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**What is Vocational Learning?**

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**What is vocational learning, who are the vocational learners, how does vocational learning take place.**

Up until the early 1980’s direct transition from compulsory schooling to work was the standard for many young people in England. However, since the collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s, school-to-work transitions have become in many ways ‘extended’ (Rikowski, 2001). A steady and constant expansion in the higher education sector has seen young people going onto higher education as the norm. In 1981 just 13% of school-leavers went into higher education compared to around 50% in 2013, the highest uptake ever recorded according to Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) figures (UCAS, 2016). However, the competitiveness between qualified graduates makes headlines as more people struggle to find employment. This is partly a result of the recent recession, but it also reflects the fact that our economy is creating many jobs that do not necessarily require a degree. A report from the Institute of Public Policy Research (Clifton, 2014) predicted that in the next decade, many of the jobs expected to drive economic growth and mobility will not necessarily require traditional academic pathway with 90% of these jobs being attained via vocational qualifications. But what is vocational learning? Who are vocational learners? And how does vocational learning take place?

**What is Vocational Learning?**

Over a century ago, a remark by T. H. Huxley became memorable in the field of vocational studies: ‘*it passes the wit of man, so far as I know, to give a legal definition of technical education’* (Huxley, 1893). Despite empirical efforts, we are no further advanced in establishing a formal identity to vocational education and training (VET). Williams (1963) described VET as practical, in contrast to university education that is produced under the guidance of reason which by implication is more theoretical, or academic in nature. The international standard classification of education (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisations, 1997), makes the differentiation between general education and ‘vocational or technical education’. The standard defines general education as mainly designed to lead participants to a deeper understanding of a subject or group of subjects, whereas vocational education is designed to lead participants to acquire the practical skills, know-how, and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation or trade. Vocational education helps to prepare people for work by providing them with the right skills obtained via continuous professional development whilst at work, and to change what they are doing, so that they can work in new or different occupations (Moodie, 2002). According to the Wolf Report (2011) there is no formal definition for vocational education in England. This is because the debate surrounding the many different purposes which vocational education serves, ranging from the highly selective apprenticeships offered by large successful companies to programmes designed to recruit low academic achievers. Whilst some insist that low-achievers need vocational programmes others argue that using the term for the latter purpose damaged the former. What should be taken into consideration is whether or not the educational pathway truly contributes to career progression, or whether it provides the skills and education that prepare an individual for a job. Understanding the history and the context in which vocational education originated may shed light into its current definition, applications and future.

**A brief history of Vocational Learning**

The development of Vocational Learning came from the rising demand for educated labor due to industrialization. During the industrial revolution that happened in the 18th and 19th centuries, the mechanization of production increased and the process of production itself became centralised in large factories, jobs became more specialised with the result that higher skilled practical jobs gained importance. At the time, secondary “modern schools” in England provided traditional education in areas such as Latin, theology and classics, science, mathematics and contemporary foreign languages (Ringer, 1979).

Demand for skilled workers generated by industrialisation promoted the need for education that could provide training and skills for a technically proficient work force. This lead to the formation of technical and vocational schools, a movement that also happened across Europe in nations such as Germany, France and England (Agrawal, 2013). By the turn of the century, education in Europe was stablished in three forms: first, a "traditional" form of highly selective institutions geared towards children of upper class background; second, a growing number of "modern" schools with generalised secondary programs offering educational credentials for access into civil service and managerial positions; and third, technical-vocational courses providing training for lower class in skilled trades and manual labour (Benevot, 1983).

The work of Benavot (1983) on the historical expansion of VET identified three common perspectives associated with the rise in vocational education. Firstly the economic return resulting from the need of specialised skills in the labour market during the industrial revolution and secondly the socio-phenomena such as post World War II immigration and ‘availability’ of youth workers which needed to be formally integrated into society. This lead to forward thinking educators, policy makers and educational administrators to create a practical curriculum to meet the requirements of a more mixed job market, which resulted in the expansion of vocational education programmes. Thirdly, the capitalistic perspective associated with the influence of businessmen in the economy who pushed the job training towards public or managerial responsibility, providing a relatively cheap response solution to the newly identified market gap. Regardless of the perspective, the common present theme was the nature of practical and applied characteristic of VET, which to a great extend is still present in modern vocational education.

The current economic picture in the United Kingdom (UK) presents similar challenges. During the last 50 years there has been a significant grown and change in the UK population. Life expectancy has increased contributing to an ageing population. There has been internal migration of people to industrial areas, and more recently a surge in immigration both from Commonwealth and European countries, in addition to the high level of youth unemployment all of which leads to a change in demographics (Office for National Statistics 2016). These demographic, economic and social trends have direct implications for VET in terms of employee flexibility, occupational pathways, skills development and qualifications (Cuddy, 2005). The main concern for the UK is that 13.2% of 16-24 year-olds is not in education, employment or training (Office for National Statistics, 2016). As the demand increases for skilled professionals, existing theories borrowed from the field of industrial psychology may help employers, the educational sector and recruiters to identify responsive ways of hiring and training in a more effective manner.

The British Government has developed successful initiatives aimed at expanding vocational education, starting with the creation of the Business and Technology Education Council in the 1970’s that provided further and higher education awards in the UK (Gillard, 2011). In the 1980’ and 1990’s, the government, acting on concerns over low levels of productivity in the UK linked to inadequate skills in the workforce, low levels of participation in training, and social disparity, developed a strategy focused on raising standards and inclusion. Policies were developed at rapid pace, such as the Youth and Training Scheme, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), General National Vocational Qualifications and the Learning and Skills Act (2000) (The UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014). The aim was to to secure the provision of education and training for young people and adults in England. However, the initiative was seen as unsuccessful as the proportion of young people staying on full-time education increased (Wolf, 2002). In March 2011, the government published the Wolf report. Rather than advocating yet more qualification reform, the report recommended a full embracement of the already existing vocational learning initiatives both in the UK and abroad. The report particularly identified the role of Apprenticeships as a key route for employment and national prosperity, giving a new boost to the role of VTE in the current times.

**Who are the vocational learners?**

Anybody can be a vocational learner, however, understanding the demographics and particular characteristics of this group have major implications for the future of vocational programmes. In the United Kingdom (UK) schooling is compulsory from age 5 to 16 in the (4 to 16 in Northern Ireland). Young people may leave education and training at the age of 16 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but in England the compulsory participation age in education and training is 18. Nonetheless, 16 to18 year olds are guaranteed a place in education or training in England which also extends to 19 year olds in Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, all unemployed 16-17 year olds school leavers are offered a guarantee of a training place (GOV.UK, 2016).

Young vocational learners are usually defined by entry qualifications studied. After completion of compulsory education in secondary schools, young people may choose to continue in school, move to a sixth form college or a further education (FE) college, enter employment with training such as an apprenticeship, or enter employment without apprenticeship (Visscher, 2009). Only a few decades ago, the large majority of these young people would have been in full time employment by their mid teens, however since the onset of the economic recession there has been an increase in the proportion of 16 to 24 year olds deciding to remain in full-time education to avoid unemployment. A study undertaken by the Work Foundation (2011) shows that “42 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds are now in full-time education in the UK”. The Wolf Report (2011) states employers increasingly require people to have qualifications because it helps them to screen applicants, rather than because those qualifications are actually needed to perform the job. There is also the perception that average graduates earn considerably more than those without degrees. Whereas this is true, the extend of it is overestimated. Research has shown that this only applies to a small pool of graduates at the top end of the labour market (Brown, 2012). The first distinctive characteristic of vocational learners is that the majority of them are therefore school leavers and young adults entering the job market for the first time.

A quantitative analysis by the Higher Education Academy (2015) adds to the characteristics of vocational learners. The analysis showed that vocational qualifications are unevenly distributed in the student population. What this means is that students with vocational qualifications are more likely to be from areas with low participation in higher education and demographic groups associated with lower outcomes. Compared to the rest of the student population, they have a higher average age, higher proportion of male students, and lower entry tariff. Similarly, research by (Kintrea, 2011) showed that the children of parents in lower skill occupations, lower levels of education and living in social housing, were more likely to take vocational qualifications than those of parents in professional or managerial occupations. This may be because parents without higher education experience encourage their young people to study vocational courses (e.g. business related) in order to achieve secure, highly paid employment opportunities (Batchelor, 2006).

Finally, as the nature of work itself is changing, the pace of these changes impacts upon learning. The UK is an ageing society with people living longer and required to work longer. Current economical instabilities meant increasing insecurity of employment resulting in a constant pressure for upskilling and reskilling throughout a lifetime (Tabrizi, 2014). An extended working life combined with rapid technological progress in many sectors, is likely to be making older workers’ skills obtained in school obsolete (Belloni, 2014). Adults are turning to vocational education programmes through which they can reskill or upskill themselves to become successful at competing or re-entering the job market.

**How does vocational learning take place?**

Vocational qualifications have different levels, ranging from the Entry Level to Level 8 which are very similar to other qualification levels. For example, Level 2 vocational qualification is equivalent to grades A\*-C in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), while Level 3 is equivalent to grade A in the GCSE. The GCSE is the most common secondary education qualification taken at age 16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is possible to combine academic GCSE subjects with vocational subjects and qualifications at the same level within the current education system. A significant number of vocational qualifications are on offer in the UK, however, with frequent introductions of new courses and changes to existing courses it can be confusing for young people and their parents to choose the most suitable course. Following a review of vocational qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in England (Wolf, 2011), it was recommended that the volume of vocational qualifications be reduced to ensure only good quality programmes that are valued in the labour market are offered.

Although work-related qualifications are very similar to other qualifications, they distinguish themselves for giving the emphasis on knowledge and skills that are sought after the most by the industry and employers. Some of the most popular vocational qualifications (and sought after by the employers) include healthcare, retail, leisure services, hair and beauty, construction, food and catering, and management. These qualifications are managed and regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) in England and Northern Ireland, by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) in Wales and by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in Scotland. They are accredited by over 130 awarding bodies in the UK. All vocational qualifications consist of units, each of which has a credit value that allows the learner to roughly predict how long he or she will need to achieve the desired qualification considering that one credit equals 10 hours of learning. It takes 1 to 12 credits to receive an award, therefore, the learner will need from 10 to 120 hours for the qualification. Certificates, on the other hand, are awarded to learners with 13 to 36 credits which roughly equals to 130 to 360 hours. To get a diploma, a minimum of 37 credit points or 370 hours of learning are required. The title of qualification reveals the size of training and learning but it typically also reveals the qualification level and the subject that was studied.

In recent years there has been a revival in the number of businesses offering vocational or ‘on the job’ training. According to research by the House of Commons (2016) around 500,000 new apprenticeships were created in England in 2014/15 – a 14 per cent increase on the previous year. Apprenticeships provide work-based training in a broad range of sectors to people who are learning new skills and gaining recognised qualifications while they are working. There is no single set time to complete apprenticeships and they vary widely in content and size. Apprenticeships at level 2 take a minimum of 12 months while advanced apprenticeships take a minimum of 24 months.

Apprenticeships were originally intended for young people, but in May 2004 the upper age limit of 25 for apprenticeships was removed in England. Apprentices receive pay and most have the status of employees of the organisation where they work. They typically spend one day per week at college studying the technical certificate and the remainder of their time in training or work with their employer. Apprentices have a contract and also an individual learning plan, which employers develop with the help of local learning providers, who also handle assessment and quality control and help businesses recruit a suitable apprentice. Selection takes account of school qualifications (especially for more technical occupations) and motivation. The Department for Education provides more information on all technical and vocational qualifications approved for teaching from September 2014. This can be found on <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/performance-tables-technical-and-vocational-qualifications>. The table below shows demonstrates how vocational qualifications compare to the general academic qualifications:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level | General Academic | Worked-based Learning | Vocationally- related | Careers  These are just samples of the careers you can do with qualifications at this level: |
| 8 | Doctorate | NVQ Level 5 | BTEC Professional Qualifications, City and Guilds, OCR, etc. | Biochemist  Research Scientist  Higher Education Lecturer |
| 7 | Masters, Postgraduate Diploma, Postgraduate Certificate | NVQ Level 5 | Professional Development  BTEC Professional Qualifications, City and Guilds, OCR, etc. | Architect  Town planner  Barrister  Psychologist  Nutritionist |
| 6 | Honours Degree, Top Up to Honours Degree form a Foundation Degree/HNC/HND  Graduate Certificate/Diploma | NVQ Level 4  Higher Apprenticeship  3rd Year Degree Apprenticeship | Professional Development  BTEC Professional Qualification, City and Guilds, OCR, etc. | Nurse  Electronics Engineer  Database administrator  Primary School Teacher  Nutritionist |
| 5 | Diploma of Higher Education  2nd Year Honours Degree | NVQ Level 4  Higher Apprenticeship  2nd Year Degree Apprenticeship | Professional Development  HNDs  Foundation Degree Year 2  BTEC Higher National Diploma, City and Guilds, OCR, etc. | Electronics Engineer  Database Administrator  Photographer  Advertising Copywriter |
| 4 | Certificate of Higher Education  1st Year Honours Degree | NVQ Level 4  Higher Apprenticeship  1st Year Degree Apprenticeship | Professional development  HNCs  Foundation Degree Year 1  BTEC Higher National Certificate, City and Guilds, OCR, etc. | Accounting Technician  Paramedic  Catering Manager |
| 3 | Open University Access Modules  Key Skills  Access to Higher Education Diploma  A and AS Levels | Tech Level Qualifications  NVQ Level 3  Advanced Apprenticeship | Vocational qualifications - BTEC award, certificate and diploma level 3, BTEC National, Cambridge Technical | Accounting Technician  Family Support worker  Building Technician  Building Services Engineer  Catering Manager  Dental Technician  Helpdesk professional  Retail Manager |
| 2 | Maths/English/IT/Key Skill Courses  GCSE Grades A\*-C  Diploma for Progression | NVQ Level 2  Apprenticeship | Vocational qualifications - BTEC award, certificate and diploma level 2, Cambridge National and Technical | Accounting Technician  Events Manager  Chef  Carpenter or Joiner |
| 1 | Maths/English/IT/Key Skill Courses  GCSE Grades D-G | NVQ Level 1 | Vocational qualifications - BTEC award, certificate and diploma level 1, Cambridge National and Technical | Carpenter or Joiner  Bar person  Police Officer  Care assistant  Army soldier  Checkout operator |
| Entry Level | | | | |

Remember: You can change form one pathway to another. (Adapted from (http://www.careerpilot.org.uk/plan-your-route/progression-planner/))

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