

Vocational Education and Training in England and Wales

Strengths, Challenges and Recommendations

STRENGTHS

- England and Wales are committed to a step improvement in the level of workplace skills.
- Substantial resources have been made available for this task.
- The conscious attempt to engage employers is commendable.
- VET policy making in England and Wales is self-evidently dynamic and innovative.
- The system is flexible and allows for tailor-made training solutions for employers.

CHALLENGES

- The meaning of employer engagement is very fluid.
- Few countries have achieved strong employer engagement without an equally strong apprenticeship system, which remains elusive in England and Wales.
- In spite of the government's declared intention to have much VET employer-led, the delivery of the Leitch targets will require a very strong lead from government.
- Policy structures are both more complex and more unstable than in most other OECD countries, and this inhibits employer engagement.
- A demand-driven system may imply more of a market in providers. But attempts to open up the market have been halting and the effects uncertain.
- While there is a substantial base of data and analysis, it remains fragmented, with inadequate attention to international experience.
- The current sharp economic downturn is imposing a number of pressures on the skills system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Priorities for employer engagement should be clearly defined and the rationale for seeking that engagement should be set out by the governments of England and Wales. Evidence on employer engagement should be further developed. Fragmented surveys should so far as possible be consolidated and co-ordinated.
2. Given that complexity and volatility in the VET system hinder employer engagement, the institutions of the VET system should be simplified and stabilised. We welcome and support the proposals of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) in this respect. These proposals need to be sustained and further developed.
3. As a way to engage employers so as to reach the skills targets identified in the Leitch report, governments in England and Wales should explore measures including those designed to reduce the cost of training, the establishment of a stronger evidence base to encourage employer support for training, and, possibly, the use of compulsive measures including training levies.
4. Attempts to foster employer engagement in England and Wales should be closely linked to the development of the apprenticeship system.
5. Governments in England and Wales should take account of previous experience, including international experience, when extending the market in VET provision. In particular users need good information about the quality of different programmes and institutions.
6. England and Wales should take account of international evidence more routinely in its policy-making process. Consider the establishment of a national VET institution to oversee VET research and analysis.

FURTHER READING

Vocational education and training (VET) has a key economic function in up-skilling and integrating young people into the labour market and in providing high quality technical skills. But in recent decades, VET has been a neglected part of initial education: education policy research and reform have tended to focus primarily on school and tertiary education.

The OECD's policy review of vocational education and training (VET), *Learning for Jobs*, comprises a programme of analytical work and individual country reviews and is designed to help countries make their VET systems more responsive to labour market needs.

[Learning for Jobs, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training Policies, England and Wales](#) (OECD, 2009) was released in October 2009 and assesses the main challenges faced by the VET system and presents an interconnected package of six policy recommendations. For each recommendation, the report describes the challenge, the recommendation itself, supporting arguments, and issues of implementation.

Further information about the policy review and reports on VET systems in other countries is available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/edu/learningforjobs