



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity



CREID BRIEFING 13

REVIEWING ATTITUDES TO VOCATIONAL LEARNING

Sheila Edward, Elisabet Weedon and Sheila Riddell,
Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity
University of Edinburgh

October 2008

Introduction

This review of the literature on attitudes to vocational learning, undertaken between December 2007 and March 2008, was commissioned from CREID by the Scottish Government. The aims were to collate and review the research-based evidence on attitudes to vocational learning, by different population and stakeholder groups, and to identify gaps which might be filled by further research.

Summary of main findings

Vocational learning and the achievement of 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational learning is a recurrent theme in Scottish Government policy. The establishment of partnerships between schools, colleges and employers and schools policy initiatives, such as *Higher Still*, *Determined to Succeed*, *Curriculum for Excellence*, and, most recently, *Skills for Work*, demonstrate commitment to promoting vocational learning for pupils of all levels of academic ability.

Analysis of participation statistics showed:

- a lower uptake of vocational subjects than of academic subjects;
- a strong association between gender, social class and post-compulsory education;
- greater numbers of young males in further education than females;
- gender differences in subject choices at Standard Grade, Highers, and subsequent education or apprenticeships; and
- those from more deprived backgrounds take lower level qualifications at stage 4 and stage 5, and take more vocationally oriented subjects.

Research shows that many young people have enjoyed opportunities for vocational learning while still at school. The benefits reported, however, are very diverse, in terms of personal learning, confidence-building, preparation for the workplace and learning relevant to future education or work; but little is known about the attitudes of those who did not participate, or about the long-term impact of these experiences.

Although many factors influencing young people's decision-making about career and further education options are identified and discussed in the literature, it is still not clear how these factors interact to explain subsequent subject and career choices.

The literature search suggests gaps in our understanding of attitudes towards vocational learning, particularly in relation to:

- cultural and organisational factors in schools acting as barriers to learning;
- processes of choice for young people;
- attitudes of those who did not participate in vocational learning; and
- attitudes of some stakeholders, especially parents and teachers of non-vocational subjects in schools.

Background

This review of the literature on attitudes to vocational learning was commissioned by the Scottish Government Schools Directorate, Qualifications, Assessment and Skills Division, to identify, collate and review the research-based evidence, encompassing attitudes to vocational learning. Specific objectives were to:

- report on the literature on attitudes to vocational learning, by different population and stakeholder groups;
- investigate the range and breadth of literature which has researched attitudes to vocational learning, and the methodologies employed, with a view to informing future research;
- identify gaps in the Scottish and UK-wide evidence base, and outline potential research options.

The key stakeholder groups include pupils and students, teachers, headteachers, parents and carers, careers advisors, employers, and further and higher education organisations.

Vocational learning was defined as education, training or learning intended to equip persons for a specific vocation and/or that which seeks specifically to develop knowledge and skills in learners in order to operate successfully in the world of work. It excluded professional / vocational courses in subjects such as medicine, entry for which require prior attainment in non-vocational subjects.

Relevant publications and reports, chiefly published since 2000, were identified through searches of electronic databases and websites of relevant stakeholder and research programmes. Analysis of official statistics of pupils' subject choices were also used to shed light on current levels of pupil interest in vocational learning.

Key Findings

The policy context

Vocational learning is central to the skills agenda in Scotland. *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2007) highlighted the importance of individual development; asserted the goal of achieving “parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning” (p.5); and stressed the value of school-college partnerships in establishing a coherent system to support transition and encourage young people to stay in education and training post-16. Employers have an important role in the skills strategy, which stresses the need for partnership between employers, individuals and the Government, so that the benefits of skills acquisition can be maximised. The relationship between education and the labour market is, however, complex; and the literature highlights difficulties in employer engagement. Keep (2007) highlights, for example, the potential gap between employer demand and policy-makers' desire for higher skilled job opportunities for all.

