Article

Reforming vocational education in the UK: The role of vocational education

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Abstract: Education is considered a tool for addressing issues in society. This paper identifies the role of education and how it fits with social theory. Through focusing on vocational education this article considers issues to address challenges within UK productivity, focusing on post-compulsory 16–19 years old education. The article finds that there is a limited appreciation of vocational education by society and that there have been numerous attempts to achieve parity with A levels, which has never been achieved. The article ends by providing a reflection on whether it is too early to tell and sets the challenge that while it is important to see if T levels, which were introduced in September 2020, do improve productivity and economic prosperity, it is more important to research whether they actually create parity within the qualification structure.

Keywords: T levels; vocational education; social theory; qualifications; further education

1. Introduction

Vocational education and the development of skills are often considered inextricably linked and of necessary importance for successful economic development [1]. This research seeks to investigate the role of Education with a focus on vocational education in post compulsory (FE College) settings within the UK. The article attempts to identify how and why education is viewed within the context of social theory and tries to fit this with the rationale for why Vocational Education often seems to be seen as a 'political football'. Bhattarai [2] notes this as a worldwide phenomenon, and in particular emphasises the growing need for economies to have a skilled workforce, which has been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nakar and Trevarthen [3] considered the changes caused by and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular they discussed the impact of delivery of practical courses through online means, as an initial result of the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns and the ensuing advances made.

Too often vocational education (particularly in the UK) has been considered the poor relation and second-class citizen within the educational structure, with A Levels deemed the gold standard and being given greater prominence and a higher status, among governments and educational bodies including Universities. This is not on a UK phenomenon but is evident around the globe [4].

This paper seeks to discuss the direction that the UK has taken, and perhaps generate a research debate on what is the purpose of education in the 21st Century in general, but specifically for vocational education.

2. Historical progression of education

Education has been established for a long time, but not necessary using the word education. in fact, the first provision of learning, dates back around 3500 B.C [5] where styles of writing system were beginning to develop. Various ancient civilisation around the word began to create their own sense of style, if we consider the first scrips of the Phoenician system, we can imagine that this may have been adapted by the Greeks, given rise to variety of ways the alphabet is used, this therefore allowed other colonies to use ways in which to communicate language, bring about the development of learning of learning to help communicate within a written form and establish their own school of learning [6]. However, this was to become a long process, not all was given the opportunity to have an 'education' it would be centuries later when learning could be developed among those who could afford a new skill.

Throughout the Middle Ages cathedral schools and monasteries remained and delivered the important opportunity to provide free education to their parishes [7]. This scholastic movement was beginning to spread throughout monasteries within the 12th and 13th century [8] and eventually Universities began growing out of the Monastic structure and began establishing them within European cities. Cook [9] suggested that this began to have an impact on a wider 'class of people' and major advantages in education were beginning to take shape. Education was beginning to arise as a modern system in Europe was taken shape. However, it was still founded upon religious principles where clergy still had overall responsibility of the system. Considering our own education establishment, in today's society, education within the UK have their own systems and are controlled by separate government. England's education system is set by the responsibility of the English parliament today [10].

The year, 1988 may be considered a somewhat watershed moment in UK due to the establishment of the national curriculum, a framework that set education for schools to those aged 5–18 years [11]. Although initially focussed on compulsory education, this notion of a national curriculum would come to dictate the content of post-compulsory education and within that vocational education. We shall look to discuss this later in the article. There have been many changes within the education of England, past governments have declared that education is a priority, and we must continue providing a service for all. The late 90's saw Tony Blair's government set out priorities. With his mantra of Education, Education, Education he concluded that his focus was to establish a better education system [12] one that was to change how schools are delivered and how each individual child would get the best education possible. Almost 30 years on from that speech, improvement have been made but not for all.

Stages have become an important part of education. In England there are 5 stages, early years, primary, secondary, further education (FE) and higher education (HE) According to Machin and Vignoles [13], the education system in England processes an order, without this, knowledge and power would not exist. As Foucault [14] demonstrates that power and knowledge are used to demonstrate social control. Furthermore, Foucault argues that episteme changes over time and this develops periods of episteme which has an impact on change [15].

