

# **UK Education, Employability, and Everyday Life<sup>1</sup>**

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With pressures from employers, government ministries, and the new paying student/customer, New Labour has begun to restructure higher education and worker training in the United Kingdom to accommodate global markets, in the context of increasingly intimate relations between business and the public sector/education.

Simultaneous to the flexibilisation of the labour market, New Labour has increasingly sought private sector involvement in an increased range of avenues with the goal of educating citizens to become 'learner workers', and to become accustomed to, and reproductive of, the vagaries of neoliberal capitalism in their day to day lives and work. This project has a lineage perhaps with origins in the Robbins Report of the 1960s (Maclure 2006), which gave technological institutes 'university' status, and encouraged the continued expansion of universities. A series of Teaching and Higher Education Acts and education White Papers followed, which perhaps came to a head with the strong recommendations for private sector involvement into the public. Lord Sandy Leitch's Review of Skills 2006 (commonly known as the Leitch Report) itself a prominent recent strategy intending to transform education in this nation, toward market liberalisation and market-led 'progress', despite claims for a demand driven transformation in policy. The impact that implemented changes suggested by the Leitch Report will have on workers reflects widespread and growing insecurities resulting from the rolling back of the welfare state, when looked at in the context of increasing rates of hidden unemployment (see Beatty et al. 2007) and dramatically rising explicit unemployment<sup>3</sup> in the contemporary economic 'credit crunch'.

The present piece looks at how one Anglo-Saxon country has responded to the increase of global interdependencies. It is claimed that the current government does not feel ready for the complete internationalization of its labour market ('British jobs for British workers' is a recent quote originally seen within British Nationalist Party rhetoric and more recently by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in response to conflict over companies hiring EU workers, albeit legally), and as such is deploying higher education to create an army of employable subjects/citizens who are proselytised as having the skills be able to participate effectively in the increasingly privatised global chains of commodity production and services. However, as Terry Wrigley (2007) states 'capitalism

needs workers who are *clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what's really going on*'.

### The citizen

...has become a political fiction... the externality of the citizen in relation to his own everyday life becomes a necessity projected outside of himself; in models, in fanaticisms, in ideolisations, in fetishisms. Wherever it appears, the cult of personality has a political sense and can never be reduced to a peripheral ideology; it is bound up with the nature of the State... the externality of the citizen and his projection outside of himself in relation to his everyday life is part of that everyday life (Lefebvre 1958/1991: 89).

A perception of the skills and personalities of the 'employable' citizen appears to be gradually replacing or at the very least, challenging, discussions for 'employment' or job creation. The ambiguity of the emerging debate seems to require a marriage of the productive individual (what Lefebvre calls 'productive man') with a contemporary form of idealised citizenship (or Lefebvre's 'political man') that in practice requires people to become entrepreneurs of their own fates in unprecedented campaigns, apparently triggered by unregimented globalisation and embraced by the New Right with the policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The scenario discussed in the following paragraphs reveals a striking resemblance across hemispheres in its contradictory convictions toward inclusion and emancipation; contradictory in the sense that related projects do not fully take into account the impact that the burgeoning flexibility rhetoric has had upon workers in the formation of updated subjectivities that are expected to assimilate to the requirements the state has ordained through campaigns intended to promote citizens' 'employability'. The paper is thus a critique of the forced inclusion of the inculcation of self-inventions of employability into everyday life.

Contu , Grey and Ortenblad (2003: 943) are very critical of the 'common *imaginaire*' that has emerged in the construction of a particular kind of learning discourse; one that aims to create an 'incurable learner' (Harding 2000) with campaigns

that construct a certain set of standards for individuals' employability, and the campaign's crucial companion, lifelong learning. The campaign marginalises more than it includes, as it places a homogeneity of expectations on all people, demanding certain types of capabilities for learning, excluding for example autistics, manic-depressives, schizophrenic people, welfare recipients, and perhaps, 'eccentrics', just to name a few. Britain's employability campaign demonstrates a significant shift in what is expected of citizens via the formulation of their subjectivities in a normalisation process with the aid of the private sectors' renewed demands for skills.<sup>4</sup>

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is working closely with the newly formed Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), Jobcentre Plus, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to

...transform the way people think, feel and act about learning and skills... we will achieve this ambition through a lasting, memorable and actively supported campaign which will be used and developed by everyone in Further Education (LSC 2007).

The highly personal and invasive language used in the campaign begins to move stealthily into the territory of subjectivities and people's lives. 'Everyday life' has been ascribed by elite voices to the working classes or to the supposed types of people/workers who are incapable of understanding or living in the enlightened and perhaps post modern world, an assumption that has been heavily critiqued on the left. The employability campaign if interpreted at its most extreme requires people to use every waking minute for preparation for entering into an unpredictable job market, or for management and education of the self once a person is in work, meaning that everyday life is subordinated to these preparations and activities. How does the employability campaign deal with the everyday life but as a criticism to the way people may have traditionally chosen to live, i.e. in a way that is not all-consumed with preparing oneself for supposedly immutable instability of the labour market?<sup>5</sup> Employability of the *self* is a concept that holds absolutely no meaning if it is not a lived and constructed experience by people whose relationship to their work is increasingly subordinated to global and local changes to

labour markets. So to theorise this transition of governments' attempts to upskill its labour market in various guises, Lefebvre's discussions of the citizen and everyday life are observed.

