

Briefing Note:

Raising the Esteem of Vocational Education and Training (VET) from Age 14

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Summary

- High-quality VET can sustain engagement and support transitions into skilled work and further study. However, VET tends to be stigmatised relative to academic education.
- Perceived quality, awareness, social class and employer links to VET are important determinants of stigma.
- Lack of awareness of VET remains a key barrier in the UK. This stems from a complex landscape and patchy careers guidance. However, awareness alone will not reduce stigma.
- A stronger offer at ages 14–16 should expand *exposure* to high-quality VET, not impose early tracking.

Recommendations

- Give all pupils meaningful VET exposure from age 14 while retaining a broad curriculum.
- However, avoid full tracking until at least age 16 and maintain ease of movement across pathways.
- Match any expansion with sufficient specialist teaching, careers guidance and support capacity.
- Ensure all VET programmes have strong links to employers from the outset (see T levels and UTCs).
- Continue work on improving careers guidance in schools, ensuring all students receive balanced advice and comprehensive exposure to post-16 pathways.
- Protect flexible mixed programmes, which are increasingly popular and support social mobility.

The Issue

A strong post-16 education system needs credible pathways for young people with different interests, strengths and aspirations. High-quality vocational education and training (VET) can support engagement in education, provide occupationally relevant skills and facilitate transitions into skilled employment or further study. Having a full suite of strong, well-regarded post-16 pathways is important for reducing the risk of young people becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The recent Milburn Review underlines the urgency of this challenge. It finds that nearly one million young people aged 16–24 are not in education, employment or training and argues that the institutions intended to support the transition from education to work are failing to operate as a coherent system (Milburn, 2026).

However, around the world, vocational education tends to be held in lower regard to its academic counterpart (e.g., Sim, 2024; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018; Wang, 2021). This is despite a growing recognition that vocational education can often deliver equivalent or better labour market returns in modern economies than purely academic education (Dahl et al., 2023; Kreisman and Stange, 2020; LaForest, 2023).¹ While these perceptions partially reflect underlying differences in quality in some places, there is broad acknowledgement that there are socially constructed negative attitudes unrelated to the objective quality of VET (Ackehurst et al., 2022). That is, VET is stigmatised across many societies (Ackehurst et al., 2022; Al-dossari, 2020; Chankseliani et al., 2016). This is a salient issue in the UK, where “parity of esteem” between vocational and academic education has become an enduring policy goal.

The esteem of vocational pathways matters

¹However, these advantages may vary over the life course. Vocational education often produces earlier employment and earnings benefits, while broader general skills may become relatively more valuable later as technologies and occupational demands change (Hanushek et al., 2017). The relative attractiveness of the two routes may therefore also depend on how individuals value earlier rather than later returns.

²These charts document appearances of the term “parity of esteem” alongside “vocational education” or an equivalent term.

because perceptions shape choices. Students and families consider what qualifications signal about ability, status and future opportunities. Teachers and careers advisers influence who is encouraged towards different routes. Employers decide whether qualifications certify useful skills, while universities determine which qualifications provide access to desirable courses. Negative attitudes towards VET could be driving students to take courses or pathways that are not best suited to their aspirations, abilities and needs. Stigma may also affect students after they enter a vocational route. In Flanders, around one fifth of students in technical and vocational tracks reported that others looked down on them because of their studies, and this perceived contempt was strongly associated with feelings of futility even after accounting for ability and social background (Spruyt et al., 2015). VET stigma is also likely contributing to skills shortages in technical and vocational areas, hindering economic growth and productivity.