Nakar and Olssen [16] highlight the impact of neo-liberalism on the development of education. Undertaking their research in Australia, they discuss the broadening role of vocational education in the development of ethical and moral behaviour as a key feature of individual behaviour particularly when related to the behaviours of the workforce and their organisations. In particular they highlight the use of market driven forces to dictate the status and demand for education, suggesting that supply should follow the demand, and as such vocational education will be determined by individuals' self-choice and not predetermined by supply-side policies which dictate availability and therefore have a limiting factor on an individual's opportunity to choose, and to follow their own path. Interestingly this market-driven choice has not always been as available to providers who may be driven by the availability (or lack of it) of funding.

3. Social theory

According to Harrington [17], social theory looks to explain social behaviour. In particular it considers the relationship between the social aspects of society including concepts such as gender, ethnicity and status, while also considering broader issues such as social structure and power systems. This is further developed by Elliot [18] who includes the notions of self and social transformation as key aspects. A key aspect of this are social institutions which play a key role in developing behavioural and social norms. Jones and Bradbury [19] explain social theory as a method of analysing modernity. That is that social theory acts as a lens in which we can analyse changes in society and social norms. They suggest the root of social theory dates back to the beginning of the 19th century, however it was not until the 20th century that the focus turned to the social basis of human behaviour. Murphy [20] however highlights the significant changes of recent years and highlights how technology and globalisation have heightened alternate views of society by individuals. In the UK this may a critical issue which contributed to BREXIT, and subsequent social issues that occurred. Societal change is further emphasised by Bosio and Torres [21] who highlight the interconnectedness of societies which has been brought about technological advancement and globalisation.

According to Jones and Bradbury [19], modern social theory considers society in the concept of a series of structures based around rules, inequality and membership creation. As such they highlight the contrasting views of how society is perceived and portrayed. One traditional approach based on the rules is the view of structural consensus theory which suggests that cultural rules within society dictate behaviours. As such individuals are conditioned into patterns of behaviour which over a period of time become the norm and individuals conform without considering alternative actions or behaviours. As such returning to Elliot [18], social institutions such as educational establishments (e.g., schools and colleges) play a significant role in influencing and determining behaviour and actions. This report will identify ways in which the college environment manifests behaviours within the student body further in this report. The report will also identify how T levels are potentially a further expansion of this.

An alternative perspective focuses on inequality. In particular it focuses on the advantages and disadvantages faced by individuals which enables them to succeed or

not, thus suggesting that society has structural conflict [19]. Giddens and Sutton [22] suggest that a key influencer of this is individuals' seeking of status, wealth and power, which leads to social inequality. As such conflict exists between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The third perspective considers that society is a construct of its membership. As such individuals influence individuals which in turn leads to the norms becoming a manifestation of individual approaches and the interactions between people. As such society is a social construction [23] of individual behaviours, actions and interactions and is created through interpretation, which as such further influences behaviours and actions etc. As such the world around us, the society we live in becomes a socially constructed environment and perhaps explains why different 'societies' exist around the world. The notion of social creation provides a more complex analysis of society but does not exclude the notions of structural-consensus or structural-conflict, rather it brings together greater understanding of how and why behaviour is determined. A key aspect of modernity [24] relates to the drive to constantly improve and progress. As such education is seen as a key element of this and as such becomes a key driver in how society norms.

A key aspect which may be considered is that of epistemic injustice [25] which may influence how education is seen or valued by society. In particular it is important how society values the concept of knowledge, which in turn helps to understand the value placed on it by those in society. Education and knowledge play a key part of structural consensus in the 'training' of individuality to fit into normal society and discourages different approaches on ideas which may contrast with these views. Many also see education as much of the source of inequality (structural conflict), as it re-informs societal norms and creates barriers which by definition prevent individuals from progressing or having the same opportunities of others. In essence it creates many of the advantages or disadvantages which lead to the inequality. Arguably the notion of epistemic injustice is potentially the result of the concept of membership, what is accepted and what is not accepted is ultimately a result of social construction, and as such evolves over time. What may or may not be accepted as good or correct knowledge changes over time and particularly as we develop. This is particularly evident in Clarke's [26] critique of neoliberal education policy.

