

Working life learning, young people and competitive advantage: notes from a European perspective.

..... the UK continues to experience considerable problems in developing and maintaining any form of reasonably high quality work-based apprenticeship route. This problem has been around for a long time... Despite a number of high profile government interventions, some costing very large sums of public money, a solution has yet to be found Thus it remains unclear how employers can be persuaded to cease employing young people in jobs that offer little or no training
(Keep, Ewart 2001.pp 21-22)

Introduction: Over the last decade or so, there has emerged in Canada, the European Union (EU) and other late capitalist economies, a widespread policy consensus that stress the importance and pursuit of a high skill, knowledge-based economy and learning society. 'Skills, knowledge, education, training and learning are now seen as the answer to a whole host of economic and social problems, ranging from competitiveness, productivity and economic growth to unemployment and social exclusion' (Lloyd & Payne 2002.365). Everywhere it seems, espouses a vision of a high value-added economy, nourished by a culture of 'lifelong learning'. Existing pathways from school to work and Vocational and Training (VET) arrangements more generally, acquire added importance. At the same time however, increasing doubts are raised about the simplistic notions of human capital theory underpinning claims for the vocational pathways underpinning a high skilled economy. This paper will focus on the situation in Europe. In contrast to the largely uncritical country and regional policy pronouncements of vocational education and training implicit in EU and member state policy documentation, this paper argues that the present period is best characterised by doubt, uncertainty and wide-ranging debate. Some of the reasons behind this uncertainty - such as the global economic and technological changes - are not particular to Europe and can be seen as important contextual features informing VET reform policies elsewhere, such as in Canada, Australia and South Africa (Keating et al 2002). In other instances such as the absorption of the new accession countries into the EU, there is obviously a particular regional dimension to the uncertainties. Wider socio-

economic pressures together with new educational ideas are resulting in acute pressures for change but in directions that are unclear. Established vocational learning pathways and training schemes - such as apprenticeships - increasingly are the subject of critical reviews; the very notion of a 'skilled' or 'competent' worker is recognised as problematic. In Canada, a similar uncertainty is detectable; the Apprenticeship Advisory Committee presents its report later this year.

This paper provides a selective view of the situation in Europe. Particular attention is given to the situation in Britain. Apart from the historic failure to develop high quality apprenticeship pathways highlighted by Keep (2001) above, Britain is seen as representing a particular political direction within the strategic debates on 'the way forward' within the European Union. Instead of a comparative outline of the school-to-work arrangements available in different countries, the emphasis instead is on identifying a number of issues that are shaping the more strategic concerns and reforms of these arrangements. The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the policy context within Europe. The 'Lisbon Agenda' it will be suggested, is providing a framework, discipline and urgency for reform of vocational training rarely seen at a European level. In the second section of the paper, examples of the vocational training experiences available to workers within Europe are discussed. Particular attention is given to apprenticeship schemes. The isolation of training schemes for young people from wider societal considerations, it will be argued, is a significant weakness in attempts to 'modernise' programmes. The third section in the paper will highlight three areas that it is suggested, will ultimately contribute towards shaping the strategic nature and extent of the vocational education and training experienced by apprentices.

Methodologically, it is of course a hazardous task to discuss examples and to draw conclusions from a regional European perspective. As Attwell & Hughes note,

Until recently transitional research in VET has been focused primarily on the tasks of information gathering and exchange. Typically, experts from different countries agreed on a common format for information collecting and published what were often

point to point mapping studies.
(Atwell & Hughes 2004.1)

The numerous publications from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) on European VET systems have been characterised by such an approach and have generated a wealth of cross-national, national country and sector studies in VET. Instead of a descriptive comparative approach, this paper focuses on a selective identification of key trends and developmental tasks. Such an approach avoids the largely deterministic stance that pervades much of the literature.

