

The New Business Studies Generation

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Though schools and particularly further education colleges continued to offer a range of courses in commerce, office practice and typing skills – generally for girls! - ‘Business Studies’ as a distinct subject is a comparatively recent addition to the school curriculum. One way to understand the reasons for its introduction is to see it as part of a wave of new subject areas introduced when GCSEs replaced GCE O-levels, at the beginning of the 1990s. This approach sits neatly with a ‘liberal’ paradigm in education -where a diversity of educational experiences sit alongside each other or where new subjects sit alongside ‘old’. It can be seen as a progressive development, associated with the extension of comprehensive schools and increased education opportunities which enabled greatly improved examination performance (today 67% of 16 year olds obtain at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C).

As was the case with the new subjects, the business studies syllabuses emphasised the importance of active learning through the use of case studies, encouraging students to use new ICT skills. The business syllabuses, amongst the first to use an ‘outcomes’ approach to learning, also provided opportunities to complete a course work option. I remember being the lead teacher for one of these courses from 1992 to 1994 in a west London comprehensive school. Though hard work, the course was enjoyable for both students and teachers and by far the most popular of the year 10 subject choices with up 150 students choosing it. (In this particular school, other staff members were unhappy about how their subjects were being undersubscribed and student numbers were reduced and the course eventually disbanded).

Business studies and vocational pathways

However when business studies was reintroduced into the school’s key stage 4 curriculum, at the end of the 1990s, it was as a GNVQ Part One qualification rather than as a GCSE option. GNVQ qualifications were new ‘vocational’ qualifications designed to replace a range of existing vocational qualifications like BTECs. Occupying the space of two or four GCSEs in years 10 and 11, but being full-time courses of study in sixth forms, vocational qualifications represented a new learning ‘pathway - an alternative to academic education – part of proposals by Sir Ron Dearing in his National Curriculum Reviews (Dearing 1993).

With the number of manufacturing jobs contracting it was argued that young people needed new flexible and more transferable skills to improve chances of 'employability' in the new service industries of the future and that this required a new approach to learning. Though GNVQ business units carried familiar titles like 'business in the economy', 'marketing' and 'human relations' - rather than remembering facts and writing essays, students demonstrated 'competence' by collecting evidence to satisfy the various 'elements' and 'performance criteria' for each course unit. Rather than listening to teachers they were encouraged to be 'independent learners'. Students also received Merits and Distinctions for their courses if they could demonstrate learning skills - whether they could 'action plan' before they started their assignments, 'handle information' effectively during their learning and whether they could evaluate afterwards.

There was only limited evidence of GNVQ's encouraging a new classroom culture. There were too many examples of courses being constructed around text books and of students being 'coached' through the mandatory end of unit multi-choice tests by their teachers (Allen 2004). For school managers the issue about whether these new vocational courses represented a new progressive pedagogy or a new correspondence between education and the world of work however was less important than the social function of these courses. Though, officially having the same status as GCSEs and A-levels the vocational pathway was introduced for students seen to have different needs - or 'aptitudes', a new way of grouping students in terms of perceived academic ability. Thus students on vocational pathways tended to have lower examination grades (Allen 2004). Also, GNVQ's were not offered by private schools or by selective schools in the state sector.

In many respects the new vocational courses of which business studies remained the most popular, or rather the easiest for schools to deliver and for non specialists to teach, played a similar role to the array of 'work related' courses that emerged to accommodate the 'reluctant learners' required to remain in school because of the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) in 1972/3 (Moore 1984). As Moore argues these courses had little to do with work at all, but were responses to 'control problems' resulting from 'critical changes in the school composition'. In turn the growth of the new vocational qualifications like GNVQ also reflected the failure of what Finn (1987) described as 'training without jobs' where young people increasingly voted with their feet and chose to remain in full-time education instead - resulting in a more prolonged period of 'education without jobs' (Ainley, 1999) and where, rather than being a real response to the challenges of globalisation, the main function of education is ideological not technological (Allen and Ainley, 2007) - acting as a form of 'warehousing'.

New types of students

The fact that the new courses were as much about the 'cooling out' of an expanded student population as they were about learning workplace skills should not be interpreted to imply that students taking these courses never enjoyed them or tried to use them for their own individual advantage. On the contrary, GNVQ style qualifications became an important 'second chance' qualifications allowing young people the opportunity to 'drift up' the education system and access the new post 92 'new' universities (Allen 2004) as they were then referred to as. Though they issued statements in support of GNVQ there was no evidence of any of the Russell universities accepting any GNVQ students.

