



CEDEFOP EUROPEAN PUBLIC
OPINION SURVEY ON VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

UNITED
KINGDOM



THEMATIC PERSPECTIVES



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Author: Torjus Abusland

Contributors: Katherine Latta and Lisa Collett. UK NARIC gratefully acknowledges the input of the UK ReferNet Steering Group members.

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1. Background

High quality vocational education and training (VET) systems can contribute to combatting unemployment, improving labour market integration and fighting social exclusion. However, in many EU member states, participation in VET is lagging behind general education, and VET is often seen as a 'second best' option compared to general education. Understanding perceptions about the value of VET, its ability to equip people with the right skills, and the likelihood of finding employment for VET graduates are decisive elements in creating VET as an attractive educational option. Evidence is scarce on citizens' perceptions about VET in existing literature, particularly when comparing VET perceptions to views on general education, and insights into specific attractiveness factors of VET such as permeability or satisfaction with skills acquired. In light of a desire to fill this gap and provide a richer picture of VET perceptions in Europe suitable to inform VET policy-making, Cedefop launched its first-ever opinion survey in 2016. The opinion survey provides unprecedented data on Europeans' opinions on awareness, attractiveness and effectiveness of VET in Europe. Given the heterogeneity and variety of VET within and between Member States, the scope of the survey is mostly focused on initial vocational training (IVET) at upper secondary level. The survey covers the 28 Member States of the European Union and had a total of 35 646 respondents from different social and demographic groups, aged 15 and over. 2 126 interviews were conducted in the UK during June 2016. Cognitive interviews were used to improve the questionnaire and the final report was published in October 2017 (1). This ReferNet article aims to present a more contextualised interpretation of the survey findings from a UK perspective.



¹ Cedefop (2017), [European public opinion survey on vocational education and training](#)

2. Introduction

A survey by the Edge Foundation (2014) concluded that schools and learners' families in the UK often considered children 'too clever' for vocational education and associated academic qualifications with greater success in the labour market than vocational alternatives. Only 51% of parents asked said they encouraged their child's choice to pursue vocational qualifications, yet 74% supported academic choices for their children (²). VET has traditionally struggled to obtain parity of esteem with general academic education in the UK, perhaps with the exception of certain prestigious apprenticeships offered by a handful of companies.

This article provides contextual and complementary information relating to many results from the Cedefop VET opinion survey. UK issues relating to attractiveness of VET identified in the survey include, among others, misinformation about VET's role in preparing young people for the labour market, problems related to careers advice and a general bias towards the general academic route leading to university study, which guides students through a clearer pathway than most VET routes in the UK.

The survey covered the UK as a whole, and the number of respondents that had studied in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was not specified. As England is by far the most populous country in the UK, there is a chance that the Cedefop VET opinion survey results may reflect the situation in England more closely.

This article compares views from the Cedefop survey to selected results from learner satisfaction surveys in the UK. These include the qualifications regulator Ofqual's annual *Perceptions of qualifications* survey that questions the opinions and levels of confidence of head teachers, teachers, students, parents, the general public, employers and Higher Education Institutions in qualifications in England (³).

The Education & Skills Funding Agency's *FE Choices Learner Satisfaction* survey measures the levels of satisfaction of young and adult learners in a range of general and vocational education and training providers in England. 18% of learners participated in the survey in 2016/17. The survey is linked to the Individualised

² City and Guilds' website (accessed 20/10/2017), [Children labelled 'too clever' for vocational education](#)

³ Ofqual (2017), [Perceptions of AS/A levels, GCSEs and Other Qualifications in England – Wave 15](#)

Learner Record and consists of eight questions regarding the learning programme, staff, advice, and learning provider (⁴).

More than 40% of post-16 learners in school-based further education, work-based learning, adult community learning and Welsh For Adults courses took part in the all-Wales *Learner Voice Survey* between 2013 and 2015. The survey results have been used for analysis of different sectors, ethnic groups and learners with learning difficulties. It also tracks the changing views and expectations of learners during the three years of the survey (⁵).

The *Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey* asks college students in Scotland to rate their satisfaction with their college experience by answering 10 questions. The Scottish college sector is predominantly vocationally oriented and includes post-16 learning and higher education. The survey received a response from over 35% of all college learners (⁶).

Learner View is an online tool run by the education provider inspectorate Ofsted that allows further education college students in England to rate their college. The results are available for users to search and view to gather an indication of the performance of a college; however, the numbers of learners using the tool is reported to be low.

⁴ Department for Education (2017), [FE Choices learner satisfaction survey 2016 to 2017](#)

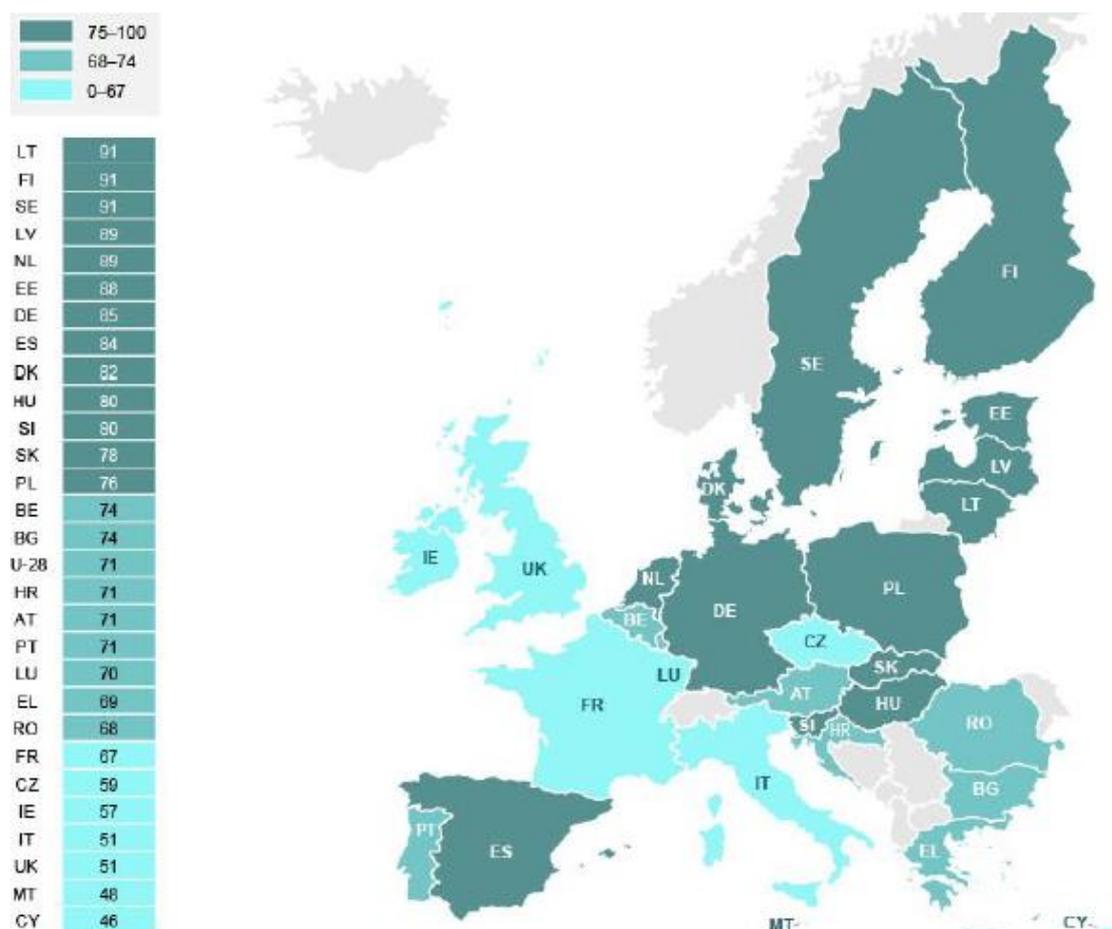
⁵ Welsh Government (2016), [Learner Voice Survey](#)

