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Vocational Education Matters: Other People's Children...Not Seen and Not Heard

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Introduction...Empowerment of the Other, Reclamation of Practice, and a History of Accidental System Neglect

In Chaps. 2 and 11, through the work of Hyland (2017, 2018) the marginalisation of vocational education and its subordination to academic education are traced back to the socio-economic and political stratifications of Ancient Greek society. Hyland points out that this marginalisation is both misguided and regrettable (Hyland 2018). Building on the work of Keep (2006), and Pring (1999), Hyland argues that,

The perennial problems of vocational education...consisting in the subordinate and inferior status of vocational studies as against academic pursuits—has led to a wide range of difficulties and anomalies which have bedevilled progress in the field for a century or more. These have included,

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inter alia, a lack of investment in VET by employers and states, difficulties of attracting suitably qualified students and a general and universal lack of esteem for vocational qualifications compared with their academic counterparts. (Hyland 2017, p. 306)

Unintended Consequences and Accidental Spirals of Neglect

Cycles of government policy initiatives in the FAVE sector in England have brought with them unintended consequences far-removed from the intentions of politicians and policy professionals. As Hyland points out above, a lack of investment in vocational education by employers and states and the subtle but systematic ‘downgrading’ of any education for young people that does not focus on the acquisition of ‘an academic education’, epitomised by English A-Levels begins to make the political rhetoric surrounding the importance of vocational education to industry and the economy sound rather hollow.

This accidental spiral of neglect can be in part attributed to changes in the English economy, and the need for a rebalancing away from manufacturing towards service delivery. However things have now reached the point that industries and government alike are aware of looming skills shortages and productivity gaps in a range of occupations traditionally supplied by technical and vocational education sectors. The added wider social realization of these issues in an era of Brexit and its related often strident discourses have served to sharpen focus upon the underdevelopment and underfunding of vocational education in England. System-wide attempts to address policy shortcomings in the field of vocational education in England are already underway in the form of New Apprenticeships and T-Levels. However, with this renewed focus comes the challenge that an ‘underperforming’ or ‘undervalued’ corner of the educational landscape can also find itself distanced from the very sources of support it may need to improve itself. These may of course revolve around funding regimes (schools are a politically popular sector to fund, colleges not so much). However, in the context of understanding how best to mediate for system-wide and long-term neglect, bringing the FAVE sector staff up to speed

with trends and developments in education practice and research, is a key component and driver of change. Unfortunately, set alongside a history of reduced funding and sometimes quite severe funding cuts, sits a narrative of a reduction of interest in researching FAVE practices and systems. This has led to a situation in which most academic enquiry in England targets the schools sector and most research activity is located in Higher Education (HE).

Research in FAVE

Allied to the above challenge is a lack of *comparable* research into educational practice in the FAVE sector in relation to research conducted in schools and university systems. A growing awareness has been developing over some time now that 'FE is under researched,

One thing to note is that the research reviewed here is in large part drawn from that done in schools and early years settings, rather than in further education and skills (FE&S) providers. This is largely due to the relative paucity of research in FE&S compared with the other sectors, and it may mean that not all of the research reviewed applies equally to FE&S. (Ofsted 2019a, p. 3)

This stands in contradiction to there being vibrant traditions of technical and further education research in many university settings, and an increasing drive by practitioners themselves to undertake research into their practice. The comparability (or not) of these activities to research practices into schools education, characterised in recent years by large scale statistically driven randomised trials (or equivalent) can further increase a wider perception of a sector that is not only underfunded but also 'not based on evidence', and therefore not best placed to take part in a debate about its own future. This is well illustrated in an Ofsted blog, bemoaning dearth of FE based research which prompted a considerable public backlash from teachers and academics alike resulting in Ofsted's Ofsted (2019b) publication of a review of research in the Further Education and Skills sector.

There also exists a compelling argument that many teachers in FAVE may be better placed engaging in subject specific research appropriate to their industrial knowledge, as they are required to be cognizant of not only pedagogic change but the continuous cycles of improvement of many of our technical sectors (see Chaps. 1 and 11). A culture of engagement in research in the FAVE sector may not necessarily generate pedagogic, or even subject specific pedagogic outputs, and the subject specificity of the sector is so diverse that engagement with industrially relevant knowledge and research may not produce a visible groundswell of activity. It could be argued that FAVE is not so much ‘under researched’ as it is (comparatively speaking) ‘under evidenced’.

