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## Challenging the skills fetish

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes the process through which human capital theory came to dominate policy in post-compulsory education, to result in the fetishisation of skills. It relates skills policies to the contemporaneous development of policies on lifelong learning. The fetishisation of skills is related to methodological and normative individualism displacing an understanding that capacity and skill arise from and are developed by interdependent action. The current promotion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, genericism and trainability leads to the alienation of skills from the people who embody and exercise them and the social context which enables and gives value to peoples' exercise of their skills. The article argues that this reification and fetishization of skills degrades education, work and social life.

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## Introduction

Education policy discourse is based on skills. The extraordinary policy enthusiasm for skills is premised on an unwavering belief that skills are the solution to all social, economic and personal ills. For nations, more and better skills will lead to economic prosperity, increased productivity, higher labour market participation rates, increased global economic competitiveness and higher levels of social inclusion. For companies, the acquisition and retention of skills is said to be key to their profitability. For individuals, more and better skills will result in a good job, better pay and the potential for promotion, the capacity to participate fully in society and with the right kind of skills, the ability to move jobs and careers and engage in personal transformation. The converse of this is also held to be true: if a nation does not have the right skills in the right combination it will languish, if companies do not have the right quantity and mix of skills they risk going out of business and if individuals do not have the right skills they and their families will languish because they have not made wise investments in their skill development.

The pervasive belief in the role of skills constitutes a *doxa* – a taken-for-granted and unquestioned truth (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Indeed, there is a moral imperative driving the skills discourse. The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2021, 4), which is a powerful advocacy body for world capitalism, has issued 'a call to action for wide-scale upskilling.'

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Globalisation, technological change and demographic changes have 'led to a pressing societal problem: how to equip people with the skills they need to participate in the economy – now and in the future' (World Economic Forum (WEF) 2021, 4). The Covid-19 pandemic has, if anything, intensified the skills narrative. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2021, 8), this is because 'it is forcing digitalization and automation at a more rapid pace'.

This article builds on an expansive literature that problematises the skills discourse and locates its emergence in the crisis of capitalism that emerged in the 1970s in the transition from the post-World War II social settlement premised on the Keynesian welfare state, to the neoliberal market state (Streeck 2016; Therborn 2012). Those who have come before us have situated the emphasis on skill and competency that emerged in the 1980s as part of the neoliberal project, based on new understandings of skill and work and of the 'market individual' (Jones and Moore 1993; Moore 1987; Wheelahan 2007). Others have critiqued the narrow behaviourism of the skills discourse, in emphasising the impoverished view of human beings and learning that the skills discourse posits (Hyland 1997, 1999; Eraut 1994). Yet others have demonstrated that the failed promise of human capital theory (Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020; Livingstone 1998, 2019) results in 'cruel optimism' that the jobs, the career, and our imagined futures will be available to us (Berlant 2011).

This article makes two contributions to this literature. The first is to analyse the nature of 21st century skills as the latest incarnation of the skills discourse. Policy debates focus on the right kind of skills and not merely on skills development per se. In contrast to so-called generic and employability skills in vocational education or graduate attributes in higher education, the WEF and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) have posited their very influential notion of 21st century skills for all sectors of education, which encompass foundational literacies, competencies and character qualities (WEF and BCG 2015).

The second contribution draws on Marx to argue that skill has become a fetish. The concept has become reified as existing independently of the bodies of those who exercise skill and of the social relations in which skills are embedded and through which skill is developed, exercised and recognised. It uses Marx's concept of commodity fetishism as an analogy to analyse skills fetishism and to argue that the skills fetish is related to commodity fetishism more directly through the notion of a labour market in which skills are bought and sold.

The first half of this article analyses the emergence of the skills discourse and its evolution from generic skills in the 1980s to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. It explains how the skills discourse was driven first by human capital theory and, later, by skill-biased technological change, both linked to neoliberal reforms of education in which education was marketised and subordinated to the economy. The second half of the article analyses the skills fetish. It first compares and contrasts Anglophone narrow task-focused conceptions of skill with broader notions associated with an occupation in collective skill-formation systems in Northern Europe. It demonstrates that the rational, self-interested actor of human capital theory is underpinned by nominalism, empiricism and methodological individualism. This is the means through which skill is reified and separated from embodied agents on the one hand, and from social relations, on the other. The commodification of skill as a resource that is traded in markets is related to the fetishisation of commodities more broadly.

## TINA and the skills discourse

A 2014 report by the Conference Board of Canada offers an illustrative example of arguments about the centrality of skills to all aspects of life:

Skills are critically important to the economic, social, political, and cultural well-being of Canada and Canadians. Advanced skills, when attained and used by a large proportion of a country's population, improve productivity, economic competitiveness, and political and community engagement, and also contribute to better employment prospects, household and personal income, and health for individuals and their family. (Munro, Cameron, and Stuckey 2014, iii-iv)

Canada has the highest level of tertiary education attainment in the world for the population aged between 25 and 64 years (OECD 2020, Table A1.1), yet there is still a rhetorical discourse (albeit in an understated Canadian way) that Canada has a skills problem and that there is a gap between the education that is provided and the skills that are attained. The same report argues that Canada is doing quite well in producing people with post-secondary education credentials but that its 'actual skills attainment is underwhelming'. This is worrying, as 'knowledge, technical skills, and essential skills' are critical for both individual and national success (Munro, Cameron, and Stuckey 2014, ix).

