VET in FE: Where do we go from here?

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Abstract

This article represents the fifth and final one in the 'VET in FE' series. It aims to discuss the FE occupational/vocational education appropriate for the 21st century by offering seven pertinent solutions.

Introduction and re-cap of the VET in FE series

This article is the fifth and final in the series – VET in FE. The opening publication argued that the proliferation of VET qualifications and the divide-and-rule concept provided needless segregation in the English FE landscape and that the sector required a re-assessment. The second article offered an alternative framework of connections with other education sectors while retaining the FE sector's characteristics of porosity, inclusivity and widening participation underpinned by social justice. The third article considered a rationalised curriculum that clarified the development of vocational provisions for stakeholders, i.e., the Occupational Education curriculum framework. The fourth article explored the salient characteristics of two current vocational programmes: the reformed T Levels and the established BTECs. It showed the weaknesses of the reformed provision. This final article discusses what a future and rationalised occupational education system could look like for the sector in the 21st century.

FE occupational education fit for the 21st century

In previous articles within this series, we (Loo, 2022-2023) have argued that vocational qualifications have been perceived as less worthy than academic qualification through a needless segregation across FE provision. In the Guardian, Weale (2021) identifies that, 'the EDSK report says the dominance of A-levels in the English education system has relegated applied and technical courses to second-class status. Yet, economic and personal development depends on equipping people with new knowledge, abilities and skillsets about emerging industries, technological advancement and the benefits of lifelong learning. What is needed for VET is an occupational education that prepares people for employment and for progression within and across occupations. This can be achieved by rethinking vocational qualifications towards occupational education curriculum pathways (Work & Study and Study & Work in the Curriculum Development Framework article, 'VET in FE' series, Loo 2022-2023).

VET programmes in the FE sector vary depending on the knowledge, capabilities, experiences, and skillsets (know-how) required for different industries. Some programmes focus on trade specific knowledge, such as carpentry and motor vehicle maintenance, while others are designed for a specific field like hospitality or health and social care. These programmes often involve a combination of classroom instruction and practical training to help students acquire the necessary know-how. However, the VET sector has faced several challenges over the years, e.g., BTEC vocational courses have had funding cut and are now being replaced by T' levels.

T' level reforms were introduced in 2021, and there have been many issues with their implementation. Commenting on the recent report by Ofsted, James Kewin, the deputy chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, identified that T-levels have not yet achieved their aim of 'gold standard' as a mass-market replacement of BTEC vocational qualifications (Adams, 2023). In the same Guardian article, Adams (2023) suggests T-levels have been strongly criticised by Ofsted for offering poor value, inappropriate work placements and having high dropout rates.

Challenges for the VET sector include a shortage of qualified teachers and a lack of investment in infrastructure. These challenges have led to a decline in the quality of education and training and a mismatch between the skills students possess and the skills required by employers. Colleges have been struggling to recruit staff qualified to teach VET courses, and this has been heightened by the expectations and workload associated the T' level courses.

Raising the expectations and entry qualifications for T' levels has impacted recruitment and already the reforms are looking troubled. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to study in an FE college, many of whom have not achieved the necessary qualifications in maths and English within compulsory schooling. The socio-economic divide between students pursuing VET courses and those studying A' levels is a significant factor. Many VET students are struggling to afford transport to college and work placements. Weale (2023) identifies that, a decade of cumulative funding cuts means colleges lack resources to meet students' needs. Student needs also include a significant rise in mental health issues.

The nature of work and education is evolving, and COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for VET programmes to adapt to new ways of learning. As classes were moved online and in-person training became difficult, the VET sector struggled to keep up with the sudden changes. The pandemic has also created new challenges for students, particularly those who rely on practical training to learn essential skills. However, colleges must not lose sight of the benefits gained using education technologies (online learning and student support platforms as well as wide use of Edtech - digital technologies). The advancements in technology have created a demand for a new set of skills that are not traditionally taught in VET programmes. For example, digital skills like coding, data analytics and online marketing are becoming increasingly important in today's workplace.

Where do we go from here?

At this year's Conservative conference, Rishi Sunak (2023) shared his 10-year vision for once again transforming post-16 education. The new Advanced British Standard is aimed at putting VET (T' level) and academic (A' level) on a supposedly equal footing. Every student will also study maths and English to the age of 18. It is recommended that students will study a mix of vocational / technical and academic subjects. Concerning reasons for the reform are predominantly, the recognition that many disadvantaged students leave school with few or no qualifications and the need for higher economic growth in the VET industries.

The VET sector has several opportunities to adapt and evolve in the short and medium durations. Here are some potential solutions that could help the sector grow:

1. Creating a wider curriculum to provide future capabilities and skillsets for VET learners in addition to specific work-related know-how to equip them in the ever-changing occupational landscape.
2. Collaborating with stakeholders such as employers and professional bodies: One way for VET programmes to stay relevant is by working closely with the stakeholders to understand their needs and develop programmes that align with the demands of the labour market. This could involve creating more apprenticeships or internships that allow students to gain practical experience while learning new skills.
3. Providing CPD for teachers and teacher educators: Another way to improve the quality of VET programmes is by investing in professionalizing instructors. By providing professional development opportunities and training on new technologies and teaching methods, VET instructors can help prepare students for the changing demands of the workforce. A professional cohort of teacher educators would be required (Loo, 2020).
4. Integrating digital skills: As mentioned earlier, digital skills are becoming increasingly important in almost every industry. VET programmes should explore the possibility of integrating these skills into their curricula to ensure that graduates are equipped with the skills needed to succeed in the workforce.
5. Reimagining practical training: The pandemic forced the VET sector to shift to online learning, but this has been particularly challenging for programmes that rely heavily on practical training. To address this, VET institutions could explore alternative ways to provide practical training, such as simulators, virtual reality (e.g., Second Life) or augmented reality tools.
6. Building infrastructure: Investing in VET infrastructure, such as workshop facilities or high-tech classrooms, is essential to ensure that students have access to the latest tools and equipment required for their industry.
7. Supporting individualized learning: Every student is different, and VET institutions must recognize this by providing personalized learning plans that cater for their needs. This could involve designing individualized curricula or offering flexible pathways that allow students to learn at their own pace.

We need to acknowledge the divide-and-rule mentality of the stakeholders in the VET landscape in holding on to their little kingdoms. Enlightened policies (especially from enlightened policy makers), realistic funding commitments (also from a sympathetic government following the forthcoming general election) and collaborative working with the stakeholders could unblock this impasse in the 'English context' (Loo and Jameson, 2017).

The VET sector in further education plays a crucial role in preparing students for the workforce. However, the challenges and opportunities facing the sector require a fresh approach, and the solutions discussed above stake a claim to a much-needed revitalization in the space. By collaborating with employers, upskilling instructors, integrating digital skills, reimagining practical training, building infrastructure and supporting individualized learning, VET programmes can adapt to the changing workforce and help students succeed. It is time to seize these opportunities and rethink VET in further education to ensure it stays relevant and beneficial for the students and the industries they serve.

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