

# Vocational education in English schools: problems and solutions

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# A little history...

- Constant reviews of technical and vocational education from 1868 onwards
- Under recent Labour administrations, major Skills Commission reports for Education/Employment Dept superseded 5 years later by Leitch Review/Report for Treasury
- Effective nationalisation of vocational qualifications in late 80s/early 90s
- Formal vocational and quasi-vocational education in school sixth forms with GNVQs, in KS4 (or even younger) much more recently

# Social and education change

- Rise in educational participation post-16
- Increase in numbers entering HE and in numbers aspiring to it
- Collapse of youth labour market
- Belief in ever-increasing demand for ‘skills’ and in number of highly skilled jobs. Reality of ‘hour-glass’ economy and decline in mid-level skilled occupations

# Decades of public consensus

- We need and should have ‘parity of esteem’ for vocational and academic routes and qualifications. This should be addressed through frameworks which assign levels ‘across’ categories
- The major drag on UK productivity is a lack of skills
- This problem can be solved by increasing numbers of qualifications – so many level 2, so many level 3 – and by giving institutions powerful incentives to award large numbers .

**Unfortunately there is little truth  
in any of this**

Government fiat does not transform the  
prestige of a qualification, nor can  
governments foresee and plan for 'skill  
needs'

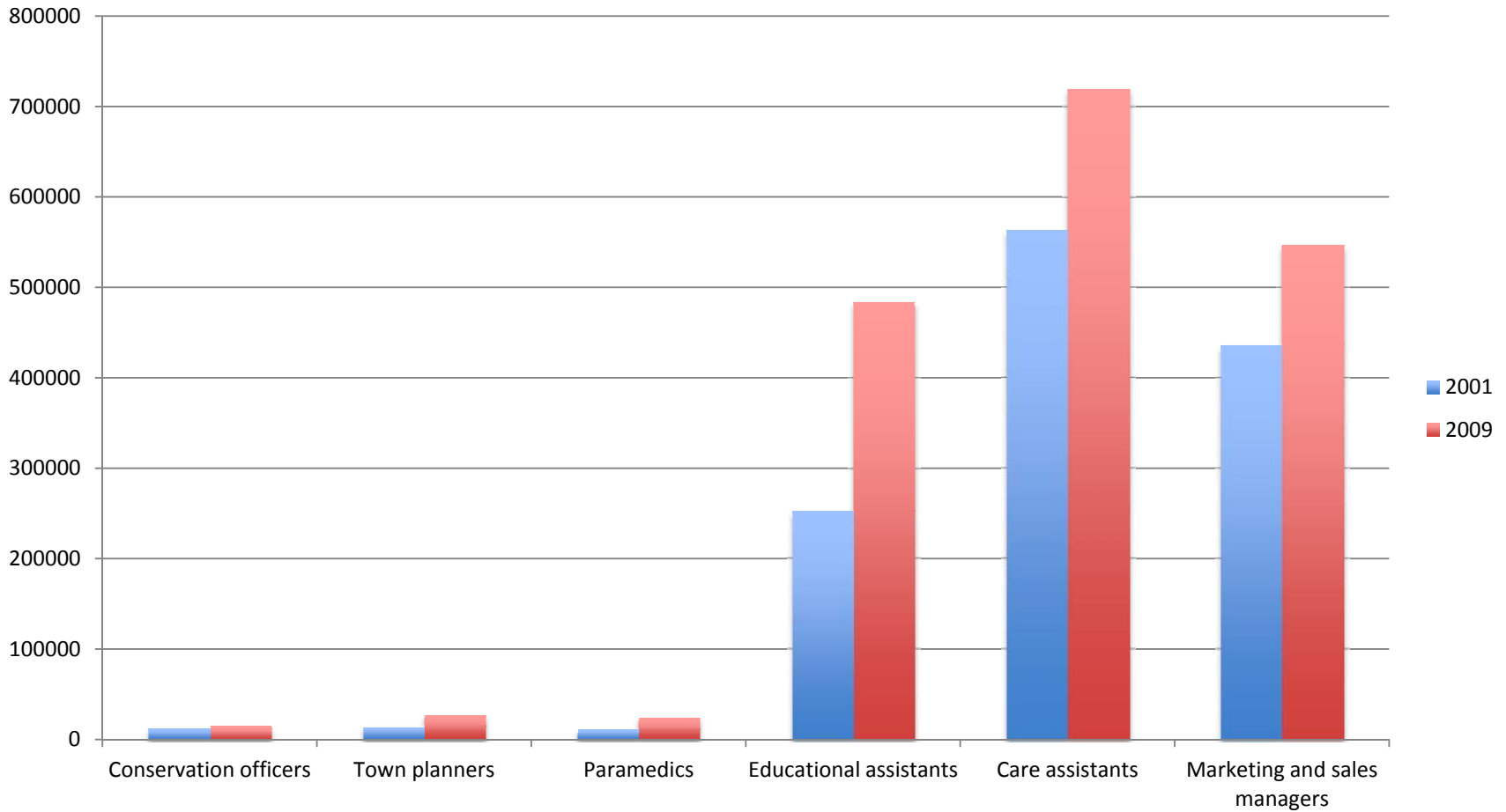
# Today's world

- A hierarchy of school-based qualifications is inevitable (and universal)
- Work experience remains crucially important
- Apprenticeship has an important place but a restricted one
- Higher education has expanded very fast, and the graduate premium has been maintained
- But university education is very expensive; if everyone went, the emerging income differences within the graduate population would get much larger – and many skills are not well taught in this environment anyway
- Labour market changes compound the problem

Modern workplaces change rapidly, and people shift roles and jobs rapidly too. The idea that employers want highly specialised, restricted skills is demonstrably incorrect: otherwise NVQs would have been the success their proponents predicted.

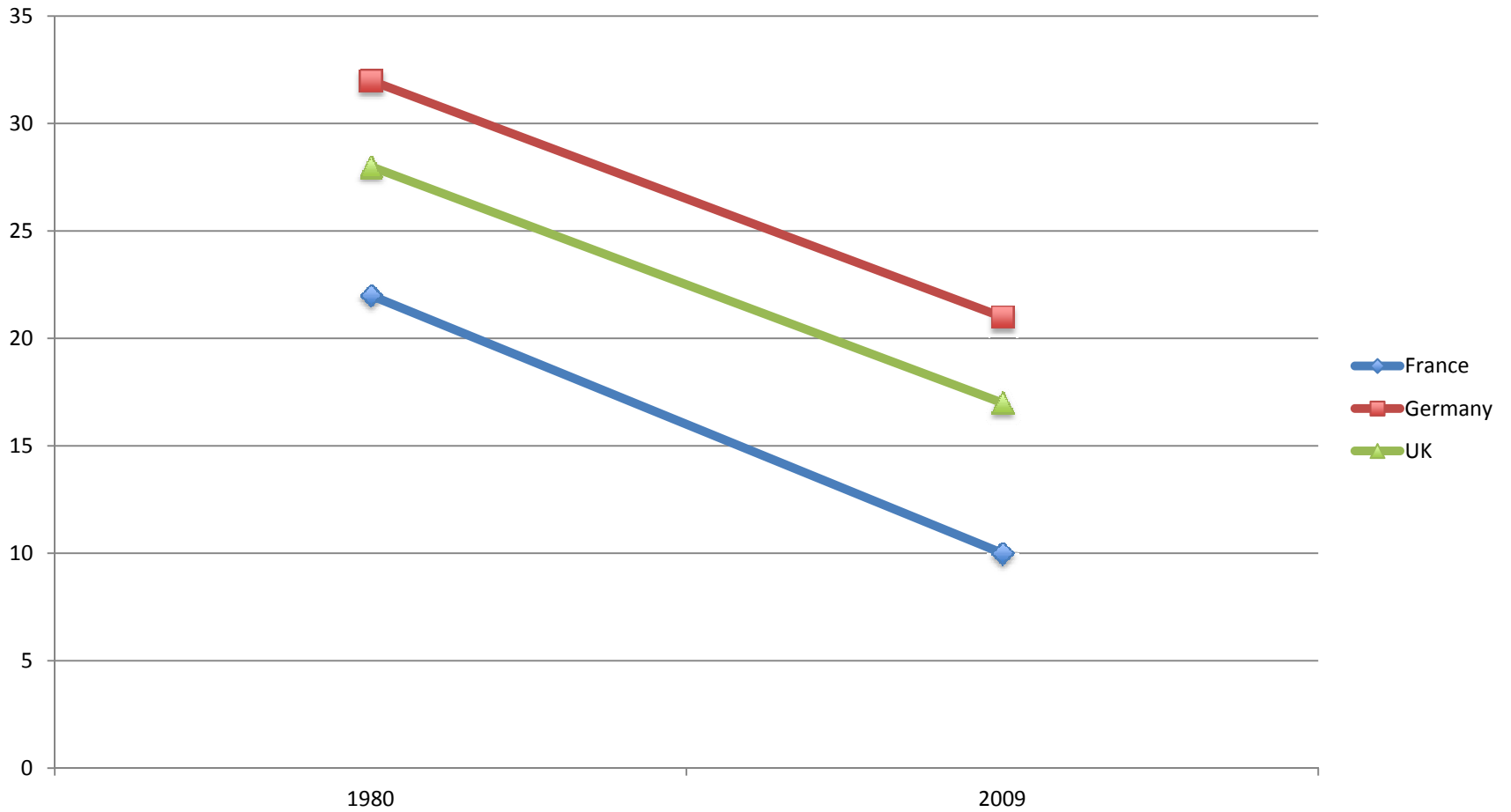
Young people change not only jobs but sectors. The longer we spend in work, the more true this will be.

