



What does lower-level vocational education and training in England look like?

What are its successes, challenges and recent developments?

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Introduction

Background and context

Vocational education and training (VET) programmes are designed to provide learners with the competencies specific to a particular occupation, while also adapting their transferable skills (OECD, 2024). Lower-level college-based VET in England include vocational programmes at Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 and are delivered primarily through further education (FE) colleges (Department for Education, 2023).

Lower-level VET is an important part of England's education system because it provides learners with vocational, technical and employability skills while helping to meet labour market needs (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2018). As England continues to face labour and skills shortages across a range of sectors, understanding the role of lower-level VET has become increasingly important in supporting economic growth by providing learners with skills required by employers. Understanding how lower-level VET is organised, who participates and the challenges learners face can help identify areas where the system works well, and where further improvements may be needed. This is particularly important as there have been ongoing reforms to England's vocational education system, which have attempted to improve progression.

Despite the important role that lower-level VET plays in England's education system, uncertainty remains about how it is organised, who it serves, the progression routes available to learners and the challenges learners experience. Understanding these aspects is important for informing future policies and ensuring that lower-level VET continues to meet the needs of learners and employers.

Aim of the report

This report explores lower-level college-based vocational education and training (VET) in England. Information relating to the sector's organisation, learner participation and progression, and policy developments is dispersed across a wide range of government publications, academic literature and sector reports.

Bringing this evidence together is important for developing a comprehensive understanding of the lower-level VET landscape in England. It would also assist in identifying the role the sector plays in supporting learners and the challenges it continues to face.

Therefore, this report aims to provide an overview of lower-level college-based VET in England by examining:

1. The organisation of the lower-level VET sector, including providers and funding.
2. Who accesses lower-level VET and participation trends.
3. Learner progression routes into employment.

4. Support available to learners and barriers that may affect participation.
5. Recent policy developments and reforms shaping lower-level VET in England.

Methodology

Methods

There were two main approaches that could have been taken when researching lower-level vocational education and training (VET) in England.

The first approach would have involved conducting primary research like interviews or questionnaires with learners, teachers or policymakers. This would have resulted in first-hand qualitative and quantitative data being collected on experiences of lower-level VET and its effectiveness.

The second approach involved reviewing existing literature, policy documents, official statistics and publicly available datasets to examine the organisation of lower-level VET, learner participation, progression pathways, challenges and recent developments.

This report uses the second approach. Although primary research would have provided valuable insights from individuals directly involved in lower-level VET, a review of existing research seemed more appropriate for answering the research aim. It allowed evidence from a range of academic studies, government publications and sector reports to be brought together, while also making use of national datasets that provide a broader picture of lower-level VET across England. This also allowed the comparison of findings across different time periods to assess effectiveness of policy changes and identify recurring themes.

Research design

This report is based on secondary research using peer-reviewed journal articles, Department for Education (DfE) publications, reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER), the Edge Foundation and other relevant organisations.

Sources were selected based on relevance, credibility and publication date. Peer-reviewed research, official government publications and reports from recognised organisations were prioritised. As research specifically focused on lower-level VET was limited there was no fixed publication date cut off. However, more recent evidence was prioritised where available, and older sources were used when they provided relevant evidence not available in more recent years.

The evidence was organised thematically into the main areas explored throughout the report such as the organisation of lower-level VET, learner participation, progression and recent policy development.

Limitations

Although this research method is best suited to aim of the report, it has several limitations:

- The report relies on the quality and availability of existing research.
- Research focusing specifically on lower-level VET in England is limited meaning some evidence has been drawn from broader studies of post-16 education and vocational training.
- Some of the research used was published several years ago. However, more recent sources have been included where possible to ensure the report reflects current developments.
- Published data does not always reflect individual learner experiences, and this report provides more of an overview of national trends.

