**Anti-work, TVET and Employer Engagement**

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**Abstract**

The paper brings together a range of debates on the left that address TVET’s future in current context. At the heart of these debates rest two issues. The first addresses competing views of capital and the second focuses on the contradiction between the interests of capital and workers. The paper argues that capital is not all of a piece and that decent work that validates human flourishing is not completely unknown. However, as with other forms of waged labour, such work is predicated on capitalist relations and interests and it is important not to overlook waged labour as a site of struggle and contestation. Consequently, when circumstances alter as a result of the development of new technology, itself is a social process, or when the balance of power shifts in favour of capital, such labour may be dispensed with or become so deskilled that it is hardly recognisable. The paper is structured in the following way. The initial sections address the paper’s genesis, a discussion of corporate social responsibility and anti-work that enables an engagement with differing conceptualisations of capital. The subsequent sections*,* Restrictive and Expansive Learning and Thinking about TVET focus on the contradictory interests of workers and capital. The paper closes with a discussion of TVET and considers responses to current conditions that necessitate an engagement with an earlier tradition of adult and community education.

**Keywords**

Anti-work, TVET, employer, post-work, capitalism, restrictive learning, expansive learning, corporate social responsibility.

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**Introduction**

The paper seeks to bring together a range of debates on the left that address TVET’s(1) future in the light of different tendencies within capitalism. At the heart of these debates rest two issues. The first addresses competing views of capital with the second focusing on the contradictory interests of capital and workers. The paper is structured in the following way. The initial sections address the paper’s genesis, a discussion of corporate social responsibility and anti-work that enables an engagement with differing conceptualisations and tendencies within capitalism. These tendencies are also present in the discussion of anti-work, which also considers the contradictory interests of capital and labour. This latter theme is taken further in the discussion of restrictive and expansive Learning, the engagement with TVET and the papers closing discussion.

This paper has its genesis in two conferences. The first being, *The 6th International Conference on Employer Engagement: Preparing Young People for the Future* (1-2 July 2021) supported by *Education and Employers* and *Edge*(2) and the second, JVET *Vocational and Technical Education* Keynotes Conference (9 July 2021) organised by the Journal of Vocational Education and Training. These conferences covered similar ground with many delegates attending both events. The two conferences led me to think about the way we conceive the relationship of workers, employers and learners to TVET. They also raised questions about the forms of employer engagement with the previous constituents -TVET and wider society. *The 6th International Conference* provided many positive examples of employer engagement with TVET (see for example Brockmann and Smiths presentation that drew on their *Gatsby report, 2020). A* rather less sanguine stance was present in *JVET Keynote Conference*. Lauder (2021) pointed out that *t*he current conjunctural moment and socio-economic context is characterised by a lack of decent jobs (and see, Brown, et al, 2020). Yet, this is belied by state and employer rhetoric that bemoans the presence of skills gaps, shortages and mismatches. This in turn reflects the dominance of neo-liberal conceptions of human capital that serve to individualise workers and pathologise their apparent failings- this is, after all, a context in which the winner takes all**. In addition the current socio-economic context is one in which there is a re-evaluation of TVET and its relationship with higher education. The British governments skills white paper, along with the Augar review seeks to validate technical pathways (DfE 2021a,b). This concern rests alongside one which seeks to dissuade young people from pursuing ‘mainstream’ academic degrees in favour of TVET. This is particularly the case for degrees provided by low status higher education institutions in non-STEM subjects that are thought tohave limited purchase in the labour market (Williamson, 2019; DfE 2021b - The Augar Review).**

