Introduction to the Special Issue on 'Learning for Work'

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The relationship between learning and work has a history that is long, complex and contested. The very title of this special issue, 'Learning for Work' is perhaps provocative, since many would challenge the idea implicit in that title that learning is or should be instrumental in preparation for work, developing skills in work, or meeting the needs of the economy, arguing that education is a citizen's right in and of itself without reference to work or economic productivity. That is a big debate, and there is a wide array of theoretical and policy literature that defends both sides of the argument. This collection of articles represents a range of positions on the challenges and benefits of learning for work. These could have been revised and edited with a view to fitting them into a pre-conceived model or pattern of learning for work. However that would have imposed an artificial conceptual template on a field that is extremely rich and diverse. Rather, the collection seeks to showcase high quality research in the field of education related to preparation for work or enhancing employees' knowledge and skills, to suggest how learning for work has been interpreted and implemented across a variety of settings.

So, the only structuring that has been carried out for this collection is in the sequencing of the articles. We begin with three articles that explore how the education system should prepare young people for employment. This field of study has seen a number of highly influential position papers in recent years, some published in this Journal, especially addressing the vexed issue of those not in education, employment or training (NEETs). Carlene Cornish's study which opens this special issue traces the experiences of 26 Skills to Succeed (S2S) students in a general English FE college. Raising of Participation Age (RPA) legislation mandates English youth to participate in post-16 education, employment or training. The study investigates the educational experiences of twenty-six S2S students to discover their trajectory and the extent to which they could access various provisions that facilitate higher academic and employment outcomes as per RPA discourse. Utilising classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and document analysis the study found that S2S students find themselves in a very competitive college environment that institutionalises a system of success and failure, and also brings them in direct competition with better qualified young people for access to desirable and limited provision. Embodied policies and practices used GCSE capital to construct an intellectual divide, segregating those with low GCSEs from those deemed more academic. Consequently, S2S students faced exclusion from a range of educational opportunities, placing higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training and the opportunity to re-take GCSEs out of reach. S2S provision fundamentally contributed to exclusionary discourses and practices that constructed great ambiguity as to whether higher academic and employment goals could be accomplished in such a milieu.

Robin Simmons' contribution presents a view of knowledge and employability in the under-researched field of creative arts. His article draws on a study of the experiences of young people classified as NEET on an employability programme in the north of England, and uses Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses to explore how the creative arts can be used to re-engage them in work-related learning. Whilst creating demand for young people's labour is central to tackling youth unemployment, the paper contends that using the arts can go some way towards breaking down barriers to learning experienced by many marginalised young people, and argues that creative

activities can be used to introduce them to forms of knowledge which have been largely flushed out of vocational education - at least for many working-class learners. The paper presents ethnographic data which suggests that skilful, well-informed tutors can, at least in some circumstances, use the creative arts to provide young people with access to forms of learning which transcend official discourses of employability, and introduce marginalised youth to forms of learning rooted in what Bernstein described as powerful knowledge.

Writing from a South African context, Joy Papier reports on research conducted to gauge the impact of supplementary practical training on the employability of TVET College engineering graduates. Utilising focus group and telephonic interviews, the study probed the students' experiences of the enhanced college programme and their preparation for work. In addition, employers were interviewed to determine firstly their perceptions of college students whom they had employed in the past, and what they expected of entry level workers. College engineering staff involved in teaching the project students were also interviewed. The research focused on the design of the intervention that supported students to obtain employment, the extent to which industry accords relevance to the theoretical curriculum offered by TVET Colleges, and the curriculum enhancements implemented to address what were understood to be industry needs. A number of recommendations emerge from the study, including the need for sufficient practical training and workplace exposure, the need for modernisation of the curricula to bring them into line with advances in technology , the inclusion of personal and interpersonal 'softer' skills in college training and that colleges should strengthen their focus on support to students during the course of their learning at TVET Colleges, and providing them with adequate work preparation skills.

Also focusing upon a technical qualification, Mahmud Emira's study is based on the initial findings of the longitudinal evaluation of a technical Baccalaureate pilot, to assess its impact on learners. The TechBac aims to provide a programme of study on par with A levels consisting of an approved vocational level 3 qualification, a core maths qualification and an extended project. Generally speaking, the TechBac programme appeared to equip learners with the knowledge and skills required in the workplace and to improve their attitude to learning, although it is acknowledged that it is difficult at this early stage in the evaluation to attribute this impact solely to the TechBac programme and exclude other factors such as learner motivation. Mediating factors, such as meeting stakeholders' needs, and moderating factors, such as insufficient information, influencing the TechBac are identified. Some suggestions to improve the learning experience and delivery are made including early introduction of the mentoring scheme in the programme and centre senior management's engagement with tutors to better understand the TechBac and its elements.

One of the most far-reaching developments in formal post-compulsory education in the UK has been the reinvention of the apprenticeship system, whereby employers take on usually a young person and provide a wage and on-the-job learning, usually in co-operation with a further education college or private training provider. Whether such schemes provide a broad or narrow learning experience is a hotly contested issue, which Dan Bishop's contribution, 'Affordance, agency and apprenticeship learning: a comparative study of large and small engineering firms', directly addresses. He highlights how increasingly skills and knowledge are developed at and through the workplace, as opposed to designated educational settings such as classrooms. He points to an expanding body of theoretical literature that has illustrated how workers learn new skills through, for example, everyday workplace interactions and socialisation processes, *ad-hoc* trial and error experiments and on-the-

job problem-solving. Thus, what is learned, and how, is shaped by the structure, culture and practices of the workplace. Such learning, as opposed to 'training' is inherent in and not elevated out of or distinct from everyday work experience. Using this lens, Bishop's study of apprentice engineers investigates the role of management, skill formation structures, and the apprentice's subjective agency in shaping the shape and quality of their learning experiences in the workplace.

