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# Why young people can't get the jobs they want and the education they need.

**Martin Allen**

**Second edition**



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## Introduction

What was initially intended to be a ‘revised’ edition<sup>1</sup> has ended up completely rewritten. But while so much has happened in the period since, just like the ‘Lost Generation’,<sup>2</sup> large numbers of the current ‘Covid Generation’, despite spending more time than ever in school, college and particularly university, will now have even less chance of getting the jobs they want.<sup>3</sup> Neither will they have had the education they really need. Changes in economy and employment continue to be central to any analysis of education but also determine the context in which education reformers operate, so the opening sections provide a brief historical context, documenting young people’s declining fortunes.

It is no longer satisfactory to see the main divisions within labour markets as being between those ‘employed’ and ‘unemployed’ or even to use the term ‘full-employment’.

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Allen & Patrick Ainley (2012) downloadable [www.radicaledbks.com](http://www.radicaledbks.com)

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Ainley & Martin Allen *Lost Generation? New strategies for youth and education* Continuum (2010)

<sup>3</sup> By this I mean jobs that are appropriate to their level of education and general aspirations, this is not a manual about how to access specific careers!

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Commentators now increasingly refer to ‘underemployment’<sup>4</sup> a situation where significant numbers – many on part-time contracts, but also thousands who work ‘full-time’ want (and need!) to work more hours than they currently do.

But underemployment can also refer to a situation where workers are overqualified for the jobs that they currently perform. Thus, the book describes how a generation of young people remain ‘overqualified and underemployed.’ It debunks the widely held assertion that education serves as important ‘human capital’ for society. Instead it argues that rather than leading to greater prosperity, the increased participation in education, particularly higher education, is the result of a situation of ‘education without jobs’. The traditional avenues from school to employment have broken down, with the only alternative for most young people being to remain in full-time learning, in the good faith that gaining more qualifications will move them further up the labour queue.

The effects of the pandemic on the employment prospects of the Covid Generation will be prolonged, not only intensifying the trends outlined in the opening sections but potentially reshaping the job market still further. With employers having to ‘furlough’ many of their current staff; then just entering the labour force, let alone securing employment at a level commensurate with the qualifications one might have, is going to become increasingly difficult. Furthermore, those sectors of the economy like hospitality and retail that employ large

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<sup>4</sup> See David Blanchflower *Not Working. Where have all the good jobs gone?* (2019)

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numbers of young people, but also allow opportunities for students to find part-time work have been particularly hit.

The pandemic has pushed education to centre stage. With exams cancelled, long running debates about assessment have re-emerged. But now there are new issues –about the role of ‘on-line’ learning for example. Yet it is probably within higher education that young people’s lives have been disrupted the most. While many of those newly graduating (in their gardens rather than with the usual pageantry) have seen their career aspirations slide, those starting or trying to start university courses have been confined to halls of residence or sent home completely, leading to rent strike threats on some campuses. Meanwhile, a long-awaited White Paper on Further Education has barely managed any media attention.

The main argument of the book however is that though the reform of education is necessary, it must be accompanied by new economic policies for young people. Education in the upper secondary and beyond, which is what this book focusses on, should be about much more than just an avenue to employment. But the current uncertainties that young people face, compared to their more fortunate predecessors of the post-war period, has meant that rather than education allowing new intellectual challenges; more than ever ‘what do I have to do to get a proper job’ remains the fundamental issue.

The data, the arguments and by implication the policy proposals in this book are focussed on education and employment in the UK. Yet the breakdown in the post-war relationships between education and employment is now an increasingly global phenomena, even if the extent of these changes varies from

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country to country.<sup>5</sup> I am aware that regularly using the term ‘young people’ ignores significant economic and educational inequalities between them, likewise inequalities in race and gender. A short book like this does not have space to seriously address these.

This edition also dispenses with lists of academic references, which for many are off-putting and inconvenient as they necessitate frequent visits to back pages, thus disturbing the flow of reading. Quoted sources are included as footnotes, with additional information being included where necessary. Website references are correct at the time of publication.

Finally, the great thing about an e-book like this is that it can be amended, extended, or corrected at any time. This remains the intention.

Martin Allen

May 2021.

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<sup>5</sup> See Brown, Lauder and Ashton *The Global Auction. The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Income* (2011).

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## Section 1

### **Why young people can't get the jobs they want.**

**Despite increased emphasis on education, employment opportunities go into reverse.**

Education is widely considered to have a significant influence on the general performance of the economy as well as on an individual's returns in the labour market. In contrast to the physical assets of an enterprise, education is regarded as 'human capital'. The origins of 'human capital theory' can be found in neo-classical economics, where workers are rewarded according to their 'marginal productivity,' the extra contribution they make to a firm's output. Because, it is argued, educated workers add more value, then according to this logic, the more rewards they are justifiably able to command. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (01/02/21) a year of schooling increases individual earnings by 8% per year on average, across advanced and high-income countries.

In the post-war period, though politicians were responsible for setting budgets and deciding how education should be organised, what was taught in schools was largely left to professional educators, many of whom considered that education should be more than just learning about work. However, since the end of the post-war economic expansion, governments have both monitored educational 'standards', but

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also increasingly intervened directly in learning and curriculum issues. A major theme of the ‘Great Debate’ instigated by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in the 1970s was that schools were not providing the skills and aptitudes young people needed in the workplace – these failures in education were, it was argued, a significant reason for national economic decline.

Since the late 1970s there has been a continual increase in centralised control, with harsh penalties for schools that fail to ‘raise standards’. Mrs Thatcher’s government introduced an Education Reform Act<sup>6</sup> greatly reducing the influence of elected Local Authorities over schools. Now, moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a ‘trimmed down’ National Curriculum prescribes what is to be taught in English schools, with Ofsted (the education regulator and inspectorate) directives increasingly specifying how. This tendency reaches to Further and Higher Education, where full funding depends on ‘delivery’ of various ‘core’, ‘key’, ‘generic’, ‘transferable’ and ‘employability’ objectives. Meanwhile, armies of researchers study classroom and curriculum practices in ‘successful’ economies, particularly those in the Pacific Rim, as an array of educational journals devoted to ‘school improvement’ discuss the effects of different types of pedagogy and assessment on student performance.

In recent years, centre-left governments have elevated the importance of education still further. The New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown being the clearest example of this, using ‘education, education, education’ as a political battle cry. According to Brown, the new global

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<sup>6</sup> For the most concise analysis of policy changes, see Ken Jones, *Education in Britain 1944 to the present* (2016 second edition) Polity.

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economy now allowed ‘more room at the top’, for those who were qualified, but because of the disappearance of many low-skilled jobs, there would be less opportunities for those who were not. These developments meant that education effectively became the economic policy of the government, replacing traditional interventionist measures<sup>7</sup>.

Blair and Brown’s promises were based on wider arguments about the changing nature of capitalist production and the role that education can play within this. For Peter Drucker<sup>8</sup> management guru of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the winners in an increasingly globalised jobs market would be the ‘knowledge workers’ employed in the new ‘thinking’ occupations. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was argued that by 2020, approaching 60% of jobs would have either a high or at least a strong degree of knowledge content.<sup>9</sup> This would have significant implications for the class structure as lower paid jobs were replaced with more technically advanced occupations, with the post-war occupational pyramid being replaced by a diamond shaped format, as Drucker’s class of knowledge workers expanded. These changes were also considered to be part of a wider shift from Fordist ‘production-line’ economies to post-Fordism, which required more flexible and multi-skilled working, with, it

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<sup>7</sup> See Footnote 2, p 29/31 for a summary.

<sup>8</sup> *Post-Capitalist Society: Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (1993)

<sup>9</sup> See Allen & Ainley’s *The Great Reversal* (p38) downloadable from [www.radicaledbks.com](http://www.radicaledbks.com)

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was argued, workers taking far more responsibility for decision making.

For some,<sup>10</sup> this created opportunities for a new progressive agenda in education –the growth of post-Fordism meant that the ‘low-ability’ system that supported mass-production and standardisation and a highly developed division of labour, needed to be replaced by a system which developed a ‘collective intelligence’. In particular, achievement barriers had to be broken down, so as to ensure the mobilisation of talent necessary for securing economic efficiency. These arguments fitted well with commitments of Blairite governments to increased rates of social mobility, or at least their desire to make education and society more meritocratic –even if New Labour’s education policies were considered by many practitioners equally committed to reform, to be top-down and authoritarian!

But there is little to suggest that changes to work and employment have taken the direction that Drucker and post-Fordist theory anticipated –the shop-floor workers of 20<sup>th</sup> century manufacturing have not become the new technocrats of a British Silicon Valley! Instead opportunities in the labour market have gone into reverse.

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<sup>10</sup> See Brown & Lauder’s influential paper, ‘Education, Economy, and Society: an introduction to a new agenda’, in *Education for Economic Survival: From Fordism to post-Fordism?* (1992)

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## Not that much room at the top

Though the number of new ‘lovely jobs’<sup>11</sup> highly skilled well paid, secure occupations –from management consultants, business consultants to IT professions, has increased significantly in recent times, this has not been to the extent that work and society have been positively reordered. The Department for Education’s, *Working Futures*’ occupational projections (02/2020) estimated that managerial and professional work will still only make up just over a third of all occupations by 2027. Many more people are described as ‘managers’ and ‘supervisors’, but there are invariably huge discrepancies between a job’s title and the duties and skills that are associated with it. In addition a great deal of professional and managerial work has become ‘bit-sized’, standardised, packaged and broken down into specific tasks<sup>12</sup> or transferred to ‘para-professionals’.

The number of teachers for example, has continued to increase but the number of ‘teaching assistants’ who have taken on duties previously performed by teachers has increased by threefold in recent years, (allowing the ‘teaching workforce’ to grow by

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<sup>11</sup> Goos, M. and Manning, A. (2003) *Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The Rising Polarisation of Work in Britain*, London, London School of Economics.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) identify a trend towards digital Taylorism, where, facilitated by technological advances, previously autonomous ‘knowledge workers’ have ceded power to their superiors.

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around 10%).<sup>13</sup> Likewise, ‘legal executives’ now take over paperwork from solicitors. As a result of changes in technology, but also the introduction of new ‘leaner’ management techniques designed to increase productivity and intensity, a whole range of job variations are now included in Office for National Statistics (ONS) ‘Associate Professional and Technical’ occupations category and are projected to make up around 1 in 6 of jobs in 2027. TUC research<sup>14</sup> also shows that it is those in professional/associate professional and supervisory roles, particularly in the public sector, that are likely to do the most unpaid overtime. (In total, more than 5 million people put in an average of 7.5 hours a week in unpaid overtime during 2018. On average, that is the equivalent to having £6,532 taken out of individual pay packets.)

### **The class structure turns ‘pear shaped’.**

A consequence of the changes described above has been a collapse of traditional ‘middle-work’. ONS projections about the changing composition of employment show the number of Clerical, Administrative and Secretarial occupations falling to just 8.6% of all occupations by 2017 –down from 12.7% since 2016. Clear examples of these types of changes can be found in service industries like banking, a significant recruiter of school leavers in the post-war period and where once, an enormous army of clerical workers and cashiers presided over paper based

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Ainley *Betraying a Generation*, 2016, p 49.

<sup>14</sup> TUC 01/03/19 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/workers-uk-put-more-%C2%A332-billion-worth-unpaid-overtime-last-year-tuc-analys>

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financial transactions but which have now been replaced by on-line bank account access and automated payment clearing. The huge increase in the size of the financial sector in recent years has not been accompanied by anything near a proportionate growth in the size of its workforce. Branches have been shut and automated call-centres expanded.

