direction with greater selection and early specialization by aligning organizational and curricular features at 14 into a strongly segregated academic and vocational education. This is certainly what some on the political Right would like to do but, as we will see, there are significant obstacles. The second option is to embark on a journey towards a more unified and late selection upper secondary education system that caters for all learners over an extended 14–19 phase. In the next section of the paper both these options are subject to further discussion in terms of creating a universal and coherent 14–19 phase in the English context.

Part 3. The 14–19 phase in England

Different versions – tracked, linked and unified

The reasons for the confusions regarding a 14–19 phase is that there has never been a settled will in England for its establishment nor an agreement about what form it should take. Despite considerable professional pressure over the past 30 years, the idea of a universal, coherent and extended upper secondary phase has never fully percolated into political life and has never been seriously acted upon by government. This can be contrasted to the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales, where such a settled will does appear to exist, albeit around somewhat differing upper secondary education models (Hodgson *et al.*, 2011)[1].

The reasons for the English dilemma are not simply to do with policy preferences of successive governments, but also the role of historical qualifications and institutional barriers. In terms of curriculum and qualifications, the most significant factor is the dominance of GCSEs and A Levels and selection at 16+ with the lack of a strong and attractive technical and vocational alternative. In terms of institutional organization, the most significant factor is the dominance of 11–18 schools and the role of school sixth forms that largely offer A Levels. Both, albeit in different ways, present structural challenges to the idea of a 14–19 curriculum. Historically, responses to these barriers have been to go with the flow of system features, to try to confront them organizationally or to advocate a long and gradual reform process. The reason why we continue to debate the nature of 14–19 education and training is that no approach has emerged thus far as capable of creating the 'settled will' in England.

Policy-makers have, nevertheless, flirted with the 14–19 concept by adopting particular versions of it. Here we begin by briefly describing the 'linked' and 'unified' experiments of earlier governments and then focus in more detail on the current government's 'tracked' approach, highlighting some of the challenges it poses.

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[1] The other countries of the UK are, however, taking a different trajectory: Wales remains broadly a linked system moving in a unified direction due to its 14–19 Learning Pathways and Welsh Baccalaureate; Scotland could be described as an 'open' unified system with its modular approach to the curriculum in which both academic and vocational qualifications are accredited through a common Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; and Northern Ireland could be seen as moving in a linked direction due to its Entitlement Framework from 14+ (Hodgson *et al.,* 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2016).

‘Linked’

Between 2002 and 2010 the then Labour Government supported a ‘linked’ approach to the 14–19 phase. This was manifested initially through the freedom for schools to introduce more vocational qualifications into the 14–16 curriculum and subsequently, from 2005, through the implementation of a 14–19 Entitlement that included the requirement for all local areas to provide learners with access to all 14 Diploma lines, which were themselves designed as linked qualifications – e.g. they could contain both academic and vocational qualifications and had a common core. There was an emphasis on attaining key skills across all 14–19 programmes and schools and colleges were encouraged to collaborate locally to make the 14–19 Entitlement a reality. This linked approach was reversed by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010.

‘Unified’

The ‘unified’ version of the 14–19 phase has existed for nearly three decades as a curriculum and qualifications-led reform idea, focused on the development of a common end-of-phase diploma or baccalaureate at 18/19 (e.g. Finegold *et al.,* 1990; Hodgson and Spours, 2003). Those advocating this unified version have not, however, argued for 14–19 institutions: instead they have focused on the need for strong institutional collaboration at the local level (e.g. Hodgson and Spours, 2006; Pring *et al.,* 2009). Over intervening years there have been many different types of unified curriculum and qualifications proposals and practical experiments that while not attaining the support of elected governments in England, have persisted at the level of educational civil society (for more detail see Hodgson and Spours, 2015). The nearest to official adoption of this ‘unified’ approach was the Tomlinson Report (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004) which in retrospect, even after its rejection by Prime Minister Tony Blair, could be viewed as having led to the ‘linked’ approach to the 14–19 phase described above.

English upper secondary education in 2017 – key features and challenges of the ‘tracked’ direction

While the English upper secondary education system is not heavily tracked in the sense of having a strong alignment between a vocational specialist curriculum and discrete institutions from 14 (we will see that UTCs and Studio Schools are few in number and involve a very small fraction of the cohort), the direction of government policy since 2010 has been towards greater tracking, albeit with some weak ‘linked features’ (e.g. Study Programmes, the need to continue to study English and mathematics post-16). Here we make an important distinction between curriculum and qualifications reform and institutional change.

