OVERVIEW: POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

John Lea

Introduction

It is often argued in philosophical circles that everything is a footnote to Plato. In his most famous text *The Republic*, Plato invites us to consider the nature of a just society. Not surprisingly (for it was a commonly held view at the time), he connects the notion of a just individual with a just state, i.e. if we consider what it means to be a just individual it will provide a clue as to the nature of a just society. Plato invites us to consider the very simple notion that if each individual performs tasks which are in keeping with their own unique talents this will ultimately be to the benefit of all. This *organic* conception of the nature of the social order, as it is often called, has been recycled on many occasions. It is at the heart of the functionalist school of sociology and could be said to be the foundation of the tripartite education system founded during the Second World War in Britain. The idea that the education system should fundamentally serve the purpose of allocating individuals to future jobs which are in keeping with their ‘natural’ talents, has a compelling logic and, indeed, might be argued to be the most important footnote to Plato that British education reform has written.

Perhaps the most intriguing section in *The Republic* is where Socrates (or more accurately the Platonic Socrates) outlines the *noblesse oblige*, which will function to help people understand the nature of justice. It is worth quoting this allegory in full:

You are, all of you in this community, brothers. But when god fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers (which is why their prestige is greatest); he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and
other workers. Now since you are all of the same stock, though your children will commonly resemble their parents, occasionally a silver child will be born of golden parents, or a golden child of silver parents, and so on. Therefore the first and most important of god’s commandments to the Rulers is that in the exercise of their function as Guardians their principal care must be to watch the mixture of metals in the characters of their children. If one of their own children has traces of bronze or iron in its make-up, they must harden their hearts, assign it its proper value, and degrade it to the ranks of the industrial and agricultural class where it properly belongs: similarly, if a child of this class is born with gold or silver in its nature, they will promote it appropriately to be a Guardian or an Auxiliary. And this they must do because there is a prophecy that the state will be ruined when it has Guardians of silver or bronze.

(Plato, Penguin Classics: 182 Stephanus 415)

Discussion point

To what extent would you say that this allegory has served the British education system well? Would you say it still does?

Let us use Plato’s Republic as the backdrop to the issues we will discuss in this chapter. We will consider these issues under two (interrelated) headings: the rise of the new vocationalism and the widening participation agenda. What we need to keep in mind here is what we feel the fundamental purpose of education should be, and, what we want the notion of ‘education for all’ to imply?

The new vocationalism

Background

Throughout the 1980s a series of educational initiatives were implemented by central government in an attempt to ‘tighten the bond’ between education and the immediate needs of industry. This was combined with an extension of the ‘market’ philosophy to education, in effect reducing the power of local education authorities and establishing new forms of professional accountability (see Part 2).

There seem to have been several important contributory factors at work here:

• The Callaghan ‘Ruskin’ speech in 1976, which emphasized the role of education as a preparation for work; that Britain needed a ‘core’ curriculum; that education needs to become more accountable to employers and parents rather than teachers. For some this was seen as an endorsement of the right-wing backlash against so-called progressive education (Cox and Boyson 1977).
• Local authorities had come under increasing attack in the early 1980s for being politically motivated institutions, controlling schools and local services with provision in opposition to central government concerns, for example, focusing on race and gender issues at the expense of the ‘3Rs’; encouraging multicultural curricula at the expense of British history; promoting minority rights (for example, of homosexuals) at the expense of the moral majority. The extent to which this was a reality or simply an agenda set by a politically motivated right-wing press is, however, debatable (see for example Curran et al. 1988).

• It was seen as desirable that public services such as health and education should be made more accountable in market terms, i.e. competition between institutions should become the guardian of quality and efficiency and direct central government funding would make such institutions more directly cost aware. This would have the effect of giving more power to parents and governors, and not local councils. We might also add that the general aim of right-wing thinking in the 1980s was to reduce direct taxation and public provision in favour of direct consumer power (Friedman and Friedman 1979).

**Discussion point**

*To what extent do you think it is necessary to place education in this wider political context to understand reform?*

These debates culminated in the Education Reform Act 1988. Some of the main features of the Act were (see McClure 1988):

• *A National Curriculum* of core subjects which all students must study until the age of 16.

• *Standardized testing* at the ages of 7, 11 and 14, with publication of results.

• *Opting out* – all schools, through a ballot of parents, could decide to opt out of local authority control, by voting to be funded directly by government.

Although these reforms were aimed at compulsory education; it is important to consider how the political agenda that drove the reforms might eventually feed into the post-compulsory sector. Of course, on the last matter, further education colleges were in effect opted-out by the incorporation legislation of 1992 and the establishment of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

**Discussion point**

*To what extent do you feel that the Education Reform Act 1988 has acted as the background agenda for reforms which subsequently took place in PCET?*
Vocational initiatives in PCET (1977–1992)

Throughout the 1980s various attempts were made to bridge the gap between vocational and academic education (indeed, this is still happening). This seems to have had two main assumptions. First, British curricula (in general) were centred on academic concerns, but the majority of the population did not succeed in, or need, such an education, with the result that the curriculum was perceived as being out of touch with the needs of individuals and industry. Second, academic education was itself seen as too narrowly focused, with students concentrating very quickly on only a few subjects, and the knowledge itself rarely being of an applied nature.

For readers unfamiliar with some of the earlier curricula reforms here is a brief summary:

- The Youth Training Schemes (YTSs) – derived from the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), which was established in 1973 to promote an easier transition from school to work for 16-year-olds (work experience, etc.) In 1978 YTSs became the Youth Opportunities Programmes (YOPs), with ‘day-release’ provision for young people. In 1983 YOPs became the One Year YTSs, with the government increasing provision by financing the employment of young people as trainees with local firms. In 1986 the One Year YTSs became Two Year schemes. The schemes were subsumed under the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in 1990.

- In 1982 the government began the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) which attempted to promote the introduction of elements of vocationalism across all curricula. In effect, it was used by many colleges to establish a greater awareness of work experience schemes; promoted the use of records of achievement where students, teachers and employers could monitor the building up of a range of competences amongst students; and it encouraged a more widely spread provision of information technology.

- In 1983 the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) was formed, and by 1986 it had established the basis for provision of a range of courses aimed at providing qualifications for entry into a number of professional vocations which would have academic rigour, but would emphasize more practical vocational competence, when compared with GCSE (then O level) and A level qualifications. (BTEC Firsts would be equivalent to five GCSEs; BTEC National Diplomas would be equivalent to two or three A levels).