Findings

Overview of lower-level VET in England

Lower-level vocational education and training (VET) in England, consists of Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications, which are designed to help learners with a range of educational backgrounds. These qualifications give students with a range of educational backgrounds, a stable foundation and aid progression to higher-level study or employment, by developing their knowledge, behaviour and skills required for work (Department for Education, 2021).

Qualification level	Example qualifications	Example subject areas
Entry level	Entry Level Award/Certificate, Entry Level ESOL	Employability, English, Maths
Level 1	BTEC Level 1 Certificate, Functional Skills Level 1	Construction, Hair & Beauty, Business
Level 2	BTEC Level 2 Diploma, Functional Skills Level 2	Health & Social Care, Engineering, ICT

Table 1. Examples of qualifications offered within lower-level VET in England. *Source: Department for Education (2021); City & Guilds (2025)*

Table 1 illustrates the range of qualifications and subject areas offered within lower-level VET in England across Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2.

Fleckenstein and Lee (2018) argue that alongside skills development, lower-level VET also contributes to social inclusion. Vocational education provides opportunities to learners who benefit from a more practical, hands-on learning approach. This makes it a vital mechanism for widening participation by providing an alternative pathway to those who may not suit an academic route. Consequently, limiting social alienation

while successfully expanding the skilled labour pool. This demonstrates both educational and social objectives of lower-level VET as it supports learners' personal development while contributing to wider economic priorities.

In England, the majority of lower-level VET is delivered through further education (FE) colleges, however there are also other providers of vocational education such as independent training providers (Department for Education, 2021). Colleges offer a broad range of vocational qualifications across different occupations and sectors, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in health and social care, construction or engineering. These programmes prepare learners for further education and employment by combining classroom-based learning with practical training (OECD, 2013).

Providers, funding and governance

In England, there are numerous providers of lower-level VET, however FE colleges remain as the principal provider. FE colleges also play a significant role in England's post-16 education system, with approximately 42% of 16–17-year-olds studying in colleges in 2022 (Robson et al, 2024). Lower-level VET is also delivered by independent training providers (ITPs), specialist colleges and some sixth form colleges. These providers offer a broad range of vocational programmes across numerous sectors, helping to meet learner needs and local labour market demands (Department for Education, 2021).

Historically, the majority of lower-level VET funding was administered by the UK government through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). However, following their closure on 31st March 2025, the responsibility for administering education funding has transferred to the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2024). The level of funding directly impacts the quality and scope of qualifications as well as learner support services. However, research has shown funding has become fragmented between further and higher education, increasing competition for public funding and resources (Robson et al, 2024). Although lower-level VET is primarily delivered as further education rather than higher education, this wider funding landscape can influence the resources available to colleges. This can make long-term planning more difficult and reduce consistent support available for learners as resources vary. Laczik et al (2023) also argues that inconsistent funding and resource allocation can reduce the effectiveness of vocational education policies and limit long-term improvement.

Lower-level vocational education is governed by multiple organisations. The Department for Education sets the national curriculum standards, qualification frameworks and institutional performance metrics (Department for Education, 2025). Ofsted then carries out quality and safeguarding inspections to ensure these standards

are being upheld. Pearson and NCFE are awarding organisations that take the responsibility of developing and awarding qualifications that meet national standards. England's post-16 education system also adopts a market-orientated and employer-led approach, focusing on competition between providers and making sure skills provided align with what is demanded in the labour market (Robson et al, 2024). In some cases, regional mayors align local technical courses with job needs, whilst school and college leaders manage funding and daily operations.

Learner participation

Approximately 10% of school leavers in England enrol on programmes below level 2 (BL2), representing around 65,800 learners (De Coulon et al, 2017). Although BL2 provision is not identical to lower-level VET, this provides an indication of participation in lower-level post-16 provision. Despite helping numerous young people, this topic has received limited research attention and there is little evidence available on learners' characteristics, participation and long-term outcomes. Lower-level VET also contributes to wider government objectives like increasing participation in education and supporting progression into further learning and employment (Department for Education, 2021). This suggests that lower-level VET has an important role beyond qualification attainment, contributing to wider educational participation and social mobility.