A more tracked curriculum and qualifications system

Current Government policy is moving the English system towards more distinct academic and vocational routes. Reforms are taking place in both routes, but as separate change processes. The most important, insofar as it concerns the dominant route involving most young people at Year 11 and a sizable minority post-16, has been the development of more linear GCSEs and A Levels which rely heavily on external assessment. This has involved the removal of their modular structure and, in the case of A Levels, the abolition of a Subsidiary AS that contributes towards the final overall grade in a summative examination at the end of two years of study.

The reasoning behind these reforms is to make general education more stretching and to increase the amount of teaching time because of the reduction in modular assessment (DfE, 2010). Critics of the past Labour Government policy on GCSEs and A Levels suggested that modularization and in-course assessment were insufficiently ‘rigorous’ and that there was a lack of public trust in educational standards (De Waal, 2009). These changes will, however, result in general education qualifications becoming more selective, with an impact on learner progression possibilities. There is emerging evidence that attainment in both GCSE and A Level examinations, and the ways in which this is measured, is affecting the proportion of the cohort attaining the required thresholds for progression to the next level. In the case of GCSE, for example, the proportion of those recorded as attaining five GCSEs grades A-C including maths and English dropped from 59.2 per cent in 2013 to 53.8 per cent in 2015 (DfE, 2016).

While some will welcome the news as evidence of more rigorous standards, others have argued that these changes will disproportionately affect attainment by ‘middle attainers’ who benefitted from a more cumulative curriculum and examination structure in the period up to 2010 (Hodgson and Spours, 2013). The current government has also emphasized the importance of discipline-based, theoretical learning through its promotion of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) at Key Stage 4 (DfE, 2013a). The EBacc is a performance measure for schools that privileges the attainment of high grades in five traditional GCSE subjects (mathematics, English, science, history or geography and languages) at age 16, with corresponding relegation of other forms of knowledge and applied learning. While the EBacc could be viewed as an entitlement to a liberal curriculum, and it certainly has been defended as such (Gove, 2009), good examination results in all five subjects have been only attained by 22.9 per cent in 2015 (DfE, 2016). The rhetoric may be one of entitlement, but the evidence thus far is of policies that are focusing on improving the capabilities of a slightly expanded elite rather than those of the majority of learners.

This greater tracking in general education has been accompanied by similar developments in vocational learning, where reforms of vocational qualifications have made more distinction between applied general and technical awards, with a much greater emphasis on external examination, rather than coursework or continuous assessment. More recently, the Post-16 Skills Plan (DBIS/DfE, 2016) and from 2013 the move to ‘standards-based’ apprenticeships with a summative end-point assessment have continued this trend. Both reforms are attempting to provide solutions to the historical weaknesses of vocational education by aiming to improve the authenticity and quality of the vocational experience. However, they carry similar risks to the policies being pursued in the academic track – the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups of learners. The Post-16 Skills Plan (DBIS/DfE, 2016) concentrates primarily on Levels 3 to 5 with less attention being paid to issues of progression for those learners operating at Level 2 and below. Simultaneously, though part of a separate exercise, the development of the new standards-based apprenticeships is focused on large companies with the risk of marginalizing SMEs that currently provide the bulk of apprenticeship placements at the lower levels (Hodgson *et al*., forthcoming). Taken together, these reforms could present difficulties for participation and progression in vocational learning both in educational settings and in the workplace.

The tracked approach is designed to distinguish more clearly between academic and vocational learning, aligning the former more closely with universities and the latter with workplaces. The aim is to provide clearly defined forms of education, each with transparent standards and sources of prestige as the result of increased university and employer influence and confidence in the design of the qualifications. In support of the tracked vision of vocational and technical education, the current Government looks to strongly bifurcated systems in Austria and Switzerland as sources of inspiration. However, this form of 'policy borrowing' overlooks important differences between England and these countries – the former are mass work-based systems that have extensive employer engagement forged through historically embedded social partnership arrangements (Kuhlee, 2015). The English system, on the other hand, has continually struggled to develop sufficient employer engagement due to its financialized structure, the predomination of SMEs and its relatively voluntaristic and deregulated character (Keep, 2015).