⁶ Scottish Funding Council (2017), [Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey 2015-16](#)

3. Awareness and knowledge of VET

In the EU as a whole, most respondents said that they had heard of VET before taking part in the Cedefop opinion survey. However, the lowest levels of awareness was seen in Cyprus (46%), Malta (48%), Italy and the UK (both 51%) as demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 1. Awareness of VET amongst survey respondents ⁽⁷⁾



Across EU Member States, 48% of upper secondary students are enrolled in vocational programmes. In the Czech Republic the proportion is close to 75%; however, in the UK, it is just 42.7% ⁽⁸⁾. Academic routes have, in recent years, acquired even higher status with the introduction of the English baccalaureate at lower secondary level, incentivising the achievement of key academic subjects. Part of the process of simplifying the education system in England has seen a number of vocational subjects lose funding as alternatives to key academic subjects at lower

⁷ Cedefop (2017), [European public opinion survey on vocational education and training](#)

⁸ Eurostat, UOE data from March 2017

secondary level. More opportunities to combine vocational subjects with general academic subjects exist in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A previous government's target for 50% of people entering into university by 2010 has moreover strengthened the belief amongst parents and teachers that university study is more likely than vocational routes to lead to well-paid jobs and fulfilling professional careers. There is generally much greater focus on general academic study routes in the UK.

3.1 Perception of what VET is

Published in 2016, *Towards 2030: A Framework for Building a World-Class Post-Compulsory Education System for Wales* ⁽⁹⁾ suggests that while the quality and performance of the further and higher education sector is good, the variety of institutions often offering similar qualifications and courses and the existence of a range of different responsible agencies render the VET landscape complex and confusing for learners. Pathways in general academic education are considered to be clearer than those in VET.

Those in positions to influence UK learners, such as teachers and careers advisers, often have little or no direct experience of VET, having followed academic routes at secondary and university level. Accurate professionally-informed advice and guidance are therefore not always available, leading to inaccurate perceptions of what VET is. VET qualifications have also been subject to more frequent reforms than traditional academic qualifications in the last decades, meaning that teachers, careers advisers, employers and parents will have limited first-hand experience of current VET provision.

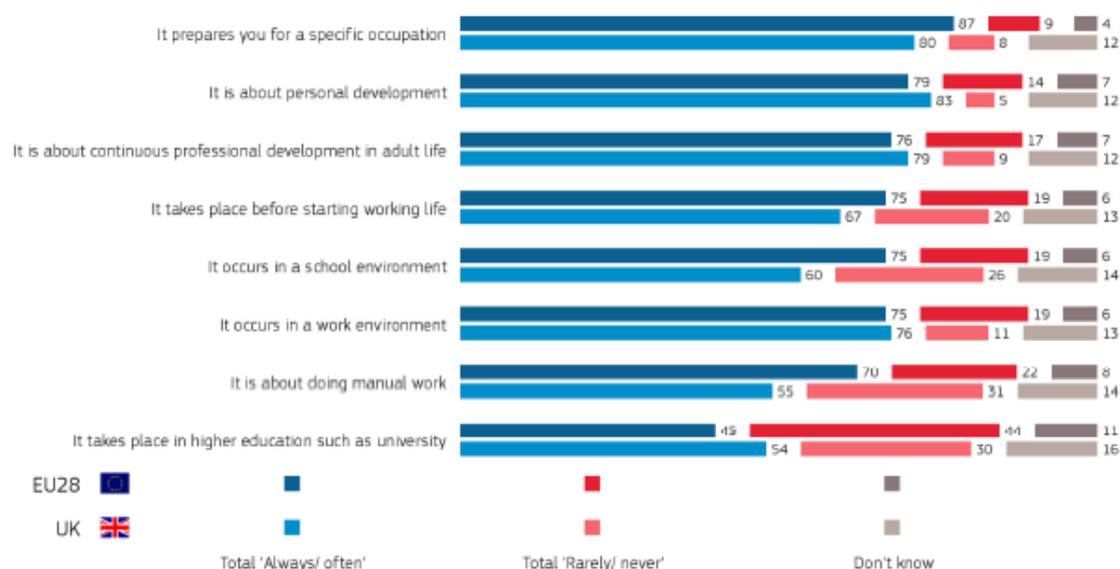
The above may be contributing factors to young people not always having an accurate concept of VET in the UK. Notable from the Cedefop opinion survey results is the fact that 60% of UK learners believe VET always or often takes place in school-based settings. 76% believe VET is always/often offered in work-based settings. Despite growth in apprenticeship starts, more VET is still school-based than predominantly work-based in the UK ⁽¹⁰⁾. 80% also think that VET mainly prepares learners for a specific occupation, yet many VET students are also enrolled on basic

⁹ Hazelkorn, E (2016), [Towards 2030: A Framework for Building a World-Class Post-Compulsory Education System for Wales](#)

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics (2017), [Further Education and Skills in England](#)

VET programmes below EQF level 4 that are often not directly linked to specific jobs, or are on more general vocational programmes that are not directly linked to national occupational standards.

Figure 2. Perception of VET ⁽¹¹⁾



A higher percentage of UK learners stated that they believe VET is always/often about continuous professional development in adult life (79%) rather than before working life (67%), which may reflect the fact that the same qualifications are generally available for adult learners and young school leavers in the UK. A high proportion of adult learners also study alongside young people in further education (FE) colleges, either full- or part-time. Apprenticeship places may also be occupied by adult learners already employed by a company.

