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The Role of Education and Training in the Development of Technical Elites: Work Experience and Vulnerability

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Abstract

Whilst education and training systems in Europe have provided qualifications preparing candidates for highly skilled, responsible occupational roles, early research indicated that firms preferred to promote to such positions internally. Following changes to labour markets, several countries now place greater emphasis on early workplace learning, in the hope that transitions to work will be eased by experience of workplace environments. The outcomes of these shifts were explored through case studies in England of provision where work-based learning provides a high level of course content. Whilst students and educators ascribed value to these early experiences, evidence emerged of a narrowing of skills taught in work settings and emphasis on behaviours and attributes. This emphasis is reflected among disadvantaged groups such as young women preparing for service roles: this paper argues for attention to the vulnerabilities of these groups, whose exclusion contributes to the reproduction of 'elite' occupations.

Keywords

Transitions; qualifications; work experience

1 Introduction

A shifting pattern of transition to employment and adulthood is emerging across Europe, as several countries seek to increase the contribution of early experiences of work to professional, technical and vocational programmes of study (European Commission, 2013, 2015). These are rationalised by such international bodies as the OECD and European Union, as well as nation-states, as promoting both national economic competitiveness and social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010). Alongside apprenticeships, full-time school- or college-based programmes also include early work experiences, although the extent of these opportunities is circumscribed by the

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learning environment available within specific work organisations (Fuller & Unwin, 2003, 2004). In exploring the shift in patterns of transition, therefore, the study reported here directed attention to the significance of these experiences in the preparation of young people for more skilful, stable and well-rewarded employment.

Education and training systems across Europe have sought over an extensive period to provide qualifications to develop highly-skilled industrial workers, who would be capable of exercising advanced technical, supervisory and developmental responsibilities. Yet earlier qualifications research in both France and Germany indicated that firms preferred to promote staff internally (Mickler, 2008; Drexel 1997; Kern & Schuman, 1984). In the late twentieth century, these accounts suggested that access to valued occupations was determined by the operation of internal labour markets rather than by formal certification, with senior employees rather than highly-qualified outsiders assuming leading roles. Several important changes have taken place since this earlier qualifications research. Firstly, a shift to service industries and the delayering of older work organisations have eroded internal labour markets, which are generally weaker in the 'new economy' (Rubery, 2000). This process has been strengthened during the period of financial crisis and austerity, which has encouraged the use of short-term contracts and casual employment, whilst encouraging the development of 'lean' production practices. Arguments for greater conceptual and 'soft' skills alongside technical expertise (ESDE, 2015) also suggest that educational preparation could play a stronger role in determining access to core occupations, by providing levels of knowledge and high-level skills not available through routine employment. Yet, although the levels of qualification demanded by employers has increased in many areas, there is less evidence outside regulated occupations that these changes are providing expertise recognised as necessary for employment (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2018).

Irrespective of changes to employment patterns and relationships, several European countries now seek to provide young people with work experience as a complement to or component of school-based programmes of study. Firm-based training now plays an increased role in school- or college-based vocational education in France, Holland, Sweden, Norway and England, albeit with shorter periods of 'work-based learning' and different supporting arrangements to those that exist in countries with 'collective' transition systems (Buseymeyer & Trampusch, 2012). International criticism of these emerging patterns of 'learning for work' has included claims that they offer socialisation into workplace hierarchies in ways that enhance the dominant role of employers at the expense of training in industry skills (Tanguy, 2016). Nevertheless, these changes are widespread. Fundamental questions about the basis of transitions into secure employment roles necessarily therefore begin by exploring the nature of this shift in the balance between qualifications and firm-based processes in the selection of candidates for elite technical roles (e.g. highly-skilled specialists, supervisors, workplace coaches and mentors. Whilst these questions are posed in terms of possibilities for progression into stable, well-rewarded occupations, they are inevitably complemented by inquiry into how others may be excluded from those occupations, for example where selective processes take place. What may be apparently serendipitous transitions into particular work experiences may disguise the operation of powerful factors for social selection (Atkins, 2017).

In England, where higher levels of vocational qualification have been lower than in other north European jurisdictions (Ianelli & Raffe, 2007; OECD, 2014), a notable shift towards work-based qualifications has taken place within the last decade. This has included the addition of 'work experience' to full-time upper-secondary programmes of study following the 'Wolf Review' (Wolf, 2011). This has been in turn followed by the development of technical education or 'T-level' courses that are chiefly distinguished by the inclusion of substantial work placements (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). These developments for full-time post-students are said to complement 'employer-led' apprenticeships from which qualifications are increasingly being withdrawn (Richard, 2012; UK Government, 2015).

Important educational questions arise from these changes. The first relates to the content of curricula and the knowledge content of these work-enhanced pathways. Whilst policy changes are often framed around qualifications, the enhancement of workplace learning is supported by an emphasis on autonomous, informal and incidental learning, valorised over planned curricula (Billett, 2014). In this climate, workplace learning tends to remain independent of decontextualised subject knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007). It also focuses directly on the practices of the single firm in which the placement is normally based.