# The fastest-growing – and the largest growth





# Manufacturing as a share of GDP



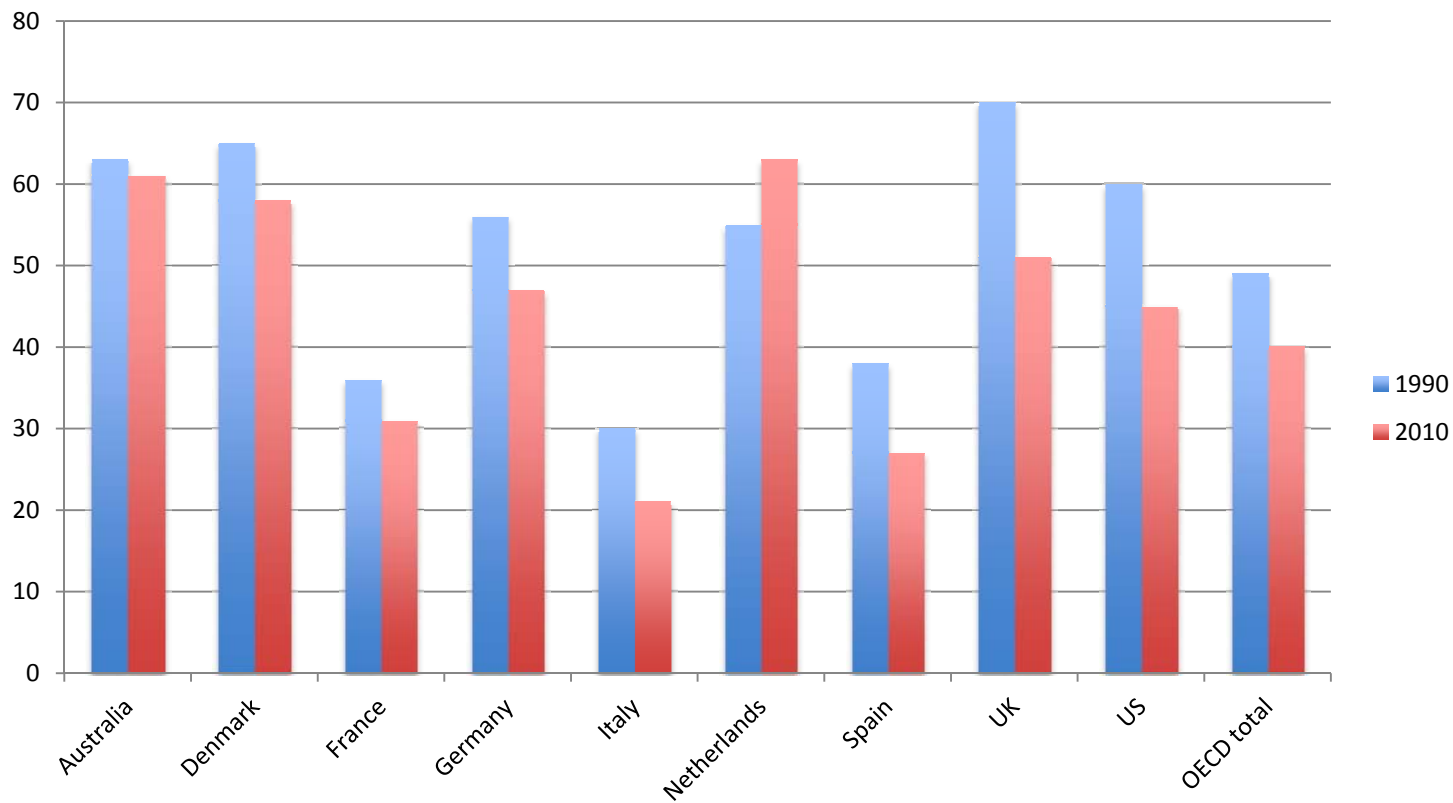
# The skills in demand

- Maths and English