Only just over half of the UK respondents to the survey were of the opinion that VET was offered in higher education settings, such as universities. Most UK VET provision is taken following lower secondary education and placed at EQF levels 3 and 4, but VET programmes can also lead to qualifications at higher education levels including university degrees. A lower percentage of UK respondents than EU respondents believed that VET always/often involves manual work. This can be explained by the vast range of vocational education and training programmes available in the UK that do not lead to traditional technical occupations. In recent years there has been an increase in apprenticeship starts in areas such as business

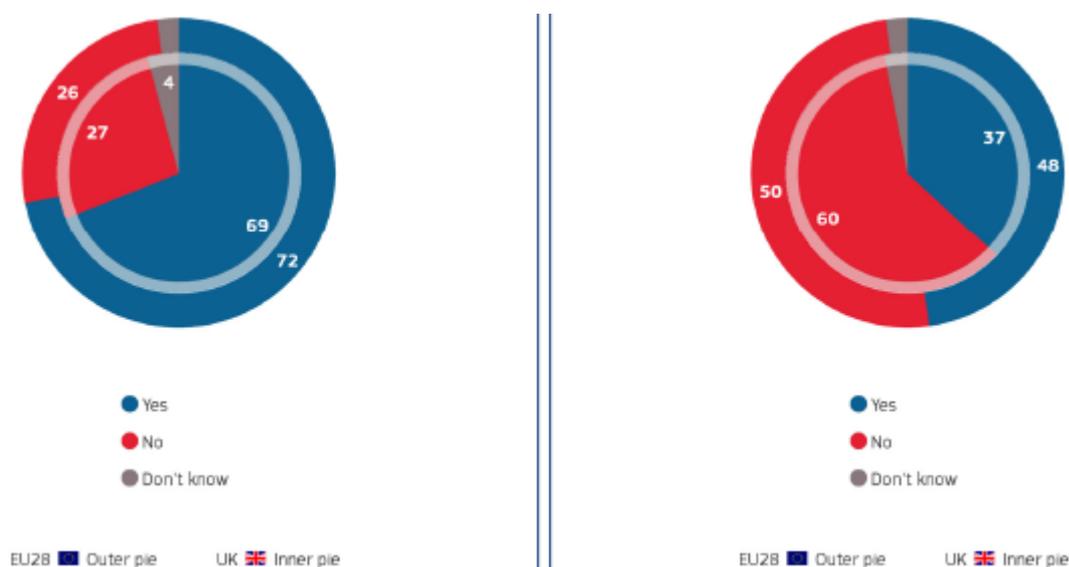
¹¹ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training, VET Factsheet

administration, and hospitality and tourism. Advertising campaigns promoting apprenticeships in various professions may have played a role in informing people in relation to this point.

3.2 Careers and guidance

The UK was one of five countries in the survey in which less than half of the respondents (44%) stated that they had received information about vocational education at the time of making a decision about which education to apply for at upper secondary education level. The EU average was 57%.

Figure 3. Respondents (%) who were informed about VET at the time of making a decision about study opportunities at upper secondary level – VET participants (left) vs general education participants (right) ⁽¹²⁾.



A survey conducted for the Sutton Trust in 2014 backs up this data. It discovered that 65% of teachers asked would rarely or never advise young people to apply for an apprenticeship if they had the requisite grades for university. The survey is mentioned in a report by the House of Commons Education Committee ⁽¹³⁾, where a VET provider ⁽¹⁴⁾ also reports that their experience is that primary and secondary schools in England promote themselves to parents and future pupils based only on

¹² Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training, VET Factsheet

¹³ House of Commons Education Committee (2015), Apprenticeships and traineeships for 16 to 19 year-olds

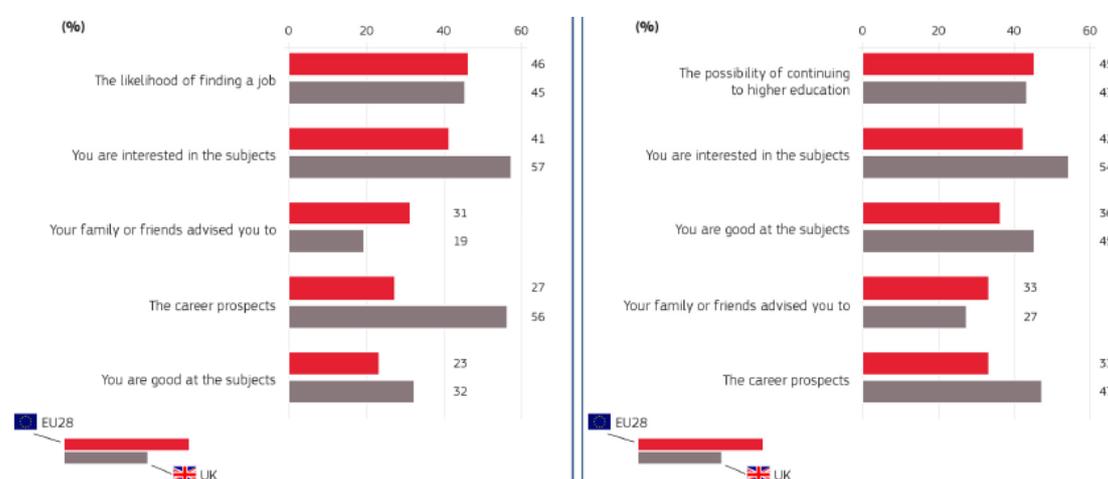
¹⁴ Newham College of Further Education

pupils' progression to university, and that progression onto apprenticeships or work is never promoted.

The *Learner Voice Survey* (see chapter 2) found that only around one quarter of students in Welsh further education colleges rated the careers information and advice offered as 'very good' (15).

Regarding factors influencing young learners' choice of education at upper secondary level, Cedefop's opinion survey finds differences between VET students and those following general academic programmes as shown below.

Figure 4. List of factors that might have played a role in VET students' (left) and general academic students' (right) choice of education at upper secondary level (multiple answers possible) (16).



Possibilities of progression from upper secondary education to higher education were on the whole emphasised more in the UK (40%) compared to the EU average (32%); however, only 28% of UK VET students chose vocational courses for this reason. Despite this, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service reports on increasing numbers of applicants to UK higher education courses possessing vocational qualifications, and also reports that less than two-thirds of 18-year-old applicants applied with only general academic subjects from upper secondary education in 2016 (17). Entry to higher education courses is decided upon at institutional discretion and students with general academic qualifications may be preferred for certain degree courses. VET qualifications for 16-19 year olds in England have furthermore been

15 Welsh Government (2016), *Learner Voice Survey*

16 Cedefop (2017), *European public opinion survey on vocational education and training*, VET Factsheet

17 UCAS (2016), *More support needed for HE students with non-traditional qualifications*

categorised as Tech Levels and Applied General Qualifications from September 2014. Qualifications meeting criteria for the applied general category comprise broad applied content, which is recognised for university entry. Similarly, the Welsh Baccalaureate and secondary qualifications within the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland allow for a mixture of academic and vocational subjects leading to higher education entry.