Vocational learning at the centre of policy developments

Around 80 million people aged between 26-64 years within the EU are low skilled (EU.2004). The variety of VET systems and programmes is great. When the proposed enlarging of the EU (through the 'accessing and candidate' countries) is included, this variety and diversity is daunting. In the Central and Eastern European accessing and candidate countries, for example

VET issues were rather low on political agendas at the start of transition. Infrastructures were often impoverished and technologically outdated, and involvement of enterprises ceased with the introduction of markets. Curricula inherited from the past were structured for narrow specialisation in large companies, with contents defined in detail at the central level and with a focus on theoretical aspects. Teachers have not really been involved in the design or revision of curricula and lack skills and competencies for organising active learning

(ETF 2004.26)

In the newer Mediterranean countries, the ETF survey suggests that current VET schemes are expensive, bureaucratically designed and ineffective. Coherent systemic reform is absent and few countries have adopted a comprehensive approach to VET reforms. Most countries however have recognised the need to link VET more closely to evolving labour market needs and to increase the involvement of social partners.

Partly as a response to the particular problems posed by the accessing and candidate countries but more importantly, as a response to perceived changes in the wider global economy, a number of important strategic policy documents and decisions have been initiated across the EU. The Lisbon European Council summit of March 2000, for example, concluded with a

number of recommendations committing the EU to becoming by 2010, 'the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment'. Central to the grandiose claims of the Lisbon Strategy or Agenda as it has come to be known, was the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of EU education and training systems. The 2002 'Copenhagen Declaration' continued this focus on the creation of 'a knowledge - based Europe'. A number of practical initiatives aimed at the development of a single framework for the transparency of competencies and qualifications ('Europass') were outlined. It is anticipated that a blueprint of a European qualification framework will have produced by 2005.

Annual Member state obligations and progress on the Lisbon Strategy objectives are available for inspection together with periodic review reports (see Kok 2004). Substantial sources of funding are available for transnational project development and for developmental activities that address strategic themes seen as characterising current and future regional objectives. The 2004 Maastricht Communiqué (E.U 2004), together with the 2004 Interim Report 'Education and Training 2010', again focused on the current and future priorities of vocational education and training within the expanding European Union. There is little doubt that education and training with a 'dynamic knowledge-based economy' as the Lisbon Strategy puts it, represents a key strategic concern at both a policy and practice level. On the other hand, there are real doubts about whether such concerns are sufficient to address and engage with the dilemmas and tensions characterising national state provision. As will be argued below, the effectiveness and contribution of VET reside less with issues of qualifications, credentials, curriculum and pedagogy (important as they are) and more with wider issues of a political economic nature.

Apprenticeship learning and wider societal context

Apprenticeships have survived as an internationally understood structure within which young people can learn, demonstrate their abilities and potential and develop their identities. At a

general level, apprentices can be seen as involving three broad and interrelated dimensions; the contractual framework between the employer and trainee, the cultural socialising aspects of introducing apprentices into work and adulthood and thirdly, the formal and informal aspects of the learning. (Fuller & Unwin 2003). The nature and meaning of apprenticeship varies greatly however, once historical and national particularities are included in any analysis. The historical weakness of the British apprenticeship arrangements, for example, through on-the-job training coupled with voluntary attendance in evening class provision resulted in industrial training failing to become institutionalised within the national education system. As a recent analysis of UK skills and education development points out

The training infrastructure between ages 14-19 suffers from the poor standing of ill-financed colleges and a under-developed apprentice system. Britain is seen to fall between two stools; it has neither a fully-fledged employer-based apprentice system nor an established mix between formal colleges and informal on the job learning - the so-called dual system.

(The Work Foundation. 2005)

As Dessinger (2004.44) points out, 'the division of education and training typical (of nineteenth century Britain) paralysed the development of educational opportunities for the working classes and helped create a social pattern of industrial training being that of 'boy labourers' rather than 'boy learners'.

The historical past continues to weigh heavily on both the content and debate of apprenticeships today. The much-publicised launch in 1986 of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), for example, together with the family of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) in 1995, radically separates the UK experience and thinking from that elsewhere in Europe. Absent in MAs is any minimum training periods - such as a three year programme for bakers - any need for a general education, any robust quality and relevance criteria and with weak regulatory framework. While MA apprentices now must hold a training contract, nearly 90% also have an employment contract i.e. 'labourers' rather than 'learners'. The emphasis on 'outcomes' rather than specified courses in NVQs together with the modular collection of competences, results in a form of vocational training that is 'independent of the site, the form of

provision and the type of pedagogy and curriculum' (Young 2003.225). As Modern Apprentices are expected to complete an NVQ during or at the end of their training time, it is not surprising that 'success' or 'completion' rates remain a continuing area of concern. The latest recent re-launch of MAs in 2004 has resulted in Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMAs) leading to a level 2 qualification and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMAs) aiming at a level 3 qualification. Worries continue to exist. As one commentator from the Social Market Foundation put it recently,

