



A Review of the UK's Vocational Education and Training (VET) Provisions

MariePRO Project

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Introduction

The UK's Vocational Educational Sector developed independently of central (or devolved) government control. There is no central curriculum of standardised course requirements such as course length, course credit, course entry qualification etc. Without this centralised control the Vocational Education Sector has grown large and confusing to navigate for pupils, teachers and policy makers alike.

After the rise to power of New Labour in 1997 the focus in the UK remained primarily on the 'academic' route to qualifications and employment with the target of sending 50% of young people in the UK to University each year. Significant progress has been made in achieving this goal and the current government remains committed to improving academic education routes with new reforms, including the creation of the EBacc to GCSE Level.

However since the economic downturn in 2008/9 the Government's attention has turned more fully on to reviewing and reforming the UK's vocational education - now known as Technical and Professional Education (TPE) sector. As well as a renewed focus on providing more, and better quality apprenticeships across the UK, the Government have commissioned several reports to review the sector and in 2016 published the first Government 'white paper' on Skills in over a decade. In 2011 Professor Lady Alison Wolf's report in Vocational Education in UK schools found significant shortfalls and a further review published in April 2016 by a panel chaired by Lord Sainsbury has recommended radical changes to the UK's TPE sector.

This report will outline what the current TPE provisions are in the UK, developments that are happening in the current system and the recommendations that have been made by Lord Sainsbury which the Government plans to implement from 2017 onwards.

Current Vocational Qualifications

According to the registry of qualifications held by the UK's qualifications regulator - Ofqual - there are approximately 13,000 Vocational/Technical/Professional qualifications currently available to students across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Education is a devolved policy area in Scotland). The register can be reviewed here:

<http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Search?category=Qualifications&sort=-None&filters%5B0%5D=status%2BAvailable%20to%20learners>

These qualifications are not subject to government control and have no standardised teaching or assessment methods. They are available in a very broad range of subjects including, but not limited to, Sport Leisure and Recreation, Manufacturing Technologies, Building Construction, Business Management Languages and so on.

The qualifications are designed and accredited by over 160 organisations across the UK including:

- Awarding Bodies
 - City and Guilds
 - Pearson / BTEC
- Charitable Organisations
 - VTCT (Vocational Training Charitable Trust)



- NOCN - National Open College Network
- Professional/Industry Bodies
 - CICM (Chartered Institute of Credit Management)
 - AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians)

This means that often very similar qualifications can be in competition with each other in order to try and gain students and providers thus making it more difficult for providers and pupils to make right choices or to know which qualifications are truly of value for the occupation and industry they wish to become involved in.

The qualifications on the Ofqual register range from Level 1 through to Level 8 in the UK's Regulated Qualification Framework (<https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/compare-different-qualification-levels>). The qualifications are worth anything between 0 - 420 credits and can be studied in schools, academies, colleges, and Universities. The qualifications are delivered through either 'taught' approaches or an 'apprentice' approach - depending on the individual qualification requirements or the colleges/schools preferred delivery method.

This is an incredibly confusing and daunting landscape for 16+ years olds to navigate and then be expected to make informed choices which will affect their study pathway and career. Young people often struggle to know which qualification is best for them or the career path they want to pursue, for instance a building engineer has to choose between around 500 courses to find the one best suited for their desired occupation and which will be accepted by potential employers (Nick Boules MP, Skills Minister, 8th July 2016, Technical education overhaul unveiled by Skills Minister, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/technical-education-overhaul-unveiled-by-skills-minister>)

Current Vocational Qualification Providers

Although the approximately 13,000 Vocational / Technical / Professional qualifications are designed by over 160 bodies they are usually delivered by one of 4 types of organisations:

- Secondary Schools
- General Further Education Colleges
- University Technical Colleges
- Universities

Schools

There are several types of secondary schools in the UK:

- State Schools
- Independent Schools (Private schools)
- Academies
- Religious Schools

Secondary schools are required to teach pupils up to age 18. All schools are required to offer GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at levels 1 - 2 (level is dependent on the grade achieved) when students reach 16 and to offer A-Level (Advanced Level) or equivalent qualifications at level 3 at age 18.