While government reforms are attempting to address historic and system problems, they appear to be doing this in such a way that it risks undermining educational and work-based participation that could disproportionately affect over half of the cohort – those who are not confident A Level learners, not on high status apprenticeships and not on vocational provision at Levels 3, 4 and 5. These groups have been described elsewhere as the 'overlooked middle' (Hodgson and Spours, 2013).

Greater institutional tracking

England has experimented extensively with an active education market, with an increasing array of autonomous upper secondary education providers operating within a highly centralized national accountability framework. English institutional arrangements are not, however, formally segregated with a large vocational school sector as evident in some other European countries (Clarke and Winch, 2007). Rather the schools and colleges that dominate this phase of education often provide a mix of academic and vocational courses, although schools predominantly offer the former, which are considered to be of higher status, and colleges the latter.

Nevertheless, there exists a subordinate tracking trend revolving around the increased role for specialist vocational schools, known as University Technical Colleges (UTCs) (DfE, 2013b) and Studio Schools (DfE, 2013c). While it is still early days for these specialist institutions, recent research by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (Evans, 2015; Cook *et al.,* 2016) suggests that the experiment is facing significant difficulties. The main problem is that these new 14–19 institutions compete with all-through secondary schools and thus find it difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of learners. Lower attainers or those with special educational needs predominate at UTCs and Studio Schools because these are the learners that mainstream schools are often all too happy to send elsewhere. The IPPR research also suggests that due to low recruitment and the type of learners they are receiving, the new schools are unable to offer the broad curriculum required to support open progression opportunities later in the 14–19 phase. Thus far the overall impact of UTCs and Studio Schools on the overall 14–19 system has been extremely small, in January 2016 there were a total of 39 UTCs (Lang and Bolton, 2016) and 33 Studio Schools with some having to close due to lack of viability (Camden, 2017).

It would appear, therefore, that this segregated institutional model cannot work in a competitive system because these institutions lack the capacity to compete successfully with mainstream secondary schools. IPPR in their report on 14+ transitions suggest a range of measures to improve the viability of these institutions which we review as part of a forward-focused strategy in the final section of the paper.

The combined effects of the tracked direction

The aim of tracking, as appreciated in the international literature, is to produce more distinctive and high quality experiences for different groups of learners. As upper secondary education becomes more universal so the demands of the phase become more diverse. Theoretically, at least, a tracked system can produce distinctive experiences for everyone and international data would suggest that those upper secondary education systems that enjoy the highest levels of participation in Europe

(Asiatic systems have a different logic) are ‘tracked’ to some extent (OECD, 2016). This includes not only the Germanic countries and their renowned apprenticeship systems, but also Nordic systems that employ the ‘educational logic’ with a strong vocational dimension.

But the problem with the tracked strategy is the English approach. We do not track in the same way as our continental partners. For example, they take a far more rounded approach to vocational education – it is supported by greater employer engagement (although this is now coming under pressure with neoliberal policies) and vocational courses contain strong elements of general education. They are also more generously funded with longer tuition hours and even additional years in comparison to England (Hodgson and Spours, 2017). Furthermore, general education in continental tracked systems is invariably broader, usually involving an end of phase graduation award, that stresses not only specialization but more subjects to be covered at different levels and 21st Century Competences (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). Other tracked systems thus offer more for all learners.

What is striking about the English tracked approach is its narrowness post-16 – once again a three A-Level diet; maths and English as a cut-down version of 21st Century Competences; more demanding vocational courses but a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment with concerns about validity, all subject to reductions in post-16 funding. Moreover, despite the apprenticeship levy, there is still a voluntarist approach to employer participation in full-time 14–19 education and training which means that a substantial increase in the volume and sustained quality of support for an expanded vocational and technical track is doubtful. It is also likely that the effects of these factors will be felt in system performance with participation and attainment rates peaking and then stagnating.

The problems facing the system are thus multi-faceted and interrelated which suggests that the proposed solutions also have to be multi-dimensional and co-ordinated. The current ‘tracked’ government approach does not look like the future-proofed, coherent, universal upper secondary education system that international comparative research would suggest is required for the 21st century.

Before moving to argue for a more unified and extended upper secondary education system in England, we pause to consider the position of young people today and how they make decisions about the transition from full-time education to adulthood and working life in order to argue for the importance of an extended 14–19 phase.

