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Debating the first principles of English vocational education

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Introduction

Over the past five 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. While these began as a way of driving academic thinking, the debate has become increasingly influential in policymaking and practice circles.

Continuing our longstanding partnership with Professor Chris Winch (King's College London), Edge hosted a fifth series of debates on the philosophy of vocational education during late 2022 and early 2023.

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.

In this edition, we sought from contributors 'provocations' in response to three primary questions discussed at our debates:

- What is an Apprentice?
- How Broad or Narrow should VET be?
- How can we balance local, regional and national VET needs?

Overview of the Latest Debates

Professor Chris Winch
Kings College London

The fifth debate on the principles of vocational education, like the previous debates, was lively and informed. The topics for this debate concerned whether we have a clear concept of apprenticeship, whether vocational education should be broadly or narrowly based and what the appropriate balance between national, regional and local governance of VET should be. Each of these were substantial issues in their own right.

Concerning **the nature of apprenticeship**, the topic of the first session, it was noted by all speakers that there are multiple understandings of what this means, not just amongst the general public but among those responsible for the formulation and carrying out of apprenticeship policy. Importantly, the regulatory framework around apprenticeship has a strong influence on how we understand the practice. It emerged that, beyond agreement that apprenticeship involves learning through work experience, there is little common understanding of what 'apprenticeship' means. Furthermore a lack of regulatory precision concerning what constitutes an apprenticeship allows for legitimate degrees of interpretation concerning eligibility for funding and qualification approval, despite attempts in recent years to arrive at a common understanding. Questions concerning the length of apprenticeships, their relationship to occupational capacity as opposed to job capability and the role of formal learning away from the workplace are all issues on which there is a lack of consensus amongst practitioners, employers and apprentices themselves.

What it means for VET to be broadly or narrowly based was itself up for discussion in the second session and different speakers developed different approaches to the question. There is, first of all, an issue as to whether VET should be explicit preparation for workplace competence or whether it should in part involve a broader introduction to the world of work. There are various possibilities centred around different aims of VET programmes. Second, there is an issue concerning the range of competence (e.g. job readiness or occupational capacity) that a VET programme should prepare learners for. Related to this is the question as to how much

industrial or sectoral knowledge and know-how should underlie a VET programme. Third, there is a question about the educational breadth of VET: should it include civic engagement and personal development, including mental well-being and ethical awareness? On this issue, too, there is a lack of consensus in England.

The balance between national, regional and local actors in VET governance was the topic of the third debate. Issues here had practical, political and ethical dimensions. The practical difficulties both of exclusively local, regional or national governance were recognised, but finding the right balance that was both efficient and satisfied differing interests was acknowledged to be a significant challenge. The political issue concerns both the complexity of involving all the relevant social partners in meaningful governance and in arriving at a balance between institutional co-operation and competition on the one hand and local choice and comprehensiveness of national provision on the other. Furthermore, the need to tailor national priorities to regional and local conditions may require new forms of governance at regional and local levels. The ethical question concerns tensions between legitimate national interests and the desire of individuals and communities to have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their daily lives and interests. How appropriate forms of governance can allow for this is a major conundrum.

These three sessions did not arrive at solutions to these complex problems and indeed did not attempt to do so. But they performed the invaluable role in mapping out the terrain on which these debates can take place in the future, by clarifying the main issues that need to be tackled.

Debate 1 – What is an Apprentice?

Our first debate considered the definition of apprenticeships and how employers can best be supported to deliver them. Four excellent panellists offered a range of perspectives.

Alison Fuller
UCL Institute of Education

Dr Michaela Brockmann
Southampton University

James Norris
Walsall College

Chris Tolley
Pall Aerospace

Our first debate considered the definition of apprenticeships and how employers can best be supported to deliver them. Four excellent panellists offered a range of perspectives.

