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UK CORVET Report Jan 2012

UK VET System

The UK Vocational Education and Training (VET) has evolved considerably over the past few years and seen dramatic changes during the 19th and 20th Centuries. Since the famous speech by James Callaghan in 1976 at Ruskin College, Oxford successive governments have aimed to improve quality, increase diversity and make institutions more accountable to students, parents, employers and taxpayers.

VET (or better still Skills Training) has had a prominent position within the UK since historical times. The Celts (500 BC) brought with them the knowledge of metallurgy, iron melting and foundry together with jewellery making skills. Successive migrants brought other skills developing the country into a prominent trading centre since early times. For example, Romans (43 AD) developed engineering and construction skills, Anglo-Saxons (450) transferred agricultural and farming know-how and the Normans (1066) established the legal and administrative skills base much of which is still evident in the UK.

While the education and training systems of England, Wales and Northern Ireland are broadly similar, the education system in Scotland has always been a completely separate system with its own laws and practices. Differences in education and training across Britain are particularly marked in the school systems. At the higher education level and for training, this is less so. This report focuses on the issues related to education in England.

By age, the education and training systems are divided into three main sectors:

- **School Education** from age five to age sixteen
- **Further Education** age sixteen onwards
- **Higher Education** age eighteen onwards



Compulsory education is from age five to sixteen and by 2015 this compulsory education age will be increased to eighteen, giving children free education for whole twelve years.

Maintained (or state) schools:

- receive funding from the local authorities (LAs)
- are required to deliver National Curriculum (implemented in 1988)
- are subject to the same system of inspection
- manage their own budgets
- select and manage their own staff (including support staff and head teacher).

But there are differences between them relating to ownership of land and buildings, the constitution of the governing body, whether they are responsible for deciding admissions policy and whether they are the legal employer of their staff. Schools fall into the following legal categories:

- community schools
- voluntary aided (VA) and voluntary controlled (VC) schools - typically faith schools
- foundation schools

Around a third (1/3) of primary schools (age 6 - 11) are Faith Schools and at secondary level the number is greatly reduced. Most of the Faith Schools are Church Schools or Roman Catholic faith though over the past two decades other faith schools have also started in some cities and communities. Independent Schools, funded by parental fees, do not have to follow the National Curriculum and around 7% of the school age children in England attend such schools.

Schools by Age Range:

Primary schools		
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	age 0-5	Nursery and reception
KS1	age 5-7	Y1, Y2
KS2	age 7-11	Y3, Y4, Y5, Y6
Secondary schools		
KS3	age 11-14	Y7, Y8, Y9
KS4	age 14-16	Y10, Y11



and often also:		
KS 5/Sixth form	Age 16-18+	Y12, Y13

Vocational Education subjects are introduced at Key Stage 3 or 4 depending upon the school and its capacity in terms of staff and their specialism. At post-16 more vocational subjects may be available and students can take these either at the sixth form in schools or colleges of further education. Qualifications gained at age 16 include single subject GCSEs and although 5 GCSEs or more with A star to C grade is a benchmark of achievement currently there is no requirement to 'graduate'.

Within the state sector Further Education (FE) Colleges there are a number of common key features:

- The large size and scope e.g. several thousand students ranging from school leavers to older people - in most colleges more than half are over the age of 21.
- The breadth of provision e.g. from basic literacy and numeracy up to technician level courses - and degree level work in some subjects.
- The variety of students e.g. from young full-time students to part-time adult learners working in industry, and those taking classes for leisure.
- Facilities for work-based learning e.g. simulated work environments such as restaurants, hair salons, travel agencies run by students, as well as classrooms, workshops and open learning centres with computer suites.
- The customer focus and links with the local community.

Most FE colleges are in the state sector. These colleges differ in size and emphasis but basically all offer the same kind of curriculum and nationally recognised qualifications. They choose their own names e.g.:

- Colleges of Further Education
- Colleges of Technology
- Colleges known for specialist subjects
- Colleges of agriculture and/or horticulture
- Sixth Form Colleges
- Tertiary Colleges which combine the functions of a sixth form college and an FE College
- Colleges which also offer higher education courses

Increasingly a number of Private Colleges have also been set up to cater for learners from overseas countries such as Asia and Africa. These colleges offered various professional qualifications and registered with the British Accreditation Council (BAC). These qualifications included Vocational subjects offered by City & Guilds and other such independent examining boards which are all monitored and inspected for quality by QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) for Higher Education and Ofsted (Office for Standards in



Education). Due to the purge by UKBA (UK Border Agency) for Immigration control many of these unscrupulous colleges have closed down.