- In 1984 a Certificate of Pre-vocational Education (CPVE) was established as a qualification rather than an initiative or scheme. This was intended to be taught, more like a traditional course, but with an emphasis on competence and skill in a range of areas directly relevant to the world of work, and aimed at those students who were in danger of leaving school or college with no formal qualifications.

- In 1986 a government sponsored committee recommended the establishment of a National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), which would seek to bring all the vocational qualifications under one
umbrella, establishing a national framework of levels of achievement. This would mirror the traditional academic ladder, with five levels – from 1 to 5 (this notion will be discussed later). The NCVQ would not establish new courses but accredit existing courses and work-based experience by establishing practically based Competence and Performance Criteria, which they should incorporate. Indeed, NCVQ became largely responsible for introducing into Britain what is often referred to as competence-based education and training (CBET) (Jessup 1991).

- In 1992 GNVQs (G for general) were introduced as distinct courses and qualifications. In part this was because, in effect, many NVQs were being taught and awarded through simulated work experiences in colleges and training centres and also because it was felt that the time was right to establish a new taught-based vocationally oriented alternative to the GCSE/A level which were still (by far) the most popular courses for students to take.

**Discussion point**

From your knowledge and understanding of these curricular initiatives and reforms, how far would you say that they bridged or widened the academic/vocational divide in PCET?

### Against the new vocationalism

Although further reforms continued throughout the 1990s and into the new century, for example, Modern Apprenticeships, University for Industry (UfI) (see later), it could be argued that the dual establishment of the NVQ ladder and the GNVQ equivalence to the traditional academic structure were the key foundational elements in the new vocationalism. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the debates that surrounded the introduction of these reforms have been bitterly fought. The most controversial issue has perhaps been the very notion that Britain should move towards competence-based curricula provision. However, concurrent with this has been a social and political commentary concerning hidden agendas and a reopening of debate concerning the purpose of education.

Several academics (for example Bailey 1984; Abbs 1994; Hyland 1994a) felt very strongly that they needed to defend traditional academic education from this new vocational onslaught.

It is a gross mutation of the aims of education to suggest either that knowledge is only important to the extent that it reveals itself in the performance of certain tasks or that the only understanding worth having is that which contributes to vocational competence.

(Hyland 1990)
The implication here is that the humanistic and cognitive aims for (particular) adult education are being sacrificed in favour of a narrow agenda set by the needs of industry. Abbs went further in suggesting that this also serves the purpose of a state operating with:

the crippling assumption that the first task of teachers is to serve the economy, to turn out skilled robots and uncritical consumers for the hi-tec age.

(Abbs 1986)

This, he claims, has had the effect of undermining the Socratic tradition in teaching, which sees education as an attitude of mind:

Education is not an object (a mass of knowledge or information or skills) which can be unambiguously handed from the teacher to the student. Education is rather an activity of mind, a particular emotional and critical orientation towards experience.

(Abbs 1994: 17)

Hyland’s essentially philosophical critique centred on how vocational qualifications (largely NVQs) were founded on what he considered to be a flawed theory of behaviourist learning, i.e. that learning is defined as measuring changes of behaviour. This completely ignored both cognitivist and humanist traditions – the latter being widely accepted as the foundation for good practice in the teaching of adults (Jarvis 1995).

Discussion point

From your knowledge and understanding of the humanistic tradition in the teaching of adults, to what extent could it be argued that we can no longer afford such an approach to education?

A liberal approach to education requires us to consider two aims in education: the need to establish a meritocracy, and the need for a broad curriculum valued for its own sake. All students, regardless of background, should be able to aspire to the increasing opportunities that have emerged due to the growth of middle-class occupations throughout the twentieth century (a ‘more room at the top’ thesis). However, for such aspirations to be meaningful the education received by all students needs to be as broad as possible, not only because a broad education is necessary to produce the kind of cultural awareness previously only afforded the well to do, but also because if students receive different types of education (and subsequent qualifications) this will enable forms of social closure to be established around the possession of the (different) qualifications.

Defenders of the liberal creed, such as Charles Bailey, have also argued that the key concern in education should be to enable students to look
beyond the ‘present and the particular’. Vocational qualifications have the effect of locating people within the present and particular because of their narrow focus on the existing work and employment structure (Bailey 1984). Indeed, it might be argued in this context that forms of vocationalism should not be called education at all – rather there should be a dichotomy between education, on the one hand, and training on the other. Also, liberal theorists are often quick to point out that when employers are asked what they want from young people in terms of skills they often respond with precisely the sorts of aptitude that one would associate with liberal education.

**Discussion point**

To what extent do you think that it is inevitable that there will always be a social hierarchy of qualifications, benefiting some to the detriment of others?

Some commentators attempted to identify a much more overtly political agenda behind the various vocational reforms. Many of these criticisms have focused on the various YTSs and the low-level NVQs. Indeed, some have argued that the YTSs were not even training, but served a political purpose of removing large numbers of young people from the growing unemployment statistics and enabled employers to recruit a new source of cheap labour, which might have the added benefit of lowering young people’s expectations of high wages and secure employment (Finn 1987). It was also argued that the schemes offered employers more flexible employment arrangements, where these young workers could easily be replaced by new recruits without concern for redundancy payments (Clarke and Willis 1984).

Finally, it was argued that the hidden curriculum of many vocational courses was to fashion attitudes in young people, disguised as transferable skills, which would foster the view that unemployment is a personal problem of not working hard enough to secure a job, rather than a structural problem in the economy – that there simply are not enough jobs (Cohen 1984). In this respect, all that vocational courses do is help reproduce existing social and economic inequalities and fashion a set of attitudes in working-class youth to prepare them for the prospect of low-paid, low-status work and possibly unemployment (Clarke and Willis 1984).

All of these, essentially Marxist, perspectives emphasized how many of the early initiatives in the new vocationalism represented nothing more than a political solution to an economic problem – the precarious nature of employment in the late twentieth century. It might be considered ironic that societies like Britain only concentrate on training for jobs when there are not enough to go around.
Discussion point

To what extent would you say that these Marxist critiques of the early vocational initiatives have largely evaporated due to an increasing perception of the educational value in vocational alternatives to academic education?