This essay looks at the process of restructuring of education in the UK as part of a global hegemonic project toward the expansion of neoliberal capitalism in the sense that education is becoming a service that is no longer public, but which is becoming increasingly subordinate to capital, and is thus being put under a process of liberalisation to *supposed* market demands. This is seen in the developing relationship between education, which was historically, a public service, and the private sector; a relationship that imposes a managerial regime onto subjects toward 'objectification of subjectivity' in a process of governmentality that points toward what Foucault termed 'biopower', or a subordination of bodies through particular means of social regulation under conditions of domination (Beckmann and Cooper 2005). The idea of 'employability' is discussed in the first section of the paper in conjunction with labour market flexibilisation, and I claim that while it is presented as a one-size-fits-all escape clause from insecurities of the market, it can also be seen as a management technique over workers' everyday lives, and for the management of any potential social unrest resulting from increased instability of the economy and the resulting ambiguities of employment, and the escalation of unemployment.<sup>6</sup>

The second section then looks closely into the developing relationship between business and education in the UK, with an examination of the Leitch Report and requisite recommended relations between business and education. The long-awaited and highly influential Report, commissioned by the New Labour government in 2004 and published in December 2006, demonstrates that the United Kingdom is significantly lagging behind other post-industrial nations in skills levels as well as productivity levels, and encourages a demand-led initiative to compensate. Leitch suggests various ways to restore the UK's international status in the general categories of basic skills improvement through the increase in people's aspirations, the awareness of the 'value' of skills, and the creation of an integrated employment/skills service; all with accelerated private sector relationships. The campaign, and the de facto privatisation of education, implicates a very different

relationship between the citizen and the state, as well as a reformation of what is expected of workers' subjectivities as a means toward the colonisation and microregulation of workers' everyday lives. The relationship requires a 'hands-off' approach on the part of the state, but a far more 'hands-on' attitude that must become adopted and incorporated into the subjectivities of each worker and of each unemployed individual alike.

### **Employability of Worker, Flexibility of Work**

New Labour intends to guide the process of integrating the private sector into the public to develop and promulgate a high skills project in response to Leitch's recent criticisms. The national Employability Skills Programme and the related 'The future, it's in our hands' campaign launched in August 2007, and the deployment of the Sector Skills Councils seem to offer a rosy hue of mobility and prosperity to people whether employed or not, with enormous value placed upon education. To remain employable, one must be a self-imposed lifelong, incurable learner (Harding 2000). The incurable learner is the character sought within key skills modules at the level of Higher Education, and employability is the 'keyest of concepts'. Harding suggests a cross-university key skills module that would become implemented over a two year process; one whose implementation, she realises, could be perceived as a 'loss' or a top-down imposition onto other course designers, but she does not once question the ethics of this 'real life need' for academics to work together to put this kind of module into place. Harding talks about a range of 'unicorn' concepts, which are 'flexibility, imagination, ability to ask good questions, to hypothesise what a situation might be like under other circumstances, and all our "C" words, creativity, confidence, challenge, curiosity, connecting, and communication' (*Ibid.* 83 – 85). These skills can perhaps function as a formula that people can adopt, in order to maintain personal employability, and apparently have replaced specific job related skills, that transcend all other abilities.

'Employability' is a highly subjective term, and requires the productive woman/man to become a citizen/worker, who is also labelled a learner worker (Williams 2005).<sup>7</sup> While the *unemployable* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were those who

were unable to work (Welshman 2006) or were generally demonised and put into various derogatory categories (Foucault 2001; Berend 2005), this concept has altered dramatically to unrecognisable proportions as a result of globalisation and the changing relationship between industry and education. Rather than specific skills and abilities alone, workers are expected to have particular ‘labour attitudes’ (Worth 2003).

Employers have begun to place emphasis on work ethics and soft skills like communication, to the extent that in 2006, employers cite communication skills, work ethic, and personality as the top three desirable skills, placed above literacy, qualifications, and numeracy (CIPD 2006). Only 26 per cent of the 1,400 employers surveyed in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) quarterly Labour Market Outlook placed literacy and numeracy at the top of rankings. The August 2006 report indicates that UK employers now emphasise soft skills over literacy and numeracy in spite of the concern regarding public examination standards in recent years, with 40 per cent of employers indicating that a key attribute they seek is excellent communication skills, and 32 per cent even emphasising *personality* as a crucial factor (Phillips 2006)!

Also in 2006, the Pedagogy for Employability Group (2006) recommended a specific pedagogy that could suffuse across the entire UK higher education curriculum to teach students how to prepare themselves for the job market from day one, and intends to ‘make the links with employability [and education] explicit’ (*Ibid.*: 15). This report, prepared by the Higher Education Academy/Enhancing Student Employability Team emphasised that teaching was now not to be simply about teaching, but was to include *task design*, and should aim to work toward ‘providing cognitive scaffolding to help students towards achievement currently beyond their unaided capability, progressively removing it as that capability develops’, and encouraging students ‘to evaluate their achievements with respect to the expectations of employers and the broader society’ (*Ibid.*: 12 - 13). This cognitive scaffolding encourages a straightjacket for the hegemony of the assumption of homogeneity of levels of ability to compete, through the mastering of certain supposedly universally attainable skills. This is seen in this group’s report, with the ideal type for employable subjects demonstrating the following characteristics:

- Imagination/creativity

- Adaptability/flexibility
- Willingness to learn
- Independent working/autonomy
- Working in a team
- Ability to manage others
- Ability to work under pressure
- Good oral communication
- Communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences
- Numeracy
- Attention to detail
- Time management
- Assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
- Planning, coordinating, and organising ability (*Ibid.*: 4).

The 'Skills Plus Project' related to the Employability group's report involved seventeen University departments across the UK who tested whether 'it is possible to take a programme approach to fostering employability even in highly-modularised curricula' (*Ibid.*: 7). This project involved strategies to create specific links between 39 'desirable characteristics' for employability and the 'fine tuned' curricula. Related to this was also the Personal Development Profile (PDP) as promoted by the QAA in 2002, which was to note 'the development of students' self-awareness' as employable subjects to the market. This was to involve 4 'broad, interlocking constructs':

- Understanding (of disciplinary material, and, more generally, of 'how the world works')
- Skilful practices in context (whether the practices are discipline-related or more generic)
- Efficacy beliefs (under which are subsumed a range of personal qualities and attributes)
- Metacognition (including the capacity for reflection, and that of self-regulation (*Ibid.* 8).