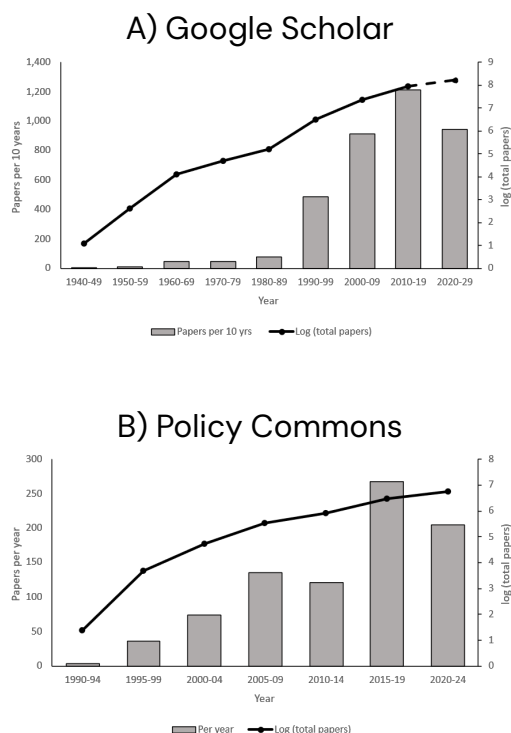
This briefing focuses primarily on school- and college-based vocational and technical education for young people aged 14–18. Apprenticeships form an important part of the wider technical education system, but differ from the programmes considered here because they combine employment with formal training and are most commonly entered after compulsory schooling (DfE, 2026). They are therefore discussed principally as a progression destination and as the work-based counterpart to classroom-based technical routes, rather than as a central focus of the briefing.

Parity of esteem as a policy goal

Policymakers have long argued for changes to the education system that will create “*parity of esteem*” between vocational and academic education. Figure 1 highlights the growth of this term (in policy and research

documents.² It has also been mentioned by Andy Burnham, the new prime minister of the UK (Whittaker, 2026): “People have argued over many years for an education system based on parity between academic and technical, and that is what we will build.”

Figure 1: Trends in references to “parity of esteem” in policy and academic literature



It's worth being clear that the objective should not be identical outcomes from academic and vocational programmes. This is one of the critiques of the term “parity of esteem” (James Relly, 2021). We do not want to get to a place where the two pathways are seen as the same because they clearly are not. Different pathways may reasonably prepare students for different destinations. The more useful ambition is that vocational and technical education should be seen as a **high-quality and positively chosen route with valuable and transparent progression opportunities**. We should be aiming to get to a place where both tracks are seen as high-quality and valuable pathways for young people to follow.

Why has vocational education been held in lower esteem?

Ongoing CEPEO research has been analysing

recently published survey data on perceptions of vocational education of more than 35,000 adults across 28 European countries (Maris et al., 2026). These data are from the Opinion Survey on VET, administered by Cedefop – the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2017). After surveying the literature and analysing these data, we identified four broad factors contributing to negative attitudes towards upper-secondary VET:

- Perceptions of quality
- Employer and labour market links
- Social class
- Information and awareness

Quality and perceived quality. Our analysis of the survey data reveals that perceptions of quality explain more variation in negative attitudes than country, demographic characteristics, awareness, experience and social class combined. This is consistent with earlier European evidence showing that attitudes towards VET are more positive among people who believe it provides a high-quality learning environment, good employment prospects, career progression and access to further education (Russo et al., 2019). In particular, respondents who believe that VET leads to respected jobs and improves the probability of finding work are more likely to recommend it to young people. Conversely, perceptions that vocational programmes are easier to enter, less demanding or offer weaker long-term opportunities can reinforce their lower status (Di Stasio, 2017; Russo et al., 2019)

This makes it crucial to continue improving the quality of VET pathways and then communicating these to the public to ensure changes translate into improved perceptions. Families will reasonably remain cautious where qualifications have variable returns, weak recognition or uncertain destinations. Perceptions of quality in the survey include perceived labour market rewards, the difficulty of the subject and whether VET is perceived as being for students with low grades. Around 75% of European respondents agreed that lower-attaining students

tended to be directed towards VET in their country. Close to 67% believed that VET was an easier pathway in their country than the academic route. Around 25% believe VET leads to jobs with low regard in society. These “low quality” beliefs were more commonly held in countries where upper-secondary VET was primarily school-based with weak links to the labour market (Maris et al., 2026).

Wider evidence on occupational prestige shows that jobs requiring vocational education tend to be ranked less highly than occupations requiring academic higher education, although prestige also depends on the knowledge and skill content of the occupation (Abrassart and Wolter, 2020). Improving the esteem of VET may therefore require raising the visibility and quality of the occupations and careers it serves, rather than changing perceptions of qualifications in isolation.