The government, and therefore the National Curricula, are involved in State Schools - all other schools can choose to follow the National Curricula but it is not a requirement. For example state



schools (which follow the national curriculum) are required to offer national qualifications - usually GCSEs. The compulsory national curriculum subjects are the 'core' and 'foundation' subjects.

| | | |
|---------------|---------------------|--|
| Core Subjects | Foundation subjects | Schools must also offer at least one subject from each of these areas: |
| English | computing | arts |
| maths | physical education | design and technology |
| science | citizenship | humanities |
| | | modern foreign languages |

Schools must also provide [religious education \(RE\) and sex education](#) at key stage 4.

<https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/key-stage-3-and-4>

Whereas non-state schools such as academies, independent schools and religious schools are only required to offer a curriculum and qualifications that are "balanced and broadly based, and includes English, mathematics and science" <https://fullfact.org/education/academies-and-maintained-schools-what-do-we-know/>

Any school (state or non-state) can choose to offer additional Vocational / Technical or Professional Qualifications to their students alongside the academic subjects. The Vocational / Technical / Professional Qualifications offered should come from the Ofqual register of qualifications in order to ensure a quality qualification in being studied. The qualification can range in level, credit amount and course length in order to best match the individual school delivering the course. Many schools are taking advantage of this as is shown by the number of pupils aged 14-16 taking vocational courses in English schools which is estimated to have been between 630,000 to 800,000 in 2012 with 999,501 vocational qualifications awarded, 85 per cent of which were at level 2 (GCSE) (Will Cook,

05.2013, Institute for Public Policy Research, **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION** IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS PROTECTING OPTIONS FOR PRE-16 PUPILS).

However it is down to each individual school what provision they make to provide Vocational / Technical / Professional Qualifications. As such it becomes part of the 'post code lottery' whether a child will attend a school that offers Vocational / Technical / Professional qualifications.

Furthermore, not only is the schools sector provision of Vocational / Technical / Professional qualifications patchy across the UK but the lack of clear Vocational / Technical / Professional pathways for students post-16 has been blamed for why the UK only has stronger vocational progression post-16 rates in the EU than Ireland, Cyprus and Greece and is well below the EU average progression rate (Will Cook, 05.2013, Institute for Public Policy Research,

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS PROTECTING OPTIONS FOR PRE-16 PUPILS).



With education now being mandatory until age 18 ([Education and Skills Act 2008](#)) it is hoped that these pathways to providing higher level Vocational Qualifications for post-16's can be built and/or improved in schools and colleges across the UK.

General Further Education Colleges (including Sixth Form Colleges)

Post-16 colleges across the UK offer a mix of academic and vocational / technical / professional courses. There are currently 379 colleges in the UK which educate pupils between 16-19 years of age. This includes 39 University Technical Colleges, described in more detail below, which educate pupils aged 14-18.

General Further Education Colleges (GFE Colleges) offer post-16 education in a mix of academic and Vocational routes. GFE Colleges are the traditional route into non-University Further Education (FE) in the UK, as such they are either the 'follow on' point for pupils who studied Vocational / Technical / Professional Qualifications in their secondary school, or they can be the first contact a pupil will have with studying a Vocational / Technical / Professional Qualification.

GFE Colleges are less hindered than schools as they have no government mandated requirements about the level, length or industry type of qualifications they must offer. They are free to design their educational offer based on what their resources can deliver and the needs of their local communities. As such the GFE Colleges can either specialise in offering certain types of qualifications, or they can offer a very broad range of qualifications (both academic and vocational) covering many sectors.

All vocational / technical / professional qualifications offered by GFE Colleges should be registered on Ofqual's qualifications register to ensure a quality qualification is being delivered, however as awarding bodies themselves this is less of a requirement for GFE Colleges as they can design their own qualifications.