Alison Fuller (Professor of Vocational Education and Work, UCL Institute of Education) began by challenging our received wisdom about the nature of apprenticeships in England. In the public's mind, she said, the term often conjures up images of young people with little to no tertiary education or employment experience.

However, statistics for 2021-22 show that only 22% of apprenticeship starts were under the age of 19, whereas nearly 50% were aged 25+. Alison also noted that the majority of starts have been employed for more than 3 months before starting their training, and cannot, therefore, be considered novices to employment. Growth in higher-level (including degree) apprenticeships also means apprentices typically already have strong prior formal education attainment (such as BTECs and A-levels). Finally, in areas like leadership and management, new apprentices are likely to be longstanding employees with existing skills.

In short, as a model of learning, Alison believes apprenticeships have grown more complex than the public perception. Poor regulation further drives the range of quality and consistency. Fostering stronger partnerships between providers and employers should help improve apprenticeship quality.

Next, **Dr Michaela Brockmann** (Southampton University) pinned down the various employer definitions of apprenticeships. Her research has shown that employers deliver apprenticeships in ways most suited to their business needs. Beyond that, approaches are wide-ranging.

Her research suggests three main tiers of apprenticeship as used by employers. The first – arguably the gold standard – develops apprentices as experts in an industry-wide community of practice. The second uses apprenticeships as a form of staff development. In this case, she cited retail and social care, where apprentices are often seen as employees who must undertake a certain number of training days. However, the onus for completion is usually on the apprentices themselves. Finally, some employers use performance-led apprenticeships to exploit the opportunity for cheap labour. Unsurprisingly, the latter represents the lowest quality of apprenticeship.

Dr Brockmann concluded by noting that the Department for Education has dismissed recommendations to strengthen apprenticeship regulations to tackle these quality issues. She suggested this might be because the government sees shielding organisations from stringent regulations as an incentive to employer take-up.

Offering a training provider's perspective, we heard from **James Norris** (Vice Principal, Walsall College). At Walsall, apprenticeships are about helping young people and adults access employment and opportunity. However, James noted that the 2017 changes make this challenging and believes the sector is still paying the price for the decision to implement funding and qualification reforms simultaneously.

While Walsall has excellent employer partners who are passionate about apprenticeships, James said that some struggle to manage their commitments. Part of the problem, he said, is a disconnect between the level of input required and the employer's expectation. He anticipates that operational pressures, cost of living and inflation will further impact the ability of employers to commit to delivering high-quality apprenticeship programmes in future. The solution, as he sees it, is to get back to basics: 'apprentice' should be first and foremost a job, with skills and training attached.

Finally, we heard from **Chris Tolley** (Human Resources Manager, Pall Aerospace). As an employer, her main challenge is developing a robust talent pipeline. She believes conscientious, forward-thinking businesses should be willing to invest in their apprentices financially, professionally and personally. However, she took issue with the assumption that apprentices should be novices – as an advocate of lifelong learning, she sees a thirst for knowledge and openness to opportunity as far more important traits than age or experience.

But even with the right apprentice and employer mindset, Chris said that the value of good training providers cannot be overstated. She has worked with providers of varying quality, ranging from the well-intentioned but under-resourced to those who see businesses primarily as a revenue stream. For her though, exemplar providers see employers as true partners and wish to understand their drivers. While Pall admittedly has more resources at its disposal than smaller employers, Chris believes a holistic approach between apprentices, employers and providers is the only way to successfully cultivate happy, productive employees who thrive long after completing their apprenticeships.

How should we define and support apprenticeships?

Alison Fuller, UCL

Defining apprenticeship remains a persistent challenge for policy, practice and research. If a Martian were to land (bear with me, I know it's unlikely!) and demand "show me an apprenticeship", how easy would it be to respond? There would be multiple and diverse options including examples of government supported apprenticeships in progress across hundreds of standards, several different levels and diverse businesses and organisations, involving apprentices from 16 to well over 60 years old.

