

Debating the First Principles of *English Vocational Education*

Why do we need to debate the principles and philosophy of vocational education?

1. Within the world of academic education, a huge amount of debate and work has taken place over the years about its purposes; the way in which knowledge and information is structured, the means of teaching and assessing and the role of education in society.
2. This has been much less the case for vocational (technical and professional) education. Society and the educational establishment have tended to view this as secondary to academic education and jumped straight into practical delivery rather than considering its wider purposes. This has made technical and vocational education a focus for constant experimentation and change, with a lack of stability and continuity, particularly in England. ***By taking the time to debate and establish the underlying principles and philosophy of English vocational education, we can start to move away from instability towards a more settled and focused vision.***

Why now?

3. There is a high degree of global consensus that high quality vocational education is a fundamental contributor to addressing economic challenges, including globalisation, technological change and the fourth industrial revolution. This is reinforced by messages from respected transnational organisations such as the OECD and World Bank.
4. This is mirrored in domestic policy by a very welcome renewed focus on technical and vocational education in English education, including through the development of new 'T-Levels'. This provides the opportunity for a ***thorough and far-reaching debate about the principles and philosophy of English vocational education*** to provide a structure and context for any future reform.

How can I take part?

5. This is a big topic, so we have begun by breaking it down into **nine specific questions** that are set out in Annex A. We are inviting anyone with an interest in education (including academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners) to provide a brief response to one or more of these questions. We want to spark short, sharp debate and so your response to any one question should be no more than **250 words**. You can submit your contribution(s) at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/VocationalPhilosophy> or by emailing them to oneyton@edge.co.uk by **Friday 16 February**.
6. We will publish a small number of these responses online (with your permission) to encourage debate and discussion during February-March before hosting a seminar in **late March**, chaired by Chris Winch (Professor of Educational Philosophy and Policy, Kings College London) to debate the issues, develop consensus and outline different approaches. A selection of contributors will be invited to take part in the debate and we will publish a write up of the session to encourage further discussion.

Annex A - Key questions

a. What is vocational education?

This question goes right to the heart of what our philosophy of vocational education should be. It has been defined in different contexts in terms of the nature of the learning, its aims and the group of individuals who it is targeted at. *What is the best way to define vocational education in the English context?*

b. To what extent should vocational education be integrated with or distinct from academic education?

Mike Tomlinson's 2004 report set out the case for a single system in which both academic and vocational strands were related in a unified curriculum and qualifications approach. The 14-19 Diplomas constituted what has been referred to as a 'linked' system of different tracks and, more recently, the T-Levels can be seen as part of a more divided system where young people choose between parallel academic and vocational routes. *What structure should underpin the relationship between English vocational and academic education?*

c. What is vocational education for?

There is an ongoing tension within vocational education between helping individuals to develop the broad transferable skills they will need for almost any job, the knowledge of a particular sector and the specific skills they need for an individual occupation. This balance may well shift at different ages or stages in the education process. The changing nature of the labour market is prompting some to argue for a greater focus on transferable skills as individuals are likely to have a more diverse career. *Where should vocational education focus to prepare individuals most effectively for the future?*

d. Who is vocational education for?

There are arguably three competing schools of thought in this area. The first is that vocational education should be of equal standing to academic education. This has underpinned many of the recent statements about Higher and Degree Apprenticeships and T-Level development. The second is a deeply ingrained societal view that vocational education is for those who are not up to an academic route or should be focused principally on re-engagement provision. A third and less prominent position suggests that vocational education is important for all learners and the question is its amount, timing and context. *What is the right target group of individuals for vocational education to focus on?*

e. How important is authentic contact between students and employers?

There have been different views over recent years about the extent to which vocational education can be achieved through work in simulated and training environments. No matter how realistic these are, some feel that they can never be a substitute for authentic experience in a real workplace. Yet the volume of work experience with employers can act as a constraint on the size of number of vocational education

opportunities available. *To what extent does high quality vocational education need to take place in a real work environment?*

f. How should the success of vocational education be recognised?

A large number of different qualifications has been developed and used over recent decades to measure achievement in vocational education. Some argue that these should be 'equivalent' to academic qualifications and others that vocational education needs its own distinct set of measures focused on employability and destinations. A third school of thought suggests that a large Baccalaureate-type award should cover general and vocational education, enabling a degree of specialisation and recognising wider achievements. *What is the right way to measure learner success in vocational education?*

g. What pedagogical approaches should be adopted in vocational education?

Recent reforms have suggested that vocational education can become more effective if it borrows certain pedagogies and modes of assessment from the academic sphere. On the other hand, a significant amount of research has focused on a 'distinctive vocational pedagogy', including employer collaboration, cross-subject working and project-based learning. *What does the most effective pedagogy look like for vocational education and is it distinct from pedagogy in academic education?*

h. What institutional structure should underpin vocational education?

The institutional structure has been the element of the system that has been changed most frequently over the years and links to a number of the other questions here – for instance whether vocational education should take place in distinct institutions or alongside academic education in the same institution. There are arguments about the extent to which institutional diversity is helpful in creating choice or confusing to young people, and how far individual institutions should collaborate with each other to deliver vocational education as part of a broader 'skills ecosystem'. *What is the right institutional structure to support high quality vocational education?*

i. What have we missed?

Are there any other key principles or debates that should feature within an examination of the philosophy of English vocational education?