Part 4. Learners’ development, transition and decision-making

Introduction

The period occupied by upper secondary education demands much of young people: the developmental changes of adolescence; and decision-making within a track-based qualifications system, that often necessitates transitions between institutions; both set within a curriculum offer that focuses on the academic. It is argued here that the development needs of young people are ignored, or invisible, with the emphasis placed on a subject-led curriculum. For young people outside the academic track, or within the margins of this, the skills required to navigate the system are immense. If young people are to develop their personal capacities and assets to make informed decisions, to have the space to develop their educational and occupational aspirations and to navigate an increasingly complex system, then of necessity the 14–19 phase must evolve to meet these development needs.

Adolescence

The developmental stage of adolescence marks a period of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformation. It is a period of significant turbulence involving developmental changes and social influence and school and college transitions that impact on adolescents’ socio-emotional and behavioural functioning (Martinez *et al.*, 2011). These years mark a critical time for young people in the formation of identity, the development of cognitive motivational strategies and social, learning, and organizational skills; all of which may have long-term consequences for young people’s educational choices, their career aspirations and lifetime participation (Nurmi, 2004). Two aspects of adolescence are highlighted in the argument for an extended upper secondary education.

The formation of identity

Erikson, in his eight-stage theory of psychosocial development, believed that the transition to adulthood was difficult. The fifth stage, identity versus role confusion, characterized the challenges of adolescence and the adolescents’ search for a sense of self and personal identity, this through an exploration of personal values, beliefs and goals. He argued that two identities were involved – the sexual and the occupational. Importance was attached to the adolescent, in the later stages of this phase, having the time and space to experiment and to confirm their identity through a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ (Erikson, 1968). Failure to commit to an identity or role after taking a moratorium, or the lack of opportunity to take a moratorium, meant that the adolescent was at risk of role confusion about their identity and their place in society.

Development tasks

Developmental tasks arise at critical points in individuals’ lives. Successful accomplishment of these tasks leads to benefits in well-being and facilitates the attainment of other developmental tasks in the future (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). One of the most important tasks is finding a suitable education and occupation. Adolescents’ personal goals related to education and occupation are the most frequently reported personal goals among young people (Salmela-Aro *et al.*, 2007). The active pursuit and engagement in career goals during adolescence is beneficial. Being engaged predicts the likelihood of finding employment and is related to higher levels of well-being (Haase *et al.*, 2012).

An extended upper secondary education phase, with a progress check at age 16, would enable young people to develop their identity and consider future education and employment without the anxiety generated by high stakes GCSE examinations that are currently pivotal to their future education and their future life chances.

Transition

The transition from full-time education in school or college to work or higher education is a significant event and can have a long-lasting impact of the life course of an individual. Dropping out of educational systems at this point can lead to an increased risk of unemployment and overall maladjustment (Rogers, 2015). Setting appropriate career goals is especially important at these transition points.

Some young people are especially vulnerable to experiencing difficulties during educational transitions. These include young people with the following characteristics: low socio-economic status, SEN, some ethnic backgrounds, poor record of attendance, low attainment, looked-after and in care, and NEET (see, for example, Evans *et al.*, 2010). Young people with poor socio-emotional skills, low self-esteem, or low self-confidence may be vulnerable during transition due to them lacking the skills that would give them the emotional resilience to cope with new expectations and social relationships (West *et al.*, 2010).

Changes in the labour market, seen internationally, mean that there are more complex careers for young people to consider, more options in work and learning and hence potentially new opportunities (OECD, 2010). The corollary of this is that increased opportunities made decisions harder for young people as they face ongoing complex choices over their lifetime (OECD, 2010). They therefore need more support than previously to navigate through these various educational and career pathways (Cedefop, 2016).

Decision-making and aspirations

Decision-making is a process that takes place over time. It is dependent on several capacities, including the ability to control emotional responses, in addition to the capacity to reason about a problem (Van Duijvenvoorde *et al.*, 2010). Decision-making is highly influenced by the contexts within which students operate, including the culture and ethos of the institution (Foskett *et al.*, 2008; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Also influential is the family, young peoples' agency and the extent to which they make more pragmatic decisions based on circumstances (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Alongside this sits the continuing influence of class-based and gendered decision-making (OECD, 2015).