Alternatively, we could take our visitor to see an apprenticeship happening informally, such as a novice researcher working on a project within a research group, learning the skills and expertise involved in undertaking research from her more experienced colleagues, gradually progressing towards becoming a principal investigator in her own right. From these possibilities, our Martian friend could take away a lot of information but would find it hard to distil into a straightforward message. For me, that helps explain why it is important to get beyond perspectives of apprenticeship as policy and programme, to conceive it first and foremost as a model of learning.

Echoing understandings of apprenticeship as a path from newcomer to expert, the background information for our event mentioned that "apprentices are both novice employees and learners". This calls to mind the traditional picture of an apprentice as a young person in their upper teenage years, probably fresh out of

school or college. Someone without tertiary education and little, if any, experience of employment. However, when we look at who apprentices are in the government supported apprenticeship programme in England, we can see that this perception is misleading.

Firstly, the official statistics describing apprentice characteristics reveal that apprentices are mostly 'not young'. Prior to 2005 the Government scheme was only open to those up to 25 years old. Since then, it has become an 'all age programme'. Most of the growth in participation relates to starts aged 25 and over. Only 22% of starts in the most recent full year statistics (2021/22) were under 19, whereas nearly 50% were aged 25 plus. Despite, various changes in policy and funding, leading to ups and downs in the overall number of starts on the programme, the percentage of starts aged under 19 has stayed stubbornly similar at 20-25%.

Secondly, there is the issue of 'conversions' where existing employees are converted into apprentices. This is very different to the received idea of apprentices being newly hired novices. Administrative data on the length of time someone has been employed by the employer with whom they started an apprenticeship reveal that the majority of people starting an apprenticeship have been employed for over 3 months before commencing their programme, and over a third have been employed for more than 12 months. For those aged over 25, about three quarters have been with their employer for more than 3 months and nearly 60% for more than 12 months. It is hard to argue that those starting an apprenticeship after a lengthy period of employment with their apprenticeship employer are 'novice employees'. It also requires us to question the extent to which apprenticeships in this category are providing significant 'additionality' and new learning.

It is important to recognise that providing high quality apprenticeships is not easy and this challenge is faced in all countries not just England. We know we have some brilliant apprenticeships, often found with employers who have longstanding and substantial training expertise and capacity to offer apprenticeships that are critical to their ability to fulfil business goals. However, our research indicates that (most) employers need assistance to enhance the quality of learning (see for example, Fuller and Unwin 2019). This includes fostering the development of partnership and co-production approaches to improve workplaces as learning environments; supporting the pedagogical

and occupational expertise of teachers and trainers in both on- and off-the-job settings; and the importance of tools for employers and providers, to help them (self-) evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their provision. For example, the expansive – restrictive continuum offers an analytical resource, which identifies a range of pedagogical and organisational characteristics that affect apprenticeship quality (e.g Fuller and Unwin 2003). This enables employers and providers to locate their provision on the continuum and identify what they might do to move it further towards the expansive end.

The way that government supported apprenticeship is defined and regulated, together with a relatively liberal labour market structure contributes to wide variation in learning quality with expansive examples at one end and restrictive at the other. Returning to our Martian visitor – they certainly could be shown many apprenticeship flowers - some would be blooming but others would be failing to thrive.

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Debate 2 – How Broad or Narrow Should VET Be?

Debate 2 tackled a core yet often overlooked question within VET: how broad or narrow should vocational education be?

Prue Huddleston
University of Warwick

Andrea Laczik
Edge Foundation

Jenny Jarvis
The Education and Training Foundation

Tom Fogden
ADA, National College for Digital Skills

Opening the debate, **Prue Huddleston** (University of Warwick) identified what would emerge as a common theme for the discussion: context is as fundamental within vocational education as content. Vocational learners cover a range of ages, skill levels, sectors and experiences. Boiling the discussion down to 'broad' or 'narrow' oversimplifies things, she argued.