The ONS cites traditional office work as being ‘high risk’ from automation,<sup>15</sup> while according to Oxford research,<sup>16</sup> for every 10 middle-skilled jobs that disappeared in the UK between 1996 and 2008, 4.5 of the replacement jobs were high-skilled and 5.5 were low-skilled. According to the OECD’s *Employment Outlook for 2020*, in the United Kingdom, new job postings for middle-skill occupations contracted twice as much between February and April 2020 as for low-skill occupations, and 40% more than for high-skill occupations.

In the occupational classifications of sociology, these types of jobs have been labelled as ‘C1’, in contrast to traditional skilled manual work and ‘technician’ employment that has been lumped together as ‘C2’. Yet C2 work has also contracted as the manufacturing sector has declined in relative importance and a smaller number of the population is now employed in ‘skilled trades.’ –projections show these declining to 8.7% of all occupations (down from 11.3% in 2007 ) by 2027. Whereas previously, high levels of trade union organisation ensured that

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<sup>15</sup> Administrative and secretarial occupations being given a 56% probability of being replaced - sales and customer services a 58%. This compared with a 24% risk for professional occupations.

<sup>16</sup> Craig Holmes & Ken Mayhew (2015) *Have UK Earning Distributions Polarised?* <https://www.inet.ox.ac.uk/files/WP2.pdf>

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skill hierarchies and wage differentials remained integral to factory organisation and shop floor culture, in sectors such as automobiles, as production lines have been automated and craft skills digitalised, a minority of technician level workers are able to oversee at least an equivalent level of output – just 2.7 million people now work in manufacturing, less than 10% of the workforce, but with an (above) average salary of £32,500.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence rather than becoming diamond shaped Blairism, it is widely argued that the occupational structure now resembles more of an ‘hour -glass’.

Yet if income is used as an indicator of occupational changes, then arguments about a growing affluence and prosperity within the top half of the hourglass, can be disputed. Compared to a medium income point of £22,400 for 2017/18 only 30% of taxpayers earn half as much again –with only 10% receiving £45,500 and just 5% at £55, 000 for 2017/18 (ONS Percentile pre-tax point data). Income rises sharply after that –with the top 2% earning £85 000. But it is only within the top 1% where differences are as wide as those between the middle and the top tenth salaries and where, as the esteemed Thomas Picketty<sup>18</sup> observes, ‘super managers’ able to set their own pay, are extremely generous at interpreting the value they add! As a result, rather than being hourglass shaped, it could be argued that the occupational structure is moving towards a ‘pear

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.themanufacturer.com/uk-manufacturing-statistics/>

<sup>18</sup> See Picketty’s monumental study of economic inequality (2013) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

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shaped' formation,<sup>19</sup> different to the post-war pyramid, but with a growing number of people, including many both young and highly educated being pushed towards the bottom.

### **A growing precariat and a new poor.**

A major reason for this has been the increase in 'lousy jobs'<sup>20</sup> – at the bottom of the expanding service sector. A 2014 analysis by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found for example, that 22% of UK jobs required no more than primary education (*Guardian* 26/02/14) and that the UK had the highest percentage of low skilled low paid new jobs. In further research about skill requirements,<sup>21</sup> CIPD found nearly 1 in 5 workers reporting no qualifications were needed for jobs they did, while over half reported no more than basic literacy skills were required and only a third identified a need for good numeracy. Surprisingly, considering the arguments about the changes to the economy (above), only 15% reported that higher levels of IT ability were necessary.

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<sup>19</sup> We first argued this in *Lost Generation* (Footnote 2) but see also <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/8.html> . It should be emphasised however that this is a longer-term transformation, in many other respects the class structure still looks 'hour-glassed'.

<sup>20</sup> Goos & Manning above

<sup>21</sup>CIPD (2018) *Over-skilled and Underused. Investigating the untapped potential of UK skills* [www.cipd.co.uk/Images/over-skilled-and-underused-investigating-the-untapped-potential-of-uk-skills\\_tcm18-48001.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/over-skilled-and-underused-investigating-the-untapped-potential-of-uk-skills_tcm18-48001.pdf)

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In her 2018 study, Claire Ainsley<sup>22</sup> argues that the ‘traditional working class’ now only represents 14% of the population, compared to a new ‘precariat’ making up 15%. Guy Standing (2011)<sup>23</sup> with whom the concept was originally associated, went much further, arguing that the precariat is now both a ‘rising’ and the most important class.<sup>24</sup> As well as being paid less, it does not have the employment security that was a feature of traditional working-class ‘core’ work. Nor does it enjoy any ‘homogeneity’ or work-based identity. It also lacks political representation –not feeling part of any solidaristic labour community. For Standing the expansion of the precariat is integral to the global transformation of capitalism. Arguably there are similarities with Marx’s arguments about a ‘reserve army’ of labour and a ‘lumpen proletariat’ which would, Marx argued, both increase as capitalism became more international.

It is not necessary to agree with Standing’s arguments about a new precariat consciousness, to accept that there is a growing ‘new poor’ spreading across the lower rungs of the occupational

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<sup>22</sup> Claire Ainsley (2018) *The New Working Class*. For Ainsley, now a senior adviser in Keir Starmer’s policy team, the working class has fragmented and traditional political loyalties have fractured.

<sup>23</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class* (2011)

<sup>24</sup> Also adopting a ‘fragmented’ class structure, Standing identifies the following classes, an ‘elite’, a salariat, a ‘profician’ made up of professional and technician employment, that covers ‘a bundle of skills’, a shrinking ‘core’ of manual workers –the old working class, a growing precariat ‘flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits’ (p8)

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structure, closely linked to the increased use of ‘non-standard’ employment. Despite significant increases in the statutory minimum wage, the ONS<sup>25</sup> reported 16% of jobs in the ‘low pay’ category, defined as below two-thirds of median hourly earnings, while according to the TUC,<sup>26</sup> 3.7 million people, 1 in 9 of the workforce, are in insecure work due to being among the ranks of low-paid agency, casual and seasonal workers, or on zero-hours contracts. Graphic examples have been provided of the hand to mouth existence of those at the bottom end of the jobs ladder.<sup>27</sup> There has also been the emergence of new types of low-paid Fordism in areas of the service sector. Owen Jones<sup>28</sup> and others have described the dismal experience of call centre workers where computers dictate the time and duration of individual tasks and where operatives have to raise hands to take comfort breaks. Similar accounts have been produced about Amazon style distribution centres.

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<sup>25</sup> ONS. Low and High Pay 2019

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/lowandhighpayuk/2019>

<sup>26</sup> Trade Union Congress (2019). Insecure work Why the new PM must put decent work at the top of his to-do list.

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/insecure-work>

<sup>27</sup> See for example *Breadline Britain* (Lansley and Mack 2015). James Bloodworth’s (2018) account of the ‘hiring economy’ and Tom Clark’s (2014) *Hard Times* - the effects of the financial crash on poverty and inequality.

<sup>28</sup> *Chavs. The demonisation of the working class*, (2011)

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As noted above, alongside low pay and poor conditions many workers also suffer an insufficiency of hours and would willingly work for longer if they were able to.<sup>29</sup> A million part-time workers would prefer to be full time – a reason why unemployment rates have been low, as firms have carried ‘slack’ or surplus labour time, being able to expand production without increasing the size of the workforce. This ‘excess’ supply of labour is, it is argued, the major reason why wages have remained so low.<sup>30</sup> The decline of trade union representation, the continued ‘atomisation’ of work combined with the reduction in welfare entitlements has also meant that workers have had no choice but to ‘take what they get.’ Doing jobs paying at minimum rates, but in some cases taking jobs that pay below.

### **‘Lousy jobs’ in retail and hospitality**

ONS projections show that far from disappearing, traditional elementary occupations like ‘Process, Plant, and Machine Operators’ will continue to represent around 1 in 6 of jobs in 2027, but new low-pay, low skilled, insecure work now makes up a large proportion of employment in sectors like hospitality and retail sectors. Sectors that have grown significantly during the first two decades of the 21st century.

Retail is a labour-intensive sector – adding just 5% to GDP but employed approaching 3 million people in 2017 (more than the manufacturing sector and representing 9.5% of the employed

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<sup>29</sup> See Blanchflower above. (Footnote 4)

<sup>30</sup> See Aaron Benanav above. (Footnote 11)

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population). During that year alone, sector employment grew at twice the speed of employment generally. Over half of jobs in retail are part time – employment data showing part-time work continues to be paid less per-hour than full-time and also being much less secure. Average pay in retail was just under £23,500, well below what ONS calculated as the average yearly earning of £26,400, with less than 1 in 5 employees being managers or senior officials.

### **A reserve army of (young) labour**

Between them, retail and hospitality employ upwards of 6 million people, over 20% of the total labour force –with 30% of the workforce being 25 years or under. Of course, many of these will be full-time students, ‘earning to learn’. The ONS *Labour Market Bulletin* estimated that over 600,000 18-24-year-olds were doing this in the third quarter of 2020. But unlike previously, the division between students and non-students is no longer as clear cut, with many young people moving between the two categories or continuing in low paid employment because of the absence of any other opportunities after completing their studies; a reason why some universities are able to claim that their students easily move into employment after graduation! Economists have used the term ‘frictional unemployment’ to describe a ‘transitional’ period between education and moving into work. For many young people today, this process can be extremely prolonged, if not endless.

The financial crash intensified the drift towards precarity. In the years that followed, though many in the workforce suffered a relative fall in earnings attributed to falls in hours worked,

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young workers (those aged 18-24) suffered the greatest loss – in the order of a 16% fall in real weekly earnings, compared to a 3% fall generally and had barely recovered this lost ground by the time the Covid crisis arrived. The proportion of young people (excluding students) in the workforce also declined significantly in the years after the crash, falling to below 68% in 2011, but then recovering in the period that followed. Youth employment patterns further resemble Marx’s ‘reserve army’ referred to above.

### **Lousy jobs in social care**

Along with hospitality and retail, adult social care is a growing area of employment comprised of around 18,200 organisations across 38,000 care with a workforce of around 1.65 million jobs. The number of people working in adult social care was estimated at 1.52 million in 2019/20; more than in the NHS.<sup>31</sup> With chronic underfunding and with local authorities having to commission care at the lowest possible costs, outsourced private providers of social care have responded by minimising their own costs. Half of the workforce usually work full-time but a quarter are reported as being on zero-hours contracts (24%, or 375,000 jobs). 42% of domiciliary care workers (rather than residential) are on these.

It might be insulting to consider jobs in the social care sector as ‘low-skilled’ –arguably they require much higher levels of dedication and commitment and in many cases providing much greater job satisfaction than in hospitality or retail, but despite

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<sup>31</sup> *Skills for Care Report* October 2020 [www.skillsforcare.org.uk](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk)

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their heroic efforts during Covid, their work is certainly low-paid. The proportion of care workers paid the statutory minimum amount has increased from 16% in March 2016, to 22% in March 2020. In the North of England the social care sector alone accounts for 10% of workers paid below what is considered to be the real living wage.

It is estimated that the staff turnover rate for directly employed staff working in the adult social care sector was 30.4% in 2019/20. This equates to approximately 430,000 people leaving their jobs over the course of the year. But turnover rates amongst those under 20 are around 50%, suggesting that as is the case with hospitality and retail, many younger workers are using this type of work as a way of getting into the labour market, rather than making a long-term commitment. As a result, predominantly female, the average age of the established social care workforce is over 40.

### **A self-employed society?**

A further feature of 21st century labour markets, particularly in the UK and US has been the increases in the number of people ‘working for themselves’. Despite self-employment still constituting a relatively small part of the UK jobs market – just 1 in 7 workers are self-employed – it accounted for 44 per cent of all employment growth between 2010 and 2014. Self-employment, supposedly allowing much greater choice and control over one’s working life, is considered another aspect of a ‘post-Fordist’ work transition and this is certainly the case for a growing number of ‘consultants’ offering their services at inflated rates across both the private but also in the semi

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privatised public sector. The pandemic has provided clear examples of this, particularly in the NHS.

