

# **What next after the political turmoil of the past 14 years for vocational/occupational education?**

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## **Abstract**

This online article challenges the atomized and divide-and-rule vocational education and training (VET) system in the English further education (FE) sector. Following the successful election of the Labour administration, it is time to consider changing the current English VET system. Occupational Education (OE) has much to offer by envisioning a joined-up, collaborative, and deliverable approach anchored by expert knowledge.

## **Introduction**

Fourteen years of the governing Con party (and its partying) end at the dawn of 5 July 2024 with years of chaos, in-fighting, empty promises and non-delivery. The centrality of these years is inequality. The widening inequality gap in the UK is pervasive and affects health, housing, poverty and the north-south income divide (Tapper, 2024). In short, this inequality impacts every facet of our society.

In comes change: the Labour administration promises service and delivery alongside its commitment to expertise and stability (Observer editorial, 2024).

From the vocational education and training (VET) perspective in the further education (FE) sector, the previous administration used the tactic of divide and rule (Loo, 2022a) to reinforce existing privileges (e.g., independent fee-paying schools with their charitable trusts) and exacerbate the inequality (e.g., cuts in funding of BTEC vocational courses) between the state education sectors and the independent fee-paying sector.

The wholesale replacement of vocational programmes, such as BTEC vocational courses, to T level vocational courses in 2021 provided an even more atomized range of vocational offers (Loo & Wilde, 2023). This latest batch of vocational courses lacks a robust definition and a distinct pedagogic approach. The atomization of these vocational courses merely creates confusion for the learners, deliverers, managers and industry stakeholders. Additionally, Ofsted regards these new vocational courses as offering poor value, inappropriate work placements, and high dropout rates (Adams, 2023). This divide-and-rule approach is not in the best interest of the stakeholders and merely supports those with a specific ideology.

## **Collaborative Change**

It is an opportune time following the tsunami of political change in the UK after the 4 July 2024 general election to consider an innovative, deliverable and joined-up occupational/vocational approach that complements the established academic pathway. The previous atomization of occupational/vocational offers and the divide-and-rule ideology have been shown to be unworkable.

This re-setting of the country's work-related offers can be envisioned by offering a fresh perspective to envisioning work-related offers as occupational ones. The benefits of occupational education (OE) are:

1. OE includes all work-related offers as one education system rather than an atomized approach (e.g., T levels) (Loo, 2019a).
2. OE recognises and celebrates the commonalities of work-related programmes across all the related education sectors, such as FE, higher and professional education in contrast to the divide-and-rule ideology (Loo, 2019a). The atomization and divide-and-rule ideology also relate to the constraints and perceptions of the 'English context' (Loo & Jameson, 2017) in the current VET system.
3. A robust definition of offered (Loo, 2019a).
4. There are concise and distinctive theoretical frameworks of OE pedagogies of occupational teacher educators and occupational teachers/lecturers (Loo, 2018).
5. Existence of clear delineations of occupational/vocational and academic subject pedagogies (Loo, forthcoming, Chapter 2).
6. Relevance of deep insights of occupational teacher educators, occupational teachers/lecturers and occupational practitioners/workers (including creatives in the digital economy). These insights include career journeys, continuous professional development (CPD), emotional ecologies, knowledge and pedagogy, professional identities, etc. (Loo, 2017; 2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022b; Loo & Sutton, 2021).

These empirically based findings focus on the micro specificities of occupational education. Loo and Wilde (2023) provide macro perspectives of OE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with their 7 suggestions relating to curriculum, collaboration with stakeholders, CPD offers, integration of digital skills, reimagination of practical training, building of infrastructure, and support of individualized learning. These micro and macro approaches provide a joined-up, collaborative, deliverable approach that is anchored by expert knowledge and a clear occupational pathway complementing the established academic route.

## **Conclusion**

This online paper argued for a fresh start of the divide-and-rule ideology that hampered VET in FE following the recent political change. OE is touted as a work-related education landscape to encompass VET across FE, higher and professional education in England across the settings of work, teaching and learning. This article delineates six micro and seven macro benefits of OE.

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