There are suggestions that decision-making is suboptimal in adolescence (Casey *et al.*, 2008; Steinberg *et al.*, 2008). Steinberg (2007) regards adolescent capacity to manage emotional responses to be immature at this time: by contrast reasoning skills are considered to be relatively mature. This can result in an 'emotional overshoot' due to the imbalance in the brain between emotional responding and control processes (Casey *et al.*, 2008).

For some young people the choices faced during upper secondary education may be the first time in their lives that they are required to make important decisions. Given the challenges of adolescence, in that adolescence is the time in development linked to young people most wanting 'to forget, act impulsively and avoid reflection' (Coren, 1997: 5), it seems paradoxical that this is precisely the time when adolescents have to make key decisions about their future.

Careers education advice and guidance

The provision of high quality, impartial, accessible, and personalized advice is key to supporting transitions into education, training and employment (Hooley *et al.*, 2012). Effective careers guidance enables social mobility (Holman, 2014) and empowers young people to develop and reflect on their aspirations. It enables adolescents to envisage a pathway to further education and work, increases their engagement with learning and supports the attainment of career management skills for future life, learning and work (Hooley, 2014). Evidence from longitudinal studies indicates that the way in which adolescents think about their futures in education and employment has a significant impact (Hughes, *et al.*, 2016). Adolescents from poorer backgrounds are more likely to have career aspirations that are misaligned with their educational ambitions (Yates *et al.*, 2011).

The pivotal positioning of end-point assessment at age 16+ in England adds to the difficulties that young people face. For the minority of students who follow an academic route from GCSE to A Levels and university decisions appear comparatively unproblematic. For the majority of learners who follow a different route, the current system for careers advice has been described as ‘complex and incoherent, with confusing incentives for young people and employers’ (HL, 2016: 4). Vocational qualifications, work-based learning and apprenticeships are less well understood by young people, their parents/carers and teachers (Batterham and Levesley, 2011). The outcome of which is that too many young people embark on post-16 courses that do not suit their needs or aptitudes. Within England careers education, advice and guidance is patchy and subject to a ‘postcode lottery’ whereby some young people receive better guidance than others (Hooley *et al.*, 2014).

Enabling young people to make the right choices is central to successful transitions into further education or work. High quality guidance can lessen the risk of students’ dissatisfaction with their choice and thereby reduce the likelihood of them dropping out. For those making the transition to FE and work-based learning one of the main reasons for leaving early is because the course was not what the student had expected (Simm *et al.*, 2007). Frequent opportunities for adolescents to engage with employers, either as part of careers guidance or through work experience or work placements, are essential in enabling young people to make positive choices about their futures based on authentic understandings of different professional and technical occupations (Mann *et al.*, 2016; Baker Dearing Educational Trust, 2017).

The emphasis on selection at age 16+ compounds the issues. In schools with weak sixth forms, some students are encouraged to continue on academic courses that they then abandon, in some cases leaving with no additional qualifications. If young people do not get the grades at GCSE to take A Levels they often have little choice at 16+ with a corresponding loss of lack of agency and empowerment.

Conclusion

There is a need for a more open, equitable and transparent system that aids young peoples' development during the period of adolescence and one that fully supports individual transition needs and offers a meaningful choice to all young people. This takes time: development for individuals takes place at different speeds and in different ways.

The curriculum space required to respond to these development needs arguably points to a common core that treats them in a serious way: a unified but diverse system (Sahlberg, 2007) that is rooted in a set of moral and educational purposes. Lessening the emphasis on summative assessment at age 16+, through an extended 14–19 phase, would provide greater opportunities for young people to think about their futures and to form their identities in relation to themselves, education and work.

Without the curriculum driven choices that adolescents are currently required to make, a unified system would facilitate more effective educational and career choices through work experience and placements that were embedded in a longer upper secondary education phase rather than bolted on as at present. There would be time for adolescents to experiment and explore, to have the flexibility to change their decisions, rather than making dead end choices that, for some, result in dropping out or failure. Guidance would be less influenced by market competition and the different status of academic and vocational pathways, thus enabling young people an extended period of time in support of their progression from education to work.

Part 5. The future upper secondary education phase in England – direction of development

The case for a long upper secondary education phase (14–19) in the English context

The discussion thus far has explained the importance of upper secondary education internationally and the different forms it can take in various national systems. International comparative analysis has shown that upper secondary education is becoming more important to all societies in a globalized era due to the fundamental role it plays in organizing mass transitions between lower secondary education and further and higher education and working life. Upper secondary education is normally associated with three or more years of study beyond lower secondary education that normally ends at around the age of 16. Here we make a case for a longer upper secondary education phase (14–19) linked to the specific conditions in England and the challenge of establishing a universal phase that is yet to secure levels of participation and attainment by the age of 18/19 that compare positively with international comparators.

