ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE: CHANGING PERCEPTONS OF 'SKILL' AMONG BRITAIN'S POLICY MAKERS SINCE THE 1950s AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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Editor's Foreword

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Abstract

The paper looks at how the meaning of 'skill' has broadened considerably since the 1950s through an examination of the relevant policy literature. The key role of both the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and Further Education Unit (FEU) in re-defining 'skill' in the late 1970s and 1980s is stressed. 'Core' or 'key skills', which have come to dominate contemporary education and training debates, are seen as an extension of this agenda. The new discourse of skill is also likely to have major implications for the vocational education and training (VET) system. The paper concludes by arguing that if Britain is to break out of a 'low skill equilibrium' (Finegold and Soskice 1988) and create a vibrant participatory democracy, it must shift education and training policy out of a narrow economistic focus and obsession with skills supply, and ensure universal access to a broad and integrated general and vocational education for all.
I'm not against skills as such ...so long as it really is skill we're talking about.
(Hart 1978: 205)

Nothing is more false than the claim that for a given assertion its use is its meaning. On the contrary, its use may depend upon its lack of meaning, its possession of wholly different and incompatible meanings in different contexts, and the fact that, at the same time, it as it were emits the impression of possessing a consistent meaning.
(Gellner, cited in Oliver and Turton 1982: 198)

INTRODUCTION
For two decades now British policy makers have stressed that economic competitiveness and national well-being depend crucially on the skills, adaptability and motivation of its workforce. By the same token, even a cursory glance through the relevant policy documents reveals that what policy makers actually have in mind when they talk about 'skill' is considerably broader now than in the past, when it tended to be equated with the technical 'know-how', manual dexterity and spatial awareness of the skilled craft worker. Several factors have combined to re-draw policy makers' skills map. First, there is the shift out of traditional manufacturing industry towards a predominantly service-based economy and the need for employees who can effect positive face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with customers. Second, is the emergence of a new and often ideologically-driven paradigm of organisational restructuring, linked to theories of post-Fordism and post-modernism (Piore and Sabel 1994, Murray 1989). Here, multi-skilling, problem solving, team working, knowledge and learning are viewed as the key drivers of competitive advantage in high value-added global markets (Piore and Sabel 1984, Murray 1989). Finally, since the mid-1970s policy makers have increasingly emphasised the need to ensure the 'employability' of young entrants to the labour market and the skills, knowledge and personal qualities needed to be 'adaptable' in the face of a highly uncertain and rapidly changing labour market.

Against this background, 'skill' has expanded almost exponentially to include a veritable galaxy of 'soft', 'generic', 'transferable', 'social' and 'interactional' skills, frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, which in the past would never have been conceived of skills at all (Keep and Mayhew 1999: 10). If the notion of skill has always perhaps been 'essentially indefinable' (Ainley 1993), it is now both broader and more conceptually equivocal than it has ever been. Despite this policy makers increasing insistence upon the salience of skills has not been matched by an appreciation of the problems that this is likely to present in the realm of vocational education and training (VET) policy.
While the concept of skill may well cry out for substantive theorising, this lies well beyond the scope of this paper (Attelwell 1990): Neither is it possible to make substantial forays into the highly charged and complex debates around the distinction between 'skill' and 'competence' embedded in the literature surrounding NVQs (Ainley 1993; Hyland 1994; Wolf 1995; Jessup 1991). Here, an attempt is made to map exactly what has happened to 'skill' across the relevant policy literature and to examine some of the problems and issues this raises for policy makers today. Section I, therefore, concerns itself with the mapping; section II with implications. Section III draws the analysis together by way of conclusion.

I. POLICY MAKERS' CHANGING SKILL MAP

1950s and 1960s

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, policy documents tended to conceive of skill as involving either high level educational qualifications and analytical capacities or 'hard' technical abilities, combining physical dexterity, spatial awareness and technical 'know-how'. The 1956 white paper on Technical Education, the Carr Report, *Training for Skill* (1958), which looked into the reform of apprenticeships, and the 1959 Crowther report into post-compulsory education, all saw 'skill' as referring essentially to the technologist, the scientist, the technician and the craftsman, demand for which was assumed to be rising as unskilled labour declined within an increasingly technological workplace. The Crowther report, for example, argued that the challenge was to:

...mobilize far more human potentialities, if there are to be not only enough pure scientists, but a whole army of technicians and craftsmen that will be needed for industry and agriculture (cited in Coffey 1992: 165).

The 1965 *National Plan* also retained a traditional conception of skill projecting future growth in the demand for 'administrative, technical and clerical staff', 'highly qualified manpower (scientists, technologists and technicians)' and 'skilled operatives'. More specifically, it spoke of the need for:

...certain types of qualified engineers (especially electrical and electronic and those concerned with production problems); mathematicians; chemists, physicists, technicians (often trained for particular industries e.g. brewing, glass, heating and ventilating); work study engineers; accountants and economists, systems analysts and computer programmers in general, instrument mechanics and electrical and electronics craftsmen (HMSO 1965 : 40).
1970s and 1980s

A major turning point came with James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976 which famously launched the 'Great Debate' around the relationship between the British education system and the economy. Against the background of economic recession and rising youth unemployment in the mid-1970s, Callaghan impugned an education system that had failed to provide the relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes needed in a vibrant industrial economy (Merson 1995). Embroidering these themes, the white paper, *Education in Schools* (1977), called on schools to better prepare pupils for employment by providing:

...a basis of mathematical, scientific and technical knowledge, enabling boys and girls to learn essential skills needed in a fast changing world of work (cited in Coffey 1992: 169).

At the same time, Callaghan's remarks concerning the anti-industrial bias of the education system, signposted the growing policy preoccupation with ensuring that pupils left school or college with the right attitudes and dispositions for the life ahead of them. Schools were to:

...help children appreciate how the nation earns and maintains its standard of living and properly esteem the role of industry and commerce in the process (cited in Coffey 1992: 169).

'Poor skills and attitudes' were therefore advanced as the primary cause of Britain's lacklustre economic performance, with other apposite explanations – British employers' uneven commitment to training, the short-termism of its financial institutions, the lack of investment in Research and Development (R&D) - conveniently brushed aside, in what was to become a central theme of UK VET policy making (Merson 1995: 303-4).

From the mid-1970s, the two central players in the unfolding drama around the shifting meaning of skill were the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), established by the Industrial Training Act of 1973, and the Further Education Unit (FEU). Responding in part to the kind of criticisms raised at Ruskin, both accepted arguments about the historical weakness of Britain's education and training system, reform of which was deemed necessary to reverse Britain's relative economic decline and move into high-tech, high value-added markets (Ainley and Comey 1990:1-2). Although there remained important differences of emphasis, there was broad agreement as to the overriding goal and the need to define more precisely the kind of 'skills' young people would require to cope with a rapidly changing labour market.
However, it was through a series of failed experiments to deal with the problems of youth unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that skill itself came to be redefined. In May 1977, the MSC published *Young People and Work* (MSC: 1977). This articulated a rationale for the new Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) which provided unemployed youngsters, judged to be ill-prepared for working life, with a short period of work experience on employers' premises. Focusing on the attitudes of young entrants to the labour market, it contended:

Most employers look for a greater willingness and better attitude to work from young people. Those who turn young people down do so because of attitude, personality, appearance/manners, and inadequate knowledge of the 3 Rs (MSC 1977: 17).

Anticipating a steady decline in 'unskilled work' and 'conventional apprentice trained craft skills', as well as a growth in demand for 'semi-skilled workers', 'technicians' and 'clerical, sales and administrative occupations', the document went on to suggest that:

...if those without skill, knowledge and motivation have no opportunity to acquire them, they may well find themselves over the years suitable only for a 1 diminishing range of unskilled jobs (MSC 1997: 34; emphasis added).

With the boundaries between skills, personal qualities and attitudes becoming increasingly blurred, the new YOP scheme promised:

...increased emphasis ...given to the provision of life and social skills and the opportunity to participate in this sort of training and in further education courses ... (MSC 1977: 36).

