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Raymond Williams and the new industrial trainers: a critique and a proposal

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ABSTRACT

Raymond Williams was a literary critic, sociologist, novelist, and political activist but ‘most of all . . . a teacher’ (Stevens, 1985, p. 2). A theory of education runs through his large and diverse body of work, summed up in a term he used in a 1961 essay when he wrote of ‘the process of society as itself a process of education’ (Williams, 1993a, p. 228). He styled the UK’s educational establishment of the time ‘Old Humanists’; guardians of a process by which elite culture defined society’s values and norms. However, he regarded the Old Humanists as already losing their influence to the new ‘Industrial Trainers’, harbingers of an economic and social order based on mass production and mass consumption for which new technical skills were demanded from the education system.

Introduction

The Welsh academic Raymond Williams was a literary critic, sociologist, novelist, and political activist but ‘most of all . . . a teacher’ (Stevens, 1985, p. 2). A theory of education runs through his large and diverse body of work, summed up in a term he used in a 1961 essay when he wrote of ‘the process of society as itself a process of education’ (Williams, 1993a, p. 228). He styled the UK’s educational establishment of the time ‘Old Humanists’; guardians of a process by which elite culture defined society’s values and norms. However, he regarded the Old Humanists as already losing their influence to the new ‘Industrial Trainers’, harbingers of an economic and social order based on mass production and mass consumption for which new technical skills were demanded from the education system.

Higher education was to play its part in this change, with new polytechnics created to advance the provision of applied courses alongside traditional subjects as part of a huge expansion of the sector. Degree education in universities (polytechnics were designated
as universities in 1992) grew exponentially, with the number of students obtaining university degrees in the UK increasing from just under 25,000 in 1960 to 432,000 by 2018/19 (Bolton, 2012; HESA, 2021).

The eclipse of the Old Humanists occurred not only with this transition from an elite to a mass higher education system but also with an increasing focus in degree curricula on ‘employability’. Yet in England the degree is now under challenge, with a shift in government policy away from so-called ‘academic’ courses towards new ‘higher technical’ courses designed for specific occupations (Department for Education, 2021a). Insofar as this is an educational rethink – since there are broader ideological dimensions discussed later in the article – it is thinking more akin to that of Williams’ twentieth century Industrial Trainers than reflecting twenty-first century skills needs. These needs, as they are appearing in actual job specifications, are often recognisably ‘academic’, such as information literacy and self-management (Binkley et al., 2012). Indeed, the German system of separate higher education and vocational training pathways, on which the recent English reforms were in part modelled, is already seeing more interweaving between higher and vocational education, such as ‘dual’ degrees that incorporate a vocational qualification within a wider higher education programme of study (Ertl, 2020).

This article makes critical use of Williams’ work to explore this constructed separation between ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ education since, in a sense, we have been here before. Much in his work was prescient but he was surprisingly dismissive of vocational education given the concern with livelihood in much of his writing. My aim in what follows is to re-integrate vocational education into Williams’ wider advocacy of education as agency, in which the relevance of learning is about ‘what you want to learn’ (Williams, 1990, p. 163).

The rise of the ‘low value’ degree

Government education policies across the world are pivoting to investment in higher-level occupational skills (OECD, 2018; Shafique & Dent, 2019). Although automation is replacing human skills in routine tasks on a huge scale, and increasingly specialist skills as well, investment by the private and public sectors in new technologies is creating new demands for human skills (Susskind, 2020). In particular, the massive spread of digital technologies into every aspect of economic and social life has fuelled demand for skills in computer and data sciences, but employers are also reporting shortages of competencies in management, leadership, and innovation (City & Guilds Group, 2021; Open University, 2020; Skills Network, 2020). Lower-level skills can still be in short supply and often partly met by migrant labour, but these are likely to be replaced to a significant extent by technological innovation in future decades (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

High-income economies cannot compete globally on wage costs, so are focusing on higher-level skills as a route to the productivity gains necessary to sustain high incomes. However, over the past four decades wages have been stagnating for all but the scarcest skills (Piketty, 2014). In some countries this has led to calls for more people to pursue ‘technical’ rather than ‘academic’ education, with a questioning of the value of conventional degree qualifications based on academic disciplines (Goodhart, 2020). This is particularly marked in England, where this position is now expressed in a policy blueprint called Skills for Jobs that sets out plans for new higher-level technical courses mapped to
specific occupational standards (Department for Education, 2021a). These will be spearheaded by new Institutes of Technology but are also an opportunity for England’s long neglected and underfunded sector of local colleges.