An underlying aim of a universal phase is one in which all learners can progress at their own pace. Central to this is removing or at least reducing the role of the 16+ GCSE selection barrier that currently exists in the English system. It can be argued that selection at 16 has depressed post-16 participation and attainment because it forces young people to reach a certain level of attainment in one type of education (general) at a single point rather than when they are ready. The idea of a fixed age-related internal selection point could be seen as increasingly redundant in an era of RPA.

The alternative approach is to conceive of upper secondary education as starting at 14 rather than 16. This marks the beginning of a young person's curriculum and qualifications journey and transition in which they have between four or five years (18/19) to mature and achieve. There are at least four main reasons to support such an approach in the English context.

First, a long phase provides an explicit recognition of a period when young people are making the transition to adulthood and where it is necessary to have a curriculum that acknowledges this process. This suggests that such a phase has to be informed by an overall curriculum framework underpinned by a set of moral and educational purposes. This is certainly not the case with GCSEs and A Levels that are single subjects which at best function as curriculum building blocks but fall short of offering overall curriculum purpose. In England, there is no Key Stage 5 as such (even though the term has been used by some), but a subject dominated approach in which curriculum purpose is devolved to institutions.

Second, a longer phase allows for a gradual change from a broad curriculum associated with lower secondary education towards degrees of specialization that relate to higher level study and work. The path towards greater specialization raises questions about the balance between breadth and depth over this phase in a system that is renowned for its excessive narrowness.

Third, and related to the problem of the 16+ selection barrier in the English system discussed earlier, is the aim of attaining the highest possible level before transitioning to higher study or working life. This suggests the need for the curriculum and qualifications system to move from being determined by ‘age’ to ‘stage’, allowing a more flexible approach so that learners have more freedom to complete particular forms of study at their own pace rather than having to jump artificial hurdles at 16.

Finally, a related issue, but one that pertains to the young person rather than the design of the education system, is that young people learn and achieve at different paces. Those from deprived and low income backgrounds often need more time and resource to realize their potential. They also need real choices to continue to pursue a broad education in different forms. Our present system is time-bound and despite its rhetoric of choice, in fact offers remarkably little freedom. As the international comparisons show, a more universal upper secondary education phase needs to provide a more diverse and less time-bound curriculum if all learners are to maximize their potential. In the English context this could be seen to lead to the concept of a relatively open upper secondary phase that normally spans four years, but allows five if need be. It would finish, as is the case in other successful systems, with a graduation or baccalaureate-style award that can contain different combinations of study and experience spanning the full general-vocational range.

The direction of international debate

The direction of debate in terms of international studies of upper secondary education is unmistakable. Given the effects of globalization and the changing modes of production (notably digital developments), together with debates about drop-out and the consequences of ‘early school leaving’ (European Commission, 2013), the trend is towards developing more open and late-selection systems.

Sahlberg (2007), for example, suggests that upper secondary education systems should have what might be described as an entitlement-based and open approach focused on all young people having a motivational and productive experience of education in order to avoid drop-out; being able to change direction between pathways; making informed decisions as a result of professional and impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance; and having the opportunity to access good quality jobs and tertiary education. A UNESCO study (2005) offers similar advice regarding flexibility within a comprehensive framework while emphasizing *‘a solid foundation of knowledge in a cluster of essential generic competencies and non-occupation specific practical skills’* and the importance of *‘increased intellectual and social maturity and greater inter-cultural understanding and tolerance’* (p. 13). It is worth noting that this direction for upper secondary education is framed in curricular rather than organizational terms.

Strengthening the ‘holistic educational logic’ of the English system

It has been argued thus far that English upper secondary education has, since the 1980s, developed an educational logic. Moreover, there are considerable barriers to significantly reinforcing its employment logic – the most obvious being low levels of employer engagement that would require extensive system reform to remediate and the fact that the direction of industrial and business development is towards levels of skill that are end-on to the upper secondary education phase. Furthermore, the strategy of strengthening the educational logic goes with the flow of developments in full-time participation over the past 30 years in England and with the direction of development internationally due to globalization.