As with many training initiatives, social and life skills originated in the United States where they had been used in rehabilitation programmes for alcoholics and drug abusers designed to re-integrate the 'victim' back into mainstream society (Avis 1991). Increasingly, the assumption was that the VET system had to compensate a new generation of young unemployed for inadequate 'socialisation' received at the hands of the mainstream education system. Social and life skills were also to figure prominently in Labour's 1979 white paper on post-16 training, *A Better Start in Working Life* (DES 1979: 4). Here, they were defined as those 'personal skills needed at work and in adult life generally' and were taken to include 'getting on with work mates and working as a member of a team', 'getting information and advice', 'handling money', 'familiarity with social services, job finding and developing leisure
activities' (DES 1979: 7). Emphasis was also placed on the acquisition by young people of 'basic job skills and knowledge, covering a range of employer-specific job skills and transferable skills, especially those relevant to changing employment patterns' (DES 1979: 7). 16-18: Education and Training for 16-18 year olds – A consultative paper (DES/DE 1979: 4) also drew attention to:

...the personal and other skills needed in adult life e.g. the ability to communicate effectively, to relate to others and to co-operate with others, and the knowledge and self-confidence to cope with the practical business of day-to-day living.

By the time Mrs. Thatcher entered office in 1979, 'skill' had already began to shade over into the realm of values, behaviours, attitudes and dispositions. It was, however, the seminal New Training Initiative: A Programme For Action (NTJ) (DE/DES 1981) that was to represent a major landmark on the shifting terrain of skill (Ainley and Comey 1990). Taking its cue from Ruskin and reflecting the strength of 'the industrial trainers' within the Conservative party in the early 1980s, it called for reform of Britain's historically weak VET system and the creation of a 'better educated, better trained and more adaptable workforce' as the sine qua non of economic renaissance (DE/DES 1981: 5; Jones 1991). This was justified by a policy rhetoric which suggested that repetitive assembly work was being displaced by multi-task 'processes', while the constant, incremental process of technological change, and shifting employment patterns, necessitated both an adaptable and competent workforce (MSC 1981).

Enter the MSC and FEU

The immediate and pressing impetus behind NTI, however, was the growing need to find effective solutions to the problems of rising youth unemployment and social dislocation signalled by the inner city riots of 1980-81 and is best remembered for the launching of the much criticised Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Originally conceived as a high quality training route that would rival the German 'dual apprenticeship' system, YTS was to offer all unemployed minimum age school leavers a programme of work experience, combined with three months 'off the job' training or further education (Keep 1986). For its critics, YTS, rather than being an effective vehicle for upskilling the workforce, was, in many cases, simply a chaotic and improvised response to the problems of youth unemployment, allowing employers to avail themselves of a cheap pool of semi-skilled labour, simultaneously disciplined in the 'work ethic'. (Finn 1985; Ainley 1988).
There was also a growing emphasis upon the need for more vocational work-related components within the school curriculum which would culminate eventually in the launching of the Technical Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). Thus, NTI argued for a school curriculum that:

...develops personal skills and qualities as well as knowledge needed for working life, and that links between schools and employers help teachers and pupils to gain a closer understanding of industrial, commercial and economic base of our society (DE/DES 1981 :5).

It was against this new policy background that the MSC set about the task of re-defining the notion of skill in a manner consistent with NTI's insistence on a highly skilled and flexible workforce. In 1981, the MSC commissioned the Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS) to prepare a report on 'Foundation Training Issues' that would underpin the New Training Initiative (Hayes et al 1982). The report noted that:

Possible growth points come under five headings: additional basic skills; the world of non-employment, broadly related skills, personal effectiveness skills and the ability to transfer and ownership of skill (cited in Jonathan 1987: 103).

In the wake of an extensive review of 'competence-based' approach to training in the USA and Canada, the MSC also began to promote a competence-based training model in the UK, a mantle which would later be taken up by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). The IMS report effectively amounted to huge scale jobs study, the purpose of which was to 'cluster' jobs into eleven Occupational Training Families (OTFs) within which it would be possible to identify a series of 'generic', 'transferable' competencies, capable of being taught and portable across occupations. The model was extensively applied to YTS (MSC 1982), had a deep impact on FE, and was also to filter into schools via TVEI. YTS stressed therefore that in addition to allowing trainees to achieve initial competence in an occupation, a key aim would be the acquisition of 'some competence in range of related jobs and skills, thus enabling him to operate more effectively in an increasingly competitive trading environment and a period of often rapid and far reaching technological and market changes.' As Silver (1987: 19) explains:

It was the notion of transferability that was particularly attractive since, at all levels, it opened up possibilities of locating skills training in broad areas and pointing towards multiple employment opportunities, or the flexibility needed for a changing labour market.
In 1982, MSC initiated its 'core skills project' which was to be introduced into YTS two years later. A central hallmark of YTS, the programme identified 103 'generic' or 'transferable' skills, distributed across 14 skill groups, and four 'core' areas: 'number', 'communication', 'problem solving' and 'practical'. Core skills were defined:

...as those skills which are common to a wide range of tasks and which are essential for competence in those tasks. They are not in themselves skills as commonly understood, but represent facets of competence. They are work related and underpin the concept of skill transfer (Levy 1989:7).

"Skill' was detaching itself from particular occupations and moving beyond its traditional association with specific technical facilities of the skilled manual worker. By the same token, 'training' now encompassed a range of generic 'social and life skills', 'communication skills', 'reasoning skills', 'survival skills' and 'problem solving skills', which in turn implied the acquisition of certain attitudes, dispositions, values and behaviours on the part of the trainee, hitherto felt to be the province of education and socialisation (Jonathan 1987). In the context of high unemployment, the emphasis therefore was on the socialisation of the individual into work through government -sponsored schemes.

The other central player helping to redraw the contours of the skill map at this time was the Further Education Unit (FEU). Established in the late 1970s, with a remit to review and evaluate the FE curriculum, it too confronted the problems of unemployed youth flooding the sector, amidst criticisms that the traditional curriculum was irrelevant, inflexible and didactic (Silver 1987). The FEU endorsed NTI, and while distancing itself from the more extreme vocational stance of the MSC, committed itself to introducing more breadth into pre-vocational education so as to ensure the future adaptability of students in the face of unemployment and an increasingly uncertain labour market.¹

As Andy Green points out, this process was already underway with the publication of A Basis For Choice, in 1979, and Vocational Preparation, two years later (FEU 1979,1982; FEU 1981). Together they argued that to be personally effective in adult life and work, young persons would need to acquire 'basic skills' that were 'broad-based and transferable, rather than specific or job-restricted, and should include that range known as social and life skills'

¹ Like the MSC it stressed the importance of transferable skills and competence-based approaches, despite holding major reservations about describing detailed occupational training families and the narrowing interpretations of vocational preparation that had held sway in the late 1970s (Silver 1987: 18)
(FEU 1981). *ABC* (as it came to be popularly known) advanced a vision of a 'common' or 'core skills' curriculum for pre-vocational students which would resound throughout FE and lead ultimately to the Certificate of Vocational Preparation (CVP), forerunner of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ). *ABC* advanced twelve central aims for a 'skills based curriculum with relevant vocational focus' (FEU 1982: 1). Among these were the 'ability to develop satisfactory personal relationships with others' (aim 4); 'the capacity to approach various kinds of problems methodically and effectively, and to plan and evaluate courses of action'; 'sufficient political and economic literacy to understand the social environment and participate in it' (aim 9); 'the development of everyday coping skills' (aim 11) and 'a flexibility of attitude and willingness to learn sufficient to cope with future changes in technology and career' (aim 12).

