Foundation GNVQ – an Invisible Cohort?

Abstract

This paper considers the implications of current government education policy for those learners within the English post-compulsory sector undertaking GNVQ Foundation (level 1) programmes. It argues that within the current policy context, a lower value is placed on young people working towards certain credentials than on others, and that this value is determined by the potential economic value of the qualification. Therefore, those young people undertaking Foundation (level 1) programmes are perceived to be of less value than those undertaking more mainstream programmes at level 2 and above. In doing this, current education policy is effectively creating an invisible cohort of young people whose needs are not understood, and who, constrained by social, cultural, class and educational barriers are likely to form the underclass within the 40/30/30 society described by Hutton (1995). Finally, this paper raises questions about how some of these issues might be effectively addressed, and calls for a wider debate on these issues as one means of finding a greater level of esteem for the young people undertaking learning programmes at level 1.

<u>Foundation GNVQ – an Invisible Cohort?</u>

<u>Introduction</u>

Post compulsory education in England has undergone major upheavals over the past 20 years, and increasingly vocal demands have been made for the development of a system which offers both parity of esteem across academic and vocational qualifications and equality of opportunity to all learners. This rhetoric has co-existed with a policy context which has become increasingly driven by economic imperatives.

Debates around parity of esteem have tended to focus on the divide between A levels and their vocational equivalents at level 3, and education policy has increasingly emphasised the perceived need to increase the skill and educational levels of workers (DfES 2002; DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b). Together, these phenomena have served to create a situation where the focus of policy and debate has been confined to those learners functioning at level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and above, although significant investment in basic skills in recent years has begun to address some of the needs more mature learners functioning at lower educational levels and who have few or no academic credentials. Largely excluded from such policy and debate have been those young people progressing from compulsory education to foundation GNVQ (level 1) programmes in a post-compulsory setting.

Level 1 qualifications such as Foundation GNVQ may be found towards the bottom end of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF recognises English and

Welsh credentials within a framework which allocates, in principle at least, notional

equivalence between qualifications from Entry to Doctoral level. Level 1 is defined

within the framework as 'the ability to apply learning with guidance or supervision'

(QCA), and is offered largely within Colleges of Further Education during the post-

compulsory phase of education and within a limited number of schools during the 14-16

phase.

In 2002 the Green Paper, 14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards referred to

the need to 'promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes of

study' as part of its proposal to reform the 14-19 phase and introduce what was then

termed a 'matriculation diploma' (DfES 2002:12).Since then, the phrase has disappeared

from policy documents, to be replaced by commitments to 'a much stronger vocational

offer' (DfES 2003a:13), increased work based learning in schools, the development of the

Modern Apprenticeship system, the introduction of vocational programmes with

'occupational relevance' and the development of the Foundation Degree (DfES 2003b).

Despite this plethora of initiatives, the Skills Strategy Document still recognises that 'The

Vocational route remains poorly regarded and misunderstood' (DfES 2003b:25). Within

that poorly regarded route, Foundation students remain invisible, victims of a lack of

esteem and significant structural barriers at a number of different levels. These include

the lack of choice and opportunity arising from the limited range of vocational

programmes available at level 1 (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004:17). The only

alternative to the vocational programmes available would be to spend a further two years

on GSCE programmes – repeating an experience at which the young person is already perceived to have 'failed'. Other barriers include the ambivalent positioning of Foundation programmes, sometimes located as a mainstream programme, and sometimes as special needs provision, and the fact that whatever their achievement at level 1, the reality as most young people and their tutors see it is that only advanced programmes have any currency outside College (Bathmaker 2002). Further, there is the commitment required to a very extended progression - to achieve a Higher Education credential a Foundation student would have to 'progress' through 4 years of Further Education, and a further 2 years of Higher Education to achieve a Foundation Degree or 3/4 years to achieve a Bachelors degree.

In addition to these issues, the Foundation programme has also received little critical examination, despite its proposed withdrawal from 2005/2006. One possible reason for this may be the relatively small numbers of young people to have been registered for the award during its lifetime (Raggatt and Williams 1999:16) together with the traditionally low achievement rates associated with GNVQ qualifications. Success rates on Foundation GNVQ Programmes stood at 83% in 2001/2002. However, this figure refers to completers, and effectively discounts the young people who withdraw during the programme. When the figures are adjusted to reflect this, the success rate for 2001/2002 was only 62% in the context of a national retention rate of 77% (Benchmarking data 2002).

