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The unbearable lightness of skill: the changing meaning of skill in UK policy discourses and some implications for education and training

Jonathan Payne

The paper traces how the meaning of 'skill' has broadened considerably since the 1950s through an examination of the relevant policy literature. It stresses the central role of both the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and Further Education Unit (FEU) in re-defining 'skill' in the late 1970s and 1980s. Core (or key) skills, which have come to dominate contemporary education and training debates, are seen as an extension of this agenda. Recent usage of the term, skill, is found to be more applicable to a vision of a low skill economy than that of a high skill one, presenting policy makers with range of difficult problems with regard to vocational education and training (VET) policy.

> I'm not against skills as such . . . so long as it really is skills we're talking about. (Hart 1978: 205)
>
> . . . nothing is more false than the claim that, for a given assertion, *its use is its meaning*. On the contrary, its use may depend upon its lack of meaning, its possession of wholly different and incompatible meanings in different contexts, and the fact that, at the same time, it as it were emits the impression of possessing a consistent meaning. (Gellner 1973: 42)

The changing face of skill

For two decades now British policy makers have repeated the mantra that economic competitiveness and national well-being depend crucially on the skills, adaptability and motivation of the workforce. By the same token, even a cursory glance through the relevant policy documents reveals that what policy makers actually have in mind when they talk about 'skill' is considerably broader now than in the past, when it tended to be equated with the manual craft worker and technologist (Ainley 1993, Keep and Mayhew 1999). Whereas the *Carr Report* of 1958 (HMSO 1958: 10), for example, could still talk of 'skilled craftsmen' as being the 'backbone of industry', forty years on, *The Learning Age* (Department for Education and Employment 1998: 65) was employing a much wider discourse of 'basic skills', 'employability skills', 'technician skills', 'management skills', and 'key skills'.

Several factors have combined to re-draw policy makers' skills maps in an era of 'globalization' and rapid structural, economic and technological change (Green

Jonathan Payne is a research fellow with the Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance (SKOPE) based at the universities of Oxford and Warwick. He is currently undertaking research into the Norwegian education system.

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1999a). First, there is the shift out of traditional manufacturing industry towards services, coupled with the growth of employment in professional, technical and administrative occupations. With this comes the need for employees with the requisite 'soft', relational skills to effect positive face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with customers and clients. Second, there is the emergence, in a minority of firms, of a new paradigm of organizational restructuring, linked to theories of post-Fordism, 'flexible specialization' and 'the learning organization' (Piore and Sabel 1984). Such high-tech forms of integrated manufacturing place a premium on a range of advanced analytical and interactional skills such as communication, problem solving, team working and creativity as the key drivers of comparative advantage in high quality, high value-added product markets. In the case of 'knowledge workers', described by Reich (1992), the demand is for people who can manipulate 'symbolic languages', think holistically in 'systems' terms, as well as creatively handle and apply ever increasing quantities of knowledge and information across diverse contexts. Finally, against the backdrop of high youth unemployment from the mid-1970s, policy makers have emphasized the need to ensure the 'employability' of young entrants to the labour market and the acquisition of skills, knowledge and *personal qualities* needed to be 'adaptable' in the face of a highly uncertain and rapidly changing labour market.

Against this background, 'skill' has expanded almost exponentially to include a veritable galaxy of 'soft', 'generic', 'transferable', 'social' and 'interactional' skills, frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, which in the past would rarely have been conceived of as skills (Keep and Mayhew 1999). If the notion of skill has always perhaps been 'essentially indefinable' (Ainley 1993: 4), it is now both broader and more conceptually equivocal than it has ever been. Despite this policy makers' increasing insistence upon the salience of skills has not been matched by an appreciation of the problems that such diffuse usage is likely to present in the realm of vocational education and training (VET) policy.

Of course, what we mean by 'skill' and what we *ought* to mean by it has been the subject of a long academic debate (see Attewell 1990). A substantive contribution to this controversy, however, remains beyond the scope of this paper. Neither is it possible to make substantial forays into the highly charged and complex philosophical debates around the distinction between 'skill' and 'competence' embedded in the literature surrounding National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) (see Hyland 1994). Here, an attempt is made simply to map out what has happened to 'skill' across the relevant policy literature and to examine some of the problems, dilemmas and contradictions that this raises for British policy makers today. Its primary focus is on the initial education and training of young entrants to the labour market as opposed to the further education and training received by those who make up the existing workforce.

The shifting policy discourse surrounding skill

1950s and 1960s

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, UK policy makers tended to hold a traditional view of skill as involving either high level educational qualifications and analytical capacities, or 'hard' technical abilities, combining physical dexterity, spatial awareness and technical 'know-how' (Keep and Mayhew 1999). The *Carr Report* of 1958 (HMSO

1958), which looked into the reform of apprenticeships, and the 1959 *Crowther Report* (Department of Education and Science 1959) into post-compulsory education, both equated 'skill' with the technologist, the scientist, the technician and the craftsman, demand for which was assumed to be rising as unskilled labour declined within an increasingly technological workplace. The latter, for example, argued that the challenge was to:

> ... mobilise far more human potentialities, if there are to be not only enough pure scientists and technologists, but the whole army of technicians and craftsmen that will be needed for industry and agriculture. (cited in Coffey 1992: 165)

In a similar vein, the 1965 *National Plan* (HMSO 1965) could confidently project future growth in demand for skilled labour such as:

> ... certain types of qualified engineers (especially electrical and electronic and those concerned with production problems); mathematicians; chemists, physicists, technicians ... ; work study engineers; accountants and economists, systems analysts and computer programmers in general, instrument mechanics, and electrical and electronics craftsmen (HMSO 1965: 40).

