In Pursuit of Equity Vocational Education and Training and Social Justice

Abstract

The paper problematises conceptualisations of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and its relationship to social justice by examining a number of debates. It explores a post-structural policy analysis which is sensitive to the manner in which, through research, we constitute the object of our inquiry and as a result of this process subtly change it. This initial discussion leads into an examination of hegemonic constructions of VET. Subsequently the paper addresses the contours of inequality as they apply to VET and English further education. This is followed by an examination of conceptualisations of equity, equality and meritocracy. In conclusion the paper poses a question - how far can VET be shifted from its occupational moorings in order to contribute towards a socially just society, or is it compromised by its close association with the needs of capital and employers? This is not merely an empirical but also a political question that hinges on conceptualisations of social justice and power as well as the manner in which these are addressed in the struggle for a fairer more just society.

Key words

Equity, Vocational Education and Training, social Justice, equality, equal opportunity, meritocracy

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Introduction

The paper conceptualises vocational education and training as occupying a liminal space lying between postsecondary and higher education (Moodie, 2002). It explores debates that engage with understandings of equity, social justice, VET as well as the constituencies VET addresses. The overarching aim is to problematise VET and its relationship to social justice. The starting point is with Zoellner's (2022a) paper, *Fashioning groups that inhabit society's fringes: the work of Australian VET research into disadvantage*. This leads into a discussion of VET and its conceptualisation; the aim here is to set VET in its broader ideational context. This is followed by two overlapping section that address *VET and equity*, and *equity, equality and meritocracy*. The closing section brings together the wide ranging arguments the paper explores.

Zoellner, in his *Fashioning groups that inhabit society's fringes,* comments on the well established genre of VET research that over the last 50 years or so has examined the reproduction of disadvantaged constituencies. This leads him to pose the question as to why there is a need for more research that iteratively addresses the same disadvantaged groups. **Although this research consistently notes the inequalities faced by the disadvantaged, it fails to be taken up by policy makers and thus does not lead to any significant improvement in the socio-economic position of disadvantaged groups** (see Zoellner, 2022a 1,16). Whilst the focus is on Australian research his analysis is applicable to other western societies, particularly those in the Anglosphere that are rooted in neo-liberalism. Zoellner's argument is set within a post-structuralist policy analysis that is very much embedded in Bacchi's work (see for example, Bacchi & Goodwin 2016). This perspective is attentive to the manner in which, through our research, we constitute the object of our inquiry and as a result of this process subtly change it. Consequently, there is a need for more research allied with the development of an increasingly nuanced and discriminating analysis. The strength of Zoellner's paper is that he offers a robust analysis of these processes as they apply not only to quantitative and statistically focused VET research but also to qualitative work. He concludes by stating,

> this post-structuralist analysis suggests that the discourses that are used to justify long-standing Australian policy settings arise from comfortable and well-practised political and bureaucratic decisions that not only describe disadvantage but actively constitute its lived reality. (Zoellner 2022a online, 16)

How can these iterative processes that serve to, or at least contribute towards the reproduction of disadvantage and inequality be interrupted? Zoellner notes the significance

and growth of quantitative data available to the state that is amenable to sophisticated statistical analysis that calls for on-going research but fails to interrupt these iterative process, rooted as they are in a reductive and calculative model of equity. To quote at length he writes,

> The 'making up of people' predominantly relies upon the application of statistical analysis (Hacking 2006). This performative work is done by well-trained professionals who generate specific kinds of knowledge, judge its validity and use it in their practice…
>
> The disadvantaged become moving targets because those investigations interact with them and change them. And since they are changed, they are not quite the same kind of people as before they became the subjects of research. This produces a continual necessity to re-measure, re-calculate and re-evaluate the equity groups for governments to problematize these made-up people in ways that are amenable to interventions into their lives – particularly if they are unemployed in Australia. (2022:10, 11)

This conundrum calls for ever more sophisticated analyses that rest alongside the ongoing reconstruction of disadvantage. In contradistinction to Zoellner's post structuralism and from a structuralist stance - this should not surprise us. VET is located within a dynamic economy and labour markets that are constantly adapting to socio-economic change as well as to the availability of different pools of labour. Within this dynamic we could also consider intra and inter classed processes in the struggle for competitive advantage. However, lurking behind these activities lies the accumulative practices of capital that in some respects are indifferent to the types of labour it exploits. Yet, both historically and contemporaneously western capitalism is entwined with race. In addition, VET being a site of struggle can be a context in which learners exercise agency. However, this space will be shaped by how broadly or narrowly VET is constructed and enacted in the hurly burly of pedagogic practice. This may open-up or close-down expansive and progressive practices whose outcome cannot be determined by fiat. We could for example consider the limited affordances for agency in Anglocentric conceptualisations of competence set against those of DACH (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). Winch writes on the German notion of Kompetenzen (2012:179) that it

> is more than a bundle of skills, but is unified through a conception of agency which involves planning, control, co-ordination, self-monitoring and evaluation, as well as the performance of a variety of tasks requiring specific skills. It also includes the ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational action.