As a later FEU document acknowledged (FEU 1982), the central thrust of both *Vocational Preparation* (FEU 1981) and *ABC* (FEU 1979) had been to 'insist that our concepts of skill need widening and to indicate how they can be used as a basis for progression' (FEU 1982:1). *ABC* had therefore advanced a new conception of skill that went beyond 'the ability to perform a specific manipulative occupational task' (FEU 1982: 1) and which now embraced:

- Language (reading, writing, speaking and listening); number (calculation, measurement, graphs and tables); manipulative dexterity and co-ordination; problem solving; everyday coping, interpersonal relationships; computer literacy and learning (FEU 1982: 2).

It also included 'experiences' relating to 'work and society', 'economic and political problems', 'the environment' and 'values'. *Basic Skills* (FEU 1982), noted that 'the concept of skill has spread onto a much broader canvas and is now used for training and education'. For Silver (1987: 24), the 'concept of skill had been virtually defined out of existence', while competence was now developed as an 'umbrella concept to incorporate skills and attitudes, knowledge and experience'. It was this stress upon 'personal effectiveness' that was to be central to FEU's appropriation of 'progressive' educational ideologies involving active pupil-centred collaborative learning, negotiated curricula, individualised student work programmes, profiling and criteria-based assessment (Avis 1991, Green 1998).

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2 The notion of ‘cores’ found expression in City and Guilds vocational preparation courses and BTEC courses.
These attempts to redefine skills and training were to attract trenchant, often vitriolic, criticism. Ainley (1988: 106) noted that:

The notion that all possible tasks involved in every occupation can be accommodated within eleven training families and that within them skills required to perform those tasks can be subdivided into particular levels of particular skills has been greeted with disbelief and derision.

'Skills', formerly understood by many as complex social processes, were now de-contextualised and de-constructed into finite, isolable 'competencies' to be located as the property of the individual, who then carried them, luggage-like, from job to job (Johnson 1983). Furthermore, the actual competencies described for each OTF, when held up to scrutiny, were found to be specified at such a low level that they could only be understood as an attempt to create a cheap pool of malleable, submissive, semi-skilled labour. According to Jonathan (1987: 105) typical competencies such as 'dress correctly', 'maintain clean and tidy work station', 'use appropriate language and behaviour' specified, for example, in OTF 'Food Preparation and Service':

...do not contribute to the vocational preparation of the trainee, other than to fit him, by motivating his attitudes, behaviour and expectations for the role of the flexible operative... we have moved away from the liberal demands for generic training to the social reproduction of a pliant underclass.

Transfer Learning Objectives (TLOs), such as 'behave in order to create and maintain satisfactory work relationships' and 'find out what rules or requirements the organisation has about how to behave', were also seen as fostering conformity and malleability on the part of the trainee (ibid. 105). Others saw the IMS's 'transferable skills' as lending themselves to parody, 'learning to push, learning to pull, learning to stand up without falling over' (Gleeson 1990: 189).

For Ainley and Comey (1990: 75), a central objective of life skills training was to socially regulate habits, behaviour and attitudes (here dignified as skills) in order to 'adjust trainees to normal working conditions, giving attention to such matters as time-keeping, discipline and maintenance of relations with others'. The YTS trainee's capacity to communicate effectively, for example, implied their acceptance of, and deference within, a particular set of authority/power relations at work, while reflection on their own learning and skills transfer could not extend to any critical engagement with the employment nexus or the meaninglessness of that which frequently passed for work (Avis 1991:131). Indeed, to move
beyond these confines, was to imply that the necessary 'core skill' had not been acquired. 'Coping' and 'survival skills', such as 'undertake a range of activities each day' or 'maintain physical and mental health', were either too banal to have real content or simply aimed to adjust the trainee to the fate of unemployment (Jonathan 1987: 108). In the end, the reactive ability to cope and survive the environment rather than actively engage with it, was what mattered. The attempt to include an element of citizenship education within the YTS core skills programme was also minimalist and impoverished, offering students appreciation of their 'rights and responsibilities' and the formalities of voting arrangements, whilst simultaneously censuring more liberating forms of knowledge that might permit critical insight into the world of work, the economy, politics and society (Jonathan 1987:109-110). Personal effectiveness training, by working on a particular form of 'subjectivity', now regulated the kind of social behaviour expected of trainees, at the same time as it blocked social and political understanding of the world of work and denied access to real skills (Gleeson 1990: 195).

**The Next Phase: Education Takes the Lead**

The broadening of skill to include attitudes, behaviours and dispositions was to figure prominently in the 1985 education white paper, Better Schools (DES 1985). The white paper recommended a 'broad and balanced' 5-16 curriculum that would encourage:

> ...the qualities, attitudes, knowledge, understanding and competencies which are necessary to equip pupils for working life (DES 1985: 6; my emphasis).

It also stressed the 'scientific, practical and aesthetic areas of the curriculum' and called on schools to enable pupils to:

> ...understand and develop positive attitudes towards the demands which industrial and technological changes will make on all aspects of adult life, notably employment (DES 1985: 27, my emphasis)

The 1986 white paper, Working Together: Education and Training (DES 1986), declared the government's commitment reform the VET and qualifications system by establishing competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) together with a new body, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), to oversee the process. There was also a familiar emphasis on the importance of young people leaving school with the appropriate 'attitudes' for working life:
A broad competence is not just a matter of knowledge, skills and understanding, it is also about doing. Positive attitudes to life and work are vital. On leaving school and college, young people ought to have the right motivation and be eager to learn, to show initiative and enterprise, to work hard and achieve. Motivation is as essential in preparing for life as it is at work (DES: 1986: 4).

Indeed, as manufacturing industry rapidly declined in the early 1980s, and the 'poor skills' explanation for youth unemployment appeared less credible, policy shifted emphasis onto the lack of enterprise and motivation as the primary cause of unemployment (Merson 1995).

Into the 1990s
By the late 1980s a new settlement had been established over post compulsory education and training (PCET), embracing a diverse constituency of actors, including the government, the Labour opposition, the CBI, the TUC, and various government departments (Whiteside 1992; CBI 1989, TUC 1989). Essentially, these called for reform of Britain's historically weak VET system and the creation of a highly skilled, adaptable and competent workforce, capable of driving forth Britain's ability to compete in high-tech, high value-added markets. In line with increasingly neo-liberal drift of government policy, the white paper, Employment for the 1990s (DE 1988: 3), signalled the determination to proceed on the basis of a 'voluntarist' market-based training system, the centrepiece of which would be new employer-dominated Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). It repeated what had now crystallised into a conventional policy wisdom that economic competitiveness would:

...depend on our ability to update the skills and productivity of all those in the workforce, on our commitment to wealth creation and economic success and above all on our increased capacity to adjust to change and take full advantage of the opportunity it offers.

Consistent with the Conservative government's increasingly individualist, pro-choice market ideology, there was growing emphasis upon the need for individuals 'take charge of their own career development and see that they acquire the right balance of skills' (DE 1988: 13). This would be echoed later in the 1990s with the CBI's adoption of the notion of 'careership' and the vision of a 'learning society' built around 'his or her responsibility for self-development in a market environment' (CBI 1993; Coffield 1998). A key theme therefore remained the need for adaptable employees who were able and willing to respond positively to change whether in the form of new technology or, as they moved between jobs, within 'flexible careers'. Employment for the 1990s (DE 1988: 44) declared, therefore, that:
Education and training must not simply be about learning skills for immediate tasks. It must enable all young people to acquire a broad foundation of skills, knowledge and understanding so that they can readily adapt to new tasks and new opportunities and so they can progress to higher levels of achievement.

The Evolution of Core Skills

In this climate, the search for 'core', 'generic' or 'transferable' skills that would facilitate labour market 'flexibility' was to continue and assume ever greater significance throughout the 1990s. It was the Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, who was to 'catapult core skills into the national agenda for change in the 16-19 sector' with a speech to the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher Education in 1989 (Lawson 1992: 86; DES 1989). Building on the earlier work of the MSC and FEU, Baker argued that 'core skills' offered a potential bridging mechanism for unifying post-16 education, capable both of enhancing the status of vocational studies and bringing them into closer alignment with 'A' levels. In his own mind, Baker felt that appropriate core skills would include 'numeracy', 'communication', 'personal relations (especially team work and leadership)', as well as 'familiarity with workplace systems, procedures and social contexts'. These skills were, therefore, to be integrated into all post-16 learning programmes, while their assessment would form the basis of credit transfer system that would facilitate progression to Higher Education as well as transferability across the academic and vocational pathways.