Yet TUC (2018) analysis<sup>32</sup> shows that self-employment is at the heart of the ‘gig economy’, a mishmash of delivery riders, cabdrivers, but also website and app designers that constitute an IT underclass, a highly educated technologically sophisticated generation, living from day to day via a series of disjointed contracts, according to one commentator, a ‘flat-white’ workforce dependent on coffee shops to provide a laptop connection.<sup>33</sup>

Thus there are similar types of polarisation within the self-employed, a minority on regular and growing incomes, with a majority facing low pay,<sup>34</sup> part-time and zero hours working. Outsourcing and privatisation also mean that many are now required to declare themselves ‘self-employed’. The successful court cases, particularly the well-publicised action by Uber drivers to secure ‘worker’ status, while extremely significant, have only scratched the surface of this type of exploitation, which is complicated further by many people holding more than

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<sup>32</sup> Trade Union Congress Two million self-employed adults earn less than the minimum wage. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/two-million-self-employed-adults-earn-less-minimum-wage>.

<sup>33</sup> See Douglas McWilliams *The Flat White Economy: How the Digital Economy is Transforming London and Other Cities of the Future* (2015)

<sup>34</sup> An analysis of 300 couriers’ takings by the *Economist* (03/04/21) found 1 in 3 making less than the minimum wage.

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one ‘gig’ job. Young people do not feature significantly within the ranks of the self-employed. Much is written about encouraging young workers struggling to find employment, to instead, start their own business. Some have, but most lack or are not able to raise the necessary capital to do so.

### **‘The robots are coming’ - Will mass underemployment be replaced by technological unemployment?**

At the beginning of the book it was argued that ‘underemployment’ should now be considered as significant as ‘unemployment’. Official jobless rates, approaching 10% after the financial crash had fallen to under 4% in the early months of 2020 with employment rates reaching an all-time high. But post-Covid, unemployment is expected to be double this, and youth joblessness, which is generally at least twice to three times more, though there continues to be heated debate about how quickly the economy will ‘bounce back’ as a result of a repressed consumer boom, but also to what extent it will be a ‘jobless recovery’. An increasing amount of literature has continued to predict a *Jobless Future*<sup>35</sup> because of the *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, or a *Second Machine Age*,<sup>36</sup> with even

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<sup>35</sup> From Aronowitz and DeFazio’s *Jobless Future* in 1994, to Susskind’s *World Without Work 2020*

<sup>36</sup> Alarm bells about the effects of technological have continued to be sounded by labour and trade union organisations, but also pro-business writers (see Brynjolfsson & McAfee’s *The Second Machine Age* (2014) and in particular Martin Ford’s (2015) *The Rise of the Robots*).

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the Bank of England estimating that 40% of current jobs could be lost in the next few decades. While some professional work is likely to be affected, it is ‘routine’ lower /lower-middle employment that is generally considered most at risk.<sup>37</sup> As noted earlier, office and secretarial work in particular will continue to be ‘hollowed out’, with most of those previously destined for this type of employment being pushed downwards.

Yet the introduction of labour-saving technology does not always occur at a steady, gradual pace. Neither is it even. Instead, it is argued that automation happens in bursts, concentrated especially in bad times, such as in response to periods of economic disruption, or what are referred to as ‘economic ‘shocks’. Even then this does not always happen. In the years after the 2008 financial crash, with labour plentiful, output of the UK economy continued to expand –albeit more slowly, because of the excess supply of labour allowing employers to defer decisions to automate.<sup>38</sup> There may also be significant time lags between investment in new technology and visible positive outcomes – or what economists describe as a ‘J curve,’ with productivity (output per worker) initially falling, before rising again as firms restructure and reorientate. The predictions that increased automation will lead to mass unemployment are also disputed by business and trade organisations. Governments continue to be optimistic and to argue that like the introduction of new technology in the past,

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<sup>37</sup> See Frey & Osborne (2013)

[https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Employment.pdf](https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> See Aaron Ben-Ner above (Footnote 11)

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automation and AI, can be used to supplement rather than replace human labour, if only people have the right skills! It is also pointed out that while particular tasks might disappear this does mean the same can be said about complete occupations.

But it is now argued that the economic downturn caused by the Covid shutdown will lead to far wider employment changes and the replacement of labour. The pandemic has speeded up existing trends in online retailing, with high street shops closing but also supermarket chains now able to shed store staff. According to the McKinsey Global Institute,<sup>39</sup> it is work with high levels of physical proximity that is likely to see the greatest transformation. Though warehouse and ‘on-line’ distribution centres might have found it difficult to step up to the sudden increases in demand, it has been just as difficult, without introducing new technology, to ‘reduce workplace density’ so as to meet the social distancing required by the pandemic.

Unlike the financial crisis, which had far greater consequences for manufacturing, the sectors most affected by Covid are the low paid, labour-intensive service sector industries described above and which young people are disproportionately dependent on. As later sections will show, many of jobs still ‘furloughed’ in sectors most at risk from the expansion of automation may be ‘zombie jobs’ not returning at all, after the job support funding is wound down. According to a Royal Society of Arts report,<sup>40</sup> over 1.9m jobs could be permanently lost as a result of

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<sup>39</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, *The Future of Work after Covid*

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/foundation/new-site-blocksandimages/reports/2020/10/work\\_and\\_automation\\_in\\_time\\_of\\_covid\\_report.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/foundation/new-site-blocksandimages/reports/2020/10/work_and_automation_in_time_of_covid_report.pdf)

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pandemic –a scale comparable to the ‘deindustrialisation’ in the 1980s. Up to 250 000 jobs in hospitality are predicted to be lost to automation (*Financial Times* 15/12/20).

Firms that have tried to stay above water and able to remain open during the pandemic will also be under pressure to automate in the more immediate future. As the RSA report notes, customers now care more about their safety and the health of staff. Machines do not fall ill, they do not need to isolate to protect peers, neither do they need to take time off work. While many companies now planning to economise on office space as more staff continue to work from home in ‘zoomie jobs’ (see below) after the pandemic, will in the future, want to reduce costs still further by subcontracting to cheaper areas and undermining pay and conditions of these ‘core’ workers, it will be lower paid front-line workers, less likely to be unionised and more likely to be young, who will lose out first.

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## Section 2

### **Why young people can't get the education they need.**

#### **Young people in the 21st century 'overqualified and underemployed'.**

If the arguments behind the 'knowledge society' have been debunked and work in the 21st century is as likely to be low-skilled, poorly paid, and insecure; then governments have continued to expand education and to lengthen the amount of time young people are required participate in it. Yet it is questionable whether the politicians ever needed to legislate. Because of declining employment opportunities, the majority of young people were already deciding to 'stay on' with up to 50% of school and college leavers now heading for university.

For young people, or at least all those that can, 'going to uni' has increasingly become the new norm,<sup>41</sup> but this has led to a situation where those graduating are increasingly 'overqualified and under employed'. According to the Office for National Statistics (29/04/19) there is now an employment 'mismatch', a dysfunctional situation where applicants are increasingly 'over-

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<sup>41</sup> I found this increasingly the case in research with sixth form students on business studies courses at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [https://radicaledbks.wordpress.com/ph-d-thesis/?preview\\_id=691&preview\\_nonce=7cf36cb26f&thumbnail\\_id=-1&preview=true](https://radicaledbks.wordpress.com/ph-d-thesis/?preview_id=691&preview_nonce=7cf36cb26f&thumbnail_id=-1&preview=true) (Open University Ph.D. thesis 2004)

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educated'. The ONS data shows a third of graduates with more education than required for the work they were doing. Though numerous studies continue to provide accounts of graduates working in bars, shops, hospitality, and catering, with many choosing to do so before searching for a 'proper' job, the ONS shows 29% of those graduating five years previously, still remaining overqualified for their current employment – compared with just 22% of those who graduated in 1992.

You would think that many amongst the army of graduates leaving university every year, would be asking the question 'is all this really worth it?' – considering the fees now payable and the dependency on loans rather than grants. (It is also the case that obtaining employment in highly sought-after areas like journalism, is likely to require completing at least one unpaid or expenses only, 'internship'.) Indeed, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies,<sup>42</sup> the additional earning power of some graduates (often referred to as a 'graduate premium') in particular subjects and from particular universities is now less than they would have been if they had not attended. But for most, rather than being able to earn what they think they are 'worth' in terms of what they consider their extended education allows them to contribute, it is as much about ensuring their earnings provide relative advantages in relation to non-grads.

In general, the ONS study shows about 1 in 6 of all workers have more education that they need for the jobs they do. Across the spectrum, more employers have been reporting that employees skills are in excess of those required for their current work. The CIPD survey (above) also reported almost a third of respondents (30%) needing a degree to get their job but

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/wps/wp1606.pdf>

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considering lower levels of qualifications were sufficient to do it. Nearly half of workers in the CIPD survey reported being mismatched in their roles, with 37% rating themselves as over-skilled and only 12% considering they lacked the necessary skills for their work.

### **A skills match or a ‘labour queue’?**

Rather than a mismatch between employers needs and young people’s skill capabilities, it is more useful to use a ‘labour queue’ approach. Here, the transition from education to work is as much a social process as a technical one. For example, despite their perceived desires for candidates with specific capabilities outlined above, yet at the same time never able to acquire accurate information about specific workplace ability, employers will rely on educational qualifications as ‘proxies’. In other words they will select candidates with qualifications considered to have high status in education system and if possible, those gained at more prestigious institutions.

Using a labour queue approach can help to explain why, for example, classics graduates from OxBridge, rather than business studies graduates from post-92 universities<sup>43</sup> are overrepresented in top City firms. It shows that education is primarily about acquiring what should be considered ‘cultural capital,’ rather than specific occupational or technical abilities. It also allows us to understand that, rather than nations being prosperous because of their workforce being better educated, the

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<sup>43</sup> Institutions, previously polytechnics and teacher training colleges that were given university status as a result of 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and those established subsequently.

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more prosperous they are, the more education becomes important as a means of differentiating people for employment. This does not mean that individuals cannot improve their position in the labour queue as a result of increasing their qualification stock, but by its very nature, this can only be at the expense of somebody else in the queue. In this respect rather than being a 'welfare good' or creating future positive benefits for society, in the way that economists have theorised, educational qualifications, or rather sought-after top grades are becoming 'zero sum' goods. They allow the holder to benefit from a place at a prestigious university, but at a cost to others.

As a result, those responsible for overseeing the awarding of public qualifications –in this country the GCSE and A-level, will seek to prevent 'grade inflation' so as to maintain public confidence in 'standards'. Reducing the number of top grades can be attained by making examinations 'harder,' but also restricting the number that can be awarded. In England and Wales for example, a 'comparative outcomes' formula has been imposed to ensure that unless differences in the ability of one particular cohort are clearly proven, performance levels are tied to those in the previous year.

As will be examined later, trying to improve the chances of more socially disadvantaged children at the back of the queue, has been central to making education more equal. But policy makers tend to ignore the fact that those nearer the front are not going to forfeit their advantage willingly. They have the power and the social advantages to extend their advantages still further. Specific examples of this will be examined in the concluding section along with the implications for education and social mobility.

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The idea that labour market entry is based on a labour queue, rather than a skills match also sits well with the ‘credentialist’ theories of American sociologist Randall Collins.<sup>44</sup> For Collins, apart from the role education plays in developing mass literacy and other basic skills, there is little or no connection between the intrinsic characteristics of qualifications and their usefulness in the workplace. On the contrary, the rate of increase in credentials gained, has far exceeded the increase in the technical requirements of the workplace. In contrast to human capital theory, where differences in wage levels reward skills that are in short supply, for Collins they are invariably the result of the ability of powerful occupational groups to maintain an ‘exclusivity’ through pushing up entrance requirements at regular intervals and, as with Picketty’s ‘super managers’ (above), effectively determining their own wage levels.