This is rather different to the narrowly instrumental notion of competence that is a feature of the Anglosphere.

The following section examines the way in which VET is constructed, being sensitive to its relationship to equity, social justice, social mobility and its radical possibilities, as well as its ideological positioning.

VET

Many VET researchers are alert to the social justice ramifications of their research, implicitly claiming that it is informed by 'leftist' if not social democratic sensibilities (Knight et al. 2022). Such research is nevertheless amenable to co-optation being constrained by the way VET is conceptualised, its articulation with capitalism and allied constructions of equity, social mobility and meritocracy. It should be recognised that although progressive practices in VET can only take us so far they do nevertheless constitute significant sites of struggle in the pursuit of social justice. Such practices as with those more generally in education can make some, albeit limited difference in the struggle for social justice (Avis and Orr 2016:60). It is important to acknowledge that the determination of what constitutes progressive practice is necessarily complex and is in effect an empirical question. Such practices are inevitably contradictory and may face in a number of different directions, being simultaneously emancipatory and reproductive. Although there may be an intent by participants to develop progressive or critical practices these may be held in check by learner and teacher orientations, the demands of employers, conceptualisations of the labour market and its requirements, curricular demands and so on – thus these become sites of contestation and struggle.

Some twenty years ago Gavin Moodie (2002) explored conceptualisation of VET, arguing that no one characteristic was sufficient to define the field, preferring instead a composite definition.

> The better approach is to define vocational education and training by the four general characteristics we have considered – epistemological, teleological, hierarchical and pragmatic. (2002:260)

The suggestion is that VET has specific epistemological features that embody distinctive ways of knowing and learning. Teleologically, it addresses extrinsic purposes and is positioned within hierarchal relations occupationally, educationally and cognitively. VET occupies a liminal space lying somewhere between post-secondary and higher education. This hierarchal characterisation echoes Moodie's discussion of pragmatism whereby VET is seen as something that is 'not elsewhere included' a catch-all categorisation (2002:258). Moodie usefully discusses a number of the debates that bear on the manner in which we make sense of VET and acknowledges their contextual location. He points to the fluidity of the term which is seen in English discussions of TVET (technical and vocational education and training) and Hive (higher vocational education) (Esmond and Atkins, 2022; Knight, et al, 2022). TVET and HIVE reflect the 'academicisation', or dare I suggest, credential inflation

surrounding VET. In England T-levels (Technical) are to be the equivalent of 3 A levels. Terry and Orr (2022) in their discussion point out that T-levels have a degree of difficulty that precludes young people who previously would have studied comparable applied work related qualifications such as G.NVQs and BTECs[1] which at Level three were to be equivalent to A levels. Here lies a paradox; T-levels and indeed TVET are thought to provide a pathway to HIVE, higher technical education and social mobility. Gavin Williamson (former secretary of state for education) sought to dissuade young people from enrolling on low value degree courses at less prestigious universities, higher education institutions, as well as HE in FE (higher education in further education) (DfEa, 2021; Williamson, 2019). However to date T-levels serve a minority of young people who Esmond and Atkins somewhat erroneously describe as a 'technical elite', in as much as these young people are advantaged in comparison with those pursuing less prestigious vocational qualifications but who nevertheless face a potentially precarious labour market. As yet T-levels are taken by a small number of young people. In addition, we must not ignore the presence of other less prestigious vocationally orientated qualifications set at the same level but taken by those Brown (1987) refers to as 'ordinary kids'. We should also note that this 'technical elite' is not only gendered but also raced. Whieldon (2021:online) points out that during the first year of T-levels out of a cohort of 1,363, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) learners were underrepresented with 14.2%, i.e. 193 of learners were from this group, which can be compared with the 84% i.e. 1,145 who hailed from a white background. However, it is important to acknowledge that only a small number of young people take T-levels. It is important to acknowledge that outside of the university sector VET is in decline and that for many working class young people HE is seen as an increasingly appropriate route to follow (Wolf, 2022; and see Crozier et al 2019; Reay et al 2009, 2010).

