

# Debating the first principles of English vocational education

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# Introduction

Over recent years, Edge has hosted regular debates on the principles and philosophy underpinning Vocational Education and Training (VET) in England.

High quality vocational education is a key element of equipping young people with the skills they need and making education relevant. But at present the vision is fractured. Due to rapid policy change and deeply ingrained cultural views, there is not yet a consensus about the role and place of VET in our broader education system, and in society at large.

That is why these debates are so important. They bring together leading academics, researchers, employers, trade unions and international experts to discuss some of the key questions that underpin high quality VET.

Continuing our longstanding partnership with Professor Chris Winch (King's College London), Edge hosted a fourth series of debates on the philosophy of vocational education during late 2020 and early 2021.

Following these timely discussions, this report seeks to bring together insights drawn from the debates, as well as more detailed reflections from colleagues working across the VET research and policy landscape.

Although discussions are multi-faceted and inextricably linked, for ease the report is structured into three overarching themes that attracted detailed focus in this series: Work-Based Learning and Professional Judgement, Qualification and Assessment, and the role of Trade Unions and Social Partnerships.

# Overview of the Latest Debates



**Professor Chris Winch**  
Kings College London

Since the Edge Foundation-sponsored debates on the principles of vocational education began in 2018, we have come a long way. The earlier debates established quite a high degree of consensus on what key aspects of the English VET system should look like in terms of aims, curriculum and pedagogies. They proved to be a welcome platform for the exploration in greater detail of important topics that have the potential for exposing disagreements. These earlier debates were also important in establishing a forum through which important issues in vocational education that had, perhaps, not been fully articulated and discussed for some time outside academic circles, were now in circulation amongst a community of policymakers, practitioners and academics. The mutual trust amongst participants and atmosphere of positivity that emerged from these earlier debates set the stage for some more detailed consideration of particular areas where unresolved issues still exist, and where robust but respectful debate can have a real impact.

That there are different points of view in the world of VET practice and policymaking should surprise no-one. In vocational education different interests are brought to bear on the common problem of creating, developing and renewing a nation's workforce. Employers, employees, young people, parents, government, the broader public all have a vital stake in the success of vocational education and a lot to lose when it falls short. At the same time, their priorities do not necessarily coincide. The perspective of a small employer on the need to integrate school leavers into the workforce as apprentices is quite likely to be different from that of young people making the first hesitant step into the adult world. Questions as to learners' scope for developing professional judgement and the potential for allowing them a growing degree of autonomy in the workplace add further considerations when planning and providing for high quality workplace learning. Policymakers and the public will also have points of view that may not coincide with those of employers or young people or, indeed, with each other. The hidden complexities of workplace learning and the relationships between socialisation, learning and contributing to an enterprise's 'bottom line' sometimes make it difficult to see how the practice of workplace learning that benefits all parties can be developed.





The contributors to this part of the debate do not shirk these difficulties but indicate ways in which a positive practical unscrambling of some of the key problems might emerge. Jim Hordern's dissection of different kinds of workplace learning engagement, Bill Esmond's thoughtful critique of craft-based learning and Mark Langhammer's detailed case study of electrician apprenticeship in Northern Ireland all indicate the ways in which such conversations can potentially develop. Lesley Powell provides a welcome reminder that matters may look very different within an informal economy (not as distant from us as we may sometimes think).

The importance of reconciling multiple perspectives is particularly apparent in the area of assessment, the next topic in the 4th Debate. Employers want workers they can rely on; workers want to be able to take their know-how to different workplaces should they desire to do so. Governments claim that they want a highly developed workforce and the public want to be able to rely on the

know-how and commitment of those who provide their food, their housing, their transport, their healthcare, their education and a whole range of other necessities for a good life. Qualifications, as a form of social guarantee of the competence of a worker, are thought to be one of the main ways of satisfying these requirements. But there can be tensions. For example, how is fairness in assessment achieved that, at the same time, meets the interests of all stakeholders involved: assessors, the users of qualifications (both employers and employees), the broader public and the government? One of the satisfying aspects of the debate is that these issues are addressed. Paul Newton looks at the challenges of ensuring competence amongst assessors as does, in a somewhat different way, Viveca Lindberg, writing from a Swedish perspective. From Poland, Horacy Debowski reminds us of the vital interest that governments have in preserving public confidence in vocational qualifications and the steps that they may take to ensure that. From the point of view of an examining body particularly



concerned with the interests of the learner, Janine Oliver draws attention to practices that can protect and nourish those interests while preserving confidence in the qualification system.

In order to identify and reconcile different points of view on such topics as work-based learning and assessment, structures for doing so and habits and attitudes necessary to make them work are needed. This is the third topic in the 4th Debate and it was tackled under the rubric of 'social partnership' or the bringing together of the main interest groups to manage different points of view but also to manage the VET system in ways that satisfy the needs of the different parties. Again, there are complexities here that need further exploration. Lord Glasman sets the scene by drawing attention to the need for an understanding of the balance of structures required at local and national levels and how the division of labour between the two can be optimised. Norman Crowther draws our attention to the need for a culture that can both recognise divergence of interest but also develop ways of negotiation and compromise to accommodate that divergence. He points to the historic difficulties that have existed in England in

achieving this balance. Hermann Nehls reflects on the extensive experience of social partnership in Germany, reinforcing Maurice Glasman's point about the need to harmonise national and local structures, but also drawing attention to an important aspect of the national settlement in Germany, namely the recognition of the autonomy of employees in the workplace and how this is to be developed, thus echoing some of the concerns expressed in the session on workplace learning. Kate Lavender reflects in some detail on what local social partnerships might look like in England and emphasises the need for trust and agreement in ways of working to enable such practices to take root and work effectively.

The fourth series of debates was thus of a varied and wide-ranging nature but provided a much-needed dig into the practical problems of putting both high-level and general agreement on principles into the actual structures and practice of vocational education at both national and local levels. It shows that we should be encouraged to think that such discussions are possible and that a settled practice of reflecting upon and discussing the principles of vocational education in a practical and problem-oriented way can yield results.