The government spends about £7 billion on education and training for low skilled young people and adults. Many programmes do little to make the participants more employable. (Alakeson 2005.17)

Central to the predominantly market-led Anglo-Saxon model of apprenticeships, and to vocational education and training more generally, is accepting the primacy of employers and, when compared with other European arrangements and the situation in Canada, the marginality of the social partners. In Denmark, for example, labour is well organised with high levels of unionisation and a history of collaboration with employers over industrial training. Decisions are highly decentralised. Social partners have responsibility with the 115 vocational colleges to adapt programmes to the needs of the local labour markets and specific sectors. Recent reforms to the apprenticeship programme have resulted in more time spent in school on theoretical teaching than in the German system and more in-company learning than in the Swedish system. Collaborative Trade Committees in the relevant occupational area agree on the duration and structure of courses. It is however, the highly regarded German 'Dual System' (and to a lesser extent, in Austria and Switzerland as well) that usually, is seen as demonstrating the advantages and effectiveness of the social democratic/social partner approach to apprenticeships when compared with the Anglo-Saxon/market driven model. In contrast to the social class divisions characterising the educational and vocational routes for young people in the UK, the German 'training culture' is based on a long-standing and widely accepted understanding of the importance of an underpinning pedagogical basis to apprenticeship learning, setting it apart from 'normal work'. The occupational character of the

apprenticeship learning within the dual system is demonstrated in the 'special qualities' of the learning both in relation to other occupations and to qualifications from higher educational institutions. Currently, just fewer than two million young people are enrolled in higher education and just over 1.6 million participating in apprenticeships (Dessinger 2004.45). Initial training is a well-recognised and socially accepted pathway into employment as it follows a traditional pattern deeply enshrined in the ancient mode of apprenticeship. The 'dual' character of the training points to the mandatory nature of the 'off-the-job' training and to see this training in vocational schools as part of the educational system.

Apprenticeships in Germany, Austria and Switzerland then can be distinguished from Modern Apprentices in the UK through their didactical principles as well as their legal, institutional and societal characteristics. German apprenticeships represent a system of training rather than as a system of employment as in the market-driven economies. By contrast, in the transitional economies of the wider Europe, reform of VET in general and apprenticeships in particular has not been an area of high priority.

However, it is not only the transitional countries that are experiencing pressure for change. Commentators such as Atwell, for example, talk of the 'crisis' facing the German dual system 'which partly stems from falling enrolment numbers and partially from the relative inflexibility of the system.' Others suggest the difficulties of the dual system sufficiently covering new occupational areas that are emerging from recent economic and technological developments. In the UK, an extensive literature documents the historical failure of British employers to provide serious and high quality vocational learning opportunities for young people.

Attempts to understand the continuing underperformance of apprenticeship schemes in Britain or the inflexibility of dual schemes are increasingly moving beyond the narrow policy rhetoric characterising much documentation. Isolating skill formation strategies from wider societal concerns for young people moving into work can easily result in prescriptive assertions that

ignore the limits and constraints of possible practices. The importance of a wider societal framework becomes even more urgent given the policy direction of seeing 'skills, education and learning (as) a panacea for a range of economic and social problems..... Skills are claimed to be the mechanism through which countries will be able to sustain higher wages, reduce unemployment, pay for a decent welfare state and provide equality of opportunities' (Lloyd & Payne 2004.5).). Vocational learning be it for young people or adults, increasingly is being seen as more than skill formation processes. Ultimately, it is a political choice about a fairer or more humane society and as such, involves assumptions and views (often hidden) about industrial democracy and political citizenship as well as strong labour and social rights, a more equal distribution of income and tolerance and respect for others. As Lloyd and Payne (2002) point out, young people making the transition from school to work within a more market driven model of capitalism do so within high levels of social inequality, limited trade union and worker rights, long working hours, a polarised distribution of skills and relatively low wages.