Clarke [26] questions the purposes of education and education policy particularly in the role it has come to play in society. In particular, individuals, political parties, and other entities have sought to use education to achieve changes in society (or create inertia) which they seek. Quite often education has been described as a political football [27]. Clarke [28] further develops this use of education as a tool for addressing the challenges in society. In particular he identifies education as a tool of control by which individuals or groups can be influenced (manipulated may be a stronger term) into making decisions and behaving in certain ways. Clarke [28] also identifies with the issues of inclusion and productivity questioning whether education and education policy can achieve greater cohesion and economic growth as identified. He suggests that the policy will rather create greater inequalities and disadvantages rather than create a more inclusive society. Similarly, there are also question marks as to whether education is the solution for raising productivity. While it seems credible to attach improvements in education to raising productivity it does not necessarily consider the previous issue of inclusion and the challenges brought about by technology and

competitive external environment pressures and political activities. See BREXIT as a fundamental issue which has a recurring impact on activities and has created a number of inertia problems. Murphy [20] concurs with this, and it can be identified as a possible key influencer in the mindset of UK society.

Significantly, Grenfell [29] points to the works of Bourdieu and the need to explain phenomena rather than create or justify theory. As such it is deemed important to consider how social theory helps us explain what is happening in society rather than it being about justifying which approach to social theory helps us explain what is happening in society rather than it being about justifying which approach to social theory is correct. This is developed by using Bourdieu's approach to explaining the concept of socialisation. In addition, Harrington [17] suggests that social theory evolves as everyday life evolves, thus suggesting that the traditional constructs need to be considered perhaps obsolete or at best constrained by their own stagnant approaches, leaving the more fluid approaches around constructing reality as the only viable alternatives in a world which is fast changing and constantly evolving both through technological advancements and educational development.

Elliot [18] notes there is no single definition of society within social theory. As such it is important to consider what society is and how social theory fits with it. Crucially it is about understanding power distribution, social interactions, communication processes, social practices and the role of social actors. Elliot [18] further ties together the aspects of both educational society and political society, considering them to be inextricably linked. In considering this it can be argued that the political use of education and education policy is inevitable and as such is implied within social theory, whether it be from considering social theory as rule based, inequality based, or membership based.

Different theorists have approached social theory from differing ontological and epistemological stances. Key theorists such as Bourdieu (Genetic Structuralism), Giddens (Structuralism) and Bhaskar (Critical Realism) all attempted to alter the framework that social theory derives from. In particular this took a more interpretative approach to understanding how we view society and the world we operate in [19]. Significantly these 'new' ideas allow a greater understanding of how society may be understood and influenced. In particular these newer theories dismissed the material objects of social systems instead identifying with the notion of social actors and the importance of people in society and social theory. Importantly social theory has become increasingly about the people in society. With this as the centre social theory is increasingly important in education and education policy. Morrow and Torres [30] highlight the linkage between social policy and education, highlighting the link that society and with that governments make between education and societal ills and suggest that often the solution of society is laid at the foot of education.

4. Purpose of education

As noted by Smith [31] "Education is deliberate". It is not something that happens by chance or is an accidental occurrence. In reviewing education, and for that vocational education in the context of the FE sector, we must first consider what the purpose of education is. In doing so, we may first consider what the purposes of

educational research is as this shines a light on the perspectives of what education is all about. Atkins and Wallace [32] suggest that the key purpose of educational research is to initiate positive change. They argue that this revolves not only around the teaching and learning process but also about the development of broader aspects such as policy and process. Alongside this Coe [33] notes research into the aspects of Applied Research and Basic or Pure (Theory) Research, which he considers as being about informing or improving practice (applied), about advancing knowledge (pure). Potentially this therefore reflects on the two stances of where education as a whole is seen. Is education about the applied and hence Vocational or is it more about advancing knowledge hence General. Just a current view on the current situation would be BTEC or A Level.