It is also important to note how views of education research differ considerably, and research practitioners from outside education view these various types of activity in noticeably different ways. The absolutist view of education practice which at times can prevail in both policy makers and some education researchers overlooks the variability of interactions with human beings and the importance of context. For some, therefore there will always be a dichotomy at the heart of some education research where those who seek to establish absolute truths, to pass on to others about ‘what works’ have to respond to others who to point to the importance of experience and judgement who counter, that we are only ever likely to know *‘what worked here, on this day, at this time with these people’*. We may be able to extrapolate from these polarized positions if/when there is an overwhelming body of evidence and it is fair we can make some general statements about what we mean by good teaching practice which we may broadly defend as being ‘usually true’. However, in the face of policy drivers seeking to make change or improvement on a national scale this dichotomy has historically tended either not been recognised, or left aside as an inconvenience.

Breadth of the Sector

The breadth of settings, in which learners and teachers in the sector learn and work is well documented (see for example, Gregson et al. 2015a, b). This heterogeneity may be one of its great strengths, meeting the needs of any learner of any age who is not served by any other means of learning. However with this breadth comes an inherent challenge. Attempts to homogenise a

teacher or learner experience, even in the context of one subject across one age-band (for example teaching of GCSE resit cohorts) consistently require mitigation for the differences found across the system. If a researcher is seeking answers to 'key questions' and enduring educational issues then they need first to try to work these out in the context in which they are sited. While this may mean that they may only be able to speak with credibility and be able to justify what they have discovered with reference to a relatively small group of similar learners, teachers and organisations, it is nonetheless a pragmatic and realistic place to start. There are of course issues that unite and divide us all, such as supporting young people with the acquisition of literacy skills, but even here, the nature of national strategies for the implementation of a national policy change often create unintended and unhelpful localised diversity. This may be the inevitable outcome of a deregulated and independent sector, but it is also a major consideration when exploring the validity, scope and scale of research work being undertaken in the FAVE sector in England. When compared to a relatively monolithic and highly regulated schools system with one main qualification output at age 16 (GCSE) and one overriding educational 'aim', it is small wonder that the FAVE sector can bewilder those not used to such varied approaches and settings. It also raises the question of proportionality of research in different sectors of education and how these differences should be addressed. The scope and scale of research activity in any sector of education is of course hard to quantify. However, if it might be interesting to try to establish the *percentage* of teachers or providers who have a record of research engagement in the FAVE sector and compare it to similar statistics for schools (were they available) and to consider what this might mean in relation to perceptions of the sector and the status of research conducted within it.

The Importance of Context

The 'context dependency' of FAVE is also related to its role as possibly the 'most liminal space' (Sennett 2009) in the English system of education. It is the bridge between general education and employment, as well as increasingly between general education and specialised higher education. It is also the space of transformation for adults who have under achieved during their time in compulsory education, and those seeking to move into new

employment as well as (historically at least) a space of personal development for adults seeking to develop skills for personal fulfillment. The FAVE sector educates offenders, those with Special Educational Needs (SEND) (both in specialist and mainstream contexts and settings). It also works as a space of educational remediation for some whilst being a driver of huge occupational and professional progression for others. At a systemic level perhaps a useful model for FAVE is one of an ecosystem of interdependency—between government and local need, between learner and educator, between apprentice and employer and between economic and personal drivers. Every balance and counterbalance in this web of related actions becomes context-dependent, and is simpler to express in small-scale local terms than it is in larger homogenous constructs.

For any policy official or government minister this staggering complexity and lack of logical cohesion (in comparison to the regimented order of the schools sector) can be bewildering and understandably lead to challenges. The nature of FAVE is predicated ultimately on responding to the needs of a constituency of learners, and may be seen as the interface between education and employment. While there is a long-standing track record of technical and vocational learners progressing to higher level study at university, and a proud history of learning for pleasure (particularly among adult learners), this education- workplace interface and interplay of a wide range of factors means that subject areas and curriculum content are more fluid, and more prone to sudden shifts in demand. For example, the digital revolution may require the school curriculum to make subtle alterations in the teaching of (for example) geography, but in FAVE the same societal changes are driving new course offerings, closing defunct programmes, creating deep divides between sectors of communities (that adult education in particular needs to address) and generating some fundamental shifts in both the content and nature of education offered across the sector.