This 'technical elite' can be contrasted with those engaged with low level vocational courses described as welfare vocationalism, though importantly, we should not ignore middling groups. However, the point is that for Esmond and Atkins VET addresses two rather different and polarised constituencies that can be described as a 'technical elite' as against those marginalised and disadvantaged young people pursuing welfare vocationalism. However, these groups can be located within the working class, broadly understood, with the latter facing low waged intermittent employment and the former encountering more secure though potentially insecure employment. Regardless of their level and depending on their teachers' sensitivities VET students may encounter forms of criticality, civic and community engagement that extend beyond the narrowly vocational. However, these practices will be set within a socio-economic context that emphasises an instrumentalism that rhetorically prioritises employer needs and waged work – in other words an orientation towards learning to labour (Avis 2004; see for example, Council of Skills Advisors 2022). To quote at length from the *Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning* (CAVTL) comment (2013:7),

> Our vision is of a first-class VET system, which develops the ability to perform in a job, and provides a platform for occupational, personal and educational progression. It must provide learners with both initial routes into work and through-career development, including opportunities to change career. And it should be based on an ambition to expand vocational provision at levels 3, 4 and 5, as the basis for progression and economic growth. Vocational teaching and learning must be characterised by a clear line of sight to work, and the VET system should operate as a two-way street…
>
> A clear line of sight to work is critical because vocational learners must be able to see why they are learning what they are learning, understand what the development of occupational expertise is all about, and experience the job in its context. The real work context should inform the practice of vocational teaching and learning for learners, teachers and trainers.

The above echoes Moodie's four general characteristics of VET, the epistemological, teleological, hierarchical and pragmatic. In some respects, CAVTL's description of VET is progressive being concerned with the development of labour. However, unsurprisingly it is wedded to the formation of workers' subjectivities that seek to match the requirements of capital. There are two points to be made. Firstly, Clarke and Winch (2007:1) echoing CAVTL note that VET is concerned with 'the social development of labour' referring to its contribution to the production and reproduction of labour power. Consequently and secondarily, VET could encourage learners to develop an 'ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational action' (Winch 2012:179). Such processes are mediated by learner agency and can serve to open-up the potential for a socially engaged and developmental VET, one that extends beyond waged labour and that could contribute towards both necessary (Gourevitch 2022) and really useful labour (Avis 2022a) which are inevitably entwined. The former points towards labour that is required to ensure the smooth running of the social formation. Much domestic labour would illustrate this as being involved with elder care and that of children, as well as the labour involved in dealing with human detritus. Really useful labour can encompass the former but also refers to that which contributes towards societal and community wellbeing. It includes 'unalienated' labour through which we can express our species being and exercise control and autonomy over our labour (Orr 2009). A broader understanding of VET could accommodate and contribute towards these different facets of labour, which in turn become sites of struggle.

The struggle by leaners, teachers and occupational groupings for a progressive VET could open-up a debate over what constitutes membership of an occupational or professional community. That is to say, the responsibilities members of the occupation have towards wider society, specific communities and employers. In this instance the contribution of VET could go beyond that of simply addressing the needs of employers, though this poses the

question of the relationship of such practices to an anti-capitalist project. Is VET so wedded to serving the needs of employers that it is irreparably limited in its social justice aspirations?

This section has considered the manner in which VET can be constructed as an object of enquiry. This is rooted in a structural analysis that recognises the contradictory processes surrounding struggle and other definitional issues that open-up different conceptualisations of VET and its future (cf Zoellner 2022b). My discussion is rooted in a structuralist framework that engages with hegemonic conceptualisations of VET that are informed by the needs of capital and the state. However, at the same time we should accept that VET is Janus like, facing in a number of different and contradictory directions. Some orientations offer affordances that are constrained by others. Taking work based learning (WBL) as an example of VET (Avis 2022b) I have discussed Bahl, et al's, (2019:14) commentary on WBL, drawing on several of their features.

- WBL means learning for work, learning at work and learning through work.
- *Learning targets and outcomes of WBL are knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Their purpose is to develop professional, social and personal competence. These are important prerequisites for employability, identity formation and social integration*.
- *Knowledge, skills, and attitudes are developed through a reflected process of participating in work tasks in a dynamically evolving professional setting*.
- The particular strength of work-based learning lies in the acquisition of practical skills and competences.
- *The character of WBL can be formal (structured and intentionally planned), informal (not highly structured and planned) and incidental (happening unintentionally).*
  My italicisation (Bahl, et al 2019:14)

