

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION FROM 14+

Beyond A Levels

Curriculum 2000 and
the Reform of 14–19 Qualifications

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours

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Foreword

There is wide agreement that 14–19 curriculum and qualifications in England, including A levels, are in need of reform; and there is growing support for the view that this reform needs to be structural and rather than a modification of existing arrangements. This is a rare situation in the history of any education system. Most countries' academic upper-secondary qualifications are sacrosanct, resistant to change and often enshrined in the constitution. In England, the A level was until recently the 'gold standard' of the educational currency, supported by powerful interests that a reforming government crossed at its peril. *Curriculum 2000* has changed all that. Few reforms in English education have generated so much controversy, and few have had such a radicalizing effect on educational opinion. The problems with examinations, the burdens on students and the controversies over key skills have filled columns of newsprint and launched several official inquiries. They have placed the reform of 14–19 qualifications firmly on the policy agenda.

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours are respected and influential commentators who for many years have studied the twists and turns of policy and practice in 14–19 education. In collaboration with colleagues in Scotland, Wales and other European countries they have compared English developments with those elsewhere. Since 1999 they have led the Institute of Education/Nuffield Foundation research project on *Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum* which has studied the progress of *Curriculum 2000* across all sectors of 14–19 education, from the preparatory phase into the third year of implementation. The project has collected data from all the main stakeholder groups using a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Together with linked smaller studies, it provides a rich evidence base for this book.

At one level, then, this book is a well-documented account—and sure to become the definitive study—of the early impact of an important and controversial reform. But it is more than this. The book can also be read as a case study of a global phenomenon: the unification of upper-secondary education and training. *Curriculum 2000* may appear to be a specifically English response to idiosyncratically English problems; but it is also an example, however partial and ambivalent, of a wider cross-national drive to 'unify' the upper-secondary level of education systems and to bring academic and vocational learning closer

together. Furthermore, it has faced the same challenges as unification programmes elsewhere: how to develop flexible curriculum pathways without creating an overload of assessment; how to raise the standing of vocational learning while avoiding its colonization by academic values and cultures; how to identify, deliver and assess the generic skills that young people need; and how to engage disaffected young people. These issues are as relevant in Scotland, Sweden, France or Australia as they are in England, even if the design of ‘unifying’ policies and their impact on education systems are mediated by very different political and institutional circumstances in each country.

A good case study illuminates the context in which the phenomenon is studied, as well as the phenomenon itself. At a third level, therefore, this book is a study of the English 14–19 education system and how this system responds to attempts to reform it. It is written with the deliberate intention to help this system to develop a ‘policy memory’ and a capacity for ‘system thinking’. The past lack of these capacities has led to a cyclical pattern of policy-making in 14–19 education and training—every few years the same policies are recycled and rebadged, and fail to solve the same problems that therefore keep recurring. Hodgson and Spours aim to break this cycle by helping us to learn, not only from the failures of *Curriculum 2000*, but also from its successes and from the good practice that it has nurtured. They argue that *Curriculum 2000* is potentially a stage towards a more durable reform and a more unified 14+ curriculum and qualifications system, but that to realize this potential—to achieve genuine progress and not just another turn of the cycle—we have to understand the English education system and the dynamics of change in this system. One way to do this is to learn the lessons of earlier reform attempts such as *Curriculum 2000*.

At a fourth level, the book can be read as a reasoned manifesto for a new model of 14–19 education. In their last chapter Hodgson and Spours outline proposals for an English Baccalaureate system based on Diplomas offering varying possibilities for specialization around a common core at different levels from Entry to Advanced 2. This model builds on the strengths of the English system, such as choice, specialization and institutional innovation, and on the achievements of *Curriculum 2000*, notably its modularity and its introduction of a new level of study between GCSE and A level. But it also learns from its mistakes. In particular, Hodgson and Spours argue that ‘any future reform process needs to be long-term, open and transparent, and to involve stakeholders from its inception to its implementation’ (p161).

