

A *SKILLS BEYOND SCHOOL* BRIEF ON THE UNITED KINGDOM



The Skills beyond School study

This brief was prepared for the publication of the *Skills beyond School Synthesis Report*, a review of post-secondary career, vocational and professional training covering 20 countries, including the United Kingdom (see box).

The OECD's *Skills beyond School* review

Across the world, countries are increasingly looking beyond secondary school to more advanced vocational qualifications to provide the skills needed in technical and professional jobs. This study addresses the policy challenges arising and builds on the OECD's previous study, *Learning for Jobs*, which examined vocational education and training policy at upper secondary level. For the purposes of *Skills beyond School*, 20 separate country studies, involving country visits, analyses and published reports, were pursued. Full country policy reviews were conducted in Austria, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea, the Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States (with case studies of Florida, Maryland and Washington State). Shorter exercises leading to a country "commentary" were undertaken in Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Iceland, Romania, Spain and Sweden.

The synthesis report was published in English on 13 November 2014. French, German and Spanish versions will follow.

See <http://www.oecd.org/education/VET>

Skills beyond School in the UK

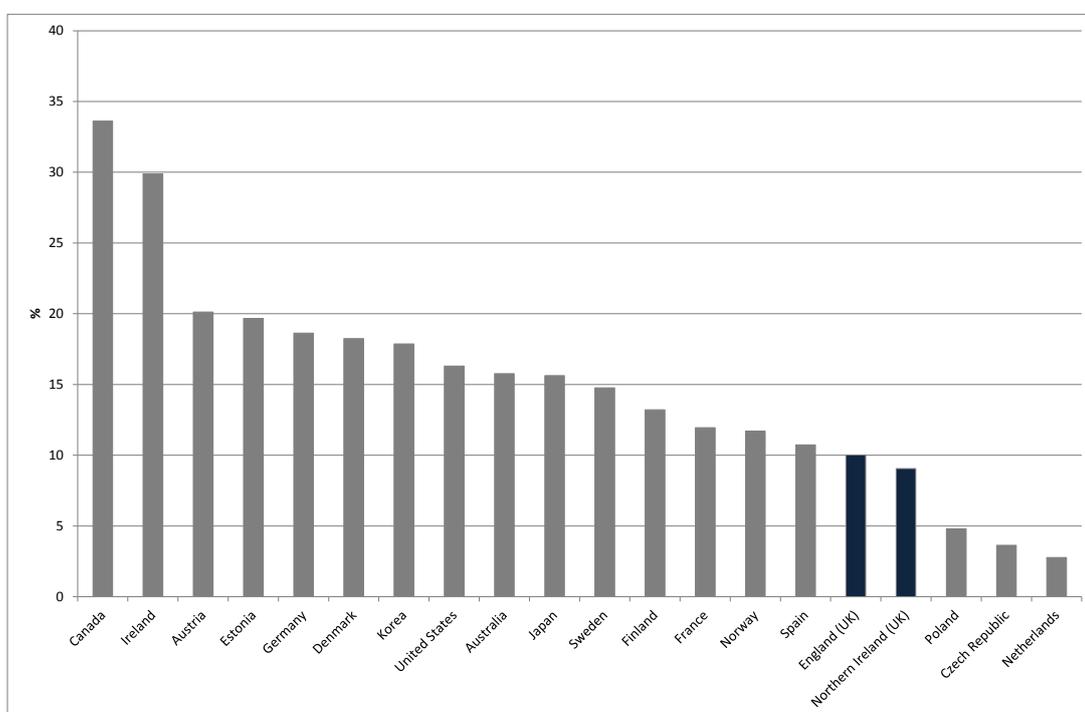
In the UK a full review was pursued in England, and country commentaries in both Scotland and Northern Ireland¹, all supported and funded by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The reports outline the main features of post-secondary vocational education and training systems and assess both the main strengths of the systems and the challenges which need to be addressed. These assessments are supported by illustrations of how other countries have dealt with similar challenges. In the case of England, the report developed policy recommendations in response to the challenges identified.

England and Northern Ireland should expand provision of higher level vocational programmes

The hidden world of post-secondary VET

School and university, and the well-trod path between them, play a dominant role in thinking about education policy. But outside these two institutions there exists a less well understood world of colleges, diplomas, certificates and professional examinations – the world of post-secondary vocational education and training. Many professional and technical jobs require no more than one or two years of career preparation beyond upper secondary level, and in some countries as much as one-quarter of the adult workforce have this type of qualification (see below). Nearly two-thirds of overall employment growth in the European Union (EU25) is forecast to be in the “technicians and associate professionals” category – the category most closely linked to this sector. A recent US projection is that nearly one-third of job vacancies by 2018 will require some post-secondary qualification but less than a four-year degree.

Percentage of adults aged 20-45 who have short-cycle post-secondary vocational education and training as their highest qualification



Note: These data identify vocational post-secondary programmes by excluding clearly general academic qualifications (according to field of study) in ISCED 4 and 5B.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012) in OECD (2014), *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264214682-en>.

Setting growth in the sector as a strategic objective

Although England and Northern Ireland have large and successful university systems offering three year bachelor degrees, they both stand out as countries where, relative both to other countries (See Figure 1), and to potential demand, there is limited provision of post-secondary VET, potentially leading to a shortage of mid-level skills. Scotland did not take part of the Survey of Adult Skills so

comparable numbers are not available for that country. But the *Skills beyond School* commentary on Scotland noted that shorter post-secondary qualifications such as the Scottish Higher National Certificates and the Higher National Diplomas have a long history, are well regarded by employers and students and they account for almost one quarter of all higher education enrolments.

The recent increase in university fees in England will encourage potential students to reflect carefully on the most cost-effective post-secondary options – creating a historic opportunity to develop shorter programmes. The OECD review of England argued that England should take strategic measures to encourage the development of such programmes (See Musset and Field, 2013, for detailed recommendations on how this strategic expansion should take place).

Expansion can build on real strengths

The *Skills beyond School* synthesis report presents a set of recommendations to enhance the profile of post-secondary VET (See Chapter 2 in OECD, 2014). In the UK, the strategic development of post-secondary VET systems should build on the strengths:

- A diverse offer of further education colleges, universities and other institutions including private providers, that meet the needs of many different groups of learners;
- Strong and rigorous quality assurance mechanisms;
- Fast-growing higher level apprenticeships;
- Strong systems of career guidance in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The awarding bodies system should be reformed

The current system of awarding bodies which operate in many parts of the UK (but works differently in Scotland) has very serious drawbacks. The proliferation of competing qualifications in England and Northern Ireland undermines the labour market value of vocational qualifications, and prevent employers from engaging effectively in the construction of qualifications. The OECD review argues for drastic simplification of the system.

Workbased learning should be made systematic

Workbased learning has many benefits

Workplace learning, as an integrated element of vocational programmes, is a powerful tool for developing both hard and soft skills, for transitioning students into employment, engaging employers, and linking the mix of training provision to employer needs.

Its use is very variable across the UK

In Scotland while work-based learning is built into some post-secondary programmes and the Scottish Modern Apprenticeship has many strengths, its use is highly variable depending heavily on the programme and individual provider. Colleges enjoy a lot of autonomy and are free to provide work placements to students (in programmes where such placements are not mandatory). For colleges, the OECD would welcome the introduction of stronger incentives, or requirements to offer training with employers as an integral part of their programmes. In England and Northern Ireland, post-secondary VET programmes make limited and variable use of workplace training. There is a real challenge in

developing the kind of systematic work-based learning that is characteristic of the strongest VET systems.

Workbased learning should be made mandatory in all vocational programmes

Evidence from a number of countries suggests that making work-based learning a mandatory element of vocational programmes is feasible and has multiple benefits, in enhancing learning, linking provision more closely to employer needs, and building local partnerships (See Chapter 3 in OECD, 2014, for more information on the mandatory principle of work-based learning). What is striking about international experience is that poorer countries with relatively weak infrastructure (Romania), countries with very little history of employer engagement in the vocational system (Sweden) and countries with very high rates of youth unemployment (Spain) have all been successful in implementing mandatory arrangements for work-based learning in some of their vocational programmes (OECD, 2014). Clearly such arrangements cannot be implemented overnight. It takes time for employers to learn how to make use of students in work placements, and to appreciate and realise the benefits to them of offering such placements.

A strong training workforce

A good balance of pedagogical preparation and professional competence needs to be ensured

Across countries, the quality of the teaching and training profession is as critical to effective learning in vocational programmes as it is in general education. The preparation of vocational teachers needs to balance pedagogical requirements with the need for teachers of professional skills to have a full grasp of those skills and for them to keep abreast of developments in their professional field (See Chapter 3 in OECD 2014, for more information on strengthening the training workforce in post-secondary VET).

This issue is very topical in the UK

In Scotland, teachers in colleges are required to have relevant professional experience as well as pedagogical training. A person with relevant occupational skills can start on a job without special training for teachers but those who wish to remain in the teaching profession have to eventually complete the training. Training lasts one year if full-time or two years in part-time mode. Teachers are also required to maintain their skills through continuous professional development. In Northern Ireland, there is considerable attention to the development of the teaching workforce, including through an innovative short programme to allow part-time lecturers to develop their pedagogical skills. This issue is also topical in England, following a sequence of reviews of qualification requirements for teachers in further education colleges. The review of England argued that the qualification requirements set for teachers should encourage a career path helping people with valuable industry experience to enter teaching either full or part-time.

For Further information:

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¹ These exercises used a standard methodology. Authorities in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland provided background reports (UKCES, 2013; The Scottish Government, 2013; Department for Employment and Learning, 2013) following which OECD teams made visits to the countries, where the team discussed issues arising with a range of policy makers, stakeholders and staff in training institutions.