The imperative in government policies for skills is the TINA discourse – 'there is no alternative'. Human capital is the driver of economies and societies and, without skills, nations will languish. 'There is no alternative' was made famous by Margaret Thatcher when, as Prime Minister of the UK, she used this idea to demonise concepts of the public good, privatise public institutions, subvert the welfare state and marketise social provision (Harvey 2007; Berlinski 2008; Littler 2018). The neoliberal world-wide economic transformation was led in the 1980s initially by Thatcher in the UK and President Ronald Reagan in the United States. Thatcher and Reagan were instrumental in taking ideas about individualism, markets and putative personal freedom that had existed in academic circles for some decades and implementing them in practice, thus ushering in neoliberalism and in the process transforming society and the state (Harvey 2007).

These changes were adopted with alacrity by all mainstream parties in other Anglophone countries and less thoroughly by other Western governments, at least initially (Hood 1995), and were enforced by international governmental organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund through global trade agreements and loans that were conditional on poor countries implementing neoliberal policies (Harvey 2007). The effect of neoliberal policies was to rebalance society, from one in which markets were assigned a supporting role towards that of a market society per se. Streeck (2016, 22 original emphasis) explains '*Now states were located in markets, rather than markets in states*'. In the market state, the point of all social institutions is to facilitate markets and heighten competition within them. In turn, individuals have to invest in their human capital to participate effectively in more competitive educational and labour markets.

The neoliberal conception of the state differs in important respects from that which went before. The 'classical liberal' pre-World War II state in western democracies was premised on notions of negative freedom, which emphasised the absence of economic constraints by a minimalist and non-interfering state. In contrast, the welfare state that arose after the destruction of World War II embraced some aspects of the notion of 'positive freedom', in which the state has an obligation to intervene through direct provision, for example, of a

‘safety net.’<sup>1</sup> While still premised on the liberal individual, the welfare state had an obligation to provide greater access to social resources (Bottomore and Marshall 1992).

Olssen (2016, 130) explains that, in contrast to both the classical liberal state and the welfare state, the neoliberal state is an activist and interventionist state which seeks to create entrepreneurial citizens who invest in their human capital as a precondition for their participation in markets. The role of the state is consequently to provide the ‘the conditions, laws and institutions’ necessary for markets to operate (Olssen 2016, 130). All social provision, including education, is subject to the discipline of the market through competition with private providers or with other public institutions. The neoliberal state also provides the mechanisms to ensure that both public institutions and those who work in them comply with market imperatives through ‘individualised incentives and performance targets... [and] a new, more stringent conception of accountability and monitoring’ (130).

Starting in the 1980s, and entrenched in policy discourses since that time, the role and purpose of education became overwhelmingly economic, displacing broader conceptions of citizenship. In the market society, the imagined economic citizen is not dependent on the state, and decision-making is exercised through the market rather than through democratic participation in social and political fora. Human capital theory enables the behaviour of individuals, enterprises and states to be understood as the pursuit of self-interest through markets. Individuals, enterprises and nations are all advantaged by wise investments in human capital.

Orthodox human capital theory posits that more educated labour elicits more demand by employers for skilled labour, which leads to higher productivity and higher wages (Becker 1964). The fate of nations depends on it, particularly in this new technological age. However, the problem for human capital theory is that, despite the fact that we have the most educated population in the history of humankind, we putatively still have a skills deficit. This narrative is given a renewed urgency because the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolutions, driven by ‘automation and intangible value creation’ (WEF 2020, 5) have rendered obsolete skills that were developed for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> industrial revolutions which were characterised by ‘the mass production of uniform talent... used to fill repetitive, process-oriented early manufacturing jobs’ (WEF 2020, 5).<sup>2</sup> Digital and socio-emotional skills must be prioritised to cope with ‘new job types that do not yet exist’ (WEF 2020, 5). The whole person must be engaged in this transformation, and Klaus Schwab (2016, 99), founder and Executive Chair of the World Economic Forum, argues that this necessitates harnessing four different types of intelligence: the contextual (the mind), emotional (the heart), inspired (the soul), and physical (the body). As will be demonstrated later, the rhetorical discourse underpinning the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution is premised on an ideal type of individual as envisaged in neoliberal constructions of the rational self-interested actor.