Instead, Prue outlined a continuum for describing VET of varying depths and complexity. At one end is what she called 'pre-vocational' learning. VET in this category engages learners by introducing a vocation at a high level, combined with general education. Next is 'medium-strength' VET, which includes sector-focused programmes containing work-based elements, for example work experience and other work-related activities (BTECs, for example, might fit this category).

Next, 'strong' vocational programmes include more intensive work-based elements, such as on- and off-the-job training and entry into employment – apprenticeships, for example. Finally, Prue identified so-called 'strongly occupational' VET programmes that target proficiencies for specific vocational skills and training standards.

Regardless of any VET programme's place on this continuum, Prue argued that all vocational learning should privilege experiential and active learning in real-work environments. It should provide opportunities to engage in authentic tasks and to encounter and learn from experts within communities of practice. This gives learners access to personal and vocational growth alike.

Next, **Andrea Laczik** (Edge Foundation) explored the dilemmas and choices we face when tackling the question of what skills and competencies VET provision should include. She believed that VET should have broader aims than simply focusing on material economics. It should also tackle issues like social mobility and support for life skills development. In short, VET graduates need more than narrowly focused vocational skills – they should be empowered to evolve throughout their lives.

In addition, when looking at what defines 'broad' or 'narrow' in VET, Andrea raised the practical issue of capacity. Each programme has only a limited circumference, as she described it. Content elements cannot grow indefinitely. We can only introduce new elements by removing others, which naturally limits the content that programmes can reasonably include.

Although this oversimplifies the matter – VET is not static and must naturally adapt – capacity still needs consideration.

Taking the discussion beyond the academic sphere, we next heard from **Jenny Jarvis** (The Education and Training Foundation). Emphasising her experience with Further Education and training professionals on the ground, Jenny felt the debate needed placing in context. In particular, it must address factors like austerity, technological advances and AI, and how these shape lives, jobs, learning and the economy at large.

Among other issues, Jenny homed in on social engagement. Following the pandemic, she noted, learners are increasingly keen to pursue work that supports green issues and sustainability. VET teaching professionals, therefore, have a pivotal role in shaping learners' values and future practices, while employers must reflect closely on the types of organisations employees and trainees want to work for.

Jenny's larger point was that VET must address how individuals wish to engage with society. Preparing learners for new challenges, roles, and ways of engaging with work will also mean helping them adapt to the concept of lifelong learning. While the idea is accepted virtue within the industry, it is not initially always a comfortable position for learners.

Lastly, having co-founded, designed and lead a specialist educational institution, **Tom Fogden** (ADA, National College for Digital Skills) offered some practical responses to the challenges described. Initially, ADA was intended to solve supply and demand issues within the tech sector. However, the college soon realised that technology is at the heart of most modern companies, meaning learners need more than just 'technical' skills. They also require broader life and transferable skills to facilitate changing jobs and sectors throughout their working lives.

As such, all ADA students learn some common skills, regardless of their particular pathway. Coding, for example, is a core digital skill that supports collaboration and team working. Additionally, ethics and global citizenship are vital topics within tech, since small teams often have oversized impacts. All these, therefore, are part of ADA's core curriculum.

As for narrowness and breadth, Tom suggested that – from his perspective – 'narrowness' often manifests as specialized skills that help graduates land jobs, while breadth emerges as agility and adaptability to change. Both are needed in today's world.

Whether discussing occupation-specific skills, meta-skills, or wider industry knowledge, the crisp, candid contributions to this latest debate highlighted that narrowness and breadth are highly subjective concepts within VET. There was consensus, however, that learners need practical, real-world learning opportunities. The future of VET seems to be moving towards personalised, experiential learning. But only time will tell.

What do we want vocational education to achieve and for whom?