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) anticipates particular forms of employer engagement with employees and wider society. These responsibilities may address the environment in which the firm is located, the diversity of its workforce as well as broader societal and community well-being and so on. In the current conjuncture CSR can be seen in the way in which the ‘apologists’ of capital seek to distance themselves from the excesses of neo-liberalism which may now be construed as an ‘irresponsible’ form of capitalism (Avis, 2021). The World Economic Forum calls for ‘a great reset’ in response to the crises of COVID-19, neo-liberal capitalism and we could add, the climate emergency (Schwab with Davis, 2018; Schwab and Malleret, 2020). This reset echoes progressive and social democratic versions of capitalism (Kenworthy, 2020) and their concern with fairness, a more equitable distributions of wealth and income, the provision of decent work, human centred growth that enables human flourishing and an orientation of stewardship towards natural resources (and see Green Google, undated; Amazon Climate Pledge, undated). Schwab and Malleret (2020:244) are not alone in suggesting that failure to act would result in irreversible damage to all members of society, and we could add, the long-term interests of capital. Indeed, there is now a clarion call shared amongst political leaders from across the global south and north that the climate emergency must be addressed (Johnson, 2021). There are several points to consider. Capitalism is not homogeneous but encompasses a variety of types whose interests may conflict. This can be seen in the different interests of industrial, financial, digital and carbon capital. For some forms of capital environmental issues are seen as business opportunities - the development of green technologies would be a case in point, whereas other fractions remain tied to fossil fuels. In relation to diversity a firm’s interest in gender and ethnic equality may be placatory, being more concerned with public relations and the way in which businesses present themselves than with a wholehearted commitment to equality and social justice. This is particularly the case when ethnicity, race and gender, are treated separately from class. However, even when class is considered it tends to be constructed as an individual rather than structural or systemic question. **Fraser captures the ‘essence’ of these arguments in her conceptualisation of progressive neo-liberalism** (and see [Táíwò](https://www.plutobooks.com/author/olufmi-o-taiwo) 2022). **This articulates marketisation with an individualised and meritocratic version of identity politics that does little to undermine the structure of capitalism but calls for an acknowledgement of diversity and the provision of equal opportunity.**

Roose (2019) commenting on the 2019 World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Davos suggests there is a tension between the public and private face presented by some executives. The public face addresses worries about the impact of the 4th Industrial Revolution and artificial intelligence (AI) on worker employment and well-being. However, Roose suggests that privately executives are seeking to automate the workforce to enhance profitability with scant regard for its impact on employees. In this instance, the technologies surrounding the 4th Industrial Revolution are being used to deskill and eradicate employment. Roose (2019:online) writes, ‘They crave the fat profit margins automation can deliver, and they see A.I. as a golden ticket to savings, perhaps by letting them whittle departments with thousands of workers down to just a few dozen’. Whilst Roose may be overstating the case, he does nevertheless point to an important tension surrounding the pursuit of capital accumulation. Technological developments are not innocent being shaped by capitalist interests (Avis, 2020) though they can be held in check by class struggle as well as by the state’s regulatory framework. **The decision to automate will be, in part, based on cost. It may be financially expedient to employ workers to labour alongside machines rather than to fully automate. The relationship between AI and automation may not be as clear cut as Roose implies**. In addition, he points to the manner in which the interests of capital are presented as those of all members of society. This can be seen in conceptualisations of CSR, which in turn echo social democratic, egalitarian, stakeholder and progressive versions of capitalism.

Eeckhout (2021) draws a distinction between pro-market and pro-big business capitalism, the former being predicated upon competition, which he claims benefits all members of society in the way neo-liberal ideologues suggest, whereas the latter mobilises monopsony power. Eeckhout’s (2021) thesis is that technological innovation tends to benefit early adopters and subsequently concentrates wealth in a few hands as evidenced by platform capitalism (Wark, 2019:8). For example, the use of monopsony power can be seen in the activities of Amazon, Google, Facebook as well as those of large retailers such as Walmart (Srnicek, 2017). Whilst some writers refer to digital or platform capitalism Wark (2019:13) argues that the emerging ruling class is the vectoralist class whose power derives from ‘ownership and control of the vector of information’. Notions of corporate social responsibility can be used to occlude the monopsony power of the dominant class. Eeckhout (2021:276) argues that stakeholder capitalism and corporate responsibility are thought to address the excesses of pro-business capitalism, but points out that it is unlikely that ‘CEOs or boards of companies [or indeed the vectoralist class] [will] take it upon themselves to reduce their market power’. The solution for Eeckhout lies in state regulation. However, this is constantly undermined by the logic of capitalism and the pursuit of surplus value, or in vectoralist terms, ‘surplus’ information. This is not to forget the specific conjunctural moment in which regulatory practices arise and alliances forged that can constrain capital. The caveat is that such constraints may not undermine the secular interests of capital, whilst at the same time noting the existence of struggle between different fractions of capital to secure advantage.