The above can be read as reflecting a concern to enhance labour power so that it contributes towards the accumulation of value. Yet at the same time it could be seen as moving beyond such an interest, anticipating a more expansive understanding of WBL that goes further than a concern restricted to the development of labour power and profitability. The italicisations above illustrate such possibilities. There are two additional points to be made. The affordances whereby learners and teachers can develop critical forms of VET are situationally specific and consequently raise empirical questions. They might also be shaped by curricular frameworks. For example, Guile's (2011) aircraft apprentices were required to address 'human factors' as part of their TVET which could open-up a broader discussion of environmental issues and the social responsibility of employers to wider society. In addition, our positionality as teachers and learners may open-up spaces for critical practices which cannot be decided by theoretical fiat but rather pose empirical assessment. These will be associated with limits and possibilities surrounding our positionality. As one of my reviewer's suggested there is a need to 'humanise' these processes. In part VET is enacted and constructed through the practices of teachers, learners, as well as occupational

communities. The latter features not only occupational and professional association and the related trade unions but also the social media networks surrounding VET and FE. For example #JoyFE a practitioner collective creates spaces for people to come together while posting positive messages out into the FE world. The trilogy of books edited by Daley et al (2015, 2017, 2019) reflect a particular type of intervention whereby for the most part practitioners struggle towards a socially just FE sector. However, at the same times these groups are constrained by the structural relations in which VET is located. In the following I contrast the possibilities offered by equity and equality models of social justice.

VET and equity

Here I briefly consider the lineaments of inequality as they apply to VET and Colleges of Further Education (FE), which are the main providers of VET in England. Whilst T-levels aim to increase the standing of VET, to date they serve not only a minority of students but a constituency that is predominantly white.

> Black, Asian and minority ethnic students were "alarmingly" under-represented in the first year of T Levels… 14.2 per cent, or 193, of the 1,363-strong overall cohort for 2020/21 were from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background. Eighty-four per cent of students, or 1,145, were from a white background. (Whieldon, 2021, online)

The conclusion of The Social Mobility Commission[2] (SMC) (2020) remains in place,

> Disadvantaged students aged 16 and over tend to cluster in further education – often the poor relation to schools and universities. The sector is underfunded and undervalued. With the right support and a concerted effort to rebuild its reputation, however, this sector could transform lives for the better. (2020:36; and see Council of Skills Advisors 2022)

In the UK children's eligibility for free school meals is used as an indicator of disadvantage (see Farquharson, 2022:43, 44). This measure is associated with a range of inequalities in relation to poverty, health, education, socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity as well as those surrounding where people live – the provision of services and so on. SMC (2020) notes that colleges of further education are pivotal for the vocational, applied and general education of disadvantaged young people in what is an underfunded sector (see Daley, et al. 2020; Field, 2022:4-10). The following table illustrates ethnicity and participation in further education.

Table 1 Ethnicity and participation in further education[3]

- in the 8 years to July 2019, the total number of people in further education in England fell by 30.6%, from 4.2 million to 2.9 million
- during the same period, the percentage of people in further education from the Asian, Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic groups increased from 19.3% to 22.6%
- however, the number of students from these ethnic groups decreased from 796,730 to 650,130
- the number of White students fell by 33.7%, from 3.3 million to 2.2 million
- in the academic year ending July 2019, White people made up 77.3% of those in further education, and 84.0% of the overall population of England
  Source: ESFA 2021. Online

The table examines data in the eight years up to July 2019, a period in which there was a drop in the total numbers of learners in further education. This finding applied to both white and BAME ethnicities. During the same period the percentage of BAME students increased from 19.3% to 22.6% whereas the percentage for white students declined by 33.7% from 3.3 to 2.2 million. At the same time, the percentage of apprentices from BAME backgrounds went up from 9.7% to 11.8%. Nevertheless, those with BAME backgrounds are less likely to be on apprenticeships than their white peers (DfE 2021b; Council of Skills Advisors 2022:15). In 2019, 78% of White people were employed, compared with 66% of people from all other ethnic groups. The highest employment rates for most ethnic groups were in the South and East of England – the lowest were in the North of England, Scotland, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside. These employment rates reflect patterns of regional disadvantage (Council of Skills Advisors 2022:14; ONS (Office for National Statistics) 2021; Webb, et al 2022:17). With respect to gender in every ethnic group, the rate of employment was higher for men than women. The gap between men and women was biggest in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic group, where 73% of men and 39% of women were employed. The gap was smallest in the Black ethnic group, where 71% of men and 67% of women were employed. For both men and women, the highest employment rate was in the white other[(3)] ethnic group (89% for men, 78% for women). The more refined the data becomes the more it encourages researchers to drill down in order to gain greater granularity and points towards a need to disaggregate the data to gain a more complex understanding of the contours of inequality. However, this process fractures a collective bottom-up politics paradoxically serving to undermine solidarity by emphasising the specifics of inequality and cross group differentiations. The implication, as with the BAME discourse, is to suggest that such disparities can be addressed through ameliorative practices of the state and market (Shafi & Nagdee, 2022). Consequently, the necessity for social transformation is by-passed and in a sense, the status quo is secured.