And just such a reform process may now be unfolding, inaugurated by the government’s publication of *14–19: opportunity and excellence* early in 2003, by its appointment of a Working Group under Mike Tomlinson to explore strategic directions for change in 14–19 education, and by wider developments such as the annual Review of 14–19 Education being established by the Nuffield Foundation that funded the research underpinning this book. These developments themselves reflect the influence of Hodgson and Spours, and of

the IoE/Nuffield project, on the 14–19 policy process. This book will contribute further to the reform process, by not only proposing new ideas for reform, but also by providing the evidence and analysis on which these ideas are based and by promoting the policy memory and system thinking necessary for effective change.

Professor David Raffe
University of Edinburgh

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First and foremost we wish to acknowledge the support and resources we have received from The Nuffield Foundation for the Institute of Education/ Nuffield Research Project *Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum*, which provides much of the evidence for this book. In particular, we would like to thank Anne Sofer and Catrin Roberts for their enthusiasm and for their interest in this research. We also wish to recognize the excellent work of the Research Officer on the project, Chris Savory, particularly in relation to the research for Chapters 2 and 5 and that of Martyn Waring, which contributed to Chapter 7. In addition, we would like to thank Stephanie Fox for her support throughout the project.

Over the last three years we have worked with education practitioners in different parts of the country, notably in the 50 schools and colleges which made up the sample for our research, together with colleagues from South Gloucestershire, Surrey, Essex and Lancashire LEAs. We want to thank these teachers, lecturers and learners for their time, commitment and professionalism. The qualitative research in which they participated has been an invaluable source of evidence and challenged much of our previous thinking in the area.

We are also very grateful to colleagues from the DfES, QCA, UCAS, LSDA and the education professional associations who have shared with us their data and their ideas on *Curriculum 2000*. Their research and writing in this field have provided us with invaluable evidence to compare with our own. In addition, we want to thank ministers and political advisers who have, from time to time, been prepared to give us some of the inside story.

While we take full responsibility for the final text, we are indebted to those who took time to comment in detail on drafts of some of the chapters. Our thanks go to Annie Cullen, John Dunford, Kathryn Ecclestone, Maggie Greenwood, Jeremy Higham, Tom Leney, Geoff Lucas, Alison Matthews, Tim Oates, David Raffe, Chris Savory, Gordon Stobart, Alison Wolf and David Yeomans.

Finally, we want to thank our long-suffering families who never quite believe us when we say that next term will be easier. We are really grateful for their ongoing support and understanding.

Introduction

In November we received in the post what we thought was a PhD thesis: it turned out to be one month's press cuttings on *Curriculum 2000* collected and analysed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). This document, which was at least seven centimetres thick, demonstrated the continued newsworthiness of A levels, two years after the introduction of reforms to the advanced level curriculum. Two main themes emerged from the thousands of words contained in this document—either *Curriculum 2000* has been a disaster and we should never have messed about with A levels, or let's now finally get on with a new system such as a Baccalaureate.

This book, which is the first to be published on *Curriculum 2000*, tries to explain why the reform of advanced level qualifications has been so controversial by telling a story arising from three years of research. In our view, the book provides a much more textured picture than that portrayed in the media. We recognize that A levels did need reforming, that there are both strengths and weaknesses in *Curriculum 2000* and that we need to use the experience of these reforms to help us move forward to a new and better system.

There are three reasons why we have chosen the title *Beyond A Levels*. The first is that having been around for over 50 years, A levels look immovable yet, at the same time, there have been constant attempts to reform them. Is it possible to move beyond A levels? The second is that *Curriculum 2000* was seen by the new Labour Government as the most far-reaching attempt to date to reform A levels. However, what our research suggests is that the old system has been destabilized, but a new system has not yet been born. So have we moved beyond A levels? Third, if we think it is time to move beyond A levels, then what kind of new system should be put in their place and what features, if any, should be drawn from the past. So, what lies beyond A levels?

To be able to answer these questions requires a sense of the past and its relation to the present. In particular, it requires a sense of 'policy memory' — what has worked, what has not and how reforms are always part of a wider context. Policy-makers—ministers and their civil servants in particular—are notorious for wanting their own new ideas and initiatives and are often not around long enough to have any sense of 'policy memory', so they are unable to benefit from 'policy learning'. They often suffer from what might be termed

‘policy amnesia’. Practitioners, on the other hand, who are usually around a lot longer than politicians, do have a sense of policy memory because of their ongoing efforts to mediate national reforms to make them work at grassroots level.