A key point in these workplace experiences is the process by which individuals are exposed to new environments. In England, in the absence of institutional mechanisms, early decisions about work placements tend to take place outside the classroom: variously negotiated by students and their families, by non-teaching staff or even devolved to third-party organisations (Esmond, 2018). Whilst these experiences may be seen as opportunities to augment the 'human capital' of students, they are also mediated by the availability of economic and cultural resources to each individual. Once within the workplace, early experiences may not offer the same protections and inclusive ethos that generally characterises educational settings, particularly in small organisations. These are particular concerns for those excluded from elite occupations, such as young women preparing for service occupations. The age and stage of development at which their encounters take place add to the vulnerabilities to which Fineman (2008) calls attention.

These developments in turn have implications for educators and trainers. The relocation of learning in the workplace automatically displaces college- or school-based teachers from the students' learning environment. These educators may lack opportunities and motivation to engage in the kind of 'boundary-crossing' that would engage with students' workplace learning and provide opportunities to raise this above the level of industrial training, building iteratively on their diverse experiences (Guile & Young, 2003).

These educational questions are central to the ways in which young people's transition are being reconstituted. Ianelli and Raffe's (2007) characterisation of countries that follow an education logic noted the ways that these systems disadvantage those assigned to vocational routes which assign a 'vertically' inferior status; however, these authors additionally identified 'horizontal' differences attributable to different qualification types. Vocational pathways are frequently dominated by gendered orientation to particular occupations and these distinctions can be central to the ways in which particular groups and individuals can be disadvantaged. Of course, these are in practice experienced by the individual who provides the key ethical reference point (Lopez-Fogues, 2016). Insights into the difficulties facing many young people undertaking placements in challenging environments are offered by the work Fineman (2008) on vulnerabilities.

The study described here therefore focused specifically on the experiences of students undertaking early work experiences as part of their studies, collecting data both from student groups and from their teachers. Work placements already form a substantial part of the upper-secondary courses of many vocational students in England, in such areas as early childhood education, or health and social care. The 'T Levels' are to extend this kind of placement into further vocational areas. Still other vocational students, including many higher education students in colleges, are already in employment and study part-time. The study drew on their reported experiences, using the methods described below.

2 Methods

From its broad concern with the shift of transitions to include more substantial early work experiences, the study focused on placement experiences in England of several months' duration, or the equivalent. It was possible to study these developments both in vocational fields that already include placements in the main qualification, and in other fields where early work

experiences are under development. The areas selected were the areas designated for the first phase of T Levels: early years education, professional construction and software design; along with hairdressing and beauty therapy, which also include an established tradition of work placements. Data was also collected in comparator areas, where work experience is so far largely limited to apprenticeship and part-time qualifications, such as engineering, including heavy vehicle engineering.

Case studies of each occupational area were developed using a multiple case-study design (Yin, 2003) which allowed the team to make comparisons between, and identify commonalities amongst, the individual cases. Ethical approval was sought from, and granted by, the University of Derby, and the conduct of the project was consistent with the BERA ethical guidelines (2018).

The collection of data sought as much as possible to capture the experience of employment settings and data gathered included the study of company policies and documents. However, the main focus of data collection was students who were undertaking work-based learning, or had completed placements. Data collection aimed to support the development of judgements about how formal and informal processes might support their progression into secure and responsible job roles. Data collection included interviews with both students and teachers about work placements and early experiences of employment.

Since teachers had in most cases an indirect relationship with student placements, a wider variety of instruments were used to surface issues in placement learning and its relationship with classroom teaching. A survey of teaching staff examined the sources of their expertise and the various ways in which they saw this as contributing to young people's transitions. Film elicitation was conducted, showing discussion of workplace learning among college tutors, work-based educators and employers.

Interview data were subject to thematic analysis utilising the constant comparative method (Wellington, 2000). Whilst SPSS software analysed quantitative responses from the survey data, open question data were analysed utilising the same approach as interview data. The research team checked and cross-checked data to confirm that initial codings and interpretations were agreed. The following sections sets out some of the key findings from the study.

This data analysis identified distinct patterns of development between those prepared for 'elite' occupations and those excluded from these roles. Yet in many senses these developments are complementary. The substantial social elements in the preparation of elites is to some extent dependent on the exclusion of others. In the absence of space to discuss both groups in full, the data extracts below explore the experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

3 Results

For many vocational students and tutors, opportunities to learn in practice were valued in ways widely reported across Europe. For those studying occupations with a high level of personal contact, these experiences could not be substituted in the classroom:

> I think it's great for especially people like me who prefer, to be somewhere where you can learn and do stuff. Because I personally find like classrooms a bit boring… I just feel like you're writing the same all the time. My tutors who have worked in nurseries, they've got their own experience, but it's different when *you* are in a workplace… If I'm struggling to tell another child off, instead of getting it wrong... I can observe the actual practitioner telling them off... just how to be a good practitioner while still caring for children and taking them on as your own: because they are your responsibility while there in care (Jade, childcare student).

> The confidence to talk to the children and introduce them to like new things, and take on roles with them… once you've got the confidence to do things with them, they learn a lot more as well. You may have to talk with the parents in talking about the child and like how their day's been and what things you've done with them during the day. (Katie, childcare student).