Thus far it could be suggested I have neglected socio-economic inequalities though these stand as a back drop to those of ethnicity and gender. The SMC (2022a) mobilises an occupational model of class which lends itself to detailed analyses of statistics or what we

could crudely describe as number crunching, but which fails to address the nuances of class based inequalities by privileging occupation. Such models fail to view class as a relational phenomenon ignoring lived experience as well as its intersection with other structures of inequality such as race and gender. Nevertheless occupational models draws our attention to a number of class-based inequalities, pointing towards the continued significance of poverty and disadvantage in the lives of many people in the UK. These inequalities are currently being deepened as a result of the current crisis surrounding the increasing cost of living and growing rates of inflation which now stand at 10.1% (BBC News 2022a, 19 Oct). SMC (2022a) cite Goldthorpe who argues,

> a situation is emerging that is quite new in modern British history, and one that could have far-reaching socio-political consequences… younger generations of men and women now face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents, or their grandparents: that is, are less likely to experience upward mobility and more likely to experience downward mobility. (SMC 2022a:49; cf Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2018:48)

Yet at the same time those hailing from professional backgrounds have better life chances, though 'this gap does not seem to be widening. It may well be shrinking' (SMC 2022a:49). This has implications for what Ainley and Allen describe as the insecure working/middle class, those at the borders of class relations and their political as well as cultural affinities (cf Pitts et al, 2022). SMC anticipate that, at least,

> in the short term, the challenging set of economic circumstances we face in the UK may widen existing inequalities. This includes between:
>
> • different areas of the country [North South divide]
>
> • the majority and ethnic minority groups
>
> • disabled people and those without disabilities
>
> • the highly-educated and those with low qualifications
>
> This is because recessions typically have greater adverse effects on more 'marginal' groups of workers, since they tend to be the first to lose their jobs, with consequent damage to their mobility prospects. However, there is no clear sign of this yet. (2022a:49)

We could add to this list the increasing significance of in-work poverty (see for example, BBC News 2022c).

The SMC is developing a matrix to address social mobility. In its *State of the Nation 2022* report it anticipates the development of intersectional analyses that will be able to articulate the relationship between occupational class categories and those of gender, ethnicity and disability as well as regional location. However, in its current iteration it

anticipates these developments but is restricted at best to the articulation between occupational class and gender[6].

With respect to the preceding discussion there are at least two points to be made. Firstly, in the processes undertaken by SMC there is a continual review of the data and refinement of findings and categories. This reflects similar processes described by Zoellner (2022a, b) in his Australian analysis, discussed in the introduction to this paper. Secondly, in SMC's analyses there is an on-going concern with fairness and the development of equal opportunities. However, this takes for granted the economic status quo or calls for the softening of the starker inequalities spawned by capitalist relations. SMC states that, 'we need to ensure that policy solutions target all people who miss out on having a fair and equal opportunity' (2022a:54).

At the time of writing, citing the ONS, BBC News (2022b:online) stated,

> The unemployment rate [UK] fell to its lowest level in nearly 50 years'. Whilst pay grew by 5.4% inflation currently stands at 9.9% [as of 19 October is 10.1%] consequently regular pay fell by 2.9%. In addition it was suggested that the 'jobs market may have peaked… in the three months to September fell by 46,000 to 1,246,000, which is the largest fall since mid-2020. (online).

This is set within a broader socio-economic context in which employers make much of skills gaps, mismatches and shortages, though it should be to acknowledge that these can co-exist with the presence of surplus labour. This is because alongside advantageous labour markets there may be those characterised by churn, low wages, in-work poverty, intermittent employment, indecent work and high levels of disadvantage (Brown, et al. 2020; Shildrick, et al. 2012; Giupponi and Machin 2022:45-46; Webb et al, 2022). This may in part reflect regional disparities whereby the presence of advantageous labour markets exist alongside restrictive markets in the same locality (Martin & Morrison, 2003). In addition, Giupponi and Machin (2022:1), note,

> Higher earnings inequality, with low real earnings growth, and a very different labour market from 40 years ago have placed the world of work in a much more unequal and divisive place. To halt or reverse this trend requires significant attention be devoted to ways to restore and reinvigorate real earnings growth and to generate decent jobs with good career opportunities in an inclusive way.

Notably there are polarisations both within and across class groupings. This can be seen in the working class between those fractions facing differentiated labour markets that correspond to the most disadvantaged and privileged sections of the class. This sits alongside polarisation across class divisions as a result of the hollowing out of middle level jobs leading to the starker inequalities that Giupponi & Machin (2022) cite.