But if qualifications are key to securing a position in the labour queue, it could be argued that they are not the only determinant. Despite being educated to a higher level than any previous generation, employers and particularly the organisations that represent them, continue to complain that young people are not ‘work ready’ when they leave the classroom. The CBI 2018 Education and Skills annual report, *Educating for the Modern World*, found 44% of employers agreeing with this and called for the reform of the curriculum with a new emphasis on broader more generic skills such as ‘resilience’, communication, and problem-solving. The Department for Education’s 2018 *Employer Perspectives Survey* produced similar findings with

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<sup>44</sup> Collins work is hugely underrated or rather largely undiscovered in this country. See in particular *The Credential Society. An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (1979) now reissued as a legacy edition.

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just 58% of employers considering 18-year-olds work ready and only 68% of those leaving further and higher education.

But it would be surprising given the distance and the differences between classroom learning and the workplace, if anybody could be completely work ready! What employers say they want and the basis on which they recruit their staff are completely different matters. Employers views are as much stereotypical as they are based on concrete evidence. Having said this, employers may be right when they complain about young people lacking ‘experience,’ but with schools and colleges increasingly finding it difficult to arrange work-placements for students and a decline in the number of ‘Saturday jobs,’ then a Catch-22 situation emerges.

When there is excess labour available (a ‘reserve army’) young people may experience much greater employer discrimination compared to other groups. Women with childcare responsibilities and wanting to work during evenings or weekends, might be seen as more ‘reliable’ than young people, while adult labour from overseas (fast being depleted as EU workers return home post-Brexit) may be considered more ‘subservient’.

There is also evidence that ‘retired’ older people are returning to work in larger numbers and are seen as being more ‘mature’. While many older workers continue to enjoy social benefits from working, many others continue in employment beyond pensionable age, joining the reserve army out of economic necessity (many women have suffered the result of major changes in pension entitlement for example). According to Department for Work and Pensions statistics (20/11/2020), the average age of labour market exit has increased over the past

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two decades. In 2000 the average age for men was 63.3 years old, increasing to 65.2 years old in 2020, an increase of 1.9 years. Over the same time period, in 2000 the average age of exit for women was 61.2 years old, increasing to 64.3 years old in 2020, an increase of 3.1 years.

### **From jobs without education, to education without jobs**

It is often forgotten that until the 1970s, up to 40% of school leavers had few if any qualifications (the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) had been an attempt to rectify this) yet continued to make relatively straight forward transitions to the workplace –and often, as early as possible without any of the ‘vocation preparation’ now considered necessary. As Paul Willis (1977)<sup>45</sup> described in his classic study, school played a minimal role in *Learning to Labour* for ‘work ready’ young people.

Working class young people (particularly boys) often followed relatives into traditional manual employment in the locality, but a substantial number (again also almost entirely boys) followed the apprenticeship route, (not to be confused with the current version described below) into skilled employment. Invariably this became a ‘time serving’ exercise, designed to maintain the position of established trades, though also requiring some form of day release attendance at a further education (FE) college. At their peak, 25% of school leavers started apprenticeships every summer. Of course these transitions remained possible because

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Willis *Learning to Labour. How working-class kids get working class jobs* (1977)

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of post-war (both Labour and Conservative) government commitments to ‘full-employment’ (on average the jobless rate remained around 1.5% until the 1970s) and where ‘you could be out of one job on Friday and into another by Monday’. A very different situation to that currently, where individuals are expected to ‘skill-up’ and take advantage of ‘lifelong learning’ to ensure ‘full-employability’ and where opportunities to ‘job-hop’ are a thing of the past.

Although it has been in long-term decline since Britain enjoyed the title of ‘Workshop of the World’, the importance of manufacturing in providing unskilled and semi-skilled employment for school leavers in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain cannot be overemphasised. Until relatively recently, continuing in full-time education beyond what was legally required, remained the prerogative of the middle-classes –and a section of the working-class parents who aspired to join them. As economic prosperity began to wane however, the nature of employment changed as ‘youth jobs’ dried up. This was linked to a further decline in manufacturing, particularly ‘shopfloor’ employment, even if, in 1979 the sector still made up 28% of economic output and employed 26% of the workforce.

During Mrs Thatcher’s first term in office, almost 1 in 4 manufacturing jobs disappeared, while in the years that culminated with the financial crash, a period when the City boomed and the housing market ‘bubbled’ manufacturing slumped further. Five years after the crash, the UK had only 11% of its workers in manufacturing compared with an EU average of 17%. While outsourcing and automation contributed to this, proponents of ‘globalisation’ (like Brown and Blair above) continued to argue that there would be plenty of other

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opportunities for young people, provided they worked hard and gained new skills.

As the youth training schemes that had been put in their place became no more than *Training Without Jobs*,<sup>46</sup> working class youth were pushed back into schools and colleges. The absence of appropriate jobs meant ‘earning’ was replaced with ‘learning’. As noted above, the raising of the ‘participation rate’ – in effect the raising of the school leaving age to 17 and then 18 years in 2015, should be considered as much a reflection of this trend as it is a cause. (In sharp contrast, when the leaving age was raised to 16 in 1972, many working-class parents opposed it.) Department for Education figures show that between 2015 and 2016 the proportion of 16–18-year-olds in education and work-based learning (WBL) increased to 81.9%, the highest level since consistent records began in 1994.

Thus, consistent increases in the number of examination passes, particularly for GCSE, in which by the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 60% of 16-year-olds achieved five, are not entirely the result of government and Ofsted expectation that schools ‘raise standards’. In contrast to their post-war predecessors, young people now had a ‘recession consciousness’, aware that without what is now considered a ‘basic’ level of performance, one’s future transition to the labour market will be severely compromised.

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<sup>46</sup> Dan Finn *Training Without Jobs. New Deals and Broken Promises* (1987)

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## **The myth of vocational education**

Nevertheless, the vocational courses that developed in school sixth forms and FE colleges in response to increased staying on rates, were developed around a new pedagogy. Originally associated with the Manpower Services Commission's Youth Training Schemes of the 1970s, it was considered to reflect the changing requirements of 'post-Fordist' work described earlier and with a message that unemployed youth needed new skills if they were to find work. Referred to as the *New Vocationalism*, it encouraged 'learning through doing' rather than 'listening to teacher' with the importance of project-led and group work emphasised. As well as demonstrating specific competencies, the courses also required students to meet standards in a range of 'core skills.' The advocates of vocationalism, considered it a challenge to the rigid subject based academic curriculum that was, they considered, increasingly out of date in a changing world<sup>47</sup>

One of the most successful vocational awards, at least in terms of the number of student enrolments, was the General National Vocation Qualification (GNVQ) which evolved from workplace based NVQs. To complete it, students were required to submit portfolios of 'evidence', based on assignments set and then 'verified' by their teachers. But critics argued that merely recording what students could do, prevented any real 'understanding' of what they were doing. Rather than the

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<sup>47</sup> See in particular Gilbert Jessop's *Outcomes: NVQs and the emerging model of education and training* (1991)

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development of autonomous learning, there was, the critics said, evidence of over dependency on textbook learning and of teachers drilling students on how to pass the mandatory multi-choice tests included to confirm their knowledge of the vocational area in which the GNVQ was being awarded<sup>48</sup>. It was also argued that teachers spent as much time assessing and recording ‘outcomes’ as encouraging student learning skills.<sup>49</sup>

Because the new vocationalism was introduced in response to working class young people remaining in schools and colleges due to the absence of work (a new ‘business studies generation,’<sup>50</sup> not considered suitable for academic study), it was not surprising that rather than challenging the stature of academic learning, as its creators intended, vocationalism developed alongside and failed to acquire anything like the recognition enjoyed by GCSE and A-levels. Employer representatives were co-opted to working parties, overseeing syllabus design, but there is little evidence that individual employers understood, or paid much attention, let alone had an interest in recruiting applicants with them.

Consequently, students on the vocational pathway route continued to find themselves further down the labour queue.

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<sup>48</sup> For an overview and critique of GNVQ see my doctoral thesis at [www.radicaledbks.com](http://www.radicaledbks.com)

<sup>49</sup> One of its harshest critics, Professor Smithers likened vocational assessment to ‘like testing every bullet in an armament factory’.

<sup>50</sup> See my Greenwich University 2010 paper ‘The New Business Studies Generation’.  
<https://education-economy-society.com/category/the-business-studies-generation/>

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Rather than providing new opportunities for entering the workplace, particularly into the (now disappearing) ‘middle jobs’, that technical qualifications used to lead to and with the post-92 universities desperate to recruit, students who had not been able to secure university places via the A-level route, found vocational qualifications provided a ‘second chance.’ Admissions data shows that 30% of HE applicants have a vocational qualification making up at least part of their application (80% of school or college leavers have studied at least one A-level). But even if, despite advanced and higher-level vocational qualifications having official ‘parity’ with academic certificates, there has been little evidence of leading universities acting on this.

As a result, vocational qualifications were renamed and redesigned to increase their status, image and their ‘marketability,’ with more ‘applied’ academic learning included and external assessment under examination conditions. As part of New Labour’s *Curriculum 2000* proposals for example, GNVQ, was repackaged as a Vocational, then an Applied A-level, creating a ‘worst of both worlds’ situation, failing to draw in those on the traditional A-level pathway and alienating the very students it was originally designed for (those with lower GCSE results). The vocational qualifications that followed GNVQ –for example, New Labour’s Special Diplomas –were developed along similar lines, but went on to become (expensive) white elephants.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See my 2008 pamphlet with Patrick Ainley, *A new 14+ Vocational Diplomas and the Future of Schools, Colleges and Universities*. Downloadable at [www.radicaldbks.com](http://www.radicaldbks.com) and my *Forum* article <https://radicaldbks.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/forum-1.pdf>

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## **Twenty -five T-levels coming your way.**

Similar fears are now being expressed about new T (Technical) –level awards, intended to be ‘middle’ qualifications that sit between academic certificates and the ‘reconstructed’ apprenticeships described below. T-levels were a product of yet another ‘review’ of vocational education, this time by Lord Sainsbury and then launched in a 2016 White Paper. There will be 25 different T-levels by 2023. Each officially equivalent to 3 A-levels and with no real opportunity to combine other types of study.

Appearing to have much in common with Labour’s Specialist Diplomas referred to earlier, there are important differences. The earlier Diplomas started at 14, but incoming Coalition education minister Michael Gove abolished them in his first week of office, wanting a traditional academic curriculum for every student until 16. As a result, the T’s are strictly post-16 qualifications. Like previous vocational qualifications the T levels provide ‘core’ knowledge of a particular economic sector, but they are more occupationally specific – there will even be a ‘Cultural Heritage and Visitor Attractions’ part of the Creative and Design route. But there will also be longer, compulsory work placements. (A required 45 days during the 2-year course duration, even though the shorter placement in current vocational qualifications are often difficult to arrange, because of an increased reluctance or the inability of employers to provide them.)

The original intention was that T-levels would be delivered in new specially designated colleges, but now it appears that all

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post-16 providers can apply to offer them, subject to guarantees on student numbers, having a good Ofsted report, and able to show they are financially sound (!) So, by September 2020 around 50 institutions (mostly FE colleges, one or two schools and a ‘business partnership’) were lined up for delivery of the first three areas, Digital, Construction and Childcare, despite calls for delay and most teaching having to be online. Another seven T-level routes will be rolled out the following year (though it is widely assumed this will take much longer) while the remaining three can only be completed through an apprenticeship. All T-levels are now being overseen by the newly established, but still largely unheard-of ‘Institute of Apprenticeships’,<sup>52</sup> which will have the words ‘technical education’ inserted in its title, in order to reflect its elevated status!

