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**IN SEARCH OF VET**

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## **Editor's Foreword**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the reasons which make it difficult to establish a clear picture and understanding of vocational education and training (VET) in England. It begins by identifying a range of factors and policies which have prevented VET from having a clear identity and from developing higher status. These include confusion at government level about the role and nature of vocational education, and about the rights and responsibilities of employers in a voluntary system. It is argued that government attempts to raise the status of VET by bringing about closer links with academic education can be seen to have worked against the development of VET according to its special strengths and qualities. Several aspects of the 'blurring' of the academic/vocational distinction are discussed, including those affecting qualifications and their regulation, national funding and planning, and quality assurance. Evidence is produced to show that the attempt to ignore important differences has increased rather than removed anomalies of treatment, whilst also failing to strengthen links with professional education at HE level. It is concluded that without a clear concept of, and a location for, VET it will be impossible for policy-makers to define a first-rate vocational offer and to ensure the necessary infrastructure for its delivery.

## **Introduction**

It is always difficult to get a clear picture of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in England. This paper analyses why this is so, and examines the dangers and anomalies that result. A number of related factors are identified that prevent VET in the UK from gaining a clear identity and appropriate status. Although many of the factors apply to all countries of the UK, some institutional, inspection and funding arrangements differ between them, and this paper focuses on the situation in England.

### *Merging the vocational and the academic*

Ironically, one set of factors derive from a well-meaning attempt to give status to VET by forging strong links with academic or general education and removing what is assumed to be a damaging 'academic - vocational divide'. It is argued here that this can, in practice, prevent VET from developing its own distinctive identity and qualities. The possibility of progression to higher education is also being increasingly emphasised, but this has not led to an examination of the different paradigms and funding regimes that apply to VET in higher education, and the issues raised by these apparent anomalies.

### *VET and Higher Education*

Vocational Education at FE level is conceived and administered differently from its equivalent in higher education (HE). The latter is usually labelled as 'professional', and is often assumed to require additional commitment and ability over and above that required for the academic. Progression from VET at lower levels is not as clear as it is for academic subjects.

### *The regulatory context*

Something that would bring considerable status to VET would be an increase in the requirement for 'licences to practice' in the UK. The fact that other countries have such a system puts their VET in quite a different context and makes many international comparisons dubious.

### *Role and purpose*

Other factors are more to do with confusion over the role of VET, the questions of whose needs it should serve, and who should have most influence over it. Is the vocational a means of reaching the otherwise alienated, or does a vocation require a special commitment? Is the primary purpose of VET to give an individual a place in the working community, to enable a company to become more efficient, or to provide a progression route to higher qualifications and status? Should it exist in a market driven by the learners, a market driven by employers, or should it be planned by the state and its agencies?

### *Concepts and labels*

A further group of factors are to do with confused terminology that leads to confused thinking. For example:

- the term ‘vocational education’ is itself used in a variety of ways, together with misleading use of terms like vocational ‘routes’ or ‘pathways’;
- recently the word ‘skills’ has become a synonym for vocational education and training, so that a ‘skills strategy’ can be presented as a strategy for VET when it is no such thing;
- being unqualified is used as evidence that someone is ‘unskilled’. Gaining a qualification is used as evidence that good quality VET has been experienced;
- policy statements are confused about whether training produces more innovative companies, or whether it is necessary to stimulate innovation in order to increase the demand for training;
- they are similarly confused about the role of VET in motivating the disaffected. Assertions about this are made without much evidence, and without considering the potential affect of this rhetoric on the desire for parity of esteem.

## **The Blurring of Distinctions**

As a matter of policy, and with the aim of enhancing parity of esteem, the provision, assessment, inspection and funding of VET in England below university level has been merged with that of other forms of education and training. The consequence has been that what positively distinguishes VET has been obscured. Also, the need to fit in with systems designed for general education has weakened VET

### Particular issues or examples:

*The role of FE colleges* Further Education (FE) Colleges remain the largest providers of VET, but most now have also developed sizeable academic provision. This is both for 16-18 year olds and for older students wishing to return to study and/or progress to university. Indeed, the FE sector as a whole now provides more A Level candidates than do secondary schools.

*The creation of QCA* Since 1997 a single national Regulatory Body - the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) - has been responsible for overseeing both academic and vocational qualifications. QCA was created by the merger of two organisations, the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).

*Unitary Awarding Bodies* In 1999, and as a result of government requirements, mergers took place between those examining and awarding bodies that administered qualifications for full-time students, so that each now offers both academic and vocational qualifications at 16 and at 18.<sup>1</sup> There are three such 'unitary' organisations, which compete with each other with regard to levels of service, but each has to meet the same criteria for methods of assessment and for content as laid down by QCA.