In this section I have explored the contours of inequality by drawing on data produced by the SMC. This data and the patterns of inequality that it describes serves as a backdrop to VET. The importance of VET is that it is located in a liminal space providing some possibilities for short range social mobility within the working class - what we might describe after Allen and Ainley (2007) as the insecure working/middle class. Some fifteen years after Allen and Ainley's discussion, these insecurities have been intensified. The insecure middle class are experiencing increased vulnerabilities and a worsening standard of living as are the insecure working class, though here this is felt most acutely by its most disadvantaged fractions (Goldthorpe see above). These processes represent a re-composition of the class structure. Erstwhile sections of the middle class increasingly find themselves having more in common with the working class than those at the apogee of the class structure. It is important to recognise the porosity of class relations and the manner in which these are continuously being remade. At the same time we need to acknowledge that fractions of the working class located in welfare vocationalism face even greater impoverishment. The shift towards equity models of equal opportunity serves to deepen the above processes by offering a narrow economistic understanding of social justice, and by default VET's contribution to a fairer socially just society.

Equity, Equality and Meritocracy

In this section I re-visit an earlier discussion that addressed equity, equality and meritocracy (Avis, 2016; Lingard, et al, 2015; and see Lingard 2021). Underpinning the activities of SMC lies a commitment to some sort of notion or aspiration towards meritocracy. That is to say, that one's position in the social structure is earned on the basis of merit - a concern with fairness and equal opportunity (SMC, 2022a:54). However, all these terms are contingent, being subject to ongoing mediation which subtly or not so subtly changes their meaning (Zoellner, 2022, 10, 11). Lingard et al (2015) illustrate the manner in which social justice is conceptualised having shifted from a quasi-social democratic understanding to one that sits comfortably alongside neo-liberalism. Lingard commenting on the Australian context, but one that is equally applicable to the UK (2021:346) suggests,

> Until the early 1980s social justice had been thought of as equality of opportunity demanding redistributive funding to schools located in poorer communities. There was some debate around whether the stress should be on equality of opportunity or outcomes. This was a conceptual, philosophical debate, working with a social democratic definition.

Lingard et al (2015) point towards the philosophical underpinning of social democracy citing approvingly Fraser's discussion of social justice. Fraser (2003, 2008, 2013) suggests, and here I recap parts of her argument, that social justice,

> hinges on parity of participation whereby all members of society have voice and are enabled to engage in decision making. This is linked to a three-dimensional model that encompasses the politics of redistribution (access to economic resources), recognition (dignity and identity) and representation (who should count in matters of justice). (Avis, 2016:3)

However, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. Social democracy carries with it an ideology that favours redistribution, recognition and representation and in this way can serve as a resource in the struggle for social justice. This struggle can be aligned with leftist, feminist and anti-racist politics and so on, that seeks to move the social formation in progressive directions. Importantly, this is a potentiality whose enactment will depend on the outcome of struggle but is also vulnerable to reversal and co-optation. If we were to consider the history of social democracy in the UK following the end of the second world war we would note the presence of inequality, poverty and what we would now describe as indecent work. In addition we would note the reproduction of privilege not only via fee paying independent schools but also through the state system via grammar and the more prestigious comprehensive schools. There are two key points to raise. Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge the brakes placed on the development of progressive possibilities under social democracy - after all this settlement was set within an acceptance of capitalist relations[7]. Secondly, we need to recognise the ongoing reproduction of intersectional relations in terms of class, race and gender and surrounding inequalities as well as resistance to these processes.

For Lingard et al (2014; Lingard, 2021) new public management and the associated development of neo-liberalism served to undermine social democracy and its conceptualisation of equality replacing this with one of equity. This is set within a supranational context in which measurement and various forms of performance indicators are used to judge the effectiveness of specific social formations and their education systems. Here we can reflect on the activities of UNESCO, the World Bank, IMF, World Economic Forum and so on (Avis, 2020). Equity becomes framed by numerical data, measurement and metrics. This calculative and reductive approach serves to close down and eclipse the philosophical underpinning that under social democracy could have been used to judge its contribution to social justice (Lingard et al 2015). In its stead, we have metrics orientated towards the development of a competitive economy allied to the expansion of human capital. This represents a rather different and technicised understanding of social justice delivered in neo-liberal fashion through the development of a competitive economy - an inclusive economy that is thought to lead to the provision of decent work, wages and so forth predicated on the enhancement of human capital. There are two points to make. Firstly, VET has an important role to play in the development of human capital as well as the skills of the workforce that could contribute to a vibrant economy. Secondly, whilst the language of meritocracy, equality and equal opportunity

remain in place these terms are re-accented to align with neo-liberalism and its metrics. At the same time these ideas could be used as part of an autocritique to point out the impoverishment of these conceptualisations of social justice as embodied in neo-liberalism. In other words, the way in which equality, opportunity, social justice and meritocracy are mobilised by neo-liberalism can be turned against itself, becoming a critical resource in anti-capitalist struggle.