- **'Soft skills' as demonstrated by experience**
- General intelligence/quickness

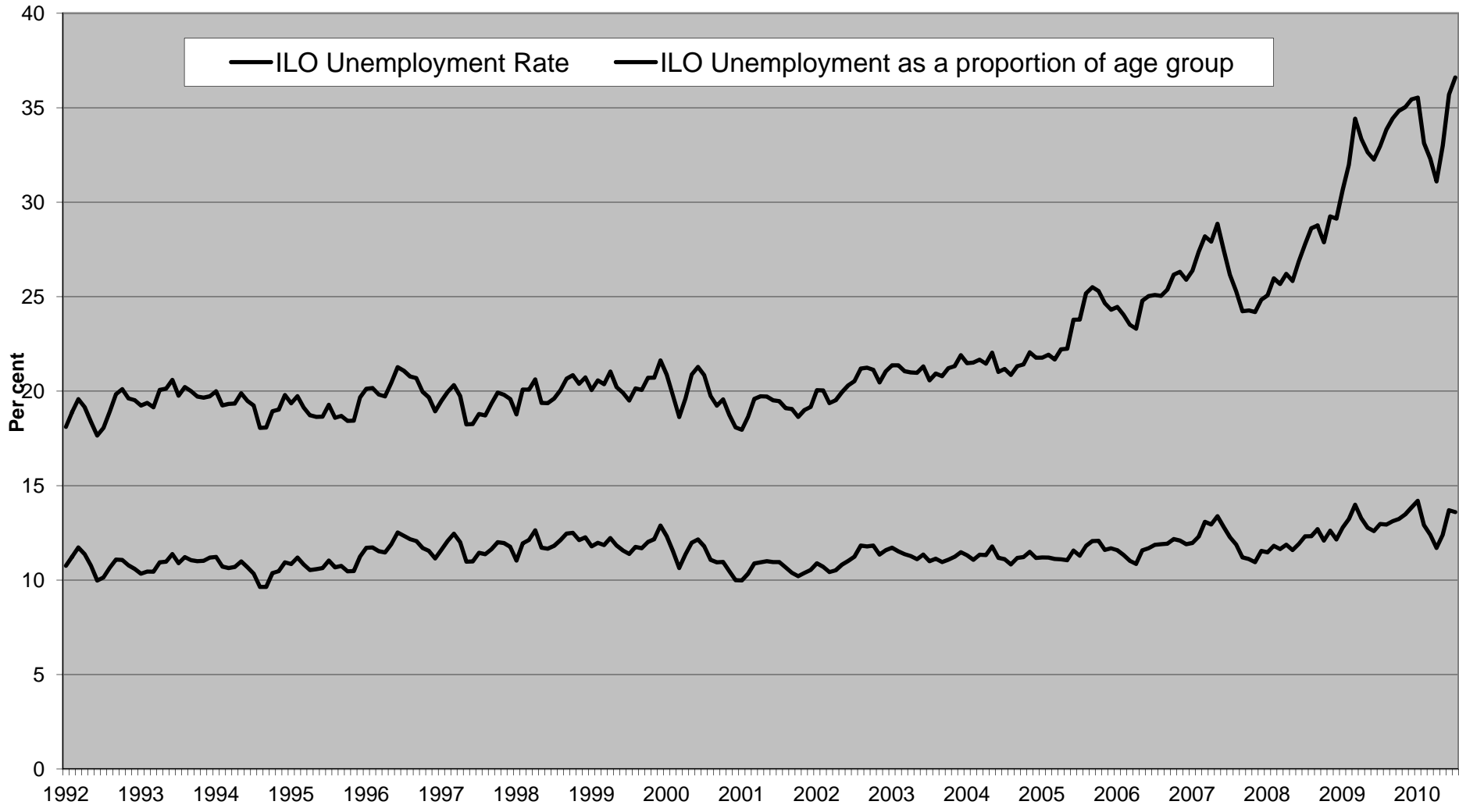
# Disappearance of the youth labour market for 16-18 year olds