Defending the new vocational creed

In his book *Outcomes*, Jessup (1991) took on the job of defending CBET from the above criticisms by arguing that it is all too easy to forget how out of touch education had become throughout most of the post-war period. Education was largely academic, being both beyond the capabilities of most students, and largely irrelevant to most people’s lives. It was extremely teacher-centred, in that individual teachers had enormous powers to produce ill-defined broad aims and woolly assessment criteria and leave students as passive recipients. And, we might add, what is wrong with education meeting the needs of the economy? Without a wealthy economy there would not be any feasible way of providing any form of mass education.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the 1980s was a period in education provision where the dual concerns of ‘tightening the bond’ between school and work and the desire to bring market forces to education helped to create a political climate in which:

- progressive education was seen as undermining the traditional teaching of the 3Rs;
- local education authorities were seen as politically motivated institutions undermining the wishes of other stakeholders in education;
- students were leaving school and college ill-prepared for the needs of industry, and we were thus losing out to our international competitors, and unnecessarily swelling the ranks of the unemployed.

Given the general thrust of right-wing economic policies, such as low direct tax and reductions in public expenditure, it was clear that the type of state-funded education established in the 1960s was likely to be changed. On the positive side, it could be said that all education in Britain in the mid-1970s had become too academic (particularly given that only around 13 per cent of students were going on to higher education), and it was important that British industry should begin to compete more equally with countries like Germany.

On the negative side, it could be said that the new vocationalism narrowed the aims of education – fostering not a Socratic attitude of mind in young people, but a set of attitudes consonant with the realities of low-paid, low-status, scarce work. Furthermore, this type of realism could not offer a challenge to the existing social and economic inequalities, but could only foster an acceptance of their inevitability, where young people
compete to market themselves for what work is available, with what vocational qualifications they can acquire.

The present vocational context (1992–2002)

Vocational reforms continued throughout the 1990s. Many of these were prompted by the scrutiny that ensued from the above controversies. NVQs have been subject to a wide-ranging review (see particularly Smithers 1993) and GNVQs have been constantly monitored (see particularly Bates et al. 1998). Others have been prompted by the change of government in 1997 and might be viewed as part of the New Labour philosophy, the Third Way. Most important in this context have been the New Deal and the University for Industry. Both reforms are clearly vocational in that the former is aimed at getting people into work and the latter is aimed at providing educational opportunities for those wishing to update their skills and qualifications. The Third Way philosophy is looked at in more detail in Part 2, suffice it to say here that the broad aim is to be seen to be helping people to help themselves, i.e. it is a deliberate policy shift away from both a welfare model of assistance and a market-oriented model of atomistic individualism. In this context the government will put into place the infrastructure to enable people to take responsibility for themselves (Hodgson and Spours 1999).

Discussion point

Do you think that the vocational reforms since 1997 (such as New Deal and UfI) demonstrate a significant change in social policy? How would you describe the effects?

Alongside these curriculum and government reforms have been more academic discussions of the way forward. For example, Ainley (1993) produced a wide-ranging discussion of the notion of skill, emphasizing how new technologies could help produce a multiskilled workforce, whilst Pring (1995) put forward a broad strategy to integrate the academic with the vocational. Although both were critical of the current vocational context, they were also keen to outline the possibilities it presents.

NVQ reformers have made concerted efforts to address the problem of an outcomes-led approach which had been accused of ignoring both underpinning knowledge and the notion of reliability in assessment procedures (see particularly Wolf (1995) and Tarrant (2000) for interesting discussions of assessment and competence). GNVQ reformers have made concerted efforts to address the assessment burden and prevent the qualification from being led by its assessment mode. There has also been a wide-ranging discussion of the way that GNVQs have tried to incorporate elements of progressivism in the curriculum and concentrate on student-centred self-development, and how this is often constrained by its inherited legacy of
CBET (Hodkinson 1998). In all of this, the A level ‘gold standard’ has survived relatively unscathed by vocational discussions. However, there have been numerous calls for A levels to become more like French-style baccalaureates and to integrate key skills elements into the subject specifications. Curriculum 2000 addressed both of these issues, but the former seems only to have produced a call for A level students to take a larger number of AS qualifications in their first year of study and the latter seems to have been overshadowed by the need for students to be seen to be taking ‘discrete’ key skills qualifications.

It might be argued that these developments have helped to move us towards attempts to design curricula which, on the one hand, meet the needs of a wide range of learners and, on the other, are both relevant and intellectually challenging, and, in the process, help move us away from the PCET curriculum being focused too narrowly on a ‘preparedness for jobs’ agenda. However, it could equally be argued that the legacy of the new vocationalism hangs over the current reforms and this has enabled entrenched attitudes to persist and be used in judgement against them. Dearing’s report (Dearing 1996) on the PCET curriculum was precisely aimed at taking a hard look at the state of play in the mid-1990s and it culminated in the PCET reforms usually referred to as Curriculum 2000 (DfEE 1997).

Discussion point

Review Dearing’s original report of 1996 and ask yourself to what extent it was inevitable that his proposed reforms would be undermined by entrenched attitudes.

The aftermath to the Dearing report seemed to produce the following options for further progress in searching for the ideal PCET curriculum:

- Accept that there is an academic/vocational divide rather than seeking to bridge it.
- Encourage students to cross the divide whenever they can.
- Rewrite the PCET curriculum as a new, unified set of qualifications, possibly with one graduating diploma.

The Curriculum 2000 reforms

Curriculum 2000 fits neatly into the thinking behind the second of the above options. By establishing a tariff of learning blocks, all students will be able quickly to see what is equivalent to what and how much credit they will need to achieve their aims. An example is shown in Figure 1.1.

The drive towards increased relevance and vocational preparation can still be seen in the much-vaunted introduction of Key Skills across the curriculum and the subsequent debates on their desirability. Apart from asking the somewhat obvious question about why compulsory schooling is
not able to deliver students to PCET with ‘key skills’, there are clearly several other questions that need to be asked in this context. For instance, when taught discretely, do they simply act as a distraction for students and staff alike from what is seen as the main purpose of their PCET presence? However, when they are integrated into mainstream qualifications, do they simply distract, once again, this time from the core skills and knowledge contained in the original qualifications? Finally, if some students realize (quite quickly) that they can achieve their aims (say a university place) without any Key Skills qualifications, does this leave us contemplating, yet again, whether we have created a new round of second-class qualifications?