Perhaps, if there were no economic ‘question’, these initiatives would look like some kind of game or time-wasting exercise for technocrats. In the UK the recent emerging debt crisis has had implications for the magnitude of the problem of rising unemployment. The average UK consumer is £3,008 in debt compared to an average figure of £1,558 across the rest of Western Europe. The UK is responsible for a third of all unsecured debt in Western Europe, and over the past decade, many families owning homes suffered record mortgage arrears, negative equity and a high amount of repossessions. The total figure for personal debt in Britain in June 2007 was £1,355bn, and the growth rate of debt had increased to 10.1% in the 12 months preceding June. Including mortgages the average household debt for the UK was £56,000; excluding mortgages the figure is £8,856.; and if based on households with some form of unsecured loan the average amount is £20,600. Every 4 minutes the UK’s personal debt was reported to be rising by a million pounds in 2008 (Nouse 2008).

The CIPD’s June 2008 report (CIPD 2008) has resonance when it demonstrates that the economy is ‘generating too few jobs to prevent the dole queue from starting to lengthen’, simultaneous to continued strong growth in the number of people entering the labour market’ and shows that the rate of growth in employment is much slower than in preceding quarters. The finance and business sectors are showing obvious signs of strain and shed 20,000 jobs in the first quarter of 2008, and is now easily outstripping manufacturing as the principal sector experiencing job cuts. “For the time being, however, it looks as though contract staff—the self-employed and temporary workers—are bearing the brunt of the jobs slowdown” (*ibid.*). Service sector (shops/hotels/restaurants) jobs are at a standstill, public sector employment is falling, and not surprisingly perhaps, service workers and the precariat class are the first to take the heat.

How can this travesty be explained? Is it a result of market failure? Is it a problem resulting from overvaluation and manipulation of finance statistics? Is it because markets are burdened with individuals’ debt? Or, is it because people are simply *unemployable*? Too often, employability is used as a mediator that fails to address the extent to which deregulation and governments’ willingness to allow markets to govern themselves overlooks unequal access to job markets and is merely a performance indicator that

neglects to note ‘how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities’ (Morley 2001). Generally, though, employability has become increasingly defined as the ability to adapt to flexible patterns of employment and the ability to become lifelong learners (Hillage and Pollard 1999; Tamkin and Hillage 1999).

The demands for adaptability and self-management have actually been critically deemed an ‘ethic of employability’ for unemployed youth (Worth 2003). This ethic is increasingly evangelised in a judgemental tone that appears to be encroaching on lives of all age groups. This discussion is prevalent particularly in the context of rapid shifts in internal labour market patterns. Ireland has lost more than 10,000 jobs due to outsourcing of manufacturing and service work, and has also lost 200 professional accountancy jobs to Poland. In the USA, 2.1 million manufacturing jobs have been shipped overseas. McQuade and Maguire (2005) write about the impact that migration of all types of work will have on the employability of Irish nationals, and in particular the impact that this will have on its wealth of skilled and experienced manufacturing workers. People who constitute the Irish manufacturing workforce predominantly hold more higher and further education qualifications than British workers and this type of disparity may be part of the impetus for reskilling seen in the UK. Nonetheless, the issue remains the same. As long as capital investors seek out the cheapest sites of production, there will be competition for low cost workers at all levels of the game, and thus pressures will be placed on workers in developed, post-industrial economies to keep afloat with all levels of competition.

Debates across Europe in the discussion toward employability, particularly in the pursuit of the common European Higher Education Area as defined by the Bologna Process, urge member nations to integrate the teaching of skills into higher education curriculum that is not just vocationally driven, but involves ‘holistic development of the individual’ (Harvey and Bowers-Brown 2004/5). Globalisation and the rapid renewal of information and technology apparently mean that graduates must be capable of behaving with ‘flexibility to operation in a changing environment... graduate employability is not only the technical skills and competences to do the task, but, also, such endemic competences as are necessary to manage the modern labour market’ (EURASHE 2003). At the ‘Bologna Seminar on Employability in the Context of the Bologna Process’ in

2004, a range of stakeholders were challenged to work toward incorporating a model of employability to suit social and economic changes. ‘Society, the labour market and individuals demand from higher education to make a significant contribution in order to help achieving sustainable employability, including continuous self-development... Lifelong learning should be understood as a meaningful way of enhancing one’s employability’ (Bologna 2005).

Harvey and Bowers-Brown (2004/5) identify four broad areas of activity that higher education institutions have sought across Europe, for the development of students’ employability:

- Enhanced or revised central support (usually via the agency of careers services) for undergraduates and graduates in their search for work. To this can be added the provision of sector-wide resources.
- Embedded attribute development in the programme of study often as the result of modifications to curricula to make attribute development, job seeking skills and commercial awareness explicit, or to accommodate employer inputs.
- Innovative provision of work experience opportunities within, or external to, programmes of study.
- Enabled reflection on and recording of experience, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities, through the development of progress files and career management programmes (Harvey, L. and T. Bowers-Brown 2004/5).

These responsibilities are thus shared across various institutions and groups within society, in an increasingly coherent project toward producing employable subjects via education strategies in EU member states.

In the UK, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals as well as the Department for Education and Employment attempted to express employability in terms of ‘knowledge, skills and attributes that graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate that they have acquired in higher education’ (*Ibid.*). This preceded New Labour’s modern welfare reform project within the Budget 2007, entitled ‘Employment for All’, which is

in effect, a modified version of Keynes' vision for full employment that promises to deliver all the 'support [that citizens] need to find, retain, and progress in work, and adapt to a benefit from a global labour market' (UK Budget 2007). New Labour's principles of welfare reform were set forward in the Budget as two related goals:

- To ensure employment opportunity for all, giving everyone the opportunity to fulfil their individual, social and economic potential. Achieving this requires effective labour market policies set against a background of macroeconomic stability.
- To foster a world class skills base, equipping everyone with the means to find, retain and progress in work, and the ability to adapt to and benefit from a globalising labour market. Integrating the employment and skills agenda is central to achieving this.

