

THE UK SKILLS SYSTEM

AN INTRODUCTION



THE UK SKILLS SYSTEM: AN INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of the UK's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system and how it provides the UK economy with highly skilled people. It contains the following sections:

- 1. WHY SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT TO THE UK**
- 2. WHAT ARE TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS?**
- 3. ABOUT THE UK SKILLS SYSTEM**
- 4. A FLEXIBLE, HIGH-QUALITY SYSTEM**
- 5. ABOUT THE BRITISH COUNCIL – CREATING GLOBAL LINKS**

“For the UK to seize new opportunities and grow, we need a trained and diverse workforce, supported by good business practice and the right policy environment.”

Confederation of British Industry,
'People and Partnership' (2016)

1. WHY SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT TO THE UK

People and skills are the heart of the UK's economic prosperity. Equipping everyone with the right knowledge, skills and behaviours sets them up for sustainable work and progression, supports social mobility, promotes a more equal society, and means businesses can seize new opportunities that drive growth and productivity. It is vital that employers have the workforce they need to enable them to grow and prosper in a global economy; employers and learners need skills and training provision to be both relevant and of high quality.

The UK's TVET system prepares individuals for the world of work, providing them with skills related to a specific industry, trade, or occupation. TVET in the UK is delivered in a variety of ways including through full or part-time study at a college or independent training provider and through apprenticeships with employers where students gain nationally-certified skills relevant to their industries. The aim is to have a working population that is:

Fully active in the
labour market

Appropriately
qualified

With skills to innovate
and contribute
to UK prosperity



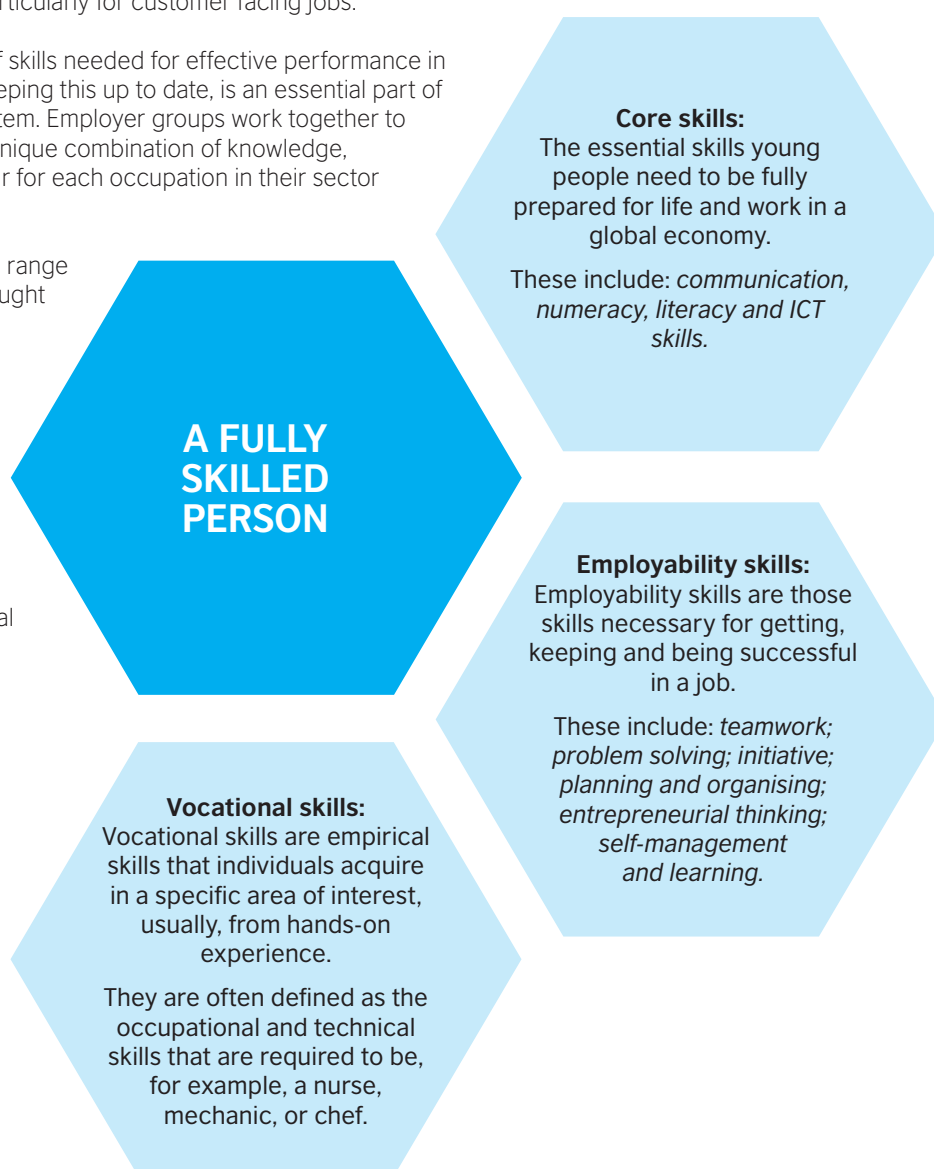
2. WHAT ARE TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS?

There are several definitions of ‘skills’. In this document, we are concerned with the skills required to perform effectively in the workplace.

As can be seen from the diagram below, being effective at work is more than just having the technical skills for a specific job role. Combinations of different skills link to each other to form overall ‘skill sets’. “Core” skills such as literacy and numeracy are vital underpinning skills, whilst “employability” skills are often seen by employers as just as important as technical skills, particularly for customer facing jobs.

Defining the particular mix and level of skills needed for effective performance in each industry and occupation, and keeping this up to date, is an essential part of the employers’ role in the UK skills system. Employer groups work together to define ‘Standards’ which capture the unique combination of knowledge, technical skills, attitudes and behaviour for each occupation in their sector of the economy.

Helping people to acquire such a wide range of skills is complex, and is not easily taught entirely through traditional classroom teaching. Therefore public and private learning providers in the UK often work directly with employers. This offers learners a mix of practical learning in the workplace, simulated work environments, project, and team based activities as well as online and classroom based learning. This helps people to have the skills, knowledge and practical experience they need to meet the appropriate standard.



3. ABOUT THE UK SKILLS SYSTEM

This section explores who delivers TVET in the UK, the structure of the system and how it is funded.

WHO DELIVERS SKILLS IN THE UK?

Across the four nations of the UK, skills are delivered through a range of organisations within the TVET sector. The main organisations delivering skills are:



COLLEGES

These institutions are at the heart of the TVET sector in the UK. They deliver a full range of different skills (see diagram on page 3 related to 'What are skills?') and often have links to schools to support younger pupils from the age of 14.



EMPLOYERS

Many employers now provide on and off-the-job training opportunities, often through apprenticeships. Training is normally directly related to the job role and the needs of the organisation but is also broad enough to ensure that learners have the ability to work in their chosen industry for other firms. Leading employers also provide their established employees with the opportunity to update and enhance their skills.



INDEPENDENT TRAINING PROVIDERS

These organisations deliver a range of skills but usually with a focus on the vocationally specific elements. They support employers in developing apprentices in the workplace and also deliver broader employability skills training.

In practice, independent training providers, colleges and employers often work in partnership to provide support for learners. Typically, training providers will directly support those employers who want to bring in external expertise to help them manage their training. The provider often organises and assesses the "on the job" training provided by the employer in the workplace and may co-ordinate with a local college to provide technical learning "off the job".



SCHOOLS

Which deliver a range of core skills and some vocational courses, particularly for learners aged 14 to 18.

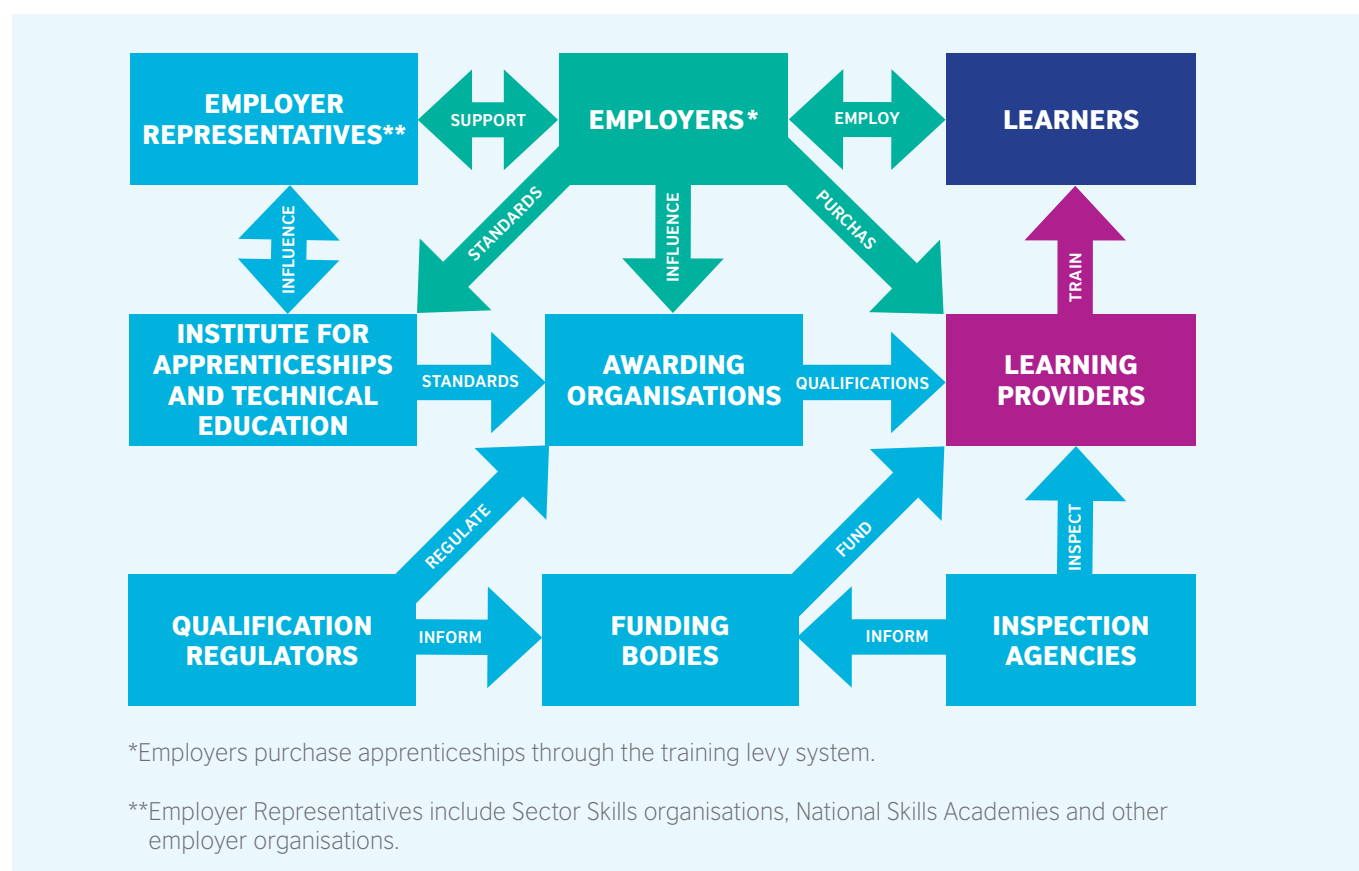


UNIVERSITIES

Alongside academic and higher-level vocational and technical skills, universities also deliver core skills and have an increasing focus on enterprise and employability. Learners usually start higher education aged 18.

STRUCTURE OF THE TVET SYSTEM

In the UK, several organisations work alongside learning providers in delivering skills provision. The diagram below explains how they link to each other in relation to public sector funding and gives further information on how they work.



COLLABORATIVE PROVISION:

Recent innovation in TVET has included encouraging a range of new collaborative arrangements between learning providers to offer alternative learning environments for young people aged between 14–19. This has included the development of:

- University Technical Colleges (UTCs) which offer a new concept in school based education for 14–19 year olds. These give students the opportunity to study at an institution specialising in a certain industry and equipped to a high standard. They are sponsored by universities and directly linked to industry. They deliver an innovative, high-quality education that combines technical, practical, and academic learning. In doing so, they offer students an alternative to the traditional GCSE and A Level curriculum. UTC's focus on applied learning in science, technology, engineering, and maths.
- Career Colleges are separate trusts established within FE colleges, with sponsorship from the Edge Foundation and Helping Hands, to offer a highly practical vocational and technical education designed to equip young people with the skills to enter a career in a specific industry.
- National Colleges are centres of high-tech training aiming to ensure the UK has skilled people in industries crucial to economic growth. These will focus on industries such as high speed rail, nuclear, onshore oil and gas, digital skills, and the creative industries, as part of an £80 million public investment by government. See case study below on the National College for High Speed Rail.
- A number of charities such as The Princes Trust, The Sainsbury Foundation and Business in the Community provide innovation support to schools, colleges and individual learners.

TVET: DIFFERENT APPROACHES ACROSS THE UK

The UK is made up of four nations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The UK Parliament is responsible for policy in England while the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly have a wide range of devolved powers, including over skills policy. In practice, they are similar TVET systems, but devolution has led to some interesting differences in how skills development is delivered and supported:

- England: has introduced a training levy on large employers to fund increased apprenticeship numbers and is passing increasing responsibility to regions for determining skills needs to support economic development. England's colleges are autonomous corporations with borrowing powers and freedom to act commercially provided they protect public money. Government has encouraged a process of collaboration and merger in order to improve longer term financial stability and enhance the learner experience.
- Northern Ireland: has also clustered and reduced the number of its colleges and has an integrated careers service model. It has pursued a policy of 'quality' modern apprenticeships. These schemes typically last three years and are focussed on specific high level growth occupations.
- Scotland: has maintained a stable TVET system with high quality apprenticeships and strong national careers information, advice and guidance services. It has clear skills plans the major sectors of the economy, a consolidated college structure and a well-regarded credit and qualifications framework
- Wales: has acted to reduce the number of its colleges. It has established regional skills partnerships, comprised of government, providers, and employers to address regional needs. Wales has also moved apprenticeship provision away from lower level skills to focus on higher level qualifications. Government maintains a close direct relationship with key employers in Wales and works to bring them and training providers together.

CASE STUDY: NATIONAL COLLEGE FOR HIGH SPEED RAIL

The National College for High Speed Rail will offer a wide variety of courses, all developed with leading employers, meaning students will be gaining the exact skills the industry needs. The courses will be taught through a mixture of hands-on classroom learning, using the very latest technology, and real work experience on real projects. The College will be opening its doors to a first intake of industry professionals and apprentices in September 2017, with courses for students aged 18+ starting the following academic year.

DEVOLUTION OF SKILLS POWERS TO LOCAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS (LEPS) AND NATIONS

There has been an increasing trend of devolving traditional UK government powers to nations and regions within the UK. TVET policy in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has continued to diverge with differences in emphasis between apprenticeship systems, greater consolidation of FE Colleges and variation in the adoption of new models of collaboration such as UTCs and National Colleges.

In England, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have increasing influence over sub-regional skills policy, funding for adult skills development and capital expenditure. LEPs are led by employers who work in partnership with local government and other economic and social partners. In parallel, local government across the sub-regions where the largest cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield are located, have come together to agree wide ranging economic development strategies with the national government. These include substantial employment and skills action plans linked to local labour market information, facilitated by a growing range of devolved powers.

HOW THE TVET SYSTEM IS FUNDED

TVET in the UK is funded mainly by government funding bodies – particularly to support the full or part time learning of young people under 25 years old and some specific adult learning. Colleges and Training Providers also receive income from fees for further and higher education programmes including where individuals have taken a government learning loan to pay for their studies. Colleges in particular also generate extra funds from income earned from employers for apprenticeships and for commercial activities such as tailor made training for employers and consultancy. Funding mechanisms vary in each UK nation, as well as in relation to the age of the learner.

Funding is used to influence quality and priorities as it:

- Follows the learner: learning providers in the publicly funded sector submit strategic plans. In these they clearly identify the types of courses they intend to run and the number of learners they expect to recruit on these courses. The funding bodies will allocate funds on this basis once the plan is agreed.
- Is paid in line with enrolment and success and is withdrawn if targets are not met: the learning provider will receive funds for the learner numbers that have been agreed, that enrol and who continue to learn. If the learners are not successful on their course or leave, funding will be withheld or may have to be repaid.
- Is used as a policy lever to deliver educational strategy: The Government focusses funds on those areas that it sees as most important and wishes to influence. Currently in the UK this includes extra financial support for young people under 24 to get their first qualification, apprenticeships and English and mathematics courses.
- Is increasingly demand led: The Government in England has introduced a training levy on larger companies across the UK to ensure business pays a fair share of training costs. The levy is held in an electronic account with Government and can be drawn down to pay for training and assessing apprentices taken on by the business. Small companies receive a grant to cover apprenticeship costs but still contract directly with Colleges and training providers. This allows the employer a greater choice and voice in the training.

In the UK, there is currently considerable pressure on government funding. Learning providers are expected to look for innovative and enterprising ways of generating income and reducing costs whilst maintaining quality.

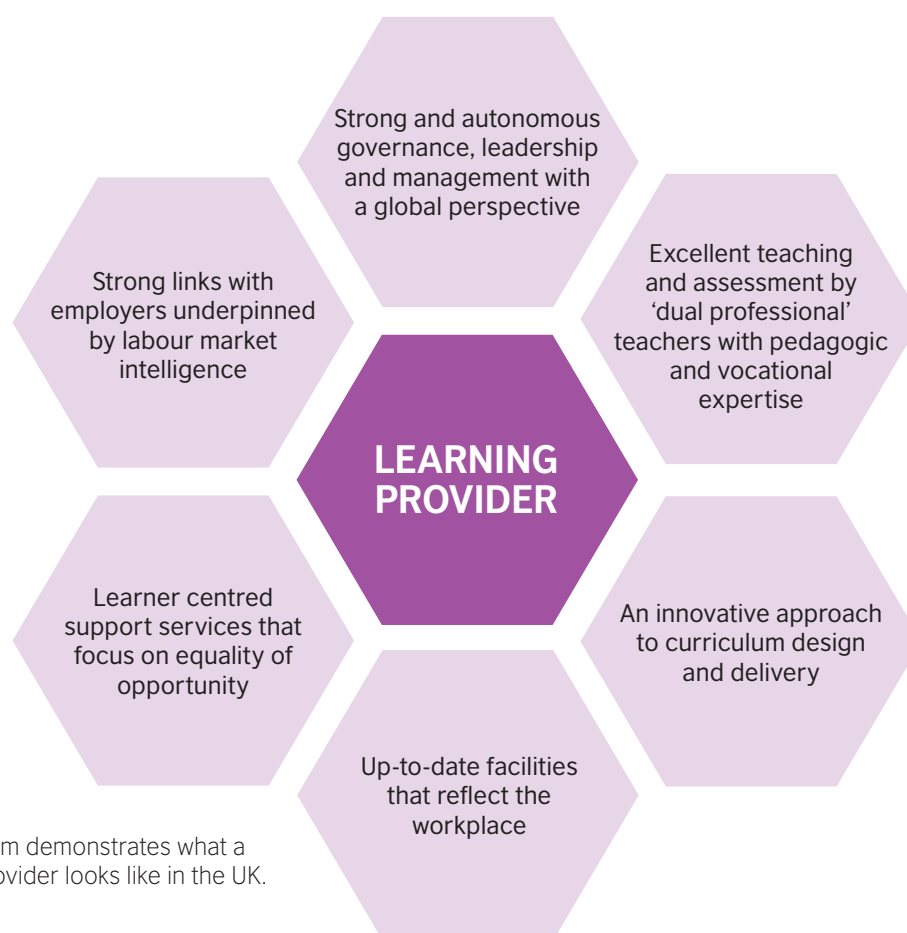
APPRENTICESHIPS: EXPANSION AND REFORM

The UK Government has given high priority to increasing the number and quality of apprenticeships. It has set a target of achieving 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020 in England. Funding for this expansion comes through a levy which is paid as a direct tax by employers with a wage bill over £3million a year at the rate of 0.5%. The levy funds, which the employer gets in the form of digital vouchers are then managed through an electronic account held between the employer and the government and can be drawn down to fund external training provider costs. Apprenticeship funding for small companies also now flows through accounts with employers rather than directly to providers. Quality is being enhanced through new simplified trailblazer standards developed by groups of employers; for example, digital apprenticeships for the IT industry. Operational freedom, all providers are still subject to rigorous controls on finance and quality assurance.

4. A FLEXIBLE, HIGH-QUALITY SYSTEM

EXCELLENT LEARNING PROVIDERS

As noted above, different types of learning provider operate in the UK. To deliver the skills that employers need in a manner that learners expect, all learning providers need to have the following attributes:



The above diagram demonstrates what a good learning provider looks like in the UK.

CASE STUDY: BARNSELEY COLLEGE

Barnsley College is rated as an 'Outstanding' FE college in the UK. It focuses on education for 16–25 year olds and covers 22 areas of study, from motor vehicles to hair and beauty, hospitality, and electronic games design. Unlike some FE Colleges, it is a 'tertiary' college in that it provides for the needs of all post-16 young people in the local community. The college has around 4500 students studying vocational qualifications (1900 apprenticeships) with high completion and achievement rates, taught by over 800 teachers. Some key features of the college facilities include:

- More than £100 million invested in the college over the past five years to construct a new main building, construction and engineering centres, and a farm
- A 6th Form Centre preparing 600 young people for university
- Higher-education centre offering degree-level education

EXCELLENT LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Learners have a range of expectations for TVET as they enter an increasingly global economy. They want the provision of TVET to be relevant to their career goals and to be flexible in terms of delivery and progression routes. Providing Careers Information, Advice, and Guidance (I.A.G.) to students is an essential part of any successful skills system. I.A.G. helps young people to make the right choices about their vocational education and their career. Different approaches are in operation across the UK.

Learners increasingly expect to be able to access high quality learning online and to be able to submit assignments and plan their studies electronically. Learning providers also rely increasingly on online tools to plan, manage, and deliver learning.

A wide range of personal support is commonly available through colleges and other learning providers in the UK including counselling, health and wellbeing services. Providers are expected to have effective processes in place to protect and safeguard learners.

INFORMATION, ADVICE, AND GUIDANCE

The Careers and Enterprise Company

In England, the Careers and Enterprise Company works in partnership with schools, colleges, employers, and youth organisations to create career opportunities for young people. They have an Enterprise Advisor Network which pairs senior business volunteers with schools to build employer engagement plans and create powerful, lasting connections between local businesses and the schools and colleges in local areas.

Skills Development Scotland

In Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, is responsible for careers information advice and guidance services which includes an extensive advisor network and a high quality online careers information portal where Sector Skills organisations and employers directly develop content. This online portal is called 'My World of Work' and is available to use free of charge for all young people in Scotland.

EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

Training providers have been innovating in both the design and delivery of the curriculum and in the ways in which they engage with the employment market to offer a higher quality learning experience to students. Examples of this include:

- Greater use of IT to manage learning, track progress and provide online content
- Distance and blended learning which provides improved access to high quality teaching and content
- Use of social media to show-case success and engage with the local community, including schools, other training providers and employers
- Building stronger links with employers and delivering high-quality training in the workplace

IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

It is vital that employers have the workforce they need to enable them to grow and prosper in a global economy. They therefore need the skills training at all levels to be both relevant and of high quality. As in many other countries, it remains a challenge to fully align the needs of employers with that of schools, colleges, and universities and to balance wider educational goals with equipping people with the specific skills they need for sustainable employment.

To meet employers' needs, UK policy has a strong focus on engaging employers in both the design and delivery of TVET and ensuring the system is "demand led" rather than "supplier driven". This is helping to improve quality and relevance.

Employers engage with and influence the skills system in a variety of ways:

Employer influence within the system through:

- Sector Skills Organisations
- Industrial partnerships
- Reform to apprenticeships through trailblazer apprenticeships
- Employer representative bodies

Employer influence on institutions at local, regional, and national level through:

- Further Education College Governance
- Sponsorship of University Technical Colleges

- Local Enterprise / Regional Skills Partnership membership
- Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education board membership

Employer involvement in delivery through:

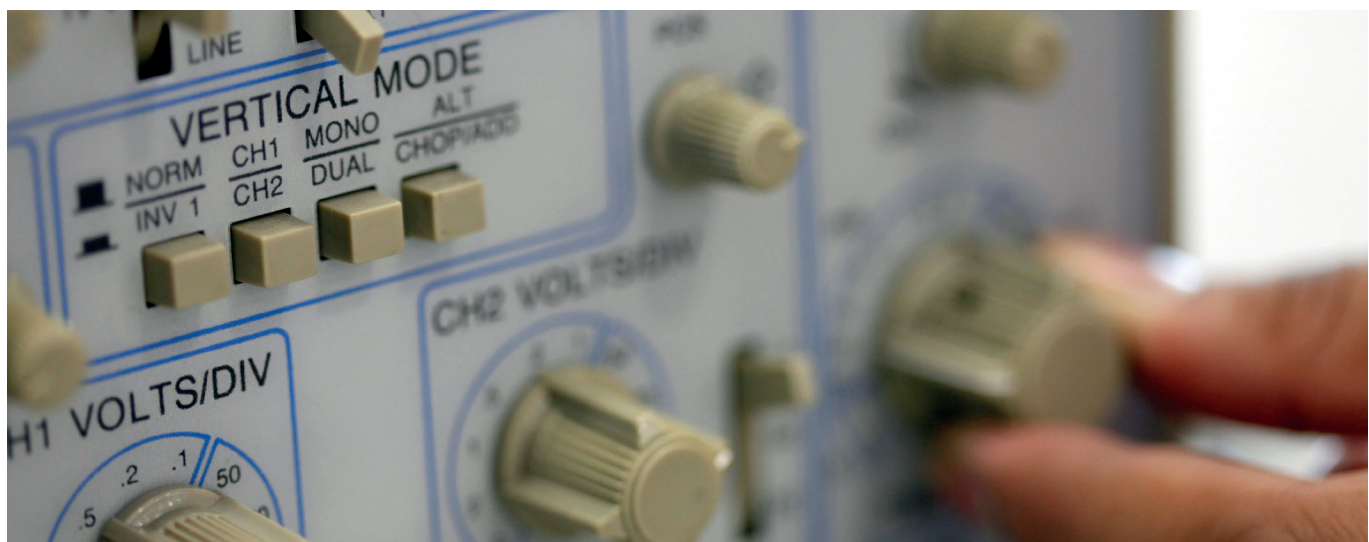
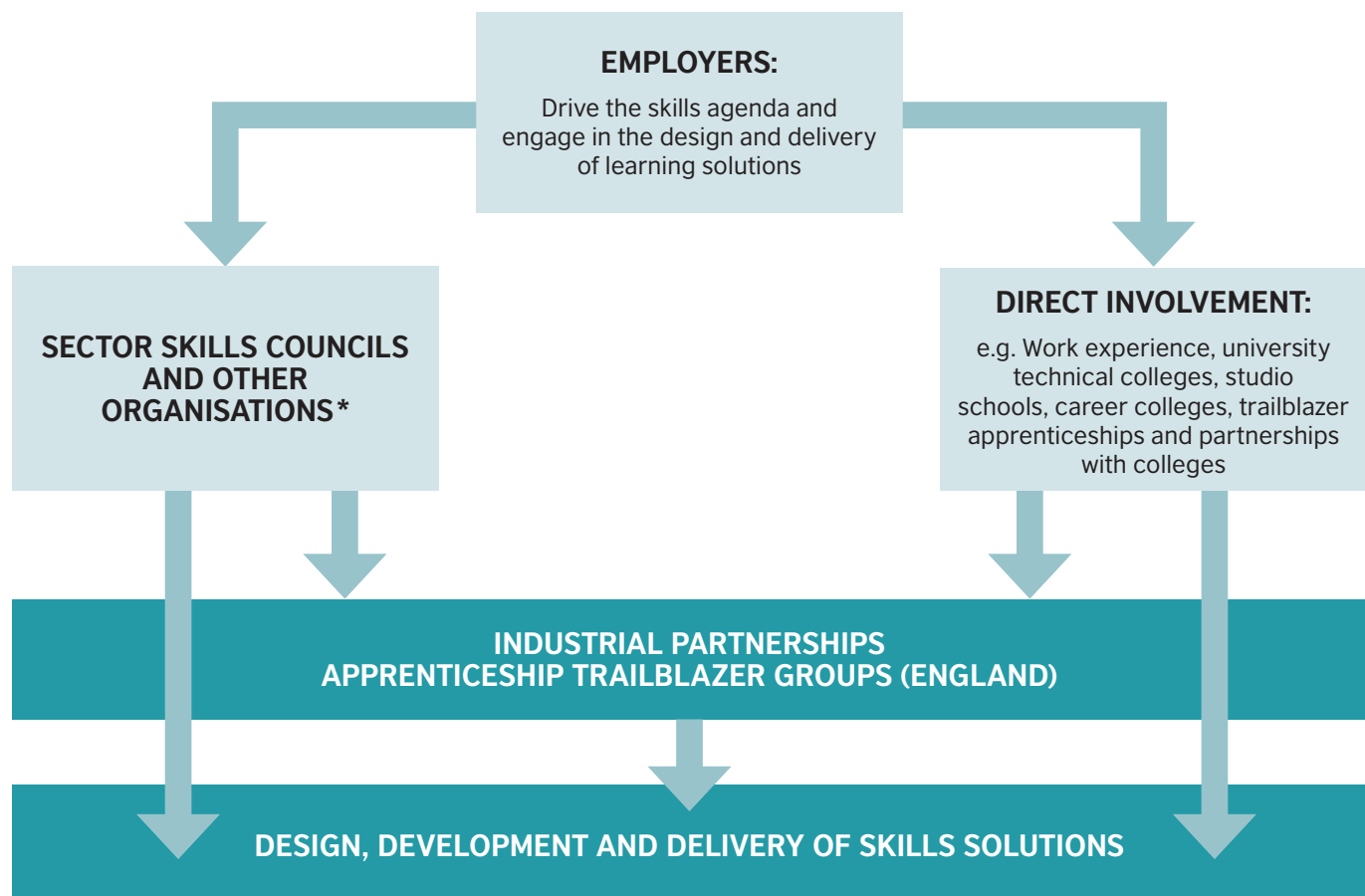
- Employing apprentices
- Input into the curriculum of colleges
- Providing work experience
- Providing mentoring
- Providing equipment and materials

CASE STUDY: EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN THE FOOD AND DRINK SECTOR

Employers in the food and drink sector (including McDonalds, Whitbread and Hilton Hotels) have worked with People 1st (the Sector Skills Council for Hospitality/Tourism) to create a 'Career Map' for their industry. They have developed very clear and user-friendly 'professional' apprenticeship standards for key roles in the sector, such as chefs and front-of-house staff. These include the key functions of the job and the behaviours required to succeed in the role. This focus on behaviours is crucial given the importance of customer service to the industry.



The diagram below shows the central role that employers play in the TVET system in the UK.



*Sector Skills Councils, Sector Skills bodies and National Skills Academies are represented by the UK Skills Federation

CASE STUDY: EMPLOYER/COLLEGE COLLABORATION IN WALES

Coleg y Cymoedd and GE Aviation have worked together for more than 30 years. This cooperation has seen both parties benefit and grow as a result, and provided jobs for many learners over the years.

At the heart of the partnership is an apprenticeship programme, providing aircraft engineers to GE Aviation. The apprentices bring fresh talent and enthusiasm to the factory that provides engine overhaul services for the aerospace industry. The apprentices who are the employees of the future are trained in the skills needed by the company to secure future overhaul work. The College also engages employers to join its governing body and the industrial and commercial experience of the governors benefits the development of the curriculum.

CASE STUDY: FORGING LINKS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The InnoTech Centre was set up by South West College in Northern Ireland to nurture the growth of technology and innovation in local companies. The centre has since become a nexus between industry and education, using the skills of its staff to match companies with students with specialist expertise in science, engineering or technology. It provides opportunities for training, technical mentoring and project management for small local businesses aiming to adopt new technologies and embed innovative approaches.

The centre is supported through input from Sector Skills organisations, local councils, regional enterprise development bodies and universities. To date, InnoTech has successfully generated over 200 real-world scenarios for students to work on in partnership with SMEs as a means of preparing them to enter the world of work. It has also generated in excess of £11 million for the regional economy.



WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DO LEARNERS STUDY IN THE UK?

Qualifications are available at all levels in the UK from very basic to higher degree level. In the UK, universities develop and award foundation degrees, bachelor's, and postgraduate degrees. Further education colleges focus on vocational qualifications below degree level, but also deliver some higher education courses including degrees, usually in partnership with universities.

Government-appointed education bodies accredit awarding bodies so that their qualifications are recognised as part of national qualifications frameworks. These national qualifications frameworks are mapped onto the European Qualifications Framework to ensure that qualifications are transferable, recognised internationally and support mobility.

The role of these awarding bodies is to: **Develop qualifications to meet an identified need. The need might be:**

- defined by government for 14–19 year olds;
- pre-employment training for young people;
- skill development for adults;
- vocational education and apprenticeships
- Quality assure and standardise the qualifications.

Unlike other countries, awarding bodies in the UK are independent organisations and operate in a competitive market place. Some provide services on an international basis.



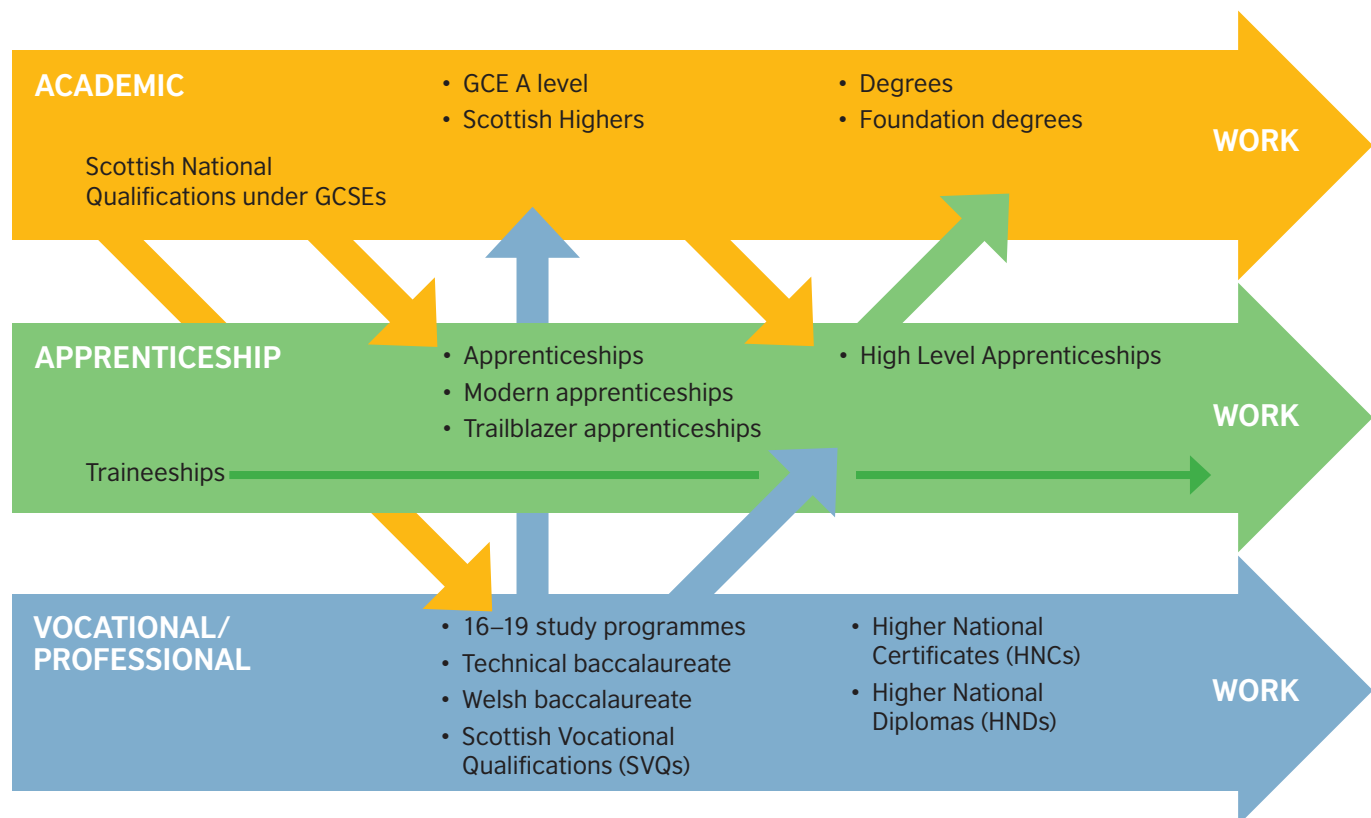
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FLEXIBLE PROGRESSION PATHWAYS

As in many countries, there has been a tendency to encourage academic rather than vocational learning routes. The cost of university study, the opportunity to earn and learn through high-quality apprenticeships and increasingly flexible progression routes are helping to improve perceptions of vocational learning and qualifications.

Some degree programmes are by their nature vocational (e.g. performing arts, teaching, nursing, and medical courses) and all have a very strong emphasis on acquiring occupational/job related skills. The diagram below shows the relationship between academic, apprenticeship and vocational routes in the UK. Flexible pathways are available so that young people can move from, for

instance, a full time vocational programme at college to an apprenticeship with an employer and then later take a higher-level apprenticeship before going to university.



RIGOROUS QUALIFICATIONS

Learning providers must have effective systems in place to ensure fairness, accuracy and consistency when delivering, assessing and quality assuring regulated qualifications. Requirements are set by the awarding organisation that offers and awards the qualifications. These requirements differ depending on the purpose of the qualifications. Awarding organisations are, in turn, accountable to the qualification regulators, to ensure that the different quality assurance requirements of each qualification meet national standards.

Learning providers are therefore responsible for 'internal quality assurance' and awarding organisations are responsible for 'external quality assurance'. Both procedures are used to monitor and verify the learning provider's assessment decisions and help to build further trust and confidence in the qualifications. Staff involved in qualification delivery, assessment and verification are required to undertake professional development and meet minimum national standards for their roles.

There are different organisations that regulate qualifications in the UK:

- CCEA: General and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.
- Ofqual: General and vocational qualifications in England. Ofqual will also have a key role in implementing a new system in England, whereby qualifications for under 18s will be 'licensed' for each of 15 defined routes, and qualifications for over 18s will be registered. See "15 Routes" section below.

- Qualifications Wales: General and vocational qualifications in Wales.
- SQA: Accrediting Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and some other qualifications.



HOW THE UK'S TVET SYSTEM WILL CONTINUE TO DEVELOP

As will all systems, the UK's TVET system will continue to evolve and develop over the coming months and years. In this section, we try to capture some of the anticipated changes that are known to be taking place or are expected to be implemented in the near future.

The following is the action the government has committed to taking to improve skill levels across the UK:

- Action to improve basic skills:
- The creation of a new system of technical education
- Addressing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) shortages
- Identifying and addressing sector-specific skills shortages
- High quality careers information, advice and guidance
- Testing new approaches to lifelong learning

CASE STUDY: POLICY RENEWAL AND REFORM IN ENGLAND

- **Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education:** From April 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will help ensure employers get the quality skills that they need from the apprenticeships system by acting as the ultimate decision maker on approving apprenticeship standards and assessment plans. Independent, and with employers at its heart, the Institute for Apprenticeships will be responsible for approving new apprenticeship standards and how apprentices will be assessed. This will further ensure provision responds to the needs of business and gives learners the skills and experience they need to succeed.
- **'15 Routes':** An expert panel chaired by Lord Sainsbury has recommended that technical and vocational education should be reorganised into 15 technical routes to skilled employment for young people. For example, a creative and design route, a digital route, engineering and manufacture, health and science, catering and hospitality, construction, business and administrative and so on. These would sit alongside and be comparable with the academic route from school to university with bridging provision between them. Each technical route would include a 2 year programme for 16–18 year olds to allow them to reach Level 2 or 3 and include formal work experience. It could be taken through college based technical education or an employer based apprenticeship. Each route would have progression pathways to higher skills. It is to be developed and accredited by a single licensed body or consortia and will be based on employer developed standards. A transition year would be possible for those young people not immediately ready for a specific technical route. The Government has welcomed these radical proposals from the Sainsbury Report and has issued a "Post 16 Skills Plan" describing how and when they will be implemented.
- **Development of an Industrial Strategy:** The UK Government is committed to establishing a long-term 'industrial strategy' – to provide a policy framework against which major public and private sector investment decisions can be made. The strategy aims to build on the UK's strengths and and to make the UK one of the most competitive places in the world to start or grow a business. With regards to education and skills, the Government recognises that raising skill levels is an important way to drive higher incomes over the long term and that it has a key role to play as the major contributor to investment in skills; but also, that it is not the only stakeholder. It needs industry to help shape qualifications and the curriculum – for technical qualifications in particular – to ensure they are useful to future employers, and needs more involvement of industry experts in delivering technical education to drive up standards.

5. HOW CAN THE BRITISH COUNCIL HELP SUPPORT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT?

The British Council works to enhance the quality of skills systems by encouraging closer links between education, employers, and policy makers in the UK and worldwide. It has strong links with the organisations that are part of the TVET system in the UK and abroad.

The British Council is also committed to fostering international links and collaboration that will:

1. Highlight best practice and innovation in skills development.

2. Develop shared benefit for the partners we work with in the UK and around the world and encourage mutual learning in those areas of TVET provision that might be relevant and useful to them.

3. Identify and manage opportunities for innovation and partnership with the UK.

4. Enable young people to develop and gain global employability skills and understand the skills needs of business in an international context.

5. Improve cultural awareness, both in the UK and overseas.



UK SKILLS PARTNERSHIP

The Partnership comprises key stakeholders in the UK skills system, who have significant capability to promote and support skills development around the world. Members work collaboratively to build the UK sector's capacity and engagement in international activities and act as an advocate for the UK's technical and vocational education and training offer internationally.

ABOUT THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. We work to enhance the quality of skills systems by encouraging closer links between education, employers, and policy makers in the UK and worldwide.



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