Recent in the UK which maintained teenage employment at high levels longer than most other European countries

Percentage of population aged 15-24 employed: selected OECD countries

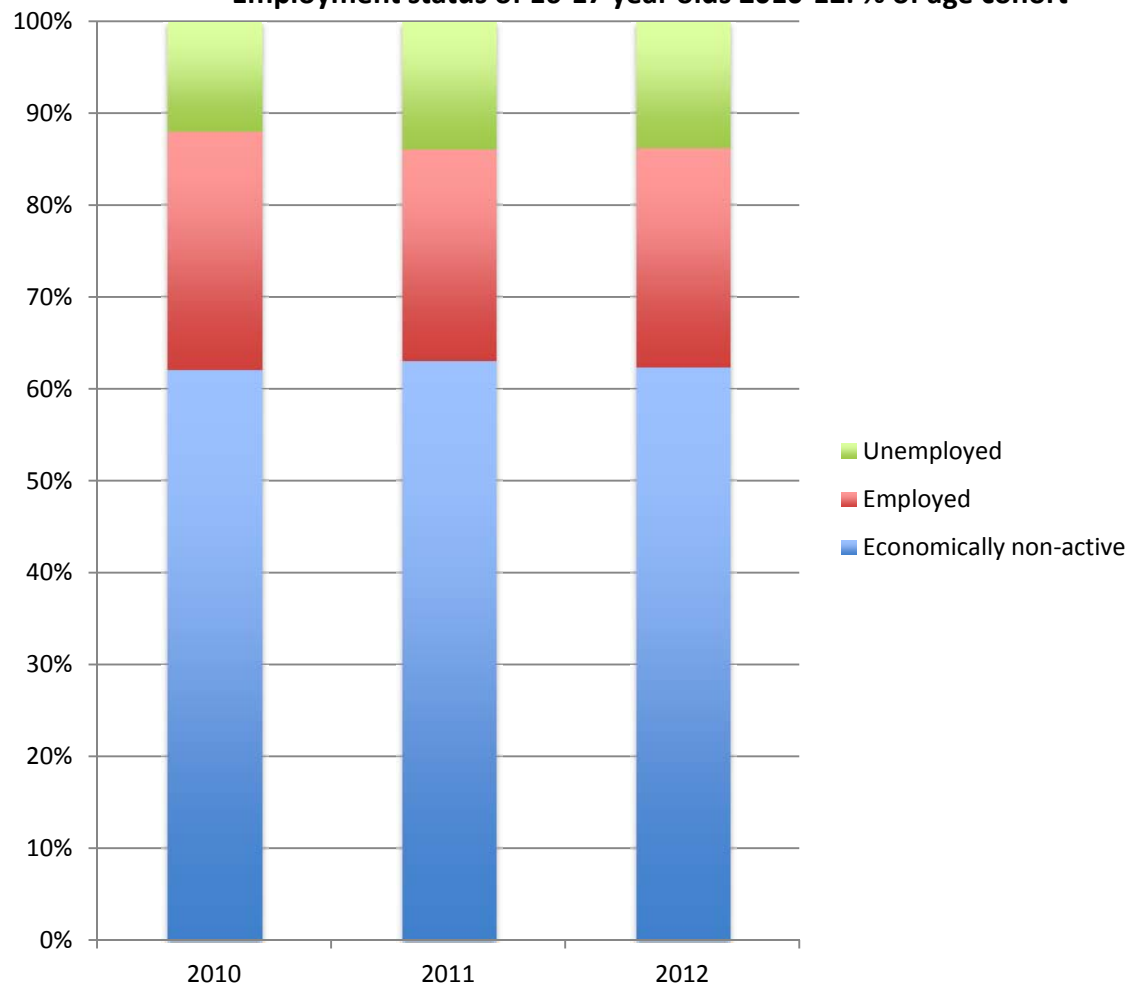


## 16-17 unemployment



Source: ONS

Employment status of 16-17 year olds 2010-12: % of age cohort



# The decline of apprenticeship

- Once the majority destination for male school-leavers
- Decline from the 1980s, actively encouraged by government
- 'Brand' revived from mid-1990s but with little resemblance to traditional apprenticeship

# Current apprenticeships

- Very small proportion of cohort – less than 5% of 16 year olds, about 7% of 18 year olds
- High returns to traditional craft (level 3) apprenticeships and evidence of positive returns generally when they are genuine workplace apprenticeships
- But level 3 a declining proportion of the whole



# Is large-scale apprenticeship a realistic goal?

- Can certainly improve on the current set-up in quality and quantity, and stop labelling existing adult employees 'apprentices' in order to meet targets
- No need to convince young people – hugely over-subscribed whenever quality is good
- But institutions have withered, and economy has changed: struggle to find places even in traditional high-apprenticeship countries

# Educational context

- Recent reforms focused heavily on qualifications – NVQs, GNVQs, Diploma, QCF and equivalencies
- Central accountability regime: behaviour of schools driven by KS4 league tables
- Post-16 funding by qualification with strong element of payment-by-results. (Pre-16 essentially per-pupil.)
- Size and complexity – about 600,000 in each age cohort, due to fall in short term, rise in medium term
- Institutional complexity

# Key Points (1)

- Very low average returns to NVQs
- High returns to apprenticeships
- High returns to English and Maths
- High returns to employment
- Motivation is crucial - effective learning requires it

## Key Points (2)

- Young people change jobs, occupations and sectors very frequently.
- Among lower-achieving students there is a great deal of ‘churn’ post-GCSE, in and out of education and employment. Very few are ‘NEET’ for a year or more.
- There is no clear or conclusive evidence to support the idea that practical and vocational courses are inherently more motivating for lower-attaining or disengaged students.