### ***Human capital theory and the evolution of the skills discourse and lifelong learning***

Human capital theory has underpinned education policies for almost 50 years. Initially, much human capital theory was descriptive: it was used to explain economic gains from expanding education. It was also used to explain why individuals, companies and governments increased their spending on education. In the 1980s and 1990s, human capital theory

became increasingly normative: advocates argued that investment in human capital should be increased to promote economic performance. Since the 2000s, human capital theory has become even more prescriptive, with advocates arguing that postsecondary education should emphasise, and then be restricted to, programs thought to have most economic benefit (Wheelahan and Moodie 2021).

From its outset human capital theory was criticized on methodological grounds, particularly in the literature on education screening and signalling (Arrow 1973).<sup>3</sup> Human capital theory seemed consistent with the wage and education data for most of the twentieth century, but there have been mismatches in recent decades (Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020; Lloyd and Payne 2016). Lloyd and Payne (2016, 1-2) explain ‘With rising graduate populations and pressure on individuals to gain more qualifications at all levels, there is increasing concern about the capacity of national economies to keep pace with the outputs of the education system, amid evidence of growing levels of over-qualification and skills wastage.’ The response has been to argue that economic productivity is increased not by education in general, but by the development of specific skills. This is the position of skill-biased technological change (Goldin and Katz 2010).<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of the skills discourse over this time is reflected in changing understandings of lifelong learning since the 1970s. The 1972 Faure report *Learning to be: the world of education today and tomorrow* published by UNESCO was expansive in its understanding of the purpose of education and the individual, on the one hand, and education and society, on the other (Faure 1972). The underpinning premises were social solidarity, democracy, lifelong education and the fulfilment of the individual ‘in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments – as individual, member of a family and a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer’ (Faure 1972, vi). Biesta (2006, 171) argued that this report reflected ‘the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s... both in terms of its concerns and in terms of its optimism that change for the better was possible.’ Streeck (2016, 21) explains that the growth of *democratic* capitalism in the West ‘reached its peak in the 1970s, after which it began to disintegrate’ and over time was replaced by neoliberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Some 20 years later, the notion of lifelong learning was ubiquitous (Field 2002; James 2020), but in a very different world. Field (2001b) explained that two different notions of lifelong learning were framing policy debates in international government organisations in the 1990s. UNESCO published the famous Delors Report, titled *The Treasure Within*, in which an expansive notion of lifelong learning was supported by four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be (Delors 1996). However, Field (2001b, 9) also explained that this report ‘said little in substance that was new or different’, at a time when UNESCO’s influence as an influential policy body was waning.

At about the same time, the OECD (1996) published *Lifelong Learning for All*, in which, as Field (2001a, 10) argued ‘an emphasis on lifelong learning was justified by reference to global competitive pressures and the changes wrought by science and the new technologies.’ This report emphasised building links between informal learning and formal education and training, thus reinforcing a key pillar of human capital theory, which is that all learning must be pressed into service for the labour market. The report advanced five arguments in favour of lifelong learning. First, the learning economy depends on engaging the whole population in lifelong learning, and those countries and individuals that fail to engage would be left behind (TINA). Second, the ‘speed of change’ argument focused on the ubiquity of

rapid technological change and growth in knowledge and information. The third argument was about the ‘life-cycle redistribution’ in which both education and work would extend over a longer period. The fourth supported active labour market policies in which an ‘underlying broad aim should be to move away from essentially passive approaches based on transfer payments – especially in response to unemployment’ (OECD 1996, 91). The final argument was ‘social cohesion’: those who miss out on arguments one to four would be effectively excluded. The report argued that ‘Learning is the most necessary insurance against exclusion and marginality’ (OECD 1996, 91-92).

Rather than the welfare state acting as the social safety net in insuring the population against risk, access to and success in education now constituted this role. Individuals must make wise investments in their human capital so that they can get a good job, keep it and progress in the labour market. Biesta (2006, 170) argued that, in the learning economy, understandings about what learning is and what it is for were based on ‘a much more individualistic understanding of lifelong learning and ... transformed lifelong learning from a right into a duty’. This duty was enforced through active labour market policies, which required individuals to undertake training in return for welfare payments. Abhorrence of ‘passive welfare’ is linked to the neoliberal notion of the individual, investor and entrepreneur, and so lifelong learning policies moved from ‘Learning to be’ to ‘Learning to be Productive and Employable’ (Biesta 2006, 170). Moreover, this duty is enforced in near universal systems of tertiary education, in which the attainment of substantive post-school qualifications (i.e., at least a diploma or a degree) is a precondition for participation in the labour market and society (Trow 2010).

### ***From generic skills, employability skills and graduate attributes to 21st century skills***

The skills discourse had its parallel in the vocational education sector in the 1980s, when youth unemployment surged as a consequence of the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s and the restructuring of the labour market (Goozee 2001). Streeck (2016, 16) explains that the long-post World War II social settlement built on the Keynesian welfare state was abandoned as a result of global inflation in the 1970s, the explosion of public debt in the 1980s, and rapidly rising private debt in the decades that followed, culminating in the Global Financial Crisis in 2008. The skills discourse, and the competency-based training models of curriculum to which it gave rise, first emerged in the United Kingdom, then in Australia and, thereafter, through processes of policy diffusion, to other, particularly poor countries, which were required to implement such policies in return for aid (Allais 2014). The assumption then and now was that the development of human capital was the basis upon which economic renewal would be built (Goozee 2001; Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020).

