This paper considers the contradictory effects of a range of influences on what is fast becoming a critical mass of Post 16 compulsory education and training: the influence of the market, those of the employer and those resulting from qualification-led reform. In the face of continuing economic crisis the paper examines the extent to which such reform either deskills or creates new skills for the 21st century. These issues are looked at both in relation to wider conceptions of work and the impact of post-industrial perspectives on the content of education and training. It is argued that missing in contemporary debate is any coherent vision of the teaching and learning process beyond the confines of markets, competencies and outcomes. In addressing this issue, the paper draws attention to some of the neglected principles of education practice, citizenship and democracy, which are considered essential in framing Post 16 alternatives. In conclusion, the paper reflects on the paradox that privatised market-led reform has come to rely on greater centralised control, including mass utilisation of FE public sector institutions. Setting private vs public control, it is argued, reflects a false dichotomy, which is neither in the interests of students, teachers, employers or economy.

Education and training for the 21st century

In the past decade post-compulsory education and training has attracted the interest of government, trade unions, employer representatives, educationists and the increased participation of students themselves. Much recent attention has followed on the influential government White Paper (1991) Education and training for the 21st century, which acknowledges that decades of failure to invest in post-compulsory education and training, have left Britain with a vicious circle of low skills, low wages and low productivity, including one of the least educated and trained workforces in the industrial world. Indeed, a new-found consensus has emerged among previously antagonistic partners, TUC (1989), CBI (1989), Labour Party (1990), Examination Bodies (RSA 1990), TECs and government, that nothing short of a skills revolution is needed to break this vicious circle and arrest Britain’s downward economic spiral. In addition, a number of key factors have placed policy issues regarding Post 16 education and training to the fore:
• the decline in manufacturing industry linked with the collapse of the youth labour market and traditional training routes;
• the lack of competitiveness: the vicious circle of low skills, low wages, low productivity linked with low Post 16 participation, high drop-out rates, lack of universal Post 16 provision, and rigid academic vocational divisions;
• the development of new technology and management systems influencing work redesign and organisation, further affected by replacement of traditional labour, changes in industrial relations and organised labour (from Fordism to post-Fordism);
• The geo-politicisation of education and training: in response to global, political, international and multi-national, industrial and commercial developments (with implications for national and local systems of education, training and work);
• the demographic trend: the bulge in youth population and rising unemployment places Post 16 centre stage, tertiary as a transition or buffer between school, work and HE.

In various and often contradictory ways, such factors have placed post-compulsory education and training at the centre of policy debate. From being a relative backwater of mainstream education, FE and training has increasingly become an integral part of mass education itself. In recent years improvements in GCSE and A level results, the take-up of vocational qualifications and increased participation rates, bode well for the passage of Post 16 education and training reform. Moreover with GNVQ\(^1\), heralded in some quarters as the alternative route (Green 1993), there are historic signs that further education and training is, at last, opening up the range of opportunities first envisaged by Crowther (1959). According to Mclure (1991) four basic policy assumptions now drive post-compulsory education and training reform, and include:

• two routes for 16–19s (academic and vocational);
• two modes of provision (full and part-time);
• overlapping qualifications (A levels and GNVQs);
• two sets of destinations.

However, in order to be successful these policy assumptions must, according to the government’s White Paper (1991), be linked to

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\(^1\) For an explanation of these and other acronyms, see Appendix 1
nationally-agreed training priorities, targets and standards, encompassing:

- attention to better use of resources: access, accreditation of prior learning and flexible learning;
- establishing nationally and internationally-agreed training targets: supported by legislation;
- centralised reform of national vocational qualifications in more systematic fashion: linking national organisation, delivery and funding control;
- establishing market employer and competency-led reform (in contrast with time-served, institution and profession-led reform);
- giving more attention to institutional self-governance of schools and colleges, including student participation and retention (at the same time deregulating local authority influences);
- supporting progression between school, college, work and HE;
- sustaining education and training markets by encouraging competition and partnerships between schools, colleges, employer, training, examination and funding agencies.

Given the policy vacuum pervading since Crowther (1959), such acknowledgement of the guidelines necessary to achieve national VET reforms represent a significant step forward. First, it has placed the neglected area of post-compulsory education and training on the national policy agenda, and accentuated the importance of much-needed VET reform for all school leavers. Second, it has drawn attention to the relationship between training reform and the social and economic futures (and opportunities) of individuals, economy and nation—derived from investment in training. And, finally, it has focussed more attention on the skills, competencies and experiences necessary to meet the changing work and education needs of the 21st century.