In the aftermath of Baker's speech, core skills were seized upon as a major new curriculum innovation and various organisations presented 'home-grown' versions that reflected their own particular interests, traditions and approaches. HMI replied with Post-16 Core Skills (1989), beginning with the needs of individuals and their ability to live positively as adults in conditions of uncertainty. In their view, the notion of core skills assumed both a thematic and knowledge-based content including: 'Knowledge about IT', 'Knowledge about society and the environment', 'Knowledge about industry and commerce', 'communication', 'numeracy', 'problem solving', 'working co-operatively', and 'adaptability' (HMI 1989). The CBI (1989) started from the premise of ensuring that VET would facilitate 'self-reliance, flexibility and broad competence as well as specific skills'. As such:

All training and vocational education should include the following common learning outcomes as core elements: Values and Integrity, Effective Communication, Application of Number, Application of Technology,
On the 28 November 1989, John MacGregor, Baker's successor at the DES, invited the National Curriculum Council (NCC) in conjunction with the Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC), to explore the possibility of integrating 'core skills' into 'A' and 'A/S' level programmes. The NCC duly followed up with *Core Skills 16-19* (NCC 1990), which presented a model comprised of six core skill units distributed across two groups, the first category of which were appropriate for all programmes post-16, the second having a more restricted application. Group I, therefore, consisted of 'communication skills' (the ability to extract, present and analyse information in a variety of formats), 'problem solving skills' (identify problems, propose and implement solutions) and 'personal skills' (greater responsibility devolved to student to manage their own learning). Group II consisted of 'numeracy', 'Information Technology' and 'Modern Language Competence'.

Attempts to arrive at a consensus as to what these portable elements might actually consist of continued to remain problematic, despite their formal adoption as 'Core Skill Units' in the new GNVQ framework under the headings 'Communication', 'Application of Number', 'IT', 'Foreign Language', 'Problem Solving', and 'Personal Skills (working with others and improving own learning performance)' (Green 1998). Core skills survived, therefore, as a chameleon-like concept subject to shifting meaning and interpretation. As Edwards (1998:7) notes:

> It may refer to basic skills in numeracy, communication and IT which employers are entitled to expect to have been acquired. It may refer to foundation for future learning which would include hunting and gathering information ...or the development of attitudes appropriate to a modern workforce.

In addition, the core skills idea was viewed as highly problematical from its inception. The claim that there actually existed broadly applicable generic skills, like 'critical thinking' or 'problem solving', for example, that were 'domain independent' and capable of being transferred across a range of contexts, had long been contentious within the philosophy of education, and continued to divide opinion even when the concept of 'meta-competence' attempted a weak rescue (Barrow 1987; Dearden 1984; Jonathan 1983, 1987; Hyland 1994, Halsall 1996).

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3 The first three were mandatory, the reminder offered as additional and desirable outcomes.
The integration of core skills within the traditional 'A' level pathway was also to prove abortive. The 1991 white paper, *Education and Training for the Twenty First Century* (DE 1991), signalled the governments' determination to preserve separate pathways within a divided post-16 qualifications structure. Hence, it established a triple track qualifications framework comprising academic 'A' levels, competence-based NVQs in the workplace and a new broad vocational route in schools and colleges, centred on the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ). In addition to expanding post-compulsory student participation, Conservative policy for the next five years sought to consolidate and 'retrench' the 'A' level' gold standard, (mainly by restricting participation through limitations on the amount of assessed course work), whilst simultaneously opening up a new broad vocational programme in schools and colleges to take the student overspill (Hodgson and Spours 1997, Young 1997). In this context, the integration of core skills within the academic pathway jarred with the government's concern to avoid any distortion of 'A' levels, while the traditional examination boards preferred to use the limited amount of coursework available to assess subject knowledge (Green 1998).

Despite these problems, core skills continued to receive a high profile within official policy statements. *Prosperity Through Skills: A Statement from the Secretary of State for Employment on his VET strategy for Great Britain* (ED 1993: 3 ), reiterated that global competition and labour market changes 'underline the need for flexible, multi-skilled individuals to deliver economic success'. It was essential therefore that young people 'gain the skills and enterprising attitudes needed for entry to the workforce and to prepare them to realise their potential throughout life' (ED 1993: 6, *my emphasis*). Thus, it recommended the promotion and development of:

...broad based skills [that] can make a major contribution to an individual's adaptability, flexibility and mobility in the labour market.

It also predicted that core skills, which were now a mandatory component of GNVQs, would form part of the goals of all those participating in youth and adult training programmes by 1996/7.

John Major's introduction to the 199~ white paper, *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* (DTI 1994: 3), also opined in familiar fashion:
We live in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. The education and skills of all our people are crucial to our prosperity and national success.

The document itself called for the incorporation of core skills within the National Education and Training Targets (NETTs). Here, the aim was to ensure:

...that all education and training develops self reliance, flexibility and breadth; in particular through fostering competence in core skills which employers have consistently identified as the foundation for effective transition to work - communication, numeracy and IT (DTI 1994: 80).

Following the CBI (1993), it also stressed that 'individuals will need to take increasing responsibility for their own adaptability and re-skilling throughout their working lives' (D111994: 76). Core skills were therefore to emerge as the very linchpin of national VET policy, affording sufficient vocational breadth and preparing students/trainees for changing work functions and a labour market in flux.

With the Dearing review of post-16 qualifications (Dearing 1996), the attempt to use core skills as unifying device for what remained a divided PCET system was also resuscitated (Green 1998). Dearing's approach was again to try to combine reform and consolidation, thereby strengthening 'tried and tested' 'A' levels, in line with the government's determination to preserve 'standards', whilst simultaneously attempting to broaden them through the inclusion of 'key skill' components. The report therefore sought to respond:

...to representations by employers on the need to build up competence in the key skills of communication, application of number and information technology, as well as to concerns to see that young people develop wider skills such as team working, problem solving and managing their own learning (Dearing 1996: 1).

Key skills, it was argued, would facilitate student progression and transfer, as well as promote 'parity of esteem' between the pathways (Hodgson and Spours 1997a).

Dearing's recommendations therefore included a reformulated one year A/S examination (equivalent to half an A level), and a Four Domain Advanced Diploma whereby candidates would be required to take an 'A' level in two domains and an A/S in the remaining two, as well as be assessed in 'key skills'. The Diploma instead of replacing 'A' levels, would be in addition to them, while the ability to force through real change would be weakened by allowing schools and colleges the freedom to retain the traditional 'A' level curriculum if they
so chose. There was an implicit assumption that some applied subjects such as photography, for example, would be better off as GNVQs, rather than 'A' levels, and that students who found the latter inappropriate to their needs should be encouraged to opt for more suitable vocational studies (Edwards 1998: 5). Dearing acknowledged the deep rooted status divisions between 'the academic' and 'the vocational' within the English education and training system (Dearing 1996: para. 1.13 and 4.5). However, by retaining a differentiated qualifications structure, the effect was to leave these unchallenged and block the development of vocational education as a high status technological alternative equivalent to traditional academic study (Edwards 1998: 4-5).

In the post-Dearing period, key skills (as core skills were now renamed) acquired a 'totemic' status (Green 1998: 23). Learning to Compete: Education and Training for 14-19 year olds (DfEE 1996: 6,9), reiterated that national prosperity was contingent upon 'well-educated and highly skilled young people'. It was vital that:

All 14-19 learning should equip young people with the key skills, behaviour and attitudes, critical to success in adult and working life (DfEE 1996: 21).