These goals are underpinned by several key principles, including the relatively conservative mantra of 'rights and responsibilities', which apparently means that 'everyone should have the opportunity to work and for this to be effective, [reform] needs to be supported by access to appropriate training, information and advice... these responsibilities on the part of the government are matched by the responsibility of individuals, where possible, to prepare for, look for and engage in work' (*Ibid.*). So the government has adopted an eclectic blend of the human capital and work-first models, propped up with a terminology that fits with New Public Management ideas and agendas as private sector techniques begin to dominate public sector management in the name of neoliberal social progress. Labour's version of 'rights' thus become transformed to construct an outer frame of 'community' expectations and supposed needs rather than an outer frame that allows for alternative personalities/types of individuals with certain needs. Government programmes therefore are now aiming to prepare workers for international competition and have begun to focus on training people to achieve 'greater individual self-sufficiency over job stability and career advancement' (Worth 2003: 608).

In 2000, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned research into teaching and learning of employability skills and its relation

to graduate employment based on 34 departments in eight universities. Results demonstrated a positive association between graduate employment within six months of graduation and participation in sandwich placement during studies, or ‘participation in work experience’, as well as ‘employer involvement in course design and delivery’ (HEFCE 2003). In later years, HEFCE promised subsidies to Universities proving their commitment to an employability agenda. However, tensions lie within this agenda, because ‘employability’ in the context here is difficult to define, to measure, to develop, and furthermore, to transfer. Thus the ‘elusive quality of employability makes it a woolly concept to pin down’ (Cranmer 2006: 172).

Inherent to the employability campaign is a suggestion of a kind of link toward emancipation from the drudgeries of everyday work and production. Will workers become entitled to produce ‘works’ rather than ‘products’? Or is this campaign another feature of the ongoing survival of capitalism (Lefebvre 1973) in its invasion into people’s everyday lives? Is this characteristic of the subsumption of lives to capitalism? (Negri 2003). Is this campaign in fact, a criticism of life choices and personal decisions on the way to manage one’s personal time and space and energies? The latter appears to be the case, considering the recommendations toward private sector involvement into education, as work becomes less and less separate from accepted definitions of ‘life’ and the flexibilisation of work and of people’s lives.

### **Private sector involvement into education and skills development**

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills’ 2005 – 6 grant letter written to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) states that ‘we need a real determination to change the way training is designed and delivered to meet the priorities of employers. In the Skills Strategy, we set out the Government’s intention to rebalance public and private contributions to the cost of learning, so that they better reflect the benefits and financial returns to learners and employers’ (LSC 2006). Pressure has thus been applied to both employers and public sector institutions to cultivate an environment that will facilitate a

particular type of worker, who, regardless of skills level, will be able to survive unstable job markets.

The case of the UK is particularly relevant in debates that look for the most appropriate ways to prepare workforces for the globalising world and for ways to navigate re-skilling of a curiously under prepared labour market. As this scenario has unfolded, the Sector Skills Development Agency, soon to become the Commission for Employment and Skills, is the latest evidence of growing corporate power and strengthened networks between business and education with the intention of creating a workforce that is subject to the contemporary ‘demands’ of capital.

New Labour claims that its recent responses to the Leitch Report, and related shifts in policy, are a ‘demand side’ initiative (DIUS 2007: 7) which supposedly can uproot the leftovers of the dramatically deregulated market-driven supply side, monetarist economics that were definitive of Thatcher’s government. But New Labour should be careful in its liberal use of the term ‘demand side’, as from 1997 its policy has typically demonstrated a mixture of monetarist and Keynesian supply side aims, nicknamed the ‘third way’. The only adjustment that the present set of initiatives seems to make toward a demand side initiative is to actively invite employers and the private sector to become more involved in the articulation of the types of skill needed for its world class skills ‘ambition’ (*Ibid.*). In fact, monetarist ideas, which usually inform supply side policy, hold that the market should be free from government intervention and that private enterprise and entrepreneurialism should be encouraged. In particular these latter two ideas are embraced by New Labour, and so, a dedication to demand side policy is approximate at best.

In order to support claims toward a ‘demand’ side scheme, several institutions and programmes have been established by the New Labour government to arrange the involvement of the private sector into education and skills development. These institutions are part of an ‘Entrepreneurial Spirit [that] Sweeps the Nation’, which the Learning and Skills Council News Release site declared in July 2007. Entrepreneurialism is apparently something that can be cultivated in the classroom, and the learner worker with a spirit of individualism and self-improvement ideologies will be best served by the

following set of initiatives created in the supposed drive toward a demand side economy. This system is sought through the following objectives:

- Transform incentives of providers to react to employers and individuals rather than meeting supply side targets.
- Streamlining the Learning and Skills Council with the main role being to manage the Train to Gain programme (support to employers for training) and individual learning accounts (support to individuals for training).
- Funding should be routed through mechanisms which put effective purchasing power in the hands of the customers. [Demonstrating a] move away from funding the provider to funding the customer (Seex 2006).

Perhaps the most relevant institutions for the UK's contemporary skills campaign are those involved in the Skills for Business network, which is made of 25 Sector Skills Councils. These independent employer-led training and research organisations which also function as policy consultants for relevant policymakers (organisations which have become known as 'quangos'). The SSCs are funded, supported and monitored by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), and exist solely to 'boost the productivity and profitability of the UK'. The SSDA works to identify and tackle skills gaps on a sector by sector basis. 'In short', the Agency's website reads, 'we're trying to get the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time'.

