



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

# Review of the skills system in Wales: initial and continuing vocational education and training programmes (summary)

This research was designed to be a thought piece to explore different visions for vocational education and training.

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# Research aims and methodology

This paper reports on a review of the skills system commissioned by Welsh Government. The research was designed as a thought piece to consider the value and implications of differentiation between Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) programmes, usually carried out in the initial education system and when making the transition into working life, and Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) programmes, which generally take place after initial education training and after entry into working life for adults to gain or enhance their knowledge and skills and continue their professional development.

The review was undertaken by Learning and Work Institute between March 2023 and September 2023.

The impact of the pandemic, Brexit, high levels of economic inactivity, changes to UK migration policy, and wider societal change, including the development of new technologies, digitalisation, and transformation to net-zero have created new challenges, and opportunities for the economy, labour market and skills system.

The overall aim of the research was to provide an overview of the evidence on establishing a cohesive skills system which differentiates IVET and CVET, and to then test the evidence base with experts and sector representatives. The research was driven by four main research questions:

- What criteria determine whether programmes should be included in IVET/ CVET?
- What is the value of using age criteria to differentiate IVET from CVET?
- What are the broader implications of adopting an IVET/CVET distinction in Wales?
- What are the overall benefits and challenges of establishing an IVET/CVET-based skills system?

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The research used a mixed methods approach and was conducted in two phases:

- Phase 1 involved a desktop review of both grey and academic international evidence available on establishing a skills system which differentiates IVET / CVET and the impact this has on learners and employers. The review involved comprehensive analysis of 88 evidence sources, selected using a research protocol agreed with Welsh Government.
- Phase 2 involved primary research to test and build on the key learning identified from the desk review and to better understand different perspectives on the skills implications of a move to IVET/CVET in Wales. This included interviews with 24 national, regional, education sector and industrial sector experts and stakeholders, as well as agencies outside Wales, in the UK and overseas. In addition, focus groups were conducted with seven learners in Wales who were currently undertaking or had recently completed VET.

## Main findings

Findings are drawn from the desktop evidence review and the primary research across three key themes: strategic and systemic aspects of VET; curriculum and delivery aspects of VET; and the benefits and impact of VET.

### Strategic and systemic aspects of VET

The analysis of strategic and systemic aspects of VET provided some important perspectives on how VET policy could be taken forward in relation to IVET-CVET differentiation; the literature showed that a clear articulation of VET policy with defined roles and responsibilities for all partners in supporting VET was essential.

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Many positive features are already in place in Wales. However, some parts of the system do not articulate well, such as collaboration, especially between employers and learning providers, which is currently inconsistent across Wales.

There was consensus among stakeholders of the relevance of the debate based on the perceived educational and social needs of different age groups. For school-leavers and young people under the age of 25, there was a clear role for IVET in addressing issues of engagement and preparation for working life.

The needs of the CVET cohort (25 years and over) were seen as largely different to IVET learners and apprentices. This group was likely to have workplace experience but could need reskilling (to undertake new roles), upskilling (to do their current role more effectively) or enabling re-entry to the workforce after a career break (through ill-health, caring responsibilities, or redundancy).

There was strong evidence in the literature that dual systems (those that combine learning on- and off-the-job) are an integral part of effective VET systems but look different across the IVET-CVET divide. In IVET, the balance is weighted towards off-the-job training and preparation for workplace entry, especially at the early stages of programmes. In CVET, the balance is more likely to be towards on-the-job training.

Evidence from stakeholders suggests that some reform is needed to the vocational qualifications system in Wales, including initiatives to enhance responsiveness to employers' needs and increased agility to reflect rapidly changing skills priorities.

Stakeholders agreed that any future VET strategy for Wales requires a clear plan for the workforce that delivers and supports it; the priority is a plan for the recruitment and upskilling of teachers, trainers and assessors.

Stakeholders saw CTER's role in leading a single tertiary education and

research system as an opportunity to address some historical inequalities that affect both IVET and CVET, including: ensuring parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways; systematically engaging employers of all sizes and in all sectors; and, ensuring any planning is future-focussed by foresight reviews.

There was a strong message throughout both phases of the research about the need to be future-focussed, ensuring strategy addresses changes to the economy and labour market, such as the move towards net zero, digital industries, and the ageing demography of Wales and designing a system agile enough to respond to such changes.

## **Curriculum and delivery aspects of VET**

Policy decisions influence VET curriculum design and delivery. For example, the approval of qualifications and the funding that they attract often defines the curriculum offer.

The flexibility of qualifications is crucial to enable an agile VET system. Evidence suggested the time lag to develop new qualifications creates a drag on the system and the product might lack relevance when it finally comes to market.

Evidence from stakeholders indicates that for IVET learners and apprentices, the enrichment curriculum is important. Both the literature and stakeholders highlight the importance of recognising and recording transversal and transferable skills as essential for both IVET and CVET learners and apprentices. Both IVET and CVET play key roles in widening participation, access and inclusion.

VET workforce development is a key concern of delivery partners, especially in sectors where wage differentials make it hard to recruit vocationally relevant teachers.

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Clear curriculum pathways are essential but evidence from the literature suggests they may become fractured due to local providers working in competition or not offering lower-level courses to enable progression.

The provision of well-informed and impartial career information advice and guidance is important for both IVET and CVET learners, but learner responses indicate that currently the offer is inconsistent.

## **Perspectives on the benefits and impact of VET**

Findings from the research suggest that the positive impact of VET on the individual is the basis for wider social, employer, and economic impacts.

In terms of IVET-CVET differentiation, stakeholders highlighted a key issue as how vocational education meets the needs of individuals in those age cohorts - the different needs of age cohorts lead to different priorities for each. Within the IVET and CVET cohorts there are subgroups whom VET benefits in different ways.

In addition to individuals, employers (and their productivity) are identified by stakeholders as a key beneficiary of both IVET and CVET. However, this could be better explained and nuanced based on the type of employer (by size, sector, region etc.).

Whatever the approach to impact measurement taken, evidence from both the literature and stakeholders suggest that transferable or transversal skills are a key element to measure as a mediator of impact.

# Implications for the differentiation of IVET and CVET in Wales

The research highlighted implications of a move towards differentiation of IVET and CVET in both policymaking and delivery and associated challenges, risks and dependencies.

The overall implication is that differentiation of IVET and CVET needs to be part of a review of VET policy in general. The message is clear: whatever system is adopted needs to be flexible. Notions of flexibility and agility also extend to the concept of 'future readiness'. Thus age, stage, and mode of study need to be considered in combination as part of one policy and not as separate initiatives.

The effectiveness of dual systems has implications for the differentiation of IVET and CVET; the differentiation of IVET and CVET should not be the basis for establishing effective dual systems. Approaches to VET, such as apprenticeships, are part of a range of approaches to support initial training, upskilling and reskilling in Wales.

## Challenges

- Whatever system is adopted, one crucial and persistent theme is employer involvement and commitment to VET. Employer engagement needs to be fully understood in a wide range of contexts: employer size, its sector, and scope of operation.
- The positioning of the Welsh language within VET needs consideration on both supply and demand sides.
- The constant updating of the VET workforce remains a challenge due to the fast-changing nature of industrial innovation and the changing needs of the economy.

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## Risks

- The differentiation of IVET and CVET risks becoming a distraction that may be confusing for effective employer engagement.
- Differentiation can potentially create boundaries that hinder collaboration in VET system and smooth career-based pathways.
- There are concerns that differentiation by age could bring increased complexity to a VET system that is already not well-understood and could bring increased bureaucracy for employers and learning providers.

## Dependencies

- The move to IVET-CVET differentiation cannot be separated from a complete strategic review of VET policy in general. This review provides some useful indications of the foundation for this and how Welsh Government and CTER might approach it, including the full and meaningful engagement of all stakeholders - including parents, students and apprentices. Policy development needs to move beyond the two responsible ministries (Economy and Education) to embrace all aspects of devolved government.
- The establishment of CTER means Wales is well-placed to take this forward. Neglecting this reform role risks creating a VET system that reinforces current imbalances and is therefore less future ready.
- A move to more flexible approaches will require a rebalancing of funding, including for individuals, across the IVET/CVET age divide.
- Sufficient resource for CTER to take forward a reform agenda at the same time as maintaining current (merged) systems. Likewise, reform would be dependent on educational institutions' willingness to share resources.
- Whatever future-ready VET system is adopted in Wales, careers information advice and guidance is crucial. The careers promotion of benefits of VET at all ages to individuals and employers is not currently fit-for-purpose.

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# Main considerations

## 1: Welsh Government should develop an overarching vocational education and training strategy

The differentiation of approaches by age (IVET-CVET) is dependent on the overarching vision of such a strategy, how it aligns with other age-related policies, and its key delivery elements: funding, qualifications, spatial planning, sectoral engagement, careers advice, and a workforce that delivers all of these.

The planning principles should be based on those in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015:

- Collaboration - to build on current policy development work with all stakeholders to draft and consult on a VET strategy that links with pre-16 education, lifelong learning policy, and other policy areas such as economy and health.
- Integration - to ensure the strategy explicitly aligns with the work of other public bodies in Wales and skills policy across the UK.
- Involvement - to fully involve all people with an interest in VET in Wales, such as parents, young people and vulnerable adults.
- Long-term - to plan for the future as well as delivering on the short-term needs of employers and individuals, by undertaking foresights reviews and involvement in transnational studies.
- Prevention - to act to ensure that current inequalities around access to skills do not persist to impact on health and wellbeing inequalities in Wales.

## 2: Welsh Government should ensure the remit of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research includes sufficient direction and resource to focus on

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## **vocational education reform**

CTER can act as a single voice to work with schools, regional stakeholders, employers and local government to ensure a coherent post-16 system, including qualifications.

Within this, CTER's role in determining how apprenticeships are commissioned and funded is crucial, particularly in relation to all-age approaches and how apprenticeships work across the border with England.

CTER should also undertake analysis of the balance of resources across the life course and determine whether 'age' or 'stage' (or a combination of both) are the best criteria for allocation.

### **3: In its response to the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, Welsh Government should consider the findings of this report**

The Lusher Review reflected the fast-changing external environment which VET in Wales operates in. There is a need for vocational qualifications to articulate better to support clear and flexible vocational pathways, to increase responsiveness to rapidly changing skills needs. Consideration of the extent to which qualifications are 'Made in Wales' or 'Made for Wales' should be explored, particularly in terms of partnerships with other devolved UK nations that use National Occupational Standards.

### **4: Welsh Government should enable the Education Workforce Council to take forward a review of the needs of VET 'dual professionals' in Wales, to inform the**

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## **development of future policy**

There is much to be learned from approaches in other countries, for example England, where the Education and Training Foundation has implemented initiatives to support dual professionalism and recruitment from industrial sectors with higher salary structures than education.

### **5: Welsh Government should ensure intermediary bodies have sufficient resource and plans in place to promote VET regionally and locally**

If regional and local delivery is key to effective VET systems, government needs to ensure it has coherence so that some areas and communities are not disadvantaged. To this end:

- Each Regional Skills Partnership should develop a 'VET Action Plan' to a common format, which shows how it prioritises sectors locally, engages employers of all sizes, and allocates flexible funds (such as skills and talent programmes).
- Careers services should publish plans on how they work with schools, parents, young people, and older workers to promote VET.
- Local authorities should co-ordinate and monitor how schools promote vocational education opportunities locally and report on this.

### **6: Welsh Government should continue to test and evaluate innovative VET policies that encourage responsiveness and flexible delivery**

Stakeholders welcomed innovative approaches developed and funded by Welsh

Government, such as Personal Learning Accounts and grants to support the development of vocational qualifications in the medium of Welsh. Such initiatives should be continued and evaluated to inform future policy development.

Another area for consideration is the way the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is operationalised consistently in Wales. The RPL of certificated learning should be extended to informal and non-formal learning to enable greater responsiveness to sectoral needs (for example in health and social care).

## **7: Education providers and employers should offer enrichment opportunities for vocational learners and apprentices in the 16 to 24 cohort**

Enrichment is a key element of academic pathways and there are no reasons why such opportunities should not be consistently offered to vocational learners and apprentices.

## **Contact details**

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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