This change in English education policy had been brewing in various reports and policy documents for several years (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016; Wolf, 2011, 2016). It has been embraced enthusiastically by the ‘hard Brexit’ government of prime minister Boris Johnson elected in 2019, for which the tilt away from universities as education’s premier institutions has been interpreted as part of a wider culture war against the liberal metropolitan and pro-European Union values of their staff and students (Watkins, 2020). However, this has not just been ideological. Purportedly objective analyses argue that there is significant ‘over-education’ in the UK (Chevalier, 2000; Savic, 2019). These studies draw on the increased availability of data on graduate employment and earnings outcomes at subject and institution levels, which reveal striking differences. For example, the proportion of graduates in professional employment fifteen months after graduation ranges from 90% to less than 40% depending on subject, while for a single subject such as engineering this outcome ranges from nearly 90% to less than 30% depending on institution (Office for Students, 2020).

These data are fraught with interpretation issues, including whether higher education should solely or mainly be about preparation for professional employment. ‘Over-education’ has in fact been shown to be less prevalent in countries with proportionately more graduates, so does not appear to be a consequence of expanding higher education supply per se (Delaney et al., 2020). There is also much less information about outcomes from other higher vocational qualifications to compare with degrees. But the data, especially the subject and institutional variations, have enabled the long-standing consensus that the continuing general expansion of degree education is good for society and the economy to be challenged. Not only are outcomes for some subjects and institutions significantly poorer than for others but much has been made of the finding that in a small number of cases outcomes appear to be worse than not having studied for a degree at all (Belfield et al., 2018). There has been a rising narrative of a ‘skills mismatch’ not just in the UK but many other countries, with Quintini (2011) for example, arguing from his interpretation of data for European states that, while one in five workers are under-qualified for their roles, one in four are overqualified. In the UK, the impacts of both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have also heightened concerns that the skills of the home workforce are not well enough matched to business and public sector needs.

The general expansion of higher education has been one of the factors blamed for this skills mismatch. This was a major theme in the recent UK government commissioned review of England’s post-18 education and funding arrangements, the ‘Augar review’ (Augar, 2019). A key recommendation, embraced by the government’s response, was that more study at tertiary level should be for qualifications at, in the English system, levels 4 and 5, which are just below the level 6 of a degree qualification (these are levels based on the complexity of skills and knowledge required, although the policy discourse is reframing these qualifications as ‘different’ rather than ‘lower’ in status). Particularly significant is the recommendation in the Augar review that level 4 and 5 qualifications should be designed to meet the detailed requirements of specific occupations, with formally constituted groups of employers deciding what needs to be in a qualification in order to be fully proficient in an ‘occupational standard’. 
The review recommended that these occupational standards – which were already the basis for the higher and degree apprenticeships introduced in England in 2015 – be used to design new and generally shorter higher technical qualifications (HTQs) as alternatives to degree study. This recommendation was accompanied by an argument that many degree subjects are over-supplied because English universities can expand with student demand that is driven by subsidised loans for fees that currently make no distinction between how ‘useful’ a subject is in the labour market. This expansion has given rise to a political narrative about ‘low value degrees’, even appearing as an explanation for racial disadvantage in a controversial government-commissioned report on race inequality:

(Y)oung people appear to be over-represented in university degrees that are not leading to the high status professional jobs they’ve been led to expect … There appears to be an exaggerated respect for the academic route as the only path to success and economic safety on the part of ethnic minorities (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, pp. 99, 102).