We start this book, therefore, with a sense of history and set *Curriculum 2000* in its wider context in order to understand why this reform took place and why it took the form it did. This historical and system analysis also helps us to understand where the strengths and weaknesses of the reform originate.

The complex picture we provide is based on several dimensions of research, mainly undertaken over the last three years. Our major source of data is the 50 schools and colleges that formed our research sites in the IoE/Nuffield Research Project *Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum*, triangulated with quantitative data from national agencies such as the DfES, UCAS, OFSTED, LSDA and QCA. In all cases, we have attempted to capture a range of voices, including managers and classroom teachers and, above all, learners. We think it is the last who have provided the most authentic and balanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of the reforms. Our research also draws on collaborative work with teacher professional associations and colleagues in several LEAs, discussions with other researchers and interviews with key national policy-makers.

The first two chapters in the book provide a framework for understanding the reforms and judging their effectiveness over time. We ask the question, ‘Should *Curriculum 2000* be seen as yet another attempt to modernize A levels or should it be seen as a vital step in their replacement?’ We attempt to answer this question in the final chapter. [Chapter 3](#) starts the process of analysing the impact of the reforms by examining learner programmes as a whole and assessing how far *Curriculum 2000* is broadening the advanced level curriculum. [Chapters 4, 5 and 6](#) discuss the contribution to this process of the main qualifications components of the reforms—the AS/2, the AVCE and key skills. [Chapter 7](#) reverts back to contextual issues by looking at how three particular levers—the UCAS tariff, funding mechanisms and inspection—are being used to shape what we characterize as a voluntarist reform. This chapter also provides new information on the relationship between *Curriculum 2000* and the universities which, in the opinion of many, are seen as a vital influence in determining the success of the reforms.

[Chapter 8](#), the final chapter, provides our overall assessment to date of the strengths and weaknesses of *Curriculum 2000*. In our view, the reforms have brought about limited breadth and quantitative gains, for example larger programmes of study, more qualifications outcomes and improved A level grades. At the same time, there have been qualitative losses and new forms of division—the decline of enrichment activity, very variable learner programmes, problems with the quality of learning and teaching in what has become an over-assessed, rushed and content-heavy curriculum. This judgement begs the question, ‘Where next?’

A background theme running throughout the book, but which comes to the fore in the final chapter, is the long-standing debate about the need for a more unified and inclusive curriculum and qualifications system from 14+. This debate has raged for more than a decade since the publication of *A British Baccalaureate* in 1990, but has never been fully embraced by government because of a continuing anxiety about replacing A levels. The vision of a more unified and inclusive system now appears, at last, to be on the Government's agenda. While *Curriculum 2000* has undoubtedly been a painful experience, it provides us with vital lessons on what learners and teachers see as valuable, what should be taken forward and built upon in the next stage of reform and how to conduct the reform process. In this sense *Curriculum 2000* has been a difficult but useful apprenticeship.

In its recent response to the Green Paper on 14–19 education, the Government has signalled its willingness to consider a long-term approach towards replacing A levels with a Baccalaureate-style system. In this context, we offer some ideas about the architecture of such a system based upon several years of debate within the education profession and informed by the principles of inclusion, high standards and social justice. The vision we offer is an *English Baccalaureate System from 14+* which moves not only beyond A levels, but also beyond the highly regarded International Baccalaureate, because of its ability to include all learners from entry level upwards in all contexts, including both full-time and work-based learning. Finally, the most vital lesson to be learnt from *Curriculum 2000* is the need to conduct the next reform process in a gradual, consensual and managed way. This type of approach, which we term 'strategic gradualism', will allow us to build on the strengths of the English system—its flexibility, choice, specialization and teacher innovation—while at the same time addressing its major weaknesses—voluntarism, division and marginalized vocational education.