Though T-levels will be graded as either Pass, Merit or Distinction, they will also qualify for UCAS points. Even if as Department for Education guidance states, ‘the core purpose of a T-Level is to prepare students for the labour market’, this is probably the only way to sell them to those young people planning to follow the traditional academic route instead. The funding implications will catch many people’s attention. Starting with a significant slice of the £400 million additional funding promised to 16-19 education for 2020-21 and probably approaching £½ billion over the roll out period, goes a long way to explain why providers are not hesitating to sign up. Yet college managers and teacher trade unions remain concerned

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<sup>52</sup> See my 2016 blog post on the White Paper and the Institute of Apprenticeships. <https://education-economy-society.com/2016/10/31/welcome-to-the-institute-of-apprenticeships-and-technical-education/>

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about whether budgets are adequate and whether the T-levels will be funded by diverting resources already promised to the FE sector.

### **And new Higher Level Technicals...**

Conservative governments have continued to emphasise the importance of technical and vocational qualifications. The 2019 Augar Review –the first government sponsored review of higher education since the 1963 Robbins Report demanded greater ‘value for money’ from Higher Education, by creating closer links between university courses and employment,<sup>53</sup> or rather for those courses offered by the post-92 universities.

The much-delayed 2021 *Skills for Jobs* Further Education White Paper published under the auspices of accident-prone education secretary Gavin Williamson continues this theme. While there is an ample supply of graduates, it complains there are not enough people taking sub-degree technical qualifications. To facilitate this, the White Paper, which attracted only fleeting media attention, sets out plans for securing greater employer involvement in further education through skills and productivity boards and other types of partnerships, as well as in course design –something also previously emphasised by New Labour at the launch of its ill-fated diplomas, but which never properly materialised. The main theme of *Skills for Jobs* however is the consolidation but also extension of the vocational route through the announcement of a new round of Higher-Level Technical

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<sup>53</sup> See my blog post <https://education-economy-society.com/2019/06/07/review-of-post-18-education-and-funding-first-impressions/>

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qualifications to be delivered by the Further Education sector, the first of which (in Digital) will be launched in 2022, enabling progression from the post-16 T levels outlined above.<sup>54</sup> Potential students, like their university counterparts will be able to access loans and grants through a new ‘Lifelong Learning Guarantee,’ though this will not be available until 2025.

Given the arguments in the first section of this book, the fact that the White Paper contains no analysis of current changes in work and occupation (apart from some contradictory footnotes) might appear rather strange. It is not, if you accept that its real aim is political, aimed at reducing the numbers going to university through promoting vocational and technical routes as ‘alternatives’. This is part of a prolonged *Great Reversal*<sup>55</sup> of progressive education policy by Conservative governments, in this instance, reversing New Labour’s plans to widen participation in HE. Yet young people know very well which sorts of qualifications are more likely to get them further up the job queue and that degrees are increasingly necessary to get any sort of secure work. This is why so many vocational alternatives have already been shunned. As a result, despite the huge increases in fees designed to ‘price out’ student numbers, those who can, continue to flood to university.

The Tories want to return universities to ‘what they used to be’ –essentially elitist institutions, organised through the Russell Group and backed up by the post-war ‘campuses’ with an

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<sup>54</sup> See my blog post [www.education-economy-societymy.com/2021/01/22/williamsons-white-paper-skills-without-jobs/](http://www.education-economy-societymy.com/2021/01/22/williamsons-white-paper-skills-without-jobs/)

<sup>55</sup> See *The Great Reversal* Martin Allen & Patrick Ainley (2013) Downloadable from [www.radicaledbkis](http://www.radicaledbkis)

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emphasis on high status, theoretical knowledge for the few and accessed through a smaller number of ‘established’ A-level subjects. But there is also concern about the huge amount of student debt (some estimates put it at 60%) that will not be repaid and therefore have to be written off.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the intended time frame, there are some practical questions about the proposed Higher Technicals, notably who will award them? This is particularly the case if universities, under pressure from Augar, also decide to offer them. But more importantly questions need to be asked about whether they will be any more successful than the short-lived Foundation Degrees? These were also designed to be equivalent to two years of a degree qualification for the growing range of ONS’s Associate Profession and Technical occupations referred to earlier. But allowing progression to a full degree, most students decided on this option and so the two-year version faded. In many other respects, regardless of Augar’s proposals there are more than enough ‘vocational’ degrees being offered in higher education, where business related subjects are still by far the most popular. So employers have plenty of graduates to recruit from.

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<sup>56</sup> In this respect and rather ironically, the very graduates that Augar has in mind, those on liberal arts degrees at post 92 universities, will, because of much worse employment destinations, be the least likely to be required to make payments –rather than not getting ‘value for money’ they are effectively receiving free higher education.

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## **Apprenticeships: real alternatives or young people, or another great training robbery?**

The Further Education White Paper makes much of the ‘success’ of apprenticeships. It is true, as noted earlier, the apprenticeship system in the UK has enjoyed a long history stretching back to the middle ages and provided a major avenue of employment opportunities. But they declined on the back of a major fall in manufacturing jobs, resulting in vocational learning relocating to the classroom. Yet, by the mid-1980s, apprenticeships had been ‘reinvented,’ receiving unanimous support across political parties. Reintroduced in 1994 as ‘Modern Apprenticeships’, in 2015 Prime Minister David Cameron, citing two million apprenticeship starts with the Coalition, promised three million more under a future Conservative government.<sup>57</sup> Carrying on with the usual mantra and promoting them as a response to a ‘skills gaps.’

But the number of starts have fallen from a 2010/11 high point of 520 000 to just under 400,000 for the academic year 2019/20. Starts for August 2020 to January 2021 being 20% down on the year previously.<sup>58</sup> Until relatively recently it has been adult workers, existing employees being reclassified as ‘apprentices’ to allow employers to claim training allowances, sometimes

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<sup>57</sup> See my research on apprenticeships at [www.radicaled.bks](http://www.radicaled.bks). Also a *Forum* 2015 contribution <https://apprenticeshipresearch.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/apprenticeships-in-england.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships/2020-21>

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entering bogus contracts with private sector trainers, that have made up the majority of starts. Even if some of these more elicit practices have been stamped out, with training agencies now having to demonstrate greater rigour and authenticity, at the end of the 2019/2020 academic year, the over 24-year-olds represented 45% of new starts, with only 1 in 4 by those under 19 and just 1 in 12 by 17-year-olds. Requirements for offsite learning have been extended, but in contrast to the apprenticeships of before, less than half of apprentices undergo this in further education colleges –private providers continuing to play a key role.

The White Paper also ignores the fact that until very recently the majority of apprenticeship starts have been at Intermediate/level 2 or GCSE equivalent, a stage that most school and college leavers have already reached. Barely lasting a year and without guarantee of progression, these types of apprenticeships were never going to create the ‘high skills’ economy, to which governments aspired. Further measures to improve quality standards have been introduced. The Higher apprenticeships, championed by the White Paper and equivalent to university entrance level have expanded, they now constitute around 30% of starts, but only a small minority start directly from school or college. Instead there have been examples of firms using apprenticeship funding for existing management trainees on Masters degrees.

Apprenticeships were also considered integral to rebuilding the UKs industrial base, but two thirds continue to be in business and social care (engineering and manufacturing representing just 11%). Starts in building and construction have continued to be disappointing considering this is a sector where there may be real skill shortages. This says much about the nature of the

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building industry, organised around small businesses and with its emphasis on sub-contracting, as well as a reliance of skilled labour from abroad.<sup>59</sup>In recent years there has been a ‘levy’ on larger employers, who are then expected to use this to cover their training costs, while smaller employers not subject to the levy pay 10% of the cost of training with the government contributing the remaining 90%. This policy has been criticised for being inflexible, start rates have fallen since its implementation and funds paid into training accounts have remained unspent.

UK apprenticeships remain far removed in quality from those of Germany –admired by many and cited as a reason for the lowest rate of youth unemployment in western Europe. But even if, as is claimed by its admirers, German technical education is to a more advanced standard, more importantly the German system has been based on a ‘social partnership’ between employers, government, and trade unions, where an apprenticeship serves as a ‘licence to practice’ in an occupation, rather than being linked to a particular ‘job’ as in this country. Some 25% of German employers provide apprenticeships; those with more than 500 employees are legally required to do so. This type of highly organised and state directed system has not been considered appropriate for an economy like Britain’s, which unlike other European countries remains without a serious national industrial strategy and has far less regulation of its labour market. Thus, apprenticeships in Germany, despite a

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<sup>59</sup> See my University of Greenwich research with Patrick McGurk  
<https://apprenticeshipresearch.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/apprenticeships-in-england.pdf>

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growing globalisation of the labour market, still provide an important route to employment, with a smaller proportion going on to university.

Yet, the changes to the occupational structure described in the opening section (the increased polarisation between ‘lovely’ and ‘lousy’ jobs and where as a result, more have been pushed downwards rather than levelled up) weigh heavily on the working of a successful apprenticeship system. Many employers simply do not need apprentices. Work is either not skilled enough to warrant extensive training, or as argued earlier, there are plenty of graduates for employers to recruit from. If apprenticeships really had been a success and provided a proper alternative to continued academic study, it is very unlikely that there would have been a need for the Further Education White Paper. Likewise if there were proper well-paid jobs for young people, there would not have been any need for specific vocation education either. A different type of labour market in a different type of economy with a different education system, would mean that young people would not have to think that university was their sole option.

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## Section 3

### What price the Covid Generation?

#### **Young people struggle to keep the jobs they have .**

After slowly recovering from the effects of the financial crash, youth unemployment began to creep up as the economy was shut down, with over 12% (1 in 8) of 18–24-year-olds not in full-time education officially out of work in the period December 2020 to February 2021, double the rate of joblessness generally. Half of those made redundant because of the pandemic have been under 25 – but they constitute only 20% of the total workforce (under 35s have made up 80% of redundancies).<sup>60</sup> As already noted, young workers, particularly those with lower-level qualifications, but also students working part-time, are massively over-represented in sectors like the hospitality and retail sectors – sectors that have suffered most from the Covid restrictions. Around 70% of Covid job losses have occurred in hospitality (350 000) and almost 200 000 in retail (*Guardian* 03/04/2021).

According to the Institute of Employment Studies<sup>61</sup> by December 2020, the number of 18–24-year-olds in work had

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<sup>60</sup> The ONS labour market report for Feb 2021 reported that 58% of the reduction in pay roll numbers over the previous year were under 25s.

<sup>61</sup> IES *Labour Market Briefing* Feb 2021

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fallen by 8% while benefit claims had risen by 125%, with 1 in 7 young people now claiming, compared with a rate of just over 1 in 20 for the population as a whole. The number of people on ‘low pay’ (earning less than two thirds of medium hourly pay) in 2020 also increased to 27%, indicating reduced hours given to lower-paid employees, driven by Covid working restrictions. Young workers featured prominently in this category<sup>62</sup>

### **Zombie jobs and zoomie jobs.**

But it is also estimated that sectors like hospitality and retail may be carrying up to a million ‘zombie jobs’—jobs from which employees have been furloughed,<sup>63</sup> sometimes for an entire year, but may well not exist after the job support measures end. These zombie jobs stand in marked contrast to the millions of ‘zoomie jobs’ mostly administrative, managerial, and professional employment that has been carried out from home<sup>64</sup> (the number of employees earning 1.5 times the median wage has remained unaffected and only 1 in 10 of workers in this category furloughed). But if home working continues, which it

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<sup>62</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/lowandhighpayuk/2020>

<sup>63</sup> According to the New Economics Foundation 09/04/21 850, 000 jobs were in danger of either disappearing or suffering cuts in pay and hours when furlough measures stopped in September.