This respect for ‘academic’ education reflects the traditionally highly selective nature of British higher education (Blackman, 2017). The most selective institutions have long had a role in sorting the children of affluent professional parents into well-paid professional careers where the recruiters are graduates of similar universities (Savage, 2015). While this has in part been about access to careers in areas such as medicine, law and finance, it also reflects a persisting divide in education between the values of the Old Humanists and the Industrial Trainers.

The Old Humanists, according to Williams, promoted a model of higher education that is about cultivating the power of the mind, but only for a minority of the brightest and best (Williams, 1993a). At the time Williams was writing, they shaped the dominant culture of British society – its values and standards of excellence – and cloned graduates for the top jobs in all sectors from government and media to industry and finance. The Industrial Trainers on the other hand, whom Williams believed to be in the ascendancy in the early 1960s, considered the purpose of education to be to fit people to jobs and meet the demand for labour and skills, challenging the conservatism of the Old Humanists but subordinating the purpose of education to the needs of employers.

In his book Towards 2000, Williams took this further by arguing how this shift was dependent on the penetration of advertising into mass culture, driven by technical developments in marketing (Williams, 1983a). This was a prescient observation given the huge power exercised today by companies such as Google and Facebook. Williams was similarly prescient about the environmental crisis to which the rise of both mass advertising and the Industrial Trainers would lead, and to which I return at the end of this article. For now, I want to explore further what his analysis might mean for the current scepticism about ‘academic’ higher education, given that higher education expanded on a scale significantly beyond what even he experienced before his death in 1988.

**Mass higher education and the anywhere/somewhere divide**

An important driver of widening participation in UK higher education, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, was the expansion of recruitment by the ‘post-92’ universities, which until 1992 had been polytechnics. With generally lower academic entry requirements than the older, more selective universities, post-92 universities have often
been chosen by students with lower school or college grades who want or need to study locally and commute rather than have the costs of relocating to a residential university (Maguire & Morris, 2018).

I recall listening to the Pro-Chancellor’s speech at a post-92 university’s graduation ceremony. He was a retired senior civil servant and included some advice about careers in his speech, starting by remarking that his classics degree from Oxford might be seen these days as relevant to little more than becoming a Mediterranean tour guide. This got a laugh, but he went on to celebrate the merits of a classics education: how it develops cultural and social literacy, citizenship skills, and abilities in argumentation and communication. He was, after all, living proof of where a classics degree could get you. But I wondered what these graduates made of hearing about the virtues of a degree subject that was quite different to any of the courses the university offered. Classics was not in demand, a reflection of how it has been abandoned in state schools but also perhaps a reflection of how young people felt their culture was not reflected in classics, that it was not relevant to them, not ‘ordinary’.

Raymond Williams is particularly known for the argument that culture is indeed ordinary (Williams, 1993b). Culture is not in its fullest sense to be found among the dreaming spires of Oxford but in the everyday lives of ordinary people. This does not mean, though, that the classics are absent in ordinary culture (Hall & Stead, 2020). A striking example is from County Durham in North-East England, an old coalfield area. When the mines were open the local trade unions or ‘lodges’ made banners that displayed messages about their cause, often paraded to the accompaniment of brass bands. The banners display messages such as ‘Labour and Peace’, ‘Fellowship is life, fellowship for all’, ‘The past we inherit, the future we forge’. They are works of art and, although the pits are long closed, new and renewed banners are still made and put on show in community centres and other venues.

Banners were also used in other coalfield areas, including those in South Wales with which Williams would have been very familiar. The messages on the South Wales miners’ lodge banners show just how much the miners of Durham and South Wales had a common political outlook, with themes of world peace, equality, brotherhood, and international solidarity. We also see across the mining communities of Durham and South Wales the same appetite for education, both self-organised and through participation in local authority and university adult education classes. This was education for everyone who wanted education and not just those selected to be educated. It is no coincidence that Jennie Lee, the Minister who drove establishment of The Open University in 1969 as the UK’s first and only non-selective university, was the daughter of a coal miner (Hollis, 1997). She was also the wife of Aneurin Bevan, the minister who 23 years earlier had led another huge political achievement, the National Health Service.