There are many perspectives on what the purpose of education is. Two traditional sociological views are that of Functionalists [34] such as Durkheim and Parsons who such that we live in a meritocratic society [35] in which success is a result of an individual's ability. As such they would suggest that successful education results in wider aspects of later life. This approach suggests that opportunities are there to be taken by all. An alternative and contrasting view, may be that of the Marxist [36] approach who would challenge this view believing that success is more a function of status and position, and that education is about reinforcing inequality and maintaining the class system. Without wanting to get into ideological and political debates both of these views hold sway with current more contemporary reflections on what education is about and the challenges faced. Certainly, governments and educationalists would like to hope that meritocracy exists and one of the key drivers of education and educational reforest is centred around the notion that educational success leads to success elsewhere, however there is recognition that individuals from disadvantaged background are less likely to succeed in education than those from more privileged surroundings. This however is not the platform to debate this issue.

More contemporary views of the purpose of education include those of Salvador [37] who highlights four purposes of education as Intellectual—develop intellectual capacity; Political and Civic—relating to position and role in society; Economic—create prosperity for self and the community; Social—to fit with the way of life. Alongside this, Gibb [38] who was then Schools Minister states:

> "Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it's an essential preparation for adult life. Delivering on our commitment to social justice requires us to place these 3 objectives at the heart of our education system."

Thus, providing a clear and focussed view on the position that education has.

5. Vocational education

A significant aspect is how we see the purpose of education. If we see it as a process for preparing people for work can be an important aspect of their career, it is a way in which skills can be developed, trades can be established, or a craft can be expanded [39]. However, Billett [4] highlights the poor image vocational education holds, which is detrimental to the way it is perceived. Fayyaleh and Fogarty [40] suggest that vocational education provides skills for life as well as skills for a particular

job role. To consider vocational education, it can be often referred to as a career or technical education. Colleges are often places where vocational education can take place, these intuitions are exclusively equipped to supply vocation education. Nakar and Trevarthen [3] highlight teachers of vocational education are charged with preparing their students for the workplace in a variety of sectors and organisations, while also contributing to regional, national and even international skills base. Traditionally It may be factual to claim that most vocational education has been delivered mainly in a classroom environment, often there are times that vocational education will allow those training to develop their skills 'on the job' this will be developed by organisations or companies who provide a specialist trade, this will lead to learners completing a qualification from accredited or distinguished professionals [41]. More recently, supported by the development of the internet and learning platforms, vocational education has become notable with online courses, making it easier for student to study while trying to juggle family life and work. However, the obstacle to this is that you are not engaging within the practical principles of vocational learning 'experience on the job' gaining practical ability. Chuan and Ibsen [42] emphasise the importance of work-based training in the delivery of, and development of vocational education, if it is to prepare people for the workplace. Nakar and Trevarthen [3] highlight that following the initial shock of the pandemic, the lockdown and the turn to online learning, colleges and providers made significant improvements to their pedagogical practices and the use of technology to enhance and enable their provision. While they do not dispute Chuan and Ibsen's [42] view of the need for work-based training they note the improvements and use of simulators and simulated environments as an appropriate alternative.

The World Development Report (WDR) [43] reports on the future of work this report suggests, 'Flexibility between general and vocational education is imperative to enable workers to complete in changing labour markets.' As part of this, we need to consider that technology will play a substantial inflectional role in vocational learning and bring about effective skills for those who embark on this type of knowledge. Similarly, Gibb [38] argued that everyone has a responsibility to educate and influence future generations. In doing this we need to ensure that they have the ability to fit with the society we are or wish to become. At the same time this includes making the culturally aware for the multi-society we live in. A big part of this, he suggests is enabling them to be fit for the workplace, to have successful careers doing jobs that fulfils their ambitions and allows them to be active citizens.