<sup>64</sup> See my blog <https://education-economy-society.com/2020/06/23/zoomie-jobs-and-zombie-jobs/>

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surely will for many people for at least for part of the week, and offices remain closed or only partially staffed, then more jobs in city centres, employing significant numbers of young people in shops, bars and cafés could be lost. As employers, trying to protect existing staff, stop hiring new ones,<sup>65</sup> the million or so young people trying to enter the labour market face mounting barriers. Also, when so many jobs are being done from home, entering the labour market becomes more difficult still.

### **A Kickstart?**

In response to rising youth unemployment, the Johnson government launched its ‘Kick-Start’ programme, a £2bn plan to finance 250,000 six-month work placements for unemployed under-25s,<sup>66</sup> according to *FE News* (12/11/20) 20,000 potential placements involving 4000 employers had been registered by the start of November. Meanwhile, apprenticeship opportunities (as noted, already experiencing a decline) have continued to

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<sup>65</sup> According to the Institute of Student Employers all types of entry-level roles have been reduced this year because of the coronavirus. Employers are hiring 32% fewer people onto apprentice or school leaver programmes than planned been cut by 12%.

<sup>66</sup> The Kickstart Scheme provides funding to create new job placements for 16- to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit at risk of long-term unemployment. Employers can apply for funding which covers: 100% of the National Minimum Wage (or the National Living Wage depending on the age of the participant) for 25 hours per week for a total of 6 months employer National Insurance contributions. A government press statement 25/1/21 claimed that 120.000 potential placements had already been agreed.

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dwindle, with only a third as many starts this year, for those under 19, just 5000, and less than half for those aged 19-24. This has led to government promising a full wage subsidy for the first three months 50% for the next six months and 25% for a further three. More recently ‘flexible apprenticeships’ – where places are spread across more than one employer have been proposed – but no more details have emerged as yet.

### **Not a good time to be a NEET.**

Published youth unemployment figures are often misleading because they include full-time students who are looking for temporary jobs, but the figures for NEETs, those ‘not in education, employment or training’, provide a clearer picture of the difficulties facing younger people, particularly those towards the lower end of the labour market. As well as young people looking for work, though not necessarily claiming benefits, NEET rates include those recorded as ‘Economically Inactive’, not looking for work, but not in education or training. This covers young people with long term medical conditions and care responsibilities, but also many who have simply withdrawn from the official labour market.<sup>67</sup>

Between October to December 2020, an estimated 11.6% of all people aged 16 to 24 years were NEET.<sup>68</sup> This represented a 0.6 percentage rise the previous three months, when lockdown

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<sup>67</sup> Many of these continue to demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills, regularly buying and selling ‘things’ on-line and off!

<sup>68</sup> ONS statistical release (04/03/21).

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measures were reimposed. An estimated 13.2% (230,000) young men between 16 to 24 years were economically inactive<sup>69</sup> up by 38,000 on the previous quarter, the highest since October to December 2013. For young women, the proportion was 10.0%. The percentage of those aged 18 to 24 years who were NEET was 13.8%, in other words around 1 in 7. According to the National Youth Agency charity<sup>70</sup> an additional 1,000 opportunities would need to be created every day in order to return NEET levels to pre-pandemic amounts by October 2021 and avoid a 50% rise in NEET young people.

## **Graduating in their gardens**

At the other end of the labour market, the thousands of students ‘graduating in their gardens’ have found recruitment culled (two thirds of university leavers have seen application paused or

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<sup>69</sup> In theory, because of the legal requirements about staying in education or training until 18 there should be no NEET or unemployed 16/17-year-olds. But the current practice is that all young people 'leave' school at the end of year 11 and then have to apply for post 16 education -- there are lots of examples of students not being accepted by their own sixth forms and there are certainly no automatic transfers. Local authorities are technically responsible for policing the whereabouts of all ‘leavers’ but certainly don’t have the resources to do so. Likewise, if you do leave for employment, neither are there likely to be checks on whether this involves statutory training (only about half of the 58 000 16/17-year-olds shown to be in employment in the April 2021 ONS labour market bulletin) are on apprenticeships).

<sup>70</sup> <https://nya.org.uk/resource/outside-looking-in/>

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withdrawn) with predictions that even three years after having left full-time education, the employment prospects for today's graduates will be 13 % worse.<sup>71</sup> Last year's graduates will also be in competition with this years, with employers also benefiting from 'experienced' applicants, those who previously had jobs but then lost them as a result of the pandemic. According to the Institute of Student Employers, internships and placements will also be reduced by almost a third and 68% of firms have cancelled work experience and taster opportunities. ISE has reported almost 40% of students are now worried they will not be able to get a job at all. Meanwhile, with so many uncertainties, interest in public sector opportunities, has continued to increase, while enrollments on law conversion courses and for post-graduate teacher training are soaring. Many more will be registering for Masters courses.

### **A calamitous year on campus.**

According to Institute of Fiscal Studies calculations, by the time children and young people returned to school in March 2021, most would have lost at least half a year of normal schooling. The IFS, as it does very well, has attempted to quantify this – arguing the average young person will be losing £40,000 in income over their lifetime. In total, this equates to an astronomical £350bn in lost lifetime earnings across the 8.7 million school children in the UK.

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<sup>71</sup> *The Financial Times* (08/03/21) reported almost 1 in 8 of recent graduates was unemployed in the third quarter of 2020, almost double the average rate for this group over the past three years.

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But it is university students who have suffered most visibly. Despite initial fears of universities that after last year's (2020) A-level debacle many might defer their places (some estimated up to 25% of A-level students might do this) young people have continued to flock to higher education –increased participation in HE was also a feature of the years after the financial crash, confirming that being able to possess a university accreditation, especially if it is from an institution higher up the pecking order, continues to be attractive against the backdrop of an economic downturn.

Government, focussing almost entirely on trying to keep schools open (no doubt hoping that this would allow parents to get back to the workplace), appeared to give scant thought to the consequences for infection rates of thousands of students moving across the country to the confined spaces of campus residencies. Universities, either locked into contracts with private sector providers, or as businesses, reliant on 'customers' bringing in money after weeks of campus closure, did little to prevent this with some actively encouraging students to believe that there would be only partial disruptions to university life.

As a consequence, rather than experiencing the excitement of a 'freshers week' hundreds were confined to rooms and without proper facilities. Partying students have been rounded on by tabloid newspapers and organisers threatened with expulsion by university leaders. Wanting to make new friends, or just improve levels of social contacts, new students faced fines breaking social distancing regulations. Lancaster University fined five students £300 for breaking coronavirus guidelines and recorded 63 students having received a warning or penalty by

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early October 2020.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, Oxford Brookes handed out 20 £100 fines for second time offences, and the University of Manchester issued 334 warnings with 35 students receiving police fines. *The Guardian* (18/03/21) reported police officers visiting halls of residence late at night to check on compliance.

But having been sent home early for Christmas and now facing months of on-line learning, public support for a ‘stranded generation’ remained high. Student resistance also began to grow. ‘9k 4?’ posters decorated windows while rent strikes starting on several campuses. At Manchester University students pulled down a fence that had been erected overnight and manned by security guards. But universities have been reluctant to make more than partial refunds. (Manchester refunded the equivalent of 4 weeks accommodation.) With universities closed again from December 2020 through to the spring of 2021, one survey<sup>73</sup> reported that 35% of students had moved back with their parents and that only 40% had spent more than three months of the academic year in student accommodation. In all, around £1 billion had been wasted on empty rooms in flat shares and halls of residence – about £1600 per student. At the time of writing campus facilities are only operational for practical and laboratory work and will not fully reopen until after many courses have finished.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://thetab.com/uk/lancaster/2020/11/18/lancaster-university-have-fined-five-students-300-for-breaking-social-distancing-measures-22292>

<sup>73</sup> *Save the Student*  
<https://www.savethestudent.org/accommodation/national-student-accommodation-survey-2021.html#ludent>

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Hardly surprising, during the pandemic, young people’s mental health has declined with levels of anxiety rising. According to the Princes Trust 1 in 4 young people felt “unable to cope with life” increasing to 40 per cent among those not in work and that those with challenging home lives, few qualifications and little confidence – would be pushed furthest away from the jobs, as the labour market becomes even more competitive. The Trust also reported 10% had self-harmed, increasing to 14 per cent of those unemployed. 1 in 5 had experienced panic attacks. According to a Mind survey,<sup>74</sup> during the pandemic, 18–24year olds’ mental health has been disproportionately affected by concerns about work (65% of 18–24s compared to 51% of all other age categories), difficulties accessing mental health support (49% against 30%), loneliness (78% against 59%) and not seeing friends or family (88% compared with 73%). According to a paper in the British Journal of Psychiatry, 7% of children had considered suicide by the age of 17 and almost 1 in 4 said they had self-harmed in the past year.<sup>75</sup> According to *The Lancet* medical journal (11/01/21<sup>76</sup>) more than a quarter of children (aged 5–16 years) and young people (aged 17–22) reported disrupted sleep and 1 in 10 (5.4% of children and 13.8% of young people) reported they often or always felt lonely.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/5929/the-mental-health-emergency-a4-final.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/21/uk-17-year-olds-mental-health-crisis>

<sup>76</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30570-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30570-8/fulltext)

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The National Union of Students has reported increased levels of ‘politicisation’ because of the hardships its members have faced during the pandemic. This may be undoubtedly the case but, despite the actions of those in Manchester (described above) and elsewhere, it is important not to overstate the extent of the rebellion and it would be premature to see the emergence of a new student movement.<sup>77</sup> On the contrary, rather than the main organiser the NUS has been little more than an onlooker. This says as much about the changing aspirations, potential vulnerabilities, but also the atomisation and fragmentation of the current generation students, compared to their privileged predecessors, as the organisation itself – now facing ‘disaffiliation’ threats. Unions representing teachers and lecturers, while sympathetic to students, have concentrated primarily on the work-place safety of their own members. With the lock down in place, the University and College Union (UCU) called for all teaching to remain online till the end of the academic year, not something a majority of students would have wanted to hear.

Campaigners will want to support students in their demands for tuition fee and rent refunds, just as they have backed calls by teachers for this year’s GCSE and A-level exams to be cancelled – which they now have, replaced by teacher assessment. Yet with the economy predicted to be suffering the effects of the pandemic even by the time of the next election, the scarring effect on the Covid Generation both economically and emotionally could also last years. As argued in the final section, a wider social and economic programme for young people,

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<sup>77</sup> See my contribution to *Post-16 Educator. Issue 102*  
[www.post16educator.org.uk](http://www.post16educator.org.uk)

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stretching well beyond the reform of education, will be required.

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## Section 4

### Alternatives

#### **Policies for young people and the economy.**

Compared with the financial crash, calls for a programme of economic ‘austerity’ have been subdued. Indeed, almost all the international ‘big players’ –from the OECD and World Bank to the European Commission, have called on governments to continue to protect jobs and to maintain, or even increase levels of public spending and state support. In the UK, employers organisations like the Confederation for British Industry have taken the unusual step of issuing joint statements with the TUC, to this effect, and been cheered on by columnists at the *Financial Times*. The return to an ‘interventionist’ economic model and an increased role for the state has been turbo charged by President Biden’s emergency \$1.9 trillion Covid rescue plan. As a consequence it is being predicted that the US economy will return to its pre-pandemic level of output by early next year, if not before. Now Biden’s proposals for infrastructure expansion are being compared to Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s.