Many learners entering lower-level VET have experienced lower prior attainment or require additional support to develop their knowledge, confidence and practical skills (De Coulon et al, 2017). This reinforces the importance of lower-level VET in supporting learners with diverse educational needs. These figures support that lower-level VET provides an opportunity to re-engage learners who may otherwise be at risk of disengagement from education or training, while also promoting social inclusion and supporting skills development (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). Although much of the literature focuses on post-16 learners, further education colleges also educate around 10,000 learners aged 14–16. Many of these learners have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), attend alternative provision or have become disengaged from mainstream education, demonstrating that lower-level VET supports a diverse range of learners with various needs (Nuffield, 2022). This highlights the importance of lower-level VET as an alternative pathway for learners whose needs may not be fully met through mainstream education.

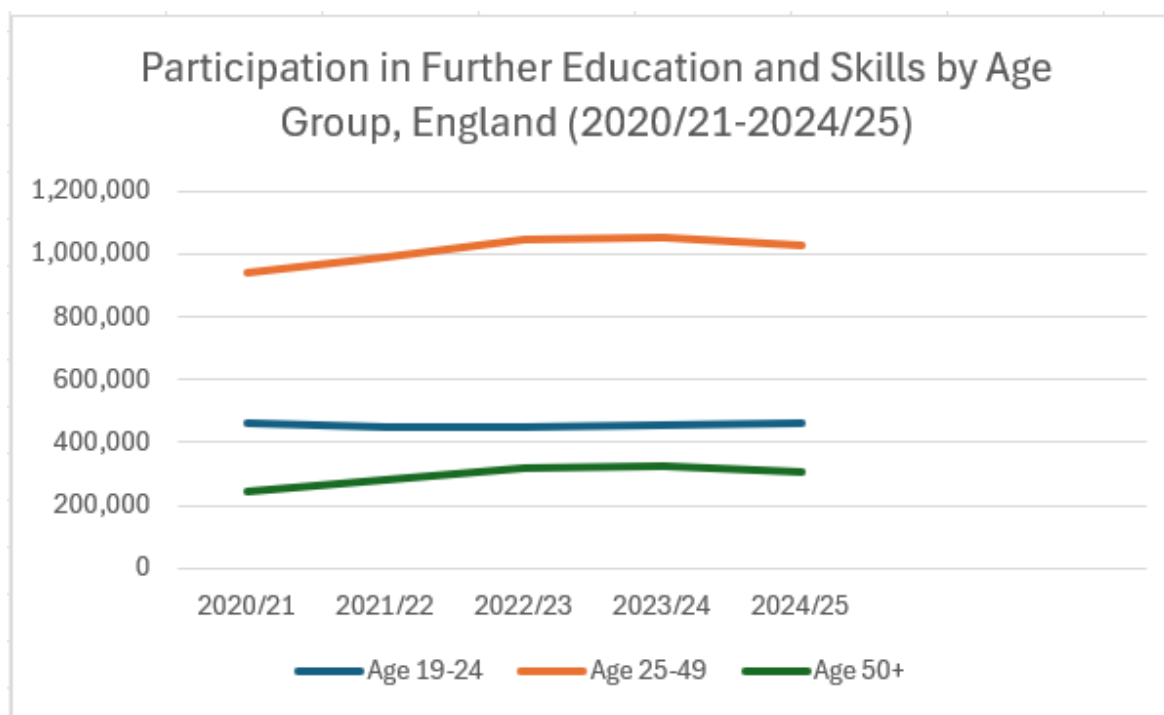


Figure 2. Participation in Further Education and Skills by age group, England (2020/21-2024/25). *Source: Department for Education (2025)*

Figure 2 shows that participation was consistently highest for learners aged 25-49 and then lowest for those aged 19-24 and 50+ during 2020/21 - 2024/25. However, analysis of the data shows substantial differences in participation trends between age groups. The participation rate of learners aged 50+ rose by 27.4% between 2020/21 and 2024/25, while for learners aged 25-49 and 50+ it grew by 9.6% and 0.5% respectively. Participation in the 25-49 age group peaked at 1,050,410 learners in 2023/24 before falling to 1,029,310 in 2024/25, while participation in the 19-24 age group was relatively stable during the period. However, as the data covers Further Education and Skills as a whole rather than lower-level VET specifically, these trends cannot be used to determine whether the same patterns apply directly to lower-level VET.