*Curriculum 2000.* From September 2000 both advanced academic qualifications (GCE A levels) and the equivalent Vocational Qualifications (Advanced (or level 3)

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<sup>1</sup> Two of them, Edexcel and OCR also offer National Vocational Qualifications to older and employed candidates. The third re-organisation created two bodies: one – Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)- concentrates on qualifications for full-time 14-18 years olds. The other, the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI), continues to focus on older learners and on occupationally specific qualifications for employees.

General Vocational Qualifications - GNVQs) have been made part of the same framework, called 'Curriculum 2000'. They now share a similar modular structure and assessment/grading system. GNVQs have been renamed 'Vocational A levels', and at the next level down, the examinations taken at 16 have been renamed academic GCSEs and vocational GCSEs with the further suggestion that the term vocational should be dropped altogether in order to ensure the appropriate status. (DfES 2003c)

*The merging of inspectorates.* Until April 2001 there were three Inspectorates, one for schools (the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)), one for further education colleges, and one for government-funded training. There are now two: Ofsted inspects all full-time 16-18 provision, whether academic or vocational, and the new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspects all non-university post-18 provision, including academic, vocational and recreational education, and work-based training. (DfEE (1999) chapter 5)<sup>2</sup>

*The creation of the LSC* Since April 2001, a single organisation, the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC), has been responsible for the funding and planning of all post-16 non-university provision in England. Previously, schools, FE colleges and training schemes were each funded by separate bodies, and according to different rules and formulae. (ibid, chapter 3) The LSC has organised its work into two areas: provision for young people (16-19 year olds), on the one hand, and that for adults (19 and over) on the other, rather than – for instance – academic provision, on the one hand, and vocational provision, on the other.

*The demise of Colleges of Education (Technical)* Twenty years ago there were in England four Colleges of Education (Technical) for the training of teaching staff in vocational specialisms. These had specialist facilities such as engineering and printing workshops, catering kitchens and model offices, and teacher trainers within each specialism. These centres have now been merged within larger institutions, and in three out of the four cases are within general teacher-training departments. A recent Ofsted Report on the training of FE staff has argued that such teacher training is now

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<sup>2</sup> After the 2005 General Election, it was further proposed that ALI be merged into Ofsted.

too generic, with staff not being properly prepared to teach their subject or vocational specialisms. [Ofsted 2003]

These changes are evidence of the currently dominant assumption that the best way to establish parity of esteem is to bring together the academic and vocational 'routes'. It is also hoped that, increasingly, candidates will 'mix and match' provision and qualifications from the two routes.

There is no reason to doubt that policy-makers are sincere in their intention to enhance the status of vocational provision, or that its status is a problem within a culture that heavily favours the academic. The danger is that unification will enable features of the academic culture to become the norm, with - for instance - only academic standards of 'excellence' being used. There are also signs of preference being given to those methods of assessment that are most appropriate for academic subjects.

In other countries the approach has been to enhance the status of the vocational by developing specialist institutions, within which learning programmes and assessment regimes have been designed to fit their particular vocational context. In some cases, status is given to lower level vocational courses by the presence in the same organisational framework of higher-level professional courses in the same vocational area, to which candidates may progress.

There has been no public debate about the philosophy behind these recent moves in England to integrate VET with academic provision at the same level. Nor has there been an exploration of the risks and advantages of what might be called this 'horizontal integration' (on the basis of the age of the learner) when compared to the possibility of 'vertical integration' of different levels of provision within the same vocational area.

At the moment different government policies seem to be favouring both horizontal and vertical links. Signals from the DfES and the Prime Minister's Office have caused many General FE Colleges to create "sixth form centres" to bring together 16-18 year olds rather than leaving them within different departments where they are in contact with older learners in the same subject area. However, some colleges are interpreting the term "sixth form" to refer only to those on A level programmes (Ofsted 2004b). At the same time, the COVE initiative is being extended. This establishes within colleges Centres of Vocational Excellence in

specific vocational areas, part of their brief being to establish stronger links with both local industry and HE.

In a few vocational areas vertical links have always been strong. Traditionally, specialist Colleges of Agriculture, now more likely to be referred to as centres for the 'land-based industries', have always catered for all levels of study within the sector, often offering a range that includes gardening courses for pupils leaving Special Schools, through craft and technician levels, and up to HNDs, undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in farm management or environmental protection. Although many have followed the trend and ceased to be free-standing institutions, most have kept this provision discrete, if only for reasons of geographical distance.

On the other hand, and for the most part, former specialist colleges - of catering, printing, art and design, for example - have merged with either FE colleges or higher education institutions (or both at the same time), and have often separated their 'non-advanced' from their 'advanced' provision in order to do so. This process was encouraged by the fact that it was decreed that they could not be designated as belonging to the HE sector if they kept more than a small percentage of FE level work within their walls

### **VET in Further and Higher Education**

VET below university level is operated within different structures and according to different paradigms from those that apply within higher education. As a result, the clarity with which the public perceives professional education and training in areas such as medicine and architecture, and the status attached to this form of VET, does not transfer to VET at lower levels.