More specifically, the challenge facing young people in a learning age would be to develop the appropriate mix of:

* the skills, knowledge and understanding as a basis for further learning throughout life and work
* the personal qualities employers look for -such as reliability, enthusiasm and perseverance
* the key skills (for e.g. working with others and improving own learning and performance) required to be adaptable in employment and manage their own careers throughout life (DfEE 1996: 52).

Enter New Labour

Throughout the 1990s then national education and training policy became increasingly mired in the belief that simply boosting the outputs of the VET system and expanding the supply of educated and skilled employees, would be sufficient to transform economic competitiveness and realise the vision of high skill, high value-added capitalism (Keep 1998). New Labour, like their Conservative predecessors, have continued to stress the centrality of education and training as the central driver of economic competitiveness, coupled with new emphasis on the role of the VET system in tackling social exclusion and community decay (Keep 1998, DfEE 1998). The 1997 DfEE white paper, Excellence in Schools, affirms that:
In the 21st century knowledge and skill will be the key to success. Our goal is a society in which everyone is well educated and able to learn throughout life. Britain's economic prosperity and social cohesion depend on achieving that goal.

The 1998 DfEE green paper, *The Learning Age*, similarly argues that in today's knowledge based global economy, 'the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination' (DfEE 1998: 9). The skills of the learning age are said to be universal, encompassing everyone from bricklayers, designers, researchers, and scientists to technicians, caterers, carers, doctors, teachers and sales people. They include the 'basic skills' of literacy and numeracy, 'employability skills' needed to gain entry to the labour market, 'technician skills' delivered through Modern Apprenticeships, 'management skills' and 'key skills' (DfEE 1998: 65). The latter are described as 'working with other people', 'effective communication, including written skills', 'the ability to work with numbers', 'the use of IT', 'learning skills' and 'problem solving'. The overall logic of the document is to suggest that in the fast moving high-tech global knowledge economy, the only constant is change, such that skill in the end boils down to learning to learn (DfEE 1998: 19). Despite certain shifts of emphasis within some government departments, the danger remains that, like their predecessors, skill supply continues to be regarded as something akin to an 'Old West Miracle Tonic' with the ability to cure all social and economic ailments with repeated dosage.\footnote{Keep and Mayhew (1999) have argued therefore that the recent DTI white paper (DTI 1998), marks the partial beginning of new awareness of the need for broader enabling/regime competition role for the state.}

Although politically comforting to policy makers in that it provides a relatively simple solution to a complex problem, it is now widely argued by critical academic commentators in the field, that the doctrine of 'economic salvation through training' is myopic and deeply flawed (Coffield 1998, Keep and Mayhew 1998, 1999; Hyland, 1994; Avis et al 1996, Ainley 1993). The complexities of this argument have been well rehearsed elsewhere and need not be repeated here. In a nutshell, what they present us with is a vision of British economy experiencing 'systems failure', trapped in an 'low skill, low quality equilibrium' where price-centred forms of neo-Fordist competition and Taylorised work regimes proliferate, not least amongst the now dominant service sector (Finegold and Soskice 1988, Brown and Lauder 1996, Avis et al 1996; Keep 1998, Keep and Mayhew 1998, 1999). Rather than a universal
demand for higher levels of skill across the workforce, the suspicion is that the reality is one of too few highly skilled jobs and new patterns of production and management strategy which increasingly segregate a shrinking 'core' of relatively secure, highly skilled, 'knowledge' workers from a swelling periphery made up of the low waged, low skilled and casualised.

In this context, a one-eyed tendency to see skills supply as the new economic messiah, capable of delivering the British economy into the promised land of a 'high skills vision', only obscures the fact that the fundamental problem may lie on the demand side and the manner by which most firms still choose to compete and design jobs. Put simply, boosting the supply of skills does not itself tackle the crux of the problem, namely that the bulk of jobs being created are at the low skill, low wage end of the spectrum. The need then is for a much braver and more far reaching policy agenda that turns the skills problem inside out, reformulating it from the demand side and addressing it at source. Investment in education and training then becomes simply one leg of a pro-active industrial policy aimed at tackling deep rooted structural weaknesses that hinder UK economic performance and opening the 'black box' of the firm to strategic intervention (Button 1995; Avis et al 1996; Keep 1998, Brown and Lauder 1996).

If however policy makers have continued to regard skills as a panacea, they have done so at a time when the notion of skill itself has undergone a transformation of almost epic proportions. By the eve of the 21st century, skill had cast its net ever wider to catch within it a series of 'soft' interpersonal behaviours, attitudes and personal characteristics that had hitherto remained separate. According to one DfEE research paper, skills 'talk' now covered everything from reading, writing, reliability, communication, reasoning, problem solving and motivation to assertiveness, judgement, leadership, team working, customer orientation, self-management and continuous learning (Anderson and Marshall 1996). Although policy takers continued to talk of 'up-skilling' the workforce as if little had changed, the new discourse of skill was to present national policy makers with a range of complex and difficult problems. It is to these that I now turn.
II. IMPLICATIONS

What we mean by 'skill' and what we should mean by it is the subject of a long debate which continues to exercise academic minds (Attelwell 1990, Ainley 1993). Indeed, never has there been a more urgent need for us to be clear on the question of what is skill? A substantive contribution to this debate however remains beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this section is to briefly flag up some of the policy implications that follow from the new 'discourse' of skill as it has come to be defined, by letting loose a series of proverbial foxes within the traditional policy coop. There are three broad areas of concern. The first concerns the expansion of ‘skill’ itself to embrace both high level analytical skills, technical mastery and theoretical knowledge as well range of 'tacit' behaviours, personality traits and attitudes, and the problems this presents for the VET system. The second stresses the limitations of our skills based model of vocational education and training, and more specifically the preference given to core skills over and above a more robust form of ‘general education' variously defined. The third highlights the inadequacies of core or key skills as a device for unifying the 14-19 education and qualifications system.

We're All Skilled Now: Implications for the VET system

Keep and Mayhew (1999) have already explored some of the implications that flow from the broadening out of skill in connection with the DTI's 1998 white paper, Our Competitive Future (DTI 1998). The latter presents a vision of an economy competing on the basis of 'knowledge, skills and creativity ...which help to create high productivity business processes and high value-added goods and services', a vision which is assumed to be universal and all encompassing. Thus, it boldly asserts:

Crucially this challenge is for all industries ...Businesses in all sectors need to exploit new sources of competitive advantage and respond rapidly and flexibly to change. All business in the UK, large and small, manufacturing and services, low and high tech, urban and rural, need to marshal their knowledge and skills to satisfy customers, exploit market opportunities and meet society's aspirations for a better environment (DTI 1998: 10).

It applies therefore to the high-performance sectors of the British economy (for example, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, software), where 'theoretical mastery of leading-edge developments is [said to be] key to developing and sustaining competitive advantage' (Keep and Mayhew 1999: 4). The vision also draws within it the much larger service-sector (and parts of manufacturing), where neo-Fordist forms of price-based competition and low skill,
Taylorised working practices, remain entrenched. In order to span this divide and retain a traditional policy line that there exists a universal demand for higher levels of skill and knowledge across the entire UK workforce, the white paper first distinguishes between, and then conflates 'two radically different types of knowledge' (Keep and Mayhew 1999: 9). Thus, we have talk of the 'abstract, theoretical bodies of knowledge' required by 'systems analysts' of the kind envisaged by Reich (1991) in his category of 'symbolic manipulators' and which would be developed through 'formalised education and academic qualifications'. Alongside this, exists 'tacit' knowledge, especially significant in the context of service economy, where the emphasis is on 'soft' personal characteristics and behaviours rather than high level theoretical skills and knowledge, and which, Keep and Mayhew suggest, could be delivered via lower level NVQs.