These significant levels of non-achievement, both in terms of failure to complete the programme or to achieve on completion are reflected in research carried out by Ball et. al. (2000) in their study of a cohort of young people from a North London Comprehensive as well as by Bathmaker (2001). Bathmaker interviewed 7 Foundation students towards the end of their programme, and found that they reported largely positive experiences. However, these were the young people who had, perhaps for the first time in their lives, experienced success and this may have been an influencing factor in their perceptions of the programme. Those who had withdrawn may have had a different perspective. In a longitudinal study Ball et. al. identified 9 students from a total of 59 (15%) who entered Foundation GNVQ programmes, and a further two who entered NVQ level one programmes. Two years later, two of those who entered GNVQ could not be contacted, and of the remaining seven the outcomes for four were discussed. One had become a mother, one had progressed through Intermediate to GNVQ Advanced, one was unemployed and one was considering doing A levels and entering Higher Education in Australia. All were defined as having factors in their lives which might lead to social, educational and/or economic exclusion. Whilst this research is based on very small samples, it consistently suggests that very few young people entering the post compulsory sector at level 1 will fulfil the policy rhetoric about individual responsibility, lifelong learning and opportunities for all and progress through the system, ultimately to level 3 or beyond.

Excluded by Policy

The reality of the lives of these young people reflects an English education policy which, over the past 20 years, has resulted in an increasingly credentialist and divisive system of secondary and tertiary education. According to government policy rhetoric, the emphasis on higher level skills (and thus qualifications) will mean that '…we will develop an inclusive society that promotes employability for all' (DfES 2003b:18). Employability in this context is defined by the holding of level 2 credentials, but the still higher value placed on level 3 and Higher Education credentials is also evident in current policy documents as well as in the targets arising from them, such as 90% of 22 year olds to achieve minimum level 3 by 2010, together with 50% participation in HE by 2010. (DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b). The Skills Strategy (DfES 2003b) makes no specific mention of level one qualifications, other than in terms of individuals who do not hold level 2. This increasingly skills driven agenda places a clear value (whether high or low) on individuals according to their perceived economic potential, which rises with each 'level' of educational attainment. This creates a situation where young people undertaking a GNVQ foundation programme are effectively working towards a qualification which is unrecognised by Government and society at large and which carries no economic value.

The lack of value placed on level 1 qualifications is also evident in outcomes at 16, where young people achieving five 'good' GCSEs (defined as grades A*-C) have attained level 2. However, those young people achieving at grades D-G, even where the grade achieved represents significant personal achievement, have attained level one by default – that is by failing to achieve level two. The attribution of 'failure' to almost half the young people who take GCSE examinations each year has been recognised by the Working

Group on 14-19 Reform (2004a:17) who have proposed a new post 14 structure which has clearly identified a need for recognition of achievement at all levels as part of a broader inclusiveness agenda. However, it could be argued that the inclusiveness agenda subscribed to by the 14-19 Working Group has also acted to reinforce the concept of Level 1 students a problematised group by acknowledging level 2 achievement as being consistent with the concept of employability and the ability to contribute to society.

The Working Group has proposed a new qualifications structure which is intended to address these difficulties, but inherent within that structure is the assumption that the student will be capable of progressing, will wish to progress through the levels proposed and will have the necessary economic, social and emotional support to do so, an assumption or expectation also found in current policy documents (DfES 2003a:17; DfES 2003b:127). The Group also recognise the need to improve the curriculum at lower levels, having identified '..an absence of consistently high quality level one programmes and qualifications' (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004:17), an added barrier to any young person wishing to progress to a level 1 option post-16.