While Lee graduated from Edinburgh University in 1927 with a teacher’s diploma and law degree, Bevan left school at 13 to start work as a miner and credited his education to the Tredegar Working Man’s Library (Hollis, 1997). However, while Bevan was reading Marx in his local library, many other miners were more interested in classics. For their book A People’s History of Classics, Hall and Stead chose as the frontispiece a photograph of the banner of the Fenhall Drift Lodge in County Durham, which was made in 1960 (Hall & Stead, 2020). A twentieth century miner is depicted next to a Roman soldier. The miners of the Durham and Northumberland coalfield learned about Roman Britain; it was part of their culture because it was part of their place. This is the land of Hadrian’s Wall. In the
1920s, classics was a very popular subject in Durham University’s extra-mural classes, where nearly half of the students were manual labourers, and a third of them miners. Did studying classics make them better miners? It probably did. Indeed, the mine owners encouraged participation, and of course had their own agenda for doing so, since there was more dangerous material in the union libraries.

Williams, in his essay ‘Culture is Ordinary’, explains working class culture as a way of life in which ‘neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment’ are defining ideas (Williams, 1993b, p. 93). ‘Place’ features in much of his writing, especially his novels. It is explored both as a locale of class action – such as the historical examples of local self-help initiatives that prefigured subsequent national reforms – and as entrapment, with whole places and not just industrial workers becoming redundant in the face of economic decline and depopulation. The latter was partly caused by improved access to educational opportunities, seeing people like Williams himself leave to go to a residential university and lead mobile professional careers.

Williams’ novel The Fight for Manod is a good example of his writing on place, a story of a new town planned by ‘experts’ that could be anywhere yet was for somewhere: the communities of mid-Wales ‘caught between rural depopulation and industrial decline’ and for whom it would be a strategy of social and economic modernisation (Williams, 1988, p. 194). The town was conceived by its planners as a way of bringing control back to local people but was destined to have the same subordinate relationship to economic and political power in distant London and Brussels. The book explores aspects of a key concept in Williams’ work, ‘structure of feeling’. This is a term that describes how the way people think, act, and give experiences and knowledge meaning are connected with how they feel, with this reflecting common material circumstances and histories. To be a Durham miner – whether locally born or having migrated for work – meant walking in the footsteps of Roman soldiers, still with the remains of their military roads and officers’ villas around the pit village. This attachment to place was to be a ‘somewhere’ person in a structure of feeling that continues to this day, albeit often tenuously, among the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of miners. To be the senior civil servant or university professor who had left his or her place of birth to go away to a residential university and move with career opportunities was, in contrast, to be an ‘anywhere’ person.

These ‘anywhere’ and ‘somewhere’ descriptions are explored in depth by David Goodhart in his book, The Road to Somewhere (Goodhart, 2017). Goodhart, a self-proclaimed social democrat but often regarded as on the liberal right of politics, is perhaps an odd author to use for insight into the work of Raymond Williams, a Marxist cultural theorist. However, Goodhart is in some respects a latter-day William Cobbett, the nineteenth-century pamphleteer and politician who was the subject of a biography by Williams (1983b). Williams approved of Cobbett’s sardonic characterisation of much adult education as ‘taking learning to a class seen in deficit’ (Steele, 2020, p. 921). Goodhart adds his voice to criticisms of what he sees as the persistence of these patronising attitudes by the highly educated towards the less educated, even in these times of mass higher education. He also adds his voice to the criticism that this deficit has been addressed by expanding academic higher education at the cost of high-level vocational training (Goodhart, 2020). In his analysis of ‘somewheres’ and ‘anywherers’ he connects this critique to ‘place’, and in doing so starts to construct an explanation for why the technical turn in English tertiary education policy is both so apparently anti-academic and place focused:
Anywheres dominate our culture and society. They tend to do well at school … then usually move from home to a residential university in their late teens and on to a career in the professions that might take them to London or even abroad for a year or two. Such people have portable ‘achieved’ identities, based on educational and career success which makes them generally comfortable and confident with new places and people … Somewheres are more rooted and usually have ‘ascribed’ identities – Scottish farmer, working class Geordie, Cornish housewife – based on group belonging and particular places, which is why they often find rapid change unsettling. One core group of Somewheres have been called the ‘left behind’ – mainly older white working class men with little education. They have lost economically with the decline of well-paid jobs for people without qualifications and culturally, too, with … the marginalisation of their views in the public conversation. (p. 3)