UK respondents to the Cedefop opinion survey chose upper secondary study based on their skills/knowledge of the subjects and interest in the subjects to a larger extent than based on advice from family and friends, teachers and advisors, and employers.

Table 1. **Contributing factors to choosing the type of upper secondary education in the UK⁽¹⁸⁾**

	General	VET
Being good at the subjects	45%	32%
Interest in the subjects	54%	57%
Advice from family and friends	27%	19%
Advice from teacher and school advisor	22%	18%
Advice from the world of work	5%	8%
Choosing the same subjects as friends	10%	7%

Young people have access to separate independent careers services in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although the results from the opinion survey indicate that not enough learners take advantage of them.

An Ofsted report looking into the quality of careers advice since September 2012, when schools were given the legal responsibility to provide this service to 14 to 16 year olds in England, discovered that very few of the schools examined possessed the knowledge, skills and expertise to provide an effective service. Vocational training and apprenticeships were furthermore often not promoted effectively⁽¹⁹⁾.

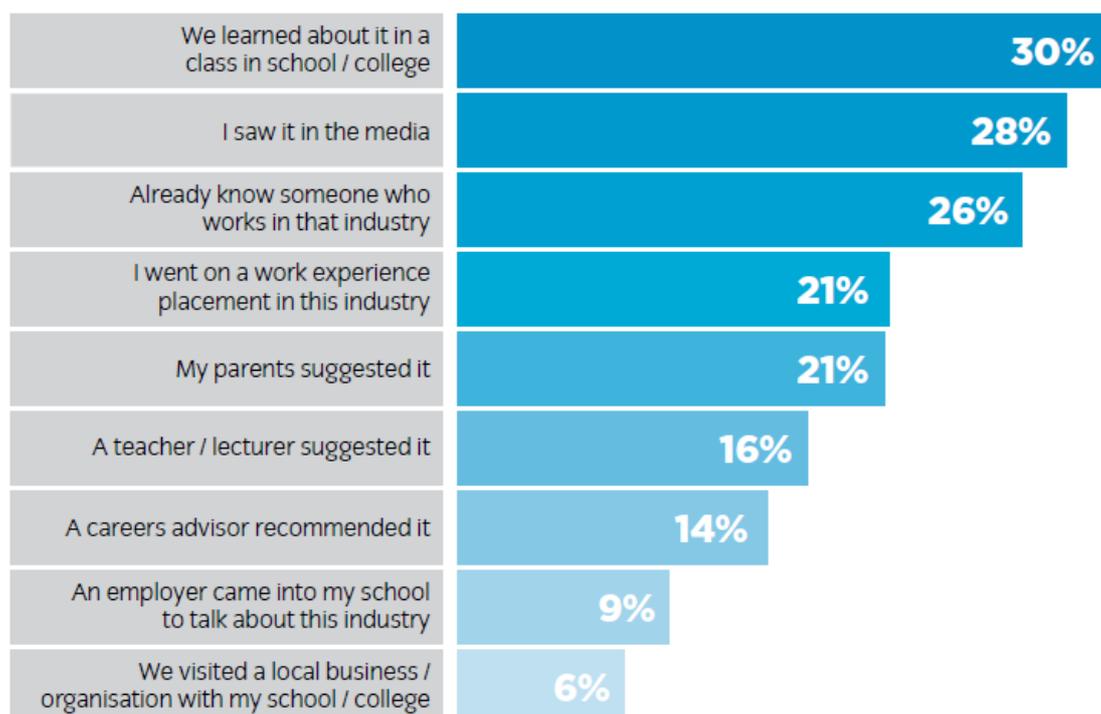
A City and Guilds (C&G) commissioned survey (2015) found that almost as many 14-19 year olds in England had heard about their chosen career through media channels as had heard about it in school. Additionally, very few young people learned about careers from employers. This is a cause for concern as media campaigns generally present information in less depth and with a narrower range of job roles than information given by employers and careers advisors. Young people also often interact only with media channels and content that they are interested in.

¹⁸ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training

¹⁹ Ofsted (2013), Careers guidance in schools not working well enough

C&G concludes that young people surveyed mostly considered careers that they see in their immediate sphere of influence, which chimes with the opinion survey when it shows UK learners choosing education pathways mostly based on interest and current ability.

Figure 5. **C&G survey: How young people heard about the job of their choice** ⁽²⁰⁾



UK respondents to the Cedefop survey also reported career prospects (49%), the likelihood of finding a job (35%) and the possibility of having a good salary (29%) as factors contributing to the decision on study choices. It is then a concern that the C&G survey mentioned above indicates that two-thirds of available jobs were not considered by the young people taking part. A rapidly changing labour market with new jobs being created shows the importance of good quality careers advice.

As explained earlier in chapter 3, there is a bias towards the general academic route in the UK; however, the Cedefop survey finds that only 14% of UK respondents claimed that they had been advised against studying vocational programmes at upper secondary level. This is compared to the EU average of 25%.

²⁰ City and Guilds (2015), Great Expectations

4. Attractiveness and access

Most UK respondents (75%) to the Cedefop opinion survey thought VET had a positive image, with 79% of VET students thinking VET in the UK has a positive image. Despite this, only 34% of UK respondents urged the government to prioritise investment in VET over general education routes, which is amongst the lowest percentages in Europe. The percentage of VET student wanting the government to prioritise VET was 55%. This is in spite of the fact that the education budget in the UK has fallen since 2010/11 and the VET sector is among the most affected by government cuts ⁽²¹⁾. Comparing this to the low amount of UK respondents (25%) who said they would recommend VET to young people gives an insight into why so few want to prioritise VET funding. As indicated above in chapter 3, most parents would like their children to follow a route leading to university study.

Most UK VET students reported that they think that VET provides them with skills that employers need. Whilst employers are increasingly more directly involved in VET design in the UK, to ensure labour market relevance in VET - such as the development of new apprenticeship standards in England - not all VET students exit their education and training at a high enough level. Too much VET is studied at EQF level 3 in the UK, whilst the labour market increasingly needs technician and higher level skills at EQF 4 and above. Therefore, not all UK VET qualifications guarantee direct access to a job. A lesser percentage of UK VET students consequently think VET allows them to quickly find a job after finishing their qualification.

Table 2. **Perceptions of VET in the UK** ⁽²²⁾

Respondents agree that:	General	VET
Students learn skills that are needed by employers	90%	91%
Quick access to the labour market	67%	66%

63% of UK respondents (75% of UK VET respondents) believed that vocational education leads to well paid jobs. Various studies have investigated lifetime earnings of workers with different levels of education in the UK. A National Audit Office study found wage premiums on average for EQF level 4 apprentices of 18% compared to people possessing qualifications at the same level that were not gained by

²¹ House of Commons (2014), Education spending in the UK

²² Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training

completing apprenticeship training ⁽²³⁾. Whilst working-age university graduates would earn an average of £32 500 compared with £22 000 for non-graduates ⁽²⁴⁾, possession of a degree may not guarantee a high salary according to the Office for National Statistics, as figures show that 29% of graduates in 2016 were paid less than the average for those having completed an apprenticeship ⁽²⁵⁾. Moreover, Sutton Trust analysis suggests that those having completed apprenticeships placed at EQF level 5 were expected to have greater lifetime earnings than graduates from ‘non-elite’ universities ⁽²⁶⁾, although only a small amount of these higher level apprenticeships currently exist in the UK.