The Teaching Workforce

Finally, the teaching workforce itself must be considered in any exploration of the status of the FAVE sector in England. The relative stability of the period between 2014 and 2019 in terms of national policy and support (one improvement agency, one set of Professional Standards), should

be contrasted with a number of prior initiatives. However even in this recent period there has been a consistently high rate of change and staff turnover among teaching professionals. The regulation / deregulation of teaching qualifications and consistent changes to modes and models of delivery, increasing pressures of work and a range of other factors should be considered. The often part time nature of teaching, whether as part of a portfolio career incorporating the profession you are teaching, or whether as a 'serial part timer' has implications for the diversity mentioned above. Changes to management structures, reporting methods and all manner of shifts in ways of working will also have an impact. For teachers presenting themselves individually or collectively as part of a profession, finding an identity as an educator, becomes progressively more challenging with each layer of complexity or bureaucracy.

A sense of identity may be a particularly important factor in the otherness and marginalisation of the FE teaching workforce. An external view of 'teaching' is much closer aligned to the world of *school* teaching which is hallmarked by a degree level educated profession with a national curriculum subject specialism, taking pupils through a general education process. In the schools sector, teachers are seen as career professionals, and expected to have been trained prior to entering the classroom.

All of these statements *may be* true in the case of those in FAVE. They also may be wildly inaccurate. Many FAVE teachers strongly identify themselves as *not* school teachers. They are often proud of their time spent in industry, have had (or still have) successful careers outside the classroom. They may work in specialist areas, such as offender learning, may be volunteers, or specialise in extremely narrow fields of work—both scientific or societal. They may be training as teachers whilst already teaching. Burning questions facing policy professionals and teachers in the sector today include; What is the driving narrative that they identify with in their teaching career?; Is it that of a classroom practitioner, one of an 'expert', a master craftworker / artisan?; Do they see their teaching as passing on hard won skills and practice to a new generation, rather than 'education'?; In these contexts, should they be engaging in professional development which increases their identity as a teacher, a dual professional or should they seek to carve out a new identity altogether?

It is not that we should necessarily celebrate educators in FAVE not identifying themselves as teachers so much as to ask why. If asked the

question ‘would you consult an amateur dentist’ or ‘would you use an unqualified gas fitter?’ it is easy enough to understand why we need our education workforce to have a strong sense of their professional identity and an understanding of the discipline of education and the essentially moral nature of educational practice including extensive knowledge of the techniques and methods of teaching. The deeper point is just that they may need a great deal more than this.

If the practice of any craft can be seen as tradition (Dunne 1997; Carr 1995), then it is certainly true that one part of this tradition has always been the development of skill and craft through cooperation and sharing (Sennett 2009). Guild knowledge, tacit understanding, mastery and transcendence of practical or cerebral activity have been passed from generation to generation for centuries. A key question here is, did these master craftsmen and women of the past identify as teachers? It may seem an irrelevance to a modern educational system, but perhaps to the teacher themselves this identity challenge is very real. Do they, ultimately, occupy a space alongside classroom practitioners in primary and secondary schools? Do they ‘belong’ more in university spaces? In an employer’s training suites? Who are modern FAVE teaching staff, and what role do they truly play in meeting the vocational education needs of our nation? Do they occupy a purely transactional space, or drive personal transformation for their students and society whilst imparting skills for work and life?

In this complex identity landscape, there has been a further exponential change in the past decade which cannot be ignored. There has always been change to the roles required of individuals in their workplace—whether through new tools, experiments in practice or through the demise of an industry, but the digital revolution through which we are living has increased this change in almost all spheres. As a minimum it has added expectations of fluency and literacy in a new realm to practices which have remained largely unchanged for some time, but in other professions the digital world has created a sense of ‘hyper evolution’ for some roles and raises questions of the extent to which young people in school or college today are being trained for jobs that no longer exist or do not yet exist. While this has happened to our society and culture before, it is certainly a massively destabilising force for a teacher. Can teachers identify still as being from a profession or craft which they no longer recognise? Have digital or technological expectations of teaching created yet

another barrier they have to overcome before identifying as part of their new profession? Once again, the question arises, does this require a new way of thinking for these practitioners?

