



DEGREES OF SUCCESS

The Transitions from Vocational
to Higher Education

Geoff Hayward • Eugenia Katartzi
Hubert Ertl • Michael Hoelscher

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DEGREES OF SUCCESS

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Vocational to Higher
Education

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

1. The Changing Transitional Landscape	1
2. The Growth in Post-16 Participation	31
3. Access, Attrition and Attainment	57
4. Conceptualising Transitions from Vocational to Higher Education	83
5. Navigating the Transitional Landscape	109
6. Admissions and Teaching	131
7. Degrees of Success	163
<i>Bibliography</i>	189
<i>Index</i>	219

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THE CHANGING TRANSITIONAL LANDSCAPE

The Robbin's principle, which has guided the development of UK HE since the 1960s, stated that

*... courses of higher education should be available
for all those who are qualified by ability and
attainment to pursue them and wish to do so.*

(Robbins Report – Committee on Higher Education,
1963, para 31)

On 1st July 2020, the Minister of State for Universities of the United Kingdom, Michelle Donelan, however, gave a speech to the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), an organisation committed to widening access to Higher Education (HE).¹ In the speech she questioned the utility of the policy pursued by successive governments, both Labour and Conservative, over the last 75 years to expand HE in England according to the Robbins principle. A week later

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-minister-calls-for-true-social-mobility>.

on 9th July, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, gave a speech to the Social Market Foundation that emphasised similar points.² The language in both speeches was highly instrumental and reductionist, defining successful HE in terms of providing access to well-paid jobs, rather than developing good citizens, contributing to individual flourishing or self-formation (Marginson, 2018a), aims on which we would place equal value. But both speeches rehearsed arguments about what Okun (1975) described as the big political trade-off in advanced capitalist societies: how to balance equality and efficiency. Thus, both Donelan and Williamson emphasised the importance of widening participation in HE to socially disadvantaged groups in order to enhance social mobility (equality) while also bemoaning HE experiences that lead to students dropping out or that did not lead to well-paid ‘graduate’ jobs (efficiency).

This book explores this tension between equality and efficiency by examining the outcomes of successive waves of policy to expand HE progression opportunities for those who have studied for vocational qualifications (VQs) after they completed compulsory secondary schooling in England. Our concern, then, is the expansion of HE and the policy of widening participation. Such expansion is largely the product of the huge increase in demand for education over the last century, fuelled by a social belief in education as a fundamental human right in a democratic society (Mandler, 2020). There is also the policy perspective, promoting the view that knowledge and the cognitive capacities to produce and manipulate knowledge based upon higher-order thinking skills – abstraction, problem-solving, reasoning – are key to

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-fe-speech-with-social-market-foundation>.

both economic growth and to promoting social mobility in post-industrial, information societies affected by skills-based technological change. This leads to an educational ideology:

...first [a] cultural belief that cognitive skill, particularly as promoted in schooling, is the essential human capability for all types of jobs and social roles and remarkably even has come to define the successfully developed person [and] second ... the belief that educational performance, as reflected in academic achievement such as degrees attained, is the chief, and rapidly becoming the sole, legitimate factor on which to base social hierarchy within society.

(Baker, 2014, p. 41)

Our lens is the increasing rate of transition of learners with VET backgrounds to HE and the impact, if any, on social mobility and, ultimately, to social justice and equality. The context or case in which we examine this phenomenon is England after the Second World War for three main reasons. First, it is one that has undergone profound change and policy experimentation, so that there is a lot to look at and think with in the case of the English patient (Pring et al., 2009). Second, it is an educational ‘system’ where we have extensive, albeit imperfect, quantitative data sets. These enable us to examine in some detail the distribution of learners with vocational backgrounds across HE providers and, to a lesser extent, what happens as they then enter the labour market, compared to those who followed other pathways to HE. Third, it is also a site of a growing, but still limited, body of research evidence that enables us to hear about the experiences of young people and older learners making the transition into HE from a vocational background.

1.1 POLICY DESIGN PERSPECTIVE

Our thinking is informed by policy design research, with its focus on how policy problems and policy targets are constructed discursively (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 1997; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Such discursive constructions beg us, following Hacking (2001), to ask the question ‘how could it be otherwise?’. This suggests the need in thinking about widening participation policy and its effectiveness to exercise our policy imagination or rather policy re-imagination. This involves painting new pictures, rich in metaphors, that provide new ways of looking at and imagining transitions from VET to HE. We are aware of the dangers of using metaphorical language (Tsoukas, 1991), but such language affords the opportunity to develop new ways of thinking, which we can then make more precise and more concrete in the final chapter of this book.