1970s and 1980s

A major turning point came with James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976, which famously launched the 'Great Education Debate'. Against the background of economic recession and rising youth unemployment, Callaghan impugned an education system that had, in his view, failed to provide the relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes needed in a vibrant industrial economy (see Merson 1995). Callaghan's remarks concerning the anti-industrial bias of the education system, therefore, signposted a growing policy preoccupation with ensuring that pupils left school or college with the right *outlook* and *dispositions* for the life ahead of them. Schools were to:

> ... help children appreciate how the nation earns and maintains its standard of living and properly esteem the role of industry and commerce in the process. (cited in Coffey 1992: 169)

It was, however, through a series of failed experiments to deal with the problems of youth unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that skill itself came to be redefined. In May 1977, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) published *Young People and Work* (MSC 1977). This articulated a rationale for the new Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) which provided the young unemployed, judged to be ill-prepared for working life, with a short period of work experience on employers' premises. Focusing once again on the *attitudes* and *behaviour* of young entrants to the labour market, it contended:

> Most employers look for a greater willingness and better attitude to work from young people. Those who turn young people down do so because of attitude, personality, appearance/manners, and inadequate knowledge of the 3 Rs. (MSC 1977: 17)

With the boundaries between skills, personal qualities and attitudes becoming increasingly fuzzy, the new YOP scheme promised:

> ... increased emphasis ... given to the provision of life and social skills and the opportunity to participate in this sort of training and in further education courses ... (MSC 1977: 36)

Social and life skills were also to figure prominently in Labour's 1979 consultative paper on post-16 vocational preparation, *A Better Start in Working Life* (DES 1979a). Here, they were defined as those 'personal skills needed at work and in adult life

generally', and were taken to include 'getting on with work mates and working as a member of a team', 'getting information and advice', 'handling money', 'familiarity with social services, job finding and developing leisure activities' (DES 1979a: 7).

By the time Mrs. Thatcher entered office in 1979, therefore, 'skill' had already begun to be associated with compensatory education and training programmes for disadvantaged youth, aimed at remedying the failures of previous socialization and 'fitting' them into work. It was, however, the seminal *New Training Initiative* (*NTI*) (Department of Employment 1981) that was to represent another major landmark on the shifting terrain of skill. Essentially, this called for reform of Britain's historically weak VET system and the creation of a 'better educated, better trained and more adaptable workforce' to secure national economic renaissance (Department of Employment 1981: 5). The immediate and pressing impetus behind NTI, however, continued to be the growing need to find effective solutions to the social crisis connected with rising youth unemployment, and is best remembered for launching the much criticised Youth Training Scheme (YTS) (Finn 1986, Ainley 1988).

It was against this new policy background that the MSC set about the task of redefining the notion of skill in a manner consistent with NTI's insistence on a well-trained and 'adaptable' workforce. In 1981, the MSC commissioned the Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS) to prepare a report on *Foundation Training Issues* that would underpin the *New Training Initiative* (Hayes *et al*. 1982). The central theme was the need to strengthen young persons' versatility and 'employability' in a rapidly changing labour market (see Jonathan 1987, Silver 1988). As such, the report noted that:

> Possible growth points and innovations come under five headings: additional basic skills; the world of non-employment; broadly related skills; personal effectiveness skills; and the ability to transfer, and ownership of skill. (Hayes *et al*. 1982: 4)

The IMS report effectively amounted to a huge scale jobs study, the purpose of which was to 'cluster' jobs into eleven Occupational Training Families (OTFs) within which it would be possible to identify a series of 'generic', 'transferable' competencies, capable of being taught and portable across occupations. In 1982, the MSC followed up with its 'core skills project' which was to be introduced into YTS two years later. A central hallmark of YTS, the programme identified 103 'generic' or 'transferable' skills, distributed across 14 skill groups, and four 'core' areas: 'number', 'communication', 'problem solving' and 'practical' (MSC 1984). In fact, 'skill' was detaching itself from particular occupations and moving far beyond its traditional association with the specific technical facilities of the skilled manual worker. Training for the young unemployed now encompassed a range of generic 'social and life skills', 'communication skills', 'reasoning skills', 'survival skills' and 'problem solving skills'. Moreover, in so far as these were aimed specifically at the cognitive, social and personal effectiveness of the trainee, they could not be distinguished from an attempt to construct a particular worker-subject replete with certain desirable values, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions (for a fuller discussion, see Jonathan 1987).