A historical perspective allows us to remember that learning in the past was predicated on a longer term relationship between learner and educator. Whether in the cloister or the workshop, knowledge transfer and skills acquisition took place in ways that possibly are still mirrored in some places of employment, but rarely in formal education practices in this country. Notwithstanding the impossibility of measuring the educational effectiveness of a learning method long consigned to history, and the likely poor experience of many young people in indentured apprenticeship, the necessary long-term co-operation between more and less experienced practitioners inherent in this approach to learning has a long lasting societal legacy. The factory system perpetuated similar models for decades if not centuries, and we consistently seek to recreate forms of this co-operative, shared learning for the young person of today. But the extent to which continue to allow the teacher, the master craftsman, the same opportunity to continue to develop theory and transcend their own capabilities in their craft is questionable (see Chaps. 1 and 11). Through practice over many years, *whilst sharing their knowledge* the greatest practitioners were able to explore their own practice through teaching, theory development and inquiry—a model we have retained in many Universities, in many artforms, but perhaps lost in the FAVE sector?

Practitioner Led Research in FAVE

There are different kinds of research in education and they all have strengths and limitations. Practitioner research is particularly good at dealing with matters of context; taking the experience of teacher/learners as the starting point for enquiry and research and for making a difference in practice. Practitioner research can even contribute to theory, by testing theory out in the arena of practice. Practitioner research is most open to criticism when it is not conducted in a systematic way, when it is not informed by peer-reviewed research and published literature and where the evidence generated by the research does not support the claims made.

Most teachers and trainers want to get better at what they do. Borrowing from the work of the sociologist Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* (published by Penguin in 2009), most of us don't just want to 'get by' we want to get better...and better...and better! If you accept the argument that putting any idea into educational practice *is* a process of inquiry and therefore a form of research (Kemmis 1995; Carr 1995) (see Chap. 1) then every teacher and trainer could be considered to be a researcher. Training in the techniques of research however is not enough. Teachers and trainers need to know how to make sure that their research is systematic, credible, informed by peer-reviewed research conducted by others and is evidence-based. Good educational practice comes from good research into educational practice *in context*. Educational theory is strengthened or weakened by being tested out in the arena of practice. Systematic enquiry into practice in context matters. That is why practitioner-research matters so much.

It is in this context that the practitioner-led research programmes funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) reside. In a policy system which values 'large scale' research based on the homogeneity of a large schools sector and a context of reduced funding and (by association) planning time for teachers, the programme attempts to give teachers in the FAVE sector the capacity to develop systematic, practice-focused research in context in situations where practitioners are reminded to keep an open mind throughout the research process and to be prepared to admit when things have not gone as well as expected and to be prepared to readily acknowledge that not every piece of research can be an immediate and runaway success!

By supporting a programme which directly targets the concerns of practitioners and local context *first*, whilst helping individuals find a method or argument which may over time expand their proposals to a wider group of practitioners, the programme aims to benefit organisations and individuals alike, by empowering and encouraging them to conduct research into practice and explorations in theory testing and theory development that is shared with their peers. The programme does not seek to create professional researchers, although this may be one outcome. It rather seeks to help teachers to reconnect with understandings and forms of knowledge that find their origins in the works of Aristotle. The programme aims to stimulate wider research into the sector at all levels, and to build a critical mass of research-literate and research-active teachers and leaders who are capable of taking educational practice

forward in the future. The programme is no longer the only way in which practitioners are able to begin this journey, but part of a range of movements that seek to empower teachers to become research-literate, evidence-informed—its insiders-practitioners who care enough about educational practice in the sector to take it forward, sometimes in small incremental ways and sometimes in ways which may be considered dramatic and even subversive (Dunne 2005).

A Changing Landscape, or a Difficult Climate?

It seems hard to make this point during such accelerated political times (for any historical reader, the UK at the time of writing, is currently in the midst of the Brexit challenges and the pressures of dealing with COVID-19 pandemic which are creating ever greater turmoil within government and policy for every department). However the levels of system-wide instability across the FAVE landscape over the past few decades are hard to over-state. Whilst many lobbying groups will point immediately to the funding shortfalls in Further Education (Wolf 2015) there exists beneath this a potentially deeper challenge for the sector to overcome.

According to the Institute for Government, between 1980 and February 2018 there were 28 major pieces of legislation introduced affecting FAVE, 49 Secretaries of State with responsibility for skills, and no national organisations supporting aspects of FAVE (Government departments included) that have survived longer than a decade. There have additionally been changes to funding rules and resultant changes to teaching delivery in *every* academic cycle for the past decade.

