



VET 2050
A Scoping Paper on the
Future of Vocational Education and Training
in England
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About the VET2050 Project

VET2050 will articulate an ambitious, sustainable vision for England's vocational education and training system with a roadmap to achieving this vision by 2050. The north-star goal of this visioning exercise is to raise youth participation in education and employment to the highest level in the OECD through practicable, system-wide reform.

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Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) provides young people with an important entry point into the labour market, equipping them with the capabilities to succeed throughout their careers. VET prepares individuals for a wide range of skilled occupations while also providing second-chance learning opportunities for those who have left compulsory education with few qualifications. For the labour market, VET provides essential skills that sustain growth and productivity. Yet VET's value extends beyond economic outcomes. High-quality vocational routes can strengthen social cohesion, widening participation in education and employment, foster social mobility through access to well-paid, meaningful work, and contribute to individual well-being and civic engagement by equipping learners with the capabilities to adapt and thrive throughout their lives.

Despite this importance, the VET system in England is often maligned, frequently under-resourced, and subject to frequent review and systemic overhaul. Change is required. VET needs to be an attractive option to young people. It must equip them with the skills to succeed in the labour market, flourish in their lives, and provide accessible pathways to social mobility. The UK Government's recent announcement, setting a target of two-thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning, is a recognition of the need for ambition (Prime Minister's Office, 2025). Yet, while policy rhetoric is welcome, the history of post-16 skills reform suggests that ambition alone will not be sufficient. Achieving a genuine step change in VET requires a new vision, one that is bold, durable, and system wide. VET2050 looks to create this vision. Ideally, it will provide a settlement that will reduce the never-ending policy churn and occasional volte-faces which have characterised much of the last fifty years or more.

The Youth Future Foundation's 'north star' goal is to have the highest participation rate in education and employment across the OECD for young people. A high quality and successful VET system is critical to achieving this goal. VET can support the school-to-work transition, equip learners with the skills for a lifelong career, and support employers with a high skilled labour pipeline. The current state of VET in England is not yet up to this challenge, though it is certainly achievable. The VET2050 project will envision and craft implementation roadmaps to meet this north-star goal.

This scoping paper lays out the challenges and opportunities around reimagining the VET in England. It first assesses the current state and trajectory of VET in England, before identifying broad domains for reform. The paper concludes with an overview of the VET2050 approach to developing this vision. At the forthcoming VET2050 kick-off workshop, policy makers, scholars, and practitioners will refine the scope of this vision and prioritise areas for action.

More information about VET2050 is [available online](#).

Current State of VET in England

In England, VET encompasses the diverse post-16 technical and professional education system, comprising further education colleges, sixth form colleges that offer technical training, independent training providers, apprenticeships, T-Levels (Level 3), higher technical qualifications (HTQs, Level 3-4) and skills bootcamps (Skills England, 2025). This reflects the complexity of vocational pathways and the complex regulatory and management structures that govern them, often marked by policy churn and instability (Robson et al., 2024). A recent example is the transfer of apprenticeship oversight from the Department for Education (DfE) to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

For decades, policy makers in England have grappled with persistent, low levels of investment in VET, and limited participation in post-compulsory non-university education (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016; Edwards, 1983). Despite reforms in the 1990s which introduced National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and modern apprenticeships, England continued to under-produce intermediate skills compared with many western European labour markets (Cedefop, 2018). Since the 1970s, successive governments have pursued a demand-led, market oriented model for VET, with repeated rounds of reform intended to raise participation and better align skills supply with employer demand (Erickson and Hogarth, 2025). Although programmes and spending expanded until around 2010, subsequent austerity measures constrained adult skills budgets and participation (IFS 2024, 2025). One significant exception is the apprenticeship system: following the Richard Review (2012), the system was overhauled, including the 2017 levy and more recently the government's move to reframe this as a Growth and Skills levy.

Policy Developments

Over the last 25 years, VET in England has been re-engineered around employer-designed occupational standards and tighter steering on what is publicly funded. Dominant policy narratives, set out in the Post-16 Skills Plan (2016), with foundations in the Sainsbury Review, were to create a clearly signposted technical route which would operate alongside the already firmly established academic route. Employers design the occupation standards, awarding organisations develop qualifications and are regulated under Ofqual's Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Approval for funding has been largely centralised through the DfE.

Depending upon one's perspective, the system might be regarded as a flexible one that is responsive to demand, or a free-for-all that produces a profusion of qualifications and / or apprenticeship standards where would-be learners cannot see the wood for the trees. While policy makers may have tended towards the latter view, there is little evidence that the VET system is any easier to navigate. The Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011) – which sought to expose the redundancy of much vocational

education in England – drew attention to the many vocational qualifications on offer to those aged 16 and over. Many were in abeyance (they were still on the register of qualifications, but no one delivered them), had few enrolments, and / or delivered relatively low-level returns to learners. The net effect was a myriad of options that few career counsellors, let alone students, could reasonably lay claim to fully understand. The Richard Review of Apprenticeships (2012) recommended clarification about what was, and was not, an apprenticeship with a view to there being a much clearer occupational focus than hitherto. Employers were seen as best placed to design apprenticeships. And the report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (2016) (also known as the Sainsbury Review) drew attention to the myriad technical and vocational qualifications on offer and recommended reform of the system so that qualifications, in future, were:

- easy to understand;
- had credibility with employers; and
- remained stable over time.

The recommendations of the Sainsbury Review were largely taken up in the Post-16 Skills Plan (2016) which stated:

“Our ambition is that every young person, after an excellent grounding in the core academic subjects and a broad balanced curriculum to age 16, is presented with two choices: the academic or the technical option. The academic option is already well regarded, but the technical option must also be world-class.

The technical option will prepare individuals for skilled employment which requires technical knowledge and practical skills valued by industry. It will cover college-based and employment-based (apprenticeship) education, building on our apprenticeship reforms.

Employers will sit at the heart of the system and take the lead in setting the standards. Crucially, standards will be designed by considering what is needed to move to skilled employment and then working backwards.”

This led to the introduction of T-levels – as recommended in the Sainsbury Review - which are designed to provide the quality of esteem associated with the A-levels, which comprise the academic pathway (A-levels are considered the gold standard among England’s qualifications). In preparation for the introduction of T-levels in 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) set about removing public funding from courses which duplicated at least part of the planned T-level provision. This, in effect, would kill them off. Government also signalled its intention to remove qualifications which had a low number of enrolments.

By October 2023, the DfE had identified 219 qualifications that would no longer be in receipt of public funding by 2025 (Lewis and Wilson, 2023). This included many in construction, engineering and manufacturing and included several BTEC vocational qualifications that have proved popular with both students and learning providers. There was an initial cull led to 5,500 qualifications, though not of all these were vocational ones. The fact that 5,500 were removed gives an indication of the scale of qualification provision in England.

With the election of a new government in July 2024, a decision has been made to ‘pause and review’ the reform of vocational qualifications though it has recently signalled its intention to bring in a suite of qualifications – V-levels. The implications for the overall structure of vocational education provision is, as yet, uncertain.

What is, perhaps, more certain is that the qualification landscape remains a complex one. There are currently at least 2,000 vocational qualifications available in England, and around 700 apprenticeship standards. There is a degree of churn within this, with some qualifications being withdrawn and new ones introduced, sometimes with the latter substituting for the former. With the creation of occupational maps, one can now identify a particular, albeit broad, occupational learning field, but within it there is likely to be a panoply of qualifications delivered by differing qualification bodies, given that apprenticeships sometimes have qualifications embedded within them.

Looking to the future, the Government’s position has now been clarified with a White Paper published in October 2025. The white paper introduces a new suite of qualifications to be known as V-levels which will sit alongside the academic A-levels and occupationally focused T-levels. This is intended to simplify the vocational landscape as V-levels will replace BTECs and the earlier proposal for an Advanced British Standard qualification. The V-level will be broader than the T-levels (subject rather than occupationally focused) and allow learners to mix and match elements from the academic and occupational tracks (DfE, 2025; Camden and Chowen, 2025).

Whether this will result in more or less qualifications on offer than currently is not stated, but there seems to be an implicit assumption that it will be less. Other announced changes include modularisation of apprenticeships with short courses which will allow more flexible use of the Growth and Skills Levy, funding for employers offering foundation apprenticeships to support those starting their careers as part of the Youth Guarantee, and Lifelong Learning Entitlements to provide loans for modular short courses (DfE, 2025).

There is, perhaps, an irony that despite the recommendation for a degree of stability called for in the Sainsbury Review (2016) the system appears to be in the middle of a period of substantial change. In June 2025, Skills England was launched as an executive agency within the Department for Education and tasked with leading skills strategy and

planning. In September of 2025, Skills England was – as noted above - moved from DfE to DWP, along with responsibilities for apprenticeships, adult further education, skills, training and careers (O’Meara, 2025). The much-anticipated skills White Paper still leaves questions on the apprenticeship system and the details on expanding the Apprenticeship Levy to a Growth and Skills levy.

VET2050 arrives at a pivotal moment in skills policy, providing a unique opportunity to fundamentally reimagine the system – not just to keep the north-start goal in sight, but to lay down a clear blueprint for achievement.

Current Trajectory

With the recent changes (announced and implemented), England’s VET system appears to be on a path of consolidation with the creation of Skills England. If these trajectories persist, we may see continued expansion of levels 4 through 6 alongside more modest growth in T level participation. Fundamental challenges, however, within and to the system remain, such as the relatively long-tail of people with relatively low level skills, uneven regional demand for skills, and financial pressures facing the FE / VET sector.

The Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy, released in October 2025, is a step toward addressing the employment demand to 2030 identified out in an earlier report (Skills England, 2025). That report anticipates sectors such as digital technologies, adult social care, construction and engineering to experience the largest increases in job demands (900,000 more skilled workers expected to be needed in the priority sectors). Of this demand, one third are expected to require a level 2 or 3 qualification for entry into the occupation with the remaining two thirds requiring higher level training (Skills England, 2025). Success in delivering VET in these sectors is essential to support the government’s recent Industrial Strategy which identified eight priority sectors (advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, defence, digital and technology, financial services, life sciences and professional and business services) (Department for Business and Trade, 2025).

The rapid pace of technological change, often described as social acceleration, is reshaping the nature of work and the skills required. A challenge is to ensure that new labour market entrants not only have the skills to be successful in their careers now, but also the adaptability to respond to changes in the labour market that will undoubtedly come. Strong foundational skills and a focus on lifelong learning will be important in this regard.

The current trajectory of the VET system in England has embedded a series of interlinked system-level constraints which limit effective collaboration and coordination across the skills ecosystem. Many of these challenges can be grouped into the following broad themes:

- Fragmented governance and weak system coordination
 - Dispersed and frequently changing responsibilities between central departments, agencies and local authorities have led to overlapping initiatives and inconsistent direction.
 - Fragmentation can undermine long-term planning and limit the capacity to align VET provision with regional and industrial priorities.
- Misalignment between incentives and weak collaboration with employers
 - Barriers to SME participation, particularly in apprenticeships and dual learning models persist, partly due to administrative complexity.
 - Continued decline in employer investment in training is coupled with state reductions in per-pupil investment in FE.
 - An employer-centred skills system risks becoming an employer burdened system.
- Funding volatility and institutional fragility
 - Short-termism, competitive funding cycles constrain FE collaboration in the FE sector.
- Inequitable access and uneven capacity
 - Persistent inequalities by region, gender, and SES reflect uneven institutional capacity, employer networks, and provision.
 - Decline in entry-level opportunities and early career on-ramps.
- Skills mismatches and weak foresight capacity
 - Limited coordination between labour market intelligence, qualification design and industrial strategy creates skills shortages in key sectors, particularly digital technology, construction, engineering and adult social care.

Creating a new path for VET

To achieve the YFF's north-star goal – positioning England as a leader among OECD countries in youth participation in education and employment – a transformative approach to VET is needed. This section introduces broad strategic directions for the future of VET and identifies key areas where transformation is most urgent.

Three general paths are available:

- Business as usual will mean continued volatility in funding and institutional governance of the VET system, continued and possibly increased fragmentation in the provision and a narrowed occupational focus.
- Coherent reform may look to stabilise the funding structures, develop simplified and stackable qualifications with a strong work-based learning spine and scale up employer partnerships in local skills ecosystems.

- Bold rest could include a youth guarantee to high-quality work-based options for the post-16 learners. This paper does not seek to proscribe these paths, simply flag general routes available.

Rather than prescribing a single course of action, this paper presents these pathways as a framework for discussion – each with distinct implications for policy and long-term outcomes.

Key domains for change

Regardless of the path that VET2050 will select, there is a set of key areas for reform which will likely be central to all routes. These are briefly introduced in the following paragraphs.

Pathways and qualifications. Fragmented learning routes, difficult to navigate qualifications and training provisions, and limited transferability make it difficult for young people, parents, and guidance councillors to navigate the VET system. A coherent and accessible system across all of the post-16 skills system, with clear occupational pathways, standards and maps which enable learners to enter and thrive in their occupation (Robson et al., 2025), would be an important step towards the north-star goal.

There are multiple routes to achieving this: simplified and stacked qualifications; a focus on broad occupational competencies; modular-based system with micro credentials, real-time data for learners and employers on emerging skill demands and labour market intelligence systems with clear linkages to available qualifications. Other routes could be the creation of a single upper secondary (US) qualification to replace the A-, T-, and V-levels currently offering levels 2 and 3 qualifications.

Role of employers in contributing to education and training. Despite the strong policy rhetoric around an ‘employer-led’ system and the emphasis on ‘skills for jobs’ (2021), research has shown that the relationship between industries and the education and skills system highly imbalanced, with an emphasis on meeting employer skills needs, while employers making a limited contribution to shaping education and training (Keep, 2020; Robson 2025). VET 2050 will require rethinking of the role of employers as a key stakeholder in the system, which will include the need to increase collaboration and partnerships between employers, education and training, learners, and policymakers to co-develop training and work-based learning.

High-quality workplace learning and skill utilisation can lead to better transitions into and sustained employment. The current apprenticeship system has too few SMEs that offer placements, the costs to employers of delivering these apprenticeships can be steep, and work-based learning opportunities are often limited. To improve access to work-based learning and expand employer partnerships VET2050 could propose: require full-time technical programmes to embed a work-based learning element that is

substantial and quality assured. Sectoral intermediaries could improve SME capacity to engage in work-based learning. Improve quality assurance for learners and employers; prioritise sectors and regional labour markets to support learners and employers to enter the apprenticeship system.

Teaching workforce and provider capacity. VET2050 will require dual professional staff, with industry practice and pedagogical expertise. They will also require up-to-date facilities and equipment. Stable funding to attract talent to the teaching workforce, access to capital investment opportunities, and CPD could support this vision. This is particularly true in occupations where instructors must take a pay-cut to put down the tools to take a job training the next generation of workers.

Funding and incentives. Funding volatility and cuts, with weak support for the VET system in general, coupled with employer underinvestment in training, depress participation, especially among disadvantaged young people and SMEs. Longer-time horizon rolling settlements for Post-16 skills provision, recalibration of employer incentives (for levy-paying and non-levy paying firms) to invest in early career skill development and upskilling for those in shortage areas.

Inclusion and place-based opportunity. Inequalities in access to training and in outcomes (by region, socioeconomic status, gender, age, etc.) remain a substantial challenge. A central challenge is the high share of young people who are not in education, employment or training (so-called NEETs). Although down from the post-2008 recession levels, the proportion of young people in NEET has been on the rise since 2021 (Powell and Murray 2025). Time spent in NEET can have detrimental impacts on health, long-term employment and earnings potential (Powell and Murray 2025). Possible avenues to address this include a universal youth guarantee, targeted re-engagement routes, targeted bursaries, travel support and flexible study, universal on-ramps could make a difference in this area.

This is far from an exhaustive list of priority domains and descriptions of the possible within each domain. Instead, this is a glimpse of the possibilities designed to ignite or challenge thought and spur conversation. The first workshop to be held as part of VET2050 will work to define priorities and the scope of the vision.

Crafting a vision for VET2050

There are big design choices facing VET2050. At the opening workshop, priorities will be set and scope of the project determined. Starting with a blank sheet of paper, the workshop will consider the goals and priorities for England's VET system by 2050. While universal agreement is not necessary, there should be elements which are core, along with some bold bets that demonstrate a willingness to push the boundaries.

Questions that will be considered in a collective format include:

- What would make England’s VET unmistakably high-quality for young people by 2050?
- What will success for young people look like in 2050?
- Which path dependencies must we break in the next 10 years?
- Which trade-offs are acceptable now to reach the 2050 outcomes?
- Which voices and perspectives should be part of this process?
- What evidence or data will be necessary to move practice or policy?

The VET2050 project marks the beginning of this process, launching a series of collaborative workshops and dialogues. Rather than being constrained by existing systems, the initiative embraces a forward-looking mindset – envisioning what VET must look like to meet this ambitious goal and then working backward to chart a strategic path toward that future.

International Perspectives on VET in England

To enliven the analysis of England’s VET landscape, this section presents a series of short viewpoints from international scholars. Drawing on insights from Norway, Singapore and Germany, these contributions offer comparative reflections on England’s current approach, perceived strengths, and areas where reform could be informed by international practice. These are not intended as direct prescriptions but as prompts for reflection and dialogue about what a more effective VET system might look like

Norway

Torgeir Nyen, Senior Researcher at Fafo

While understanding any national VET system is a challenge, fully understanding the English VET system may be one of the most difficult tasks there is. It is less uniform and more complex than most. Here, I will focus on two observations that strikes me observing the English system from outside.

First, the English system seems positioned quite far out towards one extreme when it comes to the degree of differentiation of VET qualifications, at least when IVET is considered. There is a very large number of accredited vocational qualifications. From the outside, this looks more like unwanted fragmentation than desired flexibility. A key question is whether the qualifications nevertheless hold a signalling value for companies in the labour market. At its best, a VET system helps structure the labour market. It encourages mobility and utilisation of skills. A degree of differentiation is needed to provide signals of relevant vocational skills. However, the English system appears very difficult to navigate in, both for companies, and for youths and other learners.

Second, policy interventions are very frequent in England. The system seems to be changing all the time and changing profoundly, and at a rate which may create more turmoil than deeper changes. While we have had several reforms of the Norwegian VET system over the past thirty years, it is fair to say that its basic principles have remained since 1994, so changes take place within some confines. In 1994 a thorough reform process involving both politicians and the social partners led to a kind of consensus of what the VET system is to achieve that has lasted to this day. A lack of underlying consensus on basic principles also increases the risk that different policy measures interact in unwanted ways. Whereas the shift to apprenticeship standards and the introduction of trail-blazer groups clearly did not intend to increase the number of such standards, it did seem to have that effect when combined with the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

Singapore

Johnny Sung, Professor of Skills and Performance, Research Fellow,
Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore

From the Wolf Review to Sainsbury, England's reforms have centred on accountability, training quality, employer-led standards, simplification and the intermediate-skills gap. By contrast, Singapore embeds skills policy within an economy-wide development strategy, using entitlement-like grants and curated programmes to support continuous upskilling, with youth pathways linked to an all-ages skills ecosystem rather than treated in isolation.

VET in England and Singapore: how they differ

1. Policy anchor

- England: Designs youth routes first – clearer qualifications and progression (GCSE → A/T Level → Apprenticeship/HTQ/HE).
- Singapore: Starts with industry transformation (sector roadmaps, technology adoption, job redesign), then builds youth and adult routes to serve that.

2. Forms of “employer-led”

- England: Market-shaping with guardrails – employers author occupational standards, host placements, and steer levy spend; independent assessment assures competence.
- Singapore: Economic development strategy and tripartite adoption – employer voice is channelled through sector frameworks, curated eligibility and funding compacts that prioritise firm-level adoption (for high-skilled jobs).

3. Instrument mix

- England: Prioritises qualification clarity (e.g., T Levels, HTQs), robust assurance, and increasingly modular credit/finance so learning can stack.

- Singapore: Utilises targeted grants (e.g., WSQ, Work-Study¹) tied to job redesign and technology diffusion – skills are aligned with work needs.
4. Finance philosophy
- England: Income-contingent support and levy rules aim to steer choices; potential risk = policy volatility outpacing provider capacity.
 - Singapore: Multi-year, grant-based stability; potential risk = less experimentation but faster scaling where priorities are set.
5. Governance and coordination
- England: Many actors (national regulators, local commissioners, providers). Strength = geographical sensitivity; potential risk = fragmentation and mixed signals for young people, stakeholders and SMEs.
 - Singapore: Centralised across education, workforce and industry agencies. Strength = coherence; potential risk = constant 'up-grading' leading to training fatigue.
6. Adaptability to rapid skills change
- England: Strategy = clarify and modularise so learners can pivot as technologies shift; success hinges on portable credit, placement capacity and FE workforce.
 - Singapore: Strategy = retool jobs, technology and processes first, then align provision; success hinges on firm adoption, diffusion through supply chains and continuous redesign.

Germany

Philipp Grollman, Professor, Technical University Dortmund

Despite the considerable systemic differences between VET in the UK and in Germany, both systems share a common challenge: to make vocational education an attractive and credible pathway for young people and employers alike. German researchers are therefore following the development and implementation of the T-Levels with great interest.

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¹ Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) are competency-based vocational qualifications. The Work-Study programme is an “earn-and-learn” pathway where a participant is a paid employee while completing structured on-the-job training (OJT) alongside institution-taught modules delivered by technical colleges, polytechnics or universities. Programmes are co-designed with employers, mapped to sector Skills Frameworks, and lead to recognised awards.

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