6. Development of qualifications

Qualifications such as GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), BTEC (Business Technical courses) and CACHE (Council for Awards in Children's learning) are similar level qualifications and are awarded only in the United Kingdom [44]. The difference between the qualifications are the individual subjects, often with GCSE you have variety of courses to choose from, studied full time mostly in schools at ages 14–16, and a pupil who has an interest in the subject, can be put forward to take these qualifications around 10 GCSE can be taken and are compulsory to schools are most or all are exam based. BTEC and CACHE courses require written assessment

then exams and may be a different route for those who struggle with exams but are capable to pass courses. 1988 saw the arrival of the new GCSE system replacing the old GCE (O' levels) and CSE qualifications, BTEC qualifications emerged from the business educational council and the technical education council bring new changes into how qualification is being delivered. Prabhat, (no date) 'Education for all' the manifestation that the Blair government wanted to achieve.

Vocational qualifications have gone through numerous changes over the past 30 years in the post-compulsory sector. In particular, the development of apprenticeships into modern apprenticeships and then into the more recent versions, and the changes between standards have frameworks have also seen a number of changes occur and reoccur. At the same time taught vocational provision have seen a number of changes since the 1990s. From flexible (e.g., non-prescribed BTECs, NNEB) which moved into the GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) which attempted to make the programmes more prescribed (fitting in line with the notion of the National Curriculum and the standardised delivery and content). These GNVQs were subsequently replaced by the prior qualifications which were now more prescribed in nature. (For information NNEB changed its name to CACHE). In the 2000s the government also attempted to further reform vocational education with the failed attempt to bring in the new Advanced Diploma which were an attempt to involve Skills Councils in the design of qualifications [10].

7. College based education

If as stated earlier 1988 was a watershed moment for education in general, then 1992 was a watershed moment for FE with the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). This Act altered the backdrop for both FE and HE institutions. Changes that many would argue are still having repercussions today. These changes have created recurring challenges since, arguably treating FE as a political football [27] and one which has been at the whim of reforms for successive governments over a 30-year period. There is always constant change within further education, often there seems to be a battle of contention when it comes to development and change [45].

Simkins and Lumby [46] point to these continuous education reforms and how the notion has moved away from the purpose of education being about knowledge advancement to being about the purpose of education being centred on the development of skills linked to employability. Alongside this, Spenceley [47] building on the work of Randle and Brady [48], highlight the incongruity separating the pedagogy of theoretical and practical knowledge-based delivery. This further aligns with the work of Nakar and Olssen [16] who suggest a key driver of education has become meeting the needs of business. A key aspect that relates to the context of college-based education is centred around the teaching. In theory it may be considered that academic or theoretical subjects are 'taught' by qualified teachers while vocational or practical based subjects are 'taught' by skills-based and qualified professionals. This is supported by Nakar and Trevarthen [3], who emphasise the need for staff within vocational education to have vocational competence and perception of the relationship between theory and the practical. Several may consider this a simplistic view as many curriculum areas in FE Colleges face a mix of both within the

same departments. To talk of an FE Sector, there is little in terms of a homogenous whole. What we may traditionally categorise as an FE College may be further sub-divided into sub-categories and defined as either a Specialist or General FE College, or in some cases a Tertiary College. There is also the notion of Technical Colleges. Recently the sector has also seen the formation (merger) of College Groups most notably Newcastle College Group, and Hull College Group as prime examples.

The delivery of vocational courses often are staff who are employed by the intuition. However, there are also needs to have para-professionals, staff who are not employed as lectures or teaching staff, often these roles have titles, for example, trainer, assessor mentor, usually employed in vocational arears to deliver alongside lectures and tutors. FENTO suggests that para-professional provide support give instruction to learners as well as advice to help and develop the skills and knowledge that is needed for the workforce [49]. Vocational qualification adapts this type of delivery, often courses require additional support staff to train students within the workforce and are often professional working within education. The purpose therefore of the tutor/lecture is to provide the learners with the opportunity to learn from highly skilled professional, who require the knowledge to carry out the high standards that students need to succeed both in the classroom as well as practical training.