In 2002, responsibility for the SSCs was handed over from the Department for Education and Skills to the SSDA, which has worked very hard to appropriate a 'powerful role for employers in the skills agenda across the UK' (Salmon 2002). Complementary proposals, beginning in the 1990s when the Labour Party Manifesto (1992) deemed Britain's future as a 'high skill, high wage and high technology' nation, included a National Investment Bank; enhanced allowances for related investment; increasing tripartite influence on economic policy; and a training revolution that was intended to contribute significantly to enhancing skill. These initiatives are indicative of the not-so-gradual shift from old labour to 'New Labour', which was originally a Labour party conference slogan used in 1994. This shift becomes definitive within the Party's

1997 manifesto rhetoric towards ‘personal prosperity for all’ and sets the stage for the ‘welfare-to-work budget’, which was expected to be ‘funded by a windfall levy on the excess profits of the privatised utilities, introduced in this Budget after we have consulted the regulators’ (Manifesto 1997). Over the following years, a range of policies were put into place to support these aims and to encourage increased partnerships between the private sector, the public sector, and the individual. In 2007, as an indication of these relationships, the *Universities UK* network boasts 131 UK University heads as members. This network highlights ‘knowledge transfer’ in response to the Government’s promise for an additional £450million (recurrent funding) for Universities’ establishments of community and industry links which would provide a ‘route to innovation and development at all levels’ and inspire a ‘renewed drive for entrepreneurialism and wealth creation’ (Universities UK).

Another recent justification of the restructuring of education and the corresponding involvement of industry as is seen by the introduction of SSCs only requires a hearing of Lord Leitch’s recent revelation that the UK, despite being the fifth richest economy in the world, is in danger of lagging significantly behind many of the advanced OECD nations. Productivity failure is depicted as a direct result of education and training failures (Leitch Report: 10). In this Report, the UK is ranked 17<sup>th</sup> on low skills, 20<sup>th</sup> in intermediate and 11<sup>th</sup> in high skills. The number of adults lacking functional numeracy has reached 7 million; and 5 million lack functional literacy. Skills are not just *a* driver in becoming an internationally competitive nation, but this research demonstrates that it is *the* driver, and thus, the reasoning goes, education must begin to respond directly to employers. The Report demanded a tangible policy response and the Government seems to have absorbed its advice whole heartedly, as is seen in the DIUS publication *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England* (DIUS World Class Skills).

In a formal semi-structured interview<sup>8</sup> I conducted with two policy consultants at the SSDA on the 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2007, it became clear that the precise reasoning for the formation of the Agency is to garner information directly from employers and to put pressure on employers to train staff to prepare the labour market for contemporary



changes. Perceived changes will reduce state input into telling the unemployed which skills they should have in order to go and get a job, as the SSDA, soon to be the Commission for Employment and Skills, is committed to getting this information from employers. According to the two consultants, the hardest workers to recruit in late 2006 were managerial, skilled trade, and sales and customer services staff. This could be a result of inadequate training, as can be gathered from the Leitch report, or as one employer told the CIPD, 'there's reluctance for the average British employee to change jobs... and do things they don't particularly like. There's more willingness among eastern Europeans to do these jobs' (Philpott and Davies 2006).

The consultants I spoke to at the SSDA also stated that some of the biggest skills gaps are in entry level jobs that do not require technical skills such as cleaners, and hence this has been linked to immigrant labour issues. Employers are saying they are not as concerned about qualifications as they are for qualities such as attitude, punctuality, and flexibility to change job positions. Even these qualities contract themselves within their own remit. Negri (2003) discusses the temporal features of the hegemony of neoliberalism generally, whereby capitalism requires the measure of time to prevail although subjectivities require space to expand in multiple 'times'. Furthermore, the very idea of time as confined to the restrictions of punctuality seems to contradict the basis for flexibility.

One of the SSDA consultants was furthermore wary of the flexibilisation debate for reasons to do with union rights, and asserted: 'I just have one question in my mind about flexibility, which reminds me of the Thatcher years, i.e. does flexibility mean a decline in union rights? Is that where we are going with flexibility?' Or, does flexibility refer to the ambiguities of the structure of social class in the contemporary economy? Brown and Hesketh note that that the way management see employability of workers is not an exact science, but is dependent more on a managerial 'science of gut feeling', combined with applicants' reputational and social capital, associated with class and background (Brown and Hesketh 2004). This is an important claim as Western job markets become increasingly unstable, and as flexibility is becoming increasingly accepted as the norm.

A crucial question in this discussion, of course, is who is going to pay for what, and what the implications of this relationship are.<sup>9</sup> Employers, the government, and workers alike are expected to participate in financing European-wide campaigns toward lifelong learning, as is stated in the Report of the Employment Taskforce chaired by Wim Kok, who was commissioned by the European Council held in Brussels in 2003 to carry out research on ‘employment related policy challenges and to identify practical reform measures that can have the most direct and immediate impact on the ability of Member States to implement the revised European Employment Strategy’ (European Employment Task Force 2003). In order to raise efficiency of investment in human capital, all EU Member States’ governments would be required to ‘lay the foundations for lifelong learning for all. Employers must take on responsibility to build employees’ skills throughout their career. Individual citizens must also invest in their own futures’.

The European Employment Taskforce Report goes on to make specific recommendations for each player in this recommended tripartite configuration of forces. Governments ‘must lay the foundations of lifelong learning systems that are accessible to all... a number of Member States have implemented this approach on a voluntary, compulsory or mixed basis through sectoral or regional basis’ (2003). Employers are then described as having more efficient means to provide relevant training, but the Report states, employers often do not provide this, due to the threat of poaching from other companies. This throws light on a completely contradictory element of the employability campaign, for, if workers are expected to become employable through lifelong learning, then, should they not also take advantage of the choices for employment that presumably will naturally open up to them? This paradox is exacerbated by the rise in temporary contracts, and employees who are successful at becoming ‘employable’ are surely justified in limiting their loyalty to employers who will not offer guaranteed jobs. Nonetheless, employees are told that ‘individuals will need to update their competences beyond initial education to maintain their employability and enhance their career prospects throughout a more diversified working life... individuals should therefore be encouraged to take more responsibility and participate financially in the development of their own human capital’ (*Ibid.*). So, putting these EU recommendations under scrutiny reveals that it is workers, or potential workers, who are given the most responsibility in

this division of labour, and their rights seem to stop at voluntary education schemes which require remuneration.