# Conclusions(1)

- Early specialisation is undesirable. 14-16 year olds should all follow a broad and largely common curriculum which does not pre-empt later choices. (This implies changes to the ‘four pathways’ approach inherited from the last government.)
- Achieving Maths and English at C and above should be given priority post-16 as well as pre-16 because of their central and increasing importance.

# Conclusions (2)

- “Forced’ equivalences (and speeches about ‘parity of esteem’ ) do nothing positive for the respect in which different qualifications and skills are held.
- Courses which are ‘non-academic’ or ‘vocational’ gain respect from their value – i.e. because they teach difficult and valued skills to a high level, lead onto desirable future opportunities or both.
- So that is what we should encourage and aim at. We should recognise really good ‘non-academic’ subjects and win recognition for them, not pretend everything is great.

# Conclusions (3)

- Employers are far and away the best source of quality control/quality assurance for vocational programmes.
- Vocational and practical programmes need to be taught by genuine experts.
- Competition between institutions can be extremely valuable provided the underlying incentives encourage competition on quality and provided students and their families are given good and accurate information.
- Most 16-19 year old students, and the families of most 14-19 year olds, can and do make use of information in a sophisticated way.

# Key changes to date (1)

- Changing incentives for schools to pile up large numbers of qualifications at KS4 irrespective of value to the students
- Identifying high quality vocational awards at KS4
- Changing the funding system post-16: funding on a per-pupil basis not payment-by-results for individual qualifications
- Requiring all 16-18 students to have a coherent programme of study



## Key changes to date (2)

- Allowing funding of/encouraging provision of extended and genuine work placements especially age 16-18
- Making it easier to provide quality vocational instruction /introducing mutual recognition of qualifications
- Removing statutory requirement for all KS4 pupils to have a fixed number of days of 'work related learning'
- Requiring English and Maths post-16 for all students without grade C

**And a major challenge still to  
come -**

Developing really good new courses

Building up work experience

Enlisting employers