UK Vocational Education and Training (VET) Towards a Comprehensive Strategy for International Development

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Summary

There is a large international market for further education and skills. Countries wishing to develop their economies usually turn to a select group of developed nations for assistance with specific programmes or comprehensive systems of technical and vocational education and training (VET). Among these provider nations is the United Kingdom (UK), which has achieved a substantial global business for the UK VET sector in educational awards, learning materials, software and equipment, and learning programmes delivered in the UK or in the host country.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that UK further education underperforms internationally in comparison with UK higher education and the VET systems of some competitor countries, for example Australia, Canada and Germany. This shortfall in potential market success persists despite the generally very high quality of UK VET provision; its wide range of delivery organisations spanning the public, private and not-for-profit sectors; its flexibility; and robust quality assurance measures giving effective government guarantees of high standards of occupational relevance, of the integrity of awards, and of consistently good governance, management and teaching in providers.

The development of this proposal was guided by the work of a Steering Group representing the UK VET sector, facilitated by the Association of Colleges (AoC) as the contractor to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The Group concluded that UK higher education and the practices of some competitors in VET offered clear guidelines for the enhancement of UK VET providers’ and suppliers’ performance in international markets. These included greater clarity and consistency of aims across government and sustained government support for the UK VET sector; a simple, unified ‘ecosystem’ approach to describing and marketing our UK VET system to international customers and use of a single brand. This would aim to support, contextualise and multiply the impact of the individual efforts of providers and suppliers. The brand might be promoted by a small, specialist organisation supported in partnership through government funding and a contribution from the international earnings of UK VET suppliers and providers which it has facilitated. The Steering Group recognised the good work already done by TVET UK on behalf of a group of member organisations from the UK VET sector. It remains to be determined how this can be built upon and accommodated with a body representative of the sector as a whole which will have the backing of government.

The proposal outlines the support needed from government departments and the devolved administrations if a strategy is to involve sector providers across the whole
of the UK. It suggests actions to be undertaken by the AoC working in partnership with the UK VET sector and suppliers; by the central supporting organisation when it is established; and by individual providers and suppliers across the whole range of UK VET which wish to undertake or increase their international work. The aim of the proposed strategy will be to raise the volume of international trade in goods and services undertaken by the UK VET sector, both at home and abroad, for the economic and cultural benefit of the country.
1 The need for a national strategy

1.1 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on behalf of the United Kingdom (UK) government has commissioned this proposal from the Association of Colleges (AoC). AoC has worked with the whole breadth of representative organisations in the further education and skills sector. The aspiration of the proposed strategy is that it should include colleges across the UK, work-based learning providers, private English language schools, awarding bodies, sector skills councils and manufacturers of educational equipment, materials and software. The proposal recognises that many organisations, public and private, have achieved substantial success in exporting goods and services and in providing excellent opportunities for international students in the UK. The intention is to enhance support for this work and, by encouraging greater co-ordination, to help increase its economic and cultural value.

1.2 The Steering Group recognises that the success of similar enterprises in the past has been uneven. In recent years, even initiatives taken by the Prime Minister of the day (PMI, 1 and 2) have not achieved consistent and lasting increases in the volume of international educational activity. There has been a lack of co-ordination from the top, including among government departments. There has been no over-arching strategy for the whole of the UK; for every facet of what is known as further education in this country and vocational education and training internationally (VET); and for markets at home and overseas.

1.3 The strength of the UK VET system, both intrinsically and in a number of respects in comparison with our international competitors, makes the lack of a co-ordinating strategy all the more worthy of note. UK awarding bodies are respected and trusted worldwide for the quality of the qualifications they offer and the integrity with which they assess or examine. Many colleges and companies have successfully offered education and training to international students in the UK or in their home countries for decades. The UK’s government quality assurance agencies, covering both awards and the delivery of learning programmes, are unparalleled in their rigour and in the transparency with which their findings are made public internationally, via the internet. The work so far to develop a strategy has reinforced a perception that it is not the component parts of UK VET which are weak, but our failure to present them as a coherent system which, for the potential customer be it a government or an individual student, can be simply understood and accessed. It cannot be too firmly stated, therefore, that a new strategy will not attempt to stop any UK VET organisation doing anything it has done before. What is proposed are areas of voluntary co-operation which should enhance the effectiveness of every individual effort.
The need for co-operation at every level, including government, providers and awarding organisations, is confirmed by learning from the successes of others, and especially from our competitors. There is no reliable dataset for UK VET. The best estimates,\(^1\) suggest that around 40,000 international FE students come to the UK each year and more than half a million attend English language schools, often for short periods. This should be compared with 800,000 higher education (HE) students, taking courses for three years or more, roughly half in the UK and half at UK university campuses overseas. It must also be compared with anecdotal evidence about the successes of German, Australian, Canadian and other VET systems, competing successfully against the UK in key world markets for learning. These include South-East Asia, China, India, the Middle East and South America, particularly Brazil.