The winding back of the welfare state was accompanied by the expansion of policy conceptions of skill which, over the ensuing decades, came to encompass all aspects of our lives. Payne (2000, 353), in tracing the development of the skills discourse in the UK from the 1980s, explains that the concept of what was entailed in skill expanded over time from an initial focus on the ‘manual craft worker and technologist... [to a] much wider discourse of “basic skills”, “employability skills”, “technician skills”, “management skills”, and “key skills”’. 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills take this process one step further, as is discussed later.

The perceived problem was that young people did not have the skills that were needed for the new economy and society, an echo of what we hear today. Pathologising young people who did not have jobs as being deficient was an easier policy intervention than was dealing with the restructuring to the economy that had resulted in the disappearance of jobs for teenagers (Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020). Investment in human capital was the solution, but investment needed to be in the particular skills directly needed for work.

Moore and Hickox (1994, 283), in discussing the vocationalisation of curriculum during the 1980s and early 1990s in the UK, characterised government policies during this time as instrumental, market-oriented and based on blaming the liberal values of the previous era 'as the reason for education's failure to deliver on its earlier promise'. Vocational 'modernisers' argued that education lacked relevance for the world of work (see Jessup 1991, for an example). The vocationalisation of curriculum in vocational education was initially driven by ministries and agencies external to education. In the UK, the training reforms were led by government statutory bodies under the aegis of the Department of Employment (Moore and Hickox 1994), while, in Australia, training reform as an engine for economic growth was led by 'the coordinating government departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Finance and Treasury' (Marginson 1997, 158). The result was the development of competency-based training models of curriculum. Deng (2020, 92) explains that competency-based curriculum did not originate in education as curricular concepts, but rather they were '*managerial* concepts that originate from the field of human resource management'. The explicit purpose of competency-based curriculum is to tie education directly to workplace requirements and roles.

The impact of these changes differed in different sectors of education. In most countries, the sector of education in which competency-based education has had the most impact is vocational education because it is more tightly tied to work and buffeted by powerful external constituencies such as employer bodies and unions (Wheelahán and Moodie 2016). As a consequence, the language of so-called generic skills and employability skills has increasingly saturated curriculum in vocational education, based on the idea that qualifications need to include generic or transferable skills for employment and the specific competencies required to perform particular tasks and roles in the workplace.

In Australia, the university sector was initially able to resist the imposition of more overt and tightly defined models of competency-based education (Keating 2003) but, over time, this resistance has eroded. Instead of competency-based education, all Australian universities have 'graduate attributes', which are 'descriptions of the core abilities and values a university community agrees all its graduates should develop...' (Barrie, Hughes, and Smith 2009). Graduate attributes are not as tightly defined as are competencies in vocational education, but they are nonetheless still premised on the notion that graduates need a suite of transferable skills and attributes for the labour market.

In universities in many jurisdictions, variants of competency-based education are now routine in education for the professions, and the language of competencies and learning outcomes structures national and supra-national qualifications frameworks (Mulder and Winterton 2017). These provide the basis in all sectors of education for quality assurance policies and accreditation frameworks for institutions and the programs they offer.



## Genericism and trainability

Graduate attributes in higher education and so-called generic skills and employability skills in vocational education are based on the principle of genericism, or ‘trainability’, as Bernstein (2000) describes it in his critique. He explains that trainability is premised on:

a new concept of ‘work’ and ‘life’, a concept of ‘work’ and ‘life’ which might be called ‘short-termism’. This is where a skill, task, area of work, undergoes continuous development, disappearance or replacement; where life experience cannot be based on stable expectations of the future and one’s location in it. (Bernstein 2000, 59)

Individuals must be equipped for a perpetually changing future and thus constantly be able to ‘upskill’. Lifelong learning takes on renewed importance in a world where nothing is stable, and genericism becomes the organising principle for curriculum construction. Genericism is a way of ordering curriculum, the relations between its components, and in identifying that which is important. The generic skills discourse and the extraordinarily high level of policy attention given to it in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training over decades was and is the mechanism through which *all* elements of curriculum have become vocationalised through the discourse of work-relevance. Programs and outcomes in all sectors of post-compulsory education and training must prepare students for work. Development and selection of curricular components and the way curriculum is delivered must take this into account.

However, skills are not generic in the sense advanced by their advocates. Jones (2009, 87) interviewed 37 academics in two big research-intensive Australian universities in five disciplines: economics, history, law, medicine and physics. She found that ‘generic attributes are highly context-dependent, and are shaped by the disciplinary epistemology in which they are conceptualised and taught’ (Jones 2009, 85). For example, problem-solving in economics involved using economic tools and developing economic models; in history it was understood as exploring causality; in law it was closely related to critical thinking and involved analysing hypothetical or real cases; in medicine problem-solving was understood as the application of clinical reasoning and diagnostic and therapeutic skills; and, in physics it involved abstract modelling and mathematical analysis (Jones 2009, 89-90). Problem-solving strategies involve analogies, forward search and other cognitive strategies, all of which are bound by their context (Servant 2019, 623). They require both the declarative and procedural knowledge of the subject area to develop cognitive schemata and to try the appropriate type of solution (Kirschner and Hendrick 2020, 16-18; Sweller 1988).

‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ take this process of genericism one step further. These encompass the traditional definitions of skills in most policy arenas. Using the WEF/BCG definitions, these include foundational literacies (literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, and cultural and civic literacy) and competencies (critical thinking/problem-solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration), but now also encompass *character qualities* such as persistence, grit, adaptability, curiosity, initiative, leadership and cultural awareness (WEF and BCG 2015, 3). While there are somewhat different definitions of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills offered by different entities in different jurisdictions, they are premised on social and emotional skills and skills in ‘self-management’ (Giammarco, Higham, and McKean 2020). The expanded notion of skill encompassed in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills thus reflects

the colonisation of all aspects of our lives, including who we are, our inner selves, what we believe and how we behave. The WEF/BCG (2015, 3) explain that:

Character qualities describe how students approach their changing environment. Amid rapidly changing markets, character qualities such as persistence and adaptability ensure greater resilience and success in the face of obstacles. Curiosity and initiative serve as starting points for discovering new concepts and ideas. Leadership and social and cultural awareness involve constructive interactions with others in socially, ethically and culturally appropriate ways.

In writing about the language of generic and life-skills during the 1980s, Ainley and Corbett (1994, 368) explained that this is a ‘cling-film language, that can stretch over almost anything’ and ‘serves to make the concept of “skill” into a nebulous moral issue, outside everyday experience’. The language of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is written in apparently neutral terms, based on a presumed shared understanding of what these skills are, the presumption that they can be defined, assessed and measured and the presumption they are a desirable policy goal. Nonetheless, for all that, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are still underpinned by the same moral imperatives that Ainley and Corbett were writing about almost 30 years ago in this journal, which is that young people are deficient because they do not have the skills that are needed for success in work and, as a consequence, in life.

### The skills fetish

Charles Tilly (1988, 452) argued that ‘As a historical concept, skill is a thundercloud: solid and bounded when seen from a distance, vaporous and full of shocks close up’. Allais (2011, 2) explained that, in education policy, particularly in Anglophone countries and those shaped by the Anglophone colonial legacy, skills are unproblematised and ‘separated from power, social policy, the structuring of labour markets, and the organization of occupations and jobs’.<sup>6</sup> In these systems, skills are separated from the occupations in which they arise and the social relations that underpin occupations.

The concept of skill is understood differently in Northern European systems based on collective skill formation and Anglophone systems (Clarke and Winch 2006). These systems are characterised by different ‘labour market and welfare regimes’ (Lloyd and Payne 2021, 1), with different roles for social actors such as employers and unions, different types of market regulation, and different mechanisms of coordination between education and the labour market.

Collective skill formation systems are those in which the ‘main characteristic of the vocational training systems ... is that they are *collectively organized*, because firms, intermediary associations and the state cooperate in the process of skill formation in initial vocational training’ (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012, 4). The dominant notion in these systems is the concept of an occupation (or, in the German system, a *beruf*) as the starting point for vocational education. A *beruf* (occupation) has a well-defined social, legal and employment role and status with a corresponding body of systematically related theoretical knowledge (*Wissen*) and a set of practical skills (*Können*). It corresponds also with the social identity of the person who has acquired the occupation, its knowledge and its skills (Clarke and Winch 2006, 262). There are 325 different apprenticeships (*Ausbildungsberufe*) which prepare individuals for regulated occupations in Germany and, hence, require specific qualifications or credentials as a precondition for employment. These apprenticeships

provide the basis for career progression to higher-level occupations.<sup>7</sup> Collective skill formation systems are under pressure as a result of profound labour market changes, the undermining of the institutional arrangements that underpin these systems and the ‘Europeanisation’ of labour markets and qualifications systems, even though national systems react in different ways to these changes (Clarke, Westerhuis, and Winch 2021).

In contrast, in Anglophone countries, where most of the labour market is unregulated, the market is used as the main coordinating mechanism, particularly in allocating graduates to jobs. Graduates must compete not only with those who have similar qualifications in similar fields but also with graduates from many fields and who have different types of qualifications (Hall and Soskice 2001). Educational institutions seek to respond to this by emphasising the brand value of their qualifications in the labour market, even though the match between qualifications and occupations is weak.<sup>8</sup> Given these weaker connections, the emphasis is on employability skills, or graduate attributes in general, rather than deep engagement with the specific knowledge and skills required for specific occupations (Wheelahan and Moodie 2017).<sup>9</sup> Employability is thus disconnected from occupations, as are the knowledge and skills that underpin occupational practices. Clarke and Winch (2006, 261) explain that Anglophone notions are that skills are an individual property or attribute, focused on tasks and jobs and not occupations, associated with physical or manual mastery and ability and have ‘no particular association with a knowledge base’.