1

The importance of ‘policy memory’ and ‘system thinking’ for curriculum and qualifications reform in England

We believe that there is little chance of fully understanding the current or future nature of curriculum and qualifications reform without an appreciation of its wider historical and system context. The purpose of this chapter is to provide such a framework of understanding.

Our central argument is that recent history shows a consistent and considerable reluctance by all shades of government over the last 15 years to reform the upper secondary or 14–19 curriculum in a decisive and coherent manner. In our view, as this book will testify, this also includes the most recent attempt known as *Curriculum 2000*. At the centre of this reluctance has been the unwillingness of the Conservatives to reform A levels and the fear of New Labour to be seen to be doing so. Instead, what governments have done is to make changes to curriculum and qualifications in a piecemeal, divisive and permissive manner in order to respond to wider social and economic factors and, in particular, rises in full-time participation in post-compulsory education over the last decade or so. What our historical analysis will show is that the main reform effort to date has focused not on a systematic approach to curriculum and qualifications, but to organizational and regulatory frameworks within an education market. The formation of the new Learning and Skills Council (DfEE, 1999a) is the latest manifestation of this particular policy trend.

Recent events, notably the ‘crisis’ of the A level examinations in 2002 suggest to us that this approach has run its course. The Government now stands at a crossroads in its second term of office. The Green Paper, *14–19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002a), which we will see was simply an extension of the policy of post-16 voluntarism carried into the 14–19 phase, has, in important respects, been rejected by the education profession (see [Chapter 8](#)). There are signs that, in response to the A level crisis, the views of the teaching profession and the appointment of a new ministerial team, the Government now feels able to embark upon a more radical and long-term transformation of curriculum and qualifications for the 14–19 phase of education (DfES, 2003).

It is the purpose of this chapter to develop the concepts of ‘policy memory’ and ‘system thinking’ to support professional understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls in 14–19 curriculum and qualifications reform. By ‘policy memory’

(Higham *et al.*, 2002) we are referring to the ability of those involved in the policy process to understand where mistakes were made and what good practice deserves to be incorporated from the past into the current reform effort. By ‘system thinking’ (Hodgson and Spours, 1997a) we refer not only to the historical dimension already outlined above, but also to the relationship between curriculum and qualifications reform and wider economic and social trends, together with education and training system factors that ‘shape’ these reforms. System thinking is about appreciating that curriculum and qualifications reform cannot be undertaken in isolation from powerful shaping factors such as funding, performance tables and teacher supply.

In order to provide a conceptual framework comprising historical analysis, system thinking and policy memory, we begin by setting out a brief account of the main social, economic and wider education and training trends since the late 1970s, which builds on and updates our previous analysis (Hodgson and Spours, 1997b, 1999a). We then lay out the key national qualifications and curriculum policy responses to these trends to provide a basis for discussion of the relationship between reform in this area and its wider education and training system context. Within these national policy developments we also discuss the role of local and institutional actions. Together, these three factors form the historical and analytical framework within which we locate the recent *Curriculum 2000* advanced level qualification reforms and the new 14–19 education and training policy agenda.

Factors shaping curriculum and qualifications reform—a system perspective

There are a number of important factors which, over the past 25 years, have played a shaping role in curriculum and qualifications reform in this country. Some of these have been present throughout the whole period (eg labour market and participation trends) while others, which are the result of direct education and training policy intervention (eg performance tables and higher education expansion), have only had an impact at certain periods. We will outline these major factors briefly here and then discuss their effects more fully at different stages of the curriculum and qualifications reform process in the following section of this chapter.

Participation and achievement trends

Arguably the most important background factor throughout the whole period from the late 1970s to the present has been changes in the youth labour market and the related increase in full-time post-16 participation. The same period has seen a general rise in social and educational aspirations, but also one of sharp polarization, in which sections of the population have become excluded from this general trend and have not seen education as a viable means of social progress

(Oppenheim, 1998; Pearce and Hillman, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The late 1980s, under the Conservatives, saw an increase in participation in full-time education from what, in retrospect, could be seen as 'easier to reach' parts of the cohort (ie the middle quartiles of the youth population) (Green and Steedman, 1997). The Labour Government, from 1997 onwards, focused more explicitly on widening participation in education and training to those sections of the cohort who had been left behind in the Conservative expansion and on those who had traditionally not participated in postcompulsory education and training (Hodgson and Spours, 1999a).