# Theme 1 - Work-Based Learning and Professional Judgement

Work-based learning is a vital approach for providing vocational learners with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in modern work settings. However, the topic is deceptively complex and encompasses a multitude of pedagogical approaches. To distinguish between these, Edge welcomed four expert speakers to share their insights into work-based learning and professional judgment which included Dr Jim Hordern (University of Bath), Dr Bill Esmond (University of Derby), Mark Langhammer (National Education Union, Northern Ireland), and Dr Lesley Powell (Nelson Mandela University, South Africa).

Dr Jim Hordern began our debate by offering two contrasting views of the role of the workplace in VET. In the first view, employers take a central role while educational providers supply ad hoc support. Knowledge and learning are culturally and socially situated as learners become part of the workforce with minimal institutional input. The second view sees the workplace as complementary to formal learning. In placement-centred or integrated models of VET, learners access specialised knowledge related to occupations through institutions, but are only able to realise the full potential of this knowledge through workplace practice (where they also develop context-specific knowledge). While both views recognise the importance of work-based learning, each situates it differently in relation to VET, and raises questions about pedagogy, relations between employers and institutions, and learner identity.

Next, Dr Bill Esmond discussed the use of 'craft' within VET. Bill noted a distinction, even within VET, between workplace learning that complements college learning (in more technical vocational areas) and workplace learning that prepares young people for routine employment through socialisation. Drawing on historical evidence of craft practice, Bill argued that this incorporated contextual knowledge, including understandings of materials and use of products not only in the workplace but in the rural economy and natural world. In a time of climate emergency and a drive for a greener approach to new deals, Bill suggests that



VET should contextualise the practical skills associated with work-based learning within their surrounding environment, preparing a workforce more broadly sensitive to the planet.

For a view from the ground, we heard from Mark Langhammer who offered a case study of electrician apprenticeships. In Northern Ireland, employers and trainees are placed at the centre, with additional support from colleges and the Electrical Training Trust (ETT - who provide employer liaison and business support). The curriculum is driven by the ETT and the National Electrotechnical Training Organisation (the industry awarding body). Apprentices spend one or two days a week learning health and safety, transferable skills, and key competences. However, they mostly learn on the



job. To qualify, they must obtain their AM2 qualification (a practical assessment), take exams (for theory) and their employer must sign them off. An employer-led curriculum, well-cared-for apprentices, rigorous testing and paid apprenticeships all contribute to a high-quality qualification with excellent market currency.

Finally, we heard from Dr Lesley Powell who brought a South African perspective on work-based learning, which she noted typically focuses on formal work, often in large enterprises. However, the reality in South Africa is that 61% of people work in informal and insecure jobs, such as street vendors, bakers and mechanics. Furthermore, research with young people in urban townships highlights a desire to contribute to their communities via socially useful work. This has meant entirely rethinking approaches to VET in South Africa.

For instance, the theoretical distinction between vocational and academic pedagogies is not one that young South Africans relate to. Rather, they see things

more in terms of 'meaningful opportunities' to take their lives forward. The language of VET 'pathways' is also problematic, Powell argued. A more accurate description (reflecting financial instability and the uncertainty of work) would be 'oscillation', shifting back and forth between vocational education, formal and informal work. Ultimately, regardless of geography, VET needs to move away from mere considerations of income and utility to incorporate individual wellbeing and social entrepreneurship. Crucially, future definitions of VET must be shaped with greater input from minority and disadvantaged voices.

Next, Bill Esmond outlines the importance of craft in VET in helping prepare a workforce with practical skills and greater sensitivities to the planet, whilst Jim Hordern reflects on two dominant perspectives on workplace learning and its implications for VET learners.





# Craft in Vocational Philosophy



**Dr Bill Esmond**  
University of Derby

Few people in technical and vocational education are professional philosophers; yet everyone in England's FE sector seems to be reaching for abstract notions that add meaning to their work and learning. Sometimes these concepts are vague and contradictory: competing notions of 'professionalism' have been a case in point for several years.

One of the concepts most widely used across education, but particularly in technical and vocational subjects, is the notion of craft. This expression is used to describe the practices and identities of skilled workers, and how those aspiring to become skilled might behave as vocational learners. Some of us hold 'craft' qualifications. Michael Gove, in a speech to Edge Foundation nearly a decade ago, talked about 'practical craft skills', and cited Richard Sennet's 'wonderful book' *The Craftsman*. Teacher-trainers sometimes use craft to convey the conscientious, patient and attentive attitudes they seek to develop in teachers. The term has multiple meanings,

all related to methods of learning and work, and the places where they are used. These ambiguities may be one of the reasons for its popularity.

The international use of 'craft' refers ultimately to a mode of economic activity that preceded the mechanised production associated with the industrial revolution. When craft is referenced, it often seeks to call up virtues associated with this mode of production: Bill Lucas and Ellen Spencer's *City & Guilds guide* commends attention to materials, patient repetition, moderation (avoiding over-working the task). They also reference Sennet, whose work is really a metaphor for the pragmatist philosophy which, while suggesting alternatives to a performance-driven world, seems distant from the real lives of contemporary workers and learners.

Chris Winch cites a more authentic account of craft: George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop*, a technical account of craft production that captures its skills, its workers and their rural lives with sympathy but without sentimentality. Lauded by cultural and historical commentators but usually out-of-print, this account of farm vehicle-building at the end of the 19th Century was written as this industry was being replaced by the mechanisation of both vehicles and their production. Winch cites this as an example of a mode of learning which 'is essentially non-academic and practical' (2007, p.17).



This kind of learning is sometimes depicted as an authentic alternative to learning in schools, colleges and especially universities. The impetus towards apprenticeships and industry placements and so on is part of what Sukarieh and Tannock (2020) call 'deschooling from above', where not everyone gains access to post-school education because we deem that theoretical understandings and school subjects are not part of what they need to know. Even within educational forms close to work, a divide is now opening between those whose learning at work has an acknowledged theoretical basis and those who are simply being socialised into routine employment (Atkins and Esmond, forthcoming).