Goodhart’s great divide is a divide between two structures of feeling. His analysis has been criticised for being too binary, for underplaying the family and communal values of ‘anywheres’ and overplaying the disempowerment of ‘somewheres’ in the media and public policy (Freedland, 2017). But the boundaries between structures of feeling are inevitably fuzzy and the concept broadly fits with how the UK divided in the 2016 EU referendum between a pro-EU section of society, disproportionately graduates with liberal attitudes towards immigration, the welfare state and crime and punishment, and an anti-EU section of society who are more likely to be non-graduates and have more conservative attitudes towards these issues (Goodhart, 2017). These two structures of feeling share much in common but importantly there is much that separates them, especially the feeling of being in control. The anti-EU campaign adopted to great effect the simple slogan ‘take back control’, which resonated with ‘somewheres’ for whom issues from immigrant newcomers to company closures and distant politicians were evidence of control that had been lost.

Politics and public policy can either deepen this separation, indeed exploit it, or create common ground. The direction of education policy in England risks deepening this separation. There is no doubt that ‘anywheres’ have been privileged in tertiary education and ‘somewheres’ denied opportunity and resources on the same scale. But the problem is that this is framed as a zero-sum game when tertiary education policy could actually bridge both with a new educational synthesis of the academic and vocational. This would also be much more in tune with the needs of the contemporary labour market than current policy’s return to the 1960s world of Old Humanists and Industrial Trainers.

Revaluing higher education

Both the Augar review and Skills for Jobs set up a zero-sum game between ‘vocational’ further education and ‘academic’ higher education. Students are expected to choose one or the other and the more government spending there is for one sector the less there is for the other. This is despite both sectors now focusing on skills acquisition for employment: since the 1980s there has been a much more systematic and detailed prescribing of the knowledge and skills required of students on both vocational and academic courses in the form of frameworks and standards. However, this has largely been done separately for vocational and academic education. An important reason for this is the dominance of the ‘trade’ in vocational education and the ‘discipline’ in academic education, a distinction also reflecting differences in notions of social worth. While there has been some blurring of these distinctions into a single category of ‘profession’ they still persist but are
becoming anomalies in a labour market where the attributes conventionally associated with vocational and academic education are converging in terms of what actual professional jobs need.

The professional jobs that are now the norm in advanced economies need a certain level of technical competency, including fast emerging ones like coding, but what are regarded conventionally as academic skills, like critical analysis, integrated thinking and research, are becoming more important as routine technical tasks are increasingly handed over to machines. For example, as computing capabilities manage to replicate human competencies such as pattern recognition, human abilities to develop and test hypotheses or use data ethically become more important. These are very academic competencies, common to many degree courses.

The zero-sum game between academic and technical education reflects the political and policy narrative that there is an oversupply of degree graduates and an undersupply of people qualified as technicians and associate professionals. This is a particular issue in fiscal terms because degrees are the most expensive type of tertiary qualification given their length, specialist needs and the dominance in the UK of an expensive residential model of higher education (Whyte, 2019). The issue, it is argued, is essentially one of efficiency: skills are not matching the jobs available and many graduates are in jobs where they may not only be ‘over-educated’ but actually lack the vocational skills needed. Many ‘non-graduate’ jobs on the other hand cannot attract applicants with the specific vocational skills required. Thus, in 2020 the UK Secretary of State for Education gave a speech on tertiary education reform when he cited approvingly an editorial by Lauder and Mayhew (2020, p. 9) about the labour market’s undersupply of ‘jobs that historically graduates have expected’. But the Education Secretary’s speech spins this differently as a problem of graduate oversupply:

... graduates are competing for jobs that used to be – and could still be – done by non-graduates. And a significant proportion of graduates fail to gain much advantage from going to university at all (Williamson, 2020).