Discussion point
What evidence do you have from your own PCET practice that key skills are either becoming an integral part of the PCET curriculum or being relegated as an unnecessary bolt-on?

It is for reasons such as these that it is becoming popular to believe that the only way out of this malaise is to start again. Using the university sector as a model where each student (or, perhaps better, the vast majority) graduate with one qualification, the degree, graded to reflect personal achievement, surely it is not beyond us to contemplate a similar graduating certificate (for example, diploma in further education), similarly graded to reflect personal achievement? Indeed, this is a clear proposal in the Green Paper 14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards where there is discussion of a matriculation diploma for 19-year-olds (DfES 2002: 12).
Discussion point

What do you believe is necessary to move us towards the ideal PCET curriculum?

As it stands, the new vocationalism in PCET seems to have delivered the following ladders of opportunity for students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional academic</th>
<th>New vocational</th>
<th>NVQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Professional institute exam</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma in HE</td>
<td>HND</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 A levels</td>
<td>AVCE or GNVQ adv</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 GCSEs (C+)</td>
<td>GNVQ intermediate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 GCSEs (D–G)</td>
<td>GNVQ foundation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The beauty of this model lies not just in the progression, which is built into each ladder, but the equivalence it establishes between the rungs on each ladder. Furthermore, the introduction of Curriculum 2000, particularly in colleges working hard to timetable opportunities for people to ‘mix and match’, establishes opportunities for students to collect the appropriate credit from across all three rungs of the ladders at the same time and feel confident in moving up to the next rung(s) on any of the ladders.

Discussion point

Do you have much evidence of students moving sideways between ladders? If they do, which are the key crossing points and why?

There are clearly opportunities for research (see Part 3) into student movements on these ladders and discussion of the accompanying issues. For instance, in reality, do students move sideways; is there evidence of ‘pick and mix’; what is a mix of academic and vocational elements within each ladder; how many students move all the way up the NVQ ladder; is there still an A level gold standard/academic snobbery; and, finally, are GNVQ students simply failed A level students? (See particularly Avis (1996) on the last issue.) There are important issues to be addressed here, many of which could be the focus for evidence-based practitioner research (see Part 3).

There is a long tradition in British education that education should suit the abilities of students, and that there will always be three classes of abilities: intellectual, technical and practical. Could it be argued that the metaphorical search for gold, silver and bronze in the souls of students is
what gave us the tripartite secondary education of the post-war period and
that the introduction of the new vocationalism in the 1980s is simply
another chapter in this search? In this model we would have: A levels =
intellectual, GNVQ/AVCE = technical, and NVQ = practical.

In this respect the previous table should now be reproduced on its side,
indicating that any student on any rung of the now horizontal ladders
will be perceived as being of higher educational value if they have a
footing on the intellectual ladder as opposed to the technical or the
practical.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 GCSEs (D–G)</th>
<th>5 GCSEs (C+)</th>
<th>2–3 A levels</th>
<th>Diploma in HE</th>
<th>University degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GNVQ foundation</td>
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<td>AVCE or GNVQ advanced</td>
<td>HND</td>
<td>Professional institute exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ 1</td>
<td>NVQ 2</td>
<td>NVQ 3</td>
<td>NVQ 4</td>
<td>NVQ 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are extremely important issues at stake here. Do we want to accept
the argument that it is inevitable that an unequal society will always
reproduce an unequal education system, or do we want to pride ourselves
that new curricular initiatives are bringing a wider range of students into
the educational fold? This brings us to the whole question of widening
participation in PCET.

The widening participation agenda

Background

The idea that post-compulsory education in the 1970s was very white, very
middle class and very male might have served as a convenient derogatory
way of describing a typical university in Britain but it could hardly have
meant much in the context of the sector in general. Indeed, it could be
argued that many courses, indeed, whole departments in some further
education colleges, have had predominantly female and working-class
students (Skeggs 1988). However, this may be part of the problem itself
and simply highlights the extent to which various social groups have been
both over- and under-represented in the various departments of the
various post-compulsory institutions.

Equality is variously defined in discussions of widening opportunities. In
some cases the term refers to equal treatment and is aimed at anti-
discriminatory practice with the focus on attitudes and behaviour within
a college. Sometimes the term is used in discussions of widening access to
education and this is often what is understood by the term equal opportuni-
ties. However, the term is also used by egalitarians who have a more radical
agenda and understand equality to mean equal shares. Policies framed
under this definition are aimed at inequality in society at large, where schools and colleges are asked to help pursue a wider social policy of equalizing the ratio between a social group’s presence in a community and its share of resources in that community. For example, if a London borough has an 11 per cent West Indian population then there could only be said to be equality in that community when 11 per cent of the local college community and 11 per cent of local employment is being undertaken by West Indians.

Some colleges now effectively outlaw certain expressions and behaviour and monitor all college documents and prospectuses with a view to promoting a positive image of that college’s work with respect to all individuals and social groups. Certain courses have been developed specifically aimed at social groups whom it was felt may have suffered from the ‘taken for granted’ world of schooling in the past. For example, the original Access courses were specifically for ethnic minority groups in Inner London in the late 1970s.

**Equal opportunities and PCET**

To some equal opportunities has become the most important means by which disadvantaged groups in society might become stakeholders; however, to others it is nothing more than ‘political correctness gone mad’. Some of the more controversial matters might be considered under the following headings: education compensating for society; assessment as a barrier to success; and the need to politicize the curriculum. The following examples are aimed at exploring these notions.

Let us take the example of the lone parent who enrols on an Access course knowing that one of the degree courses that he or she could aspire to is an American studies programme, which requires a year’s study in the US. Clearly, the Access course is giving the student access opportunities to the degree, but at what point should a discussion concerning the implications of a year’s study abroad be entertained? Or, perhaps, more importantly, should such a discussion be entertained? Surely the implications behind a year’s study abroad, which would include schooling for the children, should be the parent’s own? However, could it not be argued, particularly in cases where the parent is poor, that an educational opportunity is in danger of being denied if some compensatory package is not put in place? Furthermore, should not the HE provider seriously consider whether a year abroad ought to be an obligatory requirement when it is known that it causes difficulties for several students each year?