In our historical analysis of the effects of participation on curriculum and qualifications reform policy we identify two distinct periods (Hodgson and Spours, 2000a). The first was a period of rapid growth in full-time participation in the late 1980s and early 1990s leading to the need for new types of education provision, particularly in the field of post-16 broad vocational qualifications. The second was a period of slower participation growth, from the mid-1990s, which caused the Government to think again about the type of qualifications and courses that would encourage more learners to stay on and to achieve from 14+.

From the late 1980s and underpinning this wider participation trend, there have been rises in educational achievement which have led to demands for more full-time post-compulsory education, including higher education. However, this improvement has followed a similar pattern to trends in participation, and the annual percentage increases of learners achieving 'good GCSE grades' and Level 3 qualifications (A levels and their vocational equivalents) has declined since the mid-1990s. We have termed the relationship between these two sets of trends in participation and achievement 'system slowdown' (Hodgson and Spours, 2000a). This phenomenon has been recognized as providing a challenging context for meeting the national target of 50 per cent participation by 18–30-year-olds in higher education by the 2010 (HEFCE, 2001) and is thus now shaping the debate about curriculum and qualifications reform for 14–19-year-olds, as we will see below.

The market and regulation in education and training

A further key background factor to the debate about curriculum and qualifications reform is the 'marketization' of the education and training system (Ball *et al*, 2000; Green and Lucas, 1999). Both Conservative and Labour governments have supported the concept of an education and training market in which learner demand is intended to drive institutional provision (DES/ED/WO, 1991; DfEE, 1998). During the Conservative era, particularly the period from the late 1980s and the early 1990s, this policy was pursued through the encouragement of institutional autonomy and increased competition between post-16 providers to attract learners. The Labour Government, on the other hand, has placed greater emphasis on stimulating learner demand (eg Education Maintenance Allowances and Individual Learning Accounts), while at the same time encouraging schools,

colleges and training providers to collaborate over the supply of provision which is responsive to learner need (DfEE, 1999a). This can be seen as a 'managed market' approach within a voluntarist framework.

While Conservative and Labour administrations have taken somewhat different approaches to participation and stimulating educational demand, they have pursued a very similar policy over accountability and central control. Both have focused on greater levels of accountability as institutional autonomy has increased and as the education and training system has become more marketized and diverse. Both have also used targets and performance measures linked to international comparison, national inspection systems and funding methodology to mould the behaviour of the education providers. We will see at several points in the book that all of these steering mechanisms have had a strong effect on institutional motivation to implement curriculum and qualifications reform.

Part of the national regulatory agenda accompanying marketization has been the trend towards the 'unification' of national regulatory agencies. The first merger was between the Department for Education and the Employment Department, which became the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 1995. This was followed by the merger of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 1997. Hard on its heels in the same year came the rationalization of the main eight examining and validating bodies into the three unitary awarding bodies: Edexcel, AQA and OCR. Finally, the funding and organization of all post-16 education and training provision (with the exception of higher education) was brought under a single national body, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) with its 47 local LSCs, together with a Common Inspection Framework which covers all providers in the LSC sector (OFSTED/ALI, 2000). The overall effect so far of this unified regulatory framework has been to create a more direct relationship between central government policy and its implementation at institutional level.

The changing role of teachers and lecturers

The creation of a market in education and training and the inevitable accompanying central government accountability agenda has not only affected the way that post-16 institutions are managed and organized, but has also had an impact on the role and conditions of service of teachers and lecturers. The increase in participation in full-time post-compulsory education has led to more diverse groups of learners and, in many cases, a growth in class sizes. The number of temporary and part-time contracts has increased while, at the same time, more teacher time is spent on bureaucratic and administrative tasks and there is less time for professional development (Leney *et al*, 1998). Within further education, in particular, a 'new managerial class' has been created to

cope with changes in funding and the drive to recruit and retain learners (Green and Lucas, 1999).