Similarly, in his foreword to Skills for Jobs the Secretary of State asserts that instead of studying for a degree at university, ‘in many cases a college course or apprenticeship can offer better outcomes’ (Department for Education, 2021a, p. 3). The paper itself is even bolder, stating that ‘recent analysis shows that technical courses can lead to better career outcomes’, citing research by Espinoza et al. (2020) that compares earnings from some sub-degree level qualifications favourably with degrees, while these authors in fact heavily caveat these findings and urge caution in generalising from a very limited set of data.

English policy making is now celebrating the role of local further education colleges and arguing it is time to end the privileged status of the university degree both as an aspiration and for funding; time in other words to create opportunity for the ‘left behind’ somewheres. This is to be done not by continuing to expand degree education but by incentivising alternatives – apprenticeships at every level, new T-level qualifications instead of the academic ‘A’ levels of British secondary education, and new Higher Technical Qualifications as shorter and more occupationally focused alternatives to many degrees, all provided locally and for students who commute rather than relocate.
Parents’ aspirations for their children to attend university have in recent decades been nearly universal, but there is some evidence in recent years of a shift in these attitudes away from degrees towards other higher vocational qualifications and apprenticeships, although this is stronger among the general public than parents or young people themselves (Bhattacharya, 2021; Hansen et al., 2010). It seems likely that the narrative of at least some degrees being of low value in the labour market is influencing public opinion, but whether it is influencing employers is another matter.

The value of degrees to employers is not only related to their subject but also to their selectivity. Employers may value even more than their specialist content the way degrees signal other productivity and social characteristics of the degree holder, including that they completed a substantial and challenging programme of study (Gallagher, 2016). Thus, official classifications may not, for example, classify a Personal Assistant role as requiring a degree, but many employers will attach value to hiring a PA with a degree. Indeed, the graduate employee may transform the role, as has tended to happen with PA roles transitioning more to business managers as technology supports the more basic tasks like scheduling appointments and convening meetings. Employers may in fact often use a degree as a proxy for potential rather than being ‘job ready’. There is evidence they are right. Recent UK Government research shows that innovating firms have more graduate employees and are hiring more of them, in all subject areas and not just science, engineering and technology (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020). The traditional degree is still the dominant currency in the professional jobs market yet UK government – and more specifically Treasury – concern has been growing about the expense of a long, predominantly full-time qualification as participation rates continue to rise. This is particularly an issue in England where there is normally no cap on undergraduate numbers. It is probably one of the reasons that the UK Government’s recent interim response to the Augar review does not rule out the proposal for minimum entry requirements that would make degree education more selective (Department for Education, 2021b).

The higher education policy and political narrative is increasingly dominated by data on the outcomes students achieve from completing their programmes, and these data capabilities will continue to be disruptive. Modern human resources systems are already able to track what institutions and qualifications are most strongly associated with successful appointments (Gallagher, 2016). Some employers are replacing education qualifications with their own more targeted assessments in their recruitment processes, including online tests and automated interviews, a development that raises concerns about the accountability and legitimacy of these assessments compared to public qualifications (Taylor, 2021). Williams was prescient not just about how increasing data capabilities such as these would have a growing influence on policy and decision-making generally but also about how education systems would be aligned with a constant drive for short-term competitive advantage in response to a market system of global competition. In Towards 2000 he argues that unchecked this will not only intensify the exploitation of labour in the form now documented by Piketty (2014) of stagnating wage growth compared to the value of assets and capital, but ultimately ecological catastrophe as the exploitation of natural resources outpaces their renewal (Williams, 1983a).