By comparison, there have been 5 Secretaries of State with responsibility for Education, with a continuous leadership role over School provision, with only one major restructure of educational practice in secondary schools. This discontinuity in the technical education arena manages to both reinforce a sense of calm 'tradition' in the theoretical world of 'learning', and also to create a moving target for parents and employers alike to try and understand when looking to advise or employ young people. Change on this scale is unlikely to create many constants with which to work, and long-serving FAVE professionals have become inured to the shifting sands upon which they must often work.

The recent shift under a new administration to place Further Education and Skills directly with the Secretary of State may signal a welcome shift in rhetoric and positioning for the sector, but it also creates a policy weakness. Any brief run directly by a Secretary of State will by definition receive less time than one managed by a minister of state, simply because the more senior the politician the greater the demands on their time (e.g. Cabinet meetings). As such whilst this may lead to macro announcements on funding for FAVE learners or organisations, it may stymie further any change of direction or approach.

This is not meant to criticise either ministers or officials. On a systemic level, the vast majority of ministers appointed to any brief are educated via an A Level and University Route. Ignoring any bias towards independent or state education, which may account for certain education policy expectations (such as a relentless focus on the socio-economic background of students entering 'elite' universities), it is interesting to note an intriguing data 'gap'. In the Sutton Trust 2010 report on the educational background of MPs, intended to highlight the gulf between parliamentarians and the educational background of the electorate they serve *does not even refer to the college system*. So few MPs might have attended an education sector which serves approximately half of our young people that it was not even a valid statistical field in the data. There has been a lot of political positioning made of the current Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid) having attended a Further Education College, but this is in the context of taking his three A Levels and being able to 'escape' to University and his ultimately high flying career. The number of politicians who have experienced true vocational or technical learning is not representative of the constituents they serve.

Data for civil servants is not available, but personal experience suggests that whilst an increasing number of policy officials are well versed in the FAVE sector, it is extremely rare to find one who attended or taught at a vocational or technical college. With this in mind, faced with an education sector which has little public visibility, less regulation (at many points in the past few decades) and which serves an employer community which until recently has been happy to pick up graduating learners with little fuss, it is easy to see how it can become a place for more experimental or reactive policy and funding decisions. If experience is the basis of

practice and craft, or the understanding of it in others, a lack of this experience at the heart of the decision-making machine is not a reflection on those who have done their best to support the sector. There has been no time dedicated to mastery of the subject at a policy level, but perhaps this is not as a deliberate action by government, and it should be acknowledged that there are genuine attempts currently being made to address this.

On a macro level, for the past three decades, until a landmark speech from prime minister Theresa May in February 2018, Government policy has relentlessly promoted Higher Education via a University route as the only possible aspirational option for young people seeking to complete their education and achieve gainful employment. Irrespective of political leaning, this has been the 'north star' of educational policy: get young people to University, and all will be well—quite possibly based in part on the success criteria necessary for ministers and civil servants, and those professions which have a consistent voice within the parliamentary democracy. During a period of industrial decline and manufacturing slowdown, any balancing narrative from large manufacturing or technical industries has been muted at best, and in a time of reducing numbers required within the technically skilled labour market and (from the EU) uncontrolled cross border movement there is no reason for such a narrative to be listened to as attentively.

On a micro level, this same tension has played out for learners who aspire to success through a consistent message of 'University or failure' that has left individuals struggling to achieve qualifications they did not seek for employment they did not aspire to let alone enter. Their personal perception (self-identity) of secure employment prospects and a financially successful life has been altered by national perception to the potential detriment of local employers seeking young people to employ, as well as the young people themselves. Emergent evidence in the form of the independent panel's report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, (Augar 2019) demonstrates the growing gap between outcomes from different university courses, and the challenge in justifying this investment on a nationwide basis.

The rhetoric to support this relentless drive for higher education has been consistent, powerful, and credible. Only very recently, faced with productivity shortfalls, Brexit and a rapidly ageing technical workforce

with no younger generation replacements, we must ask has any thought been given to the corrosive nature of messaging that focuses squarely on one part of an educational system and gives it preference to another. Even the issues facing our economy post the 2008 crash did not move national discourse away from graduate level education, in the face of near crisis levels of unemployment amongst millennial graduates in the UK.

