

# The changing nature and role of vocational education and training in Europe

## VET in higher education: Country Case Studies

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### Case study focusing on United Kingdom (England)

prepared for CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

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#### *Disclaimer*

*This text is presented in its original form.*

*It has neither been revised nor edited by Cedefop.*

## **The changing nature and role of vocational education and training – overall aims**

The purpose of the Changing nature and role of VET-project is to improve our understanding of how VET is changing in the countries belonging to the European Union (as well as Iceland and Norway). Over a three-year period (2016-18) the project will analyse how vocationally oriented education and training has changed in the past two decades (1995-2015) and based on these results investigate the main challenges and opportunities facing the sector today and in the future. Work is divided into six separate but interlinked themes:

- (a) the changing definition and conceptualisation of VET;
- (b) the external drivers influencing VET developments;
- (c) the role of traditional VET at upper secondary level;
- (d) VET from a lifelong learning perspective;
- (e) the role of VET at higher education levels;
- (f) scenarios outlining alternative development paths for European VET in the 21st century.

The study takes as its starting point that vocationally oriented education and training is something more than the traditional VET delivered at upper secondary level (in the form of school-based education or training, apprenticeships, or combinations of these). Due to the requirements of lifelong learning, we are able to observe diversification of VET with new institutions and stakeholders involved. We also see an expansion of VET to higher education areas, partly through reform of existing institutions, partly through the emergence of new institutions. This has been caused by factors internal to the education and training system as well as by external pressures linked to demographic, technological and economic changes.

This particular case study, together with 9 other case studies, provides input to theme (b) of the project ('The external drivers influencing VET developments').

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# The re-emergence of vocational higher education in England?

## 1. Introduction

*Please provide a concise introduction that gives an overall indication of the change processes observed (during the last 20 years) related to VET at higher levels in terms of 'academic or vocational drift' or 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside higher education)'.*

### Defining the higher level VET landscape

In England, higher level VET is delivered in either (a) the further education sector or (b) the higher education sector. Sometimes similar things are delivered in both. There is little higher VET outside of either the further or higher education sectors, other than some continuing professional development – sometimes certificated – delivered at a level equivalent to EQF levels 5 to 8 by a range of public and private providers. Therefore, for the most part, higher level VET is synonymous with VET delivered in higher education (as defined below). From the 1980s onwards there has been a deliberate policy of creating an external training market which had the impact of externalising many in-house company training programmes – i.e. they were increasingly delivered externally - and accredited to national standards - rather than being delivered internally.

Comprehending the provision of higher level vocational education and training (VET) in England requires both an understanding of the post-compulsory educational landscape and the succession of policy twists and turns over several decades that have brought about the current state of affairs (Scott, 2009; Rapley, 2012). As will be demonstrated, these are inextricably intertwined. In general, educational commentators speak of the further education (FE) and higher education (HE) sectors. Whilst the latter tends to be defined with reference to, for the most part, universities and specialist providers <sup>(1)</sup> which fall under the ambit of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the FE sector proves more difficult to define. FE, for purposes of the current study, can be defined with reference to its course provision: i.e. delivery of courses typically at ISCED levels 2 to 4 though, in practice, this belies the wide variety of provision in the sector, including some at ISCED levels 5 and 6. The FE sector comprises sixth forms, further education colleges (FEC) which, historically, have been regarded as part of the public sector though their status today is perhaps more ambiguous, and private sector providers. At the risk of over simplifying the situation, it is possible to classify sixth forms - most of which are in secondary schools – as specialising in academic courses (i.e. AS and A-levels that potentially grant access to university) though there is VET provision too, and FEC as specialising in VET. Although FEC provide a range of academic courses, their forte has long been regarded as that of delivering VET. Private training providers in FE are firmly focused on VET provision.

Provision of VET at a higher level in England is divided between that delivered:

- (i) in the HE sector;

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<sup>(1)</sup> For example, conservatoires

- (ii) outside of HE and principally in the FE sector by, for the most part, FEC.

There is some overlap between the two with some higher-level VET delivered by FEC on a franchise basis under licence from a higher education institution (HEI). In other cases, FEC deliver higher level VET on their own recognisance. Some higher VET provision in the FE sector is at the bachelor level and higher, but much of it is at the sub-degree level (e.g. short-cycle ISCED level 5 courses below Bachelor level).

Defining VET provision within the HE sector is not without difficulty. In general, the HE sector is seen to focus mainly on academic courses even if some courses which fall under the rubric of academic have a substantial vocational element (e.g. dentistry, medicine, law, etc.). And there has been over recent years an increased emphasis on embedding an employability element in students' higher education where employability, to all intents and purposes, might be regarded as a synonym for vocational. As will be expanded on below this reflects desire of higher education institutions (HEI) to demonstrate that the educational experience they provide their student is one attuned to the needs of the labour market.

Understanding the current role of vocational education at higher levels in England requires a long-term perspective (Scott, 2009; Parry 2012). As noted above there are two stands of higher VET provision: (i) that within HE; and (ii) that within FE. Although the two are inter-linked, for expositional purposes it makes sense to consider each in turn.

### **Main developments within the HE sector**

Historically higher education in England was the preserve of the elite; it prepared a relatively small number of people for entry into, typically, public service in central and local government. From the 1960s onwards – following the Robbins Report in 1963 – there was the gradual expansion of higher education such that today nearly 40 per cent of the youth-cohort obtains entry to this form of education. Part of the expansion of HE in the 1960s saw the emergence of: (a) new universities (the plate-glass universities); and (b) polytechnics. The latter were very much oriented towards delivering vocational courses (with many of them having grown out of technical colleges). In essence this created a two-tier HE sector. Universities were autonomous and centrally funded, whereas polytechnics were responsible to, and funded by, the local education authorities in the municipalities in which they were located. The two types of HEI were distinct in other ways. As already noted the polytechnics were much more vocationally oriented with a mission, for the most part, to serve the needs of the local economy, whereas the universities were considered prestigious academic institutions serving a higher set of needs. Use of the word 'prestigious' draws attention to the status difference between universities and polytechnics with the latter regarded very much as second class.

From 1992, as policy continued to push for increased levels of participation in higher education, the distinction between universities and polytechnics was abolished (with the passing into law of the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992). All would, hence forward, be referred to as universities. Arguably this has resulted in the former polytechnics losing some of their original identity as they increasingly resembled the characteristics of the pre-1992 universities. The loss of that identity seemed to entail a shift from the vocational to the academic. This change occurred at the same time as student maintenance grants were reduced and then abolished and tuition fees were introduced. In the new funding regime, stu-

dents could take out loans, underwritten by the government, to fund their university studies. Previously tuition was free and maintenance grants were provided. In order to attract paying students, the former polytechnics were keen to demonstrate their bona fides as august academic institutions offering a wide range of courses, hence their increasing resemblance to the older universities. To be fair, the polytechnics had always offered a mix of the academic and the vocational in their course provision but from 1992 onwards their balance was increasingly in favour of the academic.

As tuition fees continued to rise – they are currently £9,000 a year for an undergraduate course – and the number of students continued to increase, there were increasing concerns about the extent to which HE was serving the needs of the economy. There are two elements to consider here:

- the need for universities to demonstrate that the investment in HE (by the student and indirectly by the state as the underwriter of student loans) was worthwhile (i.e. there is a positive return on the investment); and
- concerns from government regarding the extent to which it would be able to recoup the student loans it had underwritten given that students only begin to repay their student loans when they earn £21,000 or more.

In other words, if universities were unable to deliver the skills that could command a salary of £21,000 or more in the labour market, then cracks would begin to develop in the financial system that sustained the higher education edifice. Universities responded by investing substantially in employability provision across all courses so that, for example, arts courses provide numerical skills to their students. In this way students would be better prepared to enter the labour market and gain a job commensurate with their level of educational attainment. This might well be regarded as the renaissance of vocationalism within traditional academic HE.

### **Main developments within the FE sector**

Although the HE and FE sector have distinct roles – as outlined above – the FE sector has, at least as far back as the 1950s (Scott, 2009), provided some higher vocational courses albeit on a small scale. Over the past few decades provision of higher vocational education in the FE sector has increased such that commentators and policy makers now refer to a distinct sub or hybrid sector: higher education in further education (or HE in FE). This hybrid sector accounts for around 8 per cent of all students studying towards a higher education qualification (2015/16).

In many respects the growth of HE in FE – which is vocational in orientation – stems from the policy decision to increase participation levels in HE. A landmark development relating to participation in HE was the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Dearing expected future growth in higher education to be at the sub-degree level (i.e. short-cycle courses at ISCED level 5) and further suggested that FEC be given the mission to develop this aspect of the market for HE. This was also designed to curtail the academic drift associated with some FEC having ventured into the provision of bachelor degrees. In practice Dearing's recommendations were not implemented. Instead FEC were encouraged to collaborate and compete with HEIs. Given that the evidence suggested participation in sub-degree level qualifications would be unlikely to have much impact on the 50 per cent participation in HE target, the

government at the end of the 1990s introduced a new short-cycle qualification –Foundation Degrees - which engaged employers in their design and were designed specifically to meet skill shortages – which were to be delivered in FE. These degrees were typically delivered by FECs often in partnership with HEIs.

Over the 2000s the importance of delivering HE in FE was seen to have many benefits (Parry et al., 2012):

- meeting labour market demand for skills given that HE in FE is primarily vocational. Moreover, FEC often have good links with local employers which further emphasises the link to the labour market;
- allowing people to study locally and often on a part-time basis which was seen to increase participation levels amongst non-traditional students. This thereby contributed to the widening participation agenda; and
- provided a relatively low-cost study option to students given that courses were shorter than traditional Bachelor degrees and often taken on a part-time basis so study could be combined with work. In this way those who were risk averse to making an investment in their education - the maximum tuition fee for a Bachelor degree is £9,000 a year in 2017 – might be persuaded to continue with their studies.

The government policy paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS, 2011) signalled that tuition fees for HE students would be significantly increased. There was an expectation that this would significantly increase the number of students who would choose to take the cheaper, vocational pathway through HE by enrolling for foundation degrees in FE (Rapley, 2012). In practice, this does not seem to have happened quite as expected. There is perhaps a lingering feeling that universities are better than colleges, and the academic is more prestigious than the vocational. But this is difficult to corroborate.

In an effort to further boost participation in higher VET, a new policy initiative was launched – Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships (delivered at ISCED levels 4 and above). Apprenticeships at this level are seen as a response to satisfy skill needs at higher levels and provide an alternative route through HE (and one with no tuition fees and maintenance loans). There is increasing recognition in policy circles that a traditional university education is not suited to everyone, but that should not curtail the studies of those who choose not to go to university. It has been during the early 2010s that the main policy push to implement Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships has been observed. At the time of writing is not clear whether the 'education' element of the apprenticeship will be delivered in the HE sector, the HE within FE sector, or a combination of both. If successful, in the sense that these apprenticeships attract a substantial number of employers and apprentices, then it will engage employers in the delivery of training at a higher level in a way that is perhaps unprecedented. The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy – discussed further below – may well encourage employers to engage in a form of training they have shown relatively little appetite to join in previously (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the commentary provided above, there have been a number of policy twists and turns over recent decades which impinge upon the provision of higher level vocational education. From a policy perspective there have been three interlinked priorities:

- increasing participation levels in higher education;
- ensuring that the education and skills system as a whole – including higher education – is oriented towards meeting both the current and future labour market demand for skills;
- widening participation in higher education (by ethnicity, age, social class, etc.) (Hogarth et al., 1997).

The provision of HE in FE, to some extent at least, is able to make a contribution to these for the reasons set out above. But for the most part, as will be expanded on below, HE in FE, constitutes a modest part of overall HE provision. If one wants to understand the place of VET at higher levels there is a need to consider activities in the HE sector as this constitutes by far the major part of provision. Within this sector one sees swings in provision: from the two-tier system where the former polytechnics fulfilled an important vocational function, to a single-tier one that has been predominantly academic in its orientation but where the need to deliver employability, qua vocational, skills within traditional academic courses has been increasing prioritised by HEIs (Hogarth et al., 2016).

## 2. VET at higher levels

*Please briefly describe the current situation related to ‘VET at higher levels’ in your country and refer to the following questions:*

*Which **types of vocationally oriented degrees/qualifications** are currently awarded at **EQF levels 5-8** and **since when**? Please include the titles of these types and their NQF/EQF level and **describe them briefly!** Please use the most commonly used English translation for the titles of qualification types and use these titles consistently! <sup>(2)</sup> To which **educational segment** do they belong (e.g. higher education, post-secondary level VET, CVET)? What is the **‘importance’ of these types** (e.g. in terms of number of learners or graduates) compared to other types (such as number of students enrolled in academic HE programmes)? Are there any prevailing economic sectors?*

*Please include any **figures or diagrams** (time series), if possible!*

### The landscape of provision

Vocational education at the higher level is difficult to define in the case of England as indicated above. One can start with the working definition provided by Cedefop (2011):

Vocationally oriented education and training at higher qualifications level means education and training that can contain aspects of both academic and vocational areas typically with the majority of vocational aspects. It is usually located at levels equivalent to levels 6 to 8 of the European qualifications framework. (Cedefop, 2011, p.14).

Using something akin to this definition, a recent review comments that higher VET courses are diverse in England covering professional and vocational programmes targeting specific skills and career development (Lester, 2016). It encompasses 136 awarding bodies offering

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<sup>(2)</sup> If applicable, refer to the Cedefop NQF monitoring reports – see: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf/european-inventory>



1,958 vocational and similar qualifications at levels 4–7 (EQF levels 5–7), though less than half of these were in active use in 2012/13.

The regulated qualifications framework (RQF), introduced in October 2015, replaces the national qualifications framework (NQF). The RQF covers all vocational and academic qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) in England. It does not, however, indicate which qualifications are academic and which are vocational. <sup>(3)</sup> In general, there are a range of sub-degree (Bachelor) level qualifications (i.e. short-cycle ones) listed in the RQF that would fall under the category ‘vocational’ at the higher level and listed under the RQF, such as:

- Higher National Diploma (HND);
- Higher National Certificate (HNC);
- Higher Apprenticeships.

More schematically, Figure 1 outlines provision in England. It reflects the various modes of provision and the level at which courses are provided. There are traditional higher education institutions that deliver a mix of general and vocational courses at EQF levels 4-8, though mainly at EQF level 5-8. Within the traditional higher education sector there are specialist providers such as seminaries and conservatoires that deliver, in respects, education and training related to entering a specific profession (e.g. a professional musician). HE is also delivered within in FE most, if not all, of which is vocational. It is also possible to make a distinction between full- / part-time courses and those that are delivered via sandwich courses given that by definition the latter tend to have a substantial vocational element. The area shaded in black outlines that which might be considered vocational. And finally, with introduction of qualification credits it has become increasingly possible to externally accredit professional development courses.

In Figure 1, general qualifications include Bachelor, Masters, and Doctoral degrees. Within general degree level qualifications there is also a sub-class of qualifications that grant full or partial entry to a profession; for instance, law, medicine, nursing, etc. Whether or not these are considered vocational or academic is a moot point. There is also the on-going introduction of degree level apprenticeships that will provide an award that is equivalent to EQF levels 5 to 8. Whether or not degree level apprenticeships will be delivered in HE, FE or a mixture of the two remains to be seen. Below degree level qualifications there are a range of sub-degree ones (e.g. HNDs, Foundation degrees) that provide education equivalent to the first year or two of a full degree level programme. These are typically vocational in orientation. One might also want to consider the mode of study. Sandwich courses, for instance, might be regarded as vocational given the amount of time a student spends with an employer. Sandwich courses were also regarded as being relatively effective in connecting graduates to the labour market because of the experience students gained in working with an employer (Daniel and Pugh, 1975). Although they fell out of favour somewhat during the 1990s and 2000s, with the increased attention being given to the employability agenda in higher education (HE) they have had something of a renaissance of late in some universities.

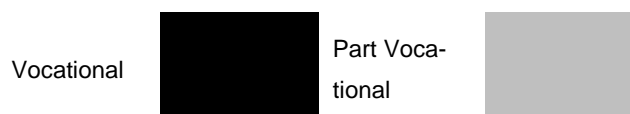
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<sup>(3)</sup> From the policy perspective in England there is little to be gained from having such information.

There is also the accreditation of continuing professional development and training to take into account. It is possible to accredit any type of learning, so where it is at levels EQF levels EQF levels 5 to 8 it is potentially possible to award a qualification at this level.

**Figure 1: Schematic outline of vocational education in the UK**

Type of qualification	Mode of delivery				
	Traditional HE institutions		Higher education delivered within Further education		Workplace based training
	Full / part time	Sandwich	Full / part time	Sandwich / Apprenticeship	Accreditation of professional training
General qualifications (EQF 5-8)					
General qualifications that provide full/partial professional accreditation (EQF 5-8)					
Degree level apprenticeships (EQF 5-8)					
Foundation degrees (EQF 4-5)					
Other sub-degree level qualifications (EQF 4-5)					
Higher Apprenticeships (EQF 4-8)					



Source: Authors

The commentary provides a somewhat restricted conception of higher level VET and raises a number of questions. It is not clear, for instance, how degree level courses might be classified as vocational. For instance, how would one classify a nursing degree - as a vocational one or a general / academic one? And how would one classify courses by mode of study - for example, is a sandwich course a vocational one? This points to the practical difficulties – or perhaps the near impossibility – of comprehensively defining higher VET in England using the initial working definition set out by Cedefop (2011). It also potentially distorts the picture of provision given that so much effort has, over recent years, been expended upon develop-

ing a vocational element within general, academic degree level programmes. This is an issue that is returned to below.

### **Participation levels**

Statistical evidence is somewhat threadbare with respect to making a vocational / general distinction in higher VET. Table 1 below provides an indication of the scale of participation in the higher VET. By adding together the percentage of people engaged in various sub-degree qualifications one can obtain an estimate of the extent to which vocational courses account for overall levels of participation. This reveals that 9.0 per cent of enrolments in higher education were in vocational courses, but this is likely to be an under-estimate. If medicine and dentistry enrolments are included, this increases the percentage in vocational courses to around 11.5 per cent.

Table 2 provides information on the number of enrolments in Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. Higher and degree apprenticeships are available at various levels. They combine work with study and may include a work-based, academic or combined qualification or a professional qualification relevant to an industry or occupation. Levels 4 and 5 are equivalent to a Higher Education Certificate/Diploma or a Foundation Degree, level 6 is equivalent to a Bachelor's degree, and level 7 is equivalent to a Master's degree. Typically, higher apprentices study part-time at college, university or with a training provider. Apprenticeships take between one and five years to complete (NAS, 2017). Although higher level apprenticeships have been around for a number of years, it has been over the past few years that there has been an increase in the number of subject areas covered by apprenticeships, and, concomitantly, an increase in the number of apprentices. For the time being, these account for a negligible percentage of the overall number of apprenticeship starts across all levels. Many of the Higher-Level Apprenticeships at the time of writing are in 'Care Management and Leadership', 'Management' and 'Accountancy' (which account for around a half of all apprenticeships at this level). But the policy expectation is that the range of subjects / occupations covered will increase (Annex II provides a list of higher and degree level apprenticeships currently available). As discussed by one interviewee, a greater focus on higher VET in the UK has developed most recently, following the implementation of the Apprenticeship Levy in April 2017. Although it is too early to fully understand the emerging changes the levy has promoted, it is expected to encourage more employers to focus and invest in apprenticeships at all levels. <sup>(4)</sup>

Table 3 provides an indication of the total number of students who are enrolled in the FE sector but studying towards a higher level qualification (i.e. at EQF 5-8). It shows that the HE in FE sector accounts for around 8 per cent of all students and this number has been stable over recent years. The Association of Colleges reports that around 200 FECs provide HE (out of 280 in total), with around 90 per cent of them delivering Foundation degrees (AoC, 2017).

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<sup>(4)</sup> To date this has not been observed in the statistics relating to the number of apprenticeship starts since the introduction of the levy.

'The changing nature and role of vocational education and training in Europe':

Work Assignment 5 – VET in higher education

**Table 1: Enrolments in different types of HE courses 2012-2015**

Type of course	Total enrolments				Percentage of enrolments in different types of course			
	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Postgraduate (EQF 6-8)	568,490	536,715	539,435	538,185	22.8	22.9	23.5	23.7
First degree (EQF 5)	154,1365	1528,495	1533,855	1524,225	61.7	65.3	66.7	67.3
Foundation degree (EQF 5 short cycle)	80,145	63130	51,895	46,105	3.2	2.7	2.3	2.0
HNC/HND (EQF 5 short cycle)	20,545	17455	16,710	15,840	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7
Other undergraduate (EQF level 5-8)	28,6085	194675	157,460	141,725	11.5	8.3	6.8	6.3
Total	2496,635	2340470	2299,355	2266,075	100	100	100	100
Total Foundation, HNC/D, other undergraduate	386,775	275,260	226,065	203,670	<b>15.5</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>9.0</b>

Source: HE Enrolments Statistical First Release (HESA); data for earlier years are not available.

**Table 2: Apprenticeship Starts by Level in England, 2011-2016**

EQF Level	Total enrolments					Percentage of enrolments				
	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Level 2	329,000	292,750	286,490	298,280	291,330	63	57	65	60	57
Level 3	18,7880	207,670	144,730	181,760	190,870	36	41	33	36	37
Level 4	2,850	4,180	3,810	7,090	9,510	1	1	1	1	2
Level 5	850	5,610	5,410	12,590	16,870	0	1	1	3	3
Level 6				100	740				0	0
Level 7					30					0
Total Higher Apprenticeships (i.e. at Level 4+)	3,700	9,790	9,220	19770	27,160	1	2	2	4	5
<b>Total Apprenticeships</b>	<b>520,600</b>	<b>510,200</b>	<b>440400</b>	<b>499900</b>	<b>509400</b>	100	100	100	100	100

Source: FE Date Library Apprenticeships Statistical First Release

**Table 3: HE students by provider type**

	<b>2011/12</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2013/14</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>2015/16</b>	<b>% 2011/12 to 2015/16</b>	<b>% 2014/15 to 2015/16</b>
Total HE providers	2,496,635	2,340,470	2,299,355	2,266,075	2,280,830	-8.6%	0.7%
Total FE providers	180,395	186,565	189,480	189,635	187,115	3.7%	-1.3%
FE in HE as % of all HE students	6.7	7.4	7.6	7.7	7.6		

Source: HESA HE students by level of study, mode of study and HE provider type 2011/11 to 2015/16

### 3. Change processes during the last 20 years - educational system perspective

One of the unique features of this study is the emphasis given to the historical development of VET systems. In this section, the focus is on the change processes that have taken place during the last 20 years related to VET at higher levels in terms of 'academic or vocational drift' or 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside higher education)' from the perspective of the educational system.

Depending upon the situation in your country, relevant developments might have started already before the 1990s. In other cases there may be no need to take such long-term perspective, but at the very least the commentary should go back to the middle of the 1990s.

Please describe first these change processes and their impact on the overall system (3.1), before presenting characteristics of VET offered at higher levels from the perspective of the educational system (3.2). Please clearly distinguish between the different objects and contexts of change, respectively the different types of VET qualifications/programmes offered at higher education levels.

Please refer to the "Characteristics and indicators of 'academic drift', 'vocational drift' and 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside HE)'" (presented in Table 2 of the guidance note; the relevant aspects are included in each section here below): Please reflect whether any of these characteristics and indicators can also be identified in your country and which ones – identified in your country - should be added.

#### 3.1. Change processes and their impact on the system

- a) To what extent can changes related to 'academic or vocational drift' or 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside higher education)' be observed? To what extent have vocationally oriented programmes/qualifications at higher levels been introduced during the last 20 years and in which way (e.g. by up-grading VET institutions/programmes into higher education, by introducing new types of programmes within higher education without upgrading VET institutions/programmes, or by establishing new types of VET programmes/qualifications outside higher education)?
- b) Can any different phases or stages of this development over time be identified?
- c) What kind of impact does this have on the education and training system? E.g. development of a new sector outside higher education, development of a new sub-sector within higher education (and to what extent has this change led to the establishment of a - full or partial - 'unified', 'binary' or mixed higher education system)?

From the late 1980s onwards, education policy has sought to increase participation in higher education – both within and outwith the higher education sector – with a view to improving skills supply to the labour market. As will be seen, the funding of higher education has driven many of the reforms over recent years with implications for the provision of higher level VET. In some respects, one can see over the early years of the expansion period a degree of academic drift insofar as much of the growth in participation was concentrated in what might be loosely referred to as the traditional university sector. As growth in higher education continued apace, there were increasing concerns being aired about the affordability of mass participation in higher education (for both students and the state), and the relevance of what was being taught with respect to the labour market. This can be seen most readily in the Dearing Report (NICHE, 1997). The Dearing Report – commissioned by the then government - set out for the future expansion of higher education in England. It recommended provision of more vocational higher education at the sub-degree (sub-Bachelor) level to be delivered in the FE sector. In this way, there was potential for higher education to have a more vocational focus given the FE sector's relative strength in delivering VET and in their strong contacts

with local employers. It would also result in the costs of higher education being reduced for those who studied in FE given that the tuition fees attached to HE in FE tended to be lower in part because duration of sub-degrees courses such as Foundation Degrees was shorter than a Bachelor degree, and because FEC tended to charge less, other things being equal. Even if Dearing's recommendations were not fully implemented they led eventually to introduction of Foundation Degrees at the end of the 1990s – which had a vocational focus – which helped increase participation rates. But higher education remained – and remains - overwhelmingly oriented towards the provision of full-time study in academic / general subjects delivered by HEIs. This has continued to raise concerns amongst policy makers about the employability of graduates and the extent to which higher education in general is oriented towards meeting the skills needs of the labour market. Hence, over recent years, there has been an increased emphasis upon developing employability skills within general courses, and developing – or at least reinforcing – the vocational pathway through higher education with the expansion of Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships.

Whilst the emphasis is on the last 20 years, in order to understand the evolution of higher education in England – within and outwith the HE sector – and the development of higher level VET, there is a need to take a slightly longer perspective. One can divide the development of higher level education into a number of separate periods.

- **The age of elitism:** up until the mid-1960s HE was an elitist system geared towards the needs of serving a small group of, typically, middle class men.
- **The initial expansion of the higher education sector:** from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s there was growth in the number of HE students, including those in the newly established polytechnics (that typically provided many vocational courses).
- **The initial period of rapid growth:** a period of rapid growth from the 1980s onwards (again with much in the non-university sector) with increasing emphasis on creating competition between HE institutions in the pursuit of students. From 1992 onwards, there was no longer any distinction between polytechnics and universities with the former losing some of the original identity that stemmed from their links to the local economies in which they were located. This period saw increased provision of HE in the FE sector.
- **A prolonged period of financial problems:** from the mid-1990s onwards there was a period of continuing growth but with the transfer of learning costs being increasingly passed onto the student. It was apparent that as the government pushed towards a 50 per cent age participation rate in HE target that it could not fund this wholly from public expenditure. The Dearing Report signalled the introduction of tuition fees that have risen successively to stand at £9,000 a year in 2017. The Dearing Report recommended that more vocational higher education be delivered by FECs. In this way, there was both a vocational option and a cheaper option available to students.
- **The period of increased instrumentalism and demonstrating value for money:** from the 2000s onwards there has been an increasing policy emphasis placed on (a) developing the employability skills of undergraduates and (b) developing a mainstream alternative pathway through higher education to one offered by universities. Universities have been observed to increase their investment in providing their students with vocational skills under the umbrella of the employability agenda. Mean-



while there has been the gradual introduction of Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships which has gathered pace during the 2010s. In April 2017 the Apprenticeship Levy on employers was introduced to further increase the number of apprentices (including Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships).

Looking back over the decades, it is certainly the case that post-Robbins there has been a more instrumentalist view taken towards the role HE should serve: in other words, that it should serve an economic purpose related to supplying the skills employers demand.

As already noted, with the publication of the Robbins Report in 1963, the higher education system was an elite one oriented towards teaching academic subjects to typically middle-class young men (Bathmaker, 2003). It was recognised even in the 1960s that the system was failing to meet the needs of the economy. Robbins wanted to create a more open HE system – i.e. one that was open to all who had the ability to benefit from it. Following Robbins the number of HE graduates doubled, even if the percentage of young people entering university remained low. The oil crisis in the early 1970s effectively stymied any future growth in participation due to the pressures on public expenditure which meant the government could not continue to fund any further expansion.

From the late 1980s to early 1990s participation increased rapidly following recognition by government that the country's competitiveness would be increasingly dependent upon the supply of high skilled and educated people. By 1992, the age participation rate had reached 30 per cent – from 17 per cent in 1987 - after which it stagnated once again resulting from pressures to rein in public expenditure resulting from the deep recession of 1990/91 (Bathmaker, 2003).

It was observed that much of the growth in the 1980s took place outside of the traditional university sector. Prior to 1992, the higher education sector comprised universities (funded via national government) and polytechnics (funded via local authorities). It was apparent that the unit costs of the polytechnics were lower than those in the university sector. This was due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that local authorities had more control over the polytechnics than national government had over universities. So this made it more cost effective for growth to take place in the polytechnic sector. It was also the case that the polytechnics had, given their roots in the local labour markets in which they were located, a more vocational emphasis. In retrospect this may have been a lost opportunity. Rather than growth in the polytechnic sector increasing the provision of VET at higher levels, the polytechnics increasingly copied the educational characteristics of their university counterparts.

In 1992, because government wanted to increase the efficiency in the higher education sector - essentially by creating more competition - the distinction between universities and polytechnics was abolished. In future both would be funded from the same funding source. The term polytechnic disappeared and all henceforth were referred to as universities. Arguably this change robbed polytechnics of some their identity; that which distinguished them from the pre-1992 universities. Polytechnics had been, historically, tied to their local labour markets and had delivered a range of vocational courses, often on a part-time basis and at sub-degree level. But in the post-1992 period they became to look and behave much like the pre-1992 universities.

By the late 1990s, boosting participation levels in HE was once again on the political agenda. With recommendations from the Dearing Report (NICHE, 1997) being implemented students would increasingly meet the full cost of their higher education. During much of the 1990s the

financial support provided to HE students had been reduced in real terms (i.e. maintenance grants had been gradually reduced and needed to be topped up with student loans). A series of studies demonstrated that the predicted lifetime earnings of someone gaining a degree was substantially higher than someone who left school at the end of upper secondary education (see Gambin et al, 2014 for a review). This created the rationale for requiring students to increasingly bear the costs of their HE: it was an investment which would generate a relatively high return compared with not going to university (other things being equal). The Dearing Report also resulted in university funding being altered so that it followed the student rather than, as previously, universities receiving a block grant to teach a given number of students. So, universities needed to market themselves to prospective students.

Dearing, however, also wanted to create an alternative to traditional route through HE. He suggested that growth in HE could be generated in the FE sector through the delivery of sub-degree vocational courses; a recommendation that eventually led to the introduction of Foundation Degrees. By providing a vocational HE pathway in the FE sector, there was an opportunity to deliver more affordable higher education to those who might be put off paying tuition fees. It needs to be borne in mind that in 1999, maintenance grants for students were abolished and replaced by loans, and tuitions fees were levied from 2006/7 initially at a maximum of £3,000 and currently at a maximum of £9,000 a year (following the recommendations of the Browne Review in 2010). Despite the increase in the cost of studying at university, participation levels continued to increase – see Figure 3.

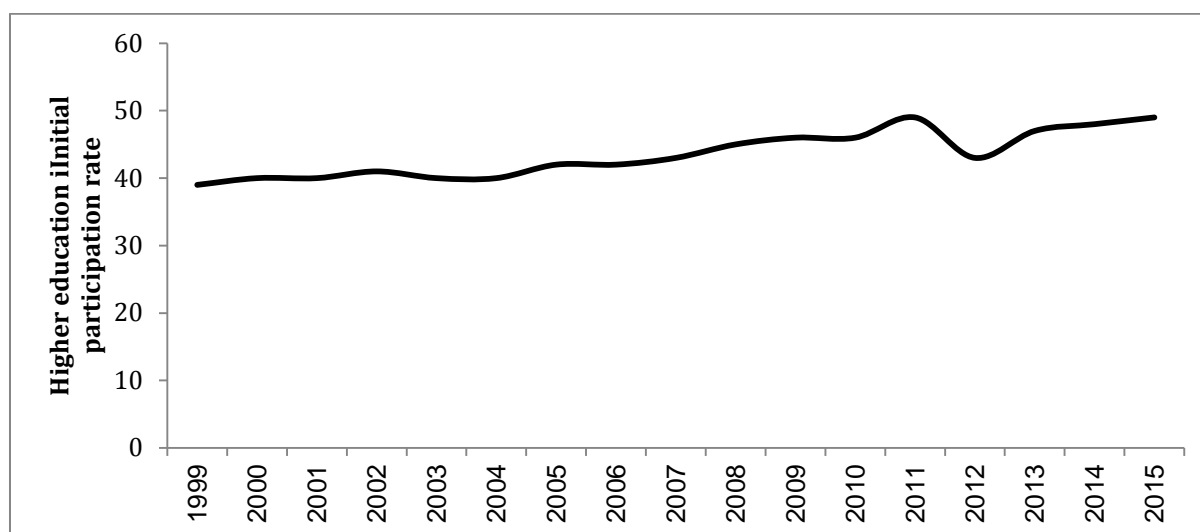
The impacts of the various changes outlined above have been manifold, but three of the most important are those of:

- potentially making students more instrumental in their decision making with respect to which universities and which courses to study;
- increased questioning of whether a university education provides value for money;<sup>5</sup> and
- increasing competition between HE institutions for students (especially outside the elite group of top universities).

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see <https://www.notgoingtouni.co.uk/>

**Figure 3: Higher Education Initial Participation Rate, 1999-2015**

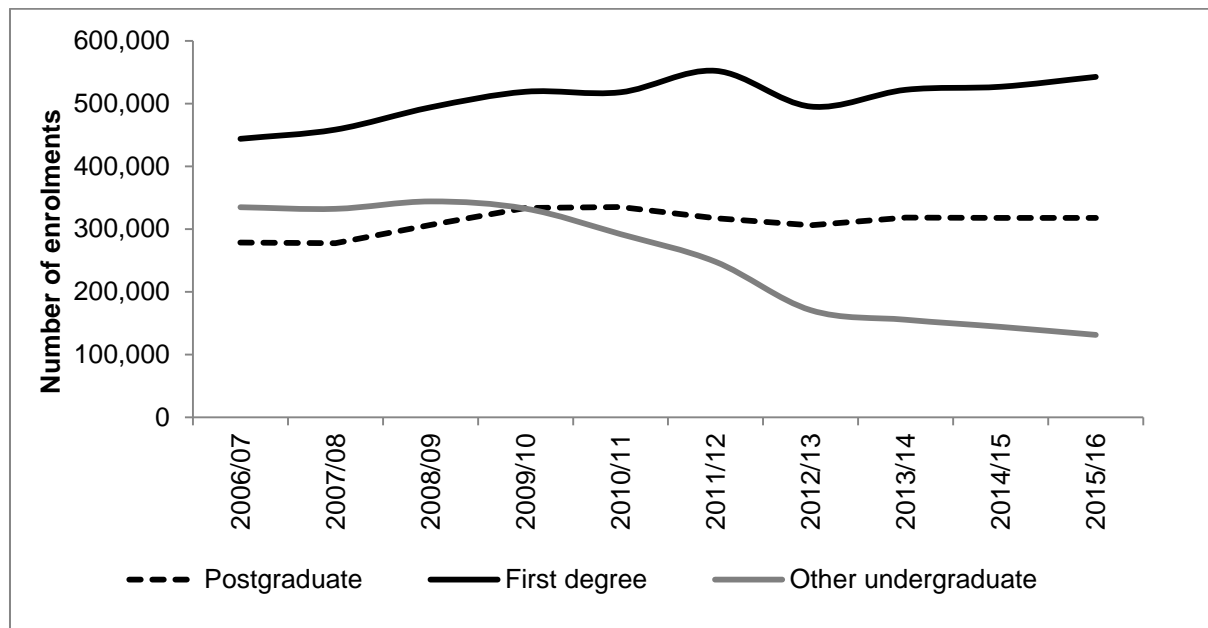


Source: House of Commons Library

Concerns about the costs of higher education also raised questions about diminishing marginal returns resulting from continued expansion of student numbers. This has, in a roundabout way, reignited the discussion about the value of vocational education in HE. It is certainly apparent that all universities have been increasing the vocational element in the academic courses they offer. To differing degrees vocational modules are becoming embedded within some academic courses and all universities offer a range of facilities that will allow their students to gain vocational skills / experiences (Hogarth et al., 2016).

There has been a tendency for HE to adopt a one-size all approach – that is, the provision of full-time degrees. One can see this in the decline of the ‘other undergraduate’ category in Figure 3. It has been full-time bachelor degrees that have been the main source of growth. This exaggerates the case somewhat, but it is apparent from the 2000s onwards - and especially during the 2010s - that there has been increasing emphasis given to creating a more diverse HE offer. It is certainly evident in policy statements. The government’s strategy contained in the White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) was supportive of the provision of HE by FEC: “Colleges have displayed particular strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher education learners including mature and part-time students. They also have a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships.” In this respect, the policy was reiterating what had been said 10 or so years earlier in the Dearing Report.

**Figure 4: Enrolments by course type**



Source: HESA Statistical First Release

Important has been that of increasing the provision of vocational courses at EQF level 4+ that could be delivered either in inside or outside the traditional HE sector. There was, for example, Foundation Degrees – essentially at the sub-bachelor level – designed to provide those with non-standard qualifications for entry into HE, the opportunity to obtain an HE qualification. The extent to which these achieved this particular goal is a moot point. Then more recently there has been the decision to introduce Higher Level Apprenticeships.

Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships have been introduced in response to a number of factors:

- in recognition of the fact that some young people are reluctant to amass the debt incurred in studying for a degree but who want to acquire higher level skills, as discussed by most interviewees;
- a policy preference for delivering VET via apprenticeships given its direct link to the labour market; and
- concerns about the extent to which HE actually meets the higher level skill needs of the economy given that many students study general degrees and a degree of uncertainty about the marginal gains to be had from further expansion of the traditional HE sector.

Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships have been introduced at the same time as the employer Apprenticeship Levy. The impact this will have on higher level apprenticeships starts is uncertain. It may well increase participation in higher level VET amongst young people – i.e. those who have the qualifications which would grant them entry to HE but who were reluctant to do so. Or it may lead to employers – especially those faced with paying a sizable apprenticeship levy payment – to use apprenticeships as a form of continuous professional development and training, essentially rebranding training that would otherwise have taken place anyway (Gambin et al., 2016). There are also some concerns, as expressed by one interviewee, that the Levy is mostly beneficial to larger employers, which could result in

SMEs being left out from FE and HE agendas. At the time of writing it is not clear how this will pan out.

In summary, what one observes over time is a period of academic drift. The creation of a single tier of higher education that emerged with the abolition of the distinction between universities and polytechnics resulted in an increasingly homogeneous HE sector. In other words one that was very much oriented towards academic study at the higher level. There was some provision of vocational higher VET but it was modest. Because the expansion of participation in higher education required students to increasingly invest in their own education and training, there was a need to demonstrate to would-be students that an investment in higher education would generate a financial return; hence the emphasis on increasing the employability skills of undergraduates (a form of vocational drift). By given the high cost of traditional HE, policy makers sought to develop an alternative vocational pathway at the higher level to be delivered by FECs and which could be delivered more cheaply than traditional HE. This has reached its apotheosis with the current impetus being given to developing Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships.

### **3.2 Changes related to characteristics of 'VET at higher levels'**

#### **3.2.1 Changes related to governance and institutional structures of 'VET at higher levels'**

- a) *What is the governance structure of these VET programmes/qualifications at higher levels and what kind of quality assurance regulations are in place (e.g. which national/regional authority provides accreditation/recognition, how are aspects of academic or vocational drift reflected in accreditation regulations)? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- b) *What is the role of labour market stakeholders/companies in relation to these types of programmes/qualifications? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- c) *What are the funding sources (and with what share) for these type of programmes/qualifications? E.g. what is the role of the State (educational or labour market budget) and of labour market stakeholders? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- d) *Which are the key providers of such programmes/qualifications? Do they differ from other providers, such as IVET providers or providers of more academic higher education? To what extent and how has this changed?*

Universities are autonomous organisations under the direction of Vice Chancellors and a Board of Governors, though national government retains a degree of influence over their behaviour via various regulations. The quality of course provision is monitored by the Quality Curriculum Authority (QAA) and the recently Teaching Quality Framework introduced by the government. Funding derived from government is channelled through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).<sup>6</sup> Some universities have demonstrated a vocational shift by promoting the employability skills of their students, and by appointing business engagement positions and placement departments across all faculties. As explored through

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<sup>6</sup> This was true at the time of writing. HEFCE closed in March 2018 with its responsibilities largely taken over by the Office for Students - <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>.

discussions with one interviewee, the role of such departments within the overall university institution is to engage stakeholders, employers and local businesses to address gaps in work experience provision and promote the university's growth. Such structures are deemed mutually beneficial for universities and employers, as employers are able to access and train higher level students, and universities can build partnerships and benefit the local economy in which they are based.

The main business of FEC is that of delivering upper secondary education – much of it VET - to young people and a range of courses to adults. They are semi-autonomous entities that fall under the authority of the Department for Education and its various agencies, such as the Skills Funding Agency. FEC, where they deliver vocational HE, often do so under the umbrella of an HE institution, in which case governance of that courses delivered falls under the authority of the HE institution.

Stakeholders are often represented on the Boards of Governors of universities and FE colleges. Where employers perhaps have most influence is in the design of apprenticeship standards and the content of Foundation Degrees. In relation to apprenticeships, employers can design an occupational standard – where one does not exist - under the guidance of the DfE. In this way apprenticeships are designed to meet the needs of the labour market (see WA2 report for England for further details). It is apparent that a sizable amount of vocational HE, is actually delivered in the further education sector. But, given the competition for students and funds, there is some indication that universities are increasingly looking to take the delivery of this training in-house in some instances.

There has been over many years a discussion about the purpose of universities (Wilson, 2012; HM Treasury 2003). They are autonomous organisations that are responsible for their own finances, though they are subject to regulation by various governmental authorities. Many engage in the provision of continuing professional development of individuals / employees. They have the power to award certificates for the training they deliver, if they so wish. The extent to which this activity takes place is not known. It is, however, important to note that the university sector is a supplier of continuing professional development and, thereby, vocational skills, to groups other than undergraduate and postgraduate students. In 2016, 5 per cent of employers reported using an HEI as a source of external training for their employees (Shury et al., 2017).

### **3.2.2 Changes related to the target groups of 'VET at higher levels'**

- a) *What is the main target group of these types of programmes/qualifications, what are the access requirements? E.g. to what extent is possession of an IVET qualification, professional work experience or the school-leaving exam a requirement? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- b) *How can the identity of students (their legal status) be indicated and how has this changed (e.g. are they predominantly students and in some cases interns and trainees or are they predominantly employees enrolled in programmes)? To what extent and how has this changed?*

Typically, entry to higher education required at least two A-levels (general, upper secondary education qualifications). This was thought to potentially disadvantage certain social groups who were less likely to enter the general track in upper secondary education. So there was recognition that alternative pathways into higher education needed to be developed or expanded upon. It is certainly the case that vocational provision has potentially allowed more

students to study at a higher level because: (a) there is less emphasis on possessing relatively high level academic qualifications to gain entry; and (b) the vocational nature of training makes it more attractive to young people who had little desire to continue down a predominantly academic track. As noted earlier, the evidence demonstrates that HE in FE has been able to attract a more diverse population of students (Parry et al., 2012).

**3.2.3 Changes related to the main purposes and functions of ‘VET at higher levels’**

- a) What is the main destination of graduates, which qualifications and rights do they acquire? E.g. do they gain rights for progressing in education (such as access to higher education), do they occupational qualifications and rights or both, educational and occupational qualifications/rights? To what extent and how has this changed?
- b) What is the occupational status of graduates? E.g. will they be technicians/professionals? To what extent and how has this changed?

Higher level VET appears to serve three purposes:

1. providing individuals with the basic vocational preparation that will allow them to access a profession;
2. giving individuals who may already be in a job with the opportunity to progress in their profession. It needs to be borne in mind that often existing employees will be placed on Foundation Degrees or apprenticeships by their current employer; and
3. allowing individuals to progress to higher levels of education – especially entry to Bachelor degree level studies often where their initial set of qualifications would not have allowed them to enter that course of study.

Table 4 shows the main destinations of students leaving academic and vocational higher level education. It shows that HNCs and Foundation Degrees can be important stepping stones to further study; more so than when students complete a first degree.

**Table 4: Destinations of graduates by type of higher level education course, 2016**

	First degree	Foundation degree	HND/HNC	Other undergraduate	Total - All undergraduates
UK work	65%	25%	35%	34%	50%
Overseas work	4%	2%	0%	1%	2%
Work & further study	6%	15%	18%	7%	9%
Further study	10%	57%	24%	48%	23%
Unemployed	8%	1%	11%	5%	8%
Other	8%	0%	10%	5%	8%
<b>Total percentage</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: HESA Origins and Destinations Data

There is relatively little occupational licensing in the UK. It is the case that some professions specify or prefer a first degree to gain professional membership – such as a chartered engineer – but this does not necessarily mean that people cannot enter that profession.

There are vocational degrees that are directly linked to an occupation, such as nursing and medical practitioner.

### 3.2.4 Changes related to the perception of 'VET at higher levels'

- a) *How are these VET programmes/qualifications at higher education levels perceived? Are they considered as second choice, equal to more academic higher education programmes or are they even valued higher? To what extent and how has this changed?*

Apart from degrees such as those related to medicine (see Figure 1), in general vocational courses do not have the same esteem as those considered to be general: this is as true in tertiary education as it is at the lower and upper secondary levels. In part this is driven by the fact the entry requirement has been lower than that for some general courses, and the fact that the more elite HE institutions have been a little reluctant to offer vocational courses that have historically been associated with other types of HE institution. Moreover, arguably, they have had little financial incentive to do so. That said, some of the more elite institutions have shown an interest in Higher Level and Degree Apprenticeships, especially for engineering degrees, as noted by an interviewee. The Apprenticeship Levy potentially provides a substantial amount of funding that may prove attractive to all HE institutions (i.e. the employer pays the levy and then is able to recoup that payment by providing apprenticeship training. The employer will need to select a training provider to deliver the formal education and training that constitutes the apprenticeship, but has a free choice about which provider to select so long as they are registered as a provider with government).

## 4. Impact on content and delivery of qualifications and programmes - the epistemological or pedagogical perspective

*This section focuses on the implications of 'vocational or academic drift' or of the 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside higher education)' for the content and delivery of programmes and qualifications.*

### 4.1 Changes in relation to content and profile

- a) *How can the content or profile of VET programmes/qualifications at higher levels be described? E.g. accentuation or reduction of theoretical, abstract and disciplinary based knowledge vs. practical or experience based knowledge or an enhanced emphasis on the integration of professional and academic knowledge? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- b) *To what extent do the learning outcomes refer to a specific occupation/profession, to a broader vocational field and to what extent can an equal balance between occupation-specific and transversal learning outcomes (such as leading teams, entrepreneurship) be identified? To what extent and how has this changed?*

As noted in the previous sections, higher / tertiary education has historically been focused on the delivery of academic education. The former polytechnics provided, for a brief period, something akin to vocational education and training with HE but following their conversion to university status in 1992, the extent to which they offered something distinct to the pre-1992 universities arguably began to disappear somewhat. There have been attempts to create a vocational stream in higher education through, for example, foundation degrees and latterly via the development of higher level apprenticeships.

There is much evidence that academic courses, or at least the participants on academic courses, are now expected to take part in a wider range of vocational activities, such as



sandwich placements or summertime work experience placements, than hitherto. This tends to be delivered under the umbrella of employability measures (Hogarth et al., 2016). Sometimes these are delivered within courses (i.e. they have become part of the curriculum) but more commonly they are likely to be optional activities in which students are expected to participate. Some interviewees noted that the input of employers in the curriculum across higher levels had resulted in a vocational shift. This shift reflects the recognition that employer input is essential to ensuring that the taught educational material is relevant, and that students acquire the necessary skills to improve their employability. This ranges from employers proposing work-based scenarios for students to address and later be assessed on, to institutions developing courses suited to local companies (such as nuclear engineering degrees).

In the case of apprenticeships, the standard, which essentially specifies what the apprenticeship is meant to deliver, is designed with the substantial involvement of employers. Employers can propose to government a standard for an occupation that is not already covered by an apprenticeship. The employer – or employers – can then work with government to develop the standard for that occupation. In this way, the standard will ensure that the needs of the employer and thereby the labour market will be met. There has to be an educational element that provides the theoretical underpinning knowledge required to meet the required standard.

#### 4.2 Changes in relation to the delivery

- a) *How can the pedagogical/didactical approach in relation to VET programmes/qualifications at higher levels be characterised? E.g. by enhanced practice-orientation (learning by doing) and work based learning (e.g. as traineeship periods') or by enhanced theory-based reflection on practice and scientific research? In which formats are they offered (e.g. as part-time study programmes for workers, as 'dual study programmes')? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- b) *Which learning sites are used? E.g. mainly classroom with some practical experience, WBL-sites including real companies, multiple learning sites? To what extent and how has this changed?*
- c) *What is the educational and professional background of teachers? E.g. are they required to have comprehensive work experience, are they part-timers who are also 'practitioners' or teachers with professional experience in industry, are they trainers in companies, do they need to have an academic degree? To what extent and how has this changed?*

Markowitsch provides three concepts of VET (Cedefop, 2017):

- pedagogical – VET as a distinctive process of knowledge production, transfer and use;
- education system – where VET is regarded as an institution where that institution has the characteristics of a sector, system, organisational field, or culture; and
- labour market – where VET contributes to social stratification by providing access to particular career pathways.

These are not necessarily mutually exclusive conceptions. Arguably, in England, the labour market perspective has played the dominant role over recent decades. The skills system in its entirety is, first and foremost, concerned with the production of skills for which there is a demand in the labour market. The various reforms of the VET system over recent decades

have been designed to make it more responsive to labour market demand (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017). Employers – or their representatives – have been very much embedded in the skills system given the role they have in designing standards that apply to particular programmes (e.g. in Foundation Degrees and apprenticeships). The rationale for including employers in the design process is that they are best placed to identify the skills that an industry or occupation requires. But there is, perhaps, a pedagogical element at play here too. The policy preference over the last decade or so is for IVET to be delivered through apprenticeships: the mix of theoretical learning combined with the opportunity to practice those skills in the workplace is seen as being particularly effective and efficient in delivering the skills required by the economy. One needs to be careful here in placing too much emphasis on the pedagogical perspective. To some extent the preference for apprenticeships – even if the number of apprentices at any one time is low – is, in many respects, a reflection of the fact that this is seen as the most cost-efficient means of delivering the skills the economy needs.

The above applies to VET at higher levels too. The development of VET at higher levels relates to meeting a perceived demand for skills that traditional HE sector might not be able to meet – either because it is too theoretical and / or a too high a level. It is interesting in this regard to note that a lot of VET at the higher level has become concentrated at the sub-degree level. But there is an increasing preference to move away from classroom based VET – such as Foundation Degrees – to an apprenticeship model at the higher levels.

The evidence on the differences between the delivery of higher level VET in HE or FE is scant. Some evidence suggests that VET when delivered in an FE setting tends to place more emphasis on classroom based learning with less value attached to extra-curricular activities when compared with provision in an HEI. There is no evidence to suggest that the quality of provision in FEC is any lower than in HEIs (Parry et al., 2012). With the introduction of higher level apprenticeships, there will be a mix of classroom and workplace based training; but this is in the very early stages of development. With the growth of higher level apprenticeships, one expert interviewee noted the need for balance between the vocational and academic elements of these courses. The expert stated that there is a risk of students doing ‘what needs to be done’ to get the job, but failing the degree or not completing the professional qualification. To do this, courses should be delivered in an integrated structure, in which one part cannot be achieved without completing the other. At the moment there is no evidence to compare apprenticeship provision with that in FEC or HEI.

For all areas of higher education, the Teaching Excellence Framework (for which The Department for Education is responsible) has also had an impact on VET provision, for both providers and students. As explained by one respondent, the TEF is comprised of three core metrics, one of which is directly linked with employability. All high level education providers are tested and awarded standards each year, following the TEF metric system. This framework applies to higher and degree apprenticeships as well as traditional academic degree pathways, and it is expected that there will be a connection between TEF results and the fees requested by providers. The influential power of the framework demonstrates a clear governmental focus and support towards VET at higher levels in the UK.

## 5. The context of change: rationale and drivers for change or persistence

*This section aims at understanding how policy influences and justifies the change processes and which external factors influence and shape policy responses/decisions and the change processes observed.*

- a) *How and to what extent are the change processes supported (or hampered) by specific educational policies?*
- b) *What is the rationale for offering VET programmes/qualifications at higher levels respectively for the changes observed? How are these changes justified in educational policy? (E.g. increasing labour market relevance of curricula/qualifications, securing supply of highly skilled labour, professionalism, innovation and economic growth in enterprises, individual and social progression?) To what extent and how has this changed?*
- c) *Which drivers for change or persistence can be identified that shape policy responses? (E.g. European/international developments, such as Bologna process – harmonisation of degree structures in higher education, expansion of higher education, autonomy of universities, technological changes, EQF/NQF implementation)?*
- d) *How are the change processes perceived in the country? (e.g. are they generally welcomed, are there critical remarks?)*

Looking back over the development of higher VET in England one can identify a number of drivers of change:

1. a policy decision to increase participation levels to increase participation in higher education in order to meet the skill needs of the economy over the medium-term;
2. a recognition that the costs of increased participation cannot be met by the exchequer such that students will need to contribute more to the costs of their education at higher levels;
3. a requirement to widen participation in higher education so that it does not remain the preserve of the middle classes;
4. a need to ensure that the outputs of higher level education in general – within and outwith the higher education sector – should produce something which has economic value.

Over time, one observes an increase in the number of students studying in universities and former polytechnics studying, to a large extent, general / academic programmes of study. As participation levels build, it becomes increasingly apparent that the exchequer cannot – or will not – continue to fund higher education in the way that it had in the past (i.e. as provision of a free good). Students are expected to increasingly meet the costs of their higher education which, given the upfront costs of entering higher education, presents challenges with regard to widening participation. This is because there are concerns that some individuals, notably those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are risk averse when it comes to taking out loans to cover their tuition and maintenance costs. The widening participation agenda has given an impetus to the development of a more vocational pathway through higher levels of learning. This had always been in place to some degree, but it has gained much more traction over recent years with the introduction of Foundation Degrees in the late 1990s and now the push to increase participation in Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. Widening participation is not the only driver of change that led to much more focus on the provision of VET at higher levels. It also relates to the requirement that post-compulsory

education confers something of economic value on the learner. A pressing concern about levels of over-qualification in the workforce has increased attention on the need for education at higher levels to have a labour market focus. Universities have responded to this through the provision of employability training within general / academic courses. But it has also led government to attempt, once more, to revitalise the provision of VET at higher levels – this time via apprenticeships. The problem with apprenticeships – notwithstanding the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy on employers – is that it has proven difficult to persuade a sufficiently large population of employers to provide them.

The above has been articulated very much with respect to higher education. This is because, as explained in the introduction to this paper, VET at higher levels does not exist to any great extent in any size, shape or form outside of what constitutes higher education in England. In so far as it does exist it relates to continuing professional development and training (i.e. CVET) that takes place at higher levels. Rightly or wrongly, CVET at higher levels has tended to be regarded very much as a private rather than public policy issue. That said, the introduction of apprenticeships at the higher level may subsume some of this higher-level VET for the reasons explained elsewhere in the paper (i.e. the tendency for employers to use publicly funded apprenticeship programme to train existing employees).

As noted by all interviewees, when it comes to VET in higher education, the most recent driver for change has been the increase in fees. For students, it has become more important to 'get more' from degrees, which includes gaining skills to enhance their employability so that they will obtain the type of employment that will have made the financial investment worthwhile. As discussed, this has led to a vocational shift in HE provision, through placement services, improved careers advice, and employer input in the curriculum and course design.

## 6. Zooming in on nursing and engineering

*Please reflect on the particular situation in the nursing and engineering areas: Which main change processes (in relation to 'academic drift', 'vocational drift', expansion of VET at higher levels outside higher education') can be observed in this area? What are the specificities and differences compared to other areas?*

It is apparent that with each successive wave of expansion in higher education a wider group of professions have become required new entrants to be graduates. This has resulted, over time, in a range of course being delivered within HE that are, ostensibly, related to a profession but in practice often tend to be academic rather than vocational.

### a) Nursing

Since 2013, all new entrants to the nursing profession need to have a degree in nursing (at EQF level 5). The past 30 years have seen major shifts in nursing. Historically, entry to nursing was through the secondary vocational pathway leading to the award of a diploma that allowed individuals to be registered as nurses. With the introduction of Project 2000 in the late 1980s there was a marked shift towards the professionalisation of nursing. Until the 1990s nurse training was mainly at the diploma level (i.e. below the Bachelor level), but with Project 2000 nurse training was to become increasingly located in higher education (i.e. in HEIs providing nursing degrees). This had the impact of increasing the entry qualifications to

train as a nurse (i.e. qualifications were required that would grant entry to university). The changes which have been increasingly rolled out since Project 2000 have professionalised the nursing and, in doing so, put it on an equal footing with other professional groups in the health sector (Carpenter et al., 2012).

There have been concerns that the creation of a degree level entry has affected the traditional role of nurses as carers – i.e. that nurses are no longer willing to carry out certain tasks which were traditionally undertaken by nurses because they these should be carried out by someone at a lower level. The Willis Review on the Future of Nursing refuted this concern. It reported that it “... did not find any evidence that degree-level registration was damaging to patient care. On the contrary, graduate nurses have played and will continue to play a key role in driving up standards and preparing a nursing workforce fit for the future.” (RCN, 2012)

As noted above the requirement that nurses now complete a Bachelor’s degree (compulsory since 2013) has changed entry requirements to the profession insofar as those who wish to enter nursing need to have attained grades at A-level that will grant them entry to university. Moreover, whilst the traditional route into nursing was of an apprenticeship type (i.e. the trainees were employed as student nurses), nurses now tend to be registered as full-time students and are required to pay tuition fees and cover their living expenses. With the withdrawal bursaries to funding nurses’ training, there has been a negative impact on the numbers enrolling to study nursing (The Guardian, 2017).

#### *b) Engineering*

Engineering has long been an established academic subject within higher education. Much of the debate within engineering circles relates to how more people might be persuaded to study engineering in universities. The Institution for Engineering and Technology for instance would like to see a refocusing of the higher education curriculum away from ‘theory’ and lectures to problem-based, project-based or experiential learning – focused on creating solutions to real-world challenges, offering internships, placements and work-related learning opportunities during the degree course (IET, 2017). In many respects these are already supplied by many higher education institutions. The debate has become focused on the extent to which graduates are work ready at the end of their studies rather than requiring substantial further training by the employer. And this relates to a wider variety of subjects than engineering. Whether or not there are real shortages for engineers, however, has been challenged (Bosworth et al., 2014).

## **7. Current debates and future perspectives**

*Please describe main current debates and any trends that can be observed or expectations related to future developments of ‘VET at higher levels’ (and specifically in the nursing and engineering areas) and provide evidence underpinning trends or expectations.*

- a) *What are the main current debates related to ‘VET at higher levels’ in your country, if any? Are there any main recent/planned developments or reforms related to ‘VET at higher levels’?*
- b) *Can any trends related to future developments be observed? (e.g. in terms of increasing or decreasing use of ‘VET at higher levels’; changes in regulations, types of providers offering ‘VET at higher levels’, profile of learners/teachers, involvement of*

*labour market stakeholders, partnerships/cooperation; development of new types of 'VET at higher levels'; coverage of 'emerging' fields)?*

c) *Please add any further information and concluding remarks!*

The current debate is very much centred around the value for money provided by higher education. Analysis of the rates of return to obtaining a first degree indicates that earnings are higher, other things being equal, than if the individual gained the qualifications that grant entry to higher education but did not do so for some reason (see, for example, Britton et al., 2016; Walker and Zhu, 2013). And, moreover, the earnings and employment premia have remained more or less stable over time even as the numbers entering university have increased. Given that so many people now enter university there has been concern that the methodology used to estimate the graduate premium may be flawed (Gambin et al., 2014). In particular that those who have the qualifications to enter university but do not do so are unusual in some way (i.e. there is unobserved heterogeneity so like is not being compared with like). There remains concerns that the returns for some groups of students may be relatively low – especially where they have studied at non-elite universities and have studied courses which are not linked to the labour market – to such a level that they will not reach the earnings threshold at which the loans they took out to fund their higher education need to be repaid. Given that these loans are underwritten by the government there are legitimate concerns relating to the extent to which the tax payer will need to meet the cost of any shortfall.

This has tended to focus interest in developing further an alternative to university based higher education. The important development in this regard is that of Higher of Degree Level Apprenticeships). These are at an early stage of development, but they are, like the rest of the apprenticeship system in England, based on standards that employers (or their representative organisations) are involved in developing (DfE, 2017). So in this sense they are very much linked to the demand-led skills agenda that tends to dominate the discussion on skills in England (and the UK more generally).

In summary, one can point to the joint issues of matching and funding dominating the debate on higher education.

## **8. Overview**

*This table should provide an overview of what types of changes due to 'academic or vocational drift' or 'expansion of VET at higher levels (outside higher education)' can actually be observed in the country.*

*Please indicate the main processes and phenomena identified during the last 20 years in the table below – referring to the direction of change, the object of change, the context of change (or target area of change), the key processes observed and the results of these processes as well as their time frame and indicate the sections in which they are presented! Examples of key processes/results are presented in table 1 of the guidance note.*

Table 1 **Overview**

Direction of change	Object of change	Context/target area	Key processes observed / results	Timeframe	Section
<b>Academic drift</b>	<b>Higher Education</b>	professionally-oriented HE	Observed in increased requirement for a degree to enter a profession with courses such as accountancy, for example, being popular courses in HE	Post-1992	1, 2, 3, 6
		traditional (or academic) HE programmes	With the mass expansion of higher education in the 1990s and 2000s, there was evidence of academic drift as the former polytechnics increasingly came to resemble the older (pre-1992 universities) in the provision of what they offered – more emphasis on the academic and less on their traditional area of strength which was the vocational	1990s and 2000s	1, 2
	<b>VET (outside HE)</b>	VET transformed to HE			
		VET offered at higher levels outside HE	As explained in the introduction, in England is not meaningful to describe training outside of the national system as the national system has subsumed it. And the national system comprises compulsory education (primary and secondary), FE, and HE.	From the 1980s onwards in earnest	1, 7
<b>Vocational drift</b>	<b>Higher Education</b>	professionally oriented HE	This has always existing with traditional HE – e.g. dentistry, medicine, etc. It is possible in England to accredit CVET and professional courses to national qualification levels – this has been in place for many years.	Ongoing	1,2,7
		traditional (or academic) HE programmes	The employability agenda is reshaping the provision of courses within HE, especially when considering the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework. There has always been provision of HE courses within FE colleges. Sometimes this is delivered at sub-degree levels – e.g. some foundation degrees were licensed to FE colleges by HE institutions. Now higher level apprenticeships will potentially provide a new pathway through HE		2, 4
<b>Expansion of VET at higher levels (outside HE)</b>	<b>VET at higher levels (or 'higher VET') offered outside HE</b>		Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. This might be delivered within HE or FE. It will also require a substantial amount of training to take place within companies. But as pointed out in the text, the extent to which it is meaningful to talk about higher level VET outside of higher education (as defined in England) has to be questioned.	2015 onwards	1,2, 5, 7

## 9. Sources of information

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Annex II: List of subjects covered by Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships

## THE A-Z OF HIGHER AND DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS

Standard Framework

Area of study	Level	
<b>A</b>		
Accounting	4	Standard
Actuarial Technician	4	Framework
Advanced Dairy Technologist	5	Standard
Aerospace Engineer Level	6	Standard
Aerospace Software Development Engineer	6	Standard
Agriculture	4	Standard
Aircraft Maintenance Certifying Engineer	4	Standard
Assistant Technical Director (Visual effects)	4	Standard
Associate Ambulance Practitioner	4	Standard
Associate Project Manager	4	Standard
Aviation Operations Manager	4	Standard
<b>B</b>		
Bespoke Tailor and Cutter	5	Standard
Broadcasting Technology	6	Standard
Bus and Coach Engineering Manager	4	Standard
Business Analyst (Digital)	4	Standard
Business and Professional Administration	4	Standard
<b>C</b>		
Care Leadership and Management	5	Standard
Chartered Legal Executive	6	Standard
Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship	6	Standard
Chartered Surveyor Level	6	Standard
Civil Engineer Level	6	Standard
Civil Engineering Site Management (degree)	6	Standard
Commercial Procurement and Supply	4	Standard
Construction Management	4, 5, 6	Standard
Control / Technical Support Engineer	6	Standard
Conveyancing Technician	4	Standard
Creative and Digital Media	4	Standard
Cyber Intrusion Analyst	4	Standard
Cyber Security Technologist	4	Standard
<b>D</b>		
Data Analyst	4	Standard
Dental Practice Manager	4	Standard
Dental Technician Level	5	Standard
Digital Learning Design	4	Standard
Digital and Technology Solutions Professional	6	Standard
<b>E</b>		
Electrical Power Protection and Plant Commissioning Engineer	4	Standard
Electrical/Electronic Technical Support Engineer	6	Standard
Embedded Electronic Systems Design and Development Engineer	6	Standard
<b>F</b>		
Financial Adviser	4	Standard
Food Industry Technical Professional (Degree)	6	Standard
<b>H</b>		
Healthcare Assistant Practitioner	5	Standard
Healthcare Science Associate	4	Standard
Healthcare Science Practitioner	6	Standard
Hospitality Management	4	Standard
Human Resource Consultant/ Partner	5	Standard
<b>I</b>		
Insurance Professional	4	Standard
Intelligence Operations	4	Standard
Internet of Things and Cyber Systems Engineer	5, 6, 7	Standard
Investment Operations Specialist	4	Standard
IT, Software, Web & Telecoms Professionals	4	Standard

Area of study	Level	
<b>J</b>		
Junior 2D Artist (visual effects)	4	Standard
Junior Management Consultant	4	Standard
<b>L</b>		
Laboratory Scientist	5	Standard
Legal Services Level	4	Standard
Licensed Conveyancer	6	Standard
Life Sciences and Chemical Science Professionals	4, 5	Standard
<b>M</b>		
Manufacturing Engineering	4	Standard
Manufacturing Engineer	6	Standard
Mineral Products Technology	4, 5	Standard
<b>N</b>		
Network Engineer	4	Standard
Nuclear Scientist and Nuclear Engineer	6	Standard
Nuclear Technician	5	Standard
Nuclear Welding Inspection Technician	4	Standard
Nurse (Registered nurse degree)	6	Standard
<b>O</b>		
Operations/Departmental Manager	5	Standard
Outside Broadcasting Engineer	7	Standard
<b>P</b>		
Paraplanner	4	Standard
Post Graduate Engineer	7	Standard
Power Engineer (Degree)	7	Standard
Probate Technician	4	Standard
Process Automation Engineer	7	Standard
Product Design and Development Engineer	6	Standard
Professional Accounting Taxation Technician	4	Standard
Professional Services	4	Standard
Project Controls Technician	7	Standard
Project Management	4	Standard
Public Relations	4	Standard
Public Sector Commercial Professional	4	Standard
<b>R</b>		
Rail Engineering Advanced Technician	4	Standard
Recruitment	4	Standard
Relationship Manager (Banking)	6	Standard
Retail Manager	4	Standard
Road Transport Engineering Manager	4	Standard
<b>S</b>		
Science Industry Process / Plant Engineer	4	Standard
Senior Compliance/Risk Specialist	6	Standard
Senior Housing/Property Management	4	Standard
Social Media and Digital Marketing	4	Standard
Software Tester	4	Standard
Software Developer	4	Standard
Solicitor	7	Standard
Supply Chain Management	5	Standard
Sustainable Resource Operations and Management	4	Standard
Systems Engineering	7	Standard
<b>T</b>		
Teacher	6	Standard
The Water Industry	4	Standard
<b>U</b>		
Unified Communications Trouble Shooter	4	Standard

Source: NAS (2017)