#### Particular issues or examples:

*Responsibility for Intermediate level skills* Programmes leading to what the White Paper calls 'Technician' or 'Associate Professional' level qualifications make for an interesting case study because, depending on the sector and the circumstances, these could be delivered either by level three programmes (as the 2003 Skills White Paper assumes (DfES 2003b, para. 4.17)) or by Foundation Degree programmes at level four, about which the HE White Paper says, "they will help to radically improve the delivery of technical skills to industry, business and services". (DfES 2003a, para

3.20) Both documents state that people with such skills are crucial to the economy and often in short supply. What makes this more than a semantic issue is that the provision in question and the students on it are treated quite differently depending upon which side of the level three or level four divide they are deemed to fall.

*Foundation Degrees* Foundation Degrees are validated by universities and level three vocational qualifications are approved by QCA, The significance of this is that all vocational qualifications approved by QCA have to relate closely to the occupational standards produced by Sector Skills Councils, and have to be available nationally. Foundation degrees have to take account of these standards, but can also work towards other objectives and outcomes, including meeting the requirements of local businesses with which the university is in direct contact.

*The differing roles of the funding councils* Because they are part of higher education provision, Foundation and other vocational degrees are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and are subject to its quality assurance procedures rather than direct inspection by ALI. Also, the HEFCE is not a planning body, and, therefore, does not discriminate in its funding between degrees in particular vocational areas. On the other hand, level three VET is funded by the LSC, which will fully-fund only that level three provision it deems to be an economic priority in a given region (DfES 2003b).

The funding of the individual is also affected by whether an ‘intermediate’ course of study is defined as further or higher education. An HE student qualifies for loans to cover both fees and maintenance whatever their age. Adult FE students have no such entitlement; insofar as they qualify for grants, these are set at the level to which 16 year olds living at home are entitled, rather than a level more appropriate to an adult living independently (ibid.).

These anomalies and inconsistencies could be used positively in order to enable questions to be asked about which approach is best fitted for purpose. Left unresolved, however, they raise issues of equity and limit the extent to which individuals and companies can understand, or obtain what they need from, the VET system – perhaps because it is not a system at all.

### *Progression from FE to HE within VET*

In its discussion of the contribution of HE, the Skills White Paper published in July 2003 focussed its attention on Foundation Degrees, perversely ignoring the fact that (by some estimates) some 50% of other degrees are also vocational. Progression to the most well established of these, in areas such as medicine or architecture, is much more likely to be *via* the GCE A level route, of course.

When originally proposed, Foundation Degrees were seen as being primarily part-time, and targeted on people already in work, particularly those who wished to progress from Modern Apprenticeships (DfES, 2000). However, the Higher Education White Paper, published in January 2003, emphasised their role in reaching the government's self-imposed target of enabling 50% of the population to experience higher education by the age of 30. The result has been that the curriculum of most such degrees is being designed to appeal to school-leavers, rather than to provide progression from apprenticeships.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these examples. Firstly, we should be careful about talking in terms of 'vocational pathways' unless we can be sure they exist, can be maintained, and do not contain unnecessary obstructions in terms of funding or choice. Secondly, rather than using access to HE merely as a way of giving status to VET in other people's terms, perhaps we should look at the characteristics that appear to confer high status on some VET within HE. Degrees in "professional" areas such as medicine and architecture work to standards set by members of the 'trade', not by their employers, they are validated by universities and not by government agencies, and can be adapted to suit local circumstances and opportunities. They also require considerable commitment from those recruited, rather than being seen as a means of generating motivation towards learning. We return to this below.

### **Employers in a Voluntary System**

Only in exceptional cases is the possession of the relevant vocational qualification thought important enough to be a requirement before someone can earn a living in a trade or occupation. Therefore, employers are not required to offer workers relevant training before offering their services to the public. As a result, neither consumers nor companies need to focus on the process or outcomes of VET, or to get to know its features.

Particular issues or examples:

There are three kinds of mechanism through which legislation could affect the nature and degree of employer involvement in VET:-

- (a) Through a statutory requirement for employers to offer training to young employees, or to provide employees with paid time-off for training, or to publish training plans and expenditure as part of the usual requirements on a public company to produce annual reports.
- (b) Through a compulsory training levy, reimbursed to those companies who provide VET of sufficient quantity and quality.
- (c) Through a requirement for practitioners in most trades to have a 'licence to practise'.