Often apprehensive about going onto HE these new types of students invariably chose to carry on with subject areas they were already familiar. According to UCAS statistics in 1998 24% of applicants to 'business and administrative' studies were from GNVQ students and GNVQ students made up the largest cohort of those applying for HND business studies (Allen 2004) The Advanced business GNVQ students I interviewed at the end of the 1990s in an inner-London comprehensive school (Allen 2004) were almost exclusively working class and mostly black or Asian. None had the five GCSE grade C passes the school required for commencing A-levels. Several had previously completed the one year level 2 GNVQ business course and as a result, would be spending 3 years in the sixth-form.

These students were also different in other ways. Almost all were applying for and almost all going on to obtain places on either HND (as it was then known) or degree courses in business related subjects at local universities within travelling distance of their homes. Many would also continue with the part-time employment they had invariably in local super markets and super stores. They saw going to university as a way of moving on to 'something better than Sainsbury's jobs.... something that gives respect'. Into 'a job where I don't have to stand up all day' (Allen 2004).

Unlike a group of traditional middle-class A-level students in an East Anglian Cathedral town, with which they were compared and who looked forward to 'moving away to university' - 'going to uni' would be a continuation of the life style that had been previously established. When they were contacted about how their university experience contrasted with being at school, they reported that the library was bigger, there were more computers and that their lecturers didn't help them like their teachers did.

What is being argued is that the emergence of the 'business studies generation' during the 1990s was a reflection of a changing relationship between education and working class or 'ordinary' students (Brown, 1987). Staying on in full-time education although promoted by New Labour as an integral part of the 'standards agenda' in schools and the 'skills agenda' in FE- not to mention a new 'personalised' agenda over which the individual supposes exercises their own responsibility, has become a new collective strategy for the working class - now more aptly described as having recomposed into a 'working-middle' (Allen and

Ainley 2007). If these new students have changed their attitudes to education, they were not 'swots' in the sense that they identified with the values of the school or university their reasons for remaining in school were largely pragmatic and instrumental

From vocational to 'applied' learning

The increased importance of vocational qualifications as a method of accessing higher education, was one significant reason for their 'academic drift'. Universities quickly realised that even if the new GNVQ courses were officially seen as being equivalent to A-levels their academic content was not. They also questioned the large numbers of students given Merit or Distinction grades, well above the equivalent level at A-level. Universities consequently made higher offers. Ofsted reported that portfolios had been marked too generously.

Concerns about the academic rigour of GNVQ, particularly the emphasis on centre based rather than external assessment as well as a commitment, however mild, by New Labour to reduce the differences in status between vocational and academic learning, resulted in the qualifications being relaunched as Vocational and then Applied 'A' levels (and GCSEs) as part of the Curriculum 2000 proposals. Thus Applied Business would have an identical modular framework to GCE A Business Studies and students would have to take 'exams' in 2 of the 6 units to gain the 'double' award. (1 out of 3 for the single).

As has been the case with 'applied' qualifications generally however, enrolments for Applied Business have continued to decline significantly. Compared with the 28000 GNVQ Advanced business candidates in 1997 for example, there were only 11500 entries for the Double Award Applied course (9000 for the Applied single). In comparison, 'academic' business received an entry of 31000 in 2009. The differences in entries has been even more pronounced at GCSE level where the 'double' Applied Business GCSE which replaced the Intermediate level GNVQ attracted just 15000 entries compared to 83000 for the straight GCSE in Business Studies -though many schools are yet to explicitly introduce vocational pathways at post-14.

In mimicking the academic qualifications they were once designed as alternatives to, the Applied qualifications became the 'worst of both worlds' (Allen and Ainley 2007). To begin with they have not attracted students away from 'academic' A-levels and GCSEs, on the contrary the academic pathway has continued to grow: entries with 850,000 A-level entries in 2009 from a total of more than 250 000 students. Most schools and colleges set entry requirements of 5 A-C passes at GCSE but as noted earlier, 67% of students now achieve these.

The Applied course have also alienated many of the students they had been designed for. As a result schools and particularly further education colleges have returned to the centre

assessed and coursework based BTEC/National qualifications. 'BTECs' have enjoyed a rejuvenation. According to an HEFCE (2007) report 4180 students started on BTEC National business courses in 2002/3 but demand had increased by 131% by 2005/6. In the latest attempt to consolidate but also rationalise the vocational pathway, 'Business and Finance' is one of 14 new specialist diplomas announced in the 2004 14-19 White Paper- to be introduced from 2008 on a rolling programme. However the diploma has had a difficult birth, has failed to really establish itself and exhibits the same contradictions as the qualifications it seeks to replace (Allen and Ainley, 2008). If the Conservatives win the General Election, could disappear altogether.