The emphasis, particularly in Anglophone countries but increasingly also in the rest of the world, in skills policies is to ‘fix’ education so that it supplies the right skills by tying it ever tighter to the ‘demands’ of the labour market and employers. This takes for granted that the ‘demands’ from employers are coherent and well formulated, and that individuals will be able to use the skills they have in the workplace. However, as Keep and James (2012) Buchanan (2006), Brown and Lauder (2010), and others have demonstrated, the problem is the nature of (poor) jobs. There have been some attempts by the OECD (2019), and some national jurisdictions to emphasise local economic development and skills ecosystems and how employers use skills.<sup>10</sup> However, as Bosch and Charest (2009) explain, the links between education and the labour market will remain weak without the close involvement of social partners such as employers and unions. This is difficult because in many countries, increasingly ‘flexible’ labour markets combined with declining union membership means that the mechanisms for coordination between education and the labour market have become more fragmented, leaving continual policy tinkering in education one of the only policy levers governments are prepared to use.

### ***Nominalism, empiricism, methodological individualism and behaviourism***

The intellectual mechanisms that allow the separation of skills from the social context in which they are exercised, and from the bodies of people who must use them, are nominalism and methodological individualism (Wheelahan 2007). The philosophy of David Hume, the 18<sup>th</sup> century exemplar of British empiricism, is central to understanding this process. For Hume, knowledge is built through and limited to what we can observe and/or measure. The methods that are used to gain access to the world and to make statements about it are also methodologically individualist. The total is the sum of, and reducible to, its parts (Heath 2020). Hume argued that the world consists of independent objects that are not causally related. The best we can do is ‘nominalise’, that is to group or correlate the world’s particular

things, actors, activities and events under convenient generalising names (such as skills), and the outcomes of any process are the sum of events that comprise it (Johnson, Dandeker, and Ashworth 1984). Nominalism and methodological individualism hold for all levels of reality, including the social world. Markets, for example, are the aggregation of ontologically distinct individuals who pursue their self-interest, and a society is just the sum of the individuals who comprise it and nothing more. For example, Friedrich von Hayek (1980, 6), one of the intellectual progenitors of neoliberalism, argued that ‘there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior’.<sup>11</sup>

While the philosophy of behaviourism precedes neoliberalism, it is also premised on nominalism and methodological individualism, and is the basis of competency-based training models of curriculum. Behaviourism holds that the outcomes of learning can be reduced to discrete behaviours, with learning inferred to have taken place based on observable performance (see Jessup 1991). Learning must be described merely in terms of what students can do, and not what they know or are in the process of knowing or becoming. Processes of learning are assumed to be identical with, or conveniently reduced to names of, outcomes of learning, with learning outcomes described in advance as observable behaviours that are aligned to a particular task, role or requirement.

In Australia, which has a ‘tight’ model of competency-based training for qualifications in the vocational education sector, competency is defined as: ‘The consistent application of knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments’ (Naidu, Stanwick, and Frazer 2020, 10). A unit of competency describes specific roles, tasks or functions in jobs. Each unit of competency is broken down into elements of competency (particular activities, tasks and roles), which are assessed using performance criteria. Units of competency also comprise assessment guidelines, knowledge requirements and ‘range statements’ which describe the contexts of application of the unit of competency. Qualifications comprise aggregates of units of competency, and the same units of competency can be aggregated in different ways to make different qualifications.

This leads to an additive approach to the development of qualifications, in which all skills can be distinguished, named and assessed independently of each other. This even includes attributes of individuals, such as those specified in 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. An example is the unit of competency, ‘Develop and use emotional intelligence’, which is part of 10 different vocational education qualifications at three different levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (certificate IV, diploma and advanced diploma) (Australian Government 2020). There are three elements of competency: ‘1. Prepare to develop emotional intelligence’; ‘2. Develop emotional intelligence’; and, ‘3. Promote development of emotional intelligence in others’. There are 13 performance criteria that must be used to evaluate performance. For example, criterion 1.3 requires that students demonstrate that they can ‘identify and analyse potential emotional stressors in the workplace’, while criterion 2.3 requires them to demonstrate ‘techniques that indicate flexibility and adaptability in dealing with others in the workplace’. Foundation skills are also included, namely learning, oral communication, teamwork, enterprise and initiative.

Similar examples of atomised, additive approaches to skills can also be found in Australian higher education. For example, at Deakin University, it is possible to undertake a micro-credential in ‘self-management’ or ‘problem-solving’, independently of any other credential,

qualification or notion of occupation or field of practice.<sup>12</sup> Premised in both examples is that what happens in workplaces and that one's progression is a consequence of individual efforts rather than of the interplay between individuals and gendered, racialised and hierarchical social structures and power relations.