Similarly, Guile (2004) proposes a mode of production perspective for understanding apprenticeships. Instead of the narrow institutional approach this alternative societal view 'has implications for our understanding of apprenticeship'. Three modes of production - mass production, lean production and thirdly, innovative-driven production - are proposed through which examination of apprenticeships can more fruitfully be undertaken, understood and developed. Analysis of apprenticeships through this alternative approach Guile argues, highlights the 'role of knowledge, how you support learning, and above all what the purpose of apprenticeship is. Keep (2001) uses a similar approach. The 'Anglo-Saxon' model he suggests is the key to understanding recent reforms in the UK's 'fundamental mis-match between the collective result of micro-level decisions and the macro level needs of society and the economy as a whole' (ibid.27). Lloyd & Payne (2004) use the 'social market 'stakeholder' model of capitalism to discuss the German and Scandinavian apprenticeship arrangements.

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Other commentators keen to acknowledge the wider societal context of young people learning suggest similar approaches. Karen Evans, for example, is primarily interested in international examples of work-based learning as a means of countering the social exclusion of young people. Four analytic frameworks are identified: a strong non-formal sector approach (such as in the rural areas of Mediterranean countries), a market-driven approach (such as in the UK), the 'dual' enterprise/school approach (exemplified above all, by Germany) and the strong school-based (as in particular Scandinavian countries). Employing such a framework suggests Evans (2004.22), illustrates how the 'social exclusion problem' amongst young people is constructed in different societies and in different ways.

Pressures for change?

As Fuller & Unwin (2003.41) note, it is these wider societal changes that have resulted in 'several countries throughout Europe and beyond... attempting to reform their apprenticeship systems in response to a number of challenges. A growing literature on recent changes in work and social life - resulting from 'globalisation' - now exists and provides a fruitful and imaginative means through which to critically re-examine VET understandings, institutions and practices. Increasingly, there is the realisation that ability and work in the period ahead is likely to be based on more than 'the bottom line'. The future it seems is likely to involve 'smart workers' that relate to a variety of human, cognitive, cultural and organisational factors (Gerber & Lankshear 2000). Current debates and reviews of existing practices and assumptions over the socialisation of young people into employment is resulting in competing perspectives on almost all aspects of workplace learning. What are some of the issues and 'challenges' that are influencing this rethinking and reform?

Employer engagement? All late capitalist economies today share the view that global economic pressures are forcing governments to assume responsibility for speeding the

transition towards the adoption of a high skills pathway and for reforms within the education and training systems that will increase the supply of these skills. Despite the widespread adherence to such prescriptive accounts towards winning competitive advantage, cumulative research studies have cast serious doubts on so uncomplicated and confident a view of the future. Instead of a high skills, high value added strategy allied to a supportive apprenticeship and VET system that can deliver a highly educated and trained national workforce, there are other equally attractive routes to competitive advantage within advanced capitalist economies. These include protected markets, economic growth through company mergers or acquisitions, cost-cutting strategies, seeking monopoly power and new forms of Fordism (Brown & Keep 2004). Given that skills and vocational knowledge are only a means to an end in the dominant late capitalist visions of economic survival, these alternative low-skill pathways contribute towards understanding the low importance, status and performance of apprenticeships and VET in particular countries. Case study evidence in the UK, for example, suggests that many firms rely upon cost based competitive advantage in the production of relatively low specification goods and services (Keep). In their overview of British manufacturing firms, Ackroyd & Procter (1998:171) conclude that

British arrangements for manufacture at plant level do not depend on high levels of skill or high levels of investment. Profitable manufacture is not secured.... through the acquisition of a highly trained 'core' labour force, nor.... by investment in new technology. Output is achieved in part by some reorganisation of machinery, but more significantly by a combination of a heavy dependency on the flexible use of relatively unskilled labour and a willingness to utilise external sources of production. The basic arrangement for manufacture is the use of standard technology by teams of self-regulated and formerly-unskilled workers.

(Ackroyd & Procter 1998, and quoted in Brown & Keep 2004)

