

02 - POLICY DEVELOPMENT - OBJECTIVES, FRAMEWORKS, MECHANISMS, PRIORITIES

0201 - OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

For the last decade, a UK-wide policy objective has been to improve the national skills base of the population throughout their working lives and create sustainable employment in order to compete in the globalised markets. The inter-departmental national skills strategy emphasises the economic and social benefits of skills and their role in supporting more high-quality sustainable jobs. The government has also continuously targeted unemployed and inactive population.

In December 2006, the government published the Leitch Report 'Prosperity for all in the global economy', which proposed a new set of targets to be achieved by 2020:

- participation in full-time education amongst 16-18 year olds to rise to 84%;
- 95% of adults to achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy, an increase from levels of 85% of literacy and 79% numeracy in 2005;
- exceeding 90% of adults qualified to at least level 2, an increase from 69% in 2005;
- shifting the balance of intermediate skills from level 2 to level 3. Improve the esteem, quantity and quality of intermediate skills: additional 1.9 million level 3 attainments and 500,000 apprentices a year.
- exceeding 40% of adults qualified to level 4 or above, up from 29% in 2005, with a commitment to continue progression.

The government aims to achieve an employment rate of 80%, as a long-term aspiration.

In response to meeting these targets, the government published a series of White papers and other policy documents, which proposed a 'skills revolution' to close skills gaps at every level by 2020, through a demand-led system, where the needs of adult learners and employers are given priority. The reforms envisage, amongst others, legislation on funding entitlement to free training in basic skills and first full level 2 qualifications; institutional reform of planning and funding bodies (replacement of LSC with two new bodies with different remits) and others.

These policy papers have also concern with young people education. A number of early school leavers, although improved lately, still remains quite high compared with other EU member states. To remedy the situation, the government has adopted a strategy to reduce the number of NEETs by building partnerships of schools, career services and families and providing attractive alternatives to post-compulsory education and throughout impending legislation to raise the education participation age to 18 (England).

To raise attainment and widen participation, especially among disadvantaged, and to engage the interest of disaffected learners, the government is reforming 14 to 19 provision, with increased flexibility in the last two years of compulsory education (work-related learning engagement programmes) and by introducing new Diplomas in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which intend to provide a vocational alternative to general secondary education for 14-19 year olds.

The vocational qualification reform programme aims to make qualifications more flexible through the unit- and credit-based frameworks, which allows for better horizontal and vertical flexibility of the system. The Qualifications and Credit Framework in England underwent tests and trials in 2006, whereas the Scottish CQF is already well developed. The underlying aim of the ongoing reforms is to ensure 'parity of esteem' between vocational and academic education and ensure more flexible pathways for all.

A major aim is to move from a model where institutions respond to government priorities to one where they respond directly to the needs and demands of individual learners, parents and employers. One reason for this is to rebalance the roles and responsibilities of the state, employer and individual, recognising that, when potentially unlimited demand confronts limited public resource, the role of public funding must be clearly defined. Central objectives are: raising social mobility, narrowing attainment

gaps and improving performance across the system, and ensuring responsiveness to employer and individual needs.

In summary, the main policy priorities⁷ relevant to vocational education and training in England are as follows:

- Improve the skills of the population throughout their working lives to create a workforce capable of sustaining economic competitiveness, and enable individuals to thrive in the global economy;
- Build social and community cohesion through improved social justice, civic participation and economic opportunity by raising aspirations and broadening participation, progression and achievement in learning and skills;
- Employer engagement is a key focus of the government's reforms set out in World Class Skills. The government seeks to create a demand-led skills system, in which the skills training and the qualifications provided are tailored to the needs of employers;
- Strengthen the capacity, quality and reputation of the Further and Higher Education systems and institutions to support national economic and social needs;
- Achieving a better sharing of responsibilities between the individual, employers and the state.

⁷ DGVET questionnaire 2008 Policy reporting, JIU, DIUS, 2008