Learner progression

However, participation alone cannot determine the effectiveness of lower-level VET. Learners being able to successfully progress into higher-level qualifications, apprenticeships or employment is equally as important. Despite ongoing reforms, progression beyond level 3 remains limited, highlighting the importance of understanding long-term progression pathways and not just initial participation (Tatham, 2024). Lower-level qualifications are intended to act as stepping stones, allowing learners to continue education while improving their long-term employment opportunities (Department for Education, 2021).

Progression pathways vary based on individual circumstances and local labour market opportunities. Although many learners progress into further education, apprenticeships or employment, progression to higher technical qualifications remains comparatively limited. Around 56% of young workers aged 25-30 held level 3 or below as their highest qualification, while only 4.5%-4.6% of young workers held a level 4-5 qualification as their highest qualification despite consistent employer demand for higher technical skills (Tatham, 2024). This suggests progression through the vocational education system is not always linear and may be influenced by wider economic, educational and geographical factors rather than learner aspiration alone. Recent evidence shows that vocational education in England has increasingly shifted towards level 3 qualifications and higher-level apprenticeships (Robson et al, 2024). Although this reflects a shift towards higher-level qualifications, it can also reduce the importance placed on lower-level qualifications in the wider education system.

Progression beyond level 3 remains limited across numerous sectors despite increasing employer demand for higher technical skills (Tatham, 2024). Geographical limitations also influence progression as learners living in areas with fewer education providers or limited transport options may face greater challenges in accessing courses (Department for Education, 2021). This suggests that opportunities for progression are influenced not only by learners' abilities, but also by where they live and the opportunities available within their local area. Career pathways are rarely straightforward, and transitions between education and employment differ across industries. Tatham (2024) suggests improving vocational progression requires better evidence on learners' long-term outcomes to support future policy development.

Overall, lower-level VET plays an important role in widening participation in post-16 education and creating opportunities for progression. However, evidence across this section suggests success depends on initial participation alongside clear progression pathways, effective learner support and employment opportunities. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring lower-level VET remains accessible while continuing to support progression into further education and skilled employment.

Recent trends in lower-level VET

England's VET system has undergone significant reforms over recent decades in response to changing labour market demands and government priorities (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2018). Lower-level VET continues to evolve through changes to qualifications, policies and funding arrangements. These changes are designed to improve progression and better align education with employer needs. However, evidence suggests that long-term improvements are more likely when changes are supported by evidence and implemented over sustained periods rather than through repeated structural changes (Laczik et al, 2023). Recent developments reflect ongoing efforts to

improve vocational education while continuing to raise questions about how these objectives can be achieved most effectively.

Recent qualification data further illustrates changing patterns of participation in lower-level VET. Compared with the same quarter in 2024, entry level certificates rose by 24.7%, while level 1 and level 2 certificates decreased by 8.3% and 9.5% respectively (Ofqual, 2025). These figures indicate changing patterns in qualification achievement, with growth at entry level awards and a decline in level 1 and level 2 awards. Overall, the total number of vocational and other qualification certificates issued between 2021 and 2025 increased before stabilising, suggesting continued demand for vocational qualifications despite changing patterns across the different levels. Taken together, these trends suggest that demand for vocational qualification remains stable, but learner participation is gradually shifting towards entry-level provision rather than higher lower-level qualifications.