Learning at work surely shouldn't mean learning skills devoid of any broader context which might give meaning even to repetitive activities. Sturt (1923) describes learning that took place entirely at work, where the expertise of the craft workers was based on their experience of dealing with a variety of repairs, materials, and customer requirements. If this differed from school subject knowledge, it went beyond what an NVQ assessment might capture, with systematised knowledge generalised to determine the measurements of vehicles and uses of different timbers. Sturt's work

is permeated with a sense of the intimate connection between the workforce and the rural economy, society and land to which they were intimately connected.

In a time of climate emergency, isn't the idea of developing a workforce more sensitive to the planet current? Rather than separating 'practical skills' from contextual knowledge, shouldn't the question be how to link practical skills to really useful knowledge about the world in which work is taking place? Of course, this would surely be an understanding not of an 'organic community' but of a broader world, including the relationship between local industries and the places in which their supply chains begin.

Sturt was unsentimental about progress, introducing into his own workplace some of the practical improvements and mechanisation that he recognised hastened the end of the craft economy. His writing both looks back towards the disappearing world and forward to an improved one. Doesn't this also suggest ideas about what educational practices in, or linked to, the workplace ought to be about today, rather than the sentimentalisation of earlier work practices?





# Two Views of Workplace Learning in VET: their Assumptions and Implications



**Dr Jim Hordern**  
University of Bath

We could say there are two principal views of the role of workplace learning in Vocational Education and Training (VET). The first view positions workplace learning as the defining feature of VET: the more we can learn at and through work the more 'vocational' our learning becomes. The second seeks to integrate workplace learning with learning within educational institutions, suggesting that a vocational education always benefits from some substantive learning away from the workplace. In this short piece I would like to reflect on the assumptions behind these two views, and the implications of those assumptions for learners on vocational programmes.

The first view highlights the advantages of immersive workplace experiences, emphasising the embodied, socio-material and participative aspects of learning, distinguishing these from wholly cognitive or acquisitive conceptions of learning. Workplace learning enables apprentices or other vocational learners to experience

the actuality of practice in ways that are only partially possible in simulated environments or in classrooms. Time spent in the workplace together with more experienced practitioners, engaged in real workplace tasks that contribute to organisational or occupational objectives, have the highest value in a vocational education; the argument goes. Learning at work also enables the formation of identities and dispositions seen as legitimate by workplace colleagues: workplace learners quickly become part of the team, participating in the collective effort, and sharing experiences that become part of the 'war stories' of the workplace.

But what are the assumptions of such a view in terms of vocational expertise and the role of employers and institutions? Placing the workplace at the centre of vocational education suggests that expertise becomes intimately connected with specific situated workplace practices. Although such expertise may be 'transferable' to other very similar contexts through forms of recontextualisation, there is no inherent guarantee. Work groups change, technology changes, products and systems change, and as this happens the vocational learners will need to adapt and update their expertise. In extreme scenarios, occupations may disappear, and entirely new capacities may be required. In other sectors, longstanding practices may persist. It might reasonably be asked what are educational institutions able to do to prepare a learner for this? Is it better to maximise time spent at work, with opportunities to reflect on the learning process, participate in workplace practice and improve adaptability than to study within an educational institution? The role of the educational institution or provider may therefore be seen as marginal. Providers may perhaps be contracted to offer some specific input or to undertake or validate assessment.

The second view suggests that educational institutions have a necessary role in supporting engagement with vocational knowledge and can provide a base from which learners can gain critically reflective experiences of work that may be of considerable benefit within a future career. Such an approach does not discount the value of workplace learning however, recognising



that workplace experience is a core element of any vocational education. But rather than concentrate on immersion and acculturation, here the emphasis is instead on selecting and appraising workplace experiences that will be particularly valuable for the development of learner understanding and practical expertise. The learner is less likely to be rewarded for taking on the habits and dispositions of practitioners in a specific workplace, although it may be recognised that these are important for accessing employment.

This second view assumes that the acquisition of some theoretical, propositional or declarative knowledge is likely to be important in VET, and the educational institution is seen as the best place where such knowledge can be made available to learners. Certain declarative knowledge may be perceived as inextricable from an occupation or sector, as some applied scientific knowledge is in health, construction or engineering. There may also be a focus on the differentiated nature of workplace experience, with some experiences seen as particularly rich opportunities for developing expertise, and some organisations and sectors better at making these available to learners. This may lead to consideration of the dynamics of power and control in organisations, and potential improvements in workplace practice based on contemporary research and innovation.

There could be considerable benefits if learners from different organisations undertake such activities together, with each learner bringing their own 'situated' workplace perspectives for comparison. Such assumptions about vocational knowledge and learning also suggest the necessity for carefully developed and well-integrated partnerships between educational institutions and employers, for the longer-term benefit of vocational learners and the industries they work in. Dual system arrangements for VET, such as those in Germany, prioritise this integration between vocational schools and employers as the basis for VET, with the state also playing an important role.

Both these views see workplace experience as central to VET and the development of occupational expertise. However, while the first view foregrounds the workplace above all else, the second view emphasises the necessity for integration of workplace experience with structured educational activity. While the two views are contrasted here, it is possible for VET programmes to blend them, perhaps starting with an integrated approach and moving gradually towards a more immersive experience with the workplace at the centre. Such an approach may enable learners to develop expertise that serves them well over the longer term while enabling them to make a seamless transition to working life as they conclude their VET programme.



## Theme 2 - Qualifications and Assessment

The second theme in Edge's fourth series of debates focused on qualifications and assessment. This section of the report presents some provocations and reflections on a topic which has rightly necessitated greater attention throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The debate featured four speakers: Paul Newton (Ofqual), Janine Oliver (NCFE), Horacy Dębowski (Central Examination Board, Poland), and Dr Viveca Lindberg (Stockholm University, Sweden).



Paul Newton raised the issue of assessment competence in the UK VET system - namely, the ability of assessors to effectively measure a learner's knowledge, skills, and behaviours. He outlined two models. The first, a traditional nurturing model, in which an expert master connected to a guild with shared standards is responsible for assessing learners over time. The second model, end-point assessment, applies tools such as sampling and standardisation as learners are assessed at the end of their learning journey. However, the complexities of introducing these tools into assessment processes, would require assessors to have both domain knowledge and an intimate understanding of process. Following the Richard Review (2012) the UK adopted this second model. However it is noted that the shortage of assessment competences in any sector is a significant issue currently impacting VET assessment.