Despite the limited range of level 1 qualifications, the Green Paper '14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards' (2002) proposed that all 6 unit GNVQ qualifications should be withdrawn and replaced by applied GCSEs (previously Vocational GCSEs or VGCSEs), with a Foundation qualification being equivalent to D-G grade. Whilst students undertaking the Foundation programme may be subject to the types of inequity outlined above, which will constrain all aspects of their future life, the qualification has

two significant advantages over the GCSE. Firstly, it is perceived as easier to achieve and to offer a route to intermediate qualifications by the students (Bathmaker 2001, Ball et. al 2000), and secondly it offers a level 1 credential by achievement rather than failure, a significant factor in terms of young peoples self-esteem and self confidence, as well as their motivation to continue in education. Representations from PCET professionals resulted in a policy compromise on this issue, and the White Paper decreed that both 6 unit GNVQ and Applied GCSE should continue to operate until 'suitable alternatives' (to GNVQ) were available. (DfES 2003a:25)

The successor qualifications to the 6 unit GNVQs are the new BTEC Introductory Certificates and Diplomas, accredited at level 1. Level 2 BTEC programmes (First Diplomas) have been offered post 16 for many years, but will be less suitable for schools than the Intermediate as they carry a significant mandatory work placement requirement which could constrain the core curriculum. Schools are therefore more likely to offer the applied GCSE programmes, with the concomitant risk for young people of achieving level 1 by default as they fail level 2. Post 16 the withdrawal of the programmes is unlikely to lead to the increase in high quality level one programmes and qualifications identified as necessary by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004a:17) as the BTEC programmes will merely form a replacement, rather than an extension of the range of programmes currently on offer.

Hence, whilst the rhetoric of current post-16 education policy espouses 'opportunity for all' this in fact conflicts with many of the outcomes of that policy. In terms of young

people on Foundation programmes, the outcomes are largely negative, and in no way reflect the emphasis on 'opportunity'. These young people are consigned to the lowest level 'vocational' programmes, which have little social, educational or economic recognition and are deemed to be 'low ability' or 'low attainers'. Significant structural, social and economic barriers stand in the way of further educational progression. Associated with the low esteem placed on the occupations and life opportunities they may be able to access, this can only result in the creation of a cohort of young people who are perceived as 'non-valuable' by government, wider society, and themselves. Tomlinson (2001) links these divisive policies with the continued reproduction of a class structure which results in the exclusion of those who do not have access to a 'good' education, reflected in the type of credentials they achieve, and which allows more privileged social groups to 'maximise reproduction of their own advantages'. This situation can only be compounded by the lack of critical examination of students belonging to this cohort, which means that they are as invisible to academics as to policy makers, and that much of the policy which impacts heavily on them is based on perceived wisdom or assumption rather than current, credible research.

Education or Socialisation to Casual Employment?

Raggatt and Williams (1999:142) have suggested that the re-naming of the GNVQ awards in 1993 as Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced was significant in the marketing of the level three programme as an A level equivalent and therefore an alternative route to Higher Education. Prior to this, the awards were known as level one,

level two and level three. This change raised the profile and perception of the Advanced programme. It did not, however, result in an increased esteem for intermediate and foundation programmes. Bathmaker (2002) reported that both students and lecturers recognised that only Advanced GNVQ had any real exchange value outside the college, and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) found that students used GNVQ as a gradual progression to get them 'back on track' and eventually to university, inferring that the GNVQ route provided a progression ultimately to Higher Education (after achieving Advanced level) rather than entry to the world of work.

There has been a policy assumption that young people can progress through the levels, but this assumes the ability, willingness and support networks exist for every young person, together with an ultimate aim to progress to Higher Education. Such a perspective also assumes equal potential in all young people in all areas of their life, thus creating a dissonance with philosophies of diversity and with the sociological argument that educational achievement is related to social class reproduction (Tomlinson, 2001). In making such an assumption, policy also denies any intrinsic value in education for its own sake at foundation level and in the value of increased self esteem or self confidence, or other non- pecuniary benefits which might arise from undertaking such a programme (Preston and Hammond, 2003).