Governments have introduced a range of reforms to try and improve the effectiveness of vocational education and training and ensure qualifications are at the optimal level (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). Recent policy has also placed greater emphasis on the 'Skills for Jobs' agenda, presenting further education as a key mechanism for addressing skills shortages, improving productivity and responding more effectively to employer demand (Robson et al, 2024). However, the pace of reform has led to policy instability and uncertainty, making implementation much more challenging. Evidence suggests policies introduced too quickly for political reasons are less likely to be implemented successfully, as there are limited planning and evaluation before rollout (Laczik et al, 2023). This indicates improving lower-level VET means ensuring reforms are implemented consistently and given time to demonstrate their effectiveness and assess the outcome. This also highlights that the success of vocational education depends not only on the introduction of new policies, but also on their consistent implementation and long-term evaluation.

Overall, current trends demonstrate lower-level VET continues to evolve; however, reform alone is unlikely to achieve sustained improvements without consistent implementation and long-term evaluation (Laczik et al, 2023). Furthermore, patterns indicate developments are not occurring uniformly across lower-level qualifications, highlighting the importance of continuing to monitor participation and outcomes overtime. Collectively, these trends suggest lower-level VET is continuing to adapt to changing economic and policy priorities; however, the long-term impact of recent reforms will depend on how effectively they are implemented. Future developments should focus on ensuring existing policies effectively support learners and deliver intended outcomes, alongside introducing new reforms.

Successes of lower-level VET

One of the greatest strengths of lower-level VET is its ability to engage learners who may not thrive within traditional academic settings. Further education colleges educate learners with SEND, those in alternative provision and learners who have become disengaged from mainstream education, providing personalised support that encourages continued participation (Sezen et al, 2024). Consequently, lower-level VET contributes to wider social objectives, including promoting social inclusion (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). This demonstrates the greater educational inclusion provided by lower-level VET, as it contributes to widening educational participation while supporting learners with diverse educational needs.

International evidence suggests that vocational education can reduce the risk of unemployment and improve employment opportunities. Although these findings are about the international education system, they demonstrate the wider role vocational education can play in supporting employment opportunities, which can also be reflected in England's emphasis on skills development (Shavit and Muller, 2000; Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). Scholars view lower vocational education as a safety net, enhancing students' chances of finding gainful employment as skilled workers. Vocational education supports skills development that meets labour market needs (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). This demonstrates that lower-level VET can improve learners' employability and successfully aids those who are not represented by mainstream education by reducing the risk of learners becoming disengaged from education or employment.

Recent policy developments represent a positive step towards strengthening lower-level VET in England. On 28 July 2026, the Government announced a package of measures to invest in young people by expanding opportunities close to home (Department for Work and Pensions, 2026). Part of this package includes free apprenticeship training for all eligible under 25s, a new bursary to remove financial barriers to apprenticeships, and thousands more college places in colleges to make VET more accessible geographically. The announcement reflects growing government recognition of the importance of vocational education. It also signals continued investment in lower-level skills provision. If implemented successfully, these measures have the potential to improve accessibility and participation.

Overall, lower-level VET has seen numerous successes within the education and training sector in the UK. Recent policy developments also demonstrate growing recognition of the importance of vocational education and its role within England's education and skills system.

Limitations of lower-level VET

Despite its apparent success, lower-level VET poses multiple challenges in England's education and training system. Learner perception is a major issue that restricts participation in lower-level VET in England. Inconsistent information about eligibility criteria has been identified as a barrier to participation in some vocational education and training programmes (Laczik et al, 2023). Even then, VET is continuously viewed less favourably than academic education by learners, families and employers (Atkins & Flint, 2015). This discourages participation, meaning those who may not suit an academic route could struggle to find 'socially acceptable' alternatives, and could lead to high dropout rates.

Furthermore, lower-level VET continues to be disregarded when it comes to funding and resources. An excessive amount of time and money has been spent on counterproductive bureaucracy and regulation (Weale, 2026). For example, the National Audit Office estimated that administering funding, qualification and assurance systems cost general further education colleges around £180 million per year, highlighting the financial burden created by administrative requirements (National Audit Office, 2011). Inconsistent funding and resource distribution can reduce the effectiveness of vocational and education policies (Laczik et al, 2023). The increasing fragmentation in funding between further and higher education (Robson et al, 2024) creates a sense of competition between the sectors instead of encouraging collaboration. Increasing competition can create an uncoordinated system and discourage institutions from building smooth pathways that allow students to transition easily from vocational FE courses into university degrees. This could disincentivise young people from taking vocational courses, as they see minimal gain and few progression opportunities.

Due to lower-level VET having little attention, students are not fully aware of pros and cons of different available courses. This means 'large numbers of young people are not on programmes which will help them to progress either educationally or in the labour market' (Weale, 2026). Furthermore, established vocational qualifications that are critical to key industries have been denied accreditation and funding (Weale, 2026). This puts students at an unfair disadvantage as the most valuable courses are not being made available.

Building on this, high levels of geographical inequalities and geographical barriers to entry limit the effectiveness of lower-level VET. As economic opportunities differ between regions, benefits of further education are not distributed equally across the UK (Donnelly et al, 2024). This limits the impact education alone can have on reducing regional inequalities. An unequal geographical spread means many students have limited access to alternatives from mainstream qualifications, particularly in areas with fewer institutions or longer travel distances (Department for Education, 2021). This

means VET courses may not be able to reach where they are needed most, and they may be disregarded in areas where they are available.

Lastly, frequent policy reform has contributed to instability within England's VET system (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). Short implementation times can prevent effective piloting before nationwide rollout, and policies implemented too quickly for political reasons are less likely to be implemented successfully (Laczik et al, 2023). For example, the introduction of T levels illustrates concerns about the pace of policy implementation. In 2018, there were concerns raised by respondents to the governments consultation about whether the education and training system had sufficient capacity to meet the proposed rollout timetable. In response, the government decided to extend the full rollout beyond 2022 to allow more time for implementation and preparation (Department for Education, 2018). Furthermore, a lack of clear, centralised vision for vocational education can contribute to inconsistent implementation across different regions, resulting in unequal learner experiences and outcomes (Laczik et al, 2023). To be successful, policies must also understand local contexts and work closely with education providers as national reforms may not always address the needs of learners across different regions. These frequent qualification reforms have made the system complex, confusing learners and reducing engagement. Reforming qualifications without considering the wider education system is unlikely to produce meaningful improvements and in turn makes qualifications more difficult for learners to understand and navigate.

Overall, lower-level VET in England faces numerous limitations. Policy instability, geographical limitations and inconsistent funding are a few of the many challenges that limit the full effectiveness of VET.

Conclusion

This report explored how lower-level vocational education and training (VET) is organised in England, who participates and the main successes and challenges associated with the current system. The findings demonstrate that lower-level vocational education and training continue to play an important role in England's education and skills system by providing accessible pathways into further education, employment and skills development. It also contributes to wider government objectives by promoting social inclusion, widening participation and supporting learners who may not thrive within traditional academic pathways.

However, the report also identified several challenges that continue to affect the effectiveness of lower-level VET. Frequent policy changes, inconsistent funding arrangements, and geographical inequalities can reduce the consistency and accessibility of provision across England. Furthermore, learners' perception of lower-

level VET remains less favourable than that of mainstream academic education, discouraging participation despite the valuable opportunities it can provide. Although there have been recent reforms attempting to strengthen vocational education and improve progression opportunities, long-term improvement ultimately depends on evidence-informed policymaking, sustained collaboration and sufficient time to allow policies to reach their full potential.

Overall, lower-level VET remains an important part of England's education system and has the potential to make a significant contribution to learners and the wider economy. Continued investment and improved public understanding of vocational education will be essential to ensure lower-level VET remains accessible and capable of supporting learners from a wide range of educational backgrounds.

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