Debate about Vocational Education in England is an on-going event between politicians and experts. Since the famous speech of 1976, various initiatives have taken place and vocationalisation has been introduced in many areas to make UK as competitive as possible. This started with the TVEI (Technical Vocational Education Initiative) in 1980s and then the introduction of GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) being offered in many subjects such as Travel and Tourism, Business, Retail, Hair dressing and Health and Social Care. These have now been superseded by the Diplomas introduced 2010 where the learners spend about a third (1/3) of their time in employment relevant to their qualification. These diplomas were introduced with the specific help of various industry sectors such as the Hospitality, Health & Social Care, Retail and Banking and Finance.

Although there has been progress made within the field of VET, there is still a long way for UK to go if it wants to catch up with other nations and regain some of its earlier competitive advantage. Experts and various reviews (Leitch 2004; Skills Commission Report 2011; Wolf Report 2011) have all pointed in the direction of more funding and emphasis on VET to promote the next generation of skilled labour in UK. As Peter Jones, entrepreneur and Dragons Den judge said “both Business Studies and French teach skills that are vital for UK industry” (2010).

An analysis of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) qualifications commissioned for Skills Sector Commission, found that the English further education and skills sector is not producing enough technicians. A plan for growth requires a new strategic focus on technician education and training - a plan for technicians, a cross-departmental government strategy for STEM. (Skills Commission, 2011). Professor Alison Wolf, Kings College, London is clear about how vocational education for 14- to 19-year-olds can be improved in order to promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher level education and training routes. Key recommendations in the Wolf Report (2011) include:

- incentivising young people to take the most valuable vocational qualifications pre-16, while removing incentives to take large numbers of vocational qualifications to the detriment of core academic study
- introducing principles to guide study programmes for young people on vocational routes post-16 to ensure they are gaining skills which will lead to progression into a variety of jobs or further learning, in particular, to ensure that those who have not secured a good pass in English and mathematics GCSE continue to study those subjects
- evaluating the delivery structure and content of apprenticeships to ensure they deliver the right skills for the workplace
- making sure the regulatory framework moves quickly away from accrediting individual qualifications to regulating awarding organisations
- removing the requirement that all qualifications offered to 14- to 19-year-olds fit within the Qualifications and Credit Framework, which has had a detrimental effect on their appropriateness and has left gaps in the market



- enabling FE lecturers and professionals to teach in schools, ensuring young people are being taught by those best suited.

The report speaks about the need to:

- *‘. . . . tell citizens the truth. It is crucial to provide young ‘people with accurate and useful information, so that they can make decisions accordingly. For young people, which vocational course, qualification or institution they choose really can be life- determining. 14-19 education is funded and provided for their sakes, not for the sake of the institutions who provide it.’*

The current education secretary, Michael Gove, has announced the opening of the vocational schools in a 2011 Commons statement which also confirmed that 63 free schools are expected to open in England.

These new wave of comprehensive schools backed by firms including the developers of the BlackBerry, Toshiba, Boeing and Rolls Royce will open in September 2012 as part of a new generation of vocational schools in which businesses will help shape the curriculum.

Known as university technical colleges, the schools include one in Newcastle with a focus on engineering; one in Liverpool, specialising in life sciences and backed by the pharmaceutical firm Novartis, and one in Plymouth backed by the Royal Navy and Babcock, which manufactures defence equipment.

Research in Motion, which developed the BlackBerry smartphone, will be one of the business partners of a school in Buckinghamshire, which is also being backed by Hewlett Packard and Cisco.

The schools, for 14- to 19-year-olds, are sponsored by universities, and the firms will help provide training that meets their requirements for skilled workers. Perhaps finally UK will see the type of VET systems present in neighbouring countries and provide emphasis to Skills and further Lifelong Learning goals of its future generations.