Alongside the preceding debates that address employer engagement and CSR, rests another that draws attention to the lack of decent work and the limitations of waged labour in facilitating human flourishing and which validates the ‘refusal’ to engage in such labour. This discussion needs to be set in its socio-economic context in which over-qualification, allied with under-employment, intermittent and unemployment, limited security and low wages are experienced not just by the young but by many workers in both the global south and north. **It is important to recognise that whilst this applies to many, some workers will occupy a more advantageous position reflecting a polarised labour market (Edmonds & Atkins, 2022). This is an important caveat as it avoids an overly deterministic approach and acknowledges the differing interests of capital as well as the outcome of class struggle (Thompson and Knut, 2021).**

**Anti-Work**

The left has had an equivocal relationship with waged labour. On the one hand, it has been seen as the key site of exploitation and alienation. Briefly, exploitation arises through the appropriation of surplus value by the dominant class with alienation being the result of the workers separation from the product of their labour and control over the means of production. On the other hand, waged labour is thought to be pivotal to workers’ identity, well-being and sense of worth. Cohen (2021:13-14) citing the work of Hirschman (1982) who argued that in times of prosperity and relative affluence as occurred in the West in the 1960s, ‘desire… runs counter to the economic cycle: it wants authenticity when growth is strong and material wealth in periods of recession’ (14). In this way Hirschman can explain the socio-economic context of the 1960s and the conservative restoration of the 80s. It can also in part explain the shifts in leftist analyses of waged labour. However, such an analysis whilst suggestive can only take us so far and should be set alongside transformations in the economic structure and the specificity of the particular conjectural moment. Cohen (2021:61) writing about the demise of industrial capitalism argues that,

the new “stockholder capitalism” [shareholder capitalism] reduced the activities of firms to the area of their expertise, their “core business” all the rest was left to the market. Outsourcing and subcontracting became the rule. The industrial model of the large corporation encompassing all social strata would be shattered.

The demise of what Cohen describes as ‘the industrial model of the large corporation’ can be aligned with the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Italian Workerism provides an analysis of this shift, arguing that worker struggles against the Fordist regime of industrial capitalism and the refusal of work led to the shift towards post-Fordism and immaterial capitalism (Avis, 2020:6-7; Lotringer and Marazzi, 2007; Tronti, 2019). In other words, class struggle and capital’s response resulted in the development of post-Fordism. Lotringer (2004: 11) writes, ‘It was Italian workers’ stubborn resistance to the Fordist rationalization of work… that forced capital to make a leap into the post-Fordist era of immaterial work’**. It is important to acknowledge that whilst immaterial labour stresses cognitive processes and ‘soft’ skills these are supported by a material infrastructure such as that provided by the internet.**

Workerist analyses can sit alongside a set of older arguments that seek to ‘liberate humanity from the drudgery of work, the dependence on waged labour, and the submission of our lives to a boss’ (Srnicek and Williams, 2015:86; and see Gorz, 1982a:102, 1982b:1; Keynes, 2009; Marx and Engels 1970:82,85,94). John Holloway (2019:230) has argued that the call for more or indeed ‘better’ jobs serves to tie us to the capitalist system with Cleaver (2017:13) suggesting that ‘the struggle against work [is] the most fundamental threat to the [capitalist] machine’. The implication is that rather than struggling for more meaningful work the aim should be to fundamentally transform the capitalist system. There is a resonance here with those who adopt an anti-work stance and who call and struggle for a post-work society (Bastani 2019; Mason 2015). Importantly, these anti-work arguments can be seen as a call for the transcendence of capitalist waged labour that appropriates surplus value and entails alienation and exploitation. In other words, the object of critique is capitalist waged labour rather than labour in itself. Importantly, Holloway (2019:258) addresses the manner in which we contribute to the reproduction of capitalism through our everyday activities – arguing ‘we are the crisis of capital’.

Anti-work analyses serve to question arguments that align employer engagement with the development of expansive cultures of learning both within the workplace and in off-the-job education as being straight forwardly benign. These arguments challenge the implication that workers and employers can share a common interest in the development of expansive learning, with anti-work analyses providing a caution **(and see Thompson, 2003).** The relation between employer practice and strategies in the workplace that aim to encourage diversity, the flattening of hierarchical structures, concerns with the climate emergency and the mobilisation of appropriate technologies and so on, can only take us so far in the pursuit of a socially just society and an environmentally sustainable world. At the same time anti-work analyses can be debilitating. To put it crudely, the refusal of work is hardly an option for many in the global south or indeed the north. The trick is to view reformist interventions, the concern with diversity and the rhetoric of meaningful work as a starting point in the struggle for a socially just society. Such a politics could sit with the type of revolutionary, anti-capitalist, non-reformist reforms that Gorz (1968) and Fraser (2013) call for. Gorz (1968:7-8) writes,

A struggle for non-reformist reforms – for anti-capitalist reforms – is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be.

For Fraser and Gorz non-reformist reforms seek to push reformism to it limits, aiming to go beyond reformism to ‘change more than the specific institutional features that they target’ and ‘alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged’ (Fraser 2003:79). The long-term goal being the transformation of society.