The significant drivers of others’ successes are easily identified. They are these:

- A clear and frank aim at the government level: usually promotion of global economic success through sharing approaches to skill, cultural and working attitudes
- Sustained representation and investment, led by government, over many years
- A ‘black box’ approach to marketing the VET system, divesting its presentation of complexities which are of no interest to the customer and co-ordinating such vital enablers as visa availability with the offer of legitimate learning opportunities in the sponsor country
- Recognition throughout a VET system, including its funding and quality assurance agencies, that international activity adds value to the experience of home students and is a proper focus for investment and involvement
- Use of a single ‘brand’ by every contributor to the system, for example Australian TAFE or the German Dual-System, to contextualise the marketing effort of individual providers.

While UK VET has many virtues, it has been deficient in those set out above. This is in marked contrast to UK HE, which is recognised by all concerned as essentially a global activity, leading to a universally understood set of awards, with consistent support for international development by central government, the HE funding agencies and its UK-wide quality assurance agency (QAA).

Given the changes in presentation and operating environment suggested above, UK VET might more clearly be seen to have unique strengths which should fit it for a leading role globally. These are as follows:

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\(^1\) For example, from *Going Global?*, Baldauf, Hogarth and de Hoyos; Warwick Institute for Employment Research/AoC, June 2008 and research conducted for this work.
• Awards and awarding bodies which are already internationally recognised as benchmarks of high quality in VET

• A national network of modern colleges offering good provision in a wide range of settings: metropolitan, urban, rural, industrial, land-based (with differing costs of e.g. accommodation and differing cultural milieux for the student)

• A national network of work-based providers including companies whose main business is outside training but which offer apprenticeships and other learning opportunities, commercial training organisations, charitable providers and colleges which have work-based programmes

• A high level of flexibility of curriculum, delivery timing and method (including distance learning and IT-facilitated learning), and age and ability among learners

• Industrial relevance of vocational learning programmes and awards secured by consultation with employers, often through representative sector skills councils and the use of national occupational standards

• A blend of practical and theoretical studies delivered as a matter of routine

• Comprehensive government regulation and guarantees which apply to UK awarding bodies and their qualifications

• Comprehensive government regulation and guarantees of course delivery quality

• A politically stable and safe environment, reflected in good governance at the level of the individual company or institution

• A multicultural society, with powerful safeguards against unfair discrimination

• An innovative educational equipment, materials and software industry which is already well-established internationally

• A long-standing reputation for successful international trade and innovation, including association between learning organisations and international ‘blue-chip’ companies

• Teaching by native English speakers and a strong network of English language providers

• Worldwide representation by UK embassies and consulates, and by UKTI and the British Council, which could be deployed effectively to promote the UK VET system.

1.8 Flexibility and adaptability, within strict quality controls, are important hallmarks of UK VET which other national systems do not necessarily share. Whilst UK providers may look with envy at the international staff
of 20 and 12 overseas offices run by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), a detailed examination of quality assurance arrangements and national consistency in Australian TAFE, or adaptability in the German Dual-System, are less likely to arouse feelings of inferiority. UK VET could and should be the world leader in its field.

1.9 New government policies offer a fresh opportunity for providers of VET programmes, awarding bodies and equipment suppliers to take hold of the international agenda in a creative partnership with government. While funding and quality assurance agencies with no international remit necessarily inhibited the growth of international course provision when they exercised a controlling influence, New Challenges, New Chances invites local autonomy, initiative and enterprise from providers, joining that of awarding bodies and educational suppliers. The experience of UK HE has been not only that international work to some extent subsidises home students and ensures continuity of provision in some subjects which are not currently in high demand among UK students (notably STEM), but also that it is culturally transformative for the institutions that most wholeheartedly embrace it.²

² For example, Nottingham University now has campuses in Malaysia and China and a Chinese Vice-Chancellor.
2 Shaping the UK VET offer

2.1 The process of forming this proposal has been consultative and collaborative. An initial set of principles upon which a global strategy might be built formed the basis of the work of the Steering Group. That Group subsequently considered and refined two interim reports. The principles have been developed through consultation. They are set out below, with any comments that have arisen.