Yet for the majority of the English Conservative Party, fiscal consolidation can only be regarded as a temporary emergency programme – rather than a major return to the ‘Keynesian’ era. But even if this is the case, then for the moment and to fend off increased unemployment, UK Chancellor Sunak has delayed detailed discussion about tax rises and used the 2021 budget to extend the job protection measures, meaning that up to 2 million workers will have been furloughed for well over a year. As yet, Labour’s new

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leadership, perhaps surprised by Sunik’s efforts; expecting a more immediate return to ‘austerity’ but reluctant to identify with what ‘old fashioned socialists’ used to describe as ‘a programme of public works’ has struggled to articulate any clear alternatives it might have for how the economy and labour market can be re-organised post-Covid.<sup>78</sup>

But for others, the ideas of ‘Modern Monetary theory’(MMT), though still a long way from becoming an accepted alternative, are no longer being dismissed as ‘lunacy’ and becoming more influential, being debated on the pages of the *Financial Times* and even partially endorsed in editorials in the centre-left leaning *Guardian*. Returning to Keynes arguments that the economy should not be likened to a household and that budgets do not need ‘balancing,’ Modern Monetary Theory reminds us that because countries like the UK are ‘currency issuers’, they can never run out of money and as a result, be unable to repay the ‘debts’ incurred by their governments. Neither does the level of spending depend on raising money through taxation –though a commitment to progressive taxation is considered essential to reduce inequality.

MMT can sound abstract, even unreal, conjuring up images of a ‘magic money tree’<sup>79</sup> or of governments dropping ‘helicopter money’<sup>80</sup> and stoking up inflation. But even if under the stewardship

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<sup>78</sup> See my blog post <https://education-economy-society.com/2021/01/18/labour-and-the-economy/>

<sup>79</sup> <https://education-economy-society.com/2020/03/24/there-is-a-magic-money-tree-or-a-forest-after-all/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://education-economy-society.com/2020/03/26/helicopter-drops-and-the-magic-money-tree/>

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of George Osborne and then Phillip Hammond, the UK government, was arguably the most neo-liberal, aiming (though failing) to reduce National Debt through balancing the books, the Johnson government has effectively already paid for the pandemic through money creation. In short, the Treasury has followed the traditional practice of selling bonds on the markets to finance the Covid measures, but the ‘independent’ Bank of England has then bought the majority of them back (this is generally referred to as Quantitative Easing). As a result the proportion of the National Debt held by the Bank, in reality, the government itself, has continued to increase to over 30%. Pro MMT economists have argued that a similar model could be used to finance a Green New Deal and as a consequence create new jobs for young people.<sup>81</sup>

But, stimulus or no stimulus, the economy is unlikely (despite the hopes of Westminster leaders, the confidence of Bank of England officials<sup>82</sup> and upbeat forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility, of a ‘roaring twenties’ as those less affected by the economic crisis spend over £175 billion of accumulated savings) to immediately ‘bounce back’ after Covid. Even if vaccination

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<sup>81</sup> Better still, why not issue ‘youth bonds’ to underwrite a more specific programme for youth? If people know how their savings will be used, they are more likely to participate.

<sup>82</sup> The Bank’s Chief Economist Andy Haldane has claimed that with billions of pounds of accumulated savings, the economy was turning “a decisive corner with enormous amounts of pent-up financial energy waiting to be released, like a coiled spring”.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/12/british-families-ready-to-spend-billions-says-bank-of-england-man>

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progress allows a significant recovery during summer of 2021,<sup>83</sup> the economy is not going to be the same one as before. As discussed earlier, with so many people still furloughed, future re-employment in those sectors most affected, cannot be guaranteed. This means that as well as a fiscal stimulus, ‘supply-side’ policies, including significant interventions by the state, are also needed. Particularly measures aimed at young people.

### **A job guarantee programme not a ‘Kickstart’.**

With ministers now admitting that only a small proportion of planned Kickstart places have actually materialised and building on calls by Gordon Brown’s *Alliance for Full Employment*; more campaigning organisations are backing a job guarantee scheme to replace the government’s programme. One where young people are given proper contracts, paid above the statutory living wage, where all placements would include compulsory training entitlements and most significantly, where schemes would not be restricted to those on universal credit – but available to everybody not in full-time education.

Sunak’s Kickstart falls well short of New Labour’s *Future Jobs Fund* (FJF)<sup>84</sup> which, against the backdrop of the financial crash argued (against the economic orthodoxy of the time) that if jobs were not available then they would need to be created. FJFs designers

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<sup>83</sup> The *Financial Times* (16/04/21) reported UK job postings were back to pre-pandemic levels and reported quicker than predicted increases in consumer spending.

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/future-jobs-fund>

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calculated that after projected tax revenues were factored in, the initiative would also pay for itself –but more importantly, prevent the long term social and psychological ‘scarring’ effects of a prolonged period of idleness on a young person. Also, unlike Sunak’s programme, in the FJF, public sector organisations played a major role –relying on private sector employers, who’s first priority is to protect existing employees against an economic downturn, to create placements is not going to be sufficient and certainly cannot be relied upon to create ‘good’ jobs. The FJF also stipulated, or at least aimed, to ensure that the new jobs should be ‘socially useful’ – even better, a proportion of them had to be ‘green’.

Of crucial importance in any new job creation scheme would be the involvement of Local Authorities, for example by introducing quotas for the employment of young people, as a condition of Council contracts, purchasing agreements, planning permission and grants. LAs could also oversee local employment networks, where vacancies could be matched to young people’s needs and (to borrow language from the financial sector) the LA would act as a ‘provider of last resort’ for those still without employment.

But a job guarantee programme for young people, indeed any job guarantee programme for that matter, can only work as part of a wider social and economic reconstruction – in particular, part of the Green New Deal (above) combined with a plan to upgrade and ‘professionalise’ the health and social care system. Discussion about the exact details of these projects is well beyond the scope of this short book, but within them, the process of employment transition will be fundamental. We cannot just train young people in ‘new’ skills and then just hope for the best. Rebuilding around a Green New Deal and a new health and care system would also allow the creation

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of permanent employment<sup>85</sup> for young people, rather than just the six-month placements associated with job creation schemes. A Green New Deal would, for example, require a major reorganisation of the building and construction industry, as noted earlier, a sector that has not been conducive to training young people and increasing the number of apprenticeships.<sup>86</sup> Organised differently, with a rewriting of apprenticeship standards around the requirements of green jobs, a *Friends of the Earth* report argues that spending £10 billion could create 250,000 green apprenticeships over the next 5 years, and more than cover the knock-on effects of increased youth unemployment. If all young people currently without a job remain unemployed for a year, it could result in £39bn of lost wages in the UK over the next two decades.<sup>87</sup>

As stated, any successful job guarantee scheme would necessitate much greater state involvement in labour market regulation –even the establishment of a new ‘Labour State’<sup>88</sup> to replace the current free market and privatised version. This would be a completely new style of governance but could be combined with the ‘old’ Welfare State.

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<sup>85</sup> Green New Deal UK argues that a total of 1.2m jobs can be created in the UK during the next two years, This is sufficient to more than compensate for the shorter-term employment consequences of covid <https://www.greennewdealuk.org/updates/green-jobs-for-all-report/>

<sup>86</sup> See McGurk & Allen above

<sup>87</sup> Friend of the Earth *An emergency plan on green jobs for young people* <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/download/green-jobs-report-emergency-plan-green-jobs-young-people>

<sup>88</sup> See my blog post <https://education-economy-society.com/2018/09/14/towards-a-new-labour-state/>

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Unlike the 1970s, when Labour governments tried to persuade trade unions to accept wage restraint through a ‘social contract’, in current times, when with a few notable exceptions, trade unions are increasingly ineffective and where employers dictate the terms, a new social contract could be introduced to ensure not only that pay keeps up with inflation and workforce productivity, but also to regulate conditions of employment and hours worked and to ensure entitlements to education and training are implemented.

### **A youth basic income and a learning entitlement.**

During Covid and as a result of the £billions paid out through the furlough, the arguments for some form of basic, now generally referred to as a ‘universal basic income’ (UBI) has achieved a new prominence. But this is still hotly contested and divides many progressives. It is opposed by many on the traditional Labour Left for example, who consider a UBI will encourage employers to lower wages still further. But a regular payment to young people might be less contentious. A basic payment to young people could be part of a Youth New Deal, or Youth Contract. This would also include a guarantee and statutory right to free post-school education and training, able to be accessed at the discretion of the individual in sharp contrast the current government’s plans in the 2021 further education White Paper (above) for life-long learning loans but which would be funded in the same way as current university fees and loans.

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## **Can there be a different sort of education?**

It is a serious misunderstanding to think we can ‘educate’ our way back to economic prosperity. Young people’s situation will not significantly improve without wider economic changes. Without these, as has been the case in previous economic crises, teachers and lecturers will instead be blamed for education failing to ‘deliver’. This does not mean we should not campaign for an alternative education programme. But we need one that is different to that of the present (but doesn’t just long for the past). One that can run alongside economic reconstruction.

To begin with, we should reject the ‘over-education’ thesis, the argument that the amount of young people entering university needs to be reduced and that instead we should concentrate on developing the craved for ‘intermediate’ skills. You may be ‘over-qualified’ due to a lack of jobs, but you can never learn too much (!) Lifelong entitlement to free college and university participation must be a key part of the Tertiary level of the National Education Service, proposed by Labour. Further education colleges should be about more than improving employment opportunities, even if many students attend them for that reason. Rather than becoming ‘Business Centres’ as proposed in the FE White Paper (above), colleges should be local public resources, including serving as hubs for creative and recreative activities, democratically accountable to students and the local community. It might be too late, or even inappropriate, to bring colleges back into LEA control but they should work in cooperation not in competition with school sixth forms (most of which are no longer under LEA control) to ensure broad based, not duplicate, tertiary provision. There is no reason why they cannot share facilities and operate on a multi-site basis.

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## Learning and the curriculum.

Across post-16 education we should continue to promote an alternative curriculum entitlement. Different types of learning should be integrated initially through an ‘overarching’ certificate but also moving towards a ‘common core’, effectively abolishing the ridged ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ tracks that dissect Level Three (Advanced) learning.<sup>89</sup> This will make it easier for stand-alone qualifications to dissolve into a wider baccalaureate award allowing a ‘good general education for everybody’.<sup>90</sup> But where specific vocational courses continue to exist and where they are popular with both students and staff, (like for example, the ‘tried and trusted’ BTEC qualifications, which the GNVQs, Special Diplomas and now T -levels were designed to supersede !) they should offer a much broader curriculum (as is the case in Germany) with opportunities to study social issues related to employment. For example, how to achieve a better balance between work and leisure, learning about the role of trade unions, examining the benefits, and dangers of increased workplace automation; would all be essential parts of the good general education referred to above, as would learning about self-development and well-being for all students.

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<sup>89</sup> Arguments about a 14-19 continuum have, I would argue, now run their course as a result of the changes implemented by Tory governments during the last decade and the rejection of Dearing’s pathways approach from the start of key stage 4 and compulsory continuation in education until 18.

<sup>90</sup> See my arguments for a General Diploma in Allen & Ainley (eds) *Education after the Coalition* (2013) [www.radicaledbks.com](http://www.radicaledbks.com)

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But we also need to reform the content and style of ‘academic’ education. It has been over ten years since Michael Gove’s White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* set out a more subject, more contents-based style of learning, one that moved away from a ‘transferrable knowledge and skills’ approach, supported by the teaching profession and advocated by many educational bodies; but which Gove considered responsible for a fall in ‘standards’.