Prue Huddleston, University of Warwick

Vocational education learners are hugely diverse in terms of age, stage, level of programme, sector, personal goals, prior experience. Therefore, vocational education will have a variety of aims and outcomes some of which may be broadly focused, others narrower.

This may be explored by viewing vocational learning as a continuum: from broadly based, and introductory, to narrowly occupationally specific, in terms of its content and context.

A learning continuum

The starting point of the continuum is pre-vocational and very broadly based programmes, serving as an introduction to a broad vocational area or having a transitional purpose. As Simmons and Thompson (2013, 7) suggest, the challenge is how to ensure that young people have access to *'coherent knowledge and opportunities for meaningful progression'.*

Anecdotal evidence suggests that offering a broader curriculum, including vocationally relevant qualifications, may offer a way to motivate young people, preventing them from disengaging with education (e.g., Ross et al. 2011). What is offered must speak to the needs and interests of young people and by inference their future career aims *'to secure young adults' continuing involvement and their learning of key, vocational and practical skills'* (70). Such broad vocational programmes involve learning about a vocational area as well as pursuing further general education. Almost 20 years ago, Stanton (2005, 2006) pointed out that there is no alternative general education (for those with weak GCSEs) analogous to the Access courses for adults who wish to reach higher education.

At the midpoint on the continuum are programmes, still relatively broadly based, but including more sector focused activity in terms of content and context, for example work-based elements through work experience, workplace visits and speakers, but still not affording a full-blown work-based experience as in an apprenticeship. BTECs provide a longstanding example of such composite programmes.

Unfortunately, programmes originally termed vocational (even the nomenclature has changed to technical) have become increasingly 'academicised' by the reduction in the amount of practical and coursework assessment, the introduction of more external written tests, and limited access to non-classroom learning environments and activities (Smeby and Heggen 2014). Increasing programme content, through so-called qualification "reform" will not necessarily lead to broad vocational learning because the vocational curriculum is more than a qualification. Strong vocational learning *'privileges experiential and active learning, provides access to rich and varied learning environments with opportunities to engage in authentic tasks and to encounter, and learn from, experts within communities of practice'* (Huddleston, 2011: 43).

Further along the continuum are strongly technically focused programmes. Apprenticeships are work-based, including on- and off-the-job training, for those preparing for, or already in, employment, sometimes conferring licence to practice. Young people should pursue apprenticeships that provide sufficient breadth and depth to successfully launch a career, and not just fill a job slot. Narrowness of standards risks the danger of their becoming too occupation or even firm specific.

However, in 2021/2 apprentices aged 25+ accounted for 47.4% of total (House of Commons, 2023). Breadth in this context may be more about growth and progression within an existing role.

At the end of the continuum are sector specific, often small, qualifications required for upskilling, skills updating, or granting licence to practise. These are often narrowly focused specialist qualifications that build on an underlying foundation of broader knowledge and skills. "Routes through the best international technical education systems begin with a broad curriculum, then increasingly specialise as an individual progresses to higher levels of knowledge and skills" (DBIS/DfE 2016, p.49.)

Vocational education should be a form of learning rather than just a qualification.

Vocational learning encompasses learning *'to become'* as much as learning *'what', 'how' and 'where'* (Huddleston 2011, 43). This implies the need for learning that is broad in terms of context, not just content. Adding more content, assessing it, and tying outcomes to targets will not improve breadth.

The increasing demand for skills beyond the purely technical now expressed as "knowledge, skills and behaviours" in specifications/standards, reprises a familiar refrain concerning the importance of what variously have been termed "common", "core", "key", "essential", "soft" and "transferable" skills. It is claimed that these skills have a longer shelf-life than technical and practical skills, enabling employees to better adapt to the changing nature of work, and transition between jobs (Development Economics, 2015).

European priorities also highlight the need for more extensive articulation of key transversal competences in VET curricula, the need for more practical opportunities and for innovation in learning methods and environments. This requires attention not simply to the content of vocational learning but to the context in which it occurs and acknowledges the importance of broader educational outcomes that move beyond the acquisition of technical skills and competencies.