On this basis one might reasonably expect to discern a clear policy direction following on from the White Paper. Yet, if in official terms, the rhetoric surrounding Post 16 reform concerns reskilling the economy in the teeth of economic crisis, the question arises: how will market and qualification-led reform achieve this? While there is a growing consensus about what constitutes the problem (i.e. the low skills, low wage, low productivity syndrome) there is little agreement about how that consensus should translate into policy and practice. In current government thinking, for example, there is less emphasis on
policy and planning and more on market and employer-led reform reflecting increasing polarisation between ‘public’ and ‘private’ domains. Given the historical failure of voluntarism in FE and training policy, it is curious then that post-compulsory reform in Britain should again go down this road. What is the thinking behind this: and what realistically can the restructuring of tertiary arrangements on market principles deliver to Post 16 students, employers and economy alike?

The new FE

Though FE has traditionally operated in the market, its development often arose more by default than by design: its voluntaristic nature being determined more by the vagaries of local labour markets and demographic trends, than by direct government involvement. That situation has since changed with the combined effects of ERA (1988); FE and HE Act (1992) and Schools Bill (1993), which have effectively established greater central State control of a deregulated school and FE system. In theory institutional autonomy and corporate status now place institutions in the market apparently unfettered by external constraint, regulation or professional restriction. Increasingly self-governance, in the form of local financial management, TECs, training credits, enterprise and business partnerships, now have a major impact on school and Post 16 provision, rendering education and training more market led, client centred, entrepreneurial and responsive to industrial and commercial needs. It is envisaged that this flexibility will be achieved in two inter-related ways: first by Post 16 institutions becoming less course led and more student centred and, second, by colleges anticipating new markets and funding arrangements with FEFC, TECs, and lead business, industrial and commercial bodies driving the new system. In support of this, recent legislation seeks not only to centrally promote an expanded Post 16 education and training system (sustained more by private than public enterprise) but also to ensure delivery of vocational priorities, improved skill levels, GNVQ, student participation and better value for money, at local level. In the words of one college principal:

... the new arrangements of further education and training will redistribute the subsidy from the supplier (the colleges), to the customer (most likely industry or commerce) and the consumer (the student).

(Temple 1991)
From this perspective, reducing unit costs, competition and responding to market needs is seen to encourage efficiency, responsiveness and flexibility of institutions. If on the surface such an approach appears radical and student-centred, it has much in common with other deregulated aspects of government industrial relations legislation. In recent years much of this has been concerned with curbing the influence of trade unions, local authorities, health and safety bodies, and with abolishing wages councils, industrial training boards, and training levies. If this is ostensibly concerned with freeing up the market, it also represents a political mechanism for centralising State control. In education and training terms this involves transferring the knowledge base of the curriculum from professionals to preferred groups (employers, TECs, governors, training agencies, NCVQ, FEFC and other bodies). Moreover, reducing the role of LEAs, teachers and unions to residual functions, (creating managerial systems charged with accountability and establishing institutions as financially autonomous) effectively ensures the responsiveness of schools and colleges to external agencies and agendas. According to Esland (1994) such factors, reinforced by teachers working to contract, predefined content and assessment, is yet a further indication of the pervasiveness of the political in support of economic agendas. How is this achieved?

At the political level it is reflected in government attempts to break what it terms as the public sector monopoly of Post 16 education and training, enshrined in its historic and local democratic links with schooling, the 1944 Act, LEAs and Crowther (1959). At the administrative level it involves placing Post 16 institutions in new market arrangements, linked with industrial lead bodies, training, examination and funding agencies, apparently unfettered by bureaucracy and more responsive to market need. Thus, if granting corporate status is ostensibly to do with making colleges competitive, independent and entrepreneurial, it also has much to do with deregulating FE arrangements, making them more responsive to a business, industrial and commercial infra-structure, which they are expected to serve—and which has important implications for the teaching and learning process. Viewed from this perspective, the White Paper (1991) and FE and HE Act (1992) is less concerned with providing a policy or curricular framework for Post 16 Education and Training, than with radically repositioning FE within new administrative, organisational and accounting arrangements. As I have argued elsewhere (Gleeson 1993), it seeks to do this in two inter-
related ways: first, by creating internal competition, lumping together sixth form colleges, FE, school, sixth forms and tertiary colleges, linking institutional survival with unit costs, increased student numbers and reduced funding; and, second, by encouraging a new competitive and formula-driven framework, involving schools, Post 16 institutions, TECs, funding councils, NCVQ, exam boards, LEAs, business and industrial partnerships.

