

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education is education that prepares students for work and, as such, it is closely linked with the needs of the economy (i.e. the types of workers which are required for the country to operate effectively). Vocationalism is far from a new concern – and the needs of the economy have been central features of many of the reforms of the past century. However, from the mid-1970s vocational concerns gained additional importance in the form of **New Vocationalism** – which we will explore in this lesson.



Think about “the needs of the economy”

1. Try to identify features of the reforms covered so far that have been influenced by economic needs.
2. Think of examples of from your own experience of school of “education for work”.
3. Make a list of the kinds of skills and abilities needed for the country to operate.
4. Does every member of society need these skills? What proportion of the population need them (just indicate high and low)?
5. Based on this line of thinking – try to offer a functionalist interpretation of education.

New Vocationalism

New Vocationalism has its origins in 1976, when the Labour prime minister James Callaghan made a speech at Ruskin College in which he called for a **great debate** on education. In this speech, Callaghan questioned whether the urge to create a just and equal society through education (social engineering) had meant that another important function of education – to create a skilled workforce – had been neglected.

This priority was taken forward by Thatcher’s conservative government. During the 1980s Britain experienced high unemployment – reaching 12% (3.1 million people) in 1982 and remaining at this level for four years. Unemployment amongst young people was particularly severe – and this led to even more concern. It was claimed that education was not preparing students for the world of work, producing a “skills crisis” which was leaving Britain at a disadvantage in comparison with its industrial competitors.



Where have we heard this argument before?

It was felt that education had been dominated for too long by an obsession with engineering a just society. Similarly, there was a view that education was too concerned with the **liberal humanist tradition** and the academic concerns of universities, which emphasised a critical appreciation of subject knowledge for its own sake. The Thatcher conservative government, which was typical of New Right thinking, argued that this was fine for developing a nation of critics, but no help in developing the economy. This new focus on vocational education (i.e. New Vocationalism) led to the implementation of a number of policies.

TVEI

In 1983, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative was started as a pilot scheme. The aims of TVEI were to prepare secondary school pupils for work and to improve

their technical skills – through the introduction of schemes such as work experience for school pupils. TVEI was extended beyond the pilot of 14 LEAs to all schools in 1986 and later extended to sixth form colleges.

NCVQ

In 1986 the National Council for Vocation Qualifications was established. Vocational qualifications had existed before this, but were a mishmash of different certifications and awards (such as BTEC and City and Guilds). The main aims of the NCVQ were to simplify and standardise the mass of qualifications so that both students and employers could see what was equivalent to what. The two main qualifications introduced by the NCVQ were the **NVQ** and later the **GNVQ**.

NVQs	GNVQs	Academic
Level 5 Professional/Managerial	Higher Education	
Level 4 Higher Technician / Junior management		
Level 3 Technician / Supervisor	Advanced	2 A Levels
Level 2 Craft	Intermediate	5 GCSEs (A-C)
Level 1 Foundation	Foundation	5 GCSEs (A-D)

NVQs

National Vocational Qualifications were introduced to provide a unified vocational qualification. They cover specific trades or crafts such as accountancy, plumbing or hairdressing. Each of these areas would previously have its own set of qualifications and so it was difficult to see how they compared with each other academic qualifications. NVQs are graded by level from one (equivalent to low-grade GCSEs) to five (equivalent to Higher Education).

The introduction of NVQs also brought about a change in the way students were assessed. Because they are skill based the assessment is based on what students can do – on their **competencies**, which are assessed as the course progresses rather than at the end. This contrasts with traditional academic assessment through examinations.



Can you suggest a way of assessing sociology through competencies?

GNVQs

Whilst NVQs are purely vocational, General National Vocational Qualifications were introduced in 1993 as bridge between academic and vocational programmes. NVQs are qualifications in a particular skill, such as plumbing, while GNVQs are qualifications in a general vocational area such as Leisure and Tourism. GNVQs give individuals the option to progress on to a career in a particular area of work, such as the caring professions, or to progress to university, as the Advanced GNVQ is equivalent to two A levels.

The introduction of Advanced GNVQs was an attempt to raise the status of vocational qualifications. One of the problems that students on vocational courses had always faced was that vocational qualifications were seen by many as having a lower status than academic qualifications like A-levels. By making advanced GNVQs the equivalent of

two A levels and also an acceptable qualification for entry into higher education, it was hoped that this would raise the status of vocational education and encourage more individuals to take these courses.



Think about the status of vocational education...

- *Is academic education more prestigious than vocational education?*
- *Has the introduction of GNVQs addressed this?*
- *The GNVQ have recently been renamed as Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education. Why do think this has happened?*

Youth Training Schemes (YTS)

Since the late 1970s, various training schemes have been introduced with the aim of improving the skills of those who have already left school. To encourage (some might say force) young people to take part in education or training after leaving school at 16, the Conservative government withdrew the right to claim state benefits from 16-year-old school leavers. They were normally only able to receive benefits if they were on a recognised training scheme. The **Youth Training Scheme (YTS)** is one such example – combining both work experience with education leading to an NVQ qualification.

The current Labour government have continued this idea in the form of the **New Deal** for young unemployed people, introduced in 1998. Under New Deal, young people have to undertake full time education, training or work (through a subsidised job, or a charity, or as part of a team to clean up the local environment). Individuals refusing any of these options have their benefits withdrawn



How do you feel about the withdrawal of benefits to encourage people to seek further training?

Criticisms

Political and Theoretical Objections

New Vocationalism came under attack from both the left and right in politics. It was resisted by Conservative supporters of the academic tradition, who thought that traditional knowledge- and subject-based A Levels were a “gold standard” which should be defended at all costs. On the other hand, critics on the Left argued that it reduced education to the requirements of work in a capitalist economy. Was education only for work?

Finn (1987)

Finn has strongly attacked New Vocationalism, with particular focus on Youth Training Schemes. He argues that there is a hidden political agenda to vocational training. Firstly, they provide cheap labour for employers and this small allowance for wages keeps the general pay rate low.

He also argues that YTS undermines the power of the unions. Because only permanent workers can be members of a union, non-member YTS employees cannot strike – which means they can be used as a threat to other union members.

YTS also reduces politically embarrassing unemployment statistics by redefining who is classed as “unemployed”. It also shifts the problem of unemployment away from the government and industry and on to the individual – New Vocationalism argues that unemployment arises because young people lack adequate job skills. Finn argues that the real problem is a lack of jobs in the first place!

All of Finn’s arguments could also be applied to the New Deal

Cohen (1984)

Cohen examines the social and life skills provided in YTS. He argues that the real purpose of vocational training is to create “good” attitudes and work discipline rather than actual job skills. In this way, young people come to accept a likely future of low-paid and unskilled work. Those young unemployed who view training schemes as cheap labour, and refuse to join them are defined as irresponsible and idle, and are “punished” with the withdrawal of benefits.

New Vocationalism and Social Class

In practice, it is lower-ability students who tend to be channelled into vocational courses. New Vocationalism thus introduces another form of selection, with working class and ethnic minority students being disproportionately represented on these courses. In this way, New Vocationalism can be seen to be reproducing existing divisions of social class.

Furthermore, critics have also pointed out that the sorts of skills taught to YTS trainees are only appropriate for jobs in the **secondary labour market**. This consists of jobs that are unskilled, insecure and pay low wages – such jobs offer little chance of training or promotion, employer investment is very low and labour turnover is consequently very high.