Williams was just as critical of the Old Humanists as the Industrial Trainers because neither’s model of education developed the public critical consciousness that avoiding these crises needed. He was just as concerned about universities defining ‘what learning is … what is a subject and what is not … what is evidence and what is not’ as the
Industrial Trainers usurping education for job training (Williams, 1993c, p. 261). He looked to whom he called the ‘new humanists’ to engage publics in real understanding of the world, starting from what people wanted to know. However, given the importance of ‘livelihood’ elsewhere in Williams’ writing, it is paradoxical that he frames humanist education as something detached from work when it is only through new kinds of work – green skills and jobs, for example – that the crises Williams warned about can be practically addressed. His concern that industrial training was separated from education about environmental or human exploitation was not reflected in a concern that a critical humanist education was separated from learning skills for a job.

It is an essentially twentieth century mind that separates academic and technical education. Those who went into the professions in the last century often first enjoyed a liberal academic education at university in part because a liberal education was useful for complex jobs. As more jobs become professional in an advanced services economy, and as the content of those jobs changes due to automation, we cannot afford to confine the attributes traditionally associated with academic education only to those selected by high prior academic attainment for such an education. Distinctions between academic and vocational education are melting away not just because of the growth of hybrid jobs, blending two or more occupational competencies such as data analytics and marketing, or because of the heightened importance of uniquely human skills such as communication and interpersonal sensitivity, but because personal wellbeing is now so important to productivity and job satisfaction. A recent survey of adults in the UK, USA and Australia about the most popular subject areas to learn that respondents believed could future proof them in the jobs market were health and wellbeing, mindfulness and nutrition (Futurelearn, 2021).

There is a danger in current English policy directions of siloed degree and sub-degree qualification routes. Occupational competencies overlap much more than suggested by separate occupational standards, including with the content of so-called ‘academic’ degrees. Above all, just as when the English reforms are creating highly linear and siloed technical qualifications for occupations that exist now but might not exist as defined today in the future, real jobs are unbundling and recombining, which means that there is a continuous need to learn new knowledge and skills in much smaller amounts than whole qualifications. The cutting edge of this wider development in labour markets is entrepreneurs, who set out to learn what they need and not what a qualification prescribes. This comes into sharp focus in the comments of the beauty entrepreneur Sharmadean Reid:

I am constantly doing courses because it gives me my competitive advantage to have knowledge in adjacent areas. So I actually do courses in philosophy, or I’ll do a course in human behavioural biology … I did economics because that was a big gap in my knowledge (Reid, 2021).

Learners like Reid can accumulate credit but will find it difficult to ‘cash in’ their credit for a qualification, especially if the courses are from different institutions, and be unable to achieve the credentialising that is likely to remain important in the jobs market despite the usefulness of what they have learned (Sperlinger et al., 2018). The UK Department for Education plans to support study of single modules rather than whole qualifications with a new student loan system from 2025 but this still distinguishes between ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ courses that have assessment criteria which cannot easily be translated one to the other and so combined into a single qualification (Department for Education, 2021a).
More flexibility would allow greater responsiveness as technology changes and new challenges emerge at an accelerating pace. Occupational standards, for example, are already having to catch up with the growing demand for green skills as economies shift to more sustainable production (Clarke et al., 2020).

Conclusion: a sustainable future

Williams believed that improvements in production – notably durability, higher quality and greater economy – were crucial to resolving the ecological crisis that he saw ahead. Fundamentally, he looked to a different type of society not based on capitalism: a future where instead of ‘society as production’ society is about the emotional rewards of non-exploitative relationships between humans and between humans and nature, both of which often involve a sense of place and belonging (Williams, 1983a, p. 266). He made a connection between exploiting nature and exploiting people, with these behaviours driven by economic structures that reward short-term competitive advantage over long-term sustainability.

Vocational education and training, he argued, had been captured by the logic of short-term competitive advantage (Williams, 1993c). His interest was in another kind of training, what he called ‘training for democracy’ (Stevens, 1985, p. 92). This, he argued, should be part of the liberal education that every citizen receives and is about developing everyone’s critical consciousness, including education as a prophylaxis against disinformation. This, therefore, needed to be a common educational experience. Democracy essentially depended on comprehensive education.