The other central player helping to redraw the contours of the skill map at this time was the Further Education Unit (FEU). Established in the late 1970s, with a remit to review and evaluate the FE curriculum, it too confronted the problems of unemployed youth flooding the sector, amidst criticisms that the traditional curriculum was irrelevant, inflexible and didactic (Silver 1988). The FEU endorsed NTI, and while distancing itself from the more extreme vocational stance of the MSC,

committed itself to introducing more breadth into pre-vocational education so as to ensure the future adaptability of students in the face of unemployment and labour market uncertainty. As Andy Green (1998) points out, this process was already underway with the publication of *A Basis for Choice*, in 1979, and *Vocational Preparation*, two years later (FEU 1982a, FEU 1981). Together, they argued that to be personally effective in adult life and work, young persons would need to acquire 'basic skills' that were 'broad-based and transferable, rather than specific or job-restricted, and should include that range known as social and life skills' (FEU 1982b). ABC (as it came to be popularly known) advanced a vision of a 'common' or 'core skills' curriculum for pre-vocational students which would resound throughout FE and lead ultimately to the Certificate of Vocational Preparation (CVP), forerunner of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ). Specifically, it advanced twelve central aims for a 'skills based curriculum with relevant vocational focus' (FEU 1982b: 1). Among these were the 'ability to develop satisfactory personal relationships with others'; 'the capacity to approach various kinds of problems methodically and effectively, and to plan and evaluate courses of action'; 'sufficient political and economic literacy to understand the social environment and participate in it'; 'the development of everyday coping skills' and 'a flexibility of attitude and willingness to learn sufficient to cope with future changes in technology and career' (FEU 1982a: 30–41). As *Basic Skills* (FEU 1982b: 2) acknowledged, the central thrust of both *Vocational Preparation* and *ABC* was to insist that, 'the concept of skill has now spread on to a much broader canvas and is used for training and education'. Thus, 'skill' now embraced:

> Language (reading, writing, speaking and listening); number (calculation, measurement, graphs and tables); manipulative dexterity and co-ordination; problem solving; everyday coping, interpersonal relationships; computer literacy, and learning. (FEU 1982b: 2)

It also included 'experiences' relating to 'work and society', 'economic and political problems', 'the environment' and 'values'. For Silver (1988: 24), the 'concept of skill had in fact been virtually defined out of existence', while competence was now developed as an 'umbrella concept to incorporate skills and attitudes, knowledge and experience'.

These attempts to redefine skills and training were to attract trenchant, often vitriolic, criticism. 'Skills', formerly understood by many as complex *social* processes, were now de-contextualized and de-constructed into finite, isolable 'competencies' to be located as the property of the individual, who then carried them, luggage-like, from job to job (Ainley 1993). Furthermore, the actual competencies described for each OTF, when held up to scrutiny, were found to be specified at such a low level that they could only be understood as an attempt to create a cheap pool of malleable, submissive, semi-skilled labour. According to Jonathan (1987), typical competencies such as 'dress correctly', 'maintain clean and tidy work station', 'use appropriate language and behaviour' specified, for example, in OTF 'Food Preparation and Service':

> ... do not contribute to the vocational preparation of the trainee, other than to fit him, by motivating his attitudes, behaviour and expectations for the role of the flexible operative ... we have moved away from the liberal demands for generic training to the social reproduction of a pliant underclass (Jonathan 1987: 105).

Others saw the IMS's 'transferable skills' as 'so basic as to lend themselves to parody: learning to push, learning to pull, learning to stand up without falling over', while the inclusion of social and life skills in YTS merely patronized the young by inviting

them 'to improve their appearance, interview techniques and approach to authority' (Cockburn 1987: 23–24). In this view, 'skill' had become so watered down that personal effectiveness training for disadvantaged youth offered neither bona fide marketable skills, nor a rigorous general education in citizenship that might afford genuine critical insight into the world of work, economy, politics and society (Gleeson 1990).

Into the 1990s

By the late 1980s a new settlement had been established over post-compulsory education and training (PCET) embracing a diverse constituency of actors, including the Conservative government, the Labour opposition, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and various government departments (CBI 1989, Whiteside 1992). Essentially, these called for reform of Britain's historically weak VET system and the creation of a highly skilled, adaptable and motivated workforce, capable of driving forth Britain's ability to compete in high-tech, high value-added markets. The 1988 white paper, *Employment for the* 1990s (Department of Employment 1988: 3), repeated, therefore, what had now crystallized into a conventional policy wisdom that economic competitiveness would 'depend on our ability to update the skills and productivity of all those in the workforce'.