Keep and Mayhew (1999: 10-11) present at least two broad implications that follow from widening spectrum of skill. First, it means that the National VET and qualifications system must now service an economy where the real skill behaviour demands of employers are widely divergent. As such, the use of terms such as 'upskilling' may become essentially meaningless unless one is clear as to what 'skills' are actually being enhanced. It is perfectly possible, for example, to argue that the economy is being effectively 'up-skilled' without any real progress being made either in the advancement of technical or intermediate level skills in which the UK is widely held to be deficient, or any shift necessarily occurring towards high value-added business processes.

It is important to note that whilst presenting policy makers with some complex problems, the broadening of the skills concept also confers distinct advantages. In a curious ideological twist, the new language of 'tacit' skill allows policy makers to claim that we are all part of a high skill knowledge economy, when in reality very little may be changing in terms of the actual quality of jobs many people do, with large swathes of employment still requiring only enough 'skill' to fill shelves, swipe barcodes, follow instructions and smile pleasantly at the customer. One does not need to be a Marxist to dispute that skill without real autonomy or discretion is very likely to be no skill at all. The very real distinction between high and low skill, 'theoretical and technical knowledge' and 'tacit behaviours', is dissolved by the white paper into nothingness. As the quote by Gellner suggests, with which this paper began, the virtue of 'skill', continues to be its very ambiguity and diffuseness, coupled with the fact that it now offers policy makers a moveable feast, with an application broad enough to span the
British economy in toto. Skill is now so loosely defined that it stretches across both 'high' and 'low' skill sectors of the economy emasculating the huge chasm of experience between them. The widening of skill to encompass behaviours, attitudes and personal characteristics thus makes it easier for policy makers to claim, paradoxically, that we are moving towards the promised land of a high skill, high value-added 'knowledge' economy, whilst sections of the economy and employment remain firmly trapped within the low skill cage.

Second, the 'softening' of skill to embrace personality traits and attitudes, raises the issue of whether these are actually trainable through the VET system or innate characteristics, and indeed whether it is desirable that such 'training' happens at all. While some skills such as 'team-working' may be capable of being taught, others like 'creativity' or 'leadership', may be thought less so, being either genetically acquired or the product of early social conditioning in childhood. The view that the education and training system should begin to develop generic 'skills' of 'problem solving' or 'critical thinking' also runs up against the familiar transference problem, already mentioned briefly in this paper, namely that 'thinking is always about X', while the solving of any specific problem requires contextually specific knowledge and understanding (DfEE 1997, Halsall 1996). As Dearden (1984: 60) pointed out some time ago, just because I am skilled at diagnosing a mechanical fault in a car does not mean that I can simply transfer this skill to medicine, or indeed, that there is 'some general [diagnostic problem solving] skill ...which is common to both or could be trained free from any particular context'.

The claim that the VET system should concern itself with developing 'motivation' is similarly contentious raising real ethical and political problems in the context of jobs that are poorly designed, lacking in discretion, monotonous and closely supervised (Keep and Mayhew 1999: 10). At the same time, new research into Glasgow's 'trendy' bars, hotels and retail outlets, suggests that parts of the 'style conscious' service sector may in fact be searching for 'aesthetic labour', endowed with certain voice-quality, behaviour and physical appearance. According to Nickson et al, some Glasgow employers already provide personal 'make-over classes' for new employees, while others vigilantly police 'appearance' through 'special grooming committees'. Here 'skill' is about having the face, voice, body, image and grooming that fits the corporate image and 'sells'. Moreover, this begins to cast the VET system into an altogether new and unfamiliar role (Nickson et al 1998). As Keep and Mayhew (1999: 10) note:
...VET providers would appear to need to be thinking about speech training, department, and personal grooming classes rather than degrees, GCSEs, or NVQs.'

Indeed, the list could even be extended to include such things crash course slimming classes for the over-weight and unemployed on New Deal! The fact that parts of the economy require potential employees to have their very personal or class-based identity re-designed in this way, is likely to bring with it a host of adverse psychological side effects in the future. Many have argued that the performance of 'emotional labour' requires service sector employees to separate 'self' from the image and feelings they project (Horschild 1983). The emergence of the new 'aesthetics' of labour, and the evolution of training model that concerns itself with image construction, could conceivably render any sense of personal estrangement, insecurity and dissatisfaction yet more acute.

Moreover, many of these desirable personal characteristics may well turn out, on closer inspection, to be bound up with the 'cultural capital' of different social groups, with serious implications in terms of labour market access and closure. Research in the United States, for example, into the importance of 'soft skills' in the service economy, found many employers already perceived black men as lacking the desired attitude, behaviour and demeanour necessary to secure employment (Tilly and Moss 1996). The more skill shades over into personal presentation, behaviour, voice and appearance, the more issues of class, race and gender stereotyping are likely to be brought into play. One person employed in financial services, interviewed by Nickson et al (1998), recounted how a new employee had been sent by personnel to work in her branch:

On paper her application was fine ...[but] this woman walked in ...How she looked and how she spoke ...it was even the way she wore her uniform, the way her hair and make up was ...my manager took an instant dislike to her and the woman lasted seven weeks ...I mean she was brilliant at [bank telling] but because of the way she looked and the way she spoke, he took and instant dislike to her...(emphasis added).

Another respondent within a Glaswegian restaurant chain also explained how a colleague was dismissed for being 'too common', although the reason given was 'poor performance'.

There may be similar implication for the integration of 'key skills' into higher education. Ainley (1994: 80) has suggested therefore that personal and transferable skills:
are neither personal, transferable, nor skills; they are social and generic competencies ... To present attitudes and habits detached from their cultural context as technical abilities that can be acquired piecemeal in performance not only divorces them from the cultural context that gave them their original meaning but represents them as equally accessible to all students whatever their class cultural background, gender or race. It ignores the fact that middle class students already possess many of these competencies as a result of their previous education and family socialisation ... For at rock bottom, the real personal and transferable 'skills' required for preferential employment are those of whiteness, maleness and traditional middleclassness.

In the final analysis, we would do well to remember then that 'skill' remains, to a large extent, socially constructed (Dex 1985). The more skill overlaps with attitudes, behaviours and personal attributes, the more likely it is to become impregnated with the 'whiff of elitism'.

**Implications for the Compulsory Mass Education System**

The very diffuseness of skill is also likely to hold implications for the mainstream compulsory education system. Since the 1970s policy makers have insisted that education should be made more relevant to the needs of the economy and become more directly involved in the preparation of students for 'work'. Much of the legitimation for the 'new vocationalism' has been supplied by theories of post-Fordism and so called 'smart' production methods, which seem to call forth a new generation of multi-skilled, highly educated, autonomous and problem-solving workers. For many on the Left, this new economic vision has supplied a ready made get-out-of-jail-free card, offering the perfect policy-friendly economic rationale for breaking with an elitist education system and pursuing the progressive curricula and pedagogic reforms they favour (Ball 1990, Young 1998, Bentley 1998). Others have argued that post-Fordism is itself conceptually ambiguous, referring to diverse phenomena, while any straightforward linkage with a progressive form of vocational education per se should be treated with utmost caution (Hickox 1995).

What is inescapable, however, is the fact that there are major problems with rooting any educational reform agenda in a vision of the British economy radically different to the one that exists in reality. For if the 'bleak house' scenario of the 'low skill equilibrium' holds good, and large swathes of employment continue to demand employees with only minimum basic education, the requisite interpersonal skills and a submissive attitude to working life, then the real economic pull on the education system is likely to be in a very different direction to that which many hope for. In this context, a narrow vocationalism simply makes schools
'outposts' of the economy to be blamed repeatedly for its productivity woes, while the vision of the curriculum tends to 'come out materially the same as the shop floor' (Lewis 1997). Thus, the dominant curriculum fare in the US and UK continues to be one of raising standards, 'back to basics', and the inculcation of appropriate inter-personal skills and work-related behaviour that the bulk of jobs require (DfEE 1997).