Table 3. **Perceptions of VET in the UK**

Respondents agree that:	General	VET
VET leads to well-paid jobs	61%	75%
VET leads to highly regarded jobs	57%	78%

74% of UK respondents to the opinion survey from a vocational background believe it is easy to continue studies at higher education level, including at university, compared to only 57% of those following a general academic route. 19% of all UK respondents replied that they didn’t know. As mentioned in chapter 3.2, an increasing number of university applicants enter UK universities with vocational subjects. The low percentage of general students thinking VET can lead to university entry suggests that progression possibilities from VET are not emphasised by, or known to, careers advisers, teachers and parents.

A similar trend is found in the percentage of general students thinking upper secondary VET provides opportunities to study abroad compared to VET students. According to 2016 numbers from the UK National Erasmus+ Agency, 11 778 placements of UK students took place abroad in higher education institutions, against a total of 3 466 VET placements. Including youth exchanges, there was a total of 40 370 placements, so a higher percentage of HE students are taking advantage of learning opportunities abroad ⁽²⁷⁾.

²³ National Audit Office (2012), Adult Apprenticeships

²⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015), Graduate Labour Market Statistics

²⁵ Office for National Statistics (2016), A comparison of the earnings of graduates and apprentices in the UK, 2004 to 2016

²⁶ Kirby, P (2015), Levels of success: the potential of UK apprenticeships

²⁷ Erasmus+ National Agency (2017), Erasmus+ UK Programme, Application Results Statistics

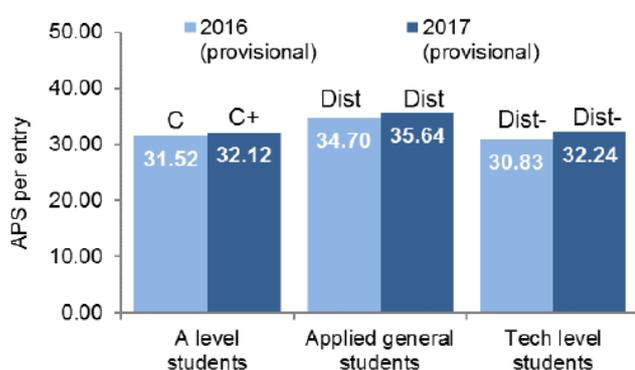
Only half of UK respondents to the opinion survey think it is easy for VET students at upper secondary level to switch to general academic study at the same level. This is perhaps a surprisingly low percentage considering the opportunities that exist to combine vocational and general academic subjects at this level in the UK; however, switching from more occupationally specialised VET, such as apprenticeships, may require some additional study at institutional discretion.

Table 4. **Perceptions of VET in the UK**

Respondents agree that:	General	VET
VET provides easy access to higher education	57%	74%
VET provides opportunities to study abroad	53%	70%
It is easy to switch from VET to general education	49%	54%

Only 55% of UK respondents think it is easier to obtain a vocational qualification than a general academic one compared to 63% of EU respondents. A number of vocational qualifications were removed at lower secondary level in England partly because they were considered to be easier alternatives to core academic study; however, the survey results suggest that upper secondary VET is considered harder to pass.

Figure 6. **Average points score (APS) per qualification for level 3 (EQF 4) study by 16-18 year olds in England ⁽²⁸⁾**



Figures from England show that the average grade at upper secondary level from general academic A levels is a 'C' on a six-point A*-E scale and that the average grade from the two VET streams is 'distinction', which is the second highest grade on a four-point scale.

Comparing performance directly across qualification types is not recommended due to differences in entry patterns and grading structures between qualification types.

69% of UK respondents agreed with the statement "students with lower grades are being directed towards vocational education". In general, higher grades are required

²⁸ Office for National Statistics (2017), Provisional A level and other 16-18 results in England, 2016/2017

to gain access to prestigious universities in the UK. Entry requirements for both school-based VET and apprenticeships are generally more flexible in the UK, although entry to certain high quality apprenticeships is now also very competitive.

82% of students following a general route and 74% of VET students in the UK were of the opinion that general education has a more positive image than vocational education. Atkins and Flint (²⁹) concluded that there are still class-based social inequalities in the UK education system where VET is seen as low quality programmes intended to prepare people for work rather than provide training for a profession. The study found that many of the people surveyed associated VET with the working class, which young people considered to be negative.

Table 5. **Perceptions of VET in the UK**

Respondents agree that:	General	VET
Easier to gain VET qualifications than general education	55%	63%
Students with low grades are directed towards VET	76%	70%
General education has a more positive image than VET	82%	74%

4.1 Solutions to attractiveness challenges

Careers advice and guidance strategies exist in all UK countries as well as various initiatives to promote VET and engage employers with schools. An example is the Inspiring the Future programme that work with teachers in schools and colleges to invite volunteers from industry to engage with students.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has added information about vocational courses and general careers advice to their website under the name UCAS Progress. These new descriptions of study opportunities in VET, alongside higher education entrance information, provide a more balanced picture of further study opportunities in the UK.

National strategies aiming at simplifying the VET system and creating clearer routes from education and training to specific occupations are in place and in various stages of implementation in the UK nations. Clear pathways to jobs are envisaged to attract young people and especially those from areas experiencing high youth unemployment.