While the primary focus of government legislation remains one of placing institutions in the market place, little thought has been given to how different facets of the competitive process hang together beyond self-regulation. Missing is any coherent analysis of the effects of markets in terms of up-grading or down-grading knowledge and skills in the curriculum, particularly in relation to fluctuations in the fortunes of local and national labour markets. Left unregulated, for example, the education market does not necessarily operate or effectively redistribute skills and resources in the interests of producers, customers or nation. Courses that sell today may not, however, sell tomorrow, resulting in over-production of some skills and under-production of others. In such circumstances, it remains unclear as to how market-driven VET will respond to local and national skill requirements—and how the balance between need and provision will be regulated, by whom—and in whose interest? Linked with this is the danger of institutions working to their own market agendas and survival instincts, leading to greater institutional parochialism, including academic and vocational protectionism. In such circumstances, where do new and challenging questions and ideas about skill and knowledge in the curriculum come from? Moreover, preoccupation with unit costs, cost-effective courses and student numbers may radically effect the responsiveness of colleges and employers in meeting special education, community and multi-racial needs in the face of more lucrative earning courses.

In such circumstances, competition is likely to support the envisaged principles of Post 16 integration of provision, qualification and progression, envisaged by GNVQ. It may well be that without some form of regulation, an issue addressed later in the paper, replication, duplication and waste will continue to prevail. For Evans (1992) this represents a salutary reminder to employers and college principals alike, that when recession ends they will discover the difficulty of recruiting skilled and able students and staff, if they base their
forecasts and planning entirely on market forces—a view endorsed by Austin (1992):

You can not turn the supply of plumbers on and off like one of their own taps. It is a certainty that when the recession finally ends and orders for new homes pick up, there will be a painful, immediate and familiar shortage of skilled labour. Angry customers, frustrated contractors and embarrassed politicians will sound off once again about how badly the supply side of the system works, while those who have been trained have their wages raised by the competing employers, and more tenders will be won by firms from France or the other EC partners . . . if you have a product for which demand is so irregular, which is expensive to provide (think of the costs of all the materials which trainee builders get through) you might advise your governors that you should pull out.

(Austin 1992)

This view brings into sharp relief the often tenuous relationship between long-term requirements of curriculum planning and the short-term interests of market needs. The question arises, how do employers and Post 16 institutions avoid the market trap in responding to the demand and supply side of important skills? In addressing this question, the government response has been to match market-led FE with the flexibility of a competency approach based on work (NVQ) and college-based training (GNVQ). In contrast to the European tradition of time, knowledge and skill-based training, the UK has adopted the American model, essentially defining the content of training in market and occupationally-derived terms. The approach, which currently finds expression in GNVQ has been described in a recent TES Editorial Leader (1993) ‘. . . as the answer to all our prayers’. Not only is it seen to be market sensitive but also strategic in accommodating the critical mass of young people staying on, essentially offering them an alternative route to A level.

**GNVQ as the alternative route**

As if anticipating Evan’s (1992) reminder, recent government directives place GNVQ as pivotal in the reform process, both as a means of meeting national and international training targets and of bridging academic, vocational and occupationally-specific divisions in education and training. In this respect GNVQ has proved popular among
government and critics alike in recognising that past Post 16 provision has not worked, either for a majority of young people going through it, or for the perceived needs of the economy for a better skilled workforce. However, there is rather less agreement among protagonists about what constitutes the underlying nature of this 'problem'. For government and their supporters, A levels and their relationship with HE is not the main issue: the challenge is seen to be one of producing vocational qualifications of similar status. In contrast Young (1993) and Finegold (1991) argue that it is precisely those historical and cultural divisions between high-status academic knowledge and low-status vocational courses which is at the root of 'the problem'—to which integration, rather than parity of esteem, is the answer. However, in the rejecting Higginson Committee's (1989) recommendations to broaden the A level base, the government, influenced by CBI, has chosen to adopt GNVQs as the means of building new bridges and ladders linking school, college and work. Moreover, GNVQ as a qualification-led reform is seen to complement existing post-compulsory education and training practice, without disrupting the present range of academic (A level) and occupationally specific (NVQ) courses. Thus, GNVQ is becoming central to the reform process in a number of significant respects. It is expected to bridge from A levels to NVQs, from education to employment, and from compulsory schooling to higher education. Its success is crucial to current policies, exemplified by NETTS, to increase the numbers of young people staying on in full-time education, and to raise qualification levels for the age group. GNVQ is also illustrative of the latest series of attempts at curriculum innovation by the government, operating within relatively new and untested contexts of performance-related funding in the newly independent FE colleges, and the need to both recruit and retain students in colleges and schools. The increasing power of TECs and the FEFC, balanced by the waning influence of LEAs, adds to the novelty of this current context for innovation.