By implication this also meant moving away from a student-centred curriculum and the recognition that knowledge is ‘socially constructed’, reflecting a variety of viewpoints rather than, as in traditional curriculum models, something that is essentially ‘fixed’ or ‘final’ and handed down from one generation to another! Gove’s curriculum priorities were reinforced by the ‘English Baccalaureate’ also announced in his White Paper but hardly the sort of baccalaureate once promoted by progressive reformers. Instead it was essentially a wrap-around qualification incorporating 5 GCSEs from tightly prescribed areas; English, maths, history/geography, science, and a modern language. Serving as a new A-list of subjects for measuring school performance levels.

It is also the case that alternative curriculum entitlements, if they are to have real weight, will have to be imposed across the education system, preventing Elite institutions opting out and promoting their own alternatives (the increased popularity of A-levels after Labour’s limited *Curriculum 2000* reforms (p37 above) led to leading private schools regrouping around the Cambridge U). ‘Selecting’ universities like the Russells and some of the country campuses would also be inclined to set their own entrance tests resulting on schools and aspiring students putting more emphasis on these and a danger that a new ‘comprehensive’ baccalaureate style qualification would become an also ran certificate.

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Providing an education young people really need, would require changes to the relationship between students and teachers. The Gove curriculum reforms were also designed to restore a more traditional style of teaching – ‘from the front’ instruction, where the teacher has complete control of the learning process (although in reality, anybody who has any experience of the classroom would understand that this can never be assured!) the pace that lessons take place and the ‘outcomes’ that are to be achieved. Because lessons would now follow a prescribed pattern, it also enabled an still tighter form of teacher management. A teacher’s professional competence could be reduced to a tick box exercise against a lesson observation template.

### **Opportunities for real personalised learning**

These changes have put a block on attempts to develop real personalised learning and the promotion of independent study for older students, where teachers could use their skills as ‘tutors’ or ‘facilitators’. It cannot be denied that the array of new technologies available are an invaluable resource for the development of personalised learning – in contrast to the type of online instruction forced by the pandemic where in most cases rather than standing in front of a room of desks, teachers simply delivered their prepacked lessons by Zoom, leading to even greater boredom amongst students. (Despite this however, some teachers have reported that as they have used this form of communication more, they have been able to become more innovative.) The problems are as much to do with the nature of the school curriculum as they are the limitations of technology. This should not be allowed to detract from a recognition of the potential of digital learning to be key part of a new approach.

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Schools, particularly secondary schools, continue to be organised around industrial ‘Fordist’ principles, where large numbers of students follow inflexible timetables, moving from room to room every hour and cramming themselves into often inadequate buildings which then remain closed for 150 days a year. Of course, education is not and never can be like the new ‘zoomie’ work referred to earlier, that as a result of the pandemic has moved to people’s homes. Home schooling during the pandemic flagged up the inequalities in access to both hardware and online access with many students relying on their phones. But even if these problems are resolvable, learning away from the classroom requires having access to personal space and if done at home, the ability to shut oneself off from others –something not possible for many young people. Learning should also always have a social and collective aspect. But for older students an alternative ‘hybrid’ approach is possible, for many, even beneficial. The arguments in *Lost Generation?*<sup>91</sup> about how learning could be organised in less formal manner for older students and where a network of learning centres could complement official school structures remain relevant.

### **Exams and assessment after Covid.**

The Covid crisis has forced us to revisit issues around assessment. With the summer exams now suspended for a second year, an entire cohort of GCSE and A-level students have been spared these protracted agonies. Yet because of the ‘high stakes’ nature of these exams, uncertainties have been rife. Damaged by the last-minute U-turn on the ‘algorithm’ last year, the government has taken no chances, announcing in February that the 2021 grades would be

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<sup>91</sup>See *Lost Generation?* ( p 151/2 ) Footnote 2

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based on teacher assessments. While the majority of practitioners and many students appeared to welcome this ( more than a few being aghast to hear Tory politicians like Nick Gibb, if only temporarily, reversing their opinions about teacher assessment) alarm bells rang amongst education leaders, managers and administrators who quickly pointed to dangers of ‘grade inflation’ (particularly if the ‘comparative outcomes’ formula referred to earlier, where results are not allowed to significantly deviate from the previous years, is not going to be used).

Because educational qualifications have now become ‘credentials’ –wanted for their exchange rather than any intrinsic ‘use’ value, in other words, as argued above, for what they can buy in terms of a future position in the labour queue or accessing particular universities, then whatever the form of assessment used, it will always be ‘high stakes’. Thus, *The Guardian* (12/03/21) reported that headteachers fear teachers, now responsible for assessing their students in England are increasingly being aggressively lobbied by parents “with pointy elbows and lawyer friends” to boost their children’s GCSE and A-level grades this summer and widening the attainment gap further than if externally set examinations had been in place.

So ironically when assessment becomes ‘high stakes,’ external exams are considered by some, to have strong advantages. With clear marks schemes and performance criteria they also encourage students to accept that success or failure is essentially the result of their own efforts, in other words it performs an important legitimisation function! More student-centred approaches to assessment have only really survived in qualifications that have been created as alternatives for ‘non-academic’ students, for example the vocational qualifications described earlier, but also the CSE examinations of the 1970s. It is because these qualifications were

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‘low stakes’ that alternative approaches could be tolerated.<sup>92</sup> Because schools have become ‘exam factories’ or, for one US critic ‘credential mills’<sup>93</sup> then under pressure to meet performance targets and parental expectations of good grades, they will increasingly try to devote as much time as they can to achieving these. As a result, space available for extracurricular or enrichment activities is always likely to be compromised (arguably enrichment programmes and social education are now more extensive in the private schools, not facing the same restrictions and with greater resources). Extra curricula activities may well be constrained further post-pandemic, with proposals being discussed to make school days longer and extend school terms to enable students to ‘catch-up’ lost exam preparation time.<sup>94</sup>

### **‘Closing the gap’—education and social mobility.**

Reformers have continued to emphasise the importance of social background and social origin on affecting school performance, arguing that ‘education cannot compensate for society’. The effects of social and economic deprivation on educational performance have been starkly exposed during the pandemic has, as noted, enforced ‘home schooling’ has widened the attainment gap further. Yet there continues to be significant interest in how differences between schools can widen gaps in performance. As a result, as well as

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<sup>93</sup> See Stanley Aaronowitz’s *Against Schooling* (2006)

<sup>94</sup> See my blog <https://education-economy-society.com/2021/03/18/closing-the-gap-education-and-social-mobility/>

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continuing to oppose the continuation of grammar schools, campaigners have correctly highlighted the negative effects of Academies and Free Schools, which are the most recent examples of increased differentiation in state education which originates from the 1988 Education Reform Act and then developed further through New Labour's 'choice and diversity' agenda.

But competition between schools also fits an education system where students' main aim is to gain the qualifications and grades that improve their prospects in the labour market. As a result, the main reason for 'choosing' one school rather than another is because of its exam results and league table position. Though generally no longer allowed to explicitly choose their students on the basis of academic performance, schools with higher league table positions rely on more socially advantaged families being able to 'choose' them. While parents, or rather those with the 'pointy elbows' (above) can and do challenge admission decisions, for those able, moving to a new house to be close to a 'good school' is a much safer strategy. There is even evidence of increasingly desperate families being prepared to join church congregations to secure places at higher performing voluntary aided schools. And of course there is always the private sector!

So education's ability to increase social mobility continues to be overestimated. Much of the upward mobility during the post-war years should be understood as 'absolute' mobility –where white collar/professional work was expanding and providing space for working class children to move into this new 'middle'. In comparison, 'relative' mobility –the chances of those further down the education queue moving up, compared to those in front of them, has remained extremely limited. Today, as a result of declining employment opportunities and an increasingly polarised

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occupational structure, the threat for many is instead downward mobility, earning less than their parents.

Serious discussion about how to close the attainment gap should continue, but it must be recognised that to have any success it requires radical action. There is no doubt that a significant redistribution of funding to schools based on their social intakes – going way beyond the current ‘pupil premium’ – would help reduce inequalities. A different type of curriculum and smaller class sized would also help! But other policies would also need to be considered. For example, imposing quotas on schools to ensure social mixing, limiting access to private tutors for those who can afford to pay for them, even cancelling out the benefits of moving into a particular catchment area.

These measures, particularly if abolishing private schooling was included, would go much further than anything even considered before and may be considered infringements on the personal freedoms enjoyed in Western democracies. While most people are in favour of wealthier individuals handing over more of their income in tax, many would balk at the suggestion that any young person (no matter how socially advantaged) should have restrictions placed on their education, considering it a form of ‘levelling down’!

## **Reforming universities**

It is disappointing that reformers continue to concentrate their efforts almost entirely on inequalities in the school system. As a consequence the selective role of higher education has survived serious challenge. Indeed elite universities now play a far more significant role in ensuring labour market placement and progression

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than any school does. Where you have studied is often as increasingly important as what you have studied.

Perhaps the reason for a lack of action is because many of education's most committed school reformers remember their time in what was then a very different university system, with fondness; leaving home, 'growing up' and moving to far away campuses for example and maybe making it difficult to comprehend a more localised and locally accountable university system? Some of the most liberal academics also now congregate under the banner of 'defending academic freedom' and as a result continue to oppose more 'government meddling' in their sector. Confusing their 'independence' with a lack of accountability and local democratic provision.

Yet it is essential that universities should not be allowed to hide behind their 'research ethos' at the expense of teaching. The huge increase of independent think tanks and other bodies in recent years has meant that some of the most dynamic research has been able to be done more quickly outside of the bureaucratic cultures of universities. Rather than the new post-92 institutions trying to emulate those further up the pecking order, elite institutions could learn a lot from these universities, but also from the further education colleges discussed earlier, about how to embed themselves in the communities around them.

The model of further education colleges espoused by the 2021 White Paper has been rejected earlier. Indeed, it might be more appropriate for colleges to move closer to the HE sector, working alongside universities to provide steppingstones for adult returners along the lines that Access courses now do. This would not necessarily cut across the closer relations with post-16 education suggested earlier and could further extend their community base.

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## **Conclusion: changing education, changing work.**

The endless struggle for qualifications continues. More so a situation has emerged where education has become akin to running up a downwards escalator<sup>95</sup> and where you must move faster and faster simply to stand still. As the mass of students ‘play by the rules’ and continue to work their way through school, college, and university, they increasingly experience disappointment and a lack of confidence in educational institutions. This surely is the real crisis in education, but campaigners have yet to see it this way!

Reformers should of course continue to support and encourage the individual efforts of their students but also understand how things could be different for young people as a whole. As argued throughout this book, if young people are to get the education they really need, one that encourages but also enables their own personal and intellectual development and extends their social awareness, as opposed to one where they must jump through hoops to have any chance of securing at least a degree of economic security; a new relationship between education, the labour market and the economy is required.

Yet for this to happen, there also has to be a new relationship between work and society more generally –changes to its organisation, content, and, linked to campaigns for reduced hours, the amount of work that people are required to do. While the job creation possibilities of a Green New Deal have been documented

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<sup>95</sup> See my blog <https://education-economy-society.com/2013/09/11/education-has-become-like-running-up-a-down-escalator/#comment-2260>

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above, the green economy of the future will ultimately be one in which automation and advances in technology; rather than seen as a threat to employment, are used to create a society where social progress and future prosperity is not dependent on maximising archaic notions of ‘full-employment’ however ‘good’ the jobs may be. Like proposals for a UBI, this is a contentious issue for many of on the ‘Left<sup>96</sup>’ and is something well outside the remit of this short contribution. But it must also be part of the horizons of education reformers and campaigners. This book has described the ‘commodification’ of education as a result of rampant ‘high stakes’ credentialism. This cannot be challenged effectively without a similar decommodification of the workplace.

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<sup>96</sup> See the recent book by Labour MP Jon Cruddas *The Dignity of Labour*, but also his critics.



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