These Vocational qualifications can be delivered in a 'taught' format for through an apprenticeship and can cover anywhere between qualification Level 1 to 8 and be worth up to 420 credits.

The 'taught' format' is where the qualification is lecturer led and content taught primarily in the classroom and assessed through exams and coursework. This is the more traditional method of teaching in the UK but it has been falling out of favour in recent years with much more focus on practical learning and 'real world' experience.

The apprentice format is managed in partnership between the college and a specific employer with guidance and support from the National Apprenticeship Service and Skills Funding Agency. The Apprenticeship model has been gaining popularity in recent years and is based around the pupil being in work or training for a minimum of 30 hours per week. The pupil will either be working at their 'sponsoring company' in a real position with real responsibilities, or they will be in college learning the theory and taking the exams to gain the formal qualification. The apprentice is paid for their hours and the government sponsors the company to help pay for the training fees. Apprenticeships are a devolved matter for Scotland but the qualifications achieved are broadly consistent across the UK with minor regional differences. There are 4 different qualification levels an apprentice can study for depending on the requirements of the company:



| Apprenticeship Name | Apprenticeship Level | Equivalent educational level |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Intermediate | 2 | 5 GCSE passes at grades A* to C |
| Advanced | 3 | 2 A level passes |
| Higher | 4,5,6 and 7 | Foundation degree and above |
| Degree | 6 and 7 | Bachelor's or master's degree |

<https://www.gov.uk/apprenticeships-guide/overview>

University Technical Colleges

These are a new addition to the UK's education structure. Currently there are 39 University Technical Colleges (UCT's) across the UK with an aim for there to be more than 50 by 2018 (<http://www.utcolleges.org/>).

UTC's are specifically designed to cater for around 600 students aged 14-18 yrs. Each UTC will focus specifically on a technical or specialist subject e.g. Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies, Product Design, Digital Technologies etc. The pupils will study and gain Vocational qualifications in the colleges' specialist area alongside their mandated academic subjects at GCSE level (e.g. Maths, English and Science), in this case they are similar to other non-state secondary schools.

However UTC's differ from other non-state schools (academies, independent schools and religious schools) because they are founded as colleges and are governed by 'partner' businesses and Universities who job it is to help design and deliver a curriculum and qualifications that are relevant, meet employer needs and include a range of 'real world' training activities, projects and course work. There is also the opportunity for some students to register as an apprentice once they reach 16 years of age.

All vocational / technical / professional qualifications offered by UTC's should be registered on Ofqual's qualifications register to ensure a quality qualification is being delivered, however as awarding bodies themselves this is less of a requirement for Colleges as they can design their own qualifications.

Universities

Universities primarily offer academic qualification at level 5 and above from the regional qualification framework. However Universities are becoming involved in the Vocational Qualification sector through their provision of Continuous Professional Development qualifications (CPD) for adults in work, and also through 'folding in' additional qualifications to their degree programs.

Traditionally Universities design their degree qualifications and then search for links and equivalencies in vocational qualifications in order to add additional value to their degree, for instance for many years the University Undergraduate degrees could be split by year so that if a student left after year 1 they would still receive a Higher National Certificate (HNC, level 4), after two years they would receive a Higher National Diploma (HND, Level 5) and after the full 3 years a Bachelor's Degree (BA / BSc, Level 6). In recent years this has shifted to Universities offering Foundation Degrees (Level 5) to students to study in their first year and then depending on their grades students can progress to the full degree course.



As well as providing their own vocational / technical / professional qualifications (Foundation Degrees, CPD qualifications) Universities also try to match their degree programmes to already existing qualifications e.g. Accountancy Degrees ensure a student gains exemptions from specific modules when studying for their professional qualification.

However the primary purpose of Universities remains to provide academic qualifications and research, any provision of vocational, technical or professional qualifications is at the sole direction of the University. All vocational / technical / professional qualifications offered by Universities should be registered on Ofqual's qualifications register to ensure a quality qualification is being delivered, however as awarding bodies themselves this is less of a requirement for Universities as they can design their own qualifications.