Colonisation of the everyday lives of workers is clearly occurring in this scenario, as workers are expected to embrace their own alienation from their work, and are told that the project of self-employability must become a part of their subjectivities and self worth. The 2004 UK Pre-Budget Report states in its 'Skills in the Global Economy' section that 'increasingly, job security relies upon employability rather than the classical notion of a job for life, and employability depends upon acquiring the skills that employers need. More widely, having skills can enable people to contribute to their communities and to aid personal fulfilment' (HM Treasury 2004: 2). As discussed here, elite reports on employability now include notions of citizenship, subjectivity, and self-fulfilment; ideas that infiltrate increasing areas of life. It was also in this 2004 report that Sandy Leitch, Chairman of the National Employment Panel and formerly Chief Executive of Zurich Financial Services was commissioned to conduct the independent review mentioned; the Leitch Review of Skills.

Leitch criticises the UK for its low skills base and claims that 'evidence shows that around one fifth of the UK's productivity gap with countries such as France and Germany results from the relatively poor skills of workers in the UK. If the UK had similar skills levels in these countries, its national income would be significantly higher' (Leitch Report: 29). Inevitably, there has been some dispute over the research findings in this Report, which emphatically suggest that companies need to become more involved in the training of their employees to basic skills levels, with actual penalties for businesses that refuse to comply to the 'skills pledge'. London First (2006) disputes the Report's claim of low productivity in comparison with France, saying that the average French worker does NOT produce 20 per cent more gross domestic product per hour than the average UK worker, and that French labour costs are higher than the British, as well as the typical situation of lower efficiency seen in French organisations. Gordon Brown has pointed out that in the past 10 years, the UK has risen from bottom to second in the measure of GDP in G7 nations 'so overall, we are not convinced that the UK actually has the productivity problem as described by Leitch' (Kingston 2007: 9). Nonetheless, this recent research demonstrates the urgency of the restructuring of education to suit business

demands, and the clear transformation of expectations on workers in the new world of work.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was quick to welcome Lord Leitch's ideas for how to integrate world-class skills into Britain's workforce. The Chair of the LSC, Chris Banks, remarked that 'This is a clear rallying call and Lord Leitch has set ambitious challenges to employers, learners and to those who work with them. The LSC is in full agreement that we need to seize this opportunity and ensure that the ambitions of being world-class in skills are met' (Learning and Skills Council 2006). The Council acknowledged in December 2006, directly after the Report was published, that they condoned the recognition of programmes and services operated through the Council, such as Train to Gain, Apprenticeships, Skills for Life, and the National Employer Service.<sup>10</sup>

On 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2007, at the direction of the Minister for Employment Caroline Flint and now Under Secretary of State for Skills David Lammy, the 'Employability Skills Programme' was released. The Programme is a group initiative by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Jobcentre Plus and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and the DIUS. The DIUS made a point of working on this particular project, in order to introduce a programme specifically designed to 'help people improve their skills, find a job and progress at work'. Lammy stated that:

It is important that low-skilled unemployed people have access to flexible training which gives them the skills that employers value, to help them get jobs, and progress in work. The Employability Skills programme will provide this access and will be hugely important for people trapped by a lack of skills between dead-end jobs and periods of unemployment. By assessing people's needs based on their skills levels they can be given structured learning programmes tailored to their needs that help them secure sustainable employment (Department for Work and Pensions press release 2007).<sup>11</sup>

Another parody that demonstrates the government's commitment to this policy rhetoric is the 'World Skills' competition. This event is held every two years and invites participants from 48 countries to compete on a variety of skills, which 'range from Milinery to Mechatronics and Web Design to Welding'. The event gives young participants a chance to become 'intensively trained by skilled mentors, thanks to the work of UK Skills'. The competition is immediately aligned with publicity for the 'Our

Future, it's in our hands' skills campaign initiative introduced in August 2007 as another response to Leitch:

*It's in Our Hands* is bringing the skills debate into front rooms and gyms, canteens and workplaces and really making people sit up and take notice. And it's a mark of the Government's commitment to one of the most important issues to face UK workers and businesses. But as we all know, the campaign will depend on many different partners all pulling together to achieve the same ambitions – increasing people's confidence, their skills base, their earning power and crucially, encouraging people and employers to engage in learning (Smith 2007).

So, Liz Smith, the Director of Unionlearn, writes that 'we all know' that this campaign depends on all of us, and on our listening and 'taking notice', whether we are having this debate in our front room, at the gym, having lunch in the canteen, or in our very workplaces. The skills campaign is only going to work if it becomes part of 'our' day to day lives, and it is our responsibility as Marxist social scientists to think carefully and critically about the impact this will have in subsumption of our lives to capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

Is this a story wreaked in ambivalence, and simply an obvious response to the process of over accumulation in one developed, post-industrial nation? Or, is the employability campaign in the UK part of a rising tide of projects that accompany and define the managed expansion of neoliberal capitalism? Does the rhetoric associated with imposition of entrepreneurial lifelong learning personal projects demonstrate a return to the pre-industrial craft labourer for whom Marx felt nostalgia? Or, in the context of neoliberal globalisation, does it reveal national insecurities for the future of workplaces and the labour market, resulting in an emphasis of responsibilities onto workers for self management? Is the appropriation of the craft worker, seen in government and employer ordained projects of workers' required 'learning' resulting in increased colonisation of the everyday, in a scenario that requires the blending of productive man/woman with the

political man/woman; in a relationship of renewed alienation? This campaign appears to be based in an intention toward increased colonisation of everyday lives.