It is within this context that GNVQ is now seen to be a prime mover in market-driven reforms, ostensibly providing a more unified system of qualification, accreditation and learning experience, including a flexible curriculum which can respond to the ups and downs of market need. In this respect, GNVQ is strategic in keying into an expanding Post 16 market, providing courses suitable at school and college level, linked with work preparation, HE access and parity of esteem, alongside academic qualifications. Increasingly, GNVQ is now
seen to represent a major alternative route through an expanded Post 16 sector: a development which will also radically influence the shape and character of that sector. The legislative decisions to introduce GNVQs, and which govern its raison d'être are, however, based on a series of ideological compromises and theoretical assumptions. One of these relates to the nature of learning experiences in GNVQ, and what counts as high-quality learning. Will there be 'academic drift' driven by the need to link with A level, and if so, will the practical once more be devalued in British education? Here, the relationship between classroom experiences and notions of upskilling the labour market require further examination. Another issue concerns the assumption in much writing about Post 16 education and training that better skilled and qualified young people are a necessary pre-condition for economic prosperity. Implicit in such a view is a belief that if young people become better qualified, they will be more able to acquire good jobs. For many, this notion is linked to a post-Fordist, or even, postmodern labour market, with both core and periphery workers requiring higher levels of skill and flexibility compared with the past. However, it may be equally true to say that successful 16–19 education and training provision is dependent on a buoyant youth labour market (Hodkinson 1994), and that the reality of increasingly high youth unemployment in Britain contrasts sharply with the rhetoric of post-Fordist curriculum planning (Bates & Riseborough 1993).

From this viewpoint, there is a need to ask new questions about what is an appropriate education for young people in that age range. In various ways GNVQ anticipates this, and represents a strategic and long overdue reform. Not only does it provide a flexible and coherent framework for a wide cohort of intake and ability, but it also offers the possibility of overlap with A level and other qualifications. Whether or not GNVQ will be able to fulfil all its expectations—in equipping students with competencies which can form a foundation easily transferred into specific work-related competencies, including HE access, is questionable. Much depends on the skilful interpretation of teachers and how they handle a qualification which is primarily outcome rather than curriculum driven. If, in this respect, GNVQ retains a flexible framework, any vision of who the learner is beyond VET competencies, is missing. Without such vision there is a real danger that knowledge, experience and learning in GNVQ will become confused solely with competencies and outcomes, rendering GNVQ just another qualification to be bought and sold in the market.
A link issue here is one of progression and careership. Under this new curriculum structure, will young people continue to be divided largely on class lines into different, diverging career trajectories (Roberts 1993), or will greater flexibility between routes be achieved? Ostensibly, GNVQs are designed with the intention of enabling young people to progress either to higher education or into employment, allowing virement between academic and vocational courses. Yet, both routes and courses are problematic: the latter exacerbated by what currently appears to be a widening gulf between GNVQ level 3 (now called vocational A levels), and NVQs. The effectiveness of this system for individual young people within it is also problematic. There is a current uneasy alliance in curriculum thinking between 'progressive' liberal educators (Hodkinson 1994; Brown & Lauder 1992), wedded to a belief that education can and should empower young people—and the market-force individualism of the new right, as exemplified in current calls by the CBI for a credit system for all Post 16 provision, giving young people 'power' as purchasers of services provided by competing agencies (CBI 1989, 1993). The question is, can either of these visions of empowerment work through GNVQ in the political and economic context within which it is being introduced? In response to this question a number of key (unresearched) factors are likely to have a significant impact on future GNVQ development, and include:

- the situated nature of GNVQ in the context of the market place, both driving and being driven by the market;
- coherence and progression in GNVQ with respect to curriculum, teaching and learning, modularisation and credits (holistic versus fragmentary perspectives);
- ideology and identity in the knowledge base of GNVQ curriculum, as preparation for the 'knowledge' or 'compliant' worker;
- critical mass implications of GNVQ on structuring youth learning as the alternative route;
- continuity and discontinuity between occupationally-related training (GNVQ) and occupationally-specific (NVQ) training principles (long termism, short termism and post-Fordism);
- intended and unintended consequences of GNVQ on equal opportunities, in terms of parity of esteem, provision and progression; and
- GNVQ as a modularised apprenticeship for all. Critical implications of its relationship with labour markets which utilise (or not, as the case may be) the trained labour supplied.
At one level GNVQ, in addressing such principles, represents a potentially exciting development, in addressing the hitherto ignored aspect of mass vocational education in Britain. At another, however, 'tilting at windmills' may not be enough to sustain curricular momentum, coherence and progression for all students. This is essentially because Post 16 institutions and GNVQ itself are part of a network of market forces, involving FEFC, TECs, employers, local labour markets and exam boards, whose short-term and long-term interests vary markedly. Moreover, the situation is complicated by existing tripartite divisions in Post 16 education and training, between the academic (A level), the broad vocational (GNVQ) and the occupationally specific (NVQ), which make curricular coherence problematic. Despite recent optimism about combining A level and GNVQ, the likelihood is that flexibility and choice will remain limited by institutional and curricular constraints. Yet, without a more integrated curricular and qualification structure, many students will not have the opportunity to choose from a wide range of subjects (Green 1993) thereby reducing their influence in the market. In all this there remains the neglected issue of employer commitment to GNVQ and college-based training, and how such commitment translates (or not, as the case may be) into practice over and beyond the network of training and enterprise councils. The likelihood, for example, that employer funds will flow into the system looks increasingly unlikely, given that there is little chance to win at local level a battle over training levies and student grants which has not been fought nationally (Jallade 1991). In other respects, it is doubtful whether corporate status and competition between colleges is an appropriate response to low skill levels, including Post 16 recruitment and retention.