Employer and labour market links. Attitudes towards VET are more positive in European systems where vocational education has stronger institutional links with employers and recognised occupations. Previous comparative research similarly finds that occupationally oriented systems, particularly those containing apprenticeships and substantial work-based training, are more likely to be understood as providing a reliable transition from school into employment (Di Stasio, 2017). Evidence on public attitudes also shows that VET’s connection to the world of work is one of the strongest predictors of whether individuals would recommend it to young people (Russo et al., 2019).

Effective employer linkage involves more than consulting employers when a qualification is initially designed. Strong systems distribute responsibility between education providers and labour-market actors across curriculum design, programme delivery, workplace training, assessment and the updating of occupational standards (Bolli et al., 2018; Rageth and Renold, 2020). This helps ensure that qualifications teach current occupational skills and provide signals that employers understand and value.

In systems such as those in Germany and Austria, workplace learning, employer participation and established occupational destinations reinforce one another. However, these cross-country patterns do not establish that any one institutional feature causes higher esteem: countries also differ substantially in industrial structure, occupational regulation and social-partner institutions. The key lesson is therefore not to copy a particular national model, but to ensure that employer involvement is sufficiently deep for qualifications to develop and signal recognised and economically valuable skills.

Social class and status. Our recent research shows negative attitudes remain socially patterned even after accounting for perceptions of quality. Middle- and upper-class respondents are more likely to stigmatise VET than working-class respondents. This is consistent with earlier European evidence showing that highly educated respondents are less likely to recommend vocational education, even where they acknowledge that it provides a useful route into employment (Di Stasio, 2017). Russo et al. (2019) similarly find that respondents with tertiary degrees and those in managerial occupations held less positive views of VET.

These differences are also reflected in actual participation. In England, lower-level technical routes with relatively weak labour-market returns have disproportionately enrolled young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, while access to higher-level and more valuable technical pathways is often more socially selective (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Internationally, even countries in which technical and academic education are more equally valued continue to display socioeconomic inequalities in access to the most advanced vocational routes (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

This suggests that the esteem gap partly reflects social norms about which forms of knowledge, occupations and destinations are considered appropriate for different groups. The status of vocational education is also historically connected to the standing of the occupations it serves. Billett

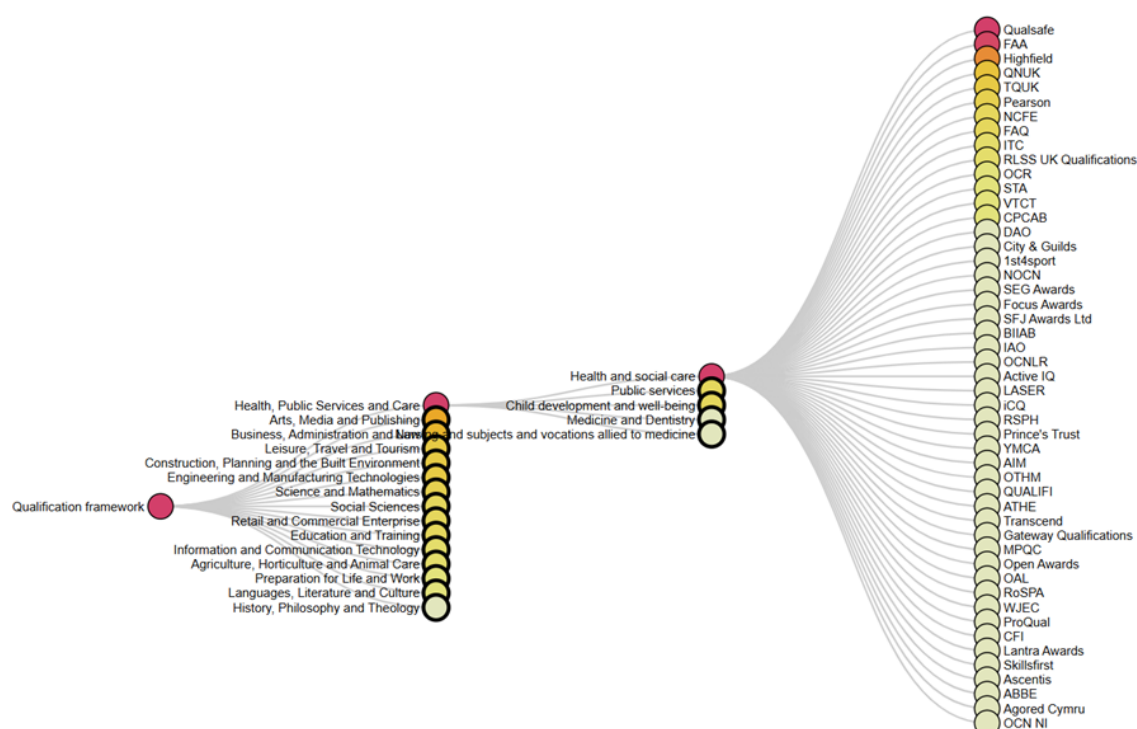
(2014) argues that the standing of vocational education is inseparable from longstanding social hierarchies between academic and occupational knowledge, and from the status attached to the occupations that VET serves (Billett, 2014). In some cases, those in the upper class are more likely to believe VET is of high quality but still have an overall stigma towards VET. This points to deep-rooted causes of VET stigma that deserve continued research and policy focus. Shifting these social norms will be challenging, but they may weaken over time as vocational pathways become more consistently high quality and lead to recognised, well-rewarded occupations.