Such a poor record and performance on the recognition and development of 'vocational knowing' amongst employees may not be particular to the British economy. It maybe instead a characteristic of the Anglo American variety of development and of these countries adhering to the 'flexibility' advice of agencies such as the OECD. As Keep (2001) points out, when considering the issue of 'skills', there is a central paradox at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism. The rejection of the stakeholder model of capitalism with their regulated

apprenticeship environment and labour involvement, in favour of a deregulated shareholder perspective with an heavy emphasis on 'high performance' through skills resulting from high trust, high involvement and high discretion work systems, is failing to deliver. As Milkman (1999.38) points out, in the USA, the 'home' of the high performance workplace model and of strategic Human Resource Management, 'the low wage, low trust, low skill, 'low road' is the path most USA firms are following'. Instead of a shift towards the high performance model, the Anglo Saxon model has instead witnessed the emergence of a model of people management in which job security has declined and work intensification and stress levels increased. Such a style of management tends to discourage investment in skills and undermines employee commitment. After a review of the research evidence from the UK and USA between training and business strategies, Keep (2003.9) concludes that 'evidence amassed over the last decade and a half indicates that in both Britain and America.... product quality and production technologies often remain divorced from people management issues. The problem with training and skills nest within this general tendency by senior management to ignore all manner of personnel issues'.

Such business practices, irrespective of the contrary policy rhetoric, help to explain the continuing low status and performance of apprenticeship schemes within such countries competing on price and quantity and low specification within a voluntary and deregulated labour market is likely to reduce requirements for skilled labour or vocationally learning young people. An emphasis on long production runs with economies of scale and job design which removes skills and initiative from a significant proportion of tasks is an inhospitable environment within which to persuade employers to cease employing young people that offer little or no training, to embrace the development of generic or key skills - such as those covering literacy, numeracy, communication, team working, new technology and problem solving - or to conceive of training that extends beyond a narrow and task specific nature (Green 1998).

A significant challenge, then, exists within particular varieties of late capitalist economies of resolving this paradox between ideals of a high performance nature and the investment and

development of a knowledgeable workforce. In some countries such as the UK, there is the persuasive argument that apprenticeship schemes remain a prisoner and casualty of this paradox.

Competences? A second cluster of issues that impinge on the discussion and reform of apprentice training in Europe, Australia, North America and elsewhere, is greater understanding of what constitutes competence at work. There has been a perceptible movement in occupational curricula away from a dominant perspective of 'technical rationality' ie from the idea of a set and defined body of knowledge on which could be based the performance of a range of predictable and routine tasks (Attwell & Brandsma 2004). The structural changes occurring in western economies coupled with increasing rationalisation of capital, decentralisation, customer focus and technical renewal, has resulted in changing conceptions of competence that recently were seen as simple and uncomplicated. Instead of seeing competences as attributes of employees or individuals (whether it be motivation, traits, self-image or skills) or as personal attributes resulting from particular work activities, recent discussions and studies have tended towards more interpretative understandings. Instead of rationalistic approaches of attributes into quantitative measures - such as the narrow and simplified behaviourist-inspired modular competences characterising Modern Apprenticeships and NVQs - there is a greater awareness today of the ways people experience or interpret their work. Instead of an emphasis on the worker and then on the work, there is now a unified conception of the workers' lived experience of work (Sandberg 2000). Competences are situational and context-dependent. Performing better than others has less to do with possessing a superior set of attributes and more to do with different ways of understanding the work and through interactions with others at work. To some extent, these changes are being recognised: for example, reforms in OECD countries of VET and apprenticeships have aimed to develop more practical training in the curriculum. Nevertheless, problems remain. The dual-system is seen as relatively inflexible, unable to adjust to the new thinking and 'cannot sufficiently cover new occupational areas that emerge from economic and technological

developments' (Attwell & Brandsma 2004.5). Nevertheless, the increased stress of practical training is seen as smoothing the transition from school to work. Another clear trend is the attempt to draw working and learning closer together (Brown & Keep 2004). Practical experience is seen as important, but so too is theoretical understandings that do not arise from such experience, some suggest (Guile & Young 1996). The use of the term 'work-related knowledge' to some extent, is an attempt to capture some of the new thinking or the 'dynamic equilibrium between the know-what of theory and the know-how of practice' (Brown & Keep 2004.5). Encompassed within conceptions of work-related knowledge is recognition of the tacit dimension of knowing and secondly, a recognition of the social context underpinning our ability to know, i.e. within particular communities of practise whose members develop ideas about how knowledge should be acquired, applied and shared. Fuller & Unwin for example, have used critically the insights of Lave & Winder (1991) in their studies of Modern Apprenticeships. Their empirical studies for example have explored a variety of learning environments or cultures experienced by apprentices within an 'expansive-restrictive' continuum. They conclude that 'approaches to apprenticeships that offer extensive opportunities for participation in and beyond the workplace appear to offer the most expansive learning experiences' (Fuller & Unwin 2003.53).