2.2 A focussed and comprehensive VET offer – an ‘ecosystem’ approach providing system-to-system solutions

The brand tentatively proposed for testing was ‘UK FE Global’. The fact that ‘FE’ is not widely understood internationally and that VET or TVET (technical and vocational education and training) are already well-established, has led the Steering Group to adopt the term ‘VET’. The conception is that, with government backing, UK VET could offer a comprehensive package of learning programmes, awards, quality assurance, equipment, technology and leadership training to another country, comparable with the introduction of the German Dual-System in Saudi Arabia and the emerging opportunity in Colombia. If that is the scope of UK VET at the most comprehensive end of the spectrum, the Steering Group has been clear that this new initiative should not inhibit the enterprise of individual organisations. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these organisations would find that collaboration with a UK VET international organisation and use of its brand would add further substance to their marketing. They might promote other aspects of UK provision wherever appropriate and inform a central office of the nature and scale of their activities to enable the development of reliable national data. In order to make an ecosystem approach a practicable proposition, the Steering Group is strongly of the view that there should be government funding into the future, to support a central UK VET organisation and that this funding should be agreed through an approved business case basis. It is envisaged that this would collate opportunities; contact those interested in fulfilling them; provide branded marketing materials; establish relationships with in-country UK government support organisations such as embassies, consulates and the British Council; and promote UK VET.

2.3 Flexible and adaptable services

The work of the Steering Group and the experiences reported by those consulted confirmed the richness and range of the UK offer. Few other countries, for example, put employers in so central a position in defining the occupational standards on which many vocational awards are based. Few countries offer genuine work-based training leading to reliably-

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3 See Appendix 1: organisations represented on the Steering Group or consulted.
assessed national awards. Few seamlessly combine the acquisition of knowledge and practical skill. Few are able to offer bespoke qualifications and delivery to match the needs of new industries, new products or unusual work and shift patterns. The Steering Group believes that a UK VET strategy should underline these and other aspects of flexibility, demonstrating that the UK can meet clients’ needs rather than simply offering access to existing provision.

2.4 Subscriber-based with matched funding
The concept that the UK VET international offer would be delivered by constantly changing ‘coalitions of the willing’ gathered together from the whole FE sector has emerged strongly from the Steering Group’s work. Government can provide direction and leadership by promoting UK VET through consistently including its representatives in ministerial visits; through repeatedly visiting target markets rather than making single visits to many countries; and by marshalling the support of embassies, consulates and British Council offices to host permanent in-country representation, where appropriate. The Steering Group has begun to consider the best means of securing funds from the sector to match those from government. It may be more appropriate instead, to seek a proportion of the international earnings gained by providers or suppliers through opportunities facilitated by the organisation, in order to build over time an international presence comparable with that available to our competitors. This is the approach that has been adopted by TVET UK but in the face of pressure on budgets for expansion, especially in colleges, progress has inevitably been slower than would have been the case with pump-priming funding from government.

2.5 Integrated language training
The UK as the home of the international language of commerce and technology enjoys a considerable advantage over competitors. English language training, in the UK and overseas, is already a major business. Its most significant growth area is reported to be in technical and professional English, related to specific and often highly specialised vocational areas. Nevertheless, there is seldom a systemic connection between English language schools and VET, such as the common provision of on-campus foundation courses preparatory to higher education in the UK appears to represent. Academic controversy about whether it remains appropriate to emphasise the importance of UK usage in English – despite the demand for this approach often found internationally – is also unhelpful. A more secure connection between UK VET and English language provision, where this would add value, will need to be worked on.

2.6 Quality assured delivery and awards
The UK has a uniquely sophisticated system of quality assurance for business practices, qualifications and the delivery of VET. International customers are impressed by the standards and quality assurance of UK provision and awards and wish to be assured that those delivered
internationally are the same as in the UK. None of the government inspectorates – Ofsted, Estyn, ETI and HMIE – has a remit to work internationally, unlike QAA which audits the work of UK universities in one overseas market country each year. Whilst the Steering Group had some reservations about state regulation of international work, it accepted the critical need to assure customers of the quality of UK VET services and to protect the great majority of good suppliers and providers against reputational damage caused by the very few who might offer sub-standard work. For example, informal conversation with QAA indicated that it might be willing to include VET delivery alongside HE in its annual audits, a cost-effective and convincing means of filling a quality assurance gap. The Steering Group wished to see this line of development pursued as part of the UK VET quality assurance strategy.