Some US commentators have already suggested that if skills are really to do with attitudes, behaviour and personality – the so-called 'Third Dimension Expertise' of the new post-Fordist, human resource driven workplace- then the case for involving the education system in their development is made all the stronger. This is because while many personal attributes may be innate, others are most likely to be susceptible to development during the early formative phase of a child's life in school. Cappelli (1995) has argued therefore that the new post-Fordist organisational paradigm breaks the traditional education/economy 'correspondence', where schools socialised pupils into deferential forms of behaviour and the submissive acceptance of the routinisation of factory life (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Instead, it fashions a new role for them in teaching the 'pro-social behaviour', attitudes and skills ('motivation', 'persistence', 'co-operation') that employers look for:

…the sooner a discussion of workplace attitudes and behaviours can be brought into the more general debate about education reform, the easier it will be to produce a system that aligns and reinforces the interest of schools and of the workplace (Cappelli 1995:118)

The problem with this approach is that it transposes an idealised view of economy (in this case the US) as we would like it to be, on to a predominately low skill, service-based economy, and then uses it to legitimate a functionalist view of education as delivering appropriate attitudes, behaviour and skill for work. Clearly there are problems. Teaching pupils to be persistent, enthusiastic, committed and co-operative in preparation for 'real jobs' that frequently lack discretion, autonomy and personal control and which remain embedded in hierarchical personnel management structures (see Dench et al 1998), is simply to socialise them into the submissive and pliant work roles of old. The ideological rationale for the education/economy correspondence may have changed, but in reality it is played out in the same way.

By the same token, the effect is to assume once again that workplaces are essentially 'sound' provided they can attract the right kind of worker, thereby shifting attention away from the
organisational constraints which exist in many firms to the utilisation of workers' skill and knowledge. Thus, we are returned once more to the fact that the skill problem starts with the employee, rather than the firm and the lack of demand for skill, as this paper has suggested. It is then only a short step to blaming the victim for their own lack of employment. At the same time, as the reproductive function of schooling is legitimated, factors of race, gender and class which continue to shape educational and employment prospects and life chances are obfuscated (Taylor 1998). While schools certainly have a vital role to play in 'education for work', it is vital that their contribution to economic performance is properly formulated and understood, and that any form of vocational education provides students with the means to reflect critically on social and economic realities inclusive of the world of work itself (Lewis 1998). However, with skill encompassing notions of appropriate interpersonal social behaviours and attitudes, that schools might conceivably deliver, the danger is that 'vocationalism' once more becomes truncated and warped.

A Peculiarly English Trade Off sacrificing general education in favour of 'lean, competencies and core skills
The way 'skill' itself has been approached and understood in Britain also presents major problems. Competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) have attracted criticism from diverse quarters. Supporters have seen them as breaking with an elitist academic past, welcomed their access-based approach to assessment, and the fact that they celebrate what people 'can do' (Jessup 1991). Critics, on the other hand, have pointed to weak 'take-up' by employers, the fact that most have been awarded at low levels (levels 1 and 2), the discredited behaviourist learning principles on which they are founded and their marginalisation of supporting frameworks of theoretical knowledge (Hyland 1994, 1995; Smithers 1993). Hyland (1994: x) has argued on these grounds that they are 'simply not up to the task of upgrading the skills of the workforce and bringing about the learning society.'

According to Green (1998: 24-29), Britain has long been hamstrung by a 'lean' notion of technical skill and knowledge which is radically different to that found in mainland Europe, where the creation of highly skilled, flexible employees is seen to be inextricably bound up with the need to create a highly educated, active citizenry. According to the normative model of skill formation through the English apprenticeship system:
...craft learning meant socialisation into a particular work culture and the acquisition, through guided practice, of certain manipulative skills underpinned by a minimum of 'useful knowledge' which was often no more than rules of thumb (Green 1998: 28).

With the decline of apprenticeships and the move towards competence-based models of learning in the 1980s, this 'lean' notion of skill has become yet more emaciated, evolving as both 'culture -and theory-free' (ibid.) Thus:

Competence-based learning ...defines 'skill' as the ability to perform pre-given tasks with predictable accuracy. Knowledge and theory are important only in so far as they are necessary to competent performance, and may be 'tacit' or non-articulated. So long as the student can 'do' there is little need to know why or be able to articulate 'how' (ibid.).

This is in marked contrast therefore to the European paradigm where a minimum of 'general education' and 'culture' is regarded as a sine qua non of active citizenship, and the ability to handle abstract knowledge and theory is seen as endowing the individual with the capacity to adapt to new technology, changing work roles and a shifting labour market (Green 1998: 28).

The lack of substantive intellectual content in English vocational education and training, when compared to mainland Europe, is therefore one of its central hallmarks. This is visible within GNVQs, where 'core skills' have functioned as an 'inferior proxy' for continuing general education (Green 1998). By contrast to the rigorously taught and assessed general academic education afforded to vocational counterparts in Germany and France, notions of 'relevance' and 'suitability' have confined English vocational students to a much blander diet of employer-driven 'core skills', which are frequently end up being neglected within taught vocational programmes. The result, says Green, is that they are left with:

...an impoverished form of general education which is neither adequately delivering the minimum basic skills normally associated with an effective general education, such as verbal articulacy, logical skills and mathematical literacy, nor even a foundation of scientific and humanist culture adequate to the demands of active citizenship in modern societies (Green 1998: 40).

Keep (1998) has suggested that this impoverished view of English vocational skill, reflects not only long standing political and cultural traditions in country where notions of active citizenship are weak, but also the materially reality of a still predominantly Fordist or neo-Fordist workplace where self-reliant, polyvalent and autonomous knowledge workers remain more fiction than fact. Consistent with this, is the fact that employer-designed NVQs do not
specify the ability to work unsupervised, except at level 3, and then only to a limited extent. Studies of employers' own perceptions of 'key skills' also indicate the widespread presence of Fordist and neo-Fordist production strategies and a reliance upon unreconstructed Taylorist work regimes and personnel approaches. According to Dench et al (1998:61), therefore, far from requiring employees who could demonstrate independence, autonomy and responsibility, 'in reality most employers simply wanted people to get on with their jobs, and not to challenge things'.

*The Problematic Role of Core Skills in the 14-19 Curriculum*

If major difficulties exist with the UK's narrow and low level skills based approach to education and training, the role of core skills within the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications framework also remains problematic. Debate continues as to whether the British 14-19 qualification system is better left to develop as distinctive track-based system, favoured by Dearing, or requires more radical overhaul towards 'unification', whereby currently divided vocational and academic streams would run together within a single qualifications framework or Baccalaureate type model. Limitations of space prevent a detailed discussion of the nuances of this debate (for a general overview see Hodgson and Spours 1997). A key area of controversy, however, continues to be what form of 'general education' should be provided for post-compulsory students in order to ensure sufficient breadth and flexibility of study, 'party of esteem' between the pathways and sufficient opportunities for student transfer and progression. Broadly, 'trackers' have argued for continuing academic education for those who wish to continue with school subjects after 16, and 'key skills' for the remainder. One problem with this is, as Hodgson and Spours (1997) note, is that it confines general education 'in any real sense to the highest achieving 30% of the age group', assumes vocational students are suited to more 'relevant and useful knowledge' and so reinforces the traditional academic-vocational status divide within the PCET system. 'Unifiers', by contrast, have argued for a single qualifications framework and modular based approach, which provides a universal entitlement to a mandatory core of 'general education'. Although rarely spelled out in detail, this core is often said to comprise the following 'mix': English; Mathematics; Scientific and Technological studies; Political, Economic and Sociological Literacy; Environmental Awareness, International Understanding, a Modern Foreign Language and Cultural and Aesthetic Experience (Young 1993; Green 1998: 40).
For Green (1998) core skills, despite the amount of political capital invested in them, are an unlikely vehicle for unifying the post-16 qualifications system and bridging the academic-vocational divide. First, they remain the product of the divided education and training model and embody assumptions as to the kind of 'limited' general education and 'really useful knowledge' that vocational students should have access to. Second, they are acutely tied to the needs of employment and employers and are unlikely to offer a genuinely critical and empowering education capable of producing reflective and active citizens. Third, their delayed and problematic introduction into the academic pathway is symptomatic of the fact that they derive from a competence-based model of learning, which is radically different from the knowledge-based tradition of 'A' levels. As Green concludes:

...given their very narrow and particular aims, core skills cannot serve as a basis of a common core for both academic and vocational courses. Arguably no curriculum area derived for the world of work ...can achieve the kind of universality which would allow it serve as a common foundation for learning. Only some notion of general culture, addressing the future needs of adults as both workers and citizens, can fulfil this function.