Employer engagement with workplace learning can be set on a continuum that ranges from the restrictive to the expansive. In the latter TVET is given a wider brief that extends beyond a narrow focus on the specific needs of a particular employer and may embrace a radical stance giving it a progressive hue. **This has been a feature of the German dual system which has to some extent been compromised by neo-liberalism (Thompson, 2003).** The following section addresses the affordances of restrictive and expansive learning morphing into a broader discussion of TVET.

**Restrictive and Expansive Learning**

Following the seminal paper of Fuller and Unwin (2003) much research has explored the potential of expansive learning in the workplace. Fuller and Unwin (2003) drew on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) as well as Engeström (2001) to inform their discussion (3). Employer engagement with expansive learning in the workplace has been seen as a measure of their commitment to the development of workers (see figure 1). In contrast to restrictive learning the development of cultures of expansive learning in the workplace allied with off-the-job training are thought to open-up opportunities for social mobility and in this way address social justice concerns. **In addition, organisational cultures of expansive learning may create dialogic spaces in which questions of human flourishing, climate change, green issues, diversity and so on can be addressed, albeit that these will be constrained by the contextual setting of the organisation. We could think about Guile’s aircraft engineers who as part of their TVET are required to consider ‘human factors’ which might serve to open-up dialogic spaces.**

[INSERT Figure 1 about here]

**Figure 1** **The expansive–restrictive continuum**

**EXPANSIVE RESTRICTIVE**

Participation in multiple communities of Restricted participation in multiple

practice inside and outside the workplace communities of practice

Primary community of practice has Primary community of practice has little

shared ‘participative memory’: cultural or no ‘participative memory’: no or little

inheritance of apprenticeship tradition of apprenticeship

Breadth: access to learning fostered by Narrow: access to learning restricted in

cross-company experiences built in to terms of tasks/knowledge/location

programme

Access to range of qualifications Access to competence-based qualification

including knowledge-based vocational only

qualifications

Planned time off-the-job including for Virtually all-on-job: limited opportunities

college attendance and for reflection for reflection

Gradual transition to full participation Fast—transition as quick as possible

Apprenticeship aim: rounded expert/full Apprenticeship aim: partial expert/full

participant participant

Post-apprenticeship vision: progression Post-apprenticeship vision: static for job

for career

Explicit institutional recognition of, and Ambivalent institutional recognition of,

support for, apprentices’ status as learner and support for, apprentice’s status as learner

Named individual acts as dedicated No dedicated individual ad-hoc support

support to apprentices

Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual

aligning the goals of developing the capability to organisational need

individual and organisational capability

Apprenticeship design fosters Apprenticeship design limits opportunity

opportunities to extend identity through to extend identity: little boundary

boundary crossing crossing experienced

Reification of apprenticeship highly Limited reification of apprenticeship,

developed (eg through documents, patchy access to reificatory aspects of

symbols, language, tools) and accessible practice

to apprentices

**Source:** Fuller and Unwin, 2003:411

Bishop (2017) in his discussion of expansive and restrictive learning cultures points to the importance of co-participation and the institutional affordances that may support or restrict learning. Such affordances are shaped not only by the organisational structure but also by the agency and commitment of employers, managers, work colleagues **and learners as well as by the productive system in which the organisation is placed** (Felder, et al, 2021). In some senses, these processes transcend a crude dichotomy that draws a clear-cut distinction between organisational cultures of learning and offers a more nuanced approach. Large firms may be able to develop specialised training support for their workers, which may not be viable in small and medium sized enterprises. The competitive strategy of the firm will also be salient and will vary over time being shaped by the nature of employer engagement. Thelen and Busmeyer (2008) point to the shift from collectivism towards segmentalism in the German VET system. In the latter, there is a narrow focus on firm specific skills whereas in the former there is a tendency to ‘over-train’, with workers developing a broad range of vocational skills and capabilities. Thelen and Busemeyer (2011:69) comment,

In collectivism employers were encouraged to over train thereby producing

workers with broad and portable occupational skills whereas in the latter [segmentalism] training is organised around internal labour markets and the specific needs of the companies concerned. (Thelen and Busemeyer 2011:69)

Emmenegger et al (2019) remind us that cooperation in collective training systems such as in Germany and Switzerland are vulnerable to disruption. Conflicts of interests can emerge that undermine cooperation. Emmenegger et al (2019) point out that this is an empirical question that cannot be determined by theoretical fiat. However, changes in the competitive regime faced by the firm, in the structure of the labour market, patterns employment and associated costs as well as the affordances of AI, will all have an impact that could render a move towards segmentalism more attractive.