In England none of these requirements applies, in contrast to the situation in many of the countries with which our VET performance is often compared. Amongst other things, this means that workers in some other countries are much more likely to have qualifications that attest to the skills and knowledge they possess. In England, it is very likely to be the case that many workers possess the skills they need, but either:

- they and / or their employers do not see the need to obtain a qualification as well;  
or
- the content of the qualification is not seen to match what the job they are doing requires.

*Licences to practise* The lack of the need for a licence to practise (except in a few cases where public safety has been demonstrated to be at stake such as fitting gas boilers and – after some disastrous events – railway maintenance) is, of course, what most clearly distinguishes a trade from a profession in the UK. Its presence in other countries, at all levels, has a profound effect on both the degree to which employers feel the need to engage with the design of VET qualifications, and on the status in the community, as well as in firms, of those with qualifications.

*Skills and qualifications* In the absence of the need for a licence to practise there may not be a correlation between having skills and also having a qualification to

prove it. This is why comparing ‘skills levels’ between the UK and Germany, for instance, by using the possession of qualifications as a key indicator, can be so dubious an exercise.

*The possibility of other statutory requirements* From time to time, other measures - such as an entitlement to paid time-off for training – are debated. But it seems clear that insofar as government is willing to impose new legislation on employers at all, it will give priority to such things as pensions and time-off to care for children. Understandable and welcome though this might be, it may reduce still further a firm’s willingness to engage in those things – such as training - that are voluntary.

*Government activity* Another consequence of the unwillingness of governments to use legislation is their overuse of the levers they do have - the funding of the public sector providers, in particular. This has produced a turbulent environment for these providers and, as we shall see, sits uneasily with a worthy policy emphasis on provision being demand- rather than supply- driven. The use of funding to encourage employer participation by subsidising their use of NVQs may also have unwittingly bred in companies a dependency culture, in which subsidy is expected and VET is not seen as an essential investment that can be justified as part of a normal business plan (as is advertising, for instance).

### **Demand and Supply: Whose Demand, Whose Supply?**

Although there is much talk of ensuring that VET below degree level is ‘demand-led’, there is confusion about whose demand this should be, and how it should be identified. The dominant position given in recent policies to the requirements of ‘employers’ means that neither workers nor their teachers feel any sense of ownership. However, since the views of employers are expressed through ‘representative groups’, rather than directly by individual employers, some employers also feel disenfranchised.

#### Particular issues or examples:

*The needs of employers not of employment.* Providers at all levels are being urged to serve the needs of employers better. There was a time when this was phrased in policy documents in terms of the needs of ‘employment’ or of ‘industry’ in general,

with the implication that both the economy and the workforce might have needs to be met that would not always exactly match the needs of a particular company. (In passing, ‘company needs’ would itself be a step forward from the far more ubiquitous phrase ‘employer needs’, implying as it does the needs of a group of people rather than those specified by an individual. (See the later section on nomenclature.) A tripartite approach to the development of VET, which involved employers, unions and the state, was abandoned in England during the time of the Thatcher government. The most obvious embodiment of this approach was the Manpower Services Commission, finally abolished in tripartite form in 1988.

*The role of national occupational standards* Whilst higher education institutions are free to design a course and assessment regime that they negotiate with an employer, in the LSC sector providers need to offer courses that lead to nationally recognised qualifications if they are to be publicly subsidised. To be nationally recognised, a VET qualification has to embody agreed national occupational standards.

This has produced great tensions. Large employers (such as some retailers) feel big enough to specify their own standards, and often wish to make them distinct from those of their competitors for marketing and other reasons. On the other hand, small firms cannot afford the time to attend the meetings where standards are agreed, and in any case they often find that the job specifications and boundaries appropriate to large companies are not as relevant in their context.

*Key Skills.* An illuminating case study is that of Key Skills. The standards and assessment regime for these have been specified by government, and made a compulsory part of government-funded apprenticeships. Many providers and employers find the standards too inflexible and the assessment methods invalid but they do not have the freedom to negotiate different approaches between themselves.

*Responding to local needs, and the voice of the market.* Some FE colleges have in the past designed VET provision in conjunction with local companies. Indeed, from the 1970s onwards the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) offered a validation regime that encouraged this and gave the resulting qualification national accreditation. However, it was more common for the negotiations to take place between representatives of companies and providers in meetings convened and

moderated by national awarding bodies such as City and Guilds or the Royal Society of Arts. More recently, qualifications designed by agencies such as NCVQ in conjunction with government have become the preferred policy option. However, we should note the market's verdict on these changes. NVQs have become a niche product rather than the universal framework for vocational qualifications originally planned (DES 1991), and overall there were fewer NVQs awarded in 2002/3 than there were five years previously<sup>3</sup> (DfES 2004b). GNVQs were first heavily modified, then incorporated into the GCE A level framework as the AVCE.