Moving beyond the local and parochial, there are more significant national and global factors likely to impinge on Post 16 education and training reform. With international competition and domestic economic crisis set to continue, the most burning issues may be less to do with qualification reform, or with academic-vocational integration (important as these may be). Perhaps a more pressing issue concerns the changing nature of work itself, its implications for education and the task of identifying and creating new skills for the future. A basic flaw in much current thinking about how to improve training is that no questions are asked about the changing nature of work in society, its structure, design and reorganisation. Paradoxically, this is largely ignored in the rush to reconstitute generic work competencies into
curriculum, in support of employer, market and qualification-led reform. The danger is that the knowledge base of the curriculum becomes indistinguishable from those corporate interests which now define curricular outcomes. Missing in all this is any broader vision of citizenship and learning—in terms of the kind of people the new FE is designed to produce—including images of 'human nature' which competencies presume to develop. The question arises, is there a way of rescuing the reform process from itself, and in what direction should we be looking for a broader vision of Post 16 education and training? One way of addressing this question is in the apparent global shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, and the changing education-production interface which it implies.

From Fordism to post-Fordism?

While there remains disagreement about whether a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism has taken place, or offers adequate insight into current trends in industrial societies, there are those who see radical potential for education in such change (Brown & Lauder 1992; Young 1993)). Despite evidence of its uneven development within Britain, the argument runs that increasingly hierarchical systems of managerial control and surveillance are being replaced by flexible organisational structures, involving adaptable machinery, flexible workers, flatter hierarchies and the breakdown of the division between mental and manual labour. Not only is this seen to herald the end of ideology, including the decline of class and trade-union-related politics, but also of the need for education to respond, in terms of the way the curriculum, schools and colleges are run. Here the self-managing school is seen to mirror the Toyotarised self-regulating firm, built on apparently flatter, leaner and more co-operative (corporate) structures. In the new order, demanding flexible specialisation and multi-skilled workers, the education challenge is seen to be one of eliminating traditional hierarchies of knowledge, prescription and differentiation, which divide off people in school and work. Such traditionalism, it is argued, is counter-productive to new concepts of education and training in the 21st century, where new skills of thinking, learning, abstraction, team-work, independent thinking, and experimentation will be required by increasing numbers of workers.

It is not difficult to see how this radical and universal conception of the knowledge worker finds appeal across a broad and diverse
spectrum, including government, opposition, CBI, TUC and examination bodies. Though the conservative new right have sought to retain traditional hierarchies in work and education, major VET initiatives, including TVEI, CTCs, GNVQ, enterprise and TEC initiatives, confirm confusion in government ranks over the skills envisaged for the 21st century. For perhaps different ideological reasons government, educationists, labour party and trade unions, retain different interpretations of what post-Fordism will bring in terms of innovation, profit, change in work organisation, labour, and self-development. Such is the flexibility of the post-Fordist vision of society that it has become ‘all things to all men’. For the left it legitimates critiques of old models of hierarchy which offer false promises of choice, classlessness and freedom. For the right it legitimates market-led reforms in modernising Britain’s work and education institutions on more flexible and competitive terms. In so doing, both perspectives are able to idealise education and the quality of teaching and learning as a necessary co-determinant of economic change. Moreover, with the apparent gradual collapse of the bureaucratic Fordist assembly line school, in favour of the self-managing institution, modernisers (of all political persuasions) anticipate a progressive and humane conception of the worker, as an autonomous rather than as an alienated being. Thus, not only does the post-Fordist vision of society suggest that education and work are synonymous, but that the creation of the knowledge worker implies radical changes both in the content and form of the curriculum. For Young (1992) this necessarily involves challenging divisive specialisation associated with academic-vocational divisions, insulated subject boundaries, and the separation between education and training.

*It is suggested that in future changes in industrial economies will be expressed in terms of moves from divisive to flexible (or organic) specialisation. In curriculum terms flexible specialisation is a way of describing a curriculum for the future which would need to be based on the following principles:*

- flexible relationships between core and specialist knowledge;
- opportunities to connect knowledge in different areas and relate theory to practice in a variety of contexts;
- clearly defined and inter-connected pathways.