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Balancing specific and general

Andrea Laczik, Edge Foundation

How broad or narrow should vocational education and training programmes be? *What is the right balance between teaching the occupation-specific skills required for a job, and developing skills for the industry or wider transferability?* The answer to these big questions is heavily contested. We all have our own ideas what a healthy or right balance looks like between:

1) teaching the occupation-specific skills required for a job and developing skills for the industry,
2) developing skills for wider transferability,
3) developing skills for life in general and to become an active participant citizen.

This paper explores how we think about narrow and broad vocational education and training (VET) programmes and how to balance teaching the specific and the non-specific. I will argue that there is no such thing as 'right balance'. It all depends on the context and the aims of VET, learners and other stakeholders.

Narrow and broad firstly need defining. During the first Philosophy of VET debate in 2018 Dina Kuhlee neatly described how narrow and broad are defined in German vocational education law.

> *[It] not only aims to qualify for the labour market, it also contributes to the personal development of young people. It is seen as aiming to develop the technical, vocational, methodological, social and ethical competences to reach the capacity to plan, realise, control, reflect and adapt one's own professional action […] This is based on a broad understanding of the everyday work a skilled worker has to fulfil and is not reduced to the execution of particular tasks* (Kuhlee, 2018).

Within a 'narrow' VET programme, teaching focuses on occupation-specific skills and learners are trained 'to execute particular tasks in their job'. This involves a high degree of specialisation in a specific occupation (Coenen et al., 2015) limits the scope for autonomy in managing one's own work.

A VET programme can be 'broad' by contrast, in relation to:

1) occupation specific vs broad sectoral knowledge and skills, such as the introduction to construction for bricklayers
2) inclusion of transferable skills, such as teamwork, problem solving and project management abilities
3) inclusion of aspects of general education (English including literature, Maths, art/creative subjects, history) and
4) a broad VET programme may include such as citizenship education. A broad VET programme may encompass elements of all these.

Narrow versus broad VET programmes can be visualised on a spectrum, where narrow programmes are at the one end and the broad programmes are at the other end.

Narrow ⟵⟶ **Broad**

The purpose of VET may naturally lead to narrow or broad VET programmes. From the point of view of the labour market, VET graduates should achieve high productivity rates in their occupations during their working lives (Coenen et al., 2015). VET of course has broader aims than just focusing on the growth of the economy, including supporting social inclusion and social mobility, and the development of life skills. However, even the labour market logic requires more than narrowly focused VET programmes. VET graduates need to be able to move freely in the labour market and effective throughout their working lives. Consequently VET graduates have to develop skills, attitude and behaviour that support them in professional and personal development and in life-long learning.

Determining how broad/narrow a VET programme should be depends in significant part on the capacity of the programme in term of content and programme elements and the available time. To visualise this, we can envisage each VET programme as a defined circle but with limited flexibility of its circumference. So, the area (capacity of programme) is given. This is the capacity we can 'play' with when we change VET programmes' curriculum. This means that, for example, the content elements of a programme cannot grow indefinitely unless the circumference grows with it – i.e. more time is given for the programme. Differently phrased, we can only introduce additional elements to a VET programme to make it broader to the expense of existing ones.

This is a simplified argument and in real life VET programmes are not static and frequently respond to the changing nature of work and life. Discussing narrow and broad VET programmes highlights complexity.

However, investigating the narrowness and broadness of existing vocational qualifications by placing them on the spectrum of broad/narrow would lead us to think about what is important to include/exclude from the programme. Comparing examples of NVQs, L3 qualifications and T-levels might reveal how broad or narrow these qualifications are and the extent to which they serve their purpose.

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Debate 3 – How can we balance local, regional and national VET needs?