Vocational education offers benefits to many young people, and therefore will have an impact on the contribution they make to the economy and their own lives. Better educational training will lead to opportunities that young people should have the chance to lead [50]. The Sainsbury report believed that technical education is the way forward. It will transform and widen the skills gap. The report highlights the importance of giving young people the opportunity to choose between technical and academic options this will bring about a system of technical qualification that will work in the industries as it delivers the skills employers need [51]. This however is not perceived by Billett [4] who still suggests that vocational education still has an image issue.

8. The birth of T Levels

The Wolf Report [52] outlined 27 recommendations of which recommendations 5 and 6 had particular resonance for further education and vocational qualifications. Recommendation 5 suggested that programmes of study should be governed by a set of general principles which related to content, structure and assessment to ensure parity, relevance and context of the programme. This would ensure students were being taught the equivalence as to what is being taught elsewhere. Recommendation 5 also addressed the issue of contact time, again to ensure parity. Issues around the funding which obviously relates to contact time were addressed in later recommendations. Following on from this, recommendation 6 suggested that the programme of study should not be entirely occupation based, and that it should not be limited to the content of a single national Occupational Standard. In essence ensuring that students were not limited into a single career opportunity. The recommendation suggested that progression should be available into further study or into skilled employment. There was also some acknowledgement of the importance of English and Maths, which were enhanced in later recommendations [52].

After consideration and process of action an outcome of the Wolf report, the subsequent 2016 Skills Report outlined the government reforms to vocational education. This report introduced the notion of technical qualification and introduced T levels which commenced in September 2020, being delivered by college, schools and independent organisations in a phased roll-out of subject specialisms [51]. These T levels (an attempt at parity with A levels) aimed at students who are prepared to take part in a mixture of classroom-based learning as well as 'on the job' experience. The government has designed the courses to allow students to develop a wide variety of experience, this will enable students to have an open-door skill into employment they are training for, or it will help them to be equipped for further study or completing a higher apprenticeship Department for Education [51]. The T levels (introduced in September 2020) are designed to include, a technical qualification (linked to a career); a placement; Maths and English (if required). As such, according to the DfE [53] and using the Level 3 Education and childcare T level as an example. It contains core content covering aspects such as child development, safeguarding, and wellbeing, while also having occupational specialisms such as education, early years and childcare, assisting teaching, and supporting and mentoring students in further and higher education. As part of the programme students are expected to undertake a placement of between 315 and 420 hours. Students who do have a level 2 in maths and English are expected to also complete either GCSE in each subject (achieving a grade four minimum) or functional skills Level 2 (pass).

According to Nick Boles [54] minister of state for skills puts forward an argument that despite the progress of apprentices and the changes that were made from the Skills Report 2016, investments have been made for the growing industry to train students. However, there are a number of strengths, these includes dedicated professional who help to train students. Alongside this BBC News [55] reported that a government spokesman reported that T levels would address the weaknesses in UK Productivity levels. It does seem however that there are or have been some issues. Boles concluded that Technical Education is the poor relation of academic education [54]. There has been some considerable debate about why there must be a change in the FE sector skills, as when each parliament begins a change over there never seems to be a time of completion before the next ministerial opponent takes charge.

9. Discussion

In considering the role of vocational education it is evident to be able to see how it fits with the differing aspects of social theory. Jones and Bradbury [19] identify three perspectives within social theory based around rules, inequality and membership, which have alignment with the purposes of education and with vocational education in particular. In essence in attempting to prepare students for the world of work they are introducing and reinforcing students to the set of rules that apply in the workplace, however at the same time many of these rules are also those that govern society and contribute to society as societal norms, aligning with the view of Nakar and Olssen [16] and Nakar and Trevarthen [3]. At the same time, it can be argued that structural conflicts still exist in society, and that there are a number of inequalities that are in evidence in society and within education in particular. There is some attempt to create