In the same way as on-the-job training may be more or less expansive or restrictive, so too with off-the-job-training. Knowledge-based vocational qualifications align with the former and Anglo-Saxon competence based qualificationswith the latter. Winch (2012:179) reminds us that the German conceptualisation of,

Kompetenzen 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’.

Whilst knowledge and theoretically orientated vocational qualifications might suggest higher levels of employer engagement, we should not forget the potential for a disconnect between the workplace and off-the-job training. Yet knowledge-based TVET may extend beyond a focus on skill-based and theoretical vocational knowledge towards a recognition of more ethical and social justice sensibilities. This has been to some extent a feature of the collectivism of the German dual system in relation to environmental issues and green technology and is embedded in the construction of ‘Kompetenzen’. In this instance, TVET takes on a wider brief orientated by professional and occupational concerns that go further than a narrow focus on the specific needs of a particular employer, thereby leading to a more expansive engagement. At the same time we should note the constraints associated with segmentalism. Clarke and Winch (2007:1) point out that TVET addresses ‘the social development of labour’ and implicitly refer to its role in the production and reproduction of labour power. As a result TVET could develop an ‘ability to appreciate the broader economic and civic implications of occupational [and one might add professional] action’ (Winch 2012:179). Such processes are mediated by learner agency and do serve to open-up the potential for a socially engaged and developmental TVET that engages with collective intelligence. Lacey suggests (1988:93–94)

Skills and talents are concerned with solving problems within already existing paradigms and systems of knowledge. Intelligence has to do with understand­ing the relationship between complex systems and making judgements about when it is appropriate to work within existing paradigms and when it is appropriate to create new courses of action or avenues of thought... Collective intelligence [is] defined as a measure of our ability to face up to problems that confront us collectively and to develop collective solutions.

This argument calls for a broadening and recontextualising of TVET and raises the question of what it means to be an educated member of a particular occupation or profession, as well as what might be the concomitant responsibilities to society (and see Winch 2012:15). There is an articulation here with conceptualisations of distributive justice and access to powerful knowledge (Wheelahan 2010; Young 2008), that is say to, academic disciplines that carry epistemic gains that facilitate understanding and engagement with wider society. Learners’ access to such knowledge enables them not only to evaluate occupational practices but also, and relatedly, those of wider society. Importantly, powerful knowledge needs to be aligned with ‘really useful knowledge’. The recontextualisation of TVET through its engagements with ‘really useful knowledge’, and by default lived experience in its totality, can be aligned with ‘really useful labour’. This type of labour is productive and develops ‘use value’ but exists independent of the wage nexus and the concomitant extraction of surplus value (Avis, 2014, 2018b, 2020). ‘Really useful labour’ may address sustainable development, community and individual well-being as well as questions of social justice in relation to distributional issues and so on (McGrath et al, 2020. Tikly, 2020). It goes beyond the broader economic and civic implications of occupational and professional practice seeking to push these to their furthest. It is a moot point as to whether TVET, or indeed employer engagement with learning, will be able to address in its entirety such a broad agenda. In order to do so it will need to align with a broader politics as well as with progressive social movements. It is important to acknowledge that employer engagement with the development/learning of workers is uneven, varying across countries and regions as well as sectors of the economy (Keep, 2021). In addition, Keep’s (2020) extensive body of work draws our attention to the historic failure of English employers to invest in education and training. Of course, there are exceptions but these are very much in the minority. The employers of Guile’s (2011) aircraft engineers would be a case in point (and see Barack and Shoshana 2020).

The Augar review of post-18 education in England (2019:19) refers to the core purposes of TVET as comprising a commitment to ‘equity and equal opportunity’, ‘democracy and civic integration’, ‘scholarship’, ‘open enquiry and dialogue’, ‘and of course, to maintaining economic prosperity in a world of global competition’. These core purposes can be aligned with the wider duties of employers that call for societal engagement and include obligations towards environmental sustainability that acknowledge and seek to address the climate emergency. In addition, there may be commitments to the communities in which the firm is located and to the inclusion of a diverse workforce that is visible throughout the organisational structure in terms of age, disability, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. However, unsurprisingly these ‘core purposes’ are set on a terrain in which the pursuit of economic prosperity is predicated on competitive and capitalist relations. This consequently places a limit on how far these commitments can be pushed in a progressive direction.

