

Debating the first principles of English vocational education

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“Vocational education cannot solve all of society’s problems, but it can make an important contribution. It is necessary but not sufficient in tackling issues like productivity and social justice.”



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Contents

1. Introduction – Why do we need this debate? What were the key messages from the first debate?	2
2. How should we define vocational education and training (VET)?	3
3. What should be our approach to VET – distinctiveness or unification?	4
4. What is the aim of VET – increasing productivity or securing social mobility?	7
5. How should high quality VET be delivered?	8
6. The European perspective	11
7. Conclusions and next steps	13



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Introduction

WHY DO WE NEED THIS DEBATE?

Olly Newton, *Director of Policy and Research, Edge Foundation*



The latest research shows that there are 226,000 skills shortage vacancies in the UK economy¹ and yet more than half a million young people aged 16-24 are unemployed and looking for work².

As we set out in *Towards a Twenty-First Century Education System*³, something has clearly gone wrong in the way that our education system prepares young people for life and work, and this will be an increasing challenge as we face the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

We need to tackle this challenge at a number of levels –from a fundamental debate about the principles and philosophy of vocational education to practice on the ground.

This report builds on *Debating the First Principles of English Vocational Education*⁴ and is based on a debate held in November 2018 which included a wide range of leading academics and researchers as well as businesses, providers, Trade Union and voluntary sector representatives.

WHAT WERE THE KEY MESSAGES FROM THE FIRST DEBATE?

Chris Winch, *Professor of Educational Philosophy and Policy, Kings College London*



In the first debate on this area, which I chaired in April 2018, there was surprisingly little dissent about the problems that face English vocational education and what its direction of travel should be.

In terms of the aims of English vocational education, there was general agreement that it does not have to have one single aim and that multiple and complementary aims are desirable.

Preparation for working life was considered to be essential, although some contributors emphasised the need for this to be more than just preparation for jobs, but something more akin to preparation for an occupation and for adult life more generally.

There was also broad agreement that there should be a citizenship element to vocational education and some contributors stressed the importance of social partnership to a successful and balanced system.

However, there were also plenty of unresolved tensions – around the esteem, positioning and delivery of high quality vocational education. Our second debate aimed to provide further insight into these areas.



How should we define vocational education and training (VET)?

The discussion centred around **whether or not vocational education could be encapsulated in a neat definition that distinguished it clearly from other forms of education**. The previous debate had suggested⁵ that there was a high degree of consensus around the idea of broadly-based vocational education and the idea that VET should have more than one aim. In particular, the aim of citizenship was emphasised.

The feeling of this group was that there **should not necessarily be a single tight definition** of vocational education, but that the ground that it covered should be clearly delineated, even if there was some fuzziness at the edges. There was a desire **not to exclude anything that might potentially be valuable as a component of VET**. There is more work to be done in exploring the scope and limits of VET in England, particularly in a rapidly changing policy, technological and economic landscape.

Example definitions submitted by participants:

Vocational education brings together theoretical and practical learning within an authentic context. It encourages learners to develop the capacity to live, work, and contribute to their communities through a positive participatory form of moral purpose. Vocational education at its very best develops the learner's intelligences: intellectual, practical, social and moral. Vocational education can be adapted to the needs of individual learners through changing the balance of learning reflecting the stage of development, aptitude and interest. (David Turrell, National Baccalaureate Trust)

Vocational education is related to:

- **WHERE it is taught** – in industry standard facilities.
 - **HOW it is taught** – by practice-led learning, where theory interprets experience, and mastery of technique enables creativity and innovation.
 - **HOW it is assessed** – by doing and practical demonstration, as well as by written examination. (Martin Doel, Institute of Education, UCL)
- All learning has the potential to be vocational but to be truly so it has to be: engaging, practical, applied, real world, within a rich context, collaborative, team-based and resulting in authentic outcomes to an authentic audience. (David Taylor, Stanley Park High School)*



What should be our approach to VET – distinctiveness or unification?

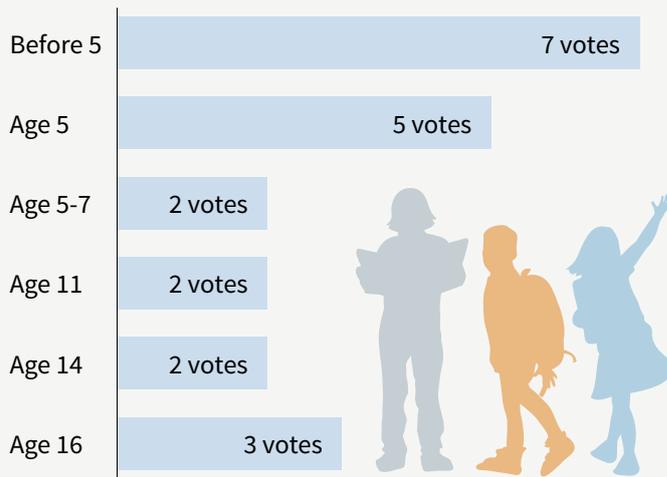
Both Ken Mayhew and Geoffrey Hinchliffe, who introduced this debate, were clear that VET was about more than training, that **it should be broadly based and that it should not be subsumed into general education.**

They raised an issue about expectations and the need to be ambitious when formulating the approach to VET, in particular the need to ensure that employers were engaged. It was generally agreed that wholesale policy borrowing was dangerous and that whatever the future trajectory of VET in England, it would need to take into account the conditions prevailing in the labour market and in the attitudes of employers and prospective employees.

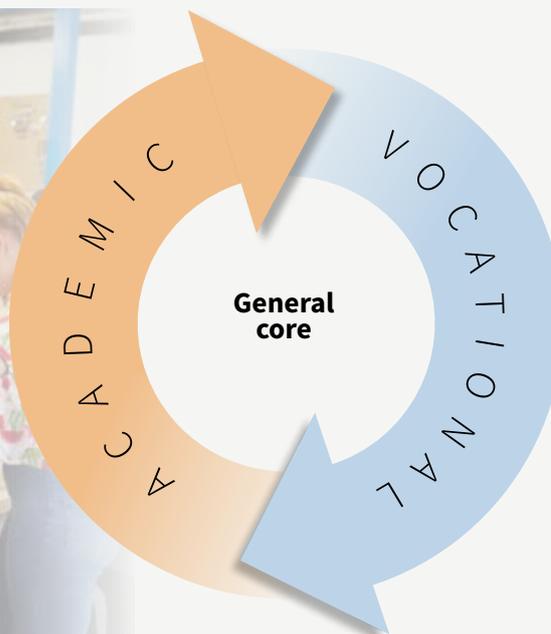
An important point was raised from the floor concerning when vocational education should begin - that is, whether it should be a distinctive offer post 16 or post 14 or whether it has a role to play from an earlier stage in schooling. There was a **degree of agreement concerning the need for some form of VET to begin at an early age** but less agreement as to exactly when. Another important contribution recommended a distinction between ‘weakly’ vocational at an early age – about work – as distinct from ‘strongly’ vocational at a later age – directly for work.

From what age should young people be able to access vocational education?

Polling Results (21 debate delegates)



In general, **unification of academic and vocational education was not approved of, but distinctiveness of vocational education was** – carving out a clear and particular role for high quality vocational education and training. This would need to take place without the marginalisation of VET and build on a common core of excellent general education.



What should be our approach to VET – distinctiveness or unification?

WHAT IS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR?

Ken Mayhew, *Emeritus Professor of Education and Economic Performance, Oxford University*



In the UK, vocational education is often presented as the poor relation of academic education, reserved for the less academically gifted and designed to directly prepare someone for a particular trade or occupation, but it is more complicated than that for several reasons:

- **First**, for many decades a number of university courses reserved for the academically gifted have been designed to directly prepare students for their chosen occupations - law and medicine, for example.
- **Second**, and more recently, much more vocational preparation now takes place in higher education establishments, often replacing formal or informal apprenticeships. Nursing and policing are prominent examples.
- **Third**, with the expansion of higher education, more students of lower ability are now enrolled on courses

that are not directed at a particular trade or occupation and which are largely academic in nature.

- **Fourth**, international comparisons suggest that, even for education and training directly concerned with preparation for a particular trade, there is wide variety in the width and depth of that preparation. The content of German vocational courses compared to their UK equivalents provides a notable example.

So in the light of all of this, what is vocational education for and what should be its content? Clearly it should be directed towards particular trades and occupations. Sometimes its recipients will be the academically gifted. Sometimes, and certainly more often, it will be targeted at those who have done relatively modestly at school. For years, governments tried and failed to give the vocational route parity of esteem with the academic route. Perhaps in insisting on this they widened rather than narrowed the divide. Times, however, have changed because a large number of young people are going to university only to find that they are not getting value for money in terms of the courses provided, whilst the labour market rewards are modest. Slowly people are realizing that a revived vocational route is necessary, both in Bachelor's degrees at university and in shorter sub-degree offerings whether in university, FE colleges or work-based apprenticeships.



Vocational philosophy 2

That route need not, and should not, be narrow and simply occupational- skill based. It should include the enhancement of cognitive skills – the ability to identify problems, to think creatively about how to solve them, and to express ideas cogently whether orally or in writing. To quote the 1963 Robbins Report, *while emphasising that there is no betrayal of values when institutions...teach what will be of some practical use, we must postulate that what is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind.* Not only will this produce better workers, it will also give people more chances to switch jobs and experience greater labour market mobility. Most importantly of all, it will create thinking and critical citizens.

REFLECTIONS: Ken's analysis reminds us of the long history of thinking in this area and the significant degree of blending between academic and technical education that goes on right up to Higher Education level. He makes a strong case for a **distinctive approach to vocational education**, but one that is broad and includes the wider skills that will be needed for success in any industry. His approach would also allow young people to continue with both academic and vocational education during their careers, as a sound basis for further study will have been laid.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT STRUCTURE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION?

Geoffrey Hinchliffe, *School of Education, University of East Anglia*



We can think of VET as essentially the preparation, learning and development that an individual requires for an occupation. This gives any programme of VET a focus which is more specific than 'employability' or 'preparation for the world of work'.

I suggest that VET has a *distinctive* and *substantive* character that needs to stand up well in comparison with academic education, so that learners, teacher-trainers and employers all have confidence in the process.

My view is that we should conceive of a tripartite structure to VET:

- 1. Occupational Education and Training.** Includes developing a technical and vocational skill set; appropriate communication and team working skills; an understanding of planning requirements; a broader understanding of the relevant sector.
- 2. General Education.** Concerned with the development of knowledge and understanding of subject disciplines related to an occupation, including maths and English where appropriate.
- 3. Social Education.** Includes traditional citizen education but also some understanding of the history and culture of one's community. It should also involve some awareness of the place an occupation has in the economic and social context of the UK.

The aim of the suggested tripartite structure is to produce learners who have occupational skills and understanding, backed up by appropriate academic subject knowledge and who can operate in a modern, diverse society.

VET will include training in specific skills required for an occupation but the focus is on developing not just a trained workforce but an *educated* workforce as well. The guiding thought here is that occupational all-round competency requires individuals who can reflect as well as deliver results and who have an intelligent appreciation of the societal context in which they operate.

A final plea - that VET includes something that might be called '*occupational aesthetics*'. The thought here is that any occupation involves some degree of style or artistry over and above the necessary functional requirements and that 'artistry' much enhances the satisfaction in working well.

REFLECTIONS: Geoffrey's perspective builds on Ken's contribution to continue to emphasise the **importance of a broader academic and social education** alongside occupation specific training if we are to have a truly educated workforce.

What is the aim of VET – increasing productivity or securing social mobility?

This was one of the most difficult questions to answer. Kevin Orr, who attempted to answer it, was far from convinced that there was a genuine policy dilemma here, and felt that it could be possible to meet **both the requirement for increased productivity and increased upward social mobility**. However, he was also clear that VET on its own is not sufficient for either of these social goals to be met. Sometimes too much pressure and expectation has been placed on it to do so.

In the debate that followed, **the preference was for increased opportunities overall**, to be secured through a greater provision of satisfying, well-paid work and the ability to link demand for skills to the supply of them. However, low educational achievement at school raised distinct questions about providing a ‘second chance’ and there was interest expressed in ways in which **young people could be motivated through engagement with work** to raise their sights in relation to their education as a preparation for a working life.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT BALANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION BETWEEN INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY AND SECURING POSITIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY?

Professor Kevin Orr, *University of Huddersfield*



This question reveals two persistent assumptions about vocational education and training (VET): that improving VET leads directly to economic development and directly to positive social mobility. Both assumptions need to be challenged.

Productivity can be broadly defined as the rate of output against input within a particular process, usually measured by cost. This reductive definition recalls Bobby Kennedy’s (1968) criticism of the measurement of Gross National Product, which “does not allow for the health



Vocational philosophy 2

of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play.” So, if we are to use productivity to position VET, we need at least a definition that incorporates the individual and social good, not just the bottom line. Nevertheless, to be clear, good VET *may* be necessary for achieving improved productivity but it is not sufficient.

Making an explicit connection between improving skills and improving social mobility has a long history. So, how to define positive social mobility? For the Cabinet Office⁶ it is “a measure of how free people are to improve their position in society”, which is laudable but nebulous. More robust is the definition of the Social Mobility Commission⁷:

The link between a person’s occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents. Where there is a strong link, there is a lower level of social mobility. Where there is a weak link, there is a higher level of social mobility.

With this definition there is no evidence that VET systematically leads to any kind of social mobility. Similar to productivity, good VET *may* be necessary for positive social mobility but it is not sufficient. Much else needs to be present, above all, well-paid jobs.

Returning to the question, I offer these five comments in response:

- The right balance between productivity and social mobility depends on how they are defined, but any causal connections are spurious.
- Good VET is a marker of a more equal society and a thriving economy.
- Good VET maintains a clear occupational focus alongside social responsibility.
- Good VET requires well-informed pedagogy.
- VET can change individuals’ lives, which is why it is always worth doing well.

REFLECTIONS: Kevin’s contribution reminds us that vocational education **cannot be expected to solve all of the challenges of society around productivity and social mobility on its own**. Taking broad and sensible definitions of productivity and social mobility, high quality VET may be necessary but is certainly not sufficient to achieve these goals.

How should high quality vocational education be delivered?



As ever with this debate, the discussion spanned from the most theoretical to the most practical and turned frequently to the **right solutions on the ground to deliver the best high quality vocational education**.

Tami McCrone offers an excellent model of the key ingredients of a distinctive vocational pedagogy from her recent research. Building on the points of Ken Mayhew and Geoffrey Hinchliffe, this is grounded in the need for a **solid base of high quality general education** on top of which the unique qualities of VET are layered.

At a systems level, Ken Spours offers us a positive and hopeful vision of FE Colleges as **anchor institutions at the centre of an ecosystem of high quality vocational education**.

How should high quality vocational education be delivered?

WHAT WOULD BE THE KEY INGREDIENTS OF A DISTINCTIVE VOCATIONAL PEDAGOGY?

Tami McCrone, Senior Research Manager, National Foundation for Educational Research



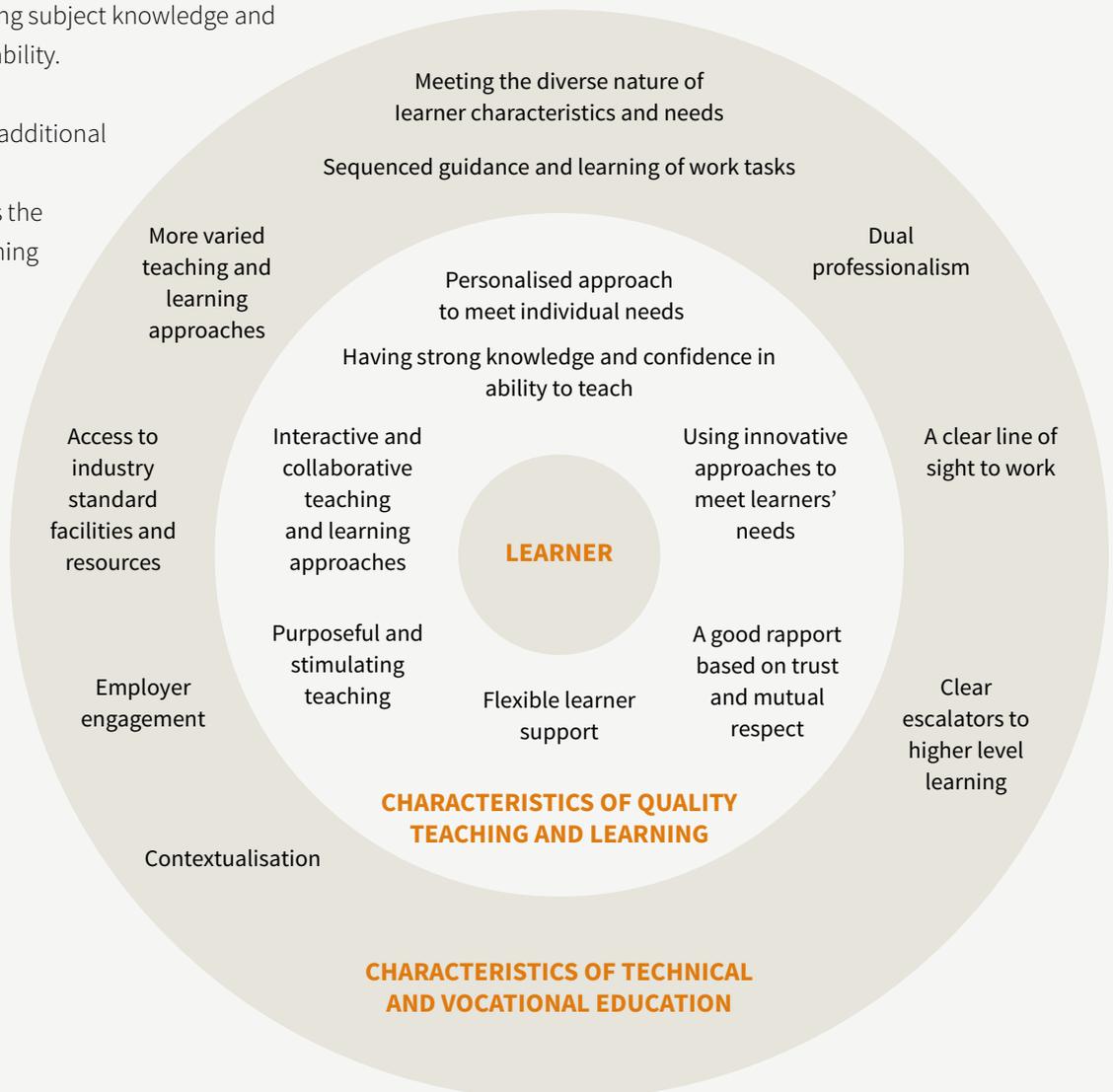
Firstly, fundamental ingredients⁸ of vocational/technical pedagogy include: a calm, well-disciplined and orderly learning environment; a culture of aspiration and achievement for all learners; purposeful and stimulating teaching; outlining behaviour expectations of learners; developing shared respect; adapting learning support to the needs of learners; interactive approaches to teaching; fostering positive relationships between teachers and learners; and teachers having strong subject knowledge and confidence in their own ability.

Secondly, the important additional distinctive ingredient of effective VET pedagogy is the contextualisation of learning to the workplace. VET teachers need to have ‘dual professionalism’ where they are experts in their subject and also have expertise in pedagogy. Moreover, sequencing of learning is important, with contextualisation representing the

critical layer. This vital ingredient includes having a ‘clear line of sight’ to work - relating learning to the workplace or contextualising it in the relevant occupational sector.

We have developed a model to assist understanding of VET pedagogy. The model places learners at the centre. The characteristics of high quality general and academic teaching and learning form the first ring of provision. The second ring presents the distinctive ingredients of high quality VET education, building on this strong base.

REFLECTIONS: Tami’s model reinforces the earlier strands of this debate that **there is a distinctive nature to vocational education and the way it is taught** but that to be successful it must **build on a stable base of high quality general education**.



Vocational philosophy 2



HOW CAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROMOTE INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH?

Professor Ken Spours, *Institute of Education, University College London*



It's time for a more holistic view about the relationship between productivity, economic development and skills. Thus far, in England at least, the national policy perspective has focused on 'skill supply' - education should produce the skills employers say they need. Added to this has been a new emphasis on higher skills levels - 3, 4 and 5. Upper end skills supply is clearly part of the picture; but on its own is narrow and elitist, ignoring the fact that employers as a whole have historically shown low demand for skill and that the vast majority of enterprises in England are SMEs, many of which lack skill development capacity.

A number of councils and regional authorities are taking the lead to promote another view of productivity and skills, focused around inclusive economic growth strategies that prioritise the need for new homes, better paid jobs, supportive community infrastructure and with a vital role for intermediate level skills.

One way of looking at inclusive growth strategies is through a social ecosystem lens in which local and regional councils embrace a place-based view of the relationship between working, living and learning. People not only need better jobs; they need affordable places to live and the knowledge and skills to not only access these jobs, but also to progress within work itself.

This involves taking a 'combinational' view of the local economy, with strategies to improve skills in different types of work and not just the upper tech end. Further education (FE) and strong technical and vocational education have a key to developing a combinational economy because colleges, acting as local 'civic anchor institutions', have a major role in creating

‘skills escalators’ into new types of work and to provide development hubs for local SMEs, micros and start-ups.

But FE colleges will not be able to do this on their own. They need to collaborate with other social partners through new types of partnership networking and with a vital role for local government. For some colleges, this will require a change of mindset. And local civic networks will also not be able to do this on their own either; requiring support from central government in the form of more devolved powers and strategic investment. Therefore, everyone has a specific role to play in the social ecosystem of inclusive economic growth, sustainable living and lifelong learning.

REFLECTIONS: Ken’s contribution reinforces the important point that we **cannot divorce questions about the delivery of high quality vocational education from their setting**. In looking at the broader question, we must also consider the future of further education and how colleges can be best placed and supported to deliver. Ken also reminds us that a strategy for high quality VET should go hand in hand with a strategy for high quality employment and that there should be a geographical relationship between the two. This kind of strategy should help to deal with the ongoing problems of skills mismatches and shortages referred to in the introduction to this paper.

The European Perspective

Dr Jörg Markowitsch joined us to provide a pan-European perspective on VET from his recent work for the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop).

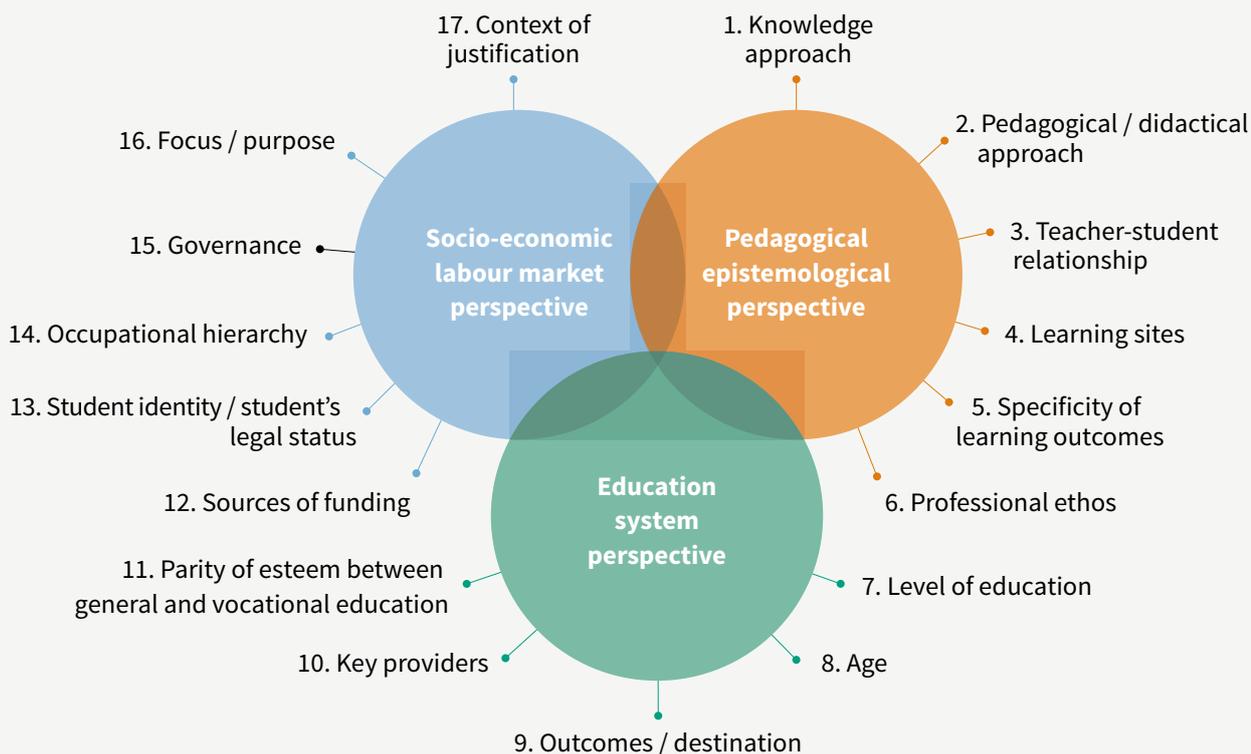
Jörg began by reminding us that the challenges of defining VET are definitely not unique to England. In fact, when surveyed, **no two European countries chose exactly the**

same combination of purposes!

Some of the features most often selected included ‘occupation-specific education’, ‘predominantly addressing young people’ and interestingly ‘seen as inferior to general or academic education’⁹.

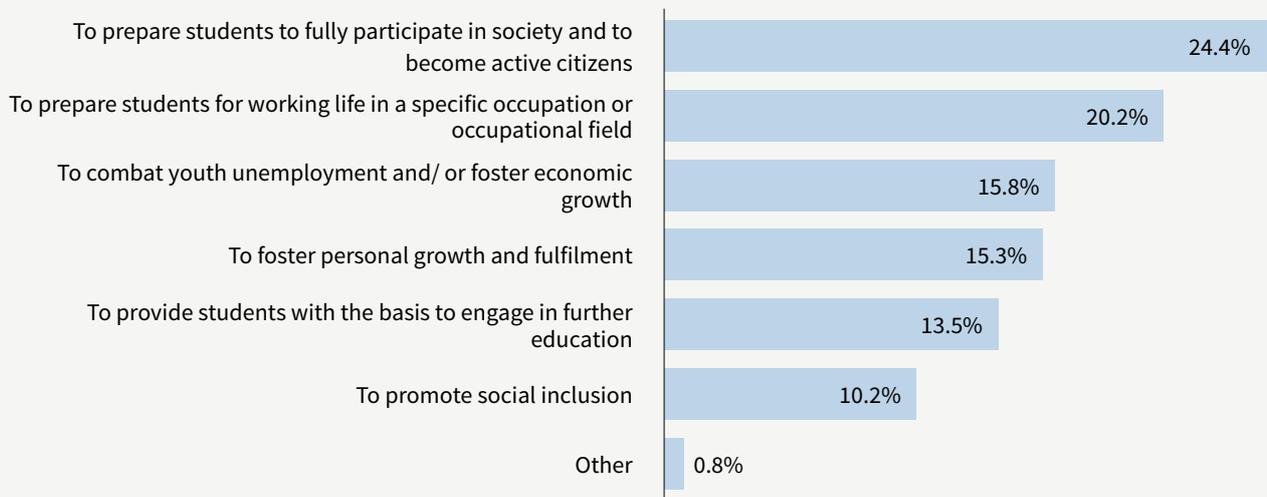


DEFINITIONS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION



Vocational philosophy 2

If you could have three wishes, which of the following would you like to see as the main characteristics of VET in 2035?

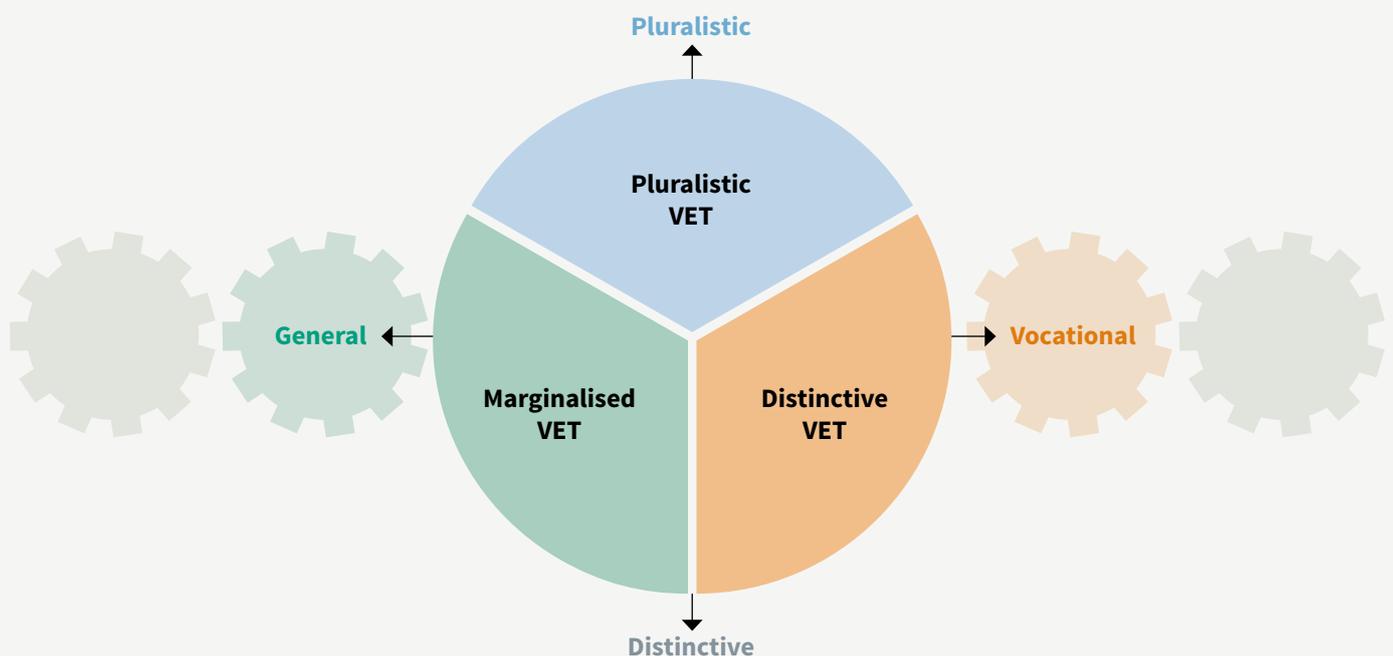


Jörg categorised these definitions on a spectrum of broad to narrow. Although, like the European countries surveyed, the group at the second debate did not come to a single firm definition for VET in the UK, **the debate definitely focused around the broad end of the spectrum**, encompassing formal and non-formal learning and building on a base of strong general education.

Looking at the changing landscape for VET, Jörg gave us a **model to examine the direction in which the English system might move over the coming years**. This looks at whether VET is strengthening as a single core or

diversifying to become pluralistic, and whether the system is drifting more towards the academic or vocational end of the spectrum.

Rapid economic and technological change make it difficult to predict with any precision the future trajectory of VET in Europe and here in England, but it is possible to envisage scenarios in which VET could move nearer to higher education, could become more distinctive or could even become marginalised to some degree. However, overall it was felt likely that **VET as a continuing broad form of education would continue to play an important role over the next 50 years or so**.



Conclusions and next steps

This second debate built on the first to bring out some of the **challenges in developing VET in England**, despite the clear and continuing consensus about aims and the breadth of VET amongst most of the participants.

Some of the key messages coming out of the debate were clear:

- **Access to high quality VET needs to begin before the age of 16**, although there was a spread of views about when this should start from primary school through to age 14.
- We should focus on a path of **distinctiveness for high quality VET**, setting out how this form of education provides its own unique objectives, curriculum and pedagogy.
- High quality VET, like high quality academic education, **must rest on the strong foundation of a broad general education**.
- Vocational education cannot solve all of society's problems, but it can make an important contribution. **It is necessary but not sufficient** in tackling issues like productivity and social justice.
- Building on the distinctiveness of VET itself, we should continue to support the development of a **distinctive pedagogy and institutional structure** that best supports high quality VET teaching.

As ever, the debate brought to the fore the complex nature of the VET landscape and in particular the **need to engage a wide variety of partners** in schools and colleges, workplaces and government, both national and local, and to engender a sense of common purpose. **We look forward to the next phase of this debate.**

ENDNOTES

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