

CEP's *Skills for All* research programme has been looking at the life choices and life chances of the many young people in the UK who do not go to university. **Hilary Steedman** summarises the key findings and what they mean for recent government initiatives to improve vocational education and upgrade the nation's skills base.

# Skills for all

**M**ore than half of all young people in the UK do not go on to university. Our research programme has examined the routes these young people take – or do not take – to higher levels of skills and education, their motivation (or lack of it), the quality of education and training they receive and the contribution of employers and colleges to their success.

One of our central conclusions is that at present, all our efforts to improve post-16 education and training, including apprenticeships, are seriously weakened by what happens pre-16. Specifically, pedagogic style and curriculum rigidity for young people up to the age of 16 are resulting in significant disaffection and under-achievement.

The most damaging manifestation is the reluctance of a significant proportion of school-leavers to continue to engage with any sort of formal learning. This undermines all our efforts post-16 – and apprenticeships in particular.

## Disengagement 14-16

Young people's disengagement from education is not a new phenomenon. But

changes in the demand for skills and the importance of lifelong learning, together with a more inclusive employment and social agenda, have made it a high policy priority. Hence the need to estimate the size of the challenge presented by disengagement and to distinguish the variety of needs of those in this group.

Disengaged learners fall into two categories, for which different solutions may be needed: those who are disengaged but are achieving at or above their potential; and those who are disengaged and under-achieving. The disengaged are located within the broad group who achieve fewer than five GCSE A\*-C grades at age 16. This is made up of three groups.

The first is a very small group of young people (1-2% of each cohort) who have practically lost contact with school between 14 and 16. This group – the 'out of touch' – appears to make some progress through individualised alternative provision that provides one-to-one contact, an adult and supportive approach and new opportunities to mark progress through certification. But success in even the best of these programmes is mixed and OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education) has expressed deep concern about variability in the quality of provision.

The size of the second, larger group is difficult to estimate but it is probably contained within the 20% of the cohort who claim to have no GCSE qualifications at ages 17-19. These young people can be characterised as 'disaffected but in touch' and they appear to respond to a wide range of initiatives that take them out of school into a further education, work-related or leisure setting.

Evidence for improved attainment and progression to further education and training for this group is again mixed. OFSTED is cautious about this type of intervention (stressing the need for careful planning and monitoring of work placements) but, with some provisos, considers that well configured work-based learning may contribute to re-engagement and improved performance.

The third group is also difficult to quantify but approximates the further 20% who gain one or more (but fewer

**We need to develop a vocational route to level 3 skills and higher education**

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**“like, whatEVER...”**  
**“duh!”**  
**“boring!”**

than five) grade C or higher GCSE passes. Within this ‘1-4 A-C grade’ group, some may have reached their full potential, but others will be capable of much more if interest and enthusiasm can be aroused.

This group has been targeted by many initiatives that offer new/improved vocational subjects and qualifications, which allow students to demonstrate aptitudes and capabilities that are not required by more ‘academic’ subjects. OFSTED has expressed concern about the capacity of schools and teachers to offer such courses to the standard required. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that such vocational courses can have a highly motivating effect on students’ performance.

**‘Increased flexibilities’**

Increased Flexibilities is a £120 million government programme aimed at creating enhanced vocational and work-related learning opportunities for 14-16 year olds who can benefit most, including provision of new GCSEs in vocational subjects. Our research finds encouraging evidence that the programme has reawakened interest in learning post-16 and we hope that the variety of learning location and choice that the programme makes available can be extended nationwide as soon as possible.

In particular, the research shows that including vocational courses and work-related learning pre-16 leads, in many cases, to: improved motivation among young people said, previously, to be lacking in motivation or to be potentially disaffected or disengaged; improved attendance and behaviour; and improved confidence and self-esteem. There are also indications of a greater preparedness for post-16 studies, especially among young

people studying vocational courses pre-16 at colleges.

Our qualitative research undertaken with 17 post-16 students in three colleges of further education largely supports these findings in terms of the perceived impact of pre-16 vocational experiences on young people’s motivation, attendance and behaviour. The interviewees report that the practical nature of the courses increased their motivation and stimulated their learning; that they preferred the nature of teaching (with more individual attention and more group work) and student/teacher relationships in college;

and that their attendance and behaviour at college improved as a result of being involved in pre-16 vocational courses.

**International comparisons of qualifications**

So how does the UK’s performance in producing skilled individuals compare with that of other major industrialised countries – France, Germany and the United States – and an Asian tiger – Singapore? Our ‘skills audits’ show that:

- In France and Germany, vocational qualifications continue to play an important role in enabling more young people to reach level 2 (GCSE) and

Figure 1: Percentages of national populations aged 25-28 at level 2 and above by type of qualification held, 2002/03



level 3 (A-level equivalent) and above by age 25-28 (see Figure 1).

- In France, Germany and Singapore, substantial proportions of higher education qualifications are vocational/applied. In the UK and the United States, proportions with short vocational/applied diplomas/degrees are much lower.
- At level 3 and above for the 19-21 age group, Germany had an advantage of 14 percentage points relative to the UK in 1994 and the gap with the United States was of a similar magnitude. The gap with respect to Singapore was slightly smaller. These gaps have now disappeared.
- But for 25-28 year olds at level 3 and above, not only the UK but also France and Singapore have experienced rapid growth with the result that the UK is just about 'keeping pace' with those countries rather than closing the gap (see Figure 2).
- Qualification levels in the UK increase much more slowly after ages 19-21 than in France and Germany. In the latter countries, qualifications at level 3 and above increase substantially between the ages of 19-21 and 25-28.

The rapid growth in qualifications of 19-21 year olds at level 3 and above in the UK between 1994 and 1998 resulted from the one-off rise in proportions gaining five or more GCSE A\*-C grades between 1988 and 1992. Since 1998, growth has halved as post-compulsory enrolment rates have flattened out. Measures proposed in the Tomlinson Report – including a vocational route to level 2 and level 3 – are urgently needed to achieve another step-change in the post-compulsory enrolment rate.

### The vocational route

The evidence from other countries shows convincingly that a vocational route to level 3 skills and to higher education is essential if 80% are to reach level 3 by age 25. To provide a vocational route to level 3 skills, employment and progression on to higher education, we also need a full-time vocational route to provide for the 20-30% who have left school with some good GCSE passes, currently take some vocational courses but fail to reach level 3.

We therefore welcome the government's White Paper on 14-19 education and look forward to its rapid

Figure 2: Narrowing the gap: 25-28 year olds at level 3 and above

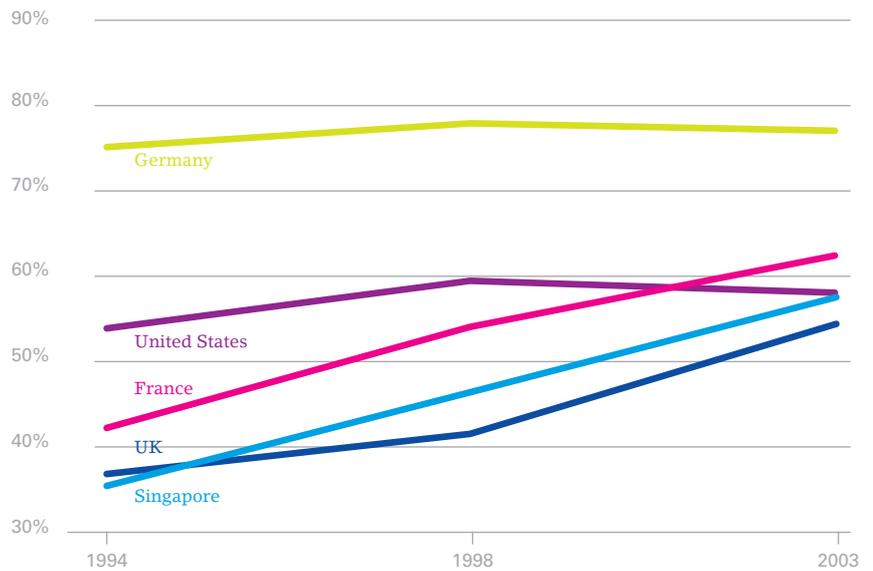
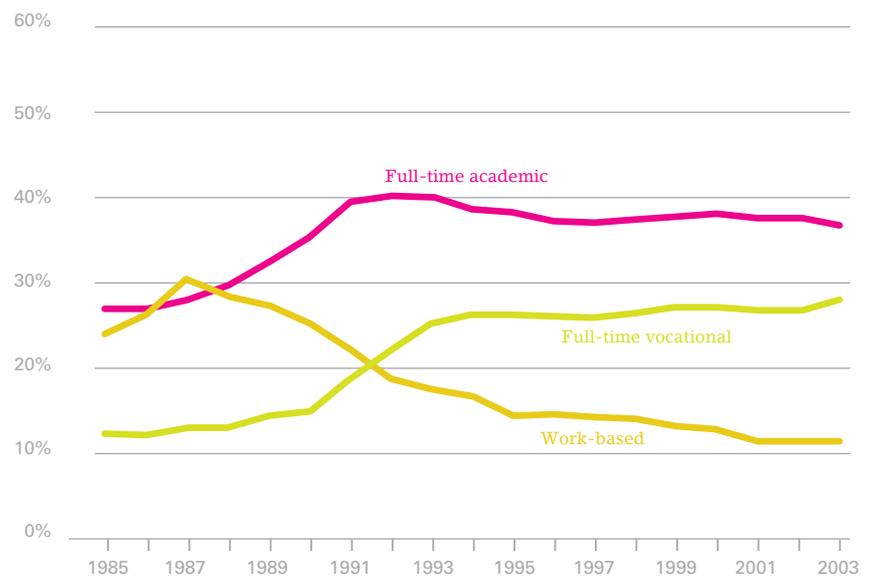


Figure 3: Percentages of 16 and 17 year olds in education and training



implementation. But the experience of other countries suggests that is important not to lose sight of the need for: transparency and clarity in order to overcome information failure; substantial practical vocational content and mandatory work experience in the relevant sector; and progression to level 3 and a clear expectation that level 3 is the goal even though a period of study longer than two years may be required.

There are strengths in our system with around 30% of 16 year olds opting for full-time vocational programmes in school or college, quite apart from the numbers

entering apprenticeships (see Figure 3). But vocational education has suffered a chequered history, being subject to many different initiatives over the years, each of which has had rather different purposes in mind. This overlay of initiatives, courses, qualifications and indeed philosophies has resulted in:

- a confusing plethora of qualifications, with no image in the minds of young people, parents and employers about what vocational education involves;
- high degrees of non-completion with switching between the many different

courses and a dropping off of participation at 17;

- poor linkages both between the various types of vocational courses on offer, and between them and vocational offerings in higher education – a third of vocational students are on courses that could not lead to higher education, either directly or through a further related course;
- and poor linkages to the labour market, which are not helped by the fact that the industry bodies that are meant to set standards have been reorganised five times in the last 30 years and twice in the last five years alone.

Other countries offer models of how to constitute programmes of full-time vocational education. These are common in continental Europe, even in countries that have a strong apprenticeship tradition. There is no single recipe, but the lessons for us are these:

- offering vocational courses both as pathways in their own right and as options that can be mixed with academic subjects is unlikely to succeed;
- linkages with both higher education and apprenticeship are both possible and desirable;
- vocational education can be a respectable option, and certainly is not seen abroad, as it sometimes is here, as an alternative to academic subjects for those who are struggling at school;
- and the quest for 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational subjects is a wild goose chase – far from raising the reputation of vocational courses, it is likely to distort them and make them pale imitations of academic studies, with little purpose of their own.

## The way forward

The way forward is to develop substantial national vocational programmes, perhaps 15-30 in all, each culminating in an award at level 3, the first point at which vocational education has a demonstrable payoff in the labour market. These programmes would:

- be designed through genuine working partnerships between industry, awarding bodies, higher education and vocational teachers;
- include a rich mixture of relevant physical and social science subjects to enable general education to be continued in a natural manner;
- give access to the large array of vocational subjects already present within higher education;
- enable students to gain credits towards 'advanced modern apprenticeships' or 'foundation apprenticeships';
- and include an introductory stage for young people with weaker GCSEs who need to build up their skills, and mesh in with preparatory programmes for those under 16 who want to sample a number of vocational options before committing themselves.

These vocational programmes would build on the structures and courses that already exist, but 'by gathering them together' make them much more coherent. They would reflect the best of successful practice abroad, where vocational studies are more esteemed than here and produce better results. And they would be consistent with emerging proposals for an 'English baccalaureate', providing the specialised vocational variants that are envisaged under this system.

## Apprenticeships

While apprenticeships have a leading role to play in the provision of vocational education and training, a number of issues are still not satisfactorily resolved. Again, comparisons with other countries offer valuable lessons.

In continental Europe, apprenticeships tend to be 'demand-led': employers take on apprentices on the basis of their assessment of their future skill requirements. Individuals therefore get trained in relevant areas, while firms get the skills that they need. But in the UK, apprenticeship training is 'supply-led': training providers receive government funding to place young people with firms, with the aim of achieving government targets for numbers trained rather than to respond accurately to local skill needs and the aspirations of young people.

In continental Europe, apprenticeships tend to have a common identity across occupations, provided by statutory regulation of their key features, such as duration, standards and assessment. But in the UK, there are widespread differences in the quality of apprenticeships along these dimensions, such that there is no single definition of what an apprenticeship actually is and what it entails. Some apprentices are even unsure whether they are involved in an apprenticeship scheme or not.

There appears to have been little or no improvement in the quality and quantity of advice available to young people in school and college on following a chosen career by means of apprenticeship. Furthermore, apprenticeship is now overwhelmingly a programme aiming at level 2 skills rather than level 3. Elsewhere, vocational routes aim to take the majority to level 3 and our research shows good wage returns to this level.

Vocational courses for 14-16 year olds can have a highly motivating effect on students' performance

“brill.”  
“...COOL.”  
“yup.”

**Hilary Steedman** is a senior research fellow in CEP's education and skills programme. She co-directed *Skills for All* with Richard Layard and Sheila Stoney of the National Foundation for Educational Research. The programme was core-funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation with additional financial support from the Anglo-German Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council. For further information on *Skills for All*, see: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/research/skills/skillsforall.asp>).