An important facility in any robust quality system is the ability for customers to make and have promptly and fairly considered any complaint they may have about the service received. The Steering Group was agreed that the international organisation should work with its partners to bring this about.

2.7 Strengthen progression routes through FE and HE
The UK system offers progression to the highest awards in vocational subjects and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) standardises levels and sets out equivalences and structured approaches to comparing different means of learning (formal, non-formal and informal). Discussions with UK HE representative bodies have suggested that there is scope and willingness for HE to assist the wider establishment and success of UK VET internationally. This might include initially the adaptation of the HE Global/UUK website architecture to quickly and cost-effectively promote UK VET, for example. The potential benefits to all concerned of relating VET to HE are considerable. In the first instance the balance of advantage might be to VET, gaining from the international credibility of UK HE, its contacts, its systems and the prospects of progression for learners. In the longer term that imbalance might be redressed when more UK VET organisations were able to put forward students for entry to HE after checking identity and prior qualifications. The Steering Group is clear that as much commonality of practice as possible would benefit all concerned.

2.8 Long-term, effective governance and maintenance of excellent relationships with UK organisations
The Steering Group has established a wide base of representation among those who must work together to assure the success of UK VET. It will be important to consolidate that inclusiveness in designing the governance of an international organisation and, crucially, in engaging those who have already been successful internationally: the trailblazers. The necessary characteristics of a UK VET international organisation are clear. Among others, it must be transparent, accountable legally and to stakeholders, financially robust and it should be obliged to plough back any surpluses
for the benefit of the sector. The Steering Group has made no firm recommendation on governance but the choices are around some form of social enterprise based on a company limited by guarantee and/or a charity. Whilst charitable status is restrictive in some respects, it does offer advantages of perceived altruism so far as customers are concerned.

2.9 Market intelligence and research

The current lack of reliable data has been referred to already. The consequences are that there is no certain sense of the weight of momentum behind the international extension of UK VET, no solid justification for any particular level of investment based on increased turnover, no readily identifiable KPIs for growth. The Steering Group was convinced that these are significant issues which will need to be addressed thoroughly to underpin the global development of UK VET. Data of varying reliability are available from several agencies and these will need to be brought together with new information collected at source. Market intelligence is also available from a number of sources which will need to be collated centrally.

2.10 Following the launch of a strategy and agreement of the budget for an international organisation with government, it will be necessary to establish it without delay. There is agreement that it should not duplicate the existing membership organisation, TVET UK; indeed TVET UK will most likely be the foundation upon which the new or refreshed organisation could be built upon leveraging the progress that it has made in brand recognition with overseas partners and customers. However, the means of establishing a broader structure, representative of the whole UK VET sector and the government’s support but avoiding duplication or confusion remains to be resolved in detail. The proposed strategy itself – in essence who should do what to bring about the accelerated participation of the UK in the world market for education and skills – is set out in the next section.
3 Implementing the Strategy

3.1 The aim of the proposed strategy is to increase the participation of UK VET suppliers and providers in the international market for education and skills, such that the UK achieves a leading role, benefits its national economy, enriches its national culture and contributes to the efficient operation of global trade and knowledge exchange.

3.2 The primary means of achieving this aim should be the development of a central support organisation for the full range of UK VET internationally. It should have a brand that participating organisations might use to signify that their work is part of a wider, coherent, UK offer. It should be supported by government for the long term, with cross-government co-ordination by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Financial contributions to it should take the form of government funding and probably a proportion of the earnings from the international business it facilitates. It should be a primary aim of the organisation to ensure that all services offered in its name are independently quality assured.

3.3 The establishment of this international organisation is a supportive and enabling initiative undertaken in partnership by government, including if possible the devolved administrations, and further education sector providers, the awarding bodies, educational suppliers and other partners. Working with the organisation and using its brand would not preclude individual initiatives.

3.4 For its part in the development of the strategy, BIS should undertake the following actions:

- Support for a launch at the AoC International Conference, with ministerial involvement
- Financial investment in an international organisation for UK VET, sustained over time
- Co-ordination with other departments of state (specifically the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office, the Department for International Development, the devolved administrations) and agents such as embassies, consulates, the British Council, UKTI, the National Apprenticeship Service and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, to facilitate common approaches in pursuit of the aims of the strategy
- Inclusion of representatives of UK VET in ministerial and other international trade missions, and promotion of VET

TVET UK as a pre-existing and increasingly well-recognised brand provides a starting point for this development work.
• Provision of market intelligence for use by UK VET, highlighting countries where focussed efforts to develop trade are being made
• Consultation with the international organisation to assure co-ordination of the Department’s initiatives with those being made by UK suppliers and providers.