**Discussion point**

How far would you go in accepting that it is the PCET provider’s duty to provide extra-curricular assistance for students to achieve their learning goals?
Let us now take the example of a student who is deaf who enrols on a degree course knowing that they must undertake a 2500-word written assignment for each of the units on the degree. However, when it comes to handing the first one in, the student questions why this has to be in written form. The student suggests that a signed version on video assessed by a qualified signer would more readily suit them as a method of assessment.

**Discussion point**

You work at the university where the deaf student is registered and are asked for your opinion on the student’s request. What is your response?

Of course, the simple solution to this dilemma is to take a look at the university’s equal opportunities document to see what it says. Let us imagine that the only statement that clearly addresses this issue is one stating that ‘the university will do everything in its power to ensure that all types of learner are able to achieve their learning goals’. Could the student not claim that the university is in breach of this if it does not accommodate their request?

Finally, let us consider the GCSE English class where students are discussing Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock* and the following passage is referred to:

In Seven Dials the negroes (sic) were hanging round the public house doors in tight natty suiting and old school ties and Ida recognised one of them and passed the time of the day . . . the great white teeth went on like a row of lights in the darkness above the bright stripped shirt.

(quoted by Kiwi 1989)

The novel is well known as an exploration of Catholicism, but this passage seems to raise the issue of racism. If there has never been a question in the exam that invites a discussion of racism, to what extent should the teacher now invite this discussion? Perhaps more importantly, how should the discussion proceed? Is this an example of writing from its time (several editions of the novel interchange negro with nigger)? Should the class discussion document student testimonies on their reaction to the paragraph? Should teachers lobby exam boards to have such texts removed or balanced by others with more positive images, and who should decide what causes offence?

**Discussion point**

How would you conduct the above GCSE class discussion if the above paragraph was referred to in the class?
These examples raise important questions concerning the responsibilities of PCET practitioners in operating with the principle of providing equal opportunities. First, it also raises the question of the extent to which it is possible for PCET institutions to effectively compensate for society. If society produces social inequality, and it is brought to the classroom, surely the search for solutions should be centred not on the classroom but on society? Second, to what extent should we, as teachers, accept that assessment techniques are prone to create unnecessary hurdles for students in demonstrating their learning and, thus, that we should open up these techniques for critical scrutiny, and allow students to choose from a wider range of assessment options? Or is this simply a recipe for absurdity, encouraging students who once might have handed in their assignment on ‘recent reforms in PCET’ as a traditional essay, to do so now in the form of a poem, or video dance routine with their peers?

**Equal opportunities and curriculum reform**

Curriculum reforming groups such as the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the US have been working for some time to encourage teachers to consider these issues as a routine part of curriculum design and provision (CAST 2002). Utilizing the architectural principle of universal design, i.e. that buildings should be designed on the principle of multiple usage and users, CAST suggests that teachers should design curricular resources and assessment methods in the same way. More practically, teachers should design with the following in mind:

- multiple representations of content;
- multiple options for expression and control;
- multiple options for engagement.

In other words we all need to consider not just the forms through which we communicate information, but also the different means by which students might engage with educational material, and also how they might exercise more control over the ways in which they are assessed. If we are to be serious about what has been learnt about the way that the brain processes information and different representational systems (O’Conner and Seymour 1990); different learning styles (Honey and Mumford 1992) and multiple and emotional intelligences (Gardner 1993; Goleman 1995) we must translate this knowledge practically in curricula reform.

Finally, to what extent do we all have a responsibility to change, not just access opportunities to curriculum and assessment techniques, but also the actual content of the curriculum? If Shakespeare and Chaucer are boring to 16-year-olds, could they be removed? Could history classes be framed around the concerns of the actual students about to embark on the course? This list of questions is endless and would take us into the history of multiculturalism both in the US and in the UK. What is at stake is the extent to which the curriculum should be seen to be serving different purposes. It has long been believed in the US that the disaffection of minority groups in education can be challenged through curricula which
reflect their interests, cultures and languages and that this could be achieved when the curriculum is used as a critical means of self-understanding (Giroux 1983).

**Discussion point**

How often do you entertain educational aims that are not strictly within the scope of the immediate specifications or syllabus?

Readers who are familiar with the radical agenda in adult education might be dismayed at this point to have to hear talk of reorienting the curriculum towards specific learners’ needs when there is a long tradition of this in adult education centres throughout the UK. Indeed, rising to the ‘basic skills’ agenda has often been accomplished precisely through a more liberatory and contextualized curriculum model:

Reading not only helps define the individual’s relationship to society but provides a mechanism for understanding and developing the self and constructing an identity.

(Kean 1995, quoted in Mayo and Thompson 1995: 58)

In this context the relevance of the curriculum is defined not in strict instrumental terms, i.e. as a preparation for work, but in terms of its relevance to one’s life, social context and individual self-development. Equal opportunities, in this context, might be defined as designing curricula for particular groups of individuals who have been traditionally under-represented in PCET. It is not about giving access to a nationally prescribed curriculum, or about achieving national targets for numeracy and literacy (important as this might be), but about working innovatively and imaginatively with local individuals and social groups, be they female returners, redundant manual workers or various ethnic minorities, to choose some obvious examples.

On the one hand, it could be considered ironic that, in the desire to widen participation in PCET in general, the various sectors within it – higher education, further education, adult and community education – have become blurred as they all chase all types of learner and try to meet a range of learners’ needs, thereby risking losing the distinctiveness of the traditions that had grown up within them. In this respect ‘the really useful knowledge’ tradition of adult education, which has made enormous contributions to the opening up of opportunities to students has now got somewhat lost as higher education and further education seek to cater for all needs (Hughes, in Mayo and Thompson 1995). On the other hand, we might argue that this has far more to do with the state taking control of mainstream education, indeed, defining what mainstream education is, and the inevitability of innovative practice losing out in the ensuing funding battles. In this context, what central government has been able to do is define what useful knowledge is, i.e. useful knowledge is now
narrowly defined as vocational relevance rather than individual self-development. This is clearly the point where the new vocationalism meets the widening participation agenda. We might say that there are now more widely available educational opportunities but they are also more narrowly defined in scope.

**Discussion point**

How far would you say that it is PCET reform itself that has limited students’ opportunities to experience ‘useful’ education?