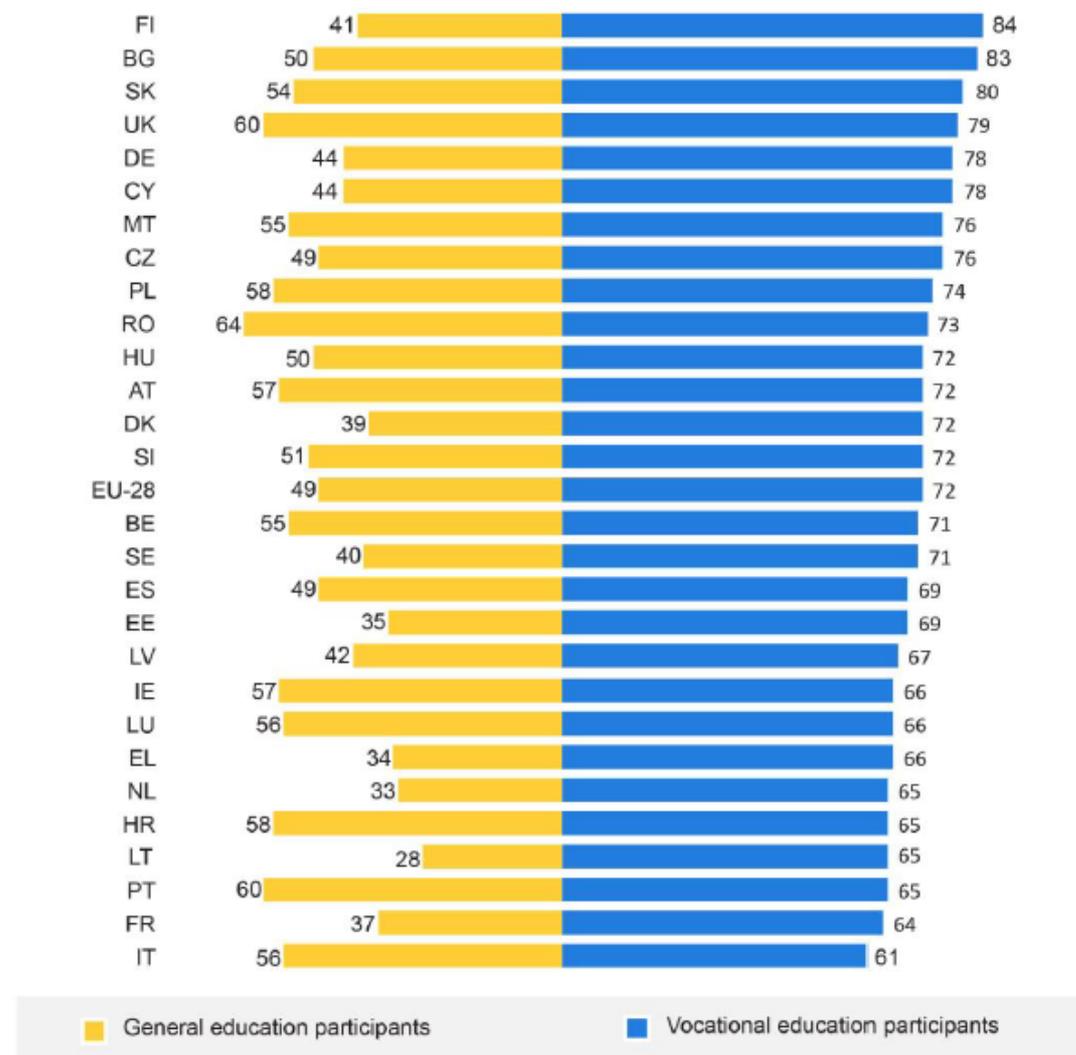
²⁹ Atkins, Liz and Flint, Kevin (2015), Nothing Changes: Perceptions of vocational education in a coalition

5. Experience and satisfaction

The Cedefop opinion survey shows that both students following a VET or general study route are largely satisfied with the education received in terms of general and work-related skills, the available equipment and the quality of teaching. General academic students reported a slightly lower satisfaction level with the work-related skills developed in their training programmes, which reflect that less work-related skills are included in upper secondary level university preparatory courses.

The UK scored highly compared to EU countries when all the aspects of upper secondary education mentioned above were taken into consideration, as shown in figure 7 below.

Figure 7. **Index of satisfaction (%) with education aspects at upper secondary level** ⁽³⁰⁾



³⁰ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training

The *FE Choices Learner Satisfaction Survey* of general and vocational education and training providers in England (see chapter 2) showed in 2016/17 that 83% of respondents would recommend their learning provider to friends or family. Furthermore, it found that a higher percentage (93%) of adult learners (above age 25) would recommend the learning provider than younger learners between 16 and 18 years old (76%) (³¹). Adult learners study largely the same qualifications as younger VET students in the UK, suggesting the satisfaction level increases when students have chosen a study programme after having experienced working life, which may help them in choosing an appropriate study programme.

The *FE Choices* survey moreover finds that learner satisfaction is higher in providers rated 'outstanding' or 'good' (85%) by the education provider inspectorate Ofsted, compared with 77% of learners at providers rated as 'requires improvement' and 74% at providers rated as 'inadequate'. Most apprenticeship framework areas were furthermore rated higher than classroom-based study in equivalent subject areas. 76% of learners rated the teaching they received highly, with adult learners above age 25 very positive (85%). Despite general satisfaction with the teaching and support by staff, a lower rating was given for careers advice.

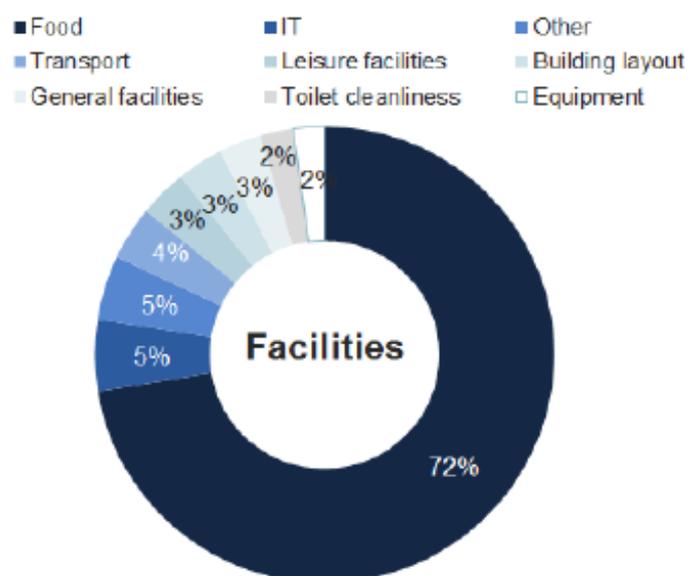
The *Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey* (³²) shows that a large majority of Scottish college students are satisfied with their college experience and, relevant to the Cedefop survey, around 90% reported that their time at the college helped them to develop knowledge and skills for the workplace.

85% of learners responding to the all-Wales *Learner Voice Survey* between 2013 and 2015 (see chapter 2) rated their learning experience as 'good' or 'very good'. The key factors most frequently cited as reasons for giving positive ratings were help and support (specific one-to-one support, extra learning support and support with personal circumstances), teaching and learning, and information and advice. Work-based learners in Wales were particularly likely to rate the help and support they received highly and 65% said the training was relevant to the work they wished to do.

³¹ Department for Education (2017), FE Choices learner satisfaction survey 2016 to 2017

³² Scottish Funding Council (2017), Student Satisfaction and Engagement 2015-16

Figure 8. **Learner Voice Survey, suggested improvements: facilities** ⁽³³⁾



UK respondents to the Cedefop opinion survey gave a very positive rating of the equipment that was available at their education provider (VET students: 89% and general students: 82%). When the *Learner Voice Survey* asked what could be improved in Welsh education providers, 41% replied that the facilities were an issue; however, as

seen from figure 8 below, the majority of students only had concerns about the standard of the food.