(Young 1992)
Whether flexible specialisation at work and in the curriculum will correspond in such post-Fordist fashion (or is even desirable) is open to question (Gleeson 1993). The danger here is one of causally linking changes in curriculum with assumed technological changes in economic systems. It is premised on a challenging but seductive functionalism which implies, almost inevitably, that new curricular arrangements in the 21st century will find their expression in progressive changes in work and vice versa (Wexler 1992). Yet, equality does not begin or end with bridging academic/vocational divisions, or entitlement to core disciplines. There is a need to consider the content, context and culture of the curriculum: awareness that knowledge itself is culturally specific, and has different effects according to social groups (Marginson 1993). As Donald (1992) points out, there has been neglect between social inequality and the distribution of knowledge, and between inequalities and the nature of education knowledge. Elsewhere Marginson (1993) argues that economic rationalism treats people as objects—human resources—for the economy, as if the economy is an end in itself. The effect of this ‘master discourse’ obscures an active view of citizenship and learning which, in a democracy, is the end point for which all systems of society, including the economic, exist.

A central problem lies in the dominance of a ‘master discourse’, which suppresses diversity and pluralism, including alternative views of knowledge, learning and citizenship. Moreover, it limits the kinds of questions that can be legitimately asked in society, in terms of defining problems, solutions and policy options. The danger here is that ‘notions of society’ and ‘the public good’ give way to individualism and self-determination, with education reduced to the production of ideal individuals, who are separated off from the social relations which sustain them. Thus, while the concept of the knowledge worker, operating in flatter and leaner systems, is a radical one, its empowering assumptions are highly suspect. They have become confused with people controlling their own labour and with making them personally responsible for their own quality management and, hence, social and economic reproduction. As Avis (1993, 1994) argues, this may have more to do with shaping subjectivity and productivity, than with skill development or citizenship. Elsewhere, Bates and Riseborough (1993) point to the ways in which ‘flexibility’ and ‘adaptability’ have come to represent key words of the new enterprise state, in which proletarianisation goes unnoticed because the emphasis is upon individuality and
classlessness, rather than uniformity and regimentation. In this respect, progressive interpretations of post-Fordism may have much in common with earlier post-industrial visions of society—embracing the end of ideology—equating changing technology and work practices with a new technology of self-control. However, the problem with this sort of economic rationalism is that it retains a limited view of education as driven by the inevitable and neutral imperatives of technology. It also provides an instrumental view of knowledge and the learner (including teachers and organisations), as overcoming technical problems barring the way to national progress, in terms of improved skill levels, attendance, participation and behaviour. Thus, preoccupation with improved test scores, information and skills is primarily concerned with improved productivity and behaviour, and has little to do with enabling young people to think about their own society, or to develop the knowledge and skills needed as citizens to maintain a democratic society. In presenting the argument in this way, real and lasting educational reform cannot be subordinated to the causal determinants of the economy, or traditions of hierarchy and social exclusion. Genuine alternatives must embrace a socially-constructed view of education and citizenship which inter-links partnership and empowerment in personal, education and economic relations, beyond market, qualification and employer-led considerations. It is to this issue that I now turn.

**Beyond economic rationalism**

While national curriculum and GNVQ have established a general entitlement, both have narrowed provision and student choice, reflected in an obsession with subject content, competencies and testing. Moreover, local financial management, corporate status and de-professionalism have brought forward uncomfortable decisions about how to allocate resources, including how institutions should compete rather than co-operate with one another. In such a climate of doubt and uncertainty it is perhaps not surprising that much energy is expended in institutional competition, as opposed to developing quality schools and colleges, designed to serve the best interests of all their students. This, linked with greater centralist State and employer control of education, suggests that it is all the more important for schools, colleges and teachers to make decisions about what to do on firm educational grounds. This demands recognition that the driving force of reform is the quality of teaching and learning and not
disembodied end products, outcomes and competencies, which themselves derive their eventual meaning and existence from the education process. As ever, principles of democracy and justice are involved here, which render independent education and training a right and pre-condition of all citizens (Dewey 1916). According to Tomlinson (1993), the new model must necessarily offer the development of intellectual capacities, economic skills, and personal qualities that every individual has a right to acquire and the obligation to put these to the service of society.

The old model offers false promises of choice, classlessness and freedom. A language of conservatism and the workings of an educational market will produce neither virtuous citizens nor successful entrepreneurs. This obsolete vision continues to encourage the selection of those already advantaged for more privileged schooling and reinforces the divisions and failures of education in the 20th Century.

The new model offers the framework and values of an educated democracy in which good education ceases to be a competitive prize and becomes the basis for an economic, political and cultural order from which no-one is excluded. The prize becomes a more humane and defensible view of individuals and their capacity to join together as a human society.