Higher education has not escaped calls for radical change and institutions are continually called upon by governments to shape their curriculum and qualification offer to meet more directly the skills needs of a knowledge economy. For some, such developments are to be resisted, seen as part of a regressive neo-liberal movement to bring universities and colleges in line with national skills needs as identified by the state, sector bodies and employers. Many though have challenged the idea that higher education should be, or indeed ever was, separate from applied knowledge, and that the idea of a Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge differentiation has been a false and illusory dualism. Jim Hordern's contribution questions some of the prevalent thinking in this debate through a case study of the technical degree put forward by the Social Market Foundation, examining in particular questions relating to the curricula of technical degrees and the extent to which the qualifications would achieve credibility with their stakeholders. Issues raised include differences in conceptions of valuable knowledge and learning between higher education institutions and employers, difficulties in assuming partnerships between educational institutions and employers, workforce development activity being often seen as peripheral to the core processes of a HEI, cultural and competitive barriers to FEC and HEI co-operation, and questions around whether technical degrees would provide an adequate preparation for work. Even though proposals for a technical degree as such were not taken forward by government, Hordern's contribution clearly identifies the challenges facing future attempts to introduce similar qualifications into vocational higher education.

Staying with higher education, Paul Smith's article, 'The triple shift: Student-mothers, identity work and engagement with low status vocationally-related higher education' discusses a piece of qualitative research that examined the narratives that a group of learners articulated when they discussed their experiences of studying on a relatively low status, vocationally-related higher education programme. These students were school-based teaching assistants who were undertaking Foundation degree study at a post-1992 English university. Data collection was primarily undertaken via semi-structured interviewing with first and second year foundation degree students. Participant observations and documentary analysis of course-related documents were also drawn upon as contextualising sources of information. The accounts that were provided by students who undertook study alongside mothering are focused upon within this paper. These learners were routinely found to be involved in a triple shift of identity work arising from their positioning in the home, higher education and their workplaces. This raised questions about the desirability of encouraging disadvantaged groups, such as working class student-mothers, to enter higher education via vocational options that have limited social status. Such a concern partially arises from the finding that these students face additional performance challenges that their academic peers do not routinely encounter, notably connected to work-based learning. Furthermore, the limited esteem that these qualifications provide may result in reduced levels of status and limited identity enhancement. Yet, he also acknowledges that these programmes are highly effective in providing accessible high education routes to members of disadvantaged groups who may be otherwise excluded from such study.

Many universities have introduced some form of enterprise placement for undergraduate students. Joe Gazdula's contribution investigates the learning and academic attainment of undergraduate education students on enterprise placement projects in a longitudinal mixed methods study. By observing the placement learning and analysing previous and subsequent attainment of a second and third year group it adds to the ontology of purpose for enterprise in education and concurs with the growing body of work identifying placements with sustained academic improvement. The qualitative investigation identifies five key learning factors from the placements which support improved academic attainment. These are: pressure to learn; critical personal learning events; seeing the setting as a learning environment; professional attachments, and having space to learn. These factors support the transfer of learning from one context or situation to another and using concepts of transformative learning or transitional learning contributes to a cycle of increasing self-esteem and motivation and a sustained improvement in academic attainment. It concludes that a praxis curriculum, using self-assessments, continuous short (micro) reflections and taught awareness of the placement as a place to look for and recognise learning, would underpin these five factors and contribute to the academic processes underpinning attainment.

In an especially welcome contribution from the continent of Africa, Jeylan Hussein and Nigussie Bedasa's contribution reports on a piece of empirical research designed to evaluate the effectiveness of capacity building training on social issues in Ethiopia, including land-related conflicts for practitioners and decision-makers from district justice offices, courts of justice and rural land management and environmental protection offices. Participants were working as judges, court presidents and prosecutors. The training drew for theory on the ethos of transformative learning and thinking - a complex and dynamic process that calls for a cognitive, perceptual and behavioural commitment by those involved in the learning process. Husain details the learning tools and processes employed in an attempt to shape participants' thinking and behaviour when dealing with potentially complex and damaging disputes. He demonstrates how the training extended participants' critical consciousness and reflexive repertoires helping them to create and cement links between what learners experience and the meanings they draw from those experiences. Crucially the article underlines the importance of trainers understanding the complexity of the work context of participants to promote integrated autonomy, nuanced interaction and collaborative knowledge construction.

One of the key aims of the sponsor of this Journal, the Association for Research in Post-Compulsory Education (ARPCE), is to promote exchange of expertise underpinned by solution-focused research with a view to supporting policy makers and practice-based researchers and anyone with a responsibility for improving post-compulsory educational provision. ARPCE believes that socially responsible, independent critical research into post-compulsory education is a powerful force to influence students, teachers, employers, administrators and policymakers in order to:

- raise awareness of the intellectual, social, economic and political value of research in post-compulsory education;
- improve the quality of research particularly by supporting capacity building of practitioners to undertake research in their given sector;

- provide examples of good practice which support national and international knowledge transfer;
- critique current government policy in post compulsory education to help inform the development of future policy
- support the development of the global citizen with local and global responsibilities.

Local variation throughout the world is related to the relationship between education and employment and to the connection between lack of socio-economic capital and access to teaching and learning and employment opportunities. We hope that our emphasis on investigations into vocational education and training provision and continuing professional development helps to raise awareness of many of these issues, and stimulate positive change and improvement.