5.1 Satisfaction with VET compared with General Education

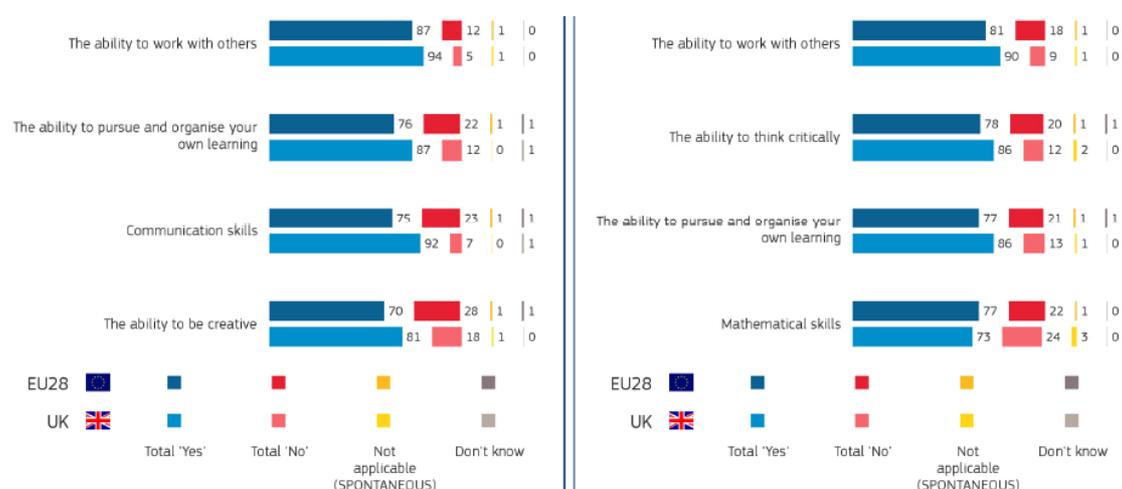
A survey by the Edge Foundation (2014) (see 3.2) revealed little difference between vocational students and those who studied academic routes in terms of their satisfaction with the careers chosen, salary, success, fulfilment and overall job satisfaction ⁽³⁴⁾.

Presented below is the degree of satisfaction in selected skills developed at upper secondary education, according to the Cedefop survey responses.

³³ Welsh Government (2016), Learner Voice Survey

³⁴ City and Guilds (2014), Children labelled 'too clever' for vocational education

Figure 9. Skills developed at upper secondary level – VET (left) vs general education (right) – top 4 answers at EU level ⁽³⁵⁾



A contributing factor to the fact that a lesser proportion of general academic students (88%) reported having developed communications skills at upper secondary level than VET students (92%) in the UK is that there are no compulsory subjects in the narrowly specialised general academic GCE A level study programme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, or the Scottish Higher qualification, preparing students for university entrance. VET students in England have been required to study English language at upper secondary level, depending on prior attainment, from 2014.

The low amount of UK respondents (32%) reporting that they were taught a foreign language in upper secondary education compared to the EU average (58%) also reflects that it is not compulsory to learn foreign languages at this level in the UK. The fact that only 19% of UK VET students studied a foreign language according to the Cedefop survey suggests that international mobility is not a priority for many VET students.

Table 6. Skills UK respondents stated they develop(ed) in upper secondary education ⁽³⁶⁾

Skills	General	VET
Communication	88%	92%
Foreign language	37%	19%

A larger proportion of general academic students studied mathematics, science and technology compared to VET students in the UK according to respondents of the

³⁵ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training, VET Factsheet UK

³⁶ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training

Cedefop survey. Of university entrants in 2016, mathematics was the most popular GCE A level subject in the UK, followed by biology and chemistry (³⁷). A number of careers require these subjects for entry, which many upper secondary students following the general route may not want to exclude themselves from. Upper secondary VET programmes often focus more on the subjects needed for a specific profession and many therefore don't include science and technology, although mathematics is increasingly becoming an important part of upper secondary VET. The same percentage of general academic and VET students reported to have studied digital and computer skills in the UK, reflecting that these skills are rising in importance across most professions.

Table 7. **Skills UK respondents stated they develop(ed) in upper secondary education**

Skills	General	VET
Maths	73%	67%
Science / technology	69%	59%
Digital / computer	54%	54%

As seen above in figure 9 upper secondary students' ability to pursue and organise their own learning is developed frequently in EU countries and the UK scores above the EU average. Results from the *Scottish Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey* back these numbers up by showing that in excess of 90% of respondents claimed that staff encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning (³⁸). Young people in upper secondary education are encouraged to develop the independent study skills needed at university in the UK. A closer link to employers, particularly through increased apprenticeship provision, also raises the importance of organisational skills related to working independently and the ability to work with others.

Table 8. **Skills UK respondents stated they develop(ed) in upper secondary education**

Skills	General	VET
Ability to pursue and organise own learning	86%	87%
Ability to work with others	90%	94%

A study by ICF GHK discovered that formal entrepreneurship courses were provided by around 30% of UK further education colleges and that around 60% of colleges offered units in the subject area as part of vocational courses. The study also found that around 30% of colleges offered non-formal entrepreneurship provision. This

³⁷ Which university? (2016), [These are the 10 most popular A-levels](#)

³⁸ Scottish Funding Council (2017), [Student Satisfaction and Engagement 2015-16](#)

shows a rising trend in colleges providing enterprise and entrepreneurship education and training (³⁹). The Welsh Government’s Youth Entrepreneurship Strategy makes enterprise education an entitlement for every student and the “Careers and the world of work” framework for 11 to 19-year-olds in Wales is used to plan entrepreneurial education across the curriculum. The Welsh Baccalaureate framework includes a Skills Certificate, which comprises critical thinking and problem solving, and creativity and innovation that are assessed through the challenges and personal investigation.

Table 9. **Skills UK respondents stated they develop(ed) in upper secondary education**

Skills	General	VET
Creativity	74%	81%
Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship	55%	66%
Critical thinking	86%	82%

³⁹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013), Enterprise education impact in higher education and further education

6. Outcomes and effectiveness

Respondents from the UK and the EU generally agree that VET has a positive impact on the economy and employment rate, and can help tackle social exclusion as shown in the table below.