Janine Oliver outlined some obstacles to innovation in assessment. First, a move towards independent assessment has led to a lack of trust in VET assessment models whilst compliance and regulation are noted to produce a risk averse environment to innovation. The outcome of increasingly transactional relationships between assessment and learning providers means learners' needs are not being met. Part of NCFE's solution would be to create a VET onboarding system. This would benchmark a learner's knowledge, skills, and behaviours before they start training, helping determine which path is right for them alongside regular, formative micro-assessments to support educators, providers, employers and learners.

Horacy Dębowski offered an international perspective from Poland's state-regulated, standardised VET system which was introduced in 2004. It uses a complex qualification model underpinned by a fairly rigid end-point assessment model, over all aspects of which the Central Examination Board has ultimate authority. The main rationale for adopting this approach was in response to concerns around a 'push to pass' culture and a devaluation of Poland's VET qualifications. However, while centralisation may have addressed this issue, new ones have been raised around the inflexibility of standardised, summative assessments in relation to transversal competences (e.g. learning to learn, entrepreneurship). As a result, like the UK, Poland is currently seeking new ways to develop and measure such skills, with ideas ranging from project-based qualifications to e-portfolios.

Finally, Viveca Lindberg offered some fascinating insights into the Swedish VET system. Sweden's qualification and assessment model is underpinned by an ideology of equity, in theory. Namely, 'aspects' (what is assessed) and 'level descriptors' (how students are measured) are simplified to the point that anyone can understand them. As such, VET assessments follow a

generic framework, regardless of discipline whilst the curriculum dictates teachers have ultimate authority. Assessment takes place through a three-way discussion between teacher, student and workplace supervisor. Ideally, teachers are experts in the vocation, while supervisors work closely with the student. In reality, however, assessors – appointed by individual schools – often lack familiarity with the vocation whilst a student's formal supervisor may not work closely with them. The result is a focus on behaviours, rather than knowledge and skills. While Sweden's underpinning ideology of equity is well-intended, there are significant flaws in practice.

This debate emphasised the imperative to define the terminology we use in relation to qualification and assessment, taking care to distinguish between the aims of assessment and the tools we choose to realise different aims. Next, Paul Newton (Ofqual) shares more detailed reflections on the occupational competence of assessors, while Janine Oliver (NCFE) offers a learner centred perspective on the challenges of the current system, but also ways to improve innovation which can offer long-term benefits to learners.



# Competence in Assessing Occupational Competence



**Paul Newton**  
Ofqual

How hard can it be to decide whether an apprentice has become good enough at their job to be judged occupationally competent? Assuming that the person making this assessment is occupationally competent in their own right, shouldn't the assessment process be fairly unproblematic? Isn't it just a matter of watching the apprentice doing their job, and simply observing how well they perform?

It is tempting to think like this because it resonates with the classic image of a novice undertaking an apprenticeship under the tutelage of their master. Working closely alongside the apprentice for years on end, the master continually observes them, and constantly checks their progress. As an expert in his field, and an active member of the Guild, the master knows instinctively what it means to be competent and is always on the lookout for signs of strengths and weaknesses during each and every interaction.

In the context of an ongoing nurturing relationship like this, assessment seems almost natural; like a father teaching his daughter how to tie her shoelaces. There seems no reason to assume that it requires any particular competence in assessing. This kind of assessment is unproblematic. Isn't it?

In fact, apprenticeship assessment has rarely, if ever, been as unproblematic as this story seems to suggest (see Wolf, 1995). However, since the Richard Review, and the switch to End Point Assessment, the challenges of assessing competence have magnified considerably.

When we remove assessment from an extended period of teaching and learning, we must immediately face the 'coverage versus practicality' dilemma. On the one hand, we should aim to gather as much assessment information as possible, to ensure that all relevant aspects of knowledge, skills, and behaviour are covered, across the full range of occupational contexts. On the other hand, our assessment(s) will need to be administered under a variety of constraints including time, human resources, cost, security, and so on. The only way to resolve this dilemma is to reconceptualise assessment as a formal process that is both strategic and technical.





Our master was awash with assessment information, derived from every minute of every day that he spent with his apprentice. In a situation like this, he might not need to worry too much about the nature or quality of the assessment information that is continuously being emitted and absorbed. The signal will surely make it through with the passage of time.

Our end-point practitioners, however, require a completely different mind-set. They recognise that they will only ever be able to gather a small amount of assessment information, which means they will have to make every single piece of information count. To achieve this, they will need to become an assessment specialist; tasked with the goal of eliciting, capturing, extracting, and interpreting assessment information – information on the competence of each learner – as efficiently as humanly possible.

How difficult can it be to assess occupational competence? Well, when it is no longer embedded within an extended period of teaching and learning, it can be very difficult indeed. To do it well requires a particularly specific competence – competence in the technology of assessment.

The technology of assessment is based upon a variety of principles, which include simplifying, sampling, standardising, and generalising. It requires solutions to a variety of technical problems for each assessment context, including how to:

- construct a plausible model of each occupational competence, which can then be deconstructed into elements of knowledge, skill, and behaviour
- design, develop, and implement approaches that are capable of eliciting and capturing a full sample of information on learner competence, without introducing irrelevant noise (e.g. sampling frameworks, tasks, observations, discussions)
- design, develop, and implement approaches that are capable of extracting and interpreting all of that assessment information, again without introducing irrelevant noise (e.g. aggregation models, marking schemes, quality assurance processes)



This technology of assessment is designed to combat the two major technical threats to validity – signal deficiency and signal contamination – and the related threats of unreliability, bias, and incomparability (Newton, 2020).

