

Chapter #10

THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERALISM ON TVET IN ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism, as embraced by many employers in England, has had a number of impacts on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Among others, it introduced performance measures to every aspect of the system, not just to learner achievement, thereby giving employers a dominant role in the TVET sector. This chapter focuses on the historic relationship of employers in England with the education and training sector and explains where the disproportionately strong role of neoliberal employers originated and how it persists to this day. It also explains how the problematic role of neoliberalism in the mind set of employers has contributed to the partial failure of government policy in TVET in that this education and training sector is being shaped in accordance with the demands of large employers, to the detriment of wider sector and of economic skills growth. The chapter also reflects on the barriers that neoliberalism erected to the creation of a TVET system which can truly address the needs of the economy as well as of individuals as total human beings. It concludes by suggesting ways in which some of these issues might be resolved, for example, through better partnerships with a wider group of stakeholders, such as universities, government and parents.

Keywords: neoliberalism, employers, TVET, education, training, social space and ethical action / function theory.

1. THE PROBLEMATIC ROLE OF EMPLOYERS IN THE TVET SECTOR IN ENGLAND

The employer relationship with TVET in England is problematic in that it has resulted in a system of technical and vocational education that appears to meet neither the needs of business and of the economy, on the one hand, nor of individuals as human beings on the other. This chapter critically explores possible reasons for this phenomenon, in the process drawing on historic, systemic and cultural factors. It also examines the impact of neoliberalism on the employer relationship with the TVET sector. It will be argued that the ability of the employer sector to formulate and execute a skills plan to support the economy has been hampered by its embracement of this ideology. The neoliberal approach, it will be contended, has put employers and employer organisations in a difficult if not an untenable position in that many of them understand that while pre- and in-service training of staff should serve the ideal of profit-making, the training of future and existing employees (also in the form of TVET training) as such is essentially a pedagogical undertaking that should be guided by pedagogical and not business or economic principles.

In countries where successful revolutions have recast society, government was able to establish a new culture through a central, national education system for all citizens. Historically, in England, however, where no such revolution took place, economic success has been linked to the interest of individual businesses rather than to that of the overall economy, the needs of society or of individuals as human beings. This explains why a

persistent historic feature of the TVET system in England has been the neglect by employers of the technical and vocational training of their workers. This employer attitude stems from having had access from the time of the industrial revolution to plentiful cheap labour to serve their business needs; training was not seen to contribute to the success of business and of the economy. At the same time, however, businessmen themselves aspired to the classical liberal education of the Upper Classes. Notwithstanding the historic existence of master craftsmen (Sennett, 2009), a prejudice against TVET took root, and persists to the present day. More recently, supplies of skilled, cheap(er) labour from outside the UK have compounded this problem in that they lend support to the view that a better national training system is unnecessary for business and economic success.

The resulting lack of investment by the majority of employers in high quality TVET, and the on-going view that academic education is superior to it, has never really been challenged by governments¹ (Andressen, 2016). This may be in part because no one seems to really know what the relationship between employer and the education and training sector should be. Employer obedience to the firmly established principles of individualism typical of the “classic” liberal economic ideology also remains a strong theme not only in the stance of employers but also in the development of TVET policy by education authorities. The liberal notion of free trade was, for instance, closely associated with belief in minimalist government intervention in the lives of citizens. Although neoliberalism later on tried to combine ‘laissez faire’ economic principles with greater state intervention in welfare and public goods, including education and training, this did not sit well with established cultural (i.e. classic liberal) practice and prejudice in England. The persistent impact of liberalism, also in its neoliberal guise, has resulted in a reliance on, and in the overly-significant impact of employers and business practice, such as performance measures, on education and training in England.

The inculcation of skills in the work force of employers is as much a matter of policy as it is a reality (Gleeson & Keep, 2004) required by government as a peg on which to hang a number of education and training initiatives. Employers themselves, however, are more concerned with the attitudes (89%) and aptitudes (66%) of school and college leavers than with the possession of specific occupational skills, except for the highest-skilled roles, where they predict a shortage of potential recruits with the required Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) skills in particular (CBI, 2016).

The role of employers in the development of non-technical skills, and their ability to carry this task out effectively are the subject of much debate (DfES, 2002; Stanton, 2006; Payne, 2008). One of the issues here is that the same large business corporations are often over-represented when it comes to defining the skills required for occupations in the sector (Payne, 2008). Such skills are not always appropriate for similar roles in smaller organisations that remain more difficult to engage. There is also the fear among employers that the personnel that they have trained will be poached by other organisations. All these considerations may lead to training being limited and mean that the transferability of the training – and therefore the prospect of progression in the work place or employment elsewhere for the individual – may remain poor.

Examples of the uncertainty regarding the purpose of vocational training / education and what it should look like, and the related failure of policy to address this problem, include:

¹ UK education policy varies considerably between England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The focus of this chapter is on policy in England, although the government is that of the UK.

- the creation of multiple versions of schools- and work-based vocational provision in an attempt to create parity of esteem between the vocational and academic tracks;
- the more recent assessment of vocational subjects through final examinations, rather than through the more traditional – and arguably more appropriate – project and coursework,
- the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships under New Labour,
- the replacement of Modern Apprenticeships by frameworks-based apprenticeships
- and most recently, a standards-based approach.

High quality technical-vocational training such as for Engineering and Construction does exist in pockets. However, the *government* has continued to supply largely unplanned vocational training for all industries, funded by the taxpayer, and has been using vocationally-based provision as a tool to keep young people deemed not capable of pursuing the academic track in full-time education. Reasons for this approach include a hope that young people who have not succeeded on an academic track might do so on a vocational one; a lack of entry-level roles for unskilled, 16-year-old school leavers in the modern economy, and more cynically, a desire for government to keep a large number of young people off the unemployment register. This multifarious purpose has done little to increase respect for this form of education and training.

Coupled with these country-specific issues, increasing globalisation has meant that businesses may be based anywhere in the world and employ an international personnel. Technology allows individuals to carry out work – and be paid for it – without ever entering or leaving a country. National governments no longer enjoy the previous level of control over economic activity, the resultant jobs nor over critical sources of revenue used for the provision of ‘public goods’ such as education, health care and welfare. Yet the assumption persists that international business will also support ‘national interest’ in the shape of a better performing UK education and training system (Keep, 2012) by training people not only to meet the skills needs of the individual business, but also of the wider economy. The government can only request inputs - or partly steer them by means of policy - rather than arrange and enforce employer contributions to education and training.

The *essential problem* that TVET in England has had to contend with is that historically employers have relied on a supply of cheap labour, and on the government to fund the training of any skills shortfall for business to achieve success. The role of employers in the formulation of skills policy has therefore remained voluntary to a large extent and, as outlined above, has occasionally exerted a disproportionately high impact on the TVET sector. The government’s positioning of employers at the heart of the definition of TVET training provision has been aimed at giving legitimacy to the content and outcomes of the TVET sector: employers prefer to educate and employ workers who show academic promise and hence seem to show an indifference to TVET (Andressen, 2016). Employers seem to favour qualifications which for them represent the brightest, if not most skilled, potential recruits. A levels, for example, are considered to represent this high standard. This attitude on the part of government and employers has so far led to the sub-optimal unfolding of TVET in England.

The role arguably played by neoliberalism in the evolution of this problem will now be discussed in greater detail.

2. NEOLIBERALISM: GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN THE UK

In the early 1970s, firms began to feel the impact of falling productivity, and many managers believed that the mounting power of organised labour (labour unions) was responsible for this. Neoliberalism's set of pro-market and anti-labour policies were first implemented by the United States backed Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (around 1973). The monetarist economic principles of the "Chicago Boys" guided the process from then on, and northern- and western-based financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund began applying "shock therapy" (structural adjustment programmes) to ailing economies in different parts of the world (Marois & Pradello, 2015, p.2-3).

Neoliberalism has many variants; it constantly evolves and diversifies. Neoliberal ideas are rooted in the principles of "classic" liberal economic and political theory and are related to the rise of the first commercial-consumer society, the expansion of trade and commerce, the availability of commodities and profits for the metropolitan market, the rights of free men and women, the accumulation of wealth, the imperative of looking after one's own interests, and in the lexicon of "bourgeois" ideas such as freedom, equality, property, possessive individualism, self-interest, a limited form of state, free trade, capital growth and gain. Neoliberalism has not only "revived" all these ideas but has gone further in that it now imposes many of these business and economic principles and ideas on non-business and non-economic activities such as education and training (TVET). It has given to each of these classic liberal ideas a "market inflexion" to make them applicable to a modern, global, post-industrial capitalism (Hall, 2011,;p. 12-16).

The discussion above and below provides evidence of how employers and other stakeholders such as governments have of late been vacillating between two sets of principles: the demands and imperatives of business and the economy on the one hand, and the insistence on application of pedagogical principles such as the guiding, equipping, unfolding, shaping, forming and nurturing of young people on the other (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 23).

In the past four or five decades, the on-going voluntarist nature of the employer role in England, which has seen employers "invited" or "allowed" to play a central part in the funding and delivery of TVET, with no consequences if they chose not to, coupled with changing global and national influences on policy and the gradual neoliberal "colonisation" of educationists' minds and approaches, inspired the state to change its relationship with business. Successive governments, from Tony Blair's New Labour, to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, and Cameron's Conservatives, have responded to neoliberalism in ways that sometimes seem at odds with their political positions.

Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government was, for instance, forced to carve out a new relationship with employers in response to the dominance of business influence on the economy. It marketised the state, allowing private sector practices and capital to permeate all levels of government. It looked for efficiency gains in public services, contracting them out to - or treating them as - private companies, and setting up new forms of governance to manage their activities. This led to a proliferation of small organisations, accountable to government departments using neoliberal practices such as 'new managerialism' more commonly associated with the private sector, for example assessment against pre-defined outcomes, league tables and employer engagement targets (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Stewart, 1998; Newman, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Payne, 2008).

Qualifications and changes to the delivery infrastructure also have been critical to the ambitions of successive UK governments. The 14-19 Diplomas created under Blair's New Labour, for example, were an attempt to offer a high-quality vocational alternative to academic provision in full-time education. The introduction of university tuition fees by the Conservative-led Coalition (2010-2015) was seen as a way to reduce the number of young people pursuing degree courses considered to be of little value in the jobs market, and to reduce public spending. This approach has forced many students into a debt trap as a result of the fact that higher education was turned "into a precious commodity to which individuals aspire and gain access" (Naidoo, 2009, p. 163). The rise in undergraduate numbers in courses that were regarded to be worthwhile actively driven by New Labour policy is considered a contributing factor to the decline in technical skills since those who might have pursued short, technical courses, instead pursued degree courses of questionable worth.

The nature of job opportunities concomitantly changed and their number decreased (UKCES, 2011). Not only have the poorly skilled found it difficult to secure employment; even graduates struggle to find employment normally associated with degree-level qualifications (Resnick, 1987). Under-employment and temporary contracts became common, resulting in the fact that social gains associated with a graduate job such as the ability to buy or even rent a home have become increasingly limited. Efficiency and an ethic of cost-benefit analysis have become the dominant norms in the process, thereby creating a closer linkage between education and the economy (Adams, 2006, p. 3 ff).

In her comprehensive review of vocational education on behalf of the British government, Wolf (2011) sought to reposition education in England as being for the good of the individual as well for as the economy, declaring that no learner should be steered onto a course – academic or vocational – that is a "dead-end" (8). It is clear from the above that tension has grown between the role of the state and the role of the employer in ensuring a skilled workforce, both for the good of individual businesses, the national economy, and the welfare and social and economic productivity of the individual. The neoliberal narrative of empowerment through individual choice masks a shift towards individual rather than state responsibility for social problems through the "logics of the market, responsabilisation and self-esteem" (Wright, 2012, p. 280). There are limited opportunities for "participation in dialogue and social integration" under neoliberalism; society divides and becomes more self-interested (Bates, 2012). Marketisation requires social policy, not only to combat the negative effects of markets but also to support the market with things it cannot provide for itself. Marketisation and social policy, however, are usually seen as opposing projects (Crouch, 2014).

The media in the UK and the United States have begun heralding the death throes of neoliberalism (Jaques, 2016; Mishra, 2017), and there are signs that both politicians and citizens in the West are waking up to the reality that neoliberalism has benefited a very limited number of people, with fewer education and career opportunities a key indicator of this (cf. Huntington, 2005). Neoliberalism however is obviously not the only explanation for the limitation of job opportunities. Technology, for example, has helped cause a hollowing out both of manufacturing jobs and of the middle management level in white collar organisations. For purposes of this discussion, however, it is worth noting that the negative effects of neoliberalism seem to have filtered into the consciousness of those who have previously benefited from, and defended it. Unfortunately, the structural and cultural changes needed to create responsive skills provision in England seem to be as distant as ever.

3. A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION

The discussion of issues raised here is necessarily limited in its scope and nature by the length of the chapter. A great deal has been written about the role of employers in (T)VET, with a wide range of factors being blamed for its problematic characteristics, among others the disproportionate degree of power exerted by employers on education (T)VET and the place of education within society, namely mainly for economic support and not for the development of the individual as a total human being (Gleeson & Keep, 2004; Wolf, 2011). The desire to create a social partnership in which the rights, responsibilities and duties of all involved in the development and delivery of (T)VET (including employers) has become more clearly articulated (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, p. 58).

Competition and privatisation in a neoliberal spirit have produced educational, social, and economic inequalities (Pantazis & Gordon, 2000; Ball, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005), and have confronted employers with a potentially confusing and conflicting set of demands and potential roles in policy (Hodgson and Spours, 2008; Huddleston & Laczik, 2012). In England, where regulation has been weak, and historic attitudes to (T)VET remain damaging to its success, some employers have benefitted considerably from access to government funding or government-trained labour resources. They have also had access to, and influence over, non-education policy through their “engagement”, however informally, with successive (T)VET policy initiatives, resulting in positive publicity for their efforts. In a fully-regulated system, however, employer provision of apprenticeship places and technical training would have been expected of them.

The role granted to employers has been based on two key assumptions. The first is that they are better placed and more able than other stakeholders to articulate teachable, assessable learning programmes to meet future employment needs, and that they would want and value new vocational qualifications (Tomlinson, 2004). The second is that there exists a single “employer view” of what learning provision is needed in both compulsory and post-compulsory education to enable progression to employment.

Gleeson and Keep (2004) question the assumption of treating employers as a heterogeneous category, showing how differences in business size, location and management style can shape employer inputs. Individual representatives of an organisation or sector might furthermore differ in their opinion of what that particular industry, sector, occupation, business type or location requires from the (T)VET system. Hodgson and Spours (2008) are in turn convinced that while employers seem to have been privileged in policy they remained powerless in practice. According to Gleeson and Keep (2004), “largely un-fettered de-regulation” has gifted employers a “voice without accountability” (p. 37).

In her 2016 research into the problematic role of employers in (T)VET in England, Andressen argues that despite the importance of structures, institutions and processes (Jensen, 1994; Lumby & Morrison, 2006), a system which is not fully regulated must rely on individual behaviours and initiatives for success. Individual attitudes towards, and perceptions of, vocational education and training can be disappointing, however. Employers who for instance refer to potential candidates for TVET as “thick”, “dumb” and “stupid” will struggle to create a truly valued set of education and training provision. Many of the employers today contributing to the formulation and implementation of skills policy are themselves products of the English system as described above, and hence to a certain extent conditioned to the belief that vocational education is inferior to the academic route. As a result of this conditioning, they tend to shape employee recruitment and training policies accordingly. Their understanding of the education and training sector and their

ability to make decisions as members of advisory groups are further impacted upon by their position within their employing organisation, their knowledge of vocational occupations when they are in management positions, and their consequent (in)ability to commit resources to the education and training effort. Acknowledgement of all these assumptions, behaviours, barriers and drivers is a critical first step in changing the currently hidden dynamic in policy implementation, as outlined above (Andressen, 2016).

Barriers to defining an effective role for employers regarding TVET include over-emphasis of the importance of skills to employers; the lack of a national industrial policy; a “learned reliance” (Andressen, 2016: 58) on the education system to provide any training needed; public funding, plus (before Brexit) a ready supply of skilled workers from the single EU market, trained at limited or no cost to UK-based employers. There is also the continued lack of a licence to practise, that is, official, compulsory recognition, similar in concept to the driving licence, which is required before an individual can work in a given sector. Also the absence of employer roles in relation to education and training as well as a disjointed employer view of skills in the UK, which differs from the broad vision of a skilled and roundly educated individual held by European apprenticeships. Employers in England often concentrate on fulfilling their immediate skills needs. Another barrier is the push for “flexibility” in programmes as a way to minimise what is required of the employer. In short, the employer in England appears to hold all the cards in the training arena. This claim can be substantiated as follows.

The Post-16 Skills Plan (DBIS, DfE, 2016) positions employers at the heart of the government vision for TVET. The Plan makes them responsible for creating standards, for deciding on assessment strategies, for defining the content of apprenticeships, in some cases without any other stakeholder input. Whilst there is a central supervising body, the Institute for Apprenticeships, to manage standards, it is difficult to hold it to account, or enforce or update standards created by temporary employer groups.

The introduction of a levy² – a sum of money equivalent to 0.5% of the pay bill of any employer whose pay bill is £3m or more, and which attracts a £15,000 allowance to those contributing to offset their payment – means that there is money available to the treasury to upskill the workforce. The downside of this is that pressure on employers to use their contribution to the funding levy appears to have driven negative behaviours such as the use of standards based on the amount of funding available for a given occupational route, the upskilling of the existing workforce rather than the creation of new positions, and in some cases, a total absence of education and training provision.

The lack of nationally recognised qualifications concomitant to the standards furthermore may result in variations of quality and acceptance. This may lead employers to overlook some qualified individuals in favour of those trained by nationally or regionally known employers, or holding qualifications more familiar to the employer. Whilst the change in sectors which have kept existing qualifications and proxies as part of their standards may be minimal, in others, employers have set out their preferred approach, regardless of practical considerations. Such contingent composition of standards might lead to a situation, for instance in the Logistics Sector, where no proxy qualifications are included, and a driver holding a full British driving licence might be assessed as a non-competent driver in a final assessment.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work#pay-apprenticeship-levy>

4. A POSSIBLE WAY OUT OF THE QUANDARY

It is clear from the discussion above that the provision of TVET in England has been suffering from a lack of understanding, cooperation and alignment between employers, government and the education and training sector. This has resulted, among others, in the employers becoming complacent with a particular set of circumstances, for instance the over-abundance of cheap labour, or being driven on the defence by an over-involved government. The problem seems to lie in a weak understanding of what the relationship between the employers, government and the education and training sector ideally should be. One way of solving this problem is to learn the hard way, through trial and error, by thrashing out an understanding between these three sectors based on experience and conflict. We would suggest a more principle-based route, however. The critical pedagogical approach that we have been following so far in this chapter allows us to also employ a transformative strategy (Ungerer, 2014, p. 4; De Lange, Moletsane & Mitchell, 2015, p. 152, 169, 172), as will now be briefly attempted in terms of the *social space and ethical function / action theory*.

Van der Walt (2017, footnote 5) recently summarised the *social space and ethical function / action theory* as follows. The theory firstly suggests that individuals, groups and societal relationships such as families, the state, business, school, universities, the education and training sector and sports clubs each occupies a particular social space in our life-world, without thereby claiming a superior or overall (absolute, dominating) status for the social aspect of reality. The social aspect is only one of the modalities of reality, and it is interwoven with all the others. The theory secondly suggests that each individual, group or societal relationship has been entrusted with a unique mandate, function, aim, purpose and calling within its own unique social space. Each should pursue its function and purpose with due diligence, responsibility and accountability and with due respect for the social spaces, self-determination and functions of all other individuals, groups and societal relationships. This respect entails recognition of the twin principles of sphere sovereignty and sphere universality. The theory thirdly suggests recognition of the ethical principle of diligent care of and for the interests of all other individuals, groups and societal relationships. This principle has been variously formulated as loving your neighbour as yourself, caring for the person and interests of the other, Kant's categorical imperative or Rousseau's maxim of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Respect for this third principle will afford social space for all individuals, groups and societal relationships to manifest and express their own meaning in life and hence contribute value in and for humankind.

What this theory suggests in the context of this chapter is that the TVET programme in a country such as England should be conceived and developed in the special social space provided by the intersection of the interests of all the stakeholders involved. It is important to firstly recognise that TVET is a form of *education*, and that as such it occupies a special social space where *only pedagogical and didactical principles and norms* apply, and not for instance business or state principles as such, although these also tangentially or secondarily come into play in the TVET sector. Although TVET occupies this special (sovereign) space as a pedagogical-didactical undertaking, the interests of many other social spaces influence and affect its conception and evolution. Government has an interest in TVET since the welfare of the state depends on the welfare of this education sector, among others. Since other stakeholders often are not in a position to concertedly determine the shape of TVET, for instance as far as the financing of the sector is concerned, governments have in the past usurped their stakeholder position and regarded themselves as the main providers of TVET

and hence insisted on dominating the scene as far as TVET is concerned. This approach, we would argue, is not defensible in terms of the social space and ethical function theory. Government is only one of the stakeholders in TVET along with the employers, the student body, the students' parents and other parties, and it should recognise this restriction on its role. Understanding of the principles of sphere sovereignty and of sphere universality will help government and all the other stakeholders to eke out a principled place in the joint venture that has become known as the TVET sector. Sphere sovereignty entails understanding that each role player has a special stake in TVET, and sphere universality suggests that they should all work together to make a success of this special sector as a pedagogical-didactical undertaking. Application of these principles will also prevent employers from playing a dominant neoliberal role in the education and training sector.

The ethical aspect brought to the discussion by the *social space and ethical function / action theory* dovetails with what has been said above. Each of the stakeholders in TVET should recognize and respect the ethical principle of diligent care of and for the interests of all other individuals, groups and societal relationships involved in the TVET sector. This is important in the current situation where neoliberal principles are being indiscriminately applied to sectors where they in principle do not belong. Neoliberal principles might be acceptable in the domain of business and economics, but not in the domains of either the state (government) or education, including the TVET sector. Government should therefore be wary of promoting neoliberal principles in spheres where they do not in principle belong, including TVET. A government that does not understand this tends to indiscriminately apply such principles also to those education sectors in which they historically have acquired an inordinately strong say and influence, as has been illustrated above. This should be avoided, and where it has already taken effect, should be actively countered. The same applies for the role of the employer sector.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been argued in this chapter that TVET in England has developed in undesirable directions, among others as a result of misconceptions among employers of their roles in this education and training sector, also as a result of a certain amount of complacency among stakeholders such as employers, and / or as a result of successive governments playing an inordinately dominant role, a passive or reactive role in the sector. It has furthermore been argued that, due to a lack of understanding of their roles as stakeholders in the TVET sector, both the employer sector and government have allowed non-pedagogical and non-didactical principles such as those flowing from a neoliberal approach to life and business to affect the TVET sector. It is suggested that all stakeholders in the TVET sector, though mainly government and employers, acquaint themselves with the principles involved in understanding their respective stakeholder roles in this joint venture. This could lead to a fundamental transformation of the TVET sector in England and elsewhere.

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