**Social exclusion and disaffection**

Since 1997, ‘targeting’ the under-represented in PCET has been largely focused around debates concerning social exclusion. It could be argued that this is clearly an area where adult education has a large amount of accumulated expertise. However, it seems to be further education that is receiving the bulk of funding. This could largely be to do with the different ways in which exclusion might be conceived. It is often taken to refer to the increasing number of school students who are permanently excluded from their schools and the number of ‘units’ now in existence in further education colleges who are accommodating them (and this, of course, raises the question of what exactly the term ‘post-compulsory’ education now means). This might be referred to as a narrow focus, not because of its scope, but because it acts on young people who have been labelled ‘excluded’. The wider focus includes all the initiatives aimed at more general social problems:

Social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

(Seu 1999, quoted in Hayton 1999: 2)

It could be argued that as these are social problems we might simply end up using education as the scapegoat for a lack of social policy. However, to a large extent, education is part of social policy and it can obviously play an important role particularly if it acts on the ‘disaffection’ which is often associated with the social problems mentioned above. Most starkly if we consider that young offenders are currently in a position to apply for only four jobs in every one hundred, it is hardly surprising that the ‘basic skills’ agenda currently has a high profile:

30 per cent of prisoners were regular truants while at school. 85 per cent of short-sentenced male prisoners involved in drug misuse had truanted; 49 per cent of male sentenced prisoners were excluded from school; 52 per cent of male and 71 per cent of female adult prisoners
have no qualifications at all; half of all prisoners are at or below level 1 (the level expected of an 11 year old) in reading; two thirds in numeracy; and four fifths in writing. These are the skills required for 96 per cent of all jobs.

(SEU 2002: 44)

Furthermore, if we know that these young offenders are leaving compulsory schooling largely without any formal qualifications we might want to question the nature of the curriculum experiences they might have had and how we might (re)engage them in their studies. Unfortunately, it is a difficult tightrope for some radical adult and community educators to walk if their funding is tied to meeting nationally agreed ‘basic skills’ targets when their experience suggests that it would be more fruitful to experiment with more radical curricular initiatives.

Of course, in general, this raises the whole question not just of the skills and attributes we would expect PCET practitioners to have, but also, once again, of the teaching methods which would be appropriate, as well as the curriculum content. If students have severe behavioural problems, clearly the traditional teaching skills of group management will need to be enhanced through some specialist training. Indeed, practitioners may increasingly find themselves needing to work in small groups and even on a one-to-one basis with individual learning plans. However, we might also find ourselves revisiting pedagogical practice and possibly utilizing the knowledge gained from discussions of andragogy (as opposed to pedagogy) as being more appropriate not just for adult learners but for a whole range of disengaged learners.

This itself raises the whole question of whether alternative teaching methods and alternative curricula are simply the means by which disaffected students might re-enter more mainstream PCET education or whether we might see this as a challenge to the mainstream itself. It is perhaps ironic that at a time when PCET practitioners are being asked to see themselves less as teachers and more as ‘facilitators of others’ learning’ that we are still talking about the difficulty that many students have in aligning themselves to the authority structure of the mainstream classroom.

**Discussion point**

*From your own experience what would you say is the balance between disaffection being caused by a student’s own behavioural problems and the teaching methods and curriculum that they are subjected to?*

This brings us to what is perhaps the most far-reaching dimension to the debates concerning equal opportunities, that is, the extent to which we would want to embrace the view, often put forward by sociologists, that it is teachers, educational establishments and the curriculum itself, and
not students and their own deficiencies, which fail them. If it is the latter we can either conclude that we should help students with difficulties or, in extreme cases, accept that some will never be able to ‘make the grade’; if it is the former, we must entertain the idea that it is our own practices as PCET practitioners that produce not just ‘failures’ but what constitutes the very meaning of the word ‘failure’ (this conceptual issue is returned to in Part 3).

At this point it might be wise to reflect on the term ‘disaffection’. This is a relatively new term in social scientific literature. Indeed, it might be suggested that 20 years ago we would probably have used the term ‘disadvantaged’ when discussing the kinds of social problems listed in the quote from Hayton above. Perhaps this reflects a changing political climate which has seen us move away from a socio-structural explanation for social inequality which looked at how individuals and social groups are shaped by their social circumstances, and move towards a more cultural approach emphasizing how individuals and social groups shape their own social circumstances. This distinction could be most clearly seen in the debates concerning the presence of ‘the underclass’ in the US and Britain (R. MacDonald 1997). This would indicate that the term ‘disaffection’ is politically loaded, aimed at asking us to see social problems revolving around the need for individuals to reorient themselves. In this respect it is not ‘disadvantage’ that causes social problems but an individual’s own ‘disaffection’ – society is not the problem, just an individual’s relationship with it.

A complicating factor in this political debate has been the more recent discussions prompted by the publication of the Tomlinson report (Tomlinson 1996). Indeed, it might be argued that the discussion that ensued has moved us beyond equal opportunities as an operating notion to the notion of inclusion and the gradual acceptance of a more sociological understanding of ‘learner identity’.

**Disability and disabling environments**

One of the recent trends in social science literature has been to challenge the notion that disability, or ‘being disabled’, is, on the one hand, a person’s own physiological or neurological problem and, on the other, an essential and all-encompassing component of one’s being (Barton 1996). As strange as it might initially sound, disability is increasingly being understood as a social relation. A straightforward example might illustrate the point. Imagine that I, as a sighted person, am having difficulty locating a book for a degree course, but when I discover that there is a library in London that has it I rush to catch the train armed only with the library’s address. Imagine further my surprise upon arrival to find that all the books in the library’s stock are held in Braille versions only. I might complicate the scenario by adding that all the instructions to enter the library are only in Braille as well. Would it be possible to argue that the environment in which I find myself now disables me?
These notions of ‘abling’ and ‘disabling’ environments are a common theme in recent literature on disability (Barton 1996). The language of disability is complicated by the rapidity of change in the terms being used. For some this signifies important developments in the treatment of people. However, for others it signifies little more than forms of political correctness, to be derided. For example, in 1980, the World Health Organization (quoted in Trowler 1995: 228) used the following definitions:

- **Impairment** – any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.
- **Disability** – any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.
- **Handicap** – any disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual.

All three definitions rested on assumptions that a social relations approach might want to challenge. For example, to what extent was the word ‘normal’ taken to be a reference to a physical being or an ideal image? And, to what extent was an impairment a physiological or neurological fact or simply a particular imposition of meaning?