Information and experience. Young people cannot make informed choices about pathways they have never encountered. There is also an argument that lack of awareness is a contributing factor to the stigma associated with VET (Ackehurst et al., 2022; Hochlaf and Dromey, 2019; Lasonen and Gordon, 2008). In the opinion survey on VET, large groups of respondents did not know what VET was

(Cedefop, 2017). The UK was ranked particularly low on this question – **almost half** of all respondents did not know what “*vocational education and training*” was.

Likewise, the recent introduction of T levels has suffered from issues of low public visibility despite large marketing spends by the DfE (NatCen Social Research and NFER, 2023; Patel, 2023). This points to a potentially larger issue around increasing awareness of the VET system in the UK. Part of this is likely due to the complexity of the existing vocational qualifications landscape, which has resulted in the existence of opaque pathways that deliver sub-optimal outcomes for students (Hupkau et al., 2017; Wolf, 2011). Figure 2 shows an example student wanting to study a level 3 vocational course in health who, in theory, faces an immensely large number of potential qualifications. This was one of the reasons for the recent reforms with plans for T levels (and now V levels) to replace most existing level 3 vocational qualifications.

Figure 2: Extract from Ofqual’s VET landscape tool (Ofqual, 2024) showing the number of different providers offering regulated Level 3 qualifications in Health and Social Care in England



Yet, our research also shows that information alone does not automatically improve attitudes towards VET. We show that in systems where there are weak links between VET and the labour market, greater awareness can be associated with more negative perceptions. Publicity and awareness may therefore reveal weaknesses rather than overcome them. This also cautions against relying primarily on promotional campaigns. Billett (2020) argues that VET's standing is unlikely to improve while it continues to be positioned institutionally as a route for students with limited alternatives; raising esteem therefore requires changes in the quality, organisation and treatment of vocational education, not communication alone (Billett, 2020). High-quality encounters with technical subjects, colleges, employers and workplaces could form part of this wider change, but only where they expose young people to strong provision and progression opportunities.

Careers guidance and information

Careers guidance in schools is one of the principal ways young people learn about the different pathways available to them. Historically, the provision of careers guidance and exposure to different pathways has been highly inconsistent across the UK (Moote and Archer, 2018; Whittaker, 2023). This resulted in the introduction of careers hubs (local careers networks), the Gatsby Benchmarks to improve the quality and consistency of careers guidance and the introduction of the Baker Clause which requires schools to provide access to further education (FE) colleges to talk to their students about post-16 pathways. However, compliance with both the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Baker Clause remains patchy and inconsistent (House of Commons, 2023; Social Mobility Commission, 2021; Whittaker, 2023). This means there are still many young people not being fully informed on their choices.