parity between A levels and T levels (introduce in September, 2020) however there remains issues, in particular, in the way vocational education is generally viewed [4]. Saying that however there is evidence to suggest that one of the reasons behind the reforms to vocational education and one of the purposes in general about vocational education is about providing the skills for the workplace [40]. This is of course to enable increases in productivity levels to make the UK more competitive at the macro level, however if we view this from the micro level then putting individuals into the workplace also generates individual prosperity providing job security and perhaps job satisfaction. In theory this should close the inequality gap. The third perspective centres around structural construction and membership of society, and the use of Vocation Education does create a sense of belonging.

Elliot [18] emphasises the importance of Educational Institutions as a key part of developing social norms and engagement. As such helping students attain and feel there is value in education is crucial to this. There is evidence to suggest that individuals from less advantaged backgrounds do not feel education is for them, partly because the school system lets them down—partly due to their lack of engagement or societal issues, perhaps due to the reinforcement that education and the more traditional academic/general education and qualifications are designed and delivered for the 'elite' or the more advantaged. However vocational education leads directly to the workplace and is considered more practical. This is therefore often seen as a more attractive proposition for those who are from a less advantaged position.

Similarly, this also fits with epistemic injustice Frank [25] who acknowledge that different elements of society may value education to different levels. Again, traditionally there has been a view that A levels are for one group (higher ability) and the less able go towards the vocational 'lesser' qualifications. As stated previously the in the introduction of T levels there is an attempt to develop parity. Of course, there needs to acceptance of these qualifications and as such it will be a while before these qualifications become the norm with the society. As such inequality will continue to exist and as such will reinforce the continued epistemic injustice. There remains debate over whether the broader aims of T levels to provide parity of esteem between A levels and vocational education, or whether there will continue to be a divide. Perhaps the use of language may add value to the T level as the distinction between them as vocational qualifications and as technical qualifications may cause greater convergence around societal thinking and debate, however as considered through the lens of social theory the notions of norms take a while to become embedded in society and as such, it may be a while before we can judge. One issue remains, however, and that is the use of vocational education being used as a political football, which successive governments have continued to use to (attempt to) drive up skills in the economy but have yet to create parity with more academic qualifications.

There is certainly an attempt by the government (and previous governments) to solve the challenges we face in society through education [28]. In particular a key challenge for the UK is economic prosperity and productivity levels. As such, this fits with Clarke's view on what education is all about.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion social theory remains the basis for the approaches taken for education. As such it also provides the foundation for vocational education, however it takes a slightly different perspective as it is viewing from a single aspect of society. In general, we may consider education as preparing people to take their place in society across a broad range of aspects, while vocational education is focussed on preparing people for the workplace, which is really just a fundamental aspect of society. The concept of Vocational Education is still considered lesser in terms of esteem and status and as such a significant effort is required to enable those undertaking the new qualifications to have parity with their counterparts.

11. Further and future research

While this paper takes a theoretical view on the purpose of vocational education, and links it to social theory, the introduction of T levels will need to be researched in the future to see if they are successful in achieving the goals that underpins them. In particular it will be interesting to find out if productivity levels do increase and whether economic growth and prosperity rises. The key aspect however from the basis of this paper will be to see if there is greater acceptance of vocational education by society and whether T levels do actually gain parity with A levels in terms of status and esteem.

12. Limitations of the study

The study aims to offer a review of vocational education within the UK education system. It draws on a theoretical and conceptual linkage between social theory and education, as such proposes the question of 'what is the purpose of vocational education' and whether the introduction of T levels can address the purpose of vocational education that they set out to do. The paper is not empirical and does not draw on data to answer the question, but instead poses the question and calls for further research, however recognising that only time will allow the introduction and implementation to see if they do.

In the same way the study does not draw comparisons with other educational systems and so does not really allow for issues and contexts to be discussed and compared. Further research could be undertaken to compare comparative systems and draw out best practice relating to the promotion and integration of vocational education within systems.

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