There are policies in train at the time of writing which are attempting, not for the first time, to address some of these issues, and a growing momentum to balance this narrative (perhaps in part driven by increasingly visible skills shortages in the face of Brexit). However the deeper perceptions of education ‘streams’ (academic and technical) are profoundly entrenched and may take many years to overcome, if ever. It is important to understand the gaps that exist between rhetoric and practice to better understand the most effective policy decisions that could be made now to address these challenges.

Learners in the FAVE Sector

Over the past five years for which data exist (2012–2016) numbers of learners age 16–18 in the English system have remained broadly static, at around 1.4 million. If numbers are grouped to divide these learners into simple categories of ‘school’ and ‘non school’, the data shows that if Sixth form colleges are considered ‘school’ then the balance of learners between these two constituent groups of almost precisely 50/50 in each of these years. If (as many sixth forms would attest) the construct of a sixth form college is that of an independent place of study which includes an increasing amount of ‘non school’ teaching, such as vocational learning and a range of specialist qualifications, and we count these colleges as being ‘outside’ of the school sector, then the balance of learners is closer to 36% in school, 64% in colleges.

The rhetoric and political positioning of FAVE however is somewhat different. School based education is a consistent narrative in the media and with politicians alike, with FAVE lagging a long way behind. Perhaps the most visible of these positioning issues can be seen in the ‘results day’

mentality which prevails as the sole measure of success for young people across the country.

GCSE results are forensically analyzed and compared year by year. A Level results have the same treatment, with the added excitement of discussion of clearing, social mobility for disadvantaged learners to selective Universities (principally Oxbridge). In the background, for the large number of Level three vocational learners these results are irrelevant and often by the time of A Level results day many of these students have already accepted University places or moved into employment. The entry statistics for HE are published, the A Level results statistics and Level 3 vocational statistics are published, but there is precious little public discourse for those learners who have taken technical and vocational courses.

It is interesting to note that government *and opposition* speakers discuss school based learning and A Levels in the public arena much more frequently than discussions which include Further or Vocational education.

This is the rhetoric, or more precisely the 'rhetoric gap'—an absence of public discourse and visibility that has led (perhaps correctly) to the perception in society that a college education is undervalued and that a college education is not an important driver to society or the economy, when neither could be further from the truth. As has been wryly observed, FE is a really great place...for other people's children. I would contend that things are possibly worse than that, in that these 'other people's children', rather than being seen and not heard, are mostly *not seen*, as well as *not heard*—only those with the gravitas and credibility of A Level learning seem to exist in the national consciousness.

The picture is improving—in part due to the pressing need to upskill a workforce due to be depleted of (some) easily imported technical labour over the coming years via Brexit, and possibly in part due to the growing pressure on treasury and personal finances from university student debt. It would have been unheard of prior to the outcome of the Brexit referendum for a serving Prime Minister to speak of the need for greater parity between 'theoretical and 'vocational' learning, and for more young people to aspire to technical skill. Placing FE and Skills in the brief of the Secretary of State for Education—however briefly this may last- is an unprecedented and powerful signal of change.

This does not begin however, to address the underlying problem that much of the decades of rhetoric has created—an otherness for parts of the education system. This divorce between, ‘academic and vocational’ and ‘practice and theory’, is perhaps the most corrosive approach to older understandings of practice (see Chap. 1) and more realistic and holistic understandings and contextualised learning possible. Those subjects which seamlessly weave together practical and theoretical skills and which we use as the poster children of why this is important (most notably medicine, but also music, engineering and others) seem to be rather inconvenient truths that public discourse cannot quite manage to fit into a model where success is to achieve an academic qualification, and everyone else does ‘something different’. It also does not take into account the context of why an individual has the drive and motivation to succeed in their area of study, at their level of maturity, in view of prior experience and their expectations of what success might look like.

Vocational Practice and Skill Development

One particular area of concern is the impact that this consistent landscape of change has had on curriculum and how we understand the learning of practice and skill. Progressive legislation has variously relied on the skills of those within a given industry to pass a person as ‘competent’ in a skill, expected delivery of highly detailed atomised outcomes from a wide range of possible learning activities, put learning in the hands of employers with ‘no qualification outcome’. There are innumerable wider historical examples, of these approaches prevailing and being delivered concurrently in the FAVE sector in 2020, sometimes by the same staff.