For childcare students, these are essential skills. They are also primarily social skills: one of the keys for the study is the distinction between these experiences and those of engineering students who reported greater emphasis on technical learning. Yet even those preparing for the service sector encountered challenges: in the following passages, the experiences of students on in childcare and personal services are reported extensively.

Work experience for most students begins with the selection or allocation of work opportunities: whilst holding some kind of part-time job has become the norm for full-time upper-secondary students in England, a minority of existing work roles conform to the requirements of placements. The nature of these arrangements varies across and within colleges, with classroom teachers usually playing a marginal role. Often placements are organised centrally by teams who are not vocational specialists. This promotes efficiency but can make it difficult to determine the quality of the placements beyond legislative health and safety requirements. As one student explained:

> The one I went to was a really bad nursery, so I left there because I wasn't comfortable with how they dealt with things [safeguarding]. But I told the college and they took me out of there straight away (Katy, child care student).

Securing a placement could be relatively easy in service industries where 'casual' staff can provide capacity at busy times. But these could be of variable quality, with hair and Beauty students particularly vulnerable to poor quality placements organised by a central team according to their tutors:

> I think they're more or less looking at it from you know the point of view, that the salon has got insurance…… So they might not necessarily look at it from our perspective, we wouldn't look at it in a completely different way in terms of its professionalism and what they can offer (Sarah, hair and beauty teacher).

> There was one that salon that [the manager] had to go and do a visit, because she didn't want to send a student. Because I think it was a bit of a fake salon (Kim, hair and beauty teacher).

The key concern, for students and teachers alike, was, however, the content of what was learnt in the workplace. The range of skills that students were able to use on their placement were contingent on either the priorities of the business or the extent to which students were deemed capable of carrying out skilled work. For example a hairdressing student explained that she was using a limited range of skills working on the pensioners day on a Wednesday:

> It was different to here, where they are teaching you how to do it, they correct you if you go wrong. But with work experience really you're just sweeping and cleaning and you know, washing hair (Emma hairdressing student).

Other students shared these limited experiences: Chira, who claimed to 'hate massage now… I had to do too much' and that she taught the staff in the salon. Similarly, a hairdressing student recounted:

> They don't actually teach you to actually cope with the work experience, Really, you're just watching, they're not teaching you anything when your actually inside. You know, like here [in the college realistic work environment] they're teaching you how to do it, and they correct you if you go wrong. With work experience really you just sweeping and cleaning and you know, washing hair (Lara, hairdressing student).

Students and staff sometimes attributed this relatively narrow range of tasks to the competence of the person training in the workplace. For example, Lucy, a student in beauty therapy, described her college's established work placement partner as:

> … not a bad therapist, she knows her stuff. She's been in the industry a very long time. But yeah, I think she hasn't adjusted to what it is [in the beauty industry] nowadays (Lucy, beauty therapy student).

Childcare students also saw their experiences as contingent on the extent to which they were trusted by the other practitioners to deal with parents and children. Anna described different settings she had experienced:

> "I think when they don't push you, they just see you as a student and nothing else then it makes it seem like you can't do as much. But, then, if you go to one and they trust you, then you get to learn more…. I think it's just certain practitioners... don't like to give you the chance because they're the trained ones and obviously they want to do it all and you just get to do jobs which aren't important (Anna, childcare student).

A critical question rarely discussed in England at this stage is how teachers engage with the practice of their students. Beauty teacher Sally described how some of the work based trainees that she teaches gain different skills in the workplace to each other, in an attempt to overcome limitations to the range of skills they practice at work:

> [Sometimes placement tasks are limited to:] clean, make tea, answer the phone, be at reception; and you've got to really make sure that the placement is effective and that they're not just using it as cheap labour. That it is a positive thing for the students, so that they're learning, and yeah, I do believe that when you're at the bottom, you have got to do a bit of cleaning but that's not just it.
>
> I've got a student that's doing level two, but the salon she is in is mainly false nails, lashes and tanning [not the full skills offered in the qualification]. So I ask her to practice the skills that she does when she is in the salon (Sally, hairdressing tutor).

Whilst this exchange of experiences can be an effective way of overcoming these limitations, this was more challenging for early years students who were unable to talk about experiences at the nursery because of confidentiality issues.

The students' perceptions capture their immediate experience. However, the more pressing concern for VET research is how these interactions reflect the educational and labour market relationships that mediate policy.

4 Conclusions

This data demonstrates an emphasis on behaviours and attributes during placements that has been remarked previously in relation to placements (Esmond 2018). Yet here they can be seen to take on another significance, with the narrow vocational learning of students excluded from elite roles complementing the educational content of those prepared for elite roles, which includes a substantial emphasis on technical knowledge. This shift towards greater emphasis on placements displaces the reproductive role of educational practice with the specific allocation of students to early experiences of the workplace that emphasise behaviours and attributes at the expense of 'technical' knowledge.

This takes place first of all through the allocation of young people to 'suitable' placements. As Fineman (2008) indicates, the placement of students in the socialised construction of the workplace serves to expose their individual vulnerabilities.

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