Much of the research that addresses meritocracy discusses the difficulties the upwardly mobile encounter in, for example, the transition to post-secondary education, higher education and specifically, the elite universities. In these new circumstances female and male working class youth as well as BAME young people may experience a sense of dislocation and alienation – 'a fish out of water'. (Jin & Ball, S. 2020; Reay et al 2009). Whilst these students will have acquired the human capital (the credentials that facilitate mobility) they may experience tensions in relation to their habitus and cultural capital in encounters with more privileged learners. In addition, on returning to the communities from whence they hail, they may feel distanced and dislocated from family and friends (Jackson & Marsden 1973). In this example there is a focus on long range mobility that crosses clearly defined class boundaries. But what of short range mobility that arises between fractions of a class and how does this impact on VET and its learners? In addition, we need to be cognisant of the changed participation in higher education, particularly in relations to low status HEIs, colleges of further education and the former polytechnics, who serve the more immediate and localised working class communities (Wolf, 2022; Crozier, 2019).

SMC (2022a) in their *State of the Nation 2022* report anticipate the development of more nuanced and granular notions of class in subsequent analyses. They state,

> For 2022, we use very broad socio-economic categories ('professional', 'intermediate', and 'working class') and simple metrics, such as median pay. In the future, we want to provide more granularity. For example, this year, we measure the proportion of people who go to any university. Next year, we may consider subgroups of universities, like the Russell Group of 24 leading UK universities. We will also consider apprenticeships and other routes into highly skilled work. This year, we divide socio-economic background into 3 parts, while next year, we may use a finer division. (55)

The forms of dislocation experienced by those entering elite universities will be of a qualitatively different order to those who form part of the 'technical elite' that Esmond and Atkins (2022) discuss. Indeed, there may not be such a disparity between the 'technical elite' and those engaged with welfare vocationalism, with both groups being conceived of as members of the working class and drawn from not dissimilar communities. In addition, we need to be cognisant of the changed participation in higher education, particularly in relations to low status HEIs, colleges of further education and the former polytechnics, who

serve the more immediate and localised working class communities (Wolf, 2022; Crozier, 2019). In the case of these institutions there will be a tighter fit between the institutional habitus of the HEI and that of the students than would be the case in the elite universities (Reay et al, 2010). In a discussion of belonging one of the contributors to Emery et al's chapter (2022:240) who hailed from a former mining community was "'not sure' whether she fits in with academia outside" her university, where she has a sense of belonging. SMC (2022a) anticipates the use of more granular measures that will capture short range mobility. Thus, for example movement within the working class can be used as a measure of mobility, whilst long range becomes increasingly constrained and restricted. As Reay et al (2009, 2010) note with respect to ethnicity and class, higher education in the UK is increasingly differentiated. In this way, educational processes will make some contribution to inter- and intra-class reproduction and its articulation with ethnicity and gender.

Social democratic versions of equality and equal opportunity offer a more 'acceptable' version of capitalism when set against neo-liberal models of equity. Yet both equity and equality models draw on a notion of equal opportunity and gesture towards an unobtainable vision of meritocracy. By default both models offer a critique of white male 'middle class' privilege, particularly at the border between the middle and working class – those located in middling jobs. If these critiques were mobilised in social and educational policy they could lead to some amelioration of these inequalities. This would result in a shuffling of positions in the class structure heralded by a rhetorical desire to mobilise the full talents of society. Such a rhetoric is present in both equity and equality models and the concern with a notion of fairness. However, meritocracy is predicated on hierarchical relations that confer advantages to some and disadvantages to others. Notable for its absence is a recognition of the logic of capitalism, its pursuit of accumulation and the capitalist class, that is to say those located at the apogee of the class structure. This is a consequence of the use of occupational definitions of class which tend to blur the extremes of poverty and wealth. For example, SMC (2022:31 Table 2.1) cites *The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification* whereby class 1 includes 'large employers, higher professional or managerial' examples of which are 'CEO of large firm, doctor, clergy, engineer, senior army officer'. We need only to consider the average salaries and wealth of these occupational groups to see the manner in which the cumulative figures serve to dampen down the appearance and extent of inequality as well as the slightly bizarre collection of occupations mobilised in class 1.

Towards a conclusion

The paper addresses what may at first sight appear to be a number of disparate issues that have a passing relationship with VET. The introduction relates VET research to the on-going construction of disadvantage amongst the constituencies it allegedly serves. There are two points to be made. Firstly, there should be no surprise in this relation to inequality given VETs liminal position. Secondly, an acknowledgement of the diverse groups that VET