The recent Milburn Review reaches a similar conclusion: although performance against the Gatsby Benchmarks has improved, access to personalised careers guidance and meaningful workplace experience remains

highly unequal, particularly for young people considering vocational routes or at risk of becoming NEET (Milburn, 2026).

In addition, evidence suggests that careers guidance can reflect the interests and provision of the school delivering it. Schools with sixth forms have financial and institutional incentives to retain pupils, and some have provided information biased towards their own post-16 offer or restricted access for further education colleges and other providers (House of Commons, 2023; Ofsted, 2023). Research from the US suggests that advisers' own educational experiences may provide an additional source of bias towards familiar academic routes (Kandalec Holm, 2019). Kandalec Holm (2019) recommended policies to ensure all careers advisors gain first-hand experience and knowledge of VET so they can accurately represent VET pathways and advise all students. Kandalec Holm (2019) reported that careers advisors without direct experience of VET often reserved VET as a fallback option for lower-attaining students.

Lessons from other education systems

The lessons from this research are that perceptions of VET are most positive in vocational systems that combine substantial workplace learning, employer participation, recognised links between qualifications and occupations and clear routes into advanced training or the labour market. The work has also shown that perceptions of VET are often built on a lack of foundational awareness and knowledge of what VET is. However, basic information campaigns could backfire if VET qualifications and systems are difficult to understand and not strongly linked to employers and the labour market.

One feature of several countries with well-regarded vocational systems is relatively early tracking into separate academic and vocational routes. However, their success should not be interpreted as evidence that early tracking itself raises quality or esteem. Comparative evidence suggests that the employment benefits of vocational education are larger where qualifications have

strong institutional links to employers and recognised occupations (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007). These institutional features are often bundled with early selection, making it difficult to isolate the effect of tracking itself.

One potential cost of early tracking is that initial placements become increasingly consequential where movement between pathways is difficult. Cross-country evidence indicates that earlier tracking tends to increase inequalities in educational achievement, particularly inequalities associated with socioeconomic background, without clear evidence of corresponding gains in average performance (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2006; Strello et al., 2017). Evidence from reforms across European countries similarly suggests that postponing between-school tracking reduces inequalities in educational attainment by parental social class (Van de Werfhorst, 2019). Other comparative evidence finds that tracking can strengthen the relationship between family background and educational attainment, partly by diverting disadvantaged students away from routes leading to tertiary education (Brunello and Checchi, 2007; Henderson et al., 2018).

Vocational education from age 14: exposure or tracking?

In England, most vocational pathways begin at age 16. However, there could be a more substantial vocational offer between ages 14 and 16 that could improve awareness and perceptions of VET.

This could take two very different forms (Table 1). The first is **early exposure**: pupils retain a broad curriculum but undertake technical subjects, applied projects, workplace experiences and employer-linked learning. This is done alongside key elements of traditional academic education. This is similar to the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc), which was introduced in 2023 by Andy Burnham (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2026). The second is **early tracking**: pupils are allocated to separate academic and vocational programmes, potentially in different institutions, with different curricula and progression opportunities.

As discussed above, some systems that track students relatively early also have well-regarded vocational pathways. However, this association appears to reflect the wider institutional structure of these systems, including strong links between vocational qualifications, employers and occupations, rather than early tracking alone. Selecting pupils into different tracks at younger ages is particularly risky where movement between routes is limited, because early differences in attainment and family resources can then have lasting effects on educational progression (Brunello and Checchi, 2007; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2006), especially given previous evidence that socioeconomic status predicts tracking into more applied routes at age 14 (Henderson et al., 2018).

Earlier exposure to VET could broaden horizons, make post-16 choices better informed and allow pupils to discover strengths that are not well captured by conventional classroom assessment. An earlier exposure model also aligns with recommendations made in the Wolf Review which argued for greater access to vocational courses at age 14 but warned against specialisation until at least age 16 (Wolf, 2011).