In this context, the search for 'core', 'generic' or 'transferable' skills that would facilitate labour market 'flexibility' was to assume ever greater significance throughout the 1990s. It was the then Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, who started the ball rolling again with a speech to the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher education in 1989 (DES 1989). Building on the earlier work of the MSC and FEU, Baker argued that core skills, such as 'numeracy', 'communication', 'team work' and 'leadership', offered a potential bridging mechanism for unifying post-16 education, capable of enhancing the breadth and status of vocational studies. In the immediate aftermath, core skills were seized upon as a major new curriculum innovation and various organisations presented 'home-grown' versions that reflected their own particular interests, traditions and approaches (see HMI 1989, CBI 1989, NCC 1990, Lawson 1992, Halsall 1996, Green 1998). The CBI, for instance, insisted that:

> All training and vocational education should include the following common learning outcomes as core elements: Values and Integrity, Effective Communication, Application of Number, Application of Technology, Understanding of Work and the World, Interpersonal Skills, Problem Solving, Positive Attitudes Towards Change'. (CBI 1989: 27)

Attempts to arrive at a consensus as to what these portable elements might actually consist of, however, remained problematic, despite their formal adoption in 1992 as part of the new General National Vocational Qualifications' (GNVQ) framework. Communication, Application of Number, and Information Technology were thereby included as compulsory elements, with Foreign Language, Problem Solving, and Personal Skills (working with others and improving own learning performance), specified as desirable outcomes. Core skills, therefore, made the transition into the 1990s as a chameleon-like concept subject to considerable semantic slippage. As Edwards (1998: 5) notes:

> It may refer to basic skills in numeracy, communication and IT which employers are entitled to expect to have been acquired. It may refer to a foundation for future learning which would include hunting and gathering information . . . or the development of attitudes appropriate to a modern work force.

The notion that core skills might also include such ill-defined and vague items as 'integrity' and 'values' was viewed as highly problematical (Edwards 1998). By the same token, the claim that there actually existed broadly applicable generic skills, like 'critical thinking' or 'problem solving', for example, that were 'domain independent' and transferable across a range of contexts, had long been contentious within the philosophy of education, and continued to divide opinion even when the concept of 'meta-competence' attempted a weak rescue (see Dearden 1984, Hyland 1994, Halsall 1996).

Despite such inherent difficulties with the concept itself, core skills continued to receive a high profile in VET policy statements, acquiring an almost 'totemic' status (see Department of Trade and Industry 1994, DfEE 1996, Green 1998: 23). Nevertheless, attempts to build them into the traditional A-level pathway have borne little fruit, and their main port of call has continued to be the vocational track (see Dearing 1996, Young 1997). The 1991 white paper, *Education and Training for the 21st century* (DE 1991), signalled the governments' determination to preserve separate pathways within a divided post-16 qualifications and curriculum structure. Hence, it established a triple track qualifications framework comprising academic A-levels, competence-based NVQs in the workplace, and a new broad vocational route in schools and colleges, centred on GNVQs. In addition to expanding post-compulsory student participation, Conservative policy for the next five years sought to consolidate and retrench the A-level 'gold standard' (mainly by restricting participation through limitations on the amount of assessed coursework), whilst simultaneously opening up a new broad vocational programme in schools and colleges to take the student overspill (see Hodgson and Spours 1997). In this context, as Green (1998) notes, the integration of core skills within the academic pathway, jarred with the government's concern to prevent what it saw as the dilution of A-levels, while examination boards saw the role of coursework as assessing subject knowledge. In his view, core skills, therefore, reflect and embody historically rooted English academic/vocational dualisms, functioning as a 'poor proxy' for vocational students to the continuing general academic education, traditionally reserved for an elite, albeit in the truncated and narrow A-level form.

Enter New Labour

Throughout the 1990s education and training policy became increasingly mired in the belief that simply boosting the outputs of the VET system by expanding the supply of educated and skilled employees, would be sufficient to transform national economic competitiveness and realise the vision of high skill, high value-added capitalism (Keep 1998). It is now widely accepted amongst critical academic commentators in the field that this prevailing policy orthodoxy is both myopic and deeply flawed (Avis *et al.* 1996, Keep and Mayhew 1999). The complexities of this argument have been well rehearsed and need not be repeated here. In a nutshell, they offer a vision of the British economy locked into a 'low skills, low quality equilibrium' (Finegold and Soskice 1988) by a web of institutions and incentives that concentrate firms' production and market strategies in 'low spec' goods and services where the demand for skill is limited. The upshot is that cost-based forms of neo-Fordist production and neo-Taylorist work regimes proliferate, not least amongst large tracts of the now dominant service sector (see Keep and Mayhew 1998). In this context, a one-eyed

tendency to focus on skills supply fails fundamentally to address the cycle of low skill, low wage *job creation* in the economy and tackle the *low demand* for skill itself.

For the most part, New Labour, like their Conservative predecessors, have continued to subscribe to this supply-side logic. They have, therefore, stressed the centrality of education and training as the central driver of economic competitiveness coupling it with a new emphasis on the role of the VET system in tackling social exclusion, welfare dependency and community decay (for a discussion, see Keep 1998). The 1997 white paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997), affirms, for example, that:

> In the 21st century knowledge and skill will be the key to success. Our goal is a society in which everyone is well educated and able to learn throughout life. Britain's economic prosperity and social cohesion depend on achieving that goal .(DfEE 1997: 9)

The 1998 green paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998: 9), similarly argues that in today's globalized knowledge economy, 'the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination'. Moreover, the skills of the learning age are said to be universal, encompassing everyone from bricklayers, designers, researchers, and scientists to technicians, caterers, carers, doctors, teachers and sales people. They include the 'basic skills' of literacy and numeracy, 'employability skills' needed to gain entry to the labour market, 'technician skills' delivered through Modern Apprenticeships, 'management skills' and 'key skills' (DfEE 1998: 65). The document is evangelical in its professed faith in 'lifelong learning', holding that in a fast-moving, high-tech, globalized future, the only constant is change, such that skill in the end boils down to learning to learn (DfEE 1998: 19). The recent DTI white paper, *Our Competitive Future* (DTI 1998), also takes the leitmotiv of the knowledge economy and embosses it with a grand, universal application. Thus:

> All business in the UK, large and small, manufacturing and services, low and high tech, urban and rural, need to marshal their knowledge and skills to satisfy customers, exploit market opportunities and meet society's aspirations for a better environment. (DTI 1998: 10)

As the rhetoric of the learning age and the 'Third Way' join hands, so New Labour's policy on education and training has become especially active with a raft of new supply-side initiatives (for a fuller discussion, see Wood 1999). These include reduced class sizes for 5 – 7 year olds; a 'back to basics' curriculum agenda bolstered by new literacy and numeracy targets; the deployment of 'hit squads' to turn round 'failing' schools; Education Action Zones to tackle under-achievement in areas of chronic poverty; Individual Learning Accounts and a University for Industry designed to enable individuals to invest in their own re-training across flexible working careers. Notwithstanding certain shifts of emphasis within some government departments (see DTI 1998, Keep and Mayhew 1999), the danger remains that, like their predecessors, skill supply continues to be regarded, rather naively, as something akin to an 'Old West Miracle Tonic', with the ability to cure all social and economic ailments with repeated dosage. At the same time, 'skill' today trammels within its net traditional technical capabilities, the conceptual and analytical skills of 'knowledge workers' and 'symbolic analysts' (Reich 1992), as well as an ever expanding range of personal characteristics and behaviours, before binding them all together with the universal (and heavily ideological) glue of employee 'flexibility'. The fudging of skill with behaviour is no more evident than in connection with schemes directed at the socialisation of disadvantaged youth into work. As part of its modernising crusade

against 'welfare dependency', New Labour has recently announced that unemployed young persons between the ages of 18 and 24 may be forced to undergo an intensive job search programme designed to teach *behavioural skills* such as discipline, punctuality and presentation (*The Guardian* 19/99). Here, then, skill equates with the 'work ethic' and all too often jobs that scarcely pass for work in any meaningful sense. For employers and management gurus too, 'skill' is ubiquitous, the term being applied to such diverse phenomena as reading, writing, problem solving, learning, team work, salesmanship, marketing, presentation, perseverance, motivation, enthusiasm, attitude, corporate commitment, customer-orientation, stress management – the list stretches forth inexorably it would seem. We have reached the point, therefore, where skill means whatever employers and policy makers want it to mean. If, then, government and policy makers have continued to regard skills as a panacea, this has not been accompanied by an appreciation of the epic transformation that has taken place in the coverage of 'skill' or indeed the problems that this is likely to present. It is to these that I now turn.

Implications, dilemmas and contradictions surrounding the new discourse of skill

There are major problems with the way 'skill' has been traditionally understood and approached in the UK which are further compounded by the fact that the concept itself has expanded across a much broader canvas. There are two broad areas of concern. The first concerns how to design a VET system supportive of a high skills vision when in reality the qualitative 'skill' demands deriving from different segments of the economy remain highly divergent (Keep and Mayhew 1999). Moreover, the inclusion within 'skill' of a range of tacit behaviours, personality traits, attitudes and even physical characteristics, points the VET system towards a different role at the same time as it raises real issues of inequality and discrimination. The second concerns how a nineteenth-century definition of technical skill in the UK, premised on the separation of mental and manual labour, and underpinned by a minimum of 'relevant and useful knowledge', lives on within today's vocational qualifications structure, rendering it ill-equipped for the task of 'upskilling' the workforce in line with the vision of a knowledge economy and learning society. Workplace vocational qualifications (NVQs) have been strongly criticized for their marginalization of theoretical frameworks of knowledge and understanding and a preoccupation with the certification of demonstrable low-level competencies (Hyland 1994). Coupled with this, there exist major problems with the role of 'core skills' within modern GNVQs, both as an adequate surrogate for broader general education in the development of flexible worker-citizens, and more generally as a unifying device for overcoming the academic-vocational rift within our 14–19 education and qualifications system (Green 1998).

We're all skilled now: implications for the VET system

As Keep and Mayhew (1999) have already argued in connection with the DTI's 1998 white paper (DTI 1998), attempting to paint the totality of the UK with the broad

rhetorical brush strokes of the 'knowledge-driven economy', merely obscures a more complex reality where firms' product strategies, work design, management systems and skill requirements remain not only diverse but also highly polarized. On the one hand, therefore, the vision is applied to the high value-added, 'lead-edge' sectors of the UK economy (for example, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, software), where the demand is thought to be for high level analytical and conceptual skills and knowledge. On the other, it draws within it the much larger, lower value-added mass service sector (as well as parts of manufacturing), where neo-Fordist forms of price-based competition and Taylorized working practices remain entrenched, knowledge is 'tacit' and the demand is often for employees who are customer-friendly, reliable, keen and pliant in the face of traditional management hierarchies (Keep and Mayhew 1998, 1999). Here, skill often translates as punctuality, reliability, speed, and submissiveness, coupled with the essential ability to always smile for the customer come what may. As one telephone call centre human resource manager explained to trainees:

> When you answer the next call, always look in the mirror ... People can tell when you're smiling on the phone. (cited in Wazir 1999)

In this particular centre, recruitment was tailored accordingly and took the form of a crude aptitude questionnaire designed to test for the required speed and personality profile (Wazir 1999). In some parts of the low value-added, cost-conscious mass service sector, the smile is *the* defining 21st century skill. As one regional manager of a discount clothing chain in the US put it:

> I tell my personnel managers, 'If they don't smile, don't hire 'em. I don't care how well educated they are, how well versed they are in retail, if they can't smile, they're not going to make the customer feel welcome. And we don't want them in our store'. (cited in Moss and Tilly 1996: 259)

Keep and Mayhew (1999) argue that at least four problems flow from this given that the forms of behaviour mentioned above are now dignified as 'skills'. First, it implies that the VET system must come to terms with the fact that both the *categories* and *levels* of skill being demanded of it are widely divergent, thereby confusing policy makers as to the precise targets and delivery mechanisms to be adopted. Furthermore, there is the danger of the UK gearing the VET system to the skill requirements of the bulk service sector, such that it is unable simultaneously to meet the needs of its 'lead-edge' organizations or promote the development of a genuine knowledge economy. Second, policy claims surrounding universal 'up-skilling' now become increasingly meaningless and contested unless it is clear what 'skills' are actually being enhanced. In a neat ideological twist, the new totalizing language of skill allows policy makers to claim that we are all being 'up-skilled', when in reality very little may be changing in terms of the actual quality of jobs many people do, with large swathes of often low waged, casualized service sector employment still only requiring enough 'skill' to fill shelves, swipe bar-codes, follow instructions and smile pleasantly at the customer (Keep and Mayhew 1998). One does not need to be a Marxist, however, to dispute that skill without real job autonomy or market power is very likely to be little or no skill at all (see Attelwell 1990). Indeed, as the quotation by Gellner, with which this paper began, suggests, the great ideological virtue of skill resides in its essential ambiguity and diffuseness, coupled with the fact that it now offers policy makers a *moveable feast* with an application broad enough to span the UK economy *in toto*. In rhetoric of the 'knowledge-driven economy', any real distinction between high and low skill sectors is thereby dissolved into nothingness. Official views of

skill and knowledge, therefore, contain an Orwellian 'double-speak' whereby we move inexorably towards the post-Fordist nirvana while, in reality, remaining firmly trapped within the low skill, neo-Fordist cage.

Third, the *softening* of skill to include personality traits and characteristics raises questions of whether such desirable employee attributes as 'motivation', 'persistence' or 'co-operation' are, in fact, trainable through the VET system or, indeed, whether such objectives are laudable in the first place, given the promise of jobs that are often poorly designed, lacking in discretion and subject to autocratic management control. Finally, new research into Glasgow's trendy wine bars, hotels and boutiques, suggest that parts of the up-market service sector may be looking to recruit 'aesthetic labour' endowed with the requisite voice-quality, demeanour, image and physical appearance (Nickson *et al.* 1998). Not only does this promise to cast the VET system in a new and unfamiliar role as a provider of speech training and personal grooming 'make-overs', but the fact that individuals may be expected to have their personal and class-based identities re-engineered in this way raises major ethical concerns as well as the possibility of adverse psychological side-effects for those whose self-image now comes under closer critical scrutiny. Moreover, the more skill shades over into desirable personality traits, behaviour, voice and appearance, the more it becomes bound up with notions of traditional white 'middleclassness', with serious distribution implications regarding labour market access and closure. Research in the US, for example, into the importance of soft skills in the service economy, found that many employers perceived black men, in particular, as lacking the desired attitudes, behaviour and demeanour necessary to secure such employment (Moss and Tilly 1996). By the same token, one respondent interviewed by Nickson *et al.* (1998), recalls how a colleague within a Glasgow restaurant chain was dismissed for being 'too common', although the actual reason given was 'poor performance'. Ainley (1994) has also argued that calls for the introduction of personal, transferable key skills into higher education creates similar problems, for, in reality, these:

> . . . are neither personal, transferable, nor skills; they are social and generic competencies . . . To present attitudes and habits detached form their cultural context as technical abilities that can be acquired piecemeal in performance not only divorces them from the cultural context that gave them their original meaning but represents them as equally accessible to all students whatever their class, cultural background, gender or race . . . It ignores the fact that middle class students already possess these competencies as a result of previous education and family socialisation . . . For at rock bottom, the real personal and transferable skills required for preferential employment are those of white maleness and traditional middleclassness.

As Avis (1996: 117) notes, in this context, key skills function effectively as a 'form of closure, deepening middle-class forms of social and cultural reproduction'. In the final analysis, skill remains as ever socially constructed, while the more it overlaps with attitudes, behaviours and character traits, the more it becomes bound up with the cultural capital of certain social groups, and acquires the distinctive whiff of elitism.