Such a policy also renders the needs and aspirations of Foundation students 'invisible' within the wider policy and education agenda, as they undertake vocational programmes which have no explicit place in current educational policy and will not accrue them any

esteemed credentials but which Chitty (1991b:104) has suggested may be seen to inculcate the attitudes needed for low skill, low paid work such as punctuality, attendance, time-keeping and discipline. This would enable them at best, to enter the low skilled, service sector employment regarded by Bathmaker (2001) as the most likely occupational destination for Foundation GNVQ students. The likelihood of vocational students on lower level programmes entering this type of employment was first raised prior to the introduction of GNVQ when Ainley (1991:103) argued that vocational education is used as a cover for creating a mass of casual workers, low-paid and semi-skilled to be used as demand dictates. Ecclestone (2002:17/19) whilst writing within a different political context, considered that employers poor record of investment in education and training may form part of a rational strategy linked to low prices, monopolisation and low wages – not all employers, she suggests, want or need highly skilled workers leading to a situation where, far from being the idealised opportunities portrayed by a post-Fordist, high skills rhetoric, the reality of the jobs market facing many post-16 learners is one of unemployment, or low skilled, temporary work with low status training as an alternative to Further or Higher Education.

Concerns also surround the social consequences of the broader structure of the Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector, and from aspects of the post-16 curriculum. Tarrant (2001) raised concerns about the structure of vocational PCET arguing that it produces 'a user socialised to work, rather than a citizen'. Whilst Tarrant's concerns relate to wider society, and the ability of all to participate in a democracy, they have resonance with other concerns about the use of vocationalism as a form of social

control, and ways in which the structure of GNVQ programmes generally, and their

forms of assessment, may contribute to this. Hargreaves (1989:137) considers that

assessment and monitoring procedures have the potential for extreme forms of social

surveillance, in which reviews form an 'almost unending process of repeated and

regulated assessment' and suppress ''deviant' conduct even before it arises' and

Ecclestone (2002) has argued that differentiation may act as a form of social control as it

means that the teacher places a lower expectation on some students than on others.

Ambivalent Definitions and Negative Discourse

McCulloch (1998:4), whilst writing more generally about education considered fit for

'the mass of the population' highlights the negative descriptors used to define 'the mass'

of young people from the 'working class' used in Victorian Debates to terminology such

as 'average and less than average' or 'less able' used in contemporary writing and

government documents. Similar types of discourse (low attainers, lacking the minimum

basic and employability skills) may be found in current government education policy

documents (2003a:9; 2003b:24) and is subsequently reflected in the implementation of

those policies. Corbett (1999:181) has discussed to consequences of labelling young

people in this way and has argued that:

'What is significant for the children concerned is that, unless they are highly resilient,

they are likely to absorb these negative images of themselves and take on the roles of

passive victim or social outsider'

Therefore, it may be argued that the discourse relating to these students influences perceptions of them both as individuals and as a cohort, and that this influence is strongly negative.

Despite the range of descriptors outlined above, Foundation students form a group which is difficult to define clearly. The cohort is defined as mainstream in some colleges, but placed within Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) provision in others. In other colleges the programme holds a more ambivalent position where it is technically mainstream, but where the students enrolled on the programme are identified as having additional learning needs, facilitating the funding to provide smaller groups and a higher staff:student ratio, broadly comparable to those found in LDD provision. Bathmaker also highlighted the 'ambivalent positioning of GNVQ Foundation' – at Midlands College it was placed within the special needs stream, but had moved backwards and forwards from mainstream a number of times. Wolf (2002:220), in a study on Level 2 students refers to the intermediate qualification as being taken by 'the weakest post GCSE candidates', implying that anything below intermediate would be special needs provision.

The definition of Special Needs, or Learning Difficulties and Disabilities provision is much clearer, being based on a formal statement of Special Educational Need which is attached to young people who have received their statutory education within special needs provision. Likewise, those students enrolled on level 2 programmes are more

clearly defined, having status both within national government education targets outlined in the Opportunity and Excellence White Paper (DfES, 2003) and the Skills Agenda (DfES 2003). Level one provision is more ambivalent, although there is a clear, if unspoken, hierarchy of programmes at this level. At GCSE, a D grade might almost have been a C, and gives a little credibility, particularly in maths and English. A G grade is almost unclassified, and therefore many young people are unwilling to 'own' such a grade. NVQ provision provides an opportunity to gain the basic skills needed for a particular type of employment – hair dressing for example – and therefore constitutes a basic 'training' from which the young person can progress to a level 2 qualification, thus fulfilling the requirements of the Governments skills agenda. E2E provision, at the other end of the level 1 spectrum, provides for socially and educationally excluded young people with a wide range of learning and other special needs, such as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty (EBD) statement, medical problems, history of school exclusion or criminal activity or other social need or difficulty. Those students undertaking foundation GNVQ fall between these groups, in the middle of this spectrum though including elements of each, and are, therefore, more difficult to define as a group.