Creating space for earlier VET exposure will require choices about what is reduced or reorganised elsewhere. The Curriculum and Assessment Review cautioned that the existing volume of content can produce an overcrowded and shallow curriculum (Curriculum and Assessment Review, 2025); technical learning should therefore not simply be added to an already constrained timetable. At the same time, any reform should preserve a strong common academic foundation, particularly in English, mathematics and science, so that technical exposure broadens pupils' experiences without prematurely restricting their later educational and occupational options.

Delivery capacity will be equally important. Earlier exposure will require access to teachers and practitioners with appropriate occupational expertise, as well as sufficient capacity in schools and colleges to provide

effective guidance and additional support. These capacity constraints may be particularly important for disadvantaged pupils, who are often more reliant on schools and colleges for guidance and support. Any ex-

pansion of technical pathways should therefore ensure that they receive the same breadth of choice and quality of provision as other pupils.

Table 1: Designing vocational education from age 14

A broad early-exposure model	A higher-risk early-tracking model
Technical and applied learning available to pupils across the attainment distribution A strong common curriculum in English, mathematics, science and other general subjects Employer projects and workplace experiences integrated with school learning Choices remain open at 16 and prior learning is portable across pathways Success judged by engagement, learning, informed choice and later destinations	Vocational programmes targeted primarily at lower-attaining or disengaged pupils A narrowed general curriculum that restricts later academic options Separate provision with weak links to employers or recognised occupations Decisions at 14 are difficult to reverse without repeating learning Success judged mainly by the number entering a vocational route

The distinction is between widening young people’s experiences and sorting them early into different destinations.

A credible 14–16 offer should therefore be available to pupils of all attainment levels, retain a broad academic core, contribute meaningfully to post-16 entry and allow students to change direction without losing substantial time. Evaluation should test whether the offer widens horizons rather than simply increasing vocational enrolment. While links to local employers can make technical education more relevant, pathways should not be designed too narrowly around immediate local vacancies. Young people need qualifications and transferable knowledge that remain valuable if local labour demand changes or they later wish to work, study or live elsewhere. Greater choice at 14 could promote increased social mobility if options are well informed, genuinely reversible and equally well supported. Evaluating the impacts of the MBacc in Greater Manchester could provide some of the earliest insights into this.

What can we learn from University Technical Colleges?

University Technical Colleges (UTCs) provide an important English test of institutionally

separate technical education from age 14. Introduced from 2010, UTCs combine academic and technical education, specialise principally in STEM-related fields and are sponsored by universities with substantial employer involvement. Students have generally been able to enter either at age 14, part-way through secondary school, or at age 16, following GCSEs. These represent a niche VET pathway for young people – only around 0.1% of learners study at UTCs (Machin et al., 2023).

The evidence points to very different outcomes at these two entry points. Earlier descriptive research found that many UTCs struggled to recruit and retain pupils, received relatively weak inspection outcomes and recorded poor academic progress at Key Stage 4. More than half of pupils entering before GCSEs left between ages 16 and 17, while pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with SEND and those with lower GCSE attainment were particularly unlikely to remain. However, UTC students were much more likely than other young people to enter apprenticeships, suggesting that the model could support strong transitions into technical education and work (Domínguez-

Reig and Robinson, 2018).

More recent quasi-experimental research addresses the possibility that these patterns simply reflect the types of students choosing UTCs. It reaches a similarly important distinction between entry at 14 and entry at 16. Entering a UTC at age 14 substantially reduced academic achievement at GCSE, including the probability of obtaining recognised passes in English and mathematics. By contrast, entering at age 16 increased vocational and STEM achievement without reducing academic attainment. UTC attendance from age 16 also increased apprenticeship entry, employment by age 19 and progression to STEM study at university, resulting in fewer students becoming NEET (Machin et al., 2023).

The contrast suggests that the difficulty is not necessarily technical specialisation itself, but the timing and institutional form in which it is introduced. It suggests there are considerable risks when moving to a specialist institution at age 14 as it disrupts established secondary education. Moving at 16 to the same specialist facilities, which offer a curriculum co-designed with employers, appears substantially more successful.