Soft and hard

More significant than the division between academic and vocational or academic and applied learning are the divisions between 'soft' and 'hard' subjects. Cambridge University and the London School of Economics both publish what has become known as the 'B list' of subjects considered easier than others and carrying preconditions for entry to elite universities. Both Business studies and Accounting feature on these lists. According to the Headmaster of Harrow, quoted in *The Guardian* (23/01/10) pupils in state schools are being misled in believing that 'top grades in soft subjects' will produce social mobility.

The Centre-Right 'Policy Exchange' think-tank, provides a comparison of entries from private and non selective schools for subjects like law, sociology, psychology and media. There are no figures for business studies, although 'economics' remains a suitably 'hard subject' and one where over 30% of entries are from the Independent sector. A quick 'google' of elite schools, including some of the 'high performing' state schools, provides some indication of attitudes. All of these schools offer economics.

Business Studies in the sixth form	
<i>Eton College</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>Harrow School</i>	<i>yes</i>
<i>Charterhouse</i>	<i>Business and Management as Pre-U subject</i>
<i>Cheltenham Ladies College</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>St Pauls (independent day)</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>Manchester Grammar (independent day)</i>	<i>“ we do not offer other A-level courses in particular psychology...business studies”</i>
<i>Tiffin Girls School (state selective)</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>London Oratory School (state voluntary aided)</i>	<i>yes</i>
<i>Watford Grammar School for Boys (state selective)</i>	<i>no</i>

The business studies generation and HE

As has been argued above, the rise of a ‘business studies generation’ is a reflection of a wider shift in the attitudes of young people to remaining in full time education as much as it does a new enthusiasm for a particular area of study. It can also be seen as part of a more widespread growth of a ‘credentialist’ culture where education is a ‘positional good’ giving the owner a specific advantage in the labour market compared to those without it. In higher education this is continued in the growth of courses considered to be more directly ‘vocational’ than others. So even if this presentation has been mostly about students in the 14-19 age group, just a few points about business studies and HE.

If we add together the different constituents of the vocational /applied pathway and those studying business as part of their A-levels, then the total number of students applying for business in UCAS comes to a much higher figure. Returning to the inner London school mentioned above, this time in September 2009; of 85 students moving to HE courses, 11 had the word ‘business’ and another 6 accounting or finance. Only a minority of these students had followed the school’s ‘double business’ Applied A-level, but they had generally done the ‘softs’ – including Applied business single and invariably psychology, law or information technology.

Applications for business related courses now draw more students than any other group of subjects with UCAS figures for 2008 entry showing 265, 519 applications out of a total of

2,195,637 (just over 12%) for the ‘business and admin studies’ cohort .
www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/data_tables)

Business studies	53,459
Management studies	64,407
Finance	7,524
Accounting	30,607
Marketing	17,551
Human Resource Management	3,363
Office Skills	43
Hospitality, Leisure, Tourism and Transport	32,397
Others in Business & Admin Studies	2,465
Combinations within Business & Admin Studies	53,600
	265,519

With ‘acceptance’ figures of **55,892 from a total of 456,627** – again approximately 12% of all acceptances - ‘business and admin’ is still the largest subject cohort.

Just as business studies courses in post-14 education are more embedded in comprehensive schools and FE colleges, business courses in HE continue to be associated with post-92 universities. Once again, a quick goggle shows London Met with 9 courses including the word business and Greenwich over 20, compared with Goldsmiths 0, LSE 0, UCL 1. Manchester had 4 but Manchester Met over 20, Leeds had 9 and Leeds Met 15. (I didn’t try ‘accounting’). All of the Inner London students referred to above, with one exception, were starting courses at post-92 universities within travelling distance of their home.

What next for generation ‘crunch’?

It has been argued elsewhere that as the economy attempts to recover from its own credit crunch, education increasingly faces its own ‘credibility crunch’ (Allen and Ainley, 2010). While the current recession will intensify the ‘graduatisation’ of another layer of jobs, previously available to non graduates it has certainly not dampened young peoples willingness to enrol in HE. On the contrary there have been increases in applications, even reported queues at some ‘clearing’ universities. The decisions these students make about whether to remain in higher education will in the long run however, be influenced by changes in labour market opportunities and the costs/ benefits of being a student

Of particular significance will be the 'underemployment' of graduates (Roberts 2009, Allen and Ainley 2010) however, particularly those from less illustrious universities, the increases in fees after the election and the continued burden of student debt. Also significant may be the shortage of employment opportunities as students have to compete with unemployed adults for 'part-time' work

On the otherhand business studies courses will likely be a candidate for Lord Mandelson's two year degrees. Primarily a way of saving money; they will be repackaged as something in the interests of students. Greenwich and London Met universities, already have drop-out rates approaching 20% (*Guardian* 04/06/09). The business studies generation, a significant driving force in the expansion of HE, might soon become its Achilles Heal.

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