However, there is a critical and additional argument to be made for a radical and holistic development of the ‘educational logic’ of the English system. Education, particularly the upper secondary phase, should both reflect and support the cutting edge of economic, social and organizational innovation. This is in addition to its roles of passing on existing established knowledge and attempting to make good the deficiencies of society. Organizational change is accelerating due, in good part, to a communication and technological revolution, with new ‘ecosystem’ type organizational paradigms providing models for the future (Laloux, 2014). Presently, our education system largely ignores this looming reality. Future models of the economy and society (more collaborative and networked) could turn our current academic-led education culture on its head. If the future of work is far more diverse, technological, networked and intellectual in the broadest sense, then engagement with working and social life in all its forms has to be an integral part of an expanded upper secondary education. Put another way, a rich vocational education as practical problem solving, entrepreneurial and social innovation, is not just a narrow education for some, but should become part of a broader education for all. Here lies one of the routes to higher status vocational learning in a future world.

In the concluding section of this paper, we argue that this strategy from age 14 needs to:

- be values and curriculum-led;
- involve the broadening of general education learning and the enrichment of vocational learning – enhancements available to all learners according to the spirit of creativity and innovation by all;
- be based on the enhancement of existing qualifications rather than the introduction of politically inspired new ones;
- be served by strong local learning systems underpinned by heightened social partnership and institutional collaboration;

- enhance the level of self-awareness and agency of the learner to be able to take maximum advantage of a more comprehensive and coherent system;
- be underpinned by a more participative, stable and evolutionary policy process that strengthens the role of educational and social partnership over that of top-down policy-making by politicians.

A curriculum-led approach

Based on the arguments in this paper, the future direction for England should be towards the concept of a substantial upper secondary education phase that is curriculum-led and is focused on developing innovative forms of learning. A long phase, in contrast to a couple of years tacked onto compulsory education, demands a rationale and a clear set of aims. A recent IPPR report made much play of this arguing that it is important to set out a clear definition of upper secondary education and its core purposes. Its response was as follows.

> *…the educational experience of a young person which starts at the beginning of Year 10 and typically lasts four years until the end of the academic year in which they turn 18. This is the period through which all young people will be expected to complete a broad, stretching and coherent programme of study, building up a collection of knowledge, skills and experience to allow them to move into a prosperous, flexible and rewarding adulthood* (Evans, 2015: 4).

An upper secondary phase with these aims would need to offer a curriculum framework that catered for all learners; involved all young people in both theoretical and practical learning; balanced commonality with degrees of specialization and choice; and was built around a latticework designed for progression and accumulation of achievement. Such a system, in our view, would also benefit from a clear form of accreditation at the end of the phase, such as a baccalaureate-style award, that recognizes the breadth of the curriculum (e.g. Hodgson and Spours, 2003, 2012b; National Baccalaureate Trust http://www.natbacctrust.org/about-the-nbfe/). However, these features do not in themselves fully address the pressing problems of the nature of general and vocational learning in the English upper secondary education system.

Increasing the quality and breadth of general education

At the risk of revisiting debates that have continued to resurface over three decades or so; the curriculum framework would have to address the issue of ‘quality’ and breadth of learning in general education. In pre-16 education, this would mean questioning once again the value of 10 examinations at 15/16 and the lack of space for innovative, experimental and practical forms of learning in terms of 21st Century challenges. GCSEs would have to move from being a selection point to a ‘progress check’. It would also involve introducing young people to working life in interesting and diverse ways. Post-16, potential solutions have also been well rehearsed and have suggested an essentially gradualist approach (e.g. Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004). This would involve, for example, enhancing the A Level tradition with at least four subjects, which could be at different levels with space for a research project, a research methodology course, forms of civic engagement and tutorial support. In fact, what has been proposed in the past to represent general education attainment at advanced level could be seen as at least three A Levels plus an International Baccalaureate core; a reform that hardly turns the world up-side down.

Enriching vocational education

At the same time, the vocational curriculum remains a challenge, not least because it has been the site of constant experimentation and an ‘alphabet soup’ stretching back to the mid-1980s – CPVE, DVE; NVQs, GVNQs; AVCEs; 14–19 Diplomas. Amidst all the government initiatives that came and went BTEC and CGLI awards, unlike their state-sponsored counterparts, have stood the test of time, albeit in continually evolving forms. How far the Sainsbury Review (Sainsbury, 2016) breaks with failed government initiatives of the past remains to be seen. Its aim to produce a clearer technical vocational route comprising 15 specialist lines seems rational enough. However, vocational qualifications are being reformed without reference to the apprenticeship reforms that emphasize ‘end point assessment’ rather than vocational qualifications, so perhaps lessons from the past have not been sufficiently learned.