The bottom line, here, is that it is not enough to rely on occupational competence to assess occupational competence. As such, one of the biggest challenges laid down by the reform of apprenticeship assessment initiated by the Richard Review (2012) was how best to conceptualise and operationalise the joint responsibility of the industry expert and the assessment expert for the co-construction of valid end-point assessments; to ensure that each and every stage of the assessment lifecycle is engineered to achieve both occupational authenticity and technical credibility. Yet, the most pressing, pragmatic challenge was for the sector to upskill substantially in terms of assessment competence; and this still remains an area that we need to invest in.

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# Case Study – NCFE Finding Innovation Within Regulation



**Janine Oliver**  
NCFE

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the already heavily scrutinised world of education further into the spotlight of the media, the Government and the public eye. Where 2020 exposed the challenges within our current formal education system, it also highlighted some of the opportunities to improve education and training, particularly assessment, for future generations.

NCFE's core purpose is to promote and advance learning, helping to create a fairer, more inclusive society. In summer 2020, we set out on a mission to build a learner journey that brings the purpose and value of assessment at different points of the journey to life. Our vision for an end-to-end learner journey will support learners to grow beyond the constraints of their subject area, develop their ability to learn and adapt and, to build the agency they need, to succeed in an ever-changing job market.

To build on our understanding of the current context, challenges and opportunities faced, we engaged with experts from the academic and regulated awarding and assessment world, as well as EdTech organisations,

corporates, JISC and other future focussed stakeholders. We found that:

- There is a duplication of provision due to a disconnect within systems and data across the learner journey which makes it difficult for learners and educators to evidence prior achievements and learning. This means learners may be unnecessarily asked to evidence the same knowledge or skill in multiple assessments.
- There is a lack of connection between data that sits in institutions' learning management systems and the outcomes of assessment within awarding organisations (AOs) and the information that is held by the associated regulatory bodies. This prevents everyone from seeing the full picture and therefore limits the insight that could be utilised to improve the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, progress and outcomes for learners.
- Recent policy direction has a focus on high stakes; synoptic assessment at the end of a programme and this has had a detrimental impact on assessment practice and capability in relation to on-programme assessment.
- There is an ongoing emphasis on knowledge recall, at the expense of skills (particularly meta and technical) within education policy.
- High stakes and stressful exams cause concern about inclusivity, particularly in relation to neurodiversity. This raises the question of how conducive exams are in allowing learners to demonstrate their best possible performance and how well they reflect the world of work.
- Fear of regulatory impact and 'compliance culture' leads to risk aversion and could limit innovation in the regulated AO community.
- Within VTQ, 'competence' is often deemed to be the standard to be assessed, as opposed to raising standards to levels of excellence or, 'mastery' - findings suggested that this is a major inhibitor to productivity and competitiveness for the UK.

- Skills shortages will continue to increase and change as organisations continue to flex and adapt to the new world. It takes too long in the current system to get new qualifications and standards through the development and sign off process ready for learners to enrol.
- Transactional relationships between providers and AOs means that we continue to miss the opportunity to deliver added value to learners.

To improve the regulated education system, we need to consider:

- How we best provide all learners with agency across a lifetime of learning, enabling them to choose the path, pace and provision that is best suited to their individual needs and objectives within the context of a dynamically changing world.
- How we build a culture of innovation within regulated education, so that organisations and individuals have the freedom to try new approaches to learning and assessment. In doing this we will be able to test approaches that are more aligned to the purpose of the assessment and offer more inclusive methods.
- How we build stronger partnerships between providers delivering on-programme learning and AOs. These organisations need to commit to sharing data across the duration of the learner's journey. This

will provide insight to improve teaching, learning, assessment, progression and outcomes for learners using credible data to pinpoint where interventions are required, or improvements can be made.

- How to work with government and regulators to develop more agile, responsive and efficient approaches to the development of standards, qualifications and programmes that can respond to the rapidly changing skills needs of employers and best prepare learners to find meaningful and sustainable employment.
- Ways to embrace technology that adds value and gives educators time back to focus on what makes the greatest difference for learners. For example, using technology to automate feedback to be more time efficient and free up educators to concentrate on content delivery and supporting learners. A good example of this is the work by EdTech company, SPARX, who use data and analytics to stretch and challenge more able learners while ensuring intervention with learners who need more support.
- Lessons learned from other industries such as oil and gas, who have had great success using 3D immersive training platforms to create virtual plant environments using a variety of real-life scenarios. This is used very effectively to train staff and assess how they respond to situations, including disaster events in a safe and controlled way.



## Theme 3 - Trade Unions and Social Partnership

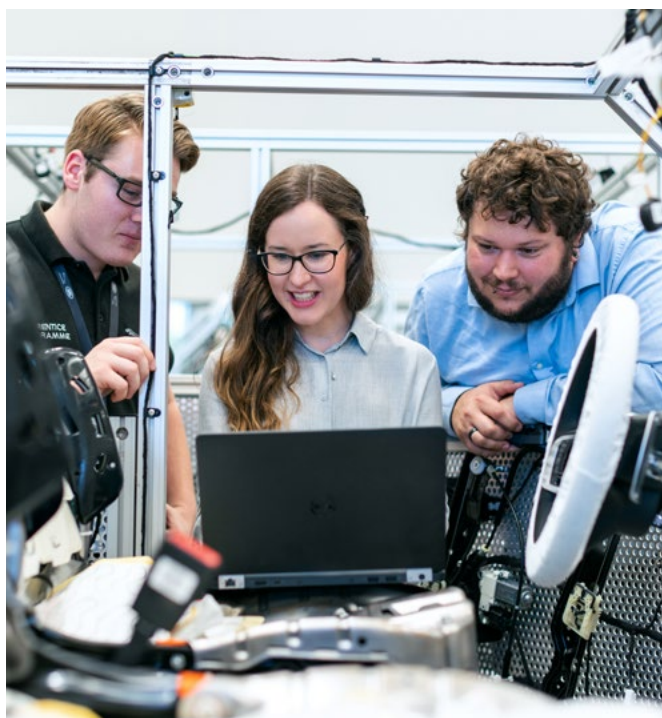
The third theme in this series of debates explored the role of trade unions and the social partnerships needed for high-quality VET. Three excellent speakers shared their thoughts which included Labour peer Lord Maurice Glasman, Norman Crowther (National Official for Post-16 Education, National Education Union), and Hermann Nehls (former Head of VET at the German Trade Union Confederation).