But, a recent Ofsted Report said scathingly that: 'The AVCE is not well designed. It is neither seriously vocational, nor consistently advanced'. (Ofsted, 2004a). We shall tactfully refrain from alluding to key skills again, after noting that there are other qualifications assessing numeracy, literacy and ICT that existed before the government's efforts and that were, and are, successful.

Meanwhile, other 'own brands' of qualifications offered by the awarding bodies have not only survived but flourished. Indeed, had they not done so there would be no vocational qualifications for full-time 16-19 year olds to include in the relevant column of the National Qualifications Framework, now that what were GNVQs have been moved into the 'general' column (but see below for definition of 'vocational').

*Employer-funded provision* Another insight into the nature of the real demand, as opposed to that interpreted by official committees and organisations, can be gained by looking at the VET purchased by employers with their own money. In general, government policy relates only to what government funds or subsidises – possibly because of the importance it has to attach to this influential lever in the absence of alternatives. The result is that the 2003 Skills White Paper neglects the large sum spent by employers on training that they fully fund. Because policy tends to neglect training funded in this way, data on it is often unavailable or disputed. However, it is clear from the Learning and Training at Work survey published in 2001 that much of the fully-funded provision is not purchased from the public sector, and that employers

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<sup>3</sup> Some sectors do buck the overall trend, but interestingly the most statistically significant of these is that which includes Health and Social Care, where there is a forthcoming requirement for licences to practise.

attach much less importance to the acquisition of a formal qualification than does the government(DfES 2002).<sup>4</sup>

A little thought shows that this is not surprising. In a regime that does not require licences to practise, and gives emphasis to national requirements rather than local flexibility when it comes to qualifications up to level three, why would employers voluntarily go beyond getting their staff skilled to getting them qualified? On the other hand, government tends to equate ‘skilled’ with ‘qualified’, and sets itself and the country targets in these terms. It also uses qualifications to assess the performance of institutions, as well as of individuals, and qualifications are one of the few aspects of VET it feels it can control.

### **Terminology**

The term ‘vocational education’ is used loosely, to cover a range of provision and qualifications that at the extremes have little in common. This breeds confusion and cynicism. Those who experience only weaker forms of vocational education become confused about what counts as “vocational” education and disillusioned about its currency within an industry. The increasing use of the word ‘skills’ as a synonym for both VET and its outcomes – especially when embodied in phrases such as ‘Education and Skills’ or ‘Learning and Skills’, causes confusion in policy and provision.

#### Particular issues or examples:

*The use of the term ‘vocational education’* ‘Vocational education and training’ is used to describe what is in fact a spectrum of provision that is usually seen as lying between full-time academic programmes, on the one hand, and part-time occupational training in the work-place, on the other. At level three academic achievement is currently assessed through conventional GCE A and AS level subjects, and occupational competence is recognised by NVQs. Vocational education is

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<sup>4</sup> These data are picked up in the Skills White Paper published in 2005, which also draws attention to the fact that of the £23,5 billion overall figure often quoted, only £2.6 billion is spent directly on training fees. This is nevertheless a significant sum.

recognised by qualifications as diverse as single subject vocational A levels (AVCEs), on the one hand, and BTEC Nationals that assess a whole course, on the other.

*‘Vocational Education’: the weakly vocational version.* At one end of the spectrum there is a form of ‘vocational education’ that might be described as “weakly vocational”. Whilst it raises awareness of the world of work, and uses examples taken from it, it does not necessarily require staff with experience of the relevant sector, or equipment that is up to modern industrial or commercial standards. Where such provision is subject-based, the whole programme may be ‘weakly vocational’ in another sense, in that the ‘vocational subject’ may form only a minority of the student’s programme of study. Where the programme includes a work-experience placement, this placement gives general introduction to the world of work rather than being a learning experience designed to be an integral part of the whole programme and as a vehicle to deliver some of the course objectives.

Some might question whether such provision can be called ‘vocational education’ in any real sense, and would certainly deny that students experiencing it should be described as being on a ‘vocational route’. Despite the fact that both vocational GCSEs and single subject AVCEs (or vocational A levels) fall at this ‘weakly vocational’ end of the spectrum, government does describe this provision as a ‘vocational route’ (DfES 2003c).

*‘Vocational Education’: the strongly vocational version* Vocational education that justifies the description of being ‘strongly vocational’ requires staff who not only have up-to-date experience of the relevant vocational sector, but the ability themselves to perform to modern occupational standards. The facilities – for example, motor vehicle workshops, training restaurants and in-college beauty salons – need to be of industrial standard. Work placements need to relate to the course being taken, and staff in the workplace may teach or assess some of its components. It is not always possible to guarantee that students on such programmes will have reached workplace competence, because it may not have been possible to assess their entire performance in that context, but they should have acquired both theoretical understanding and practical skills required for a career in a specific occupational sector.