**Thinking about TVET**

Holloway (2019:231-232) recognises the difficulties that surround the ‘refusal to labour’ acknowledging the resulting cracks, fissures and contradictions. He writes, ‘The only way in which we can conceive of an anti-capitalist revolution today is as the creation, expansion, multiplication, and confluence of these cracks’ (2019:232). How then does TVET sit with this analysis? I would like to raise two points. The first addresses vocational cultures of expansive learning on- and off-the-job. Whilst these are framed by the workplace they are not necessarily trammelled by this. Secondly, and earlier, I mentioned TVET’s role in the social development of labour and sought to place this alongside a progressive agenda linked to the development of really useful labour. Holloway (2019:234) refers to the ‘self-antagonistic unity of abstract and concrete labour’, which echoes the distinction between alienated and really useful labour (and see Holloway, 2019:270). What is significant about this argument is the recognition that both forms of labour are entwined in the ‘moment’ of practice. Through our abstract labour we are on-goingly creators of capital, yet concrete labour, although it is entwined with abstract labour, goes beyond this and is more ‘expansive’. In this sense there is an alignment between conceptualisations of concrete labour, really useful labour and the critical capabilities approach to VET (CCA-VET) developed in the global south (McGrath et al, 2020; Powell, 2012; Powell and McGrath, 2019a). CCA-VET seeks to go beyond productivist conceptualisation rooted in human capital theory (HCT) and narrowly economistic paradigms of education and training (Anderson, 2009). CCA-VET addresses, human and sustainable development, placing the well-being of learners, their flourishing and aspirations centre stage. Consequently, (T)VET should be judged,

on the extent to which it expands valued capabilities (i.e., meaningful opportunities and the freedom to choose therefrom) as well as valued functioning (achievements that matter to the well-being of people).

(Powell and McGrath, 2019b:374)

In other words, VET moves beyond a narrow focus on waged labour and asks questions about its contribution to human flourishing as well as the manner in which learners

and their aspirations are addressed. Much of the focus of this approach is directed towards young marginalised learners who encounter multiple deprivations and who aspire towards decent work and social mobility. Importantly CCA-VET places the voice of agentic young marginalised learners at the centre of analysis whilst refusing the narrow individualism and economism of HCT. To address the concerns and aspirations of youth necessitates both collective struggle and structural transformation. For many the desire for decent work and a living wage is paramount with TVET seeking to address these aspirations. Schröer (2015) similarly discusses the capabilities VET should seek to address. Wheelahan’s (2021) points out that for Schröer (2015:368), VET should accomplish three things. Firstly, it should ensure that students have capabilities for work so as to be able to access and enter the labour market. Secondly, it should enable students to undertake further education, building upon their previous studies. Thirdly, it should enable learners to develop capabilities for voice which Schröer (2015:369) defines as ‘the real freedom to express one’s wishes, expectations, desires, etc. and make them count when decisions concerning oneself are made’. However, these aspirations need to be set within a focus on human development, which necessitates a broader politics and educational practice. Schröer, (2015:369) referring to the Workable Project (2010) notes that the salience of voice ‘highlights the significance of developing critical reflection and strengthening democratic participation in society, in particular the ability to debate, public reasoning and the inclusion of traditionally excluded voices’. Such a stance moves beyond traditional conceptualisations of expansive learning (see figure 1).

Tikly (2020:20), whose argument has an affinity with CCA-VET, calls for the development of a counter hegemonic movement, which brings together a coalition of progressive groups orientated towards a vision of a ‘transformative education’ for sustainable development (ESD). However, there is a danger that ESD could be amenable to co-optation and domestication by capital. If this were the case it would undermine ESD’s articulation with an anti-capitalist and potentially anti-work project thereby compromising its moral force. Tikly usefully reminds us of the competing and contradictory visions of sustainable development that in different ways address economic growth and related questions of social and climate justice.

The formation of counter-hegemonic social movements necessitates building coalitions and alliances across a range of constituencies that are differentiated in terms of age, class, race/ethnicity, gender and occupational position, etc. TVET can contribute towards such coalition building. In its expansive version it potentially provides a space for dialogue, engagement and challenge and goes beyond a focus that solely addresses marginalised youth, thus developing a broader and more inclusive stance. In the conclusion to her commentary on Schröer, Wheelahan (2021:unnumbered) writes:

What [does] this mean in practice? Students must learn about debates and

controversies in society but also in their occupation. What are the ethical dilemmas? What is their occupation doing about global warming? What can it do? What are the effects of their occupation on other people and so on? Having a voice means having conceptual and theoretical resources to draw on – this brings us back to curriculum, but one guided by challenging the regulative discourse, and based in thinking about emerging contours of solidarity.