The characteristics that foundation students have in common include the fact that by virtue of being on a foundation programme they have low levels of academic credentials in terms of GCSE results, and that most report a poor educational experience pre-16 and significant personal and social difficulties. Further evidence suggests that these young people are constrained in their options by a broad range of factors including issues around social, economic and educational exclusion (Ball et. al. 2000) as well as by the limited

educational opportunities available at level 1 post-16 (14-19 Reform Group 2004; Bathmaker 2002) Further investigation will be necessary in order to define this cohort more accurately, and to establish aspects of their identity, perhaps within their 'arenas of action and centres of choice' (Ball et. al. 2000). Such investigation may contribute to a broader recognition of the existence and needs of this cohort.

Finding a Value for GNVQ Foundation Students

A precursor to addressing the issues raised in this paper must be a debate which is inclusive of young people undertaking foundation programmes, and of their needs and aspirations. Further, there is a need to critically examine the cohort, their curriculum and the forms of assessment used within that curriculum. A first step in moving towards such a curriculum would be for Government policy to recognise learners at **all** levels and to place explicit value on their achievements, to move away from an over- credentialist and elitist system, and to frame policy documents within a discourse which recognises the value of each human being and avoids pejoratives such as those described by McCulloch (1998:4). Questions must also be asked about the assumptions inherent within the policy and practice impacting on this cohort. For example, why is there an assumption that they must and will progress to higher (and by definition better) levels? What alternatives could or should there be? There is a need for a clearer definition of level 1 post 16 in relation to both the special needs cohort and the clearly mainstream cohort undertaking level 2 programmes.

Further, there is a need to move away from a system where a young person can be faced with limited choice of programmes, each of which has little societal or potential economic value, and which are often perceived as remedial or lacking in value, even by those who deliver them (Bathmaker, 2002) and to develop systems which 'motivate, inspire and empower' (Ecclestone, 2002:12), recognise achievement and reduce the barriers to progression.. The debate must also consider the probable impact, on individuals and society, of 'educating' young people whose credentials are not recognised by employers, policy makers and wider society. This can only contribute further to the divisive society envisaged by Hutton (1995) and Tomlinson (2001).

Bathmaker also noted that most young people took their courses by chance and because of lack of knowledge about anything else (2002:247), raising the question **how** can a Foundation programme possibly be 'empowering, inspiring and motivating' if the young person is there by accident rather than design?

Conclusion

Smithers and Robinson (1991) argued that one year vocational programmes have not had a clear role as a progression route. In terms of the Foundation GNVQ, this remains a pertinent observation almost 15 years later. The programme carries no clear economic progression route in the way that NVQs do and there are significant structural barriers to a return to an 'academic' route. Progression to Intermediate is dependent on satisfactory achievement at foundation level, and the role of the Intermediate programme itself in terms of progression is also unclear.

This lack of clarity is reflected in three key areas. Firstly, in the largely negative perceptions of GNVQ foundation as being remedial and lacking in value (Bathmaker 2002), together with its ambivalent positioning within the PCET context, secondly in government policy which effectively renders these learners invisible by not acknowledging them at all, and which assumes that all young people can take up the 'opportunities' available to them, but pays scant attention to their life circumstances which may well preclude them from embracing opportunity and espousing lifelong learning opportunities. Finally, in the lack of societal and economic value placed on the foundation award together with the structural barriers which may prevent achievement at a more advanced level.

These factors mean that, ultimately, those young people undertaking foundation programmes are in danger of becoming further excluded from a system where raising standards equates to achieving credentials, rather than to providing an educational system which facilitates each individual to achieve their potential and their aspirations. Consequently they are likely to become the victims of greater structural barriers to education as this exclusion effectively renders them invisible to policy makers, funding bodies, employers and wider society. Such exclusion can only confirm their role as low value, low status, low skill, low paid workers within a highly casualised market. This is an issue which demands –and deserves – further attention.

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