UTCs therefore support a distinction between *technical exposure from age 14* and *institutional tracking at age 14*. Schools could expand applied subjects, employer projects and workplace encounters before 16 without requiring pupils to leave their existing institution or narrow their future options. More specialised technical institutions may have a stronger role from age 16, when students reach an established transition point and can make choices informed by their GCSE attainment and earlier experiences.

Insights from England's recent post-16 reforms

T levels. Introduced in 2020, T levels are two-year technical qualifications broadly equivalent in size to three A levels. They combine classroom learning, an occupational specialism and a substantial industry placement. Their stated objectives included simplifying the qualifications landscape, im-

proving quality and raising the esteem of vocational education (Maris et al., 2024). T levels were developed following the 2016 Sainsbury Review of technical education. The Review argued that England's technical education system lacked clear routes into skilled employment and recommended a smaller number of coherent occupational pathways, designed with employers and based on standards reflecting the knowledge and skills required in industry (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016).

Early evidence identifies genuine strengths. Relative to similar learners on other pathways, T level students are more likely to enter higher technical study and advanced apprenticeships. Those who progress to further study also appear relatively well prepared, with comparatively low first-year dropout conditional on entry (Maris, 2026). These qualifications also stand out in their strong links to employers through the industry placements and the employer panels that have been co-designing and developing the qualifications. This ensures the qualifications are focused on developing the skills employers need.

However, the qualifications have suffered from a number of “teething” issues, including having too much content, lack of awareness and recognition and difficulties in finding placements. These have contributed to a relatively high drop-out rate among early cohorts and lower overall progression to further study (Maris et al., 2024). However, the delivery and structure of these qualifications continue to evolve and many of these outcomes are now trending in the right direction.

Overall, T levels have not transformed participation in vocational education. Exploratory modelling suggests that most T level students would otherwise have taken another vocational, mixed or apprenticeship pathway, rather than an academic route. Our analysis suggests we have not seen an increase in the number of pupils choosing to study VET since the T level reforms were introduced. Moreover, while most universities now accept T levels, many still place major restrictions on the courses T level students

can apply to (Maris, 2026). This reinforces the idea that creating a new qualification does not by itself raise the status or reach of vocational education.

It also reinforces the Milburn Review's argument that the post-16 system should be judged less by enrolment and qualification production and more by whether young people complete programmes and move into sustained education, training or employment (Milburn, 2026).

Need clearer level 2 options. The T level reforms had focused largely on level 3 provision of VET. Part of these reforms involved the introduction of the T level transition programme (TLTP – renamed to the T level foundation year), which was designed for level 2 learners to prepare them for a T level in the following year. However, this programme had major issues, most notable very low progression to T levels, and has now been abolished following recommendations made by CEPEO researchers and others.

Following this, the government is replacing the transition programme with two clearer level 2 pathways. A one-year Further Study pathway, centred on a new Foundation Certificate, will prepare students for T levels, V levels or A levels. A separate two-year Occupational pathway will prepare students for level 2 employment or apprenticeships (DfE, 2026). This is a welcome move away from a programme that offered no substantial qualification and defined success too narrowly as progression to a T level. However, the new qualifications will be introduced gradually from 2027 and initially cover only a small number of sectors (DfE, 2026). Their success will depend on whether students complete recognised qualifications, progress successfully and can move between the further-study and occupational pathways without being locked into decisions made at age 16.

These reforms will also require sufficient institutional capacity. The Milburn Review describes further education as the main vocational and “recovery” sector for young people who leave school without strong academic results, but finds that it has been weakened by constrained funding, falling participation,

workforce shortages and funding arrangements that can discourage colleges from expanding provision for students at greater risk of non-completion (Milburn, 2026).

Mixed programmes. England's post-16 system is often described as a choice between academic and vocational routes, but a growing number of students combine the two. Mixed programmes allow students to retain breadth, combine different forms of assessment and preserve a wider range of progression opportunities. CEPEO analysis finds that mixed learners are particularly likely to progress to some form of further study after accounting for observed student characteristics. Existing mixed and vocational pathways also appear relatively effective at supporting disadvantaged students into further study (Maris, 2026).

This cautions against building the system around mutually exclusive academic and technical tracks. The choices students are making reflect a demand for flexibility and the ability to combine complementary general and occupational knowledge.