Lord Sainsbury's Report

As described in this report the vocational education landscape in the UK has been left to develop into a very confusing system of over 13,000 qualifications offered at a range of age levels and by multiple providers; many of which are a 'post code lottery' as to which qualifications you can access.

The government has acknowledged that the sector needs to be reformed and simplified in order to enhance accountability and standards. To this end in April 2010 the government established Ofqual (The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) to regulate qualifications in England. Ofqual is an independent, non-governmental, department which answers directly to Parliament.

The government also commissioned two reports, the first by Professor Lady Alison Wolf which found significant shortcomings in the school provisions of Vocational Qualifications, and the second by a panel chaired by Lord Sainsbury which reported in April 2016 and recommended significant reforms of the whole Vocational Education System in the UK.

Lord Sainsbury's report concludes that the current system in the UK is not fit for purpose and that a new system should be developed based on found key principles:

- (i) "While Government has to design the overall system, industry experts must lay down the knowledge and skills, and methods of assessment, for each qualification. "
- (ii) "The system should provide young people with clear educational routes which lead to employment in specific occupations, and must be sufficiently clear and simple that career advisers can easily explain to young people what options they have. "
- (iii) "Short, flexible bridging provisions should be developed to enable individuals who come to believe they have made the wrong decision to move between the academic and technical education options in either direction, and to support adults returning to study. "
- (iv) "Individuals who are not ready to access a technical education route at age 16 (or older if their education has been delayed) should be offered a flexible transition year tailored to their prior attainment and aspirations. "

(April 2016, Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education)

As such a summary of the recommendations in Lord Sainsbury's report are:

- The government should design 'technical' options to incorporate into the school system. The new technical options will develop skills between levels 2 - 5 in the regional qualifications framework with industry and employer standards at their heart. This will be an end to the



current 'mixed' provision of academic and vocational education and ensure distinct and separate pathways are established.

- There should be a simple national structure in place to allow pupils to move between the academic and vocational pathways.
- There should be a clear set of 15 'technical options' for schools and colleges to offer and for pupils to choose from. Each option should be matched to an industry where there is a substantial technical knowledge or skill requirement. This means pupils have a clear path to follow: they study a technical option that matches their interest or career plan, gain a qualification, and then enter a specific occupation or industry.
- Each 'technical option' should be of minimum 2 years duration and start with a common core and then further 'specialised' modules are provided for students specialising into certain sectors or occupations within a wider industry.
- Upon completing a 2 year college based (not apprenticeship based) 'technical option' each student should have access to a structured high quality work placement. Upon successful completion of the work placement the student gains their qualification
- Minimum achievement levels for Maths and English should be both 'entry' and 'exit' requirements in each 'technical option'.
- All 15 'technical options' should be able to be studied in college / schools or gained through an Apprenticeship.
- The Institute of Apprenticeships should be given more autonomy and governing power to monitor standards and establish the relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours that must be acquired in each of the 15 new 'technical options'.
- Remove the current competition aspect of vocational qualifications (similar qualifications from different bodies competing with each other). The government should adopt a licensing approach with qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 only authorised and awarded by a single national awarding body.
- The institute of Apprenticeships should maintain a clear register outlining the new progression routes and approved qualifications from levels 4 upwards to ensure a single source of information and way for providers and students to compare qualifications.
- Any government funding to colleges and schools for vocational education should be limited to those students studying courses registered on the institute of Apprenticeships register, thus ensuring standardisation and quality across the UK.
- Government should adopt the Gatsby Benchmarks to establish a common national structure and standard for careers advice in schools and the National Careers Service should be reviewed.
- Government should embed careers advice at a much younger age in schools to ensure awareness of each of the 15 'technical options' and their matched industries and occupations.