(Tomlinson 1993)

This not only demands rethinking teaching and learning, but also the content and process of the curriculum as it affects knowledgeable adult development in a learning society. As Lee and Marsden (1990) point out, leaving youth training to market forces, now as in the past, has resulted in under-provision, skill shortages and a waste of young people—tantamount to their civic exclusion. This phenomenon, recently associated with cuts in benefit, homelessness, poverty and one-parent families, has further marginalised young people, both in societal and educational terms. The danger here is that alienation and anomie become overlain, effectively cutting off young people from mainstream society.

With mass training now coming on stream, training without work is politically unacceptable and represents an even more insidious prospect than in the 1980s. If then training programs exposed historical weaknesses in early leaving, (as well as controlling the
sudden impact of collapsed youth labour markets), this time round, it will be more difficult to sustain public support for Post 16 reform, if it simply represents another extension of schooling. If in the 1980s improving staying on rates was seen as the major political issue, that apparent dream has been partially realised. Since 1987 there has been a sharp rise in Post 16 staying on rates from under 50 per cent to 58 per cent in 1990-91, to an estimated 65 per cent in 1991-92, with the figure rising above 70 per cent in 1992-93 and set to rise still further in 1994-95—with almost half of this increase in VET being GNVQ led. However, increased student participation has less to do with the success of markets than with their failure linked with demographic factors and rising youth unemployment, resulting in rising numbers of young people undertaking ‘service sector courses’—linked with GNVQ and A level. Paradoxically, if market forces have increased student numbers and reduced drop outs, they have also highlighted failures in the system, in which the closure of manufacturing, construction, building, electrical and related craft courses reflect recessionary and market trends. Here apparent student drift away from science, engineering and manufacturing subjects toward GNVQ and A level has done little to create new education markets—than with reflecting their failure—a view endorsed in a recent Times editorial comment, that ‘... the market system is not leading to the decisions the government might have hoped for’ (TES, 17.9.93). Moreover, recent self-imposed strategies advocated by government and CBI—of keeping down wages to attract foreign competition—has done little more than depress the employment of well-trained and educated labour. Not only does this undermine the expressed concern by government to challenge the low skill, low wage, low productivity syndrome, but it also signals that the UK economy can run on low-level training. This both contradicts official discourse in support of reskilling the economy and casts doubt over the future of GNVQ if left to the vagaries of market forces. It does, however, draw attention to the fact that high quality education and training necessarily relies for its success on a well functioning labour market and national economy, and that education can only complement economic recovery, it cannot substitute for it.

There is, however, growing evidence that FE is changing to create clearer paths of access, qualification and accreditation linking school, college, work and HE—including closer working relations between NCVQ, TECs, industry and other lead bodies. Across school and college provision such change includes modularising existing courses,
developing core curriculum, improving student support and guidance, and incorporating more flexible forms of teaching and learning which encourages independence and motivation. Many schools and colleges feel that such structures and practices are desirable for all students regardless of the content of their study (HMI 1989). As Cole and Eraut (1990) have pointed out, post-16 institutions appear ready to accept the challenge of the 16–19 curriculum but that any new curriculum would require support at national and local level in delivering a greater breadth of studies; greater coherence in all its elements; improved ways of identifying and providing core skills; improved relevance to employment and further and higher education; greater choice of academic/vocational pathways; and greater opportunities for students to accept responsibility for their own learning. If, in the past, the question arose over whether FE could meet this challenge, the issue now concerns whether the market will support, or buy into, the breadth of study envisaged by Cole and Eraut (1990).

There is now greater recognition that FE is central to the VET reform process, acknowledged in the government’s Autumn Statement (1992), confirming the ‘special new emphasis’ to be given to further education. Increasingly, FE occupies a strategic position between school, HE and work, and provides important links between various training and funding agencies (FEFC, TECs, LECs, LEAs). Following on the FE and HE Act (1992), further and higher education have become effectively inter-linked, via franchising and related provision, thereby broadening the scope of post-compulsory schooling to include community and adult dimensions. Increasingly, there is growing awareness that the very survival of the British economy is now dependent on achieving such integrative reform. Yet the question remains, can the inevitability of this momentum for real and lasting reform be left to voluntarism and markets alone? The answer would seem to be a big if: ‘... if only young people, educationalists, government, unions and employers come together to make it happen’ (CBI 1989). Unfortunately, in the absence of any visible signs of consensus operating in practice, this fragile conclusion returns us to the question: whose responsibility is it to bring people together, to initiate real and lasting reform, to monitor progress and to hold the ring? It is here, as in the past, that consensus and voluntarism often evaporate in inter-agency wrangles over funding, accountability and control. For this reason breaking the vicious circle cannot be left to chance, autonomy, credits or market forces, which of themselves do
not assure quality or equality of provision, or guarantee delivery of the skills necessary to industry, employer and society.