Exploring changing and differing conceptions of competence then has resulted in a number of wide ranging discussions that ultimately, challenge many taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of vocational learning. In part, these debates reflect a growing recognition of the increased importance of VET and secondly, the need for a more sustained and analytical focus discussion on the relationship between work and learning. Symptomatic of these wider discussions is the inclusion of 'learning' to accompany the traditional emphasis on 'training'. This change in emphasis, conception and terminology is often couched within a 'lifelong learning' perspective. Pursuing such avenues incorporates not only concerns about the social, situated basis of vocational knowing but also considerations of 'occupational identities'. Attwell & Hughes (2005) for example, situate their arguments for an increased focus on occupational

identities against a background of 'profound economic and social development and change' (ibid.2), the need for lifelong learning strategies and a recognition of learning as a social activity. In contrast to occupational profiles, of which 370 are recognised in the German apprenticeship system and over 900 in the British NVQ scheme, they argue for the development of core (for entry into an occupation) and modular (for updating and continuing professional development) occupational learning programmes and the recognition and development of the workplace as a 'rich learning environment'. Despite reforms to apprenticeship schemes in most European countries over the last five years, apprenticeships 'often lack the prestige of general education and may be seen as a career path for the less academically able' (ibid.5). A closer integration of general and vocational education, the provision of alternating periods of work and learning and the development of the core and optional modules are seen by Attwell & Hughes as strengthening apprenticeship routes.

Other commentators recognise the changed socio-economic circumstances within which young people progress from school into work and increasingly, in which adults move from job to job or occupation to occupation. Tomassini (2004) for example, mentions the 'paradigm change' from 'first you learn, then you do' ie the prior certification via qualifications and formal training pathways to an approach based not on formal qualifications but on competencies obtained through workplace learning. This move from a traditional to an innovative paradigm, as he describes them, better suits the needs of a knowledge society and the need for continuous learning. Similar to Attwell & Hughes, Tomassini sees the notion of professional or occupational identities as a crucial focus of attention in meeting the new demands of 'organisational-productive contexts with the increasing complexities of life-worlds' (Tomassini 2004a).

Beyond HRD? Incorporating concerns such as 'lifeworlds' in discussions of school-to-work transitions highlights a third cluster of issues that intrudes into the more specialised VET literature. As mentioned above, the growing preference for commentators and researchers to use 'learning' as opposed to 'education and training' suggests a wider agenda that significantly

moves beyond the dominant Human Resource Development (HRD) framework. An emphasis on learning for example begins addressing the socio-cultural, social relations and situated context of young people learning in the workplace (Fenwick 2002). Exploring differing conceptions and practises of a 'learning', 'knowing', 'developing' or 'knowledgeable' workforce suggests more complicated but varied pathways that address the socialisation function traditionally associated with apprenticeship schemes. Jacobs (2002) for example argues for the adoption of 'workforce development' instead of training as it better recognises the individual, organisational and societal issues involved in VET. Others go further in distancing themselves from the HRD perspective. Chappell et. al. (2002) talk of the 'new vocationalism' which is seen as requiring different qualities to those associated with more traditionalist Fordist regimes. The emphasis today they argue is on imagination, resourcefulness and commitment within everyday work practices. Developing knowledge producers rather than knowledge users is paramount.

Conclusions

While not all commentators share the analysis underpinning the 'new vocationalism', there is evidence of widespread agreement in Canada, Europe and elsewhere of the importance of encouraging the development of these 'knowledge producers' in apprenticeship and training programmes. However there is also widespread agreement on the difficulties on making this happen. This paper has focused on the situation in Europe and has suggested some of the reasons why arrangements for young people entering the labour market remain an area of considerable concern and worry. The situation in the UK was given particular attention due to historical failure to satisfactorily resolve this problem. Paradoxically, the growing uncertainties around particular 'skill formation' strategies within the EU are matched by a growing interest amongst a variety of stakeholders and professionals in the general area of vocational learning. The growing realisation that the issue of 'skills' is too important to be left to dedicated professional and policy circles has begun to widen the issues and concerns seen to impact on existing arrangements. This paper has raised some of these wider societal issues and suggested that any future reforms of particular training schemes need to engage with this socio-economic environment.

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