Recently, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the factors we have just outlined, there has been widespread concern about the shortage of teachers in all sectors. Moreover, constant and often ill-conceived curriculum and qualifications reforms have meant that practitioners have had to spend their time mediating top-down national reforms (Higham *et al*, 2002) rather than being involved in their shaping and management. The combination of these changes in the role of teachers and lecturers, together with centralist or piecemeal reform, has tended to force the education profession into a defensive and reactive stance.

The significance of changes in Scotland and Wales

Despite the general shift towards the centralized control of education (which we also associate with marketization), in the late 1990s there was also a movement towards the political devolution of Scotland and Wales. Up until this point Wales had been almost entirely part of the English education and training system, while Scotland had enjoyed a degree of administrative autonomy since the late 1970s. Increasingly, both Scotland and Wales are now reforming their education systems along different lines from England (Scottish Office, 1994; Welsh Department of Education and Training, 2002). This will allow ‘home international comparisons’ to be made within the UK in addition to those with other national systems beyond the UK. We will speculate that these comparisons will stimulate debate for more radical change within England as both Scotland and Wales move more firmly to more planned and collaborative systems with a stronger and inclusive curriculum ethos.

Four broad phases of curriculum and qualifications reform policy

In this section we outline an historical and analytical framework to explain the development of curriculum and qualifications policy over the last 25 years. We take the late 1970s as our starting point because it is widely recognized that what has proved to be a constant period of post-14 curriculum and qualifications reform began at this point as a result of intensified economic crisis (the end of the ‘long boom’), the growth of youth unemployment and government concerns to create a stronger relationship between education and industry. In this respect, a defining moment was Prime Minister James Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech (Callaghan, 1976). Our historical analysis finishes with the publication of the Government’s Green Paper, *14–19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002a) and its response following the consultation process. The framework we use, which is organized into four broad overlapping historical phases, describes the complex and dynamic relationship between national curriculum and qualifications policy, the wider contextual factors already

outlined and local and institutional interpretation and implementation of national reforms.

The New Vocationalism (1976–1986)

We define the period of the New Vocationalism as one that stretches from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1980s and the founding of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). What characterizes this period is a series of initiatives for the young unemployed (eg the Youth Opportunities Programme and then the Youth Training Scheme) which were eventually accompanied by a range of pre-vocational qualifications and awards, such as the Certificate of Extended Education (CEE), the Certificate of Pre-vocational Education (CPVE) and City and Guilds 365. In addition, the Government introduced the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) to encourage the growth of a more vocational, applied and technical approach to the full-time 14–19 curriculum in schools and colleges.

There were two landmark policy developments in the era of the New Vocationalism. The first was the publication of *A Basis for Choice* (FEU, 1979) which proposed a rationalization of the disparate unemployment initiatives within a single 'framework of preparation', which eventually resulted in the creation of CPVE. The second was the publication of the *New Training Initiative* (NTI) (MSC, 1981), which spawned the Youth Training Scheme. The NTI could also be seen as setting out a new agenda for thinking about the design of qualifications through its argument for outcomes-based standards of a new type. This was eventually to lead to the development of NVQs in the late 1980s.

The factors shaping these developments were found principally outside the education and training system, while radically affecting curriculum and qualification debates within it. Foremost among these was the economic recession and the rise in youth unemployment. The main way in which these economic factors affected the education and training response was that they gave rise to a perceived need for the development of generic or transferable skills to prepare young people for changing labour markets, as well as to cope with youth unemployment. While *A Basis for Choice* proposed a single curriculum framework, what actually emerged was a plethora of initiatives and new awards subsequently dubbed the 'qualifications jungle' (Pratley, 1988). These initiatives were essentially aimed at those who could not gain O or A levels and who could not immediately gain entry to a shrinking youth labour market or apprenticeship.

However, the New Vocationalism was not simply seen as an alternative curriculum for some. By the mid-1980s, and often articulated through TVEI with its role in relation to full-time learners, there was a strong call from a mixture of academics and politicians for a more applied and vocationally-relevant curriculum for all learners (Broadfoot, 1986; Pring, 1986; Pring *et al*, 1988). What had started as a narrow form of vocationalism in the early 1980s was