The central argument of this paper is that left unregulated the training market initiated by a decade of conservative government reforms is likely to intensify replication, duplication and waste. According to Evans, however, flexibility and responsiveness to markets is not incompatible with medium and long-term political and strategic planning (Evans 1992). This necessarily involves more effective political leadership and accountability, beyond the ‘private governance of public money’. Decentralising in order to centralise political control has created both anarchy and chaos in the newly generated markets. Under present arrangements key players, such as schools, colleges, TECs, LECs, NCVQ, LEAs, examination bodies and associations, have been thrown together in anticipation that competition and deregulation would somehow generate the logic and momentum necessary to achieve change in the market. Yet, at present, only certain partners are involved in the training process, mainly employers and government-funded agencies, with others such as the trade unions, professional associations and local authorities side-lined. Effective policy, planning and accountability requires the active democratic participation of all parties if future training policy is not to be tainted by the criticism that it is simply part of a process of social control, generated by employer and market-led considerations. It is now necessary for the free marketers to recognise that the unregulated effects of market forces in education is counter-productive to local and national interest. This, linked with a major political shift in investment policy in Britain’s industrial manufacturing base will be necessary if both national economic recovery and a viable further education and training process is to be sustained.

Conclusion

Though cliched to say, FE now represents the last semblance of organised VET left in Britain following the decline of industrial boards, skill centres, youth, community and adult training. It is, therefore, essential that the present experimentation with market forces is arrested if a complete blight on FE and training is to be avoided. If there is truth in media hype that FE has historically always been in crisis and at the (proverbial) crossroads, the reality is that, with the White Paper and FE and HE Act, it now stands its severest test yet.
Behind all the window dressing of corporatism and independence, recent legislation represents little more than a political and administrative device which obscures a centralising and bureaucratic tendency, designed to reposition FE in the market place. It is perhaps now time to recognise that fragmentation does not equal choice, nor equate with systematic Post 16 development. As the 1990s progress it would be naive to hark back to a golden age of LEAs and local control as the answer to this question. Yet clearly new rules of governance and democratic engagement are called for, which both bring unaccountable quangos to heel and which also reconstitute debate about the meaning, function and purpose of further education: essentially addressing who it is for. Greater attention needs to be given both to the wider educational needs of young people, including progression and job opportunities, and to ways in which qualitative consideration of the curriculum, teaching and learning, informs the Post 16 policy reform process. This necessarily involves education becoming a more critical and self-critical process. In Beck's (1992) terms, self-criticism is not some sort of danger, but probably the only way that the mistakes which threaten education, democracy and peoples' lives, can be detected in advance.

What kinds of regulations and protections this will require in individual cases cannot yet be foreseen in detail. Much would be gained, however, if the regulations that make people the opinion slaves of those they work for were reduced. Then it would also be possible for engineers to report on their experiences in organisations and on the risks they see and produce, or at least they would not have to forget them once they leave work. The right to criticism within professions and organisations, like the right to strike, ought to be fought for and protected in the public interest. The institutionalisation of self-criticism is so important because in many areas neither the risks nor the alternative methods to avoid them can be recognised without the proper technical know-how.

(Beck 1992)

Optimistically, I have argued that it is of little use waiting for progressive changes in work, industry and government policy to bring about real and lasting reform in education. Part of the aim of education is to anticipate such change in a critical and constructive fashion, rather than to functionally produce and reproduce it. A subjugated response, which is what is being asked of education and training at present, offers poor service to individual or society for it
lacks the cutting edge which critical education can bring to a lively democracy, workplace and school. In seeking to address this issue, the alternative agenda cannot be simply limited to the question of how to deliver outcomes and competencies demanded by the labour market. A broader concept of post-compulsory education and training is called for which does not pander or passively respond to market dictates, but rather anticipates and creatively redefines the market in relation to the changing nature of citizenship and society itself, including the social relations which education and work play in its social (re)construction.
## Appendix 1

### Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>Business Technician Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industry</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPVE</td>
<td>Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTC</td>
<td>City Technology College</td>
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<tr>
<td>ERA</td>
<td>Education Reform Act (1988)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ET</td>
<td>Employment Training Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEFC</td>
<td>Further Education Funding Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCSE</td>
<td>General Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMS</td>
<td>Grant Maintained Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNVQ</td>
<td>General National Vocational Qualifications</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
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<td>LEA</td>
<td>Local Education Authority</td>
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<td>LMS</td>
<td>Local Management of Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Curriculum Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCVQ</td>
<td>National Council for Vocational Qualifications</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTI</td>
<td>New Training Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>NVQ</td>
<td>National Vocational Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSA</td>
<td>Royal Society of Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>School Examination and Assessment Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEC</td>
<td>Training and Enterprise Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>TES</td>
<td>Times Educational Supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUC</td>
<td>Trades Union Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>TVEI</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational and Educational Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTY</td>
<td>Youth Training</td>
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