Our final session debate considered the hotly debated topic of how to balance the needs of national VET policy with regional and local priorities. Four expert commentators addressed just a few of the many tensions that can arise from these differing needs.

Kevin Orr
University of Huddersfield

Norman Crowther
National Education Union

Viveca Lindberg
Stockholm University

Lesley Powell
Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

The debate's first provocation came from **Kevin Orr** (University of Huddersfield). His driving question was: Is it better to organise VET locally rather than nationally? He used the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) as an example. GMCA currently has devolved power over its adult education budget, while the broader situation in Manchester is an excellent proxy for England at large. Manchester faces similar problems – such as the stark division between academic and vocational pathways, lack of employer-led work-based training and a school system that reproduces (rather than redresses) socio-economic inequalities.

Kevin believes it's possible to solve these issues better at the local level, but only if authorities are freed from national policy and can apply different thinking. For example, encouraging employers to incentivise skills development by investing in their businesses could arguably be better achieved through local policymaking.

Kevin acknowledged that devolution could also further fragment the skills sector but emphasised that good policymaking – regardless of its origin – should demonstrate clear accountability to local communities.

Next, **Norman Crowther** (National Education Union) discussed the need for colleges to act as mediating institutions for technical education and skills. He pointed out that while incorporation liberated individual colleges, it failed to provide a basis for local strategies. In addition, FE continues to lack a recognised shared purpose, with college mergers and demergers (among other issues) distorting their identities.

He suggested that to become effective mediating institutions, FE colleges must articulate a strategic understanding of what it means to be anchor institutions. Unfortunately, they lack the established history of social worth that is connected to other institutions, such as hospitals and universities.

Creating a sense of civic purpose, then, requires some steps. This might include forming social partnerships with workforce trade unions and fostering clearer local

and regional pathways for technical and skilled work. He acknowledged that these are mammoth tasks – especially with the current lack of central government support – but that big problems also require big solutions.

Viveca Lindberg (Stockholm University) provided our third provocation of the day. During the 20th century, Sweden moved from a relatively locally-driven VET system to a national one. In the 21st century, however, modern VET in Sweden is again being affected by societal shifts, changes to the labour market, and evolving concepts of work and responsibility connected with wider international trends.

Her core argument was that debates around local versus national VET needs risk overlooking the more complex issue of rural versus urban. National policies, for instance, are often created in large cities and based on urban conditions. But when these solutions are applied in sparsely populated rural areas with significantly different skills needs, their real needs can be left unmet.

Zooming out, Viveca also noted that supranational organisations (such as the OECD and the EU) are contributing to changing ideas of VET on a global scale. This has the potential to be both positive and negative, she argued. On one hand, it could support a more joined-up, global approach to VET. On the other, it could impose supranational needs onto smaller communities, further widening the gap between local and national priorities.

Our final speaker was **Lesley Powell** (Nelson Mandela University, South Africa). During a rich presentation, she carefully argued for greater participatory planning in skills development, believing that skills planning needs reorientation towards a social transformation agenda that considers working, living, and learning rather than a narrow human capital approach. She also picked up and developed the theme that Kevin had initially raised about the limitations of 'supply side' and human capital approaches to VET.

There is a need, she argued, to build democratic systems where policymakers and communities can co-construct skills needs and responses from the bottom up. Furthermore, a broader notion of education and training is needed; one that recognises the multiple roles VET can play in human flourishing and in alleviating poverty. This must recognise work in its broadest sense, especially in

the global South, where the informal and care sectors and SMEs represent the areas of highest job growth.

Ultimately, the main argument was to expand the capability of community voice to help enable civic engagement. Getting this right means the associated knowledge and skills could be potentially transformative at both individual and societal levels.

As with all the debates in our series, the latest discussion proved far more multifaceted than we could have expected. From an exploration of the potential benefits and challenges of locally organised VET to the role of colleges as mediating institutions, the right balance between local and national decision making and the complexities of rural versus urban needs, there was much to consider as we unpick the geographical priorities of VET moving forward.