First, Lord Glasman reflected on the current state of Britain's social contract. He argued a change in the political consensus is approaching, driven by a move away from neoliberal globalisation. In short, tackling working-class disenfranchisement within ex-industrialised regions must be at the core of any new system, which would necessitate an independence from party politics, greater state-support for FE colleges. The political challenge, then, is to build consensus around required policies and institutions. One vision he shared was for a decentralised system, where labour market rules are state-determined, with training delivered at local authority level within an institutional partnership of colleges, local business associations, trade unions and local authorities.

Norman Crowther addressed the challenge we face in building an effective social partnership with trade union involvement. Crowther suggested this requires an ethos of mediation that England currently lacks. Repeated top-down attempts at reform have exacerbated the problem. Our divisive model of industrial relations is in stark contrast to countries like Sweden and Germany, who have struck a better balance. The problem, Crowther argued, is rooted in the policy turbulence of the early 1990s. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 cut links between FE and local authorities. Alongside pressure on FE colleges to make cuts, this has led to degraded industrial relations, the erosion of workforce expertise and a lack of collective bargaining power. Successive governments have created solutions to immediate problems, rather than looking at the long-term issues.

Crowther sees hope with institutions like the Industrial Strategy Council and approaches like the Independent Commission on The College of the Future. Both have recommended measures that would defuse industrial tensions, like bringing FE pay in line with school teachers. While difficult discussions lie ahead, he said, all parties must be ambitious in their aims.

Finally, Hermann Nehls - having helped shape the German qualification framework - had three key insights to share. First was the importance of clear apprenticeship competences. In Germany, competences are closely linked to what he calls 'reflectiveness' (or what we might call problem-solving skills and critical thinking). Colleges, universities and general schools adopt these, as well as the German VET system, which is integrated into the broader education system.





Apprenticeships result in higher status qualifications in a more equitable system.

Second, Nehls flagged the importance of quality standards. Germany's Vocational Training Act – a compromise between state, labour unions and business – clearly defines apprenticeship procedures and assessment. It also stipulates standards for individual rights, wages and working conditions. These national VET standards contribute to improved trust between employer associations and trade unions, leading to greater levels of confidence amongst employers to invest in VET, while workers are assured their qualifications have national market value.

Whilst the processes of mediation would be necessary to develop any sort of co-ordination between colleges, employers and State, Nehls argued that there's little sense in discussing coherent social partnership without systemic cooperation between industry and trade unions. He emphasised that the co-operation needed

for effective social partnerships comes from building an institutional and legislative framework together for a coherent system between employers and unions. This point was taken up by Kevin Rowan of the TUC, who argued that employer-trade union co-operation on VET worked where there was the right framework for it to flourish.

Discussions about a system with such entrenched problems are not without challenges. The debate sparked some impassioned exchanges and produced some thought-provoking suggestions for possible ways forward. Next, Dr Kate Lavender provides an overview of how we define social partnerships, Hermann Nehls reflects more widely on the opportunities for a closer social partnership between labour unions and VET, while Norman Crowther considers the role of vocational institutions in settling issues between localism, civil society and the economy.





# Social Partnerships in UK Vocational Education – Some Opportunities and Tensions



**Dr Kate Lavender**  
University of Huddersfield

Social partnerships are a long-standing feature of work done in the education and training sector. However, these partnerships are complex in their variety and form. In vocational education and training contexts, social partners are often representatives of the labour market, most common partners are employers and employer organisations such as trade unions and professional or regulatory bodies. The aim of most social partnerships is to bring together those who benefit from vocational education and training into developing and shaping education and training policy and practice.

What are social partnerships? Whilst social partnerships in education and training are complex, it is helpful to consider two umbrella categories: national social partnerships and local social partnerships. National social partnerships are those developed in response to changing national policy and labour market conditions.

These social partnerships often involve members with interests outside of the local community or labour market, are more global in their ambitions for vocational education and training, and are wider in their localities e.g. trailblazer groups for apprenticeships, consultation groups for T-levels (Billett et al. 2007). Concerns and interests held by these partners are often around developing and maintaining vocational standards. Local social partnerships are held to comprise localised networks that connect some combination of local community groups, education and training providers, industry, and government to work on local issues and community-building activities (Seddon & Billett, 2004).

Both national and local social partnerships offer opportunities for enhancing employability and the curriculum. A central feature of many vocational courses and college provision is engagement with employers to ensure the curriculum reflects the vocational reality of occupations. Occupational skills and employer needs develop at a fast pace and social partnerships can be important in ensuring the vocational curriculum is current and responsive. Potentially, involvement in social partnerships enables teachers of vocational curriculum to maintain currency in their industry expertise and therefore support those completing vocational qualifications and entering, or re-entering, the labour market.

However, as with any work involving multiples actors and stakeholders there are also inevitable tensions arising from differences in the needs and interests of different social partners. Employers or employer organisations may have interests in developing vocational education that responds to their immediate skills needs, rather than the future needs of the workforce. Furthermore, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are often under-represented in such development work, which is reflective of the ongoing tension that providers of vocational education and training face in responding to local labour market and community needs, as well as national economic priorities. Arguably, such national



priorities do not take account of and accommodate the diverse needs of individual communities and local economies. Therefore, considerations for social partnerships when developing a vocational curriculum and offer should reflect both localised and national imperatives and priorities (Billett, 2000).

Despite tensions, effective local social partnership involvement in the development of education and training can also offer social benefits in responding to the needs of individuals and society. However, “to be effective, social partnerships require partners and participants to understand that social partnerships work in ways directed towards achieving shared goals or, more likely, a common focus of concern” (Coffield, 2000 cited in Billett et al, 2007 p.638). Shared interests and values in relation to education and training provision are paramount, and real cooperation involves respecting mutual interest and trust from all partners. Some of the best examples of these partnerships come from areas of provision where these shared values and interests are well established amongst partners. For example, ESOL teachers, providers and communities forge social partnerships with other local community bodies and employers to provide opportunities for students

to engage in work-based learning whilst supporting language development. Similarly, Employability and Life Skills teachers and providers forge social partnerships with local employers and the local council to develop a curriculum that is rich in opportunity for progression in vocational areas and paid work opportunities. These examples demonstrate social partnerships that have a shared understanding of the value that marginalised and often overlooked individuals contribute to the workforce. In terms of social partnerships in vocational education, a lot could be learned from them.