**Discussion point**

To what extent would you agree with the idea that disabilities are problems only because of other people’s prejudices?

Compare the following two statements, which might be said to a prospective college student:

- Lecturer 1: ‘Because you are disabled I should warn you that you may have trouble completing the course you have chosen.’
- Lecturer 2: ‘I should warn you that this college is in many respects a disabling environment and this may cause you to experience some difficulties in completing the course you have chosen.’

This change in language mirrors the changes that have occurred in theories of disability:

The most fundamental issue in the sociology of disability is a conceptual one. The traditional approach, often referred to as the medical model, locates the source of disability in the individual’s deficiency and her or his personal incapacities. In contrast to this, the social model sees disability as resulting from society’s failure to adapt to the needs of impaired people.

(Abberley, in Barton 1996: 61)
The contrast between the two approaches can be seen most starkly by asking the question: ‘Whose problem is disability?’ Whereas the deficiency theory would argue that the problem lies with the individual, a social relations approach would argue that the problem is clearly social. However, there are theoretical differences in how the word ‘social’ is used. Labelling or interactionist theorists argue that in order for impairments to become ‘problems’ a social interaction needs to take place where the problem is the result of the attachment of a negative label by other individuals or whole social groups. More radical theorists, however, would emphasize that it is not labels that cause problems but the material circumstances, in which people live, which cause impairments to become problems. This argument is similar to a Marxist approach emphasizing the nature of the mode of production of material wealth, and how individuals are shaped to fit its needs, often marginalizing those whom it is difficult to shape:

those working within a materialist perspective maintain that the oppression of disabled people is not reducible simply to problems within the individual or within the attitudes of others, but is rooted within economic structures.

(Riddell, in Barton 1996: 86)

There is perhaps a sense here that if we could picture life as a game, the deficiency model appears to be saying to those with disabilities that you will have difficulty playing, but we will help you (for many, this is what keeps people in a dependent state); the labelling perspective seems to be saying it is possible to play, but we must first stop the existing players from using excluding tactics; the materialists, however, might be said to be arguing that it is about time we thought about what game we are playing and whether we could invent new ones.

There is an appealing logic in interactionist approaches that suggests that if only we stopped labelling people, particularly negatively, then any problem associated with the behaviour so labelled would disappear. For example, if only psychiatrists would stop calling the mentally ill ‘the mentally ill’ then mental illness would simply evaporate. If only teachers would stop calling certain students ‘disruptive’ then classrooms could become seas of tranquillity. Presumably when the famous interactionist Howard Becker wrote that ‘deviance is behaviour which has been so labelled’ (Becker 1963), he was referring, at least in part, to the way that certain forms of human behaviour have come to be understood, i.e. it is not that the behaviour would disappear if the label was removed, but the association of the behaviour with bad, wrong, or unnatural.

Thus, if we return to the case of disability, when we say that people ‘suffer’ from disabilities we need to consider the extent to which the social environment caused the suffering, be it through negative labels, or disabling environments, as well as to consider how one understands one’s own situation. If we remember my (imaginary) trip to the library, I might have to suffer prejudicial statements made by unhelpful librarians working in the library, as well as suffering from the inability to read my book.
However, depending on the nature of my disability I might also suffer from my own mental anguish.

One of the clear messages that emerge from sociological literature on disability is the extent to which we are all involved in the social construction of disability. As educators we need to ask ourselves the extent to which we contribute to educational encounters which either produce (or reproduce) relations of dependence, and/or prejudice, or which seek to empower individuals in their social lives:

Disabled people are . . . involved . . . in struggle to capture the power of naming difference itself. An emancipatory meaning of difference is one of the goals of social justice. This entails challenging definitions which isolate and marginalise and replacing them with those which engender solidarity and dignity.

(Barton 1996: 10)

We need to ask ourselves about the ways in which our everyday practice uses a language which frames the ways in which people can experience their lives – for example, ‘failure’, ‘special needs’, etc. We need to consider the extent to which our language reflects and reproduces power relations in an organization and in society at large. In this context consider the way that the American rap group NWA (Niggas With Attitude) sought to take back the language of oppression to make it their own, and how some people in the gay community now celebrate the use of the word ‘queer’, such that it loses its discriminatory, negative, meaning.

As in the cases of racism and sexism, we need to enable people to escape from the blanket use of ‘disabled’ as a summary of the entire being of a person. Even if the intention is well-meaning the effect may not be without harm, as in the case of people leaning over wheelchair users, speaking loudly and slowly, indicating that they must have hearing and cognitive difficulties if they are using a wheelchair.

The reality of most current provision in FE colleges is that of inaccessible buildings and ill-resourced, low status special needs departments (Corbett and Barton 1992: 85)

being treated as an equal is very much on the surface. Scratch this surface and you will find the fear and contempt which underlies much of the discrimination against people who don’t measure up to what we consider to be ‘normal’.

(Morris 1987, quoted in Corbett and Barton 1992: 86)

Discussion point

Ten years on from these statements, how successful would you say that PCET institutions have been in changing their learning environments and cultures?
Educational inclusion

It is surely against this backdrop that the following quotation from the Tomlinson report should be read and understood:

Put simply, we want to avoid a viewpoint which locates the difficulty or deficit with the student and focuses instead on the capacity of the educational institution to understand and respond to the individual learner’s requirement. This means we must move away from labelling the student and towards creating an appropriate educational environment; concentrate on understanding better how people learn so that they can be better helped to learn; and see people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties first and foremost as learners.

(Tomlinson 1996: 2)

Educationalists were quick to realize the implications of these statements and to lay out the challenge to PCET practitioners:

The redesigned provision called for in the Report [Tomlinson] would match the requirements of the subject matter, materials and teaching methods to students’ predispositions and developmental levels.