Implications for compulsory education

The very diffuseness of skill is also likely to hold major implications for the mainstream compulsory education system. Since the 1970s policy makers have insisted that education should be made more relevant to the needs of the economy and

become more directly involved in the preparation of students for work. Part and parcel of this, as Wood (1999: 8) notes, has been an increasing 're-orientation of *learning* towards *skills*'. Much of the legitimization for the 'new vocationalism' has been supplied by theories of post-Fordism and so-called 'smart' production methods, which seem to call forth a new generation of polyvalent, highly educated, autonomous and problem solving 'knowledge' workers enjoying new liberating forms of work. One US commentator (Cappelli 1995) has, therefore, suggested that, if skills are really to do with attitudes, pro-social behaviour and personality traits formed in childhood – the so called 'Third Dimension Expertise' of the human resource-driven workplace – then the case for involving the education system in their development is made all the stronger.

However, there are clearly problems with attempting to re-orientate the education system towards the development of such 'skills' given that the spectrum of skill has widened so tremendously. The problem is further compounded when the rhetoric of the knowledge economy is replaced by the 'bleak house' reality of the 'low skill equilibrium'. For, if the latter holds good, and large tracts of employment continue to demand employees with only a minimum basic education, customer-friendly behaviour and a submissive attitude to traditional forms of hierarchical management (see Dench *et al.* 1998), then teaching pupils to be persistent, motivated, enthusiastic, and co-operative is simply to socialize them into the subordinate work roles of old. Moreover, allowing the education system to be driven by the dominant low skill segments of the economy renders it ill equipped to meet the requirements of its few 'leading edge' sectors. Here, high-tech processes are said to require sophisticated analytical skills, problem solving and creativity, as well as the ability to work with 'symbolic systems', and manage ever increasing quantities of information and knowledge (Reich 1992). As Green (1999b: 12) acknowledges, these advanced sectors suggest the need for young people to receive a much broader general education and generic training and highlight the importance of integrating academic and vocational learning (see also Young 1998). The problem for the UK is that rather than the education system driving the way forward to a brave new knowledge economy as policy makers would have it, the reverse pull of the economy *as it really exists*, fixes the education policy debate at the lowest level, around the development of 'basic skills' and a 'skills for work' curriculum that the bulk of *actually existing jobs* require. As Lewis (1997: 483) observes in the US context, the prevailing policy vision of the curriculum for the majority 'comes out materially the same . . . as the shop floor', with any notion of education *for* work or citizenship stripped bare of offering students a genuine *critical* purchase on the social and economic realities that shape their lives. As such, the dominant curriculum fare in the UK comes to belie the myth of the post-Fordist knowledge economy, at the same time as it holds up a mirror to the disturbing reality of Britain's persistent 'low skill equilibrium' malaise.

A peculiarly English trade off: sacrificing general education and culture in favour of 'lean' competencies and core skills

The way 'skill' itself has been traditionally approached and understood in Britain also presents major problems when it comes to realizing the vision of a high skill knowledge economy. According to Green (1998), Britain has long been hamstrung by a 'lean' notion of technical skill and knowledge which is radically different to that

found in mainland Europe, where the creation of highly skilled, flexible employees is seen as inseparable from the goal of a highly educated, active citizenry. According to the traditional model of skill formation through the English apprenticeship system:

> . . . craft learning meant socialisation into a particular work culture and the acquisition, through guided practice, of certain manipulative skills underpinned by a minimum of 'useful knowledge' which was often no more than rules of thumb. (Green 1998: 28)

With the decline of apprenticeships and the move towards competence-based models of learning in the 1980s, this 'lean' notion of skill simply grew leaner, as NVQs downplayed the importance of broader frameworks of theoretical knowledge and understanding, until skill/competence emerged as 'culture- and theory-free' (Green 1998: 28, Hyland 1994). Thus:

> Competence-based learning . . . defines 'skill' as the ability to perform pre-given tasks with predictable accuracy. Knowledge and theory are important only in so far as they are necessary to competent performance, and may be 'tacit' or non-articulated. So long as the student can 'do' there is little need to know why or be able to articulate 'how'. (Green 1998: 28)

This is in marked contrast therefore to the European paradigm where an entitlement to a minimum of *general education* and *culture* is regarded as a *sine qua non* of active citizenship, and the ability to handle abstract knowledge and theory is seen as vital to the creation of a polyvalent, flexible workforce able to cope with a fast moving, high-tech, knowledge-based workplace and a labour market in constant flux.

The lack of substantive intellectual content in English vocational education and training, when compared to mainland Europe, is, therefore, one of its central hallmarks. As Green (1998) notes, this is also visible within GNVQs, where 'core skills' have functioned as an inferior proxy for continuing general education. By contrast to the rigorously taught and assessed general academic subjects afforded to vocational counterparts in Germany and France, notions of 'relevance' and 'suitability', he argues, have confined English vocational students to a much blander diet of employer-driven 'core skills', that frequently end up being neglected within taught vocational programmes. The result, says Green, is that they are left with:

> . . . an impoverished form of general education which is neither adequately delivering the minimum basic skills normally associated with an effective general education, such as verbal articulacy, logical skills and mathematical literacy, nor even a foundation of scientific and humanist culture adequate to the demands of active citizenship in modern societies. (Green 1998: 40)

Keep (1998) has suggested that this impoverished view of English vocational skill may once again *reflect* the material reality of a still predominantly Fordist or neo-Fordist workplace where self-directing, highly educated and 'empowered' knowledge workers remain more fiction than fact, and the bulk of employers still look for people with only enough basic education to simply get on and do as they are told (see Dench *et al*. 1998).

Finally, according to Green (1998), despite the amount of political capital invested in them, core skills are an unlikely vehicle for unifying the post-16 qualifications system and bridging the UK's much criticized academic-vocational divide (see also Hodgson and Spours 1997, Young 1988). First, they remain the product of the divided education and training model and embody historically rooted, cultural assumptions as to the kind of 'limited' general education and 'really useful knowledge' that vocational students should have access to. Second, their problematic introduction within the traditional academic pathway is symptomatic of the fact that they derive from a competence-based model of learning, fundamentally at odds

with knowledge-based tradition of A-levels. Third, their very derivation from the 'world of work' means they lack the universality to function as common foundation both academic and vocational studies. As Green (1998: 40) concludes, in what is now almost a conventional wisdom, 'only some notion of general culture, addressing the future needs of adults as both workers and citizens, can fulfil this function'.

Conclusion: ideological, political and policy contradictions

The paper began by charting the shifting meaning of skill across the policy literature, as the skills universe drew within it a range of personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, and embraced a new language of generic, transferable key skills. Indeed, skill has grown so diffuse and wide ranging that it now means all things to all people and can be applied almost universally without exception. In fact, one has to search long and hard to find anyone who isn't (in one sense or another) 'skilled' in the largely make-believe 'knowledge economy' that policy makers describe for us. The fundamental paradox of official versions of skill, then, is that we are all skilled now, regardless of the type or quality of job we do and the level of personal control, autonomy or market power we enjoy. Thus, as the pace of work is ratcheted up, and employees learn to cope with, what are often, low skill, low discretionary work roles, it is even possible to claim that 'pressure management skills' are being acquired. Elsewhere skill is about having the right voice, the right body shape, the right image, even the right smile for the corporate sell. For many it is simply about being punctual, reliable and willing to get on with the job without questioning what management decides. There is, then, an unbearable lightness in our official notions of skill, that can only be understood in terms of the kind of low skill economy we have, a vacuousness which nevertheless carries with it heavy ideological implications for how we read policy 'talk' on skill. The rest of this paper has sought highlight some of the more practical problems policy makers are likely to confront in an economy caught on the rails of the 'low skill, low quality equilibrium' and heavily polarised in terms of both the level and types of 'skills' required of its workforce.

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis of skill. First, for far too long, UK policy makers have started at the wrong place with skill. Skilled and educated workers are, of course, a vital ingredient of any high skills economy, but equally important is the fact that there are enough skilled jobs for them to do. British policy needs therefore to shift out of a narrow and obsessive pre-occupation with skill supply and address more directly the low level of demand for skill in the economy. This would imply a much more ambitious and radical programme across a broader range of policy fronts, designed to tackle the interlocking and mutually reinforcing institutional structures and incentives that render it difficult for firms to shift out of neo-Fordist, cost-based forms of low skill, low value-added production (Finegold and Soskice 1988, Brown and Lauder 1996, Keep and Mayhew 1999).

Second, if Britain is to design an education and training system capable of nourishing a high skills vision, then it will have to question whether a narrow preoccupation with the needs of the economy and of employers is really the best place to start. Such an approach tends to work by majority rule and fashions the VET and qualifications system into servicing the needs of the dominant low skill segments of the economy. A better approach, judging by some of our European competitors, may be to break with tradition and reset initial education and training policy within a much

broader democratic framework of education for citizenship (Avis *et al.* 1996). Here the aim is to conjoin the twin goals of a well educated, highly skilled and flexible worker-citizen, by offering all students an entitlement to a mandatory core of general education within a unified post-14 qualifications framework (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Green 1998). Such an approach might also begin to breathe some life into notions of the learning society, by closing the gap in our post-compulsory education system between those who have access to truly emancipatory forms of knowledge and education, and those for whom this has been traditionally denied (Edwards 1998, Coffield 1998).

In the end, there is no chicken or egg dilemma of 'do we start with the economy or the education and training system?' We start with both. If a genuine 'enabling' role for the British state is to be envisaged, capable of breaking out of a destructive neo-liberal market framework, reforming Britain's dysfunctional financial system, raising levels of investment, rebuilding its infrastructure and systems of welfare provision, and subordinating industrial decision-making to democratic control and social purpose; a much more radical policy agenda will be required (Hutton 1995). However, this may well have to begin by reclaiming the transformative potential of education as a vehicle for the construction of an intelligent democratic public willing to defend social life from free market blight. In a political climate where policy makers balk at the very idea of subjecting employers to greater forms of social control and regulation, where the available policy levers are held to be fewer than they were, and the very idea of a genuinely *critical* education for all, risks exploding many of the consensual, conflict-purged myths at the heart of the 'Third Way', the road ahead is bound to be a difficult one. Most of us never doubted as much.

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