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# The Role of Trade Unions and Social Partnership in Education



**Hermann Nehls**  
DGB (Germany)

A robust, highly valued apprenticeship system requires many elements. For the apprenticeship model to compete with alternative approaches to preparing workers for careers, the employers, workers and general public must have confidence in the quality of skills that apprentices learn and apply. When attempting to build a well-functioning and large-scale apprenticeship system, creating mechanisms to ensure rigorous assessment of the skills and competencies of apprentices will become vital for achieving the system's reputation for quality.

Vocational education and training in Germany is based on a fundamental social consensus. In a model for cooperation, the public sector (government, schools) recognises the private sector as an equal partner. By including employers and labour unions on a formalised basis, the dual system enjoys a high level of acceptance. The apprenticeship system in Germany has a pluralist model of governance. It is based on a close partnership between employers, labour unions, and the federal and state governments. Experts appointed by employers and labour unions exert considerable influence over the content and form of the dual system to ensure that their requirements and interests are taken into account.

Responsible action by all partners is a precondition for efficiency. The entire initial vocational training, unless conducted at universities, is governed by the German Vocational Training Act and the Crafts Code. This legislation governs all major issues related to vocational education and training, ranging from the design of apprenticeship agreements, to training conditions, to rights and responsibilities of the apprentices and the training companies. It also stipulates, above all, how trades and occupations are created. This coordinated, pluralist governance in the apprenticeship system ensures all stakeholders are involved at the national, regional/intermediary, and local level, in accordance with their expertise and interests in the dialogue on vocational education and training. This applies above all to employers, labour unions, vocational schools, and VET researchers.

## System for quality and skills assurance

Nationwide standards for government-recognised basic and advanced training occupations provide a high degree of transparency regarding qualifications. The final examination (end-point assessment) is especially important in this respect; it represents an important tool for quality assurance in apprenticeships. The structure of the relevant examination, the expertise to be tested, and the duration and weighting of individual test elements are specified in the examination requirements, which are part of the respective training regulation.

Training regulations form the basis for forward-looking apprenticeships and other vocational education and training, which, in turn, are a prerequisite for lifelong learning. The modern administrative tools necessary for forward-looking training regulations are designed in a three-phase process: preliminary research/analysis of qualifications needs, administrative tool development, and evaluation of administrative tools. Certified trades are updated (development of administrative measures) in the apprenticeship system pursuant to the Vocational Training Act and the Crafts Code.



### Labour unions in Germany insist on a broad understanding of competence

In the development of the German Qualifications Framework (DQR), labour unions have advocated a concept of competence that includes vocational, personal and social dimensions. It aims at occupational competence and personal development including the ability to plan and make decisions. Points of reference are holistic work tasks, the requirements of the labour market under the aspect of long-term usability of qualifications, individual competence development, participation in company and societal processes, and reflexive ability to act. Reflexivity means the conscious, critical and responsible assessment and evaluation of actions on the basis of experience and knowledge. It should enable individually and socially responsible actions and developments in the world of life and work. This understanding of competence is now part of the DQR.

### Importance of the reputation of the system

The Vocational Training Act and the Crafts Code create a unified basis for apprenticeships and other vocational education and training, including determining the conditions for examinations. Through their standardisation under law, the examinations become part of the public education system in Germany. A final examination in vocational training is part of upper

secondary education, which encompasses general education schools and vocational education and training. The testing system for German apprentices incorporates elements from the education and employment systems. Passing a vocational exam is a major requirement for entering an occupation and provides access to university study. It also grants entitlements that secure long-term access to the labour market.

The procedure for developing and updating occupational profiles aims to strike a balance among various stakeholder interests. Occupational profiles, training regulations, and curricula are an expression of empirically identified skill requirements as well as standardised guidelines resulting from educational goals. It is a compromise between the interests of the individual company in customised qualifications, the interest of the sector in more broad-based occupational profiles, and the interest of the individual in possibilities for professional development. The broad-based occupational profiles are good for companies and workers. When changes occur in work and business processes, companies are able to rely on an existing workforce that does not require expensive and time-consuming retraining. They can tailor their training in part to their specific needs. At the same time, workers receive sufficient general occupational training that allows them to be mobile and grow over time in their careers. They gain long-term access to the labour market through a vocational degree and occupational certificate that enables them to transfer their skills to other sectors.





# Toward a Vocational College System and Social Partnership Arrangement: Proposal for a Settlement



**Norman Crowther**  
National Education Union

The broad political context that we are currently in is significant for the future direction of FE, Skills and College formation. In fact, while we may think that the recent White Paper 'Skills for Jobs (2021)' is underwhelming in meeting the challenges of our times, it represents an attempt to engage with much deeper issues that we need to think through.

First, there is the debate around localism and devolution which focuses on institutional arrangements in local and regional economies. This debate raises issues of democratic accountability and the relation to the State.

Second, there are the discussions around what sort of economy and State we want that converges with the localism agenda. The disruption in this area is the impact by populism and the variety of perceptions of what is needed for a local civil life and economy to flourish. It is currently being fought around the trope of 'the red wall'.

Third, is the specific location and role of vocational colleges in these areas of concern. There is little doubt

that vocational colleges are a bridging institution between localism, civil society and economy. But is their current institutional shape (in all its aspects) sufficient for the task ahead?

## The importance of the local

It is worth noting that the Government's Industrial Strategy Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth is fundamentally concerned with infrastructure, local economies and skills, among other things. The relation between local and regional economic regeneration appears coterminous now with democratic accountability (the 'red wall' trope).

Such themes were articulated (and elaborated) in the College of the Future commission as People, Place and Productivity. This extensive and rich consultation found that colleges played a significant role in civil and local economic life. It also began to explore further potential in extending the relations of colleges to national and sectoral priorities, such as the upskilling of the NHS workforce and, in discussions at the TUC, in reshaping collective bargaining and social partnership along the lines of the NHS which has a range of trade union interests at different levels of engagement.