### **Reification of a social relation**

In individualising and isolating skills from individual bodies, occupations and the social contexts in which they are exercised, government skills policies reify skills and treat them as divisible, additive, tangible or concrete entities. In this way, the notion of skill takes for granted what it is supposed to explain,<sup>13</sup> or in other words, the notion of skills is tautological because skills are what people do skilfully. Skill is a given, the foundation of, and the link between, work and education. Education, in turn, is meant to supply skilled labour for work. Skill is defined by its divisible nature: there are communication skills, problem-solving skills, social and emotional skills and so forth. This is to 'confuse the things of logic for the logic of things' (Bourdieu 2001, 19), in which an abstract notion such as skill is made concrete and considered a thing in itself. The focus in policy is on the right skills and the relationship between skills: not people, not even hands, skills.

In contrast, we argue that, on the one hand, skill is embodied in individuals who exercise skill and, on the other hand, that people exercise skill in social contexts, particularly in occupations and at work and in other endeavours in life such as in participation in political and civic life, sport, craft, etc. They may do so more or less skilfully. Bernstein argues that the concept of trainability inherent in the notion of perpetual 'upskilling' in response to perpetual change misses this social context that shapes not only practices, and that gives practices their meaning, but also identities. He argues that, instead of trainability for an uncertain future, an individual needs to be able to 'project him/herself *meaningfully* rather than relevantly, into this future, and recover a coherent past' (Bernstein 2000, 59). He argues that identities emerge through the 'interface between individual careers and the social or collective base' of occupations or fields of practice, in which 'the identity enters into with other identities of reciprocal recognition, support, mutual legitimisation and finally through a negotiated collective purpose' (Bernstein 2000, 59).

The reification of skill in policy has resulted in a skills fetish. Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism is a useful analogy in understanding the skills fetish. He explains that commodity fetishism arises when commodities, which are the products of the labour of individuals produced under specific capitalist social relationships of production and exchange, take on a life of their own. The physical nature of commodities and the material and social relations under which they are produced is obscured, and commodities appear to enter into relationships of exchange with each other. He explains:

As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this

the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx 1990 [1867], 165)

Just as commodity fetishism reifies a social relation of capitalist production as a relationship between commodities, skills policies reify skills as external commodifiable ‘things’ that exist independently of the bodies of people who exercise particular skills and of the social relationships and contexts that require domain specific knowledge and skills for their realisation.

### ***Skill as a market relation and the proprietary possessive individual***

Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism is also useful in understanding the skills fetish more directly, as skills are construed as commodities to be bought and sold. Individuals invest in their skills development, educational institutions sell skills and employers purchase them. Skills are individualised, specified and exchanged and are the link between the education market and the labour market. By privileging the market value of skills as the principal reason for their development, skills are reduced to commodities (see also Kjeldsen and Bonvin 2015, 30; Sen 1989). They are alienated from human bodies and human beings who, themselves having been alienated from the products of their labour through relations of capitalist production, are further reduced to sets of skills that must undergo continuous updating in response to market requirements.

The notion of the actor who invests in their skill development is premised on a particular conception of human beings and human agency. The economic citizen who emerges from liberal and neo-liberal beliefs is intrinsic to human capital theory, which assumes that human beings are by *nature* rational self-interested actors who base their decisions on instrumental calculations about likely benefits (Hobbes 1985 [1651]). This notion has been updated somewhat since the time Hobbes was writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in response to criticisms of the orthodox conception of ‘selfish man’ in economics, Hayek (1980) eschews attributing a theory of motivation to individuals. Instead, he applies an epistemological limitation based in methodological individualism, which is that because individuals are individual, they are the only ones who know why they do certain things and that they are the ones who must deal with the consequences that ensue from their actions. However, and arguably, Hayek’s position leads back to the self-interested individual because, as Hayek argues, ‘man’ is guided ‘by those immediate consequences which he can know and care for...’ (Hayek 1980, 14). Any attempt to attribute motivations to individuals for the greater good inexorably leads to social planning and from there to socialism.

The market provides the mechanism for both social coordination and for economic and political freedom because it regulates exchanges between equal individuals free from coercion (Friedman and Friedman 2002 [1962]). Hayek (1980, 16) maintained, however, that individuals are not equal by nature. Rather, they have been endowed with different attributes and talents. What the market does is to create ‘formal equality of the rules applying in the same manner to all, [and] we can leave each individual to find his own level.’ Consequently, market behaviours are posited as an ahistorical essence as *natural* behaviours, because they provide the context for the exchange of information, goods and services in which individuals can pursue their own interests to maximum advantage. Those whose skills or attributes are valued most by the market will reap the greatest rewards.

The (neo)-liberal individual is thus premised upon a Lockean conception of individuals as *owners* of their capacities.<sup>14</sup> In his critique of the individual in liberalism, Macpherson (1962, 3) explains that individuals are seen to owe nothing to society for the conditions of their existence or the development of their capacities: ‘The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself’. This is the possessive individual within human capital theory who enters into relations of exchange with other owners of commodities, skills or attributes. In other words, individuals are *proprietors* of their persons, and ‘Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors’ (Macpherson 1962, 3).

However, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 124) puts it, the actor of human capital theory is an ethnocentric universalisation of a historically specific concept of human motivation:

All the capacities and dispositions it liberally grants to its abstract ‘actor’ – the art of estimating and taking chances, the ability to anticipate through a kind of practical induction, the capacity to bet on the possible against the probable for a measured risk, the propensity to invest, access to economic information, etc. – can only be acquired under definite social and economic conditions.

Moreover, these capacities are unequally distributed in societies shaped by relations of gender, race and class. The naturalising of the individual as ‘proprietor of him or herself’ disguises and naturalises inequalities that both exist in market society and result from it.

## Conclusion

The importance of skills for individuals and nations is a doxa that underpins education policy in many countries and in international policy discourses. Rather than question this doxa, policy debate centres on configuring the ‘right kind of skills’. The latest contender for primacy in this debate is 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which encompass and colonise all aspects of our lives, including our social and emotional attributes as well as our cognitive and practical skills. The skills discourse is underpinned by human capital theory, in which the purpose of education is to supply skilled labour for the labour market. Human capital theory moved from being a descriptive theory in the 1970s (education leads to jobs) to a normative one in the 1980s and 1990s (education *should* be about jobs) and then to a prescriptive one in the 2000s (education *must* be about jobs), and government policies must seek to shape and fund educational provision deemed more relevant to work.

The skills fetish is a reified social relation that is premised on an impoverished conception of human beings, human motivation and human agency. It is underpinned by nominalism and methodological individualism, in which skills are regarded as discrete, disembodied entities that can be observed, counted and added in different ways. This approach draws on behaviourism, in which the outcomes of learning are deemed to be identical with the processes of learning, and skills are defined as observable behaviours that can be applied regardless of context, occupation or field of practice. Human capital theory imputes a narrow understanding of the purposes of education as investment by the proprietary possessive individual in the marketable self. Individuals invest in this or that skill, educational institutions sell skills to individual investors and employers purchase them. Skill is thus the connection between education and the labour market, based on narrow understandings in

which the purpose of education is to serve the labour market. Marx's conception of commodity fetishism helps understand the fetishisation of skill, with skill being reduced to a commodity.

This article builds on the work of Brown et al. (2020, 133) who argue that human capital theory has failed to deliver its promise of high skilled jobs in a high skilled economy, because 'The fundamental problem is not that there is a shortage of the relevant skills that employers demand but that there is a lack of good-quality jobs'. It also builds on the work of Buchanan et al. who argue that education is beset by two problems. They explain that 'On the one hand education is positioned ambitiously as a key solution to economic problems; on the other hand, it is undermined – it is not seen as a distinctive and important social activity with its own problems' (Buchanan et al. 2020, 3). The result is that skills policies are unable to solve the problems of the economy *and* they distort education and its potential to support human flourishing. Our article adds to this literature by analysing policy constructions of skills as a fetish and reified social relation, with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as the latest instantiation of this fetish. In so doing, it enlarges the bases for critique of existing education policies and theory building that is needed to develop alternatives to current policies.

## Notes

1. See Eric Fromm for a discussion of positive and negative freedom Fromm (2001 [1942]).
2. For a critique of the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, see Avis (2018)
3. See Rosen (2008, 8) who explains that in 'its most extreme form, the signalling literature maintains the hypothesis that education has no direct effect on improving a person's skills, but rather serves as an informational device for identifying more and less talented people'.
4. For a critique of SBTC, see: Lauder, Brown and Cheung (2018)
5. Streeck (2016, 20) explains that in the shift to the market state the locus of decision making now exists with 'central bank executives, international organizations, and councils of ministers of all sorts...'
6. See also Payne (2000) who traces the evolution of the skills discourse in the UK, and the way the meaning of skill changed over time. In other work, Payne (2017) offers a path through the thicket of the different ways in which skill has been conceptualised over the last 50 years. His discussion of aesthetic and emotional skills is particularly helpful.
7. We are grateful to Professor Dr. Silvia Annen from the University of Bamberg for her advice here. For the full list of apprenticeships in Germany see: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/156901/umfrage/ausbildungsberufe-in-deutschland/>
8. This is the case, apart from some regulated trades and professions which require specific qualifications to practice.
9. See Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) who discuss debates about skills in collective skill formation systems and liberal market economies.
10. For example, see Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2013), Clelland (2020) Payne (2008).
11. In a footnote, Hayek (1980, 6) establishes individualism as the 'necessary result of philosophical nominalism'.
12. See: <https://credentials.deakin.edu.au/credentials/> accessed 6 April 2021.
13. This phrase is borrowed from Marx ([1844] 1934, XXII).
14. Olsthoorn (2019, 242-243) explains that the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) is regarded as the proponent of 'self-ownership'. Locke and Shapiro (2003 [1689], 111) says that 'every man has a property in his own person: this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his'.



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