From the student point of view, a strongly vocational programme occupies at least two thirds of the available study time, and its different components are integrated around the common theme of the vocational area in question. For those considering an apprenticeship, such strongly vocational provision provides an alternative in cases where:

- the individual prefers to retain student rather than worker status
- the individual wishes to keep the option of progression to HE more flexibly open
- apprenticeship provision is either not locally available or is of uncertain quality.

#### *The shift towards the weakly vocational*

- BTEC Nationals were reasonably strongly vocational, and were therefore as a general rule available only in FE colleges, where the necessary staff and facilities existed.
- In 1992 GNVQs were introduced, and were intended to supplant BTEC Nationals. (Sharp, 2002). However, since GNVQs were designed to be offered in schools as well as colleges, their vocational content was diluted.
- The Dearing Review of 16-19 qualifications in 1996 (Dearing, 1996) started a process by which GNVQs were adapted in their turn. By the time of the Curriculum 2000 reform, they had become vocational GCE A levels (AVCEs), to be taken if required as one or two subjects alongside others.

This shift has been recognised by the National Qualifications Framework, which now classifies AVCEs as ‘general’ qualifications, rather than ‘vocationally related’ as it did at the time of Curriculum 2000. It has also been recognised by the market, where there has been a resurgence of interest in BTEC Nationals, and the emergence of OCR Nationals as a new product. It has recently been recognised by the Inspectorate:

In some subjects [AVCE] course specifications lack vocational content and are too similar to GCE A level. (OFSTED 2004a)

None of this stopped the DfES saying the following in its Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners published in September 2004:-

### A wider choice of stronger vocational routes

**17.** We aim to extend vocational options across all schools as part of our commitment to strengthening choice and the personalisation of the curriculum. This means giving pupils a wide range of opportunities to suit their diverse needs, abilities and interests, and ensuring that schools respond more effectively to employers' needs and encourage better employer involvement. As well as helping to raise attainment across the board, these developments will also motivate pupils and lead to greater participation in education and training post-16. They must be able to provide as strong a basis for higher education and good employment as the traditional academic routes.

**18.** To support this, we:

- introduced GCSEs in vocational subjects in 2002/03;
- are placing greater emphasis on work-related learning from 14, by funding 90,000 part-time college placements for pupils to pursue more industry specific qualifications; will dramatically increase the number of 14-16 year olds studying vocational subjects in schools, colleges and training providers to just over 180,000 by 2007-08;
- will continue to expand the 14-19 offer for those who are disengaged from learning, or disaffected by previous experiences, particularly through pre-apprenticeship routes which provide work-based learning for 16-18 year olds.  
(DfES 2004a: p 75)

Note here the descriptions of GCSEs in vocational subjects under the heading of 'stronger vocational routes' and of the 'vocational' as being particularly appropriate for the alienated and unmotivated.

Furthermore, there are signs that the importance – or even existence – of strongly vocational college-based programmes is not recognised at the most senior political levels:-

No dropping out at 16, every young person either staying on in the sixth form or on a modern apprenticeship or job-related training leading to a good career. So substantially more academies, specialist schools, better post-16 provision in 6th forms and 6th form colleges.  
(Prime Minister Tony Blair, March 2004)

No mention was made of General FE Colleges, the providers of the strongly vocational courses. The irony is that the government's unwillingness to depart from a voluntary regime for employers leads to its inability to guarantee the quality or even the availability of apprenticeships in all occupational sectors or in all regions of the

country. There has, therefore, to be a college-based, strongly vocational, alternative available.

*The use and abuse of the word 'skills'* At a national level we have a Department for 'Education and Skills' and also 'Learning and Skills' Councils. To point out that the former should be 'knowledge and education' or 'education and training' is not to be merely pedantic. The new terminology has resulted in 'skills' being used as a synonym for VET, whereas, of course, VET needs to be a carefully designed combination of education, training and experience. The nature and proportion of each component is highly debatable – but the terminology diverts us from an enlightening and necessary debate and some important decisions about what should happen where, and who should pay for it.

Similarly, the loose use of the term 'skills' has meant that the authors of the 'Skills Strategy' were able to avoid developing the VET strategy required for achievement of the objectives being proposed. It also causes the Skills White Paper to ignore the contribution to VET made by school subjects such as mathematics and science, presumably because these are categorised as 'learning' and not 'skills', and of degrees such as medicine and architecture (presumably because these are classed as higher education rather than skills and workforce development)

Vocational Education and Training does of course require the acquisition not only of skills but also of knowledge and experience. Reducing all this to "skills" is not only inaccurate; it also leads to the assumption that the processes by which vocational competence is developed are both obvious and unproblematic. In fact they are more complex and uncertain than those involved in academic study.