V levels. The government plans to introduce the first V levels from September 2027. These will be broad, two-year vocational qualifications equivalent in size to one A level, initially in education, accounting and finance, and digital systems and data. Their smaller size should allow students to combine vocational and academic study (DfE, 2026). This closely reflects an earlier recommendation we made after examining early T level outcomes. We argued at the time for the introduction of a smaller T level type qualification so that students are not required to commit at 16 to a programme the size of three A levels (Maris, Khandekar and Robinson, 2024).

V levels could raise esteem if they are rigorous, recognised by employers and universities, and available across the attainment distribution. They also fill a gap for students who want to study VET at level 3 but do not want to undertake a T level, which we have shown is not suitable for all learners. V levels and the new further study and occupational pathways at level 2 will eventually replace the existing suite of smaller vocational qualifica-

tions that sit within the crowded VET qualifications landscape (DfE, 2025; 2026). This is encouraging for reducing the complexity of the VET system, increasing awareness of VET and raising quality perceptions.

Summary and Implications

England has repeatedly sought parity of esteem by redesigning qualifications and introducing new brands. These reforms have often underestimated that esteem emerges from the wider system. A prestigious pathway needs consistently high-quality provision, visible employer demand, recognised destinations and strong linkages to the labour market. This pathway should also maintain the flexibility to accommodate different interests and allow young people to change direction, which is one of the hallmarks of England's post-16 system.

The current combination of T level reforms, new V levels, expanded work experience and possible technical learning from age 14 creates an opportunity to build a more coherent 14–19 system. Early exposure to high-quality VET means young people and their families will be able to make more informed choices about VET and follow high-quality pathways that will not restrict their future trajectories. Early signalling of these high-value pathways could also reduce the number of young people not in education or employment (NEET), as we have seen with UTCs.

Raising the esteem of VET cannot be legislated into existence. It is more likely to follow when vocational education is demonstrably high quality, connected to valued employment and further study, and chosen by a broad range of young people. We raise the following recommendations:

1. Make age 14 the start of exploration, not allocation. All pupils should have access to meaningful technical learning and workplace exposure, while retaining a broad common curriculum. Evidence from the Wolf Review and UTCs suggests full specialisation is most beneficial from age 16 onwards. Government should specify how curriculum and assessment requirements will be adjusted to create sufficient time, rather than adding a new en-

titlement to an already crowded timetable. Expansion should also be matched by sufficient specialist teaching, careers guidance and support capacity, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

2. Design permeability into the system. Technical and vocational study at 14–16 should preserve access to A levels, T levels, V levels, apprenticeships and higher education. Likewise, VET during 16–18 education should similarly allow flexibility for students to move across pathways. Transfer arrangements, progression pathways and recognition of prior learning should be specified before new routes are expanded.

3. Continue to deepen employer involvement in VET. Employer panels (like we see for T levels) are useful, but esteem is more likely to change where employers contribute to projects, teaching, placements, assessment and recruitment. Capacity constraints, particularly among small firms and in areas with thin labour markets, need to be addressed directly.

4. Preserve mixed pathways. V levels should support combinations with A levels and other high-quality qualifications. Existing applied qualifications should not be removed until replacement routes have demonstrated comparable access, completion and progression.

5. Improve and stabilise T levels and strengthen FE capacity. Priorities should include route-specific quality improvement, sufficient industry placements, equitable access and credible alternatives for students who withdraw. Colleges must also have the resources and funding incentives to support students at risk of disengagement. Progress should be judged against completion and sustained destinations, not enrolment or qualification entries alone.

6. Providing comprehensive and balanced careers advice. VET still has an awareness problem in England, partly stemming from an overly complex existing qualifications landscape and inconsistent careers guidance. The introduction of the Gatsby Benchmarks and Baker Clause are valuable steps, but

careers information and guidance remains patchy. More work is needed to ensure all students receive balanced advice and comprehensive exposure to post-16 pathways.

7. Build esteem through quality. Publicity and awareness campaigns should follow demonstrable improvements in teaching, facilities, employer involvement, completion and destinations. This will necessarily require additional funding for the sector.

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