Reflections on the industrial strategy by the previously established (and now defunct) Industrial Strategy Council in its last annual report noted that many of the aims of the Strategy were not being met and that the priority on skills was not emerging. It also confirmed that new relations with trade unions around social partnerships and sector deals would be a preferred route to social and economic growth (Industrial Strategy Council, 2021).

This draws our attention to the democratic deficit contained in government policy. It argues for 'levelling up' and regeneration but does not emphasise institutional change and co-ordination (where each partner has the same information, visibility and voice).



For example, the inclusion in the White Paper of the British Chambers of Commerce as a new regional partner for skills development, and the heightened role of employers in local skills plans, only shores up the interest of capital over labour – which is exactly what the political literature is arguing needs rebalancing.

### It's always about politics: but should it be?

Recent political literature in this area provides key ideas primarily drawn from the work of Maurice Glasman and associated thinkers who, very broadly, agree that a rebalancing of State, Market and Civil Society is needed.

The argument here is that a fundamental indicator of this relation is found in skills development and the role of vocational colleges. Very simply, the greater the emphasis on capital the less so on labour and the consequent institutions that support its role and reproduction: trade unions, vocational colleges and, more widely, local authorities and services and the NHS.

The case of trade unions, for example, is clear in Jon Cruddas' *The Dignity of Labour* (2021), where the decline in trade union importance as a stakeholder and as a check on State policy can be tracked against the rise in inequality, particularly in the increase in wealth of the top 1% who share not only the greater financial advantages but also political influence – due to the dominance of the Market as a perceived 'actor'.

Other forms of hollowing out can be seen in the decline of funding to public sector services and public sector pay, both highly noticeable in the FE sector. As the FE

sector provides a public service to local communities, particularly in the form of moving to employment and wider civil engagement (personal transformation), it would have seemed to qualify as a key component in State thinking around 'levelling up'. However, we appear to have hit the tidemark of State willingness to let go. It recognises that the market model has not worked in the sector (in 2015 the Area Based Reviews announced the 'end of the experiment of incorporation') and the current Education Secretary has argued for a more co-ordinated skills system similar to the German model, but there is no sense of a fuller engagement with new thinking around civil society and what this means for the role of the State around skills and vocational colleges. Our task here is to encourage this thinking and see if a consensus can be reached around a new settlement of State, Market and Civil Society.

### FE colleges: a new settlement?

In recent times the issue of the place of FE colleges has been of real debate. This is little wonder. Prior to incorporation through The Further and Higher Education Act (1992), FE colleges had extensive links to local communities and businesses due to their governance being with Local Authority control. Following incorporation, FE colleges became autonomous institutions that were intended to forge a new national educational sector in their own right. However, the resulting funding arrangements and market philosophy that drove those funding arrangements for around 450 centrally driven institutions (via funding levers and government policies) had the following consequences:

- Mergers into larger Colleges and College groups. There are now 168 FE colleges.
- Absorption of Sixth Form Colleges into general FE. There are now 51 standalone Sixth Form Colleges. The 102 SFCs in 1992 are now either 16-19 Academies or merged into FE colleges.
- The 2 specialist Art and Design colleges, 13 land-based, and 10 institutes of adult learning are also important to note.
- There are also now a number of hybrid entities due to government policies since 1992: National Colleges, Institutes of Technology (both mainly working with current FE colleges), UTCs (14-19) and 2 University based FE colleges (with designated status within the university governance structure: Bolton and Portsmouth) and, of course, 16-19 Academies.

- Hollowing out of a local ethos in the search for a more corporate model of governance and strategy: either via colleges seeking national profile (mergers with other colleges across the country), international interests, HE visibility (11% of provision is HE based) or developing a multi-institutional shape (via Academisation or College Grouping), and even via broader college lobbying groups.
- The 2015 Area Based Reviews expressed the 'end of the experiment' of Incorporation but merely aggravated the issue by offering the forced solution of mergers for colleges in financial difficulties (estimated to be around 25% of colleges) and inserting a criterion of 65% staff costs for college budgets. This in itself put serious financial pressure on colleges to model a low-pay and higher-workload set of terms and conditions.

The idea that colleges are locally placed and have a priority to support the local economy either via its student body or staff is therefore problematic. At the very least, the identity of an FE college will have a plurality of interests, with the local being only one of these. However, a number of reports have argued for the 'place' of FE colleges as anchor institutions within their community. In addition, the Government agenda of localism has given some momentum to the debate.

But none of the accounts of the recent history of FE and vocational colleges, nor government policy, has embarked on relating the role of vocational colleges with the rebirth of civil economic and social life itself. While solutions have oscillated from and to state to market, current thinking is beginning to revive another tradition of what is between state and market – civil society. That in itself can provide a check and balance to those poles of English fixation.

If one accepts that social life itself needs to be a part of democratic power and accountability and economic growth, then this would necessitate vastly different civil institutions to the ones we have now, either in whole or in part.

### Out of the impasse?

The aim, we believe now, is to ensure that the debate around the institutions that can provide a rich civil society and economy is furthered, giving consideration to whether or not current institutional arrangements are sufficient for developing a robust and sustainable vocational system, as well as to the form a co-ordinated economy might take to embed social partnership consensus within it.

Therefore, we believe that there is a need to rethink:

- **The vocational college as an institution:** the relation to the State and Market; the relation to the community and local and regional actors; the relation to other educational sectors and actors (and new actors if needed).
- **The vocational college governance arrangements:** a social partnership model should be adopted that brings together trade unions and business into the heart of college governance and policy; a social partnership model that draws on the interests of local and regional trade unions and businesses, as well as other civil and local institutions (including new potential institutions).
- **The vocational college system as part of a vocational system:** the establishment of a co-ordinated skills system that provides coherent local/regional and national pathways for vocational, technical and skilled work. Such a system would integrate universities (as vocational partners or as vocational universities), employer training, and the school curriculum and careers, as part of a national vocational system.

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