

## The Academic Question of Vocationalism

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'Academic' in English education is associated with the brain and 'vocational' with the hand. Institutionally, this is reflected in traditional class terms, with academic 'higher' education for the professions endorsed by universities superior to non-academic 'further' education trade training for manual crafts in colleges. Like the US, most of the rest of the world makes no such distinction, but talks about 'tertiary education', whether at college or university, following a general or pre-vocational secondary schooling to eighteen, the age of maturity and citizenship.

Now that England has adopted an Americanised mass tertiary system alongside a persisting elite HE and FE has been 'decanted' - as Alison Wolf says - into HE (Wolf, 2015), the traditional divisions have been eroded. This doesn't mean, however, that undergraduate participation at tertiary level guarantees employment security. As new information and communications technology has led formerly securely-employed professionals to work across the previous divisions of labour and knowledge, specialised professions are reduced to para-professions, with multi-skilled, flexible working, and their more or less academic vocational education reduced to pre-vocational training. At the same time, quantitative assessment of behavioural competence and information replaces qualitative judgement of previously-acquired knowledge and skill, eg. Ofsted-supervised school teacher training (*sic*).

Consequently, 'academic' tends to be seen as abstruse and irrelevant. This tendency has been exacerbated by the 'gobbetised' grammar-schooling inflicted upon state schools by the academic National Curriculum, in order to 'raise standards' (through cramming for largely literary tests) to 18+. Those who fail this selective mechanism are relegated to second-best 'vocational' options, like so-called 'apprenticeships' and this will happen even earlier if government reintroduces secondary moderns, dividing all children into two routes from an earlier age.

Yet it is often pointed out that all HE was originally vocational – literally a 'calling' to the 'priesthood'. Indeed, the most vocational subjects of Medicine and Law still retain this high prestige. Science, however, is widely misperceived only as a method, not a vocation. The humanities, by contrast, are accepted as academic but general – fit only for teaching, while those 'who can, do', applying their 'skills' in ubiquitous business.

Business Studies, which occupies 20% and more of English undergraduates, is considered the prime vocational area, especially as, with privatization, every occupation turns into a business. But BS doesn't make you an employer and, like other students, most BS graduates seek secure, well-paid and at least semi-professional employment. If they are lucky, their business study is preparatory to that employment, so it is also pre-vocational, 'multi-skilling' in 'transferable skills', applicable across the widening range of business activities.

However, even for technical jobs, most employers prefer graduates to apprentices, so the subprime degree bubble may hold up for a few more years, although already the cake is scarcely worth the candle as NUS estimates an average £53k debt for three-year residential

undergraduates since maintenance grants were abolished. Meanwhile, the professional occupations to which degrees used to lead are continually being whittled away. This includes the academic profession, increasingly preparing its students in *The Business Study University* (Ainley, 2016) for general pre-vocational 'employability'.

So, save for a few trades turned into crafts for which a genuine apprenticeship is needed – lasting years not months – the supposedly 'vocational' has become general and pre-vocational. Only traditionally academic courses at elite universities remain genuinely vocational, sustaining, and sustained there by research communities of academic practice that students may develop the expertise to join. Elsewhere, research is often separated from overloaded undergraduate teaching.

So, all academics need to recover their academic community and collegiality, welcoming students into a community of developing knowledge and skills that, even if it cannot guarantee them access to careers in a professional community of practice, at least awakens them to higher levels of learning, ie. reveals to them that everything is not necessarily as it seems, which is the essence of the much vaunted 'criticality' we are always demanding of our students!

Government, meanwhile, persists in seeking to reduce student numbers by raising fees and cutting grants, whilst encouraging differentiation through institutional competition, undercut by the limited offerings of state-subsidised HE. Undergraduate numbers may indeed fall as technological change enables a variety of occupations to be undertaken throughout an individual's working life, obviating the need for specialised vocational preparation, but using the market is not the best way to achieve a reduction in student numbers.

### Reference list

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Wolf, A. (2015) *Heading for the precipice: Can further and higher education funding policies be sustained?* London: Policy Institute, King's College London.