Table 10. **Cedefop VET opinion survey respondents agree that** ⁽⁴⁰⁾

	EU	UK
VET strengthen the national economy	84%	84%
VET plays an important role in reducing unemployment	80%	83%
VET helps tackle social exclusion	78%	75%

Apprentices in the UK receive a lower salary during their training, but benefit from higher earnings later in their careers. Higher lifetime earnings are predominantly associated with completing apprenticeships at EQF level 4 and above. Research by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) found apprentices had an increased likelihood of finding employment, compared to similar people without an apprenticeship. Higher employment and wages furthermore result in higher taxes that benefit the government and society. Apprentices being specifically trained for a profession also have the potential to improve productivity of companies. Having calculated the cost of running the apprenticeship programmes, CEBR estimates the benefit-to-cost ratio for each £1 of public spending to be £21. The CEBR has calculated the economic impact of apprenticeships in the UK in the table below:

Table 11. **Economic impact of apprenticeships in the UK per year, over time** ⁽⁴¹⁾

	1950 £ billion, 2014 prices	1975 £ billion, 2014 prices	2000 £ billion, 2014 prices	2014 £ billion, 2014 prices
Net gains through higher wages, profits and taxes (gross value added / GVA)	0.159	7.1	19	31
Gains through saved unemployment benefits	0.006	0.16	0.24	0.37
Benefits to organisations from training	0.175	0.31	0.49	1.9
Total	0.340	7.6	20	34

The Centre for Vocational Education Research has also estimated returns of higher wages after completing UK EQF level 4 vocational qualifications, but that returns are even higher on apprenticeships at the same level and on higher level VET ⁽⁴²⁾.

⁴⁰ Cedefop (2017), [European public opinion survey on vocational education and training](#)

⁴¹ CEBR (2014), [Economic impact of apprenticeships](#)

⁴² CVER (2016), [Labour Market Returns to Vocational Qualifications in the Labour Force Survey](#)

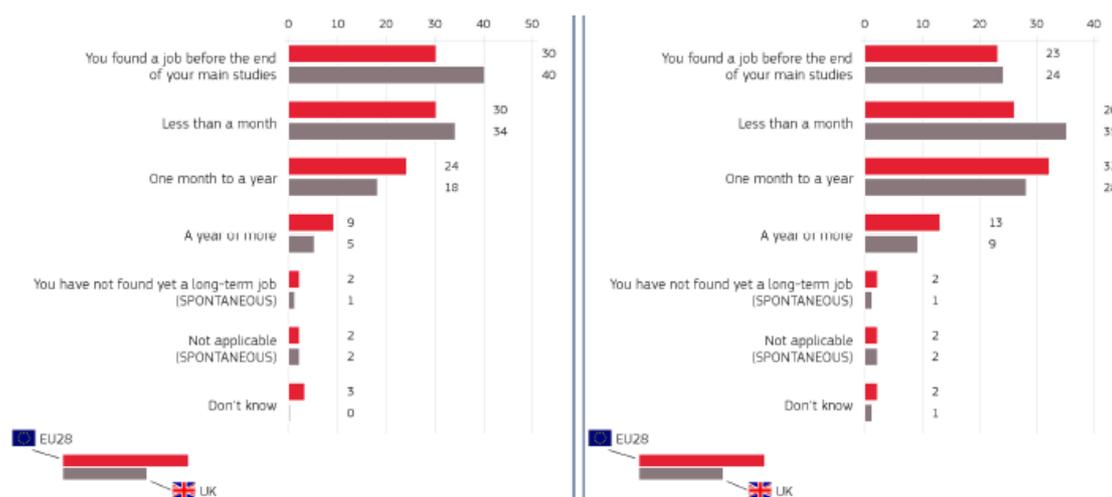
The Cedefop survey reveals that less people in the UK reported to have had difficulties in finding a job after their highest level of education than the EU average. In relation to this, it should be factored in that the UK unemployment rate is lower than the EU average. The survey indicated that the key reason for difficulties in finding employment in the UK was lack of work experience. City & Guilds discovered that more than 25% of 14-19 year olds surveyed in England did not have any work experience (⁴³).

Table 10. **Career satisfaction and respondents reporting difficulties in finding a job after their highest level of education in comparison with the unemployment rate (⁴⁴)**

	EU	UK
Difficulties finding employment	27%	18%
Satisfaction with professional career	81%	89%
Unemployment rate	7.6%	4.3%

The figure below furthermore shows that VET opinion survey respondents in the UK were able to find jobs in a shorter period of time than the EU average, which is also likely to be linked to job availability. A higher proportion of UK VET students (40%) said they secured a job prior to finishing the study than general students (24%). This suggests that much VET provision in the UK is linked closely to labour market needs, but the percentage could also be higher due to apprentices being considered to be employed in the UK through a work contract.

Figure 10. **Period of time after finishing VET (left) and general education (right) it took to find a job (%) (⁴⁵)**



⁴³ City and Guilds (2015), Great Expectations

⁴⁴ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training and Eurostat (2017), Unemployment rates for the EU, August 2017

⁴⁵ Cedefop (2017), European public opinion survey on vocational education and training, VET Factsheet

7. Main conclusions and further research needs

It is pleasing to see that the level of UK learner satisfaction with VET is amongst the highest in Europe according to the survey results, and that most UK respondents consider VET to equip learners with skills that are needed in the labour market. It is moreover interesting to observe the differences in opinions of respondents from VET and general academic backgrounds in relation to whether VET leads to well-paid and highly regarded jobs, as well as whether it provides progression routes to higher education.

The overall perception of VET in the UK is positive according to the survey results. Less positive opinions of specific issues, such as careers guidance being biased towards general education and people placing higher value on general education, explain some misconceptions of what VET is, in addition to offering valuable insight into the low level of awareness of VET in the UK.

The survey covers a wide age range and it would be interesting to discover any differences in the opinions of young learners and adults, particularly in connection to their thoughts on job prospects, as the youth unemployment rate is high across Europe. The UK ReferNet Agency also thinks looking at the impact of media in influencing young people's career choices could add value to the survey.

From a UK perspective, a break-down of responses from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be welcomed in the future. The VET systems in the four UK countries are becoming increasingly shaped to the needs of the four individual UK nations, so country-specific survey data carries the possibility of discovering trends in learner opinions within the UK.

8. Annex 1. Definition of VET

Given the heterogeneity and variety of VET within and between Member States, the scope of the Cedefop opinion survey is mostly focused on initial vocational training at upper secondary level. Some more general questions were also asked about VET without reference to a specific level or segment of the education and training system.

Addressing terminology challenges and concepts that underpin VET were crucial to shaping the survey design. The conceptualisation of 'upper secondary' and the distinction between VET and general education were the most prominent issues identified in the questionnaire design. For the purpose of the survey operational definitions based on the international standard classification of education (ISCED) and on Cedefop's terminology (⁴⁶) were used. Since the term 'upper secondary education' was not always understood in each country, a glossary of the term 'upper secondary education' was created for each official language spoken in the Member States and an age bracket was included to help respondents to frame upper secondary education as something that 'was concluded when you were 16 to 18' or so depending on the country.

The following definition of VET at upper secondary level was read out to respondents: 'vocational education is designed to give participants the practical and technical skills, know-how and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation or trade. In the following questions, we refer to vocational education which takes place at upper secondary education at 16 to 18 years old'.

⁴⁶ Cedefop (2014), [Terminology of European education and training policy](#)