There has been no consistent underlying philosophy in education practice particularly in vocational education, and as such there is very little institutional memory or knowledge upon which to draw, or a long term approach that can guide providers or their workforce. The identity debate discussed previously is brought to the fore in this context. The rise of NVQ approaches also saw a commensurate rise in Assessors within FAVE—staff who did not teach but ‘checked learning’, a role which has persisted in much Apprenticeship delivery. Staff variously may see themselves as Assessors or Trainers and use

both terms interchangeably but avoid the idea of being a 'teacher', quite rightly in some cases. For teachers there existed an identity for a long time beforehand—the identity of a 'lecturer'. For others there are 'instructors', and recently a further fracturing of this landscape to create 'subject coaches' 'learning mentors' and a range of other roles which variously and confusingly both do and do not denote having a role in which learners are educated by that member of staff. In this deregulated and complex education environment it is hard to see how best to reclaim a space in which the development of skill, craft and acquisition of educational practice are best understood in circumstances where learning and assessment can be both contextualised and consistent.

The new T Level programme may manage to align some of these challenges over time, and hopes to become the 'gold standard' of technical education, but to do so it will need to either put the sector through a considerable period of rapid change, or erode a substantial legacy of prior (and generally successful) qualifications that are known and understood, despite some lingering questions over their validity or purpose.

It appears that this is nowhere better exemplified than in Apprenticeship policy. The history of apprenticeship is long and there are many evolutions of this most vocational of learning forms. However, it is an induction to practice that has in the main rested with employers (or previously Guilds) to be the arbiters of necessary standard. It was also, perhaps crucially in this context, a training ground that was built on the supremacy of decision making by the profession, and also the investment of a profession in its own legacy over time.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty lies within measurement. A government seeking to fund any system will also by its nature seek to measure what has been achieved. An employer likewise will seek to measure what return an employee brings to their business. How long does a good education take? Who gets to decide? What forms the curriculum? In what order? Measuring skills that may be hard to define or take years to master to be able to apportion grading, funding and management can challenge even the most engaged policy maker. The employer landscape now is also so varied even in one industry that a qualification that is ideal and 'fit for purpose' for some companies may be the exact opposite for others. Should government continue to step in and legislate content that is 90%

acceptable to all parties, or allow employers to plan this learning with the commensurate risks that some will be totally dis-satisfied with the outcome? Who in this model is able to make recommendations of most logical sequencing of learning, or input knowledge of the underpinning skills an Apprentice may need to be successful *outside* the domains immediately referenced by their employers?

The 'industry standard' measurement of education practice has evolved to be Guided Learning Hours (GLH)—but how does a practice that is learnt by being part of an industry over a long period of time respond to being measured in such a granular way? Conversely, if a 'trainee' has a value to a business in part *because* they are the junior member of a developing group of skilled workers, how does an employer measure their worth? Does investing in their future justify time spent or finance committed in the name of their future workforce? If true apprenticeship is a relationship built over time between a multi layered group of individuals and masters of their craft, then breaking this down into a collection of individual skills and acts may have a value in a time and motion study, but it does not track the value of the whole—the unconscious skill, the indefinable learned behaviours of time spent within the workshop, studio or factory.

There exists in FAVE divisions of purpose, policy and approach, that will take the collective practical wisdom of all of us to resolve. Practitioners, providers, policy-makers and employers all have their part to play. There are green shoots of change all around at the time of writing, and many positive steps being taken. The learning we take from practice, from those who are directly engaged in resolving these deeper challenges must not be ignored, but instead placed at the heart of this discourse as we plot a new course, and try (again) to work out how to not have an 'unwelcome cousin' at the educational table, and instead celebrate the exceptional talents skills and practices of those who work simultaneously with hand, heart and head.

Conclusion

Around 10 and 20 years ago research in FAVE used to be conducted *upon* the sector by 'outsider' researchers often from HE. There is now a growing and critical mass of research-active 'insider' practitioner-researchers across the sector who not only understand what 'good' practitioner research looks like but also have direct and personal experience of conducting research *by* the sector *in* the sector *for* the sector. Theirs has not been an isolated journey but one in which they have they have shared experiences and cooperated not only with the other sector practitioners but also with policy professionals and research active staff from HE working in genuine partnership.

ETF has consistently invested in supporting practitioner research across the sector. Through the Practitioner Research Programme, the Foundation has established new policy-practice-research relations. These are beginning to improve how we go about policy development, implementation and evaluation. It has also developed a new model of educational change by illustrating how educational practice and the quality of practitioner-research can be improved through a practice-focused model of CPD for teachers and trainers.

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