The expansion of participation in upper secondary and HE in England has occurred within living memory and constitutes a truly astonishing social transformation over 70 years. The vast majority of the parents of the baby boomer generation born in the 1940s and 1950s would not themselves have attended secondary school. Practically, all of their children and certainly all of their grandchildren would have experienced secondary education until at least 15 and after 1972 to 16, with an increasing proportion progressing to HE. Now nearly 50% of 18–30-year-olds in England will participate in some form of HE. A complex interplay of changing social and economic conditions, which altered the perception of what ‘naturally’ children and young people should do, led to what Gambetta (2009, p. 167) describes as ‘a dense combination of mechanisms’ that changed the way people thought about the educational options that they

faced. In particular, to stay on in education, rather than leave as soon as possible to go to work, became the norm for the majority of the population. Peter Scott captures the significance of this change:

The expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom since 1945 – because its development has been first-and-foremost (some would say first-and-last) a story of growth in the number of students and of institutions – is a ‘dog that did not bark’. A strong case can be argued that it has transformed British society over the past half century: more than the rise (and fall again) of public housing; more than the establishment of the National Health Service (although higher education has never been able to match the NHS’s grip on the nation’s affections); more even than the various cultural evolutions from the ‘Swinging Sixties’ through to ‘Cool Britannia’. If Britain as it was in 1945 now seems like a foreign country, perhaps the strongest force of change has been that it has become, in good measure, a ‘uni-society’.

(Scott, 2011, pp. 327–328)

HE expansion occurred in two phases, during the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a hiatus in the 1970s and 1980s with renewed expansion from the early 1990s onwards (Mayhew, Deer, & Dua, 2004). It is the second of these phases that is of concern here. Space does not permit a comprehensive analysis of what initiated this second phase but a key document is the DES (1987) White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*. Projection Q in the White Paper envisaged a significant increase in student numbers in HE premised on both an increase in the number

gaining academic qualifications, such as GCE A level, and an increase in the proportion of that cohort who would choose to enter HE but in addition:

... alongside increases in the proportion of higher education entrants with vocational and technical qualifications, for example those validated by the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) and the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). The Government is committed to ensuring that girls have equal opportunities, throughout the education system, to develop their talents to the full. The development of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and the two-year Youth Training Scheme (YTS), and the streamlining associated with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Scottish Action Plan, should increase the proportion of young people gaining vocational qualifications and is likely to motivate more of them to seek entry to higher education.

(DES, 1987, pp. 6–7)

Thus, the White Paper recognised officially three routes into HE: traditional academic qualifications such as GCE A levels, AS levels and Scottish Highers; VQs such as BTECs, and the emerging National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs); and access courses. The policy was not to interfere with the admissions processes of HE – which students to admit remained the prerogative of individual HE providers – but they were exhorted to take responsibility for admitting a wider range of applicants including those seeking to progress with diverse VQs.

Policy design and construction theory alert us to the need to focus on how public policy constructs social problems and target populations. As Schneider and Sidney have argued:

The policy design approach directs scholars to examine who constructs policy issues, and how they do so, such that policy actors and the public accept particular understandings as real, and how constructions of groups, problems and knowledge then manifest themselves and become institutionalized into policy designs, which subsequently reinforce and disseminate these constructions.

(Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 106)

A period that Hobsbawm (2011) dubbed the ‘golden age’, lasting from the end of the Second World War to the 1970s, when there was widespread improvement in the conditions of life and increased upward social mobility, came under sharp downward economic pressure in the 1970s following the 1973 oil crisis and growing industrial unrest. Following the election of Margaret Thatcher, a new policy landscape emerged based around neoliberalism, that valued markets as opposed to the State as regulators of economic life and social provision (Harvey, 2011), combined with new public sector management. The impacts, particularly in areas such as the northeast of England, on conditions of life were stark. For example, Teesside went from being an area of low unemployment in the 1970s with a good supply of jobs, often with apprenticeships that required no qualifications to access, to one with rates of male unemployment reaching 50% in parts of Middlesbrough by the mid-1980s (Byrne, 1995; Warren, 2020).

From the 1980s onwards, as economic and social circumstances in England changed, the social democratic

consensus about the role of the State in equalising life circumstances, for example, through redistribution and social welfare provision, weakened under the onslaught of monetarism and neoliberalism. Inequality in the conditions of life, not just income and wealth but also health and mortality, widened sharply in the 1980s and became a major political challenge. Under such circumstances, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019, p. 2) argued that the following social construction emerged:

In response parties and governments across the political spectrum, whether unwilling to oppose this rising inequality or simply doubtful about the political possibility of doing so, have been drawn towards an essentially similar default position. It has been found attractive to suppose that a greater inequality of condition will become more acceptable if a greater equality of opportunity, leading to higher rates of social mobility, can be created.

(Emphasis in original)

The political onus was placed on the individual and their family to make their way in the world as governments after 1979 abandoned a mixed economic model with State-supported minimum levels of employment. Individuals had the responsibility to increase their human capital through education and signal their ‘quality’ to employers through gaining qualifications and credentials. This new political atmosphere, and the importance of education as an economic tool, was captured by Tony Blair, the leader of the New Labour government:

Human capital was becoming the key determinant of corporate and country success. Education that for so long had been a social cause became an economic