3.5 Working in partnership the UK VET sector and suppliers, the AoC in partnership with other UK Skills stakeholder partners will take forward the more detailed consideration of and action needed for:
• Development of a corporate structure to support international activity
• Recruitment of a representative board of governance for the central organisation, including trailblazers who have already made substantial achievements internationally
• Recruitment of core staff and procurement of the necessary facilities for the organisation, in collaboration with its board
• UK Skills stakeholders including, the Association of Colleges, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, the Federation of Awarding Bodies, Colegau Cymru, Scotland’s Colleges, English UK, TVET UK, GTA England, the 157 Group, BESA, INNSO, UKCES and other appropriate bodies will continue to work together in partnership to ensure the share responsibility in the strategy’s future direction.
• Co-ordination with the higher education sector, including Universities UK, the QAA, the national higher education funding bodies and trailblazer universities.

3.6 When it is established, the international organisation should pursue the following initial programme:
• Formulate its business and marketing plans (including arrangements for financial contributions) in consultation with the sector and BIS through its board
• Develop a corporate image and marketing materials
• Agree initial projects in international markets, seek the engagement of UK providers, formulate a register of UK provider and supplier capabilities and launch pilots
• Develop baseline data on international activity from which performance enhancement targets can be set
• Agree collaboration with higher education including the possibility of participation of VET providers in future QAA international audits
• Publicise and promote the international agenda within the UK VET sector and overseas
• Liaise with the British Council and others to establish an in-country presence in target markets.
• Collaborate with Ufl, the Open University and others to develop the international distance learning and e-learning markets.

• Report on activity undertaken and effectiveness

3.7 To support the aims of the international organisation, providers and suppliers in the UK who elect to work with it will be asked to do as follows:

• Contribute to good governance

• Work with the organisation to develop guidance on good practice in international work and subsequently adhere to it

• Maintain high standards of quality and co-operate with all relevant quality assurance procedures

• Use and promote the international organisation’s brand wherever appropriate to support and widen their own activities

• Contribute to a national register of capabilities which can be used to guide the international organisation in allocating participation in international projects

• Contribute to a central pool of market intelligence maintained by the organisation for general benefit.
| Appendix 1: |
| Members of the Steering Group and organisations consulted. |
| AELP | Graham Hoyle * |
| Association of Canadian Community Colleges | |
| AoC | Lesley Davis *  
| | John Mountford *  
| | Marguerite Hogg |
| AoC International Portfolio Group | |
| BIS (Observers) | Stuart Edwards *  
| | Marilyn East * |
| British Council | Tracy Ferrier *  
| | Gail Campbell  
| | Julia Smith |
| CBI | James Fothergill |
| Colegau Cymru | John Graystone |
| English UK | Tony Millns |
| FAB | Jill Lanning * |
| Gazelle Group | Fintan Donohue |
| GTA-England | Mark Maudsley  
| | Stephanie Whalley |
| INSSO | Tom Bewick * |
| 157 Group | Marilyn Hawkins |
| Podium | Ian Ashman |
| QAA | Stephen Jackson  
| | Carolyn Campbell |
| Scotland’s Colleges | John Henderson |
| TVET UK and BESA | Dominic Savage * |
| UKCES | Moira McKerracher * |
UKTI
Universities UK
World Skills

* Steering Group

Simon Perryman
Richard Parry *
Jo Newman
David Cragg
Appendix 2:

Some documents consulted.

*Action Plan for Indonesia*  
International Education Advisory Forum, 2011

*AoC India Partnership Proposal*  
Association of Colleges 2011 (unpublished)

*Aspects of Vocational Education and Training in Australia*  
Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2005

*British Council Services for International Education*  
British Council 2012

*Building skills, building partnerships*  
British Council, 2012

*Country Actions Plans: India; Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Turkey; UAE*  
International Education Advisory Group, (current)

*Going Global? UK FE/TVET opportunities in the international market*  
Baldauf, Hogarth and de Hoyos  
Warwick Institute for Employment Research/AoC, 2008

*International approaches to the development of intermediate level skills and apprenticeships*  
Gögler-Ludwig, Giernalczyk, Stock and Hogarth  
UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2012

*New Challenges, New Chances*  
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011

*Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education*  
AoC/British Council/BIS, 2011

*Sector Report: Education and Skills, Turkey*  
Yaman UKTI, 2009

*UK/Brazil Partners in Education Action Plan*  
2012 (draft)