*Needs of 'employers' and 'employment'* We have commented earlier in this paper on the loose way in which the word 'employer' is used. Examples occur in the phrases 'employer training needs', where what is meant is the needs a company has for skilled staff, or in terms like 'employer-led demand', which conceals the need for a debate about the balance to be struck between the requirements of companies, employees and the general economy.

### **Associating VET with the Unmotivated and the Lower Achieving**

At and below level three it is assumed that VET is particularly appropriate for those who would otherwise be unmotivated and underachieving. On the other hand, entry to the professions at HE level is assumed to require particularly high levels of motivation and achievement.

#### Specific issues and examples:

Associating VET with the unmotivated and the lower achieving occurs both in political and policy rhetoric (see above) and as a result of the way provision is made.

*No fresh general education pathway for lower achievers post-16* Everyone has to take the GCSE examination in the May of his or her 15<sup>th</sup> year “ready or not”. Inevitably some will ‘fail’ (not get over the threshold of five A\* to C grades that is the usual requirement for level three courses). Although this ‘failure’ may be because they need more time, the provision for ‘retaking’ GCSEs is becoming scarcer because schools and colleges find that students retaking courses they have failed rarely improve their performance. There is no alternative general education course analogous to the Access courses that have proved so effective for adults who wish to reach higher education by another route. Learners are therefore usually recommended to take a vocational course if they have weak GCSEs.

*Most sixth forms are selective* Current government policy appears to suggest that in future everyone should either ‘stay on’ after 16 in “school or college sixth forms”, or take an apprenticeship. DfES statistics show that most “Sixth forms” do not cater for anything but level three study (Stanton, 2004). Thus those not capable of this are being offered apprenticeships. Both the curriculum and the institutional arrangements therefore connect VET with those who are below average in GCSE attainment, and ensures that many going into VET at 16 are doing so by default, rather than as a positive, first choice. VET rarely escapes subsequently from the taint of these associations.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have analysed why it is that no-one - including the general public, policy makers and the participants themselves - seems to have a clear picture of Vocational Education and Training in England. We argue that this is caused by the compound effect of a range of factors, some inter-connected and some not.

In England, VET is itself an elusive and ill-defined creature. It is also difficult to know where to look for it. Attempting to study VET in England is like working in a fog. Even if the fog could be penetrated it would become apparent that there is no single arena in which VET takes place. There is no coherent set of institutions with primary responsibility for VET. This is in marked contrast with academic education at various levels.

The 'home' arena for academic education up to level three is the school. Despite the fact that much level two and three academic education now takes place in colleges, the general perception remains that academic education up to and including this level is primarily a matter for schools, their sixth forms and sixth form colleges.

The 'home' arena for academic education at levels four and five is the university. Although a significant minority (about 14%) of much level four work also takes place in FE colleges (Parry and Thompson, 2002), and this proportion is likely to increase with the advent of foundation degrees. Furthermore, there are strong links between the two arenas. Progression from one to the other is clear-cut. The implications of changes in one are always a matter for concern to the other. In contrast, the links between VET at lower levels with VET in universities are not at all clear. In fact, progression into many vocational degree courses is often easiest if academic rather than vocational options are taken at level three.

Schools and universities may come under criticism, but no one doubts that academic routes require their existence. The apparent clarity about the nature of academic education may in fact be an illusion. It is clear, however, where it takes place. In many other countries the 'home' arena for VET would be institutions similar to English FE colleges.

In England FE colleges have not been given the same status as schools or universities. When proposals for VET are made, it is frequently asserted that it can be undertaken in a variety of venues, including the premises of private training providers and the workplace itself, often with the implication that the colleges may be allowed to participate only if they can compete effectively.

Despite this, in recent years, most VET schemes have come to depend on the effective performance of further education colleges. FE has always been the prime provider of VET for 16-19 year olds and for adults, but is now also being expected to contribute to VET for 14-16 year olds and to provide vocational HE in the form of foundation degrees. It provides the backbone of the New Deal, and, given the fact that the quality or even existence of Apprenticeships cannot be guaranteed in all sectors and all regions, colleges provide a crucial underpinning here also. Despite this centrality, FE colleges have been subjected to much more turbulence in terms of funding, governance, and threats to their existence than either schools or universities.

A factor that has encouraged policy makers to believe that VET does not require a defined arena has been the fact that VET in England has in recent years been defined primarily in terms of outcomes. This has had two consequences. It assumes that the process by which these outcomes are reached is neither significant nor problematic, with consequences for both the learners' experiences and the credibility of the qualification. It has also meant that what cannot be specified in term of outputs has been neglected.

Importantly, the focus solely on the measurement of occupational competence, important though this is, has meant that we have no agreed model of what counts as excellence in VET. Without this shared understanding, the nature and volume of the resources and expertise required for quality VET, as opposed to quality academic education, are not recognised. Without a notion of what counts as quality in VET, the need for an appropriate arena is not apparent. Without consideration of the appropriate arena, quality in VET can neither be defined nor defended.