(April 2016, Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education)

New Post-16 Skills Plan

In response to the wholesale reforms proposed in Lord Sainsbury's report the government has produced the first Government 'White Paper' on skills for more than a decade. Published by the Department for Education and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills in July 2016 the 'Post-16 Skills Plan' outlines how the government intends to implement Lord Sainsbury's reforms.



Development Paper

The 'Post-16 Skills Plan' states that the pressing challenge to the UK educational system is that we " need more highly skilled people, trained effectively, to grow the economy and raise productivity, and ensure prosperity and security for individuals. " As such the government unequivocally accepted the recommendations contained in Lord Simsbury's report (where the recommendations can be implemented within existing budgets of course).

The Government's ambition is for young people to receive a solid grounding in the academic subjects and gain academic qualifications until aged 16. At Age 16 each student will have the choice how to proceed with their remaining 2 years of mandatory education - either through an academic route to achieving A-Levels and a University Degree, or to study one of 15 'Technical Options' leading to an industry relevant Technical or Professional Qualification. The qualification standards for the 'Technical Options' will be set by industry - what they need in an employee - and then the awarding bodies must work backwards to design a relevant high quality qualification.

Each 'Technical Option' will group together occupations or Industries where there are shared requirements to form a 'common core' of training in each 'option' and then specific occupations will have specialised modules or training.

The institute for Apprenticeships will be responsible for standard setting and quality management across all Technical and Professional Qualifications and Providers. This ensure a single set of national qualifications will be approved for delivery and therefore improve consistency, transparency and standardisations across the UK.

An indication of the timetable to implementing these recommendations is laid out in Chapter 8 of the 'Post-16 Skills Plan' but the full timetable is set to be published later in 2016. The government's top priority is to establish and begin delivery of the 15 'Technical Options' with additional reforms happening alongside and after this implementation. The intention is for the first 'Technical Options' to be ready for delivery by September 2019 with all 15 of the 'options' available by 2022.

In order to establish these 'Technical Options' the first action of the government will be reform and widen the powers of the Institute of Apprentices to transform it into an autonomous employer led organisation who can liaise with industry to set the standards and requirements for each of the 'technical options' - so that they can be developed in full. The government intends for the new Institute of Apprenticeships to be running by April 2017. Until all relevant legislation has been passed by Parliament to give the Institute of Apprenticeships these new powers the responsibility for setting the standards for these 'technical options' will temporarily remain with the government.

A local area review in England will be completed by 2017 and all recommendations are expected to be implemented by 2019 in order to update the funding models for TPE in England so as to meet the new system.

Conclusion

The UK's Vocational education and qualification system has become confusing and unwieldy with over 13,000 competing qualifications from over 160 different awarding bodies and delivered at multiple age levels by multiple delivery partners. Vocational qualifications have also often taken a



'back seat' to the preferred academic route which reflected the UK's move towards a service economy and away from more traditional manufacturing and industrial roles.

However as the UK economy is shifting towards high-Value Manufacturing and Digital Technologies, and the government aims to 'rebalance' the economy, there have been significant developments within the Vocational System, such as the reforming of Apprenticeships and the establishment of University Training Colleges.

The government is pleased with these changes but intends to take them further through wholesale reforms of what is now called Technical and Professional Education. These reforms are designed to ultimately lead to a single unified governing body and a single national set of qualifications, study pathways and standards (except where education is a devolved in Scotland). These are radical reforms and will streamline the TPE sector for young people. The goal is that these reforms will lead to clear and distinct pipelines for industry to become involved with and recruit from. This will allow young people to see the connection between the Technical and Professional Qualification they are studying and jobs in the real world - a link that is so often missing in the current system.

These reforms will be phased in and the Technical and Professional Education sector as a whole will be undergoing significant changes for years to come, as such the full impact of these reforms will not be measurable for a decade or more.

Appendix A

Lord Sainsbury's report in full: [Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education](#)

Appendix B

Department for Education and Department for Business Innovation and Skills July 2016 Posy-16 Skills Plan in full: [Post-16_Skills_Plan](#)