On the other hand, there is a strong case to be made for a ‘technical baccalaureate’ as part of a unified framework (not just the current performance measure), representing the best of vocational awards that have stood the test of time together with substantial engagement with a workplace or workplaces. Added to this could be a customized version of the IB-like core advocated for a reformed general route. In this sense, the technical baccalaureate awards could have both common and specialized dimensions that exist in differing combinations according to vocational need.

Institutional reform – a collaborative approach

The development of vocationally specialized schools at 14+ in a competitive system is particularly challenging, but this does not mean that a degree of vocational specialization (even early in the phase) in English upper secondary education is undesirable. Reflections on the current challenges facing UTCs and Studio Schools, however, suggest its organization will have to be addressed through a collaborative area-based strategy rather than through individual specialist institutions in open competition with secondary schools. It could be the case that some 14–16 year olds will have a main home school, but will travel for the vocationally specialist elements as they do in relatively large numbers at 16+. Valuable specialist vocational equipment and employer investment of time should be concentrated rather than dispersed. Therefore, it seems sensible that any investment in an area is decided collectively involving, for example, schools, FE colleges, independent training providers, vocational higher education and leading employers, together with the assistance of local and regional government, especially in those cases where councils will receive greater devolved economic powers (LGA, 2016). At the same time, there will have to be strong vocational providers at the centre of these collaborative arrangements. Recent research that compared vocational developments in Australia and the Netherlands in order to learn lessons for the English system (Evans, 2014), focused on the capabilities of certain providers taking a wider system reform perspective.

Committed and effective participation

One of the most striking features of our present arrangements is how the interests of learners, despite the rhetoric of choice in a marketized system, come a poor second compared with the economic interests of the institution. One of the priorities of a reformed upper secondary education system would be to create both greater fairness and impartiality regarding the most appropriate programme and best place for the learner to study. It will be important to increase the sense of agency and committed participation of learners so that they are better able to navigate a longer phase and to take advantage of opportunities arising from an improved and coherent offer and more collaborative institutional relations. As the section on guidance in this paper suggests, this would mean focusing more attention in learners' programmes on the competences and the infrastructure required to improve their levels of self-awareness; enhancing their learning autonomy and their abilities to research with integrity; and increasing their capacities for collaboration and their abilities to map their future direction.

A slower and more inclusive reform process involving 'policy learning'

The fate of education reforms is not only determined by the content of policy but by 'policy style'. And the policy style of governments of various persuasions has been one of 'policy busyness' bordering on the frenetic. Successful upper secondary education systems, however, enjoy a degree of stability in which developments are allowed to evolve according to evaluation and evidence rather than being subjected to constant politically inspired change. David Raffe (2013), reflecting on decades of vocational reform across the four countries of the UK, laid out a number conditions for the successful reform of vocational qualifications in England that might be applied more broadly to the reform of upper secondary education systems. He argued for an approach to reform that places as much emphasis on the processes of change as the content of reforms and gives due consideration to the importance of institutions because they translate and enact the reforms in education. Accordingly, the purposes of the reforms should be clear to all stakeholders so that they can understand and engage with them; the direction of travel should be towards coherence but with room for diverse needs rather than imposing inappropriate uniformity; and attention should be paid to the international and home international contexts so as to support 'policy learning' rather than 'policy borrowing' (Raffe and Spours, 2007).

In conclusion

14–19 education and training has been a site of both political contestation and constant reform for at least the last 30 years. It is unlikely that anyone involved in the implementation of those numerous different policies has the appetite for root and branch transformation of the system. Nor is this productive in terms of system performance. However, as we have seen, the international and national responses to macro factors, such as globalization, technological advances, migration, raise issues for the purpose and shape of education systems and more particularly upper secondary education.

Each of the six dimensions outlined in this section represents a small step forward for the English upper secondary education system that takes into consideration broader international trends, but at the same time recognizes the power of England's historical legacy. Arguably, however, together these six incremental steps comprise a powerful strategy for moving forward towards a more universal and unified extended upper secondary education system in England.

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