Policy for Scottish schools, through programmes such as *Higher Still*, *Determined to Succeed*, *Curriculum for Excellence* and *Skills for Work*, is also committed to promoting vocational learning for pupils of all levels of academic ability. Opportunities to take *Skills for Work* courses, for example, are intended to be open to all pupils from S3 onwards: not only those with plans to seek employment or further training in the sector relevant to their *Skills for Work* course, but also those aiming for more academic study at University, and those who have no clear idea of what they want to do when they leave school.

Subject choices and achievements at school and beyond

Analysis of participation statistics revealed:

- lower uptake of vocational subjects than of academic subjects
- a strong association between gender, social class and post-compulsory education, with more women entering higher and further education at 18+
- greater numbers of younger males (14-18) studying in further education than young women
- strong gender differences in subject choices at Standard Grade and Highers, reflected in subjects pursued in further or higher education and apprenticeships
- those from more deprived backgrounds take more vocational qualifications.

Young people's attitudes to vocational learning

Unlike some earlier schemes to promote vocational learning, *Skills for Work* is aimed at all young people, and appears to have been broadly welcomed. Gains are reported, both in preparation for specific careers and in general employability skills. The literature is rich in views of young people who have participated recently in such courses, including some who may be planning to enter a related career, for example, intending doctors or teachers doing a childcare course.

Less is known about the attitudes of those who have not participated: were they discouraged by their teachers, or did they see no benefit to themselves in participation, and why? We also know little about the longer term impact on pupils of vocational learning at school: does it influence their choice of qualifications to pursue at 16? Has it any impact on their future work and life experiences?

Factors influencing young people's choices

The literature is rich in studies of factors influencing young people's subject and career choices. These include:

- the availability of opportunities;
- interest in the subjects;
- influence of family members, peers, teachers, careers officers;

- the quantity and quality of information available about further education and/or training, and careers to which they may lead;
- personal factors such as self-concept, identity, enjoyment and confidence.

Although there are many, generally small scale, studies of young people making subject and career decisions, there is still no broad consensus on how these several factors combine to explain young people's decisions and actions and to guide their future development.

Attitudes of other stakeholders

Teachers involved in vocational learning schemes identified many benefits for young people. Those directly engaged in vocational learning initiatives and working to overcome problems of communication and timetabling in partnerships of schools, colleges and employers were very positive, but literature reveals less about attitudes in the wider teaching and guidance community.

The literature also suggests that **further education tutors** have a key role with young people, particularly in motivating those who have not been successful learners at school. **Higher education admissions tutors** remain interested primarily in evidence of academic learning.

Parents are widely accepted to be a major influence on career decisions, either directly through advice, or indirectly, through earlier choices about children's education. Parental preferences for academic routes are challenged by current campaigns by the Edge Foundation and, in England, the Learning and Skills Council, who seek to ensure parents have appropriate information about current vocational options. **Siblings** and other family members may also be influential role models, and **peer influences** may also be strong.

Surveys of **employers** reveal a range of views on the relative importance of qualifications and the softer skills and attitudes that equip young people for the workplace. Collaboration with schools on programmes such as *Skills for Work* appears to be valued. Yet the literature reveals contradictions in employer attitudes: even if some employers are involved in the design and delivery of vocational qualifications, that does not ensure that all employers will understand and value them, and even employers who express support for vocational qualifications may still rely on 'academic' qualifications when selecting new recruits.

Gaps identified in our understanding of attitudes towards vocational learning

Perhaps the most important aim of the research review was to identify gaps in coverage: areas where there were still unanswered questions, and where further research was needed. We found gaps relating to all three areas: the policy agenda, young people's attitudes to vocational learning and their decision-making, and the attitudes of stakeholders.

The policy agenda

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was asked by the Scottish education authorities in 2007 “to examine in depth the performance of the school system within the framework of the Organisation’s review of national policies for education.” (OECD, 2007, p.13). While the OECD found much to praise, its report raised questions about the “cultural and organisational factors within schools” (2007, p.141) which may act as barriers to learning, and to participation in vocