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Enriching Further Education, Humanising VET? European Perspectives on the Subject and the Case of English College Enrichment

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Abstract

Context: The paper examines the scope and boundaries of VET at a time of tension between instrumental international policies seeking to strengthen skills transmission and increasingly urgent concerns about broader issues facing young people approaching adulthood. Its empirical basis is an extended study of provision outside the formal curriculum in English further education, where neoliberal policies since the late 1970s have positioned both occupational expertise and generic behaviours within a discourse of marketable skills, to the detriment of wider educational practice.

Approach: The empirical study was carried out in England and Wales between 2020 and 2024, through two national surveys and an extended interaction between the research team and the further education sector, leading to nine case studies of enrichment practice.

Findings: The studies evidenced the possibilities of ‘enriching’ the curriculum of students aged 16–18, through attention to its broader dimensions. However, these were often overcome by an imperative to focus on skills and competences, and by an impetus to keep students on their course in the wake of post-pandemic mental health difficulties.

Conclusions: The study drew attention to the necessity for and possibilities of attention to the broader human development of young people engaged in VET studies, continuing a decades-long debate in England. At a time when greater emphasis on the specific needs of employers, on competences and on ‘matching’ skills to vacancies is spreading across Europe, these areas may require further attention in countries with a history of greater attention to the human dimensions of VET.

Keywords

skills transmission, VET curriculum, enrichment, subjectivation, *Berufsbildung*

1 Introduction

Vocational education is widely understood as a mode of education whose appeal to policymakers and to young people alike centres on its provision of occupational skills. These understandings influence not only practice but research and theorisation of the field. For example, the differences among European VET are often presented in terms of different skill formation systems (Clarke & Winch, 2015; Greinert, 2010). However, the aims of educational practice, including within VET, extend far beyond the boundaries of skill formation. Even direct preparation for the workplace has long included broader societal understandings, from state and collective bodies seeking to control behaviour through early apprenticeships to the different types of socialisation underpinning contemporary VET (Esmond & Atkins, 2022; Lane, 1996; Wallis, 2008). More positively from the perspective of human development, mainland European



countries have a long tradition of specific 'civic' provision and of teaching general education subjects on both sides of the general education/vocational divide (Nylund et al., 2020; Suissa, 2015).

By contrast, in England, VET has for much of the last forty to fifty years been overwhelmingly informed by a discourse of skill formation that overshadows other educational considerations. Discourses of marketable skill dominate the 'further education' sector that teaches both vocational and many of the country's general education courses to young people mainly aged 16 to 18. In English-speaking countries, market principles and a supply-side, human capital logic has dominated public policy and discourse since the end of the 1970s, extending market liberal principles that pre-date Adam Smith (1776). Such discourse increasingly permeates higher education but ironically takes on its most strident form when the 'skills' on offer are generic or behavioural and carry little exchange value in the labour market. Yet, in opposition to these understandings, at various moments, policymakers and practitioners working in technical or further education institutions have provided additions to the technical core of vocational study. From the 1950s, "liberal studies" or "general studies" were introduced as a compulsory element of courses in UK technical colleges, taught as an addition by specialist staff from non-technical backgrounds. Following the 1980s, such provision was nominally integrated into core curricula, although in reality a separation continued between the technical core and various additional elements designed to strengthen the employability of students, such as various forms of numeracy and literacy provision (Esmond et al., 2024a). More recently, policymakers have given greater emphasis to activities additional to the main curriculum. A funded study to gather data and analyse the nature, extent, resourcing and issues for this provision was carried out over 4 years across colleges in England and Wales, including both VET and general education provision (Esmond et al., 2024b). This provided an unusual opportunity to compare approaches to the development of the human subject across the general education/vocational divide. This study provides the empirical element of this paper.

At first sight, England appears to be an outlier within Europe in its rather selective attention to the humanity of its students. In other countries, there have been extensive debates about the inclusion of greater attention to the formation of the human subject. There has been a recent revival of interest, at least among some researchers, in Germany's important theoretical tradition of *Berufsbildung*, i.e. the notion of a full personhood [*Bildung*] attainable through the professional or occupational expertise and identity [*Beruf*]. The notion that the humanity represented by notions of *Bildung* might be extended to the vocational field date back to the foundations of vocational schooling by Kerschensteiner, Spranger and others (Gonon, 2022; Sloane, 2022), which were succeeded by a critical emancipatory literature from the 1960s onwards (e.g. Blankertz, 1982) arguing that this might be achieved through the medium of *Beruf*. Berg-Brekhus (2024) identifies cognate Scandinavian approaches and builds on these to suggest a fusion with approaches to capability. Such notions of *Bildung* may conflict with the instrumental logic of skills acquisition (Gonon, 2009) whilst both obligations to the other in occupational settings and the widespread adoption of individual 'competence' approaches appear to limit the possibilities of individual formation (Kutscha, 2023). For precisely these reasons, continuing attention to the human dimensions of VET continues to be important in mainland European countries as well as the English-speaking world.

This paper therefore addresses an overarching research question: "How can concerns for human flourishing, democratic societies and social justice be addressed *within* vocational education practices, where the concerns of employment play an inevitably dominant role?" (c.f. Esmond & Atkins, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, we draw on the above understandings of the relative significance of work skills and human considerations. This paper reviews the findings of our

empirical study to examine how the broader context of European approaches to human and societal aspects of VET can shape the life-course of individuals, and how these might be theorised. Our immediate concern is the various ways in which provision outside the formal curriculum conceptualised the formation and the transitions of young people. We reflect on different approaches in general education, where enrichment supported a process of personal formation, and in vocational education, where this was seen as a support for continuing participation in vocational studies and transitions into the workforce. From these findings, we can develop additional understandings of how VET varies across national boundaries.

2 Method

2.1 Sample

The study took place across the affiliates of the Association of Colleges, the membership body that represents further education colleges (FECs: the main public providers of VET, along with a wide range of general education, courses for adults and some higher education courses) and the country's sixth form colleges (SFAs), a smaller group of institutions mainly providing general education but sometimes offering a few vocational courses. A survey of all colleges affiliated to AoC was initially sent to college principals and gained responses from 84 institutions across a wide range of questions about enrichment provision in each college. Follow-up meetings took place with staff identified as enrichment leads in 27 colleges (three in each of the country's 9 socio-economic regions). An iterative process of meetings with wider groups of staff and students, as well as visits to colleges as soon as pandemic conditions allowed, enabled the identification of nine colleges, each representing one model of enrichment, around which extended case studies were constructed.

2.2 Procedure

The extended case studies combined observation, documentary analysis and interviews, engaging variously with college managers, teaching and specialist enrichment staff, as well as students. We were able to build on these case studies through supplementary interviews with practitioners and students at other institutions we met during dissemination activities, enriching our understanding of each type. However, we also collected comparable data from other sites, especially in following up our second survey, which attracted responses from 109 institutions. This explored the way enrichment provision had changed in response to COVID-19, having expanded at most colleges surveyed whilst a minority experienced contraction. These approaches generated a considerable volume and variety of data which was subjected to multiple analytical techniques, including thematic analysis and comparison across sites. All records of research interactions were uploaded to a double password protected space, including interview transcripts, documentary evidence, photographs, field notes and visit summaries. This made it possible for all researchers to become immersed in all the data (Wellington, 2015, p. 73) and was complemented by regular review meetings, using the 'constant comparative' model (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This gradually revealed the significance of different categories of enrichment and their relationship to specific settings. Our analytic procedures utilised an inductive approach unconstrained by either hypothesis or pre-set categories, seeking to identify and categorize emerging themes whilst acknowledging that data can only ever be partial, conditional and situated (Charmaz et al., 2018, p. 418). In an important sense, we co-constructed understandings of the role enrichment can play within further education, reflecting Burawoy's (1998) understanding of the extended case study as intervention, process, structuration, and theory reconstruction. As our thematic analysis proceeded to careful cross-checking of themes

and categories, we identified an axial theme, in the classic manner of grounded theory, in the different ways in which enrichment relates to the main curriculum, either directly extending the subject (in GE) or diffused through cross-college approaches mediated by ‘learner support’ mechanisms (in VET) and corresponding approaches to the formation and transitions of young people on each side of the academic-vocational divide.

3 Findings

This study ranged widely, documenting a wide range of activities that contribute to provision outside the examined curriculum. Earlier accounts of liberal studies in the early post-war period in English technical colleges have provided some evidence of a humanistic dimension to post-16 education, provided outside and by separate staff from the technical core: a parallel to some civic provision in other European countries. Here, we are interested in the direct relationship between this kind of additional provision and the vocational core. Our focus here is on a specific relationship, comparable to the claim that *Bildung* might be accessible by way of vocational practice, or ‘through the medium of *Beruf*’ (Blankertz, 1982). At the same time, this may have significance for the scope of VET and whether vocational pathways in England can contribute to the formation of the subject, to human flourishing and to democratic societies, and whether this is likely to remain the case in other countries as vocationalism focuses increasingly on work competences.

In the broadest sense, this project succeeded in mapping a wide range of activities that complemented the taught curriculum. Our nine case studies centred on (i) enrichment for health and fitness: a longstanding core gaining further impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic; (ii) subject enrichment in the general education curriculum and (iii) in the technical sphere, each discussed below; (iv) creative enrichment, specialist opportunities for projects in the cultural sphere, including live projects; (v) holistic enrichment for learners with special needs, often central to their curriculum; (vi) enrichment through civic and community projects; (vii) mental health initiatives; (viii) clubs and societies responding to student interests; and (ix) opportunities for advocacy and representation. In each of these cases, both staff and students recognised opportunities to extend the curriculum and to encounter broader dimensions of human development whilst extending personal networks and relationships. Especially within VET settings, staff were conscious of the inequalities that shaped students’ experiences and saw these activities as opportunities to compensate for areas of disadvantage. Activities beyond the formal curriculum have long been recognised in English-speaking countries as ways in which intergenerational advantage is preserved (Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998) and staff saw their own activities as countering these advantages, at least to some degree. We encountered multiple attempts to broaden curricula through which students were able to acquire new perspectives and networks, or to contest dominant cultures.

However, a key finding, that we have represented elsewhere as the ‘axial theme’ of the study identified a significant in the way enrichment was conceptualised and implemented on the major educational pathways, i.e. general education (represented in this study mainly by sixth form colleges) and vocational pathways within further education colleges. These pathways are often distinguished in terms of their formal curriculum, for example the access that these provide to the so-called ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2013) of traditional school subjects. In this study we found that enrichment in general education settings provided students with practical elements that extended the subject-based curriculum and contributed to the personal formation or autonomy of students. Although these were invariably activities of an essentially practical nature, this form of enrichment was only readily available to those on general education pathways. These activities were led by subject tutors as an extension to the subject-

based curriculum. By contrast, students on vocational pathways encountered enrichment as a disconnected addition to their studies, much as earlier students had experienced liberal studies. Evidence of enrichment specific to occupationally focused technical/vocational courses proved difficult to elicit for much of our study. Whilst colleges cited multiple interesting industry trips and visiting speakers, students often found it difficult to distinguish these activities from their subject curriculum. Whilst enrichment remains a space of possibility, the practice we saw in our study, whilst intended to provide cultural breadth and new experiences, did not often play an integrating and educational role for vocational students. A particular difficulty was that, where individual tutors understood the possibilities raised by enrichment, much of the enrichment in colleges was centralised and standardised across occupational areas.

4 Discussion

Whilst this project concerned an area sometimes considered as marginal within VET practice, it came to provide an area of wide discussion and activity across the further education sector and in the policy sphere. To some degree, this reflected regulatory pressures and upheavals in the sphere of technical and vocational curricula. Yet it also represented an interest in a broader curriculum, more meaningful experiences and improved outcomes for VET students. One of the sector's lead bodies, for example, initiated a call for an "enrichment guarantee" that has now been extended to become a call for a "curriculum guarantee", extending to address a broader content than many vocational courses have been reduced to in recent years. Despite an extended period of retrenchment, during which cuts to further education funded were repeated yearly, aspirations to rethink the purpose and scope of VET have by no means been extinguished.

This raises further questions that we addressed at the opening of this short paper. Can VET only be considered as a space for the acquisition of work skills? Can its scope be extended with genuine benefits for its students and advances in social justice? We argue that this project suggests that an enriched conceptualisation of the human possibilities of education and skills has potential within VET, even in the narrower conceptions of English-speaking countries. In a period of ever-increasing focus on narrow conceptions of work skills, these debates may surface sooner or later in many European systems and settings. The growing interest in enrichment across schools and colleges in England corresponds to concerns about the civic provision of European VET. Beyond these specialist areas, the question of how the technical and vocational core of VET contributes to human development and the formation of the subjects lies to some degree beyond our data, but remains important for the future of VET and young people in Europe.

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Biographical Notes

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