One of the changes often neglected in accounts of the UK’s adoption of comprehensive secondary education in the 1960s is that the reform not only meant an end to most selective grammar schools but also of so-called ‘technical’ schools. Thus, comprehensive education meant in principle ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ subjects being taught together. However, they were never given parity of esteem and the reality was that they stayed largely separate tracks, one channelling students to university and the other to technical study and work (Tomlinson, 1997). The former enjoyed a system designed to develop critical thinking while the latter were trained essentially to follow instructions, competencies that would increasingly become redundant either because of automation or the shift to service and knowledge work.

I argued earlier that the convergences occurring in contemporary high-tech economies are making this distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ increasingly anachronistic. The new hybrid economy needs the social sciences and humanities as much as mechatronics and life sciences, and this is creating an opportunity for advocates of liberal education to change the terms of the debate from ‘or’ to ‘and’. There is even potentially a moment being created by England’s new Lifelong Loan Entitlement to enable all learners to follow Sharmadean Reid’s example and select the courses they need to fulfil their purpose rather than an occupational or disciplinary requirement. For sure, some suites of courses will be necessary to qualify in a regulated profession for example, and as Clarke et al. (2020) argue there is a danger that reducing occupational education to separate modules loses the big picture. But regulated occupational requirements need to be challenged as to whether every mandatory element really is necessary and unique to that occupation, and whether their volume – often concentrated into a long, once-and-for-all qualification – is preventing studying other courses for which learners would also have a purpose now or later in life: not just later updating or upskilling, but mindfulness,
philosophy, financial management or child development for example. As much as technical education enables the learning of skills to create and make services and products useful to others, it cannot be the ‘process of society’ that Williams describes for mass education’s role, just as academic education fails on its own if learners are not equipped with the means to be employed. Above all, however, it is in making a common structure of feeling for which education is now increasingly needed.

There is now a body of research pointing to the social and inclusive values of the comprehensive education principle not just as a political or philosophical preference but as how humans have evolved to learn (Beard, 2018). Humans’ brain chemistry rewards learning something successfully with the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine (Dehaene, 2000). When learning becomes too hard or boring, as some children and teenagers unfortunately come to regard it, this is largely a result of how they are schooled and taught and essentially unnatural. It is particularly a risk in stratified education systems that define limits to the educable. The diversity of experience and different types of competency found in a ‘mixed ability’ class is in fact a rich resource for expert teachers, with peer-to-peer learning in this context one of the most powerful pedagogic methods (Hattie, 2008). Diversity among a group of people is itself a powerful resource for solving complex problems (Page, 2017).

Thus, Williams’ argument that the process of society is itself a process of education is not just political but biological. We are natural born learners and only stop learning when there are social barriers – lack of access, selection, streaming or poor teaching, for example (Beard, 2018; Dehaene, 2000). While there is a risk attached to a student choosing to study say a whole sociology degree out of pure interest and curiosity if that is the entirety of their investment in their employability, there is far less risk if they choose a sociology module because, for example, their purpose is to understand ways of seeing. That insight would complement very well modules say in computer science given how many IT projects fail because of narrow framings and design-reality gaps (Anthopolous et al., 2016).

Through learning we find our purpose, express ourselves creatively and master the tools needed to do so, lifelong. This is not different to Williams’ idea of a society of rewarding relationships because learning is social and most of what we learn we owe to others. Importantly, we learn better if we share what we learn. Everyone can be more fully human by continually developing the knowledge, skills and behaviours to enter into fuller and more rewarding relationships with each other: in and through work, in civil society or in families and communities. That is the case whether it is through what we can do as a hairdresser or biologist, a data scientist or a classics scholar, or taking some courses in all of these, depending on your purpose. It is also an idea of a society with more geographical stability, where human relationships develop ‘somewhere’ with others and with the natural world. We need to put learning into the hands of the learner, locally available, modularised and stackable, and responsive to what people want to learn.

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