Local control of training and skills in Greater Manchester

Kevin Orr, University of Huddersfield

Greater Manchester Combined Authority blazed a trail when national government granted it devolved power over its Adult Education Budget in 2019, to develop the skills of the region's workforce. In March 2023 the Combined Authority was granted further control over technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for 16-19 year olds, including the new T level qualifications. Based on the experience of Greater Manchester, is the local organisation of TVET better than national? And would better mean?

Manchester's city region is like England in miniature and Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, has described the City's own North/South divide. The city centre of high rise steel and glass has been transformed in recent years. But a short walk from the centre to Collyhurst or Newton Heath reveals poorly maintained housing and empty brownfield spaces, and that is even before you might take the tram to deprived boroughs like Oldham and Rochdale that border the region. So, no simple skills solution will meet the needs of the whole city region's diverse economy or people.

Greater Manchester has, nevertheless, the largest city region economy outside London with a gross value added of around £75 billion, larger than that of Wales. Its economy fares well compared to city regions outside London, and in all education phases under the age of nineteen Greater Manchester performs better than all other city regions, again apart from London.

But Manchester's economy fares worse than that of the country as a whole and there is a larger gap in the proportion of working age adults qualified to Level 4 and above than nationally.

Yet, the central problem lies not in the relative weaknesses of either Manchester's economy or the average Mancunian's level of skills compared to those of the rest of the country. The central problem lies in those weaknesses within the whole of the UK relative to similar nations, because Manchester's problems are those of England in miniature. These problems include the stark division of academic and vocational pathways at 16 and 19, the persistent lack of employer-led work-based training, the emphasis on initial and not on continuing skills development, and the repeated failure of school education to significantly alleviate inequality. As **Lupton and Unwin** (2019, 8) argued in their comprehensive and persuasive think-piece on the possibilities for Greater Manchester,

> "A city-region seriously concerned with transformation needs to raise its sights beyond the national average and begin to address some of the problems that are common to the English system and holding [Greater Manchester] back from the achievement of its ambitious economic and social objectives."

So, Manchester's comparison should be with cities like Barcelona and Munich, not just Birmingham and Newcastle, and local policymakers should not simply aim to improve the present system of TVET. The system needs fundamental change. That is not straightforward, however, when even Combined Authorities with Manchester's autonomy over education and skills development have statutory obligations that determine much 16-19 provision, including for example the requirement for students on TVET courses to re-sit GCSE maths and English.

Different thinking is needed. Yet, many policymakers local and national are still in thrall to a reductive interpretation of Human Capital Theory that anticipates more skilled workers leading to more skilled jobs, eventually leading to greater productivity. That has meant policies that reward colleges and training organisations for learner numbers regardless of the demand for the eventual skills and qualifications of those learners.

Instead, the problem in Manchester as elsewhere is the proliferation of low paid jobs that demand few skills, which is holding back skills development. With many exceptions, lack of jobs that require skills is the overarching problem, not lack of skills per se. Employers can encourage skills development by investing in their organisations and consequently in the creation of skilled jobs. Arguably, policymakers might encourage that better at a local level but there are inevitable border issues for individuals and organisations living or operating within different jurisdictions.

Local devolution of these matters poses ethical questions, too. Who makes the decisions about skills and training and in whose interests? Who benefits from any related economic growth? Perceiving education in purely economic terms has arguably already led to an unwelcome narrowing of provision for adult education in Manchester.

The key to better development of skills and the economy is not just local organisation of TVET, but rather well-informed decisions with clear accountability to local communities. Greater Manchester's autonomy may offer a model for other regions, but only if that autonomy leads to fundamental change to the present system of skills development.

References

Lupton, R., Unwin, L., 2019. *A New Approach to Education, Training and Skills: A technical report for the research on skills.* Manchester: Greater Manchester Independent Prosperity Review.

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