An acute contradiction such as seen in the frame of everyday life is found within the reams of text available which informs education policy at the direction of the New Labour government whose policy has uncritically embraced EU encumbrances, and aggressively recommends a particular set of practices and duties for workers' lifelong survival in the increasingly unstable world of work. Perhaps the current rhetoric of employability reflects the state's fear of mass resistance such as was seen in the 1980s in response to Margaret Thatcher's almost complete destruction of manufacturing. Typically, management attempts to organise production in specific ways that they think will minimise the chance for resistance. New Labour's employability campaign, in its rational and seemingly logical promotion of education and learning as intimately linked with work, and with the resultant blurring of productive with political man, is a case of colonisation of the everyday of people who continue the struggle for survival in the neoliberal capitalist world. The implication is that those individuals who are fortunate enough to find employment in a rapidly flexibilising job market would then be held directly responsible for not only their own employability project, coupled with the drive toward 'lifelong learning', but also will be responsible for the prosperity of their nation on the globally competitive stage.

However, this is not just an event exclusive to Britain. It has become clear that employability is an idea that has become almost a matter of common sense to inform policy making across different locations globally. Respective national skills revolutions have occurred at a similar pace, and over a similar period of time (Moore 2009). This would not have surprised Meyer et al (1997), who note that despite distinct histories, organisations within varying nation-states appear to converge in more ways than they diverge. The objective nature of a dominant and somehow benevolent world culture would inevitably emerge from a desert island if given the chance. These sociologists admit that this world culture is a Western invention, with a limited admission for locally specific ways of expressing what they interpret to be global norms, and which these authors believe will ultimately be beneficial to all states. This claim supports a blind liberal internationalism.

Meyer is therefore not critical of the impact of related policy on the day to day lives of people who are most immediately impacted by any emerging convergence project. It is clear that Meyer and his colleagues celebrate convergence and assumes that it will be a Western-led project, whereas more recent research demonstrates the fallacy of this assumption. Different nations demonstrate different approaches to projects of capitalist development, but the impact seems to remain the same, that upon the most vulnerable, or workers. Harvey and Bowers-Brown (2004-5) have shown that while expectations placed on graduates may be similar across the world, various methods are attempted to ensure employability expectations will be met.

The implications of continued private involvement into the public sector supports a view toward continued retrenchment of a welfare state and in turn holds implications for workers and their own employment security in a country that has over time embraced a liberalisation and flexibilisation agenda with more gusto than any of its European neighbours. The Sector Skills Councils in particular have been implemented with a specific intention to manage the ‘failures’ of education to prepare an adequate labour force to suit contemporary market demands, with direct implications for citizen/workers today. This discussion brings the research into a contemporary framework of the Leitch Report, which places the UK into a global framework of skills development, and which challenges the government to invite the private sector to become more intimately involved with labour force preparation. What the Leitch Report means for the development of business/education relations and for the construction of a demand-side economy is still to be seen, but the report is very critical of the perceived employability of a workforce that has been insufficiently serviced by an education system that is now being dramatically restructured.

Lefebvre reminds us that the worker is a ‘whole’, but that ‘modern industrial labour both encloses and conceals the social character of all the work done in any one firm and the total labour in society (the growing socialisation of labour and the relations of production’ (1958/1991: 81). It has been claimed here that workers and the relations of production that affect their lives are most often overlooked and this must be addressed in order to give a complete picture of modernisation of institutions within the public sector in the UK and the corresponding worker preparation, ‘employability’ campaign.

Policymakers, business figures and union representatives in the developed West have discussed the transformation of what makes workers 'employable' after industrial revolutions have apparently given way to knowledge revolutions, and have externalised responsibility through reference to the 'global' as though space has also transformed to overcome any remains of the local. At tripartite discussions between employers, unions, and government representatives, leaders have attempted to shift responsibility for workers' security in a number of ways, as is demonstrated in unprecedented training initiatives. The insecurity and limited measurability of the globalised playing field have inspired governments to shift responsibility for workers' welfare to workers themselves, by way of the explicit creation of educational environments aimed at training workers towards a new genre of individual employability or entrepreneurialism of the self, which in effect allows ongoing retrenchment of the welfare state. A corresponding danger is that this kind of state activity can be aligned with other forms of repression and the constant expansion of everyday surveillance and intrusions into everyday life such as anti-terrorism measures that begin to increasingly invade into such activities as peaceful protest. However, Lefebvre also conjures everyday life in a depiction of 'fertile soil'. He notes that a 'landscape without flowers or magnificent woods may be depressing for the passer-by'; the landscape being a metaphor for the generally perceived view of everyday life. 'Flowers and trees should not make us forget the earth beneath, which has a secret life and a richness of its own' (*Ibid.*: 87). This optimism may allude to the richness of possibilities for resistance to such campaigns which gradually appear to dominate the micro-regularities of workers' everyday lives.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to anonymous policy advisors at the Sector Skills Development Agency who met with me for discussions/interviews on the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007 in South Yorkshire at their Headquarters.

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<sup>3</sup> 'The employment rate for people of working age [in the UK] was 74.1 per cent for the three months to December 2008, down 0.3 from the previous quarter and down 0.7 over the year. The number of people in employment for the three months to December 2008 was 29.36 million, down 45,000 over the quarter and down 37,000 over the year. While there has been a fall over the quarter of 78,000 people in full-time employment, the number of people in part-time employment has increased by 33,000' (UK National Statistics 2009).