addresses seeks to overcome a reified or reductionist notion of VET. Notably, VET addresses a wide ranging constituency, reflected in the paper's discussion of the 'technical elite' and 'ordinary kids' set alongside welfare vocationalism. This is followed by a discussion of the way in which VET can be conceptualised that emphasises its closeness to the needs of employers. It also sought to signal the contribution a reconceptualised VET could make to societal, community and individual well-being. However, it is necessary to consider the contours of inequality within which VET is located which place a limit on its radical potential. The objective of this part of the paper is to locate VET within a contextualisation that touches on the patterns of inequality present within the English, and more broadly, the British social formation. The aim is to provide a snap shot, a glimpse of patterns of inequality. This section raises questions about the on-going re-composition of class relations and in particular the manner in which we conceive the insecure working/middle class. In addition, it talks back to the introduction of the paper which refers to iterative processes that define and re-define the disadvantaged groups that VET serves. In the UK the provision of free school meals is used as a marker of disadvantaged children and their families. This is a highly restrictive definition that ignores those lying at the margins of its framework and serves to narrow understandings of inequality. This discussion also points towards the re-composition of class relations and the structure of inequality. We could consider the salience of in-work poverty whereby previously secure groups find themselves facing deprivation and disadvantage. Here we could think about the constitution and re-constitution of in/secure groups within the class and the porosity of these relations. We should be alert to the presence of exploitation and oppression that are a feature of capitalist societies. The following section discusses models of equity and equality, the former being located within neo-liberalism and the latter, social democracy. Both models draw on notions of meritocracy, equal opportunity and social justice, albeit that these terms are accented differently. As a result of its narrow focus on the development of human capital and economic competitiveness the equity model, being rooted in neo-liberal sensitivities, closes down a broader socio-political and philosophical engagement, which the social democratic model would open-up. However, both models are constrained by the way in which meritocracy, equal opportunity and social justice are mobilised. Social justice can be judged on the basis of upward movement within a hierarchal class scale, based on occupation. This process can be conjoined with a model of equal opportunity that addresses institutional access and outcomes. This stance falls short of a fully-fledged radical and anti-capitalist project. It readily collapses into an interest in the development of labour power aiming to render the social formation more competitive in the global economy thereby seeking to fully mobilise the societal pool of human capital. Despite the progressive affordances of social democracy and its interest in utilising the full talents of the working class and disadvantaged members of society, it is trammelled by a technicised focus and the limited number of decent jobs (Brown et al 2020). In addition, the shibboleth of meritocracy would at best lead to a shuffling of class positions and consequently would inevitably fall short of its social justice aspirations. After all it is an ideological formation.

The paper seeks to problematize VET and in some respects this is foolhardy given the broad range of occupational groups that it addresses. However, the question remains as to how far can VET be shifted from its occupational moorings to contribute towards a socially just society - or is it inevitably compromised by its close association with the needs of capital and employers. This is not merely an empirical but also a political question that hinges on conceptualisations of social justice and power and the manner in which these are addressed in the struggle for a fairer more just society . Avis and Orr (2016) suggest VET can make some though limited difference in the struggle for social justice - but is this good enough? There is a tendency in this paper to reify and objectify VET. The purpose is to place VET within its structural context in which employer and capitalist interests are hegemonic. However and importantly this not to deny VET as a site of struggle in which learners, teachers, occupational and community groups etc., can engage. A struggle that addresses really useful knowledge and an expansive notion of VET. Social democratic sensibilities can only take us so far and need to be pushed to their limits. The struggle for a progressive VET needs to be wedded to a wider politics orientated towards the transformation of society for without this it will be amenable to co-optation and domestication. It is here that VETs contribution to the development of really useful labour could contribute towards community and societal well-being. However this needs to be set alongside an anti-capitalist politics committed to coalition building that can straddle class groupings and thereby engage more fully with the politics of social justice.

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Notes

1. G.NVQ, General national vocational qualifications were orientated towards an occupational area rather than a specific occupation. BTEC, Business and Technology Education Council qualifications are work related.
2. The SMC remit is to ‘create a United Kingdom where the circumstances of birth do not determine outcomes in life’ (2022b:online). It is to publish an annual report that addresses the progress made towards improved social mobility. It is to promote social mobility by calling institutions to account - employers, schools, colleges of further education, universities etc. Interestingly, it is to provide, at their request, English [SIC] ministers of state with advice. I draw on its publications for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a wealth of data but secondly and more importantly, it embodies conceptualisations of social mobility that draw on mainstream academic accounts that are predominantly rooted in policy science which can cohere with a range of political standpoints found within the governing and main oppositional parties in the UK

3. Kevin Orr drew my attention to these and the following statistics.
4. White other would include people who define themselves as white but do not belong to English, Welsh, Scottish, Romani or Irish ethnic groupings.
5. This is not to gainsay the significance attached to inequalities surrounding health, education, poverty that the report addresses.
6. See SMC 2022a chapter 3, p55.
7. The recent debacle surrounding the premiership of Liz Truss serves to remind us of the power of capitalism, the city and the 'market'. (BBC News, 2022d)

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