Section II has attempted to pull together some of the problems that flow from the way the UK has tended to approach 'skill'. Only a broad sketch of the problems has been attempted, while the list is by no means exhaustive. There are major debates in progress, for example, as to whether skill can be equated with competence which we have simply been forced to pass over (Ainley 1993). There are also grounds for thinking that Britain's market-driven and individualist approach to skill feeds through to impoverished 'official' versions of 'the learning society'. Here, individuals co-operating within conflict-purged, high-trust, post-Fordist organisations, and ever more responsible for their own education and training needs, transport their portfolios skills from job to job within challenging and 'flexible careers' (CBI 1993, DfEE 1998). As Coffield (1998) has argued, such ideologically saturated visions of the learning society are a far cry from the 'community of educated people', envisaged by the likes of Pring (1995), which raises the threshold of knowledge and culture across all of society, thereby affording the kind of bona fide intellectual investment, critical insight and confidence to enable people to live full and meaningful lives in conditions of ever increasing uncertainty at the end of the twentieth century.
III. CONCLUSION

The reach of 'skill' has expanded exponentially since the mid-1970s at the same time as policy makers have insisted that the skills, knowledge and creativity of the workforce constitutes the vital ingredient of national economic prosperity. This paper has charted the shifting meaning of skill across the policy literature, as the skills universe drew within it a range of personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, and embraced a new language of generic, transferable 'key skills'. Finally, it has attempted, to sketch, albeit with a broad brush, some of the implications for education and training debates in the UK.

For over two decades the obsessive 'let them eat skills' approach to economic renaissance has reigned supreme in national policy circles and denied many of the complex structural weaknesses that continue to undermine the UK's economic performance and competitiveness (Coffield 1998, Hutton 1995). At the same time, there exist major problems with the UK's 'lean' approach to 'skill', with its pre-occupation with low level competencies, and the marginalisation of theoretical knowledge within the vocational qualifications structure. We have also seen how the broadening of skill has presented policy makers with a host of new and potentially difficult problems to handle. However, there has been a bonus. As skill shaded over into behaviours and attitudes, it inevitably implied a particular 'subjectivity' on the part of the worker-enthusiastic, determined, committed, motivated - that could easily be applied to largely un-reconstituted neo-Fordist organisation and Taylorist work relations. In the end being presentable, enthusiastic, motivated and compliant at work, is all part and parcel of being 'skilled'. In many cases, the 'new skilled worker' looks conspicuously like the 'good bloke' that British employers have traditionally had in mind when thinking about skill (Oliver and Turton 1982). The great ideological trick of skill is that it now means all things to all people and can be applied universally without exception. In fact, one has to search long and hard to find anyone who isn't (in one sense or another) 'skilled' in the new knowledge economy as policy makers would define it. The paradox of skill therefore is that we are all skilled now, regardless of the type or quality of the job we do and the level of personal control, autonomy or power we enjoy. This, then, is the most fundamental difference in how skill is officially conceptualised today compared to the past, when to be skilled implied some level of real market power and personal discretion over one's work. Today, as the pace of work is ratcheted up, and employees learn to cope within what are often low skill, low discretionary work roles, it is even be possible for some to claim that pressure management 'skills' are being acquired. For policy makers, the high skill, high value added infant is
miraculously conceived within the low skill womb (DTI 1998). At the same time, 'skill' remains largely a socially construct and liable to be construed to the disadvantage of ethnic and class groups. Skill may have changed enormously but it has certainly not lost its power to mystify.

What implications can be drawn then from this brief analysis of skill? First, for far too long, policy makers have started at the wrong place with skill. Skilled and educated workers are, of course, a vital ingredient of any high skill economy, but equally important is the fact that there are enough skilled jobs for them to do. British policy needs therefore to shift out of its narrow focus on skill supply and address more directly the demand for skill in the economy and how this might conceivably be enhanced. This runs against the grain of the minimalist state tradition in Britain, requires that the 'black box' of the firm be opened up to substantive policy intervention and is likely to meet with powerful and entrenched vested interests wedded to the status quo (Coates 1996). It will be a far from easy and difficult road to persuade policy makers and politicians to go down. To argue this, is not to suggest that reform of the education and training system is unimportant. Rather, as Rogers and Streeck (1996) have suggested, the need is for double barrelled shot-gun approach, with an active enabling state pulling the demand trigger for skill first, and then pursuing appropriate education and training reforms consistent with this high skill vision.

Second, if Britain is to design an education training system capable of nourishing a 'high skills vision', then it will have to question whether the needs of the economy and employers are the best place to start. This is especially important in an economy where most employers have historically been pusillanimous in their commitment to training, and where the majority continue to aim low on the skills spectrum (Keep 1998). In this context, allowing employers to shape the education and training system as they see fit simply works by majority rule, and fashions it in their own low skill image. A better approach, judging by some of our European rivals, may be to break with tradition and reset education and training within a much broader democratic framework of 'education for citizenship' (Avis et al 1996). Here, the starting point would be the needs of the learner and the assurance that 'citizens' have universal and ongoing access to a general and vocational education that affords real critical purchase on the world. As Ainley (1993) has written, much as the Third World literacy campaigns took basic literacy and numeracy to the countryside, so the task for Britain today must be to raise the minimum threshold of knowledge and understanding across society as a whole. Such an approach
might begin breathe real life into the conception of a 'learning society', by closing the gap between those who have access to liberating forms of knowledge and those for whom it has been consistently denied. As Schostak (1991: 187) has observed, the true role of any education worthy of the name is:

...to open up the discourses through which individuals make sense of their everyday lives and subject them to critical reflection, and through all the cultural resources at one's disposal to imagine and create alternatives.

Within the context of a unified post-14 qualifications structure, a mandatory core of general education, properly worked out, could also do much to raise the status of vocational education and break its traditional association with low achievers. In the end this is not to argue for the traditional liberal separation of education and economy. It is not a case of either/or. It is now widely argued that high standards of technical education require a broad general education, and that this offers by far the best prospect of realising the twin gaols of highly skilled, well educated and genuinely flexible worker-citizen, able to live confidently in uncertain times (Green 1998). In reality, there is no chicken and egg dilemma of 'do we start with education or the economy?' We start with both. If a genuine 'enabling' role for the state is to be envisaged, capable of breaking out of a destructive neo-liberal market framework, reforming Britain's dysfunctional financial system, raising the level of investment in the economy, and subordinating industrial decision making to democratic control and social purpose, then it will begin by reclaiming the transformative potential of education as the vehicle for the construction of a democratic public willing to defend social life from free-market blight. In the end, it this transformative power of education as an act of political reconstruction which needs to be reclaimed. It is also what policy makers, politician and vested interest most fear. As Gailbraith one noted:

Education is a double-edged sword for the affluent society. It is essential given the technical scientific requirements of modem industry ...but ...by inducing more critical attitudes, it undermines the want creating power which is indispensable to the modem economy...[and] enables people to see how they are managed in the interest of the mechanism that is assumed to serve them (cited in Chitty 1992: 460.

The road to a genuinely high skill, highly educated, socially just and participatory democracy is likely be a rocky one, resisted every step of the way. Most of us never doubted this. It is
important that we hold on to where we want to go and what that will mean in terms of politics. While there is always scope for a critical engagement with policy makers, we would do well not to lose sight of Perry Anderson's wise words, that 'the danger of conceiving all of democratic life as a dialogue is that we forget that its primary reality remains strife' (Anderson 1995: 43).
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