

Seeking distinction and addressing inequalities: a critical policy analysis of new times for college-based higher education in England (0210)

Ann-Marie Bathmaker

University of Birmingham, UK

### Abstract

New and distinctive forms of higher *vocational* education are growing rapidly across a range of countries, as demonstrated in the 2014 OECD review *Skills Beyond School*. In England, established college-based higher vocational education faces new times in the light of major policy changes – a new Teaching Excellence Framework for higher education, area reviews of further education, and the Sainsbury review of vocational education which has been referred to as a ‘technical and professional education revolution’. This paper examines these developments in relation to two central themes: seeking distinction and addressing inequalities. The paper presents a critical policy analysis of the evolving nature of college-based HE, and considers this in relation to models of higher vocational education beyond England (German-speaking DACH countries, Australia, the USA) to offer a critical consideration of the possibilities and constraints of achieving distinction and addressing inequalities through a newly conceived higher level technical and professional education.

### Summary of paper

According to the OECD (2014), labour market demand for highly skilled workers is soaring globally, as knowledge-work becomes essential for innovation, economic diversification and growth. While bachelor degrees from universities continue to be the most common tertiary award, higher level qualifications in various forms are being developed across different countries to meet this pressing demand for skills, and thereby potentially expand education and employment opportunities for new types of learners. At a moment when HE is seen as a key driver to increase national productivity and raise the economic participation of disadvantaged equity groups (OECD 2012, 2014; Picketty 2014), this paper examines the claims to a distinctive meaning for higher *vocational* qualifications for students and employers, and the opportunities they are intended to provide to create more equitable tertiary opportunities and outcomes.

In England, established college-based higher vocational education faces further drivers to change in the light of major policy developments – a new Teaching Excellence Framework for higher education, area reviews of further education, and the Sainsbury review of vocational education which has been referred to as a ‘technical and professional education revolution’. This paper examines these developments in relation to two central themes: seeking distinction and addressing inequalities. The paper presents a critical policy analysis of the

evolving nature of college-based HE, and considers this in relation to models of higher vocational education beyond England (German-speaking DACH countries, Australia, the USA) to offer a critical consideration of the possibilities and constraints of achieving distinction and addressing inequalities through a newly conceived higher level technical and professional education.

The paper follows a critical policy sociology approach (Fairclough 2013; Gale 2001) to offer an analysis of evolving policy and practice in college-based higher education in England. A number of key recent policy texts are analysed, focusing on what claims are made to distinction in higher vocational education and what this involves, and how questions of equity, inequality and expanding opportunities are defined and addressed. Gale's (2001) framework of policy archeology, which highlights historiography and genealogy as part of this framework, is used as a basis for the analysis. It is argued that current policy developments involve new policy actors and new alliances that raise important questions for the evolving configuration of higher education, including challenges to notions of distinction and equity within the higher education field.

Fairclough, N. (2013) Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies, *Critical Policy Studies*, 7, 2: 177-197. DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2013.798239

Gale, T. (2001) Critical policy sociology: historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16:5, 379-393. DOI: 10.1080/02680930110071002

OECD (2012) Post-Secondary Vocational Education and Training: Pathways and Partnerships. Paris: OECD.

OECD (2014) Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report. Paris: OECD.

Piketty, T (2014) Capital in the Twenty-first Century. Harvard: Harvard University Press.