<sup>4</sup> This is seen in a collaborative Employability Skills Programme, which includes an 'Employability Award' that is granted to lucky Jobcentre Plus 'customers' who can demonstrate 'the skills, behaviours and attitudes that employers want to see in someone they recruit' (DWP 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See Gorz 1999 and Arendt 1958 for discussions of the meaning of 'work' in the postindustrial context, which is not the same thing as 'labour'. 'The notion of work [travail] is an invention of modernity or, more exactly, of industrial capitalism' (Gorz 1994, 53). Indeed, work only becomes work as we know it today in the context of commodity production and as after people did not toil, drudge, construct, prepare (ibid.), or attend to subsistence production in villages where there was no measure for production that could be used for all output and for all types of workers, as management began to think during the Fordist era. Hannah Arendt's distinction between labour and work is reflected in Gorz's insights. These authors are not ashamed to point out that Marx and Marxists paid/pay scant attention to the difference between manual and intellectual work, and focus on relations of production in a way that does not allow for historical updates. Rose points out that 'in nineteenth century capitalism - in mine, mill, and manufactory- work seems easy to picture in these terms. But over the course of the present century, types of work and conditions of working have radically changed' (Rose 1989, 56). This is particularly the case in the 21st century, during which time we see the rise of postindustrial forms of labour and organisations of work, and increased flexibilisation and precarious forms of labour on the rise. In earlier times, that which was performed in the household was the basis for survival, and 'work' was considered a very negative, intrusive, and annoying matter to be avoided. Perhaps this view is romantic and gendered in a way that can no longer be accepted in the feminist line of reasoning. But it allows some insight into the transformation of how activities can be perceived in the different historical periods.

<sup>6</sup> The reliance on private vice that is necessary to become and remain competitive on the job market for the supposed maintenance of public virtue is encouraged by the 'Private Vices by the dextrous Management of a skilful Politician [which] may be turned into Publick Benefits' (Mandeville 1714: 369).

<sup>7</sup> In this piece, Williams discusses the way in which the Australian government did not permit the use of character or competency specific terminologies in the compilation of personal skills related policy but that over time, worker subjectivities became increasingly insinuated within proposed policy, contrasting earlier regulation.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewing is an appropriate method for generating material when a study is contextualised by the meaning of particular phenomena to participants, and to gain information, as I did in these interviews, interviewees' perceptions of events or situations relate to themselves. While there is no such thing as a 'perfect' interview, Bell and Encell wrote in the early stages of incorporation of interviewing as a research tool in the social sciences that 'social research is... infinitely more complex, messy, various and much more interesting' than quantitative analyses could portray. Quantitative methods were not used here because I did not intend to compose a method for measuring other similar cases, but chose to provide a case study which demonstrates international influences to one nation and subjective interpretations from various sources regarding how this has occurred.

Meta-categories of interviews are divided into two classifications: structured, and semi-structured. It is not always obvious how to distinguish between the categories but choosing between categories will be affected by the information that a researcher seeks to obtain. For example, a structured interview might be chosen if

the researcher wants to identify facts, or to test a formal hypothesis, where data can be quantified. Feminist geographers, including Oakley (1981, 1998, 1999), Mies (1983), and McRobbie (1982), discuss different methods of data collection critiqued this methodology in the 1980s and 1990s, because subjectivity is not a considered factor within premised and mechanical sets of expectations. Structured interviews do not allow the interviewer to establish a rapport with interviewees who themselves were constructed as passive agents. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, are appropriate when the researcher aims to identify opinions or beliefs of interviewees, or when s/he wants to establish how outcomes have been reached, or decisions made.

Over time, post-positivist interviewing methods have become increasingly common (Barnes 1995). Interviews moving beyond positivist nature of structured formulae allow researchers to consider the subjectivity of participants in the context being investigated. These types of interviews look at details of discussions rather than applying a coding method, as is the technique of content analysis, and encourage an interviewer to get feedback from the participant, to ensure that the information obtained is accurate or appropriate. Overall, semi-structured interviews empower the participant rather than isolating the roles of the interviewer and the interviewed to hierarchical and restricting roles.

<sup>9</sup> Typically, in cases of increasing unemployment, as is happening in the UK, the state will pay for training, and if a company refuses to pay for training generally the state may impose increased taxes onto the company as an incentive to cooperate. In 2007, there were two industrial boards in the UK that place a training levy onto the sectors of construction, and engineering. A third levy was predicted as well, to be imposed within the film industry in order to maintain talent in the huge media companies such as the BBC, Sky, and Granada, which rely on microbusinesses for talent and only make voluntary contributions to the Sector Skills Council. The Train to Gain programme was not completely providing the skills needed within this sector, so the question of information regarding what is needed in terms of skills, as well as a clear message for who is paying for what training, needs to be made clear. Otherwise, the danger is that the costs fall onto individuals to maintain a personal project for employability, which functions to place increased responsibilities onto workers rather than provide safety nets in the increasingly unstable job market.

<sup>10</sup> The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), which was previously part of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), responded to Leitch in July 2007 with a 75 page report entitled 'World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England'. The report condoned Leitch's recommendations and pursued 'world class ambition' in the form of specific actions to be taken in the following few years. The Departments of HM Government set out this 'Plan for England', with the DIUS as its scribe. A shift in attitudes and aspiration was needed, the report claimed, 'not only in Government, but also within workplaces, schools, colleges, universities and society itself' (DIUS 2007: 3). The plan encourages employers and individuals to make a 'major new investment of time, effort and money that far exceeds the Government's direct contribution' (*Ibid.*: 4) in a 'demand-led' approach (*Ibid.*: 7).

<sup>11</sup> The Employability Skills programme has been designed as a 'package of learning' which provides basic skills, paired with employability qualifications. Jobcentre Plus customers have been promised chances to:

- Enhance their employability skills
- Improve their literacy, language and numeracy skills
- Secure and sustain employment
- Ensure that their learning journey continues and is supported once they gain employment [*italics added for emphasis*] (Department for Work and Pensions press release 2007).



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