### **Postscript**

After this paper was drafted, two further White Papers relevant to VET in England were published. We now briefly examine them, not in order to summarise their recommendations, but rather to see how far they help to dispel the fog surrounding VET in England.

The White Paper on 14-19 education and training was published in February 2005, and proposed the creation of specialised vocational diplomas, but left A / AS levels and GCSEs unchanged. At first sight this appears to move against the trend we have described of merging the academic and the vocational to the detriment of the

latter. It also repeatedly argues for ‘putting employers (in the form of Sector Skills Councils – SSCs) in the driving seat’ in order to ensure the vocational relevance and value of the new diplomas, with ‘a new system of employer-designed Diplomas’. (DfES 2005a).

However, a closer examination of the White Paper makes it clear that government also has views of its own about the structure and content of the new diplomas.

“We would expect that as SSCs design these Diplomas, they will often include at least some GCSEs and A levels among the requirements. The new GCSEs in vocational subjects would be prominent among these, as would vocational A levels. In engineering, for example, a young person preparing for university entry might well take A level maths and some physical science in pursuing a level 3 Diploma.” (ibid., p 52)

The White Paper also says the following:

“HE institutions will also have an important role, because we need to be absolutely confident that a specialised level 3 Diploma can be a good route to higher education. If high achieving young people can gain access to the university of their choice by doing well in a level 3 Diploma, then once again, that will contribute to making the Diplomas a valued choice.” (ibid. p 47 )

In other words status is to come as much from the inclusion of respected academic qualifications as components of the diplomas, and from the fact that they will be designed to give access to HE, as from their vocational nature. This attempt to ride two horses at once is what has previously led, as we pointed out earlier, to vocational A levels being trenchantly criticised by Ofsted (op.cit.).

The 2005 Skills White Paper also frequently emphasises the importance of employers taking the lead, for instance in the establishment of ‘Skills Academies’, as ‘sector-based centres of national excellence’:

The role of Skills Academies will be to provide training programmes for young people and adults which, in design and delivery, incorporate the best that is known about working with employers to meet their current and future skills needs. This new network of Skills Academies will have new capital facilities, set up and funded in partnerships with sector employers on the basis of proposals developed by SSCs and the sponsoring employers. (DfES 2005b, p 13-14)

Skills Academies will also form the hubs for Centres of Vocational Excellence, many of which are already set up in colleges. There is also new investment promised of £1.5b to transform the facilities of FE Colleges. At first sight this also looks as if it

might at last provide recognisable and good quality arenas for the delivery of VET, and there is certainly cause for hope. The problem will be if employers again fail to play their full part, and unfortunately this would fit the historical pattern.

Employer representatives were given important roles in the governance of Training and Enterprise Councils and NCVQ, and NVQs were based on occupational standards that employers rather than awarding bodies defined. This did not cause them to be as successful as hoped. There are ongoing problems about finding sufficient employment-based apprenticeship places to meet demand, and many modern apprenticeships depend on public or private training providers for their existence. As King observes in his historical analysis of the role of employers in training, despite their ‘rhetorical flourishes’, governments since 1970 have found it impossible to shift employers from their voluntarist and firm-based approach to training. (King, 1997)

The current changes can be seen as the latest example of this British tradition in which employers are offered increasing influence with much positive rhetoric but without the necessary obligations or commitments to develop their practices. The 14-19 White Paper catches this point exactly:-

We therefore want to challenge employers to become more involved in providing opportunities to learn in a work setting... Quite how much employer engagement there is will of course depend on employers both on the local employment market and on employers' willingness to get involved. In reality, there will be a continuum.... (p 55)

Thus employers are ‘challenged’ and cajoled. On the other hand providers are to be subject to ‘contestability’ and:

In order to ensure that the priorities and choices of employers really drive training supply, we think that, over the longer term, there may well be a case for routing an increasing proportion of mainstream LSC funding for adult training through the National Employer Training Programme.... But we have to be realistic about the speed with which limited public resources can be redeployed, and the consequences for the stability of colleges. (2005b, p 12)

Thus, while the providers – mainly the FE colleges which have rescued earlier government initiatives in VET – are faced with further uncertainty with regard to future funding, the official expectation is that employers will vary in their readiness to be involved. This variation will, inevitably, impact upon the breadth and quality of the VET curriculum in a locality. In turn, this suggests that policy-makers are not willing

to identify what would be an acceptable vocational offer, or what infrastructure is required to deliver it. These, as we argued above, are necessary preconditions for establishing a clear concept of, and an arena for, VET in England. No amount of rhetoric about such things as ‘driving up standards’ through ‘putting employers in the driving seat’ can make up the absence of these preconditions.

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