

VET in FE: Curriculum Development Framework

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This series - VET in FE - started with a review of VET development in the FE sector and the lessons we could draw to inform the future. In the first article, VET in FE: A question of 'divide and rule'?¹, we discussed the proliferation of VET qualifications and that the divide and rule concept created segregation in the educational landscape. And from the VET research in FE, the vocational element is not featured prominently in the FE research and publications despite 73.2% of the programme offers being vocational-related. This phenomenon and the sector's characteristics: porosity, inclusiveness, and widening participation underpinned by social justice. In the second article, VET in FE: A Way Forward², we suggested that the divide and rule approach needed re-assessing as segregation was not working with the increasing proliferation of vocational offers. A connected system was suggested linking the sectors and the related qualifications framework of FE, universities and professional education. Occupational education (OE) was recommended as it intersected work, teaching and learning in these education sectors and qualification levels. OE seeks commonalities with a nod to the lifelong learning concept. In adopting this nomenclature, seven reasons were put forward with the inclusion of the FE sectors' characteristics and the lifelong learning concept.

This third article in the series aims to consider a curriculum development framework to rationalise, de-mystify and clarify the vocational offers for stakeholders. To do this, we will consider a curriculum development framework and some considerations (e.g., aims and objectives, definitions, specifications/content, implementation, etc.) in taking this forward in the following section.

OE Curriculum Development Framework

This article considers a way to re-contextualise vocational education towards a connected system, which links sectors and reduces the division between current vocational and academic trajectories in England. Vocational/academic divisions are dominant relations within and between occupational sectors that are no longer fit for vocational education in the future (Young and Horden, 2022). Current VET courses are often seen to be confusing and have offered students uncertain futures for too long. Historically, VET has focused on skills for jobs by neglecting the need for broader educative knowledge and experience.

The attention here is to consider a curriculum development framework that allows for more movement within and across occupational fields. The curriculum needs to go beyond content and to include pedagogy, which suggests sequencing learning activities/enactments using content (Doyle, 1992; Doyle and Rosemartin, 2012). This content transformation includes institutional and classroom curricula and beyond.

Curriculum development for occupational education (OE) must consider the relationship between education and the wider world rather than simply focusing on work. An emphasis on a 'skills-based' model in VET inhibits progression to broader occupational knowledge and

¹ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/vocational-education-and-training-vet-in-fe-a-question-of-divide-and-rule/>. Accessed: 16 June 2022.

² <https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/vet-in-fe-a-way-forward/>. Accessed: 3 October 2022.

creativity within occupational fields. The vision for an OE curriculum must permit progression and transferability across sectors and areas by ensuring that students are educated to 'think' and 'imagine possibilities' rather than trained to 'do' and 'adapt' (Köpsén, 2020). It is intended that the aim of any OE curriculum will prepare people for a diverse range of employment opportunities rather than a specific lens on workplace tasks and roles (Wheelahán, 2016). What matters is guaranteeing that OE provides easily recognised, accepted and valued qualifications across contexts.

VET provision is frequently linked to specific national educational policies that aim to improve economic competitiveness, workforce development, skills and employability (Jameson & Loo, 2016). It seems there are two current pathways across the qualification/academic levels: work & study (WaS) (e.g., NVQs) or study & work (SaW) (e.g., apprenticeships, BTECs, T levels). The programmes on both pathways have curricular / specifications of knowledge, attributes and skillsets (KAS), which are often limited to a specific vocational area. Significant differences exist within each pathway. For example, (SaW), both BTECs and T-levels are deemed to have equity with 'A' levels and are supposedly equal in what students learn at level three. A key difference is regarding work – BTEC students are required to have a 'two-week work experience'.

In contrast, T-level students are expected to undertake a three-month placement in industry. To gain access to BTEC higher qualifications, students must have four GCSEs above grade 4, including maths *or* English. T-level entry requirements are higher, with five GCSE grades above grade 4, including maths *and* English. Both qualifications will gain students UCAS points for higher education. However, VET courses are primarily designed to meet the demands of various industries that require a skilled and practical workforce. There has been a general increase in VET students moving into Higher Education, with most in post-1992 institutions. That said, VET students are less likely to achieve a 'good' degree (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p. 638), and many drop out of a degree course than any other group (Kelly, 2017).

The current VET curriculum is confusing and restrictive for students, particularly if they want to change direction later. The existing 'ladder-like' structure of VET qualifications lends itself to a logic of competence accumulation, which equates to levels of qualifications or part qualifications (Gamble, 2022). Education cannot simply be compartmentalised or unitised by one vocation or level. Nor can it be divided easily between study and work. The vision for OE is to ensure an appreciation of the interrelation and co-existence of 'formal and situated knowledge' while maintaining a commitment to the 'intrinsic value of education and to sustaining meaningful work' (Shalem & Allais, 2018). As a holistic concept, OE relies on learning *through* education and experience in equal parts. The development of an OE curriculum would consider the purpose of qualifications over time and through routes for progression. Developing a clear vision for VET means that it is necessary to ensure there are adaptable routes for transitions within and across occupations. OE aims towards a learning pathway using recognition and flexibility within and across relevant sectors. Work organisation should be considered to allow students to move between sectors or progress across them (Young & Horden, 2022). To secure entry into meaningful employment for the future workforce, the potential for progression and movement within and across labour markets is crucial.

A vital issue with VET is its positionality within education. VET is often perceived as a lower educational value with limited opportunities, which must change. An OE curriculum

aims to reduce the negative perceptions often associated with the ‘academic-vocational division’ and ‘needless segregation in the educational landscape’ (Loo, 2019). As stated in the previous articles, the purpose of OE is to create a bridge between ‘vocational pedagogy and disciplinary knowledge’ (Barnett, 2006, p. 147), both necessary for successful learning. A negotiated and agreed curriculum would provide opportunities for progression to study further or occupational aspiration. OE can be developed to embrace inspired choice and progression by recognising the transferability of an accumulation of disciplinary knowledge and experience over time.

There needs to be greater collaboration between the interested sectors in designing specifications towards greater flexibility and innovation to ensure recognition of education, experience and professional practices beyond a skillset. This collaborative approach can agree on course length, level, and essential transition points. It is sensible to ensure recognition of prior experience (RPEL) and recognition of qualification (RPL) to access pathways across the OE curriculum. The specifications for OE become united by the shared knowledge and expertise of teachers, employers, trade unions and industry representatives to understand current and future workforce potential. The main point here is to reduce the increasing proliferation of VET offers, reverse the negative perception of VET and offer a transient and aspirational pathway into occupation potential.

What now?

In this article, we considered an OE curriculum framework development. We briefly discussed the aims and objectives of the OE curriculum development framework, its definitions, pathways, content/specifications, its positionality and implementation.

The following article will investigate the salient characteristics of two occupational/VET programmes of a similar occupation regarding curriculum development.

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