This position, by embracing a more expansive version of TVET, opens up a wider understanding of ‘learning’ similar to that found in adult and community education. Such an orientation is not trammelled by employer engagement or interest but has the potential to move beyond these. By adopting an educative brief marked by collective, deliberative and democratic processes such a practice could lead to the development of really useful knowledge. However, such knowledge and access to it is shaped by the engagement and forms of expertise available to participants in this educative process. Importantly, what constitutes really useful knowledge is open for contestation and is shaped by collective and dialogic processes and thus is intimately related to the question of voice. Notably, these educative processes could enable participants to develop capabilities for waged and unwaged labour both of which are willingly undertaken. Such labour could contribute to community and individual well-being as a form of use value. In addition, it could enable participants to follow any number of educational pathways and to engage in critical discussion thereby developing the capacity for voice. Coalition building and the formation of counter hegemonic alliances necessitates bringing together a diverse a range of groups in relation to cultural notions of class, age, ethnicity and occupational position and so on. It demands a recognition of incommensurate differences and divergent interests that need to be resolved through dialogic processes. Adult and community education could open-up such a dialogic space.

**Concluding discussion**

This paper has sought to problematize and question the notion of employer engagement by exploring discussions about restrictive and expansive cultures of learning in the workplace. Whilst the latter may enable the development of labour, it nevertheless is set within a capitalist framework that limits how far it can be taken. Much the same point can be made about corporate social responsibility. In this case there is the potential for a number of struggles, particularly in relation to sustainable development and the climate emergency, both of which could be linked to an anti-capitalist project. At the same time, it is important to note that these issues are amenable to co-optation. However, we should also acknowledge that capital is not all of a piece being characterised by a variety of forms that can be in tension with one another. The discussion of anti-work enables an exploration of the labour process and the contradictions surrounding this by relating the debate to the broader socio-economic and political context. Whilst anti-work arguments can be debilitating they do raise important questions about waged labour in its current context in which the opportunity to engage in decent work is restricted for the majority of people not only in the global south but also the north. The demand for decent work is clearly an important goal but itself is subject to the balance of power between labour and capital and the latter’s mobilisation of technology to serve its interests (Avis, 2020). At times when the balance of power is in favour of labour, concessions will be made but are clawed back when capital is in a more dominant position. We could reflect on the shift from social democracy, to Thatcherite neo-liberalism whereby the concessions won by the former were withdrawn by the latter.

We may join with the struggle for sustainable development, or environmental justice, or decent jobs or marginalised youth. Of itself, such a politics is valuable but limited and can only take us so far. If these issues are dealt with in isolation they become amenable to domestication, co-optation and can easily be subjected to divisive practices with one constituency being set against another. These struggles need to be brought together and set within the wider socio-economic and political context in order to envisage the possibility of a transformed society. It is here that Tikly’s call for a counter hegemonic movement becomes significant. Such a movement could bring together a number of apparently incommensurate constituencies in relation to class, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, environmental justice and so on. The use of a dichotomous notion of class that omits the dominant class and sets the middle and working class in opposition to one another is problematic. In the same way as technology has been used to deskill the working class, so too with the middle class or more correctly, middling level jobs (Avis, 2020). Importantly, this is an uneven process. Routine elements of professional work will be amenable to automation through the use of AI leaving the more ‘skilful’ elements remaining in place (Susskind & Susskind 2016; Susskind, 2020). Whilst deskilling may be the dominant tendency it exists alongside processes related to re- and up-skilling. Harvey (2014:104–111) refers to Marx’s (1976 [1867]; 1981 [1894]) argument that the logic of capitalism is toward the substitution of machines for living labour. However, in the current conjuncture the key issue is the lack of decent jobs allied to worklessness (Brown et al, 2020).

Political commentators have made much of cleavages within the working class, especially those living in the de-industrialised areas of the North of England, the former red wall constituencies that had supported the Labour party but who in 2019 voted Conservative. This traditional section of the former industrial working class has been contrasted with younger supporters of the Labour party located in metropolitan centres. This latter group comprises gig workers who are Intermittently, under or unemployed, many of whom are overqualified graduates facing restricted or blocked opportunities for social mobility and encounter the lack of decent jobs (Cruddas et al, 2021; Mason, 2021).

If our concern is with the transformation of society and transcendence of capitalist relations, a counter hegemonic movement needs to be formed that can hold together divergent interests and draw on the resources of its constituencies. This would include those who have been culturally defined as the working and middle class who sell their labour in order to survive and who without a wage face financial hardship. The formation of a counter hegemonic movement is the result of numerous struggles that seek to bring together a number of disparate constituencies in an anti-capitalist project. The preceding discussion touched on issues of class though alternatively it could have addressed climate justice, marginalised youth, sustainable development and so on. The building of a counter hegemonic bloc is necessarily an educative, dialogic and deliberative project that mobilises a radical imaginary that has to be struggled over. Such an engagement may emerge and develop from an expansive version of TVET, one that morphs into a form of adult and community education and a broader public pedagogy committed to transformative change. Whilst the technologies surrounding the 4th IR could be mobilised in the pursuit of a socially just society these are seriously constrained by their embeddedness in capitalist relations. It is as well to recall Fraser and Jaeggi’s caution (2018:5),

How “tamed” capitalism can be and still be “capitalism” is largely a semantic issue… at the same time, the excesses and threats posed by contemporary capitalism might give us pause over whether the idea of “taming” capitalism is still adequate.

The point is that reformism can only take us so far, it needs to be pushed to its limit whilst acknowledging Fraser and Jaeggi’s warning.

The significance and specific contribution of the paper is that it brought together a range of debates that address TVET’s future in the light of different tendencies within capitalism. Alongside an analysis of CSR and expansive learning, the paper draws on analyses of the global south, which mobilise the critical capabilities approach and ESD. These analyses are located in a context in which ‘worklessness’ and ‘indecent’ work are pervasive. These arguments are important as they raise specific question about the significance of, and manner in which we think about TVET in the future. They highlight the need for collective and democratic processes that address human flourishing and community well being as well as the contribution of TVET to these(4). It is for this reason that the paper has gone beyond analyses of expansive learning drawing on adult and community education and related arguments that offer the possibility of re-imagining TVET in a manner that does not dismiss its association with learning for waged labour but that goes considerably further in the struggle for a transformed society.

**Notes**

1. VET and TVET are used as equivalent terms. I have used one or other depending on the source of the argument and the terms use by cited authors.

**2. “Education and Employers** is an independent UK-based charity launched in 2009. We want all our young people to become excited by learning and their potential, to see what is possible, and to make informed decisions about their futures.

We work with state schools, employers, the national bodies that represent them and a wide range of other partners including the government and third sector organisations”. (<https://www.educationandemployers.org/about-the-charity/>)

## The Edge foundation’s web site states, “We are the independent foundation working to inspire the education system to give all young people across the UK the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to flourish in their future life and work.

We believe in a broad and balanced curriculum, interactive and engaging real world learning, high quality technical and professional training and rich relationships between education and employers”. (<https://www.edge.co.uk/about-edge/>

3. Biesta (2005, 2022) has drawn a distinction between the language of learning and education with the later terms embodying an expansive and more open understanding of education.

4. It is outside the remit of this paper to address the potential contradictions and tensions that could be present in a post-capitalist society other than to acknowledge that in such a society new forms of antagonism and conflict may arise.

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Figure 1 **The expansive–restrictive continuum**

**EXPANSIVE RESTRICTIVE**

Participation in multiple communities of Restricted participation in multiple

practice inside and outside the workplace communities of practice

Primary community of practice has Primary community of practice has little

shared ‘participative memory’: cultural or no ‘participative memory’: no or little

inheritance of apprenticeship tradition of apprenticeship

Breadth: access to learning fostered by Narrow: access to learning restricted in

cross-company experiences built in to terms of tasks/knowledge/location

programme

Access to range of qualifications Access to competence-based qualification

including knowledge-based vocational only

qualifications

Planned time off-the-job including for Virtually all-on-job: limited opportunities

college attendance and for reflection for reflection

Gradual transition to full participation Fast—transition as quick as possible

Apprenticeship aim: rounded expert/full Apprenticeship aim: partial expert/full

participant participant

Post-apprenticeship vision: progression Post-apprenticeship vision: static for job

for career

Explicit institutional recognition of, and Ambivalent institutional recognition of,

support for, apprentices’ status as learner and support for, apprentice’s status as learner

Named individual acts as dedicated No dedicated individual ad-hoc support

support to apprentices

Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual

aligning the goals of developing the capability to organisational need

individual and organisational capability

Apprenticeship design fosters Apprenticeship design limits opportunity

opportunities to extend identity through to extend identity: little boundary

boundary crossing crossing experienced

Reification of apprenticeship highly Limited reification of apprenticeship,

developed (eg through documents, patchy access to reificatory aspects of

symbols, language, tools) and accessible practice

to apprentices

**Source:** Fuller and Unwin, 2003;411