(Florian 1997)

No longer would students be expected to adapt to the requirements of the currently constructed PCET institutions. PCET institutions would have to adapt to the needs of the learners coming through their doors. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt from the sociological analysis of disability is the extent to which PCET institutions either contribute to the reinforcement of disabling aspects of self-identity or contribute to the empowerment of individuals to enrich their lives. In general, we might say that widening participation is clearly about opening up access to education and training opportunities but it is equally about how students experience that education and training. To do this has required a thorough questioning not just of the attitudes and attributes required of PCET practitioners but also of the nature of the student’s engagement with the curriculum and, to some extent, the very content of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Two of the main concerns in PCET in the past 25 years have been those of relevance and participation, i.e. addressing the questions of what it is that people should be learning and why people are not queueing up to do it. Obviously the questions are not unrelated. For example, if we take the case of a student with ‘learning difficulties’, it is one thing to encourage them to have more access to the PCET curriculum but it is another to ask whether the curriculum on offer is itself of value. One of the main aims behind vocationalizing the PCET curriculum was to make it more relevant both to the needs of the economy and to the needs of a wider population of
students. In this respect this was a widening participation agenda itself. However, more recent attempts to widen participation have, once again, opened up the question of what students are being given access to:

It [learning] is a weapon against poverty. It is the route to participation and active citizenship.

(Kennedy 1997: 4)

Presumably this provocative statement indicates the extent to which education is seen as a key to unlock the door to success in life in general. Laudable as this might be, we surely need to place this statement into the social context of Britain in the early twenty-first century. There is little doubt that formal education is able to generate knowledge and understanding for people about a whole range of subjects: to give people the qualifications, which will enable them to enter worthwhile jobs and careers; and to engender a self-confidence about shaping their own self-identity. However, education, in and of itself, is not able to create jobs nor is it able to spirit away disagreeable jobs. Furthermore, as Webersian sociologists would say, whenever there is competition for scarce resources – be it jobs, housing or social status in general – there will be modes of social closure to ensure that some remain more equal than others.

One of the most intriguing recent suggestions (Kennedy 1997) is the targeting of the most disadvantaged in society through a ‘postcode carrot’, i.e. colleges would be rewarded more highly for recruiting students from ‘deprived wards’ within their catchment areas. To paraphrase the comedian Alexei Sayle, it conjures up images of working-class youth, returning from their evening classes, standing around on windswept housing estate concrete piazzas discussing Chekov. But also it suggests that the qualifications that they will attain will grant them access to more rewarding jobs. This is a mighty task to set the PCET institutions. We might suggest that it is a task which cannot even begin to be addressed if education is not placed within a wider social context.

It is common these days to refer to all curricular reforms as moving us towards a ‘learning society’. Clearly, in an increasingly post-industrial (and some would say post-Fordist) society, people will have to get used to the idea that there are no longer ‘jobs for life’. Employment is increasingly being experienced as insecure and transient, requiring the constant updating of, often, the ‘softer’ communication skills. In this context we could argue that we cannot but create a ‘learning society’, i.e. people will need access to educational opportunities on a regular basis, throughout their lives, if they are to survive this transformation of the social order. Hopefully, this book will cause you to reflect on what exactly is the nature of the ‘learning’ that this society is giving people access to.

One of the demands of rising to a more postmodern existence is not just to accept the transient nature of the knowledge and skills we might currently own but also to accept the corollary to this, that the curriculum will increasingly receive calls to accommodate ‘the distant voices’ of the previously unrepresented. Access to the curriculum in this context is thus
also about the nature of its content and the political purposes it might serve its recipients. Opening up the curriculum in this way could be conceived as being both liberatory and also as an inevitable consequence of the postmodern sensibility. However, if the curriculum is increasingly perceived as being directed at providing narrowly defined and prescriptive work-based and work-oriented learning opportunities, it could equally be construed as being an attempt by the state to contain the nature of ‘learning’ and the definition of what constitutes ‘society’. We might say that we find ourselves increasingly being innovative in meeting the widening participation agenda, but at the same time often feeling restricted by the more narrow curriculum aims of the new vocationalism.

Over the past 25 years we have heard many rallying cries which would support many of the reforms seen in PCET: ‘Post-compulsory education is elitist and encourages wastage of talent’, ‘We need a skilled workforce’, ‘There’s too much social disaffection’. PCET institutions have risen to these challenges but they have done so within a wider social, economic and political context where social inequality persists on a large scale, where secure employment is more scarce, and where entrenched social attitudes are pervasive. Furthermore we might come to see a legacy of the last 25 years as being one where, despite numerous educational reforms, increasing participation in PCET was far more successful than widening participation, where those who benefited most from PCET in the past were simply given more opportunities to benefit further.

The new vocationalism has clearly reawakened our interest in the relevance of the curricula and whom and what they should be serving. This has been a challenge to all parts of the sector – higher education with its traditional concentration of the cognitive and the academic; further education with its traditional combination of liberal education and apprenticeships; and adult education with its traditional ethos of education as being intrinsically and personally fulfilling. However, in our desire to widen educational opportunities we find ourselves not just blurring the boundaries between these once somewhat distinctive institutional settings, but also offering those opportunities within a state agenda which has overseen the introduction of prescriptive curricula, national targets and funding carrots. This has largely been the result of the state wishing to produce a new sense of professional accountability in PCET and this is the subject of Part 2.

Further reading

Overview: Post-compulsory education in context


Part 1 exercises

1 The book synopsis

Choose five to ten books, written in the past ten years, which discuss reforms in PCET (use the Further reading as a guide). Produce a one page synopsis of each book using the following headings:

(a) A Harvard-style reference,
(b) Chapter headings,
(c) Summary of the main argument of the book,
(d) Choice, short, quotations.

If you undertake this exercise within a group context, and you exchange synopses, you could end up with ten synopses but only having read one book.

2 Critical review

Write a critical review of a recent PCET reform focusing on its strengths and weakness in terms of your own knowledge gained from professional practice and your knowledge and understanding of other academic work. Use the following list of official reports as a starting point for your focus:


In the first of the following two polemical pieces, Andy Armitage attempts a celebration of vocationalism by aligning it with progressivist forms of
curriculum design, rather than the narrowly defined behaviourist model with which it is more often associated. Furthermore, if we are to be serious about widening participation, rather than just increasing participation, he invites us to consider the urgent need to move away completely from the traditional academic forms of assessment that still pervade PCET. By contrast, in the second of the two pieces, Dennis Hayes revisits the interface between education and work, i.e. the nature of the relationship, which permits us to talk of forms of vocationalism. In a broad-ranging discussion he analyses what it means to create a ‘knowledge economy’, and more specifically, what sort of knowledge is deemed to be required to furnish workers for the contemporary job market.

QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT

When you have read the two polemical pieces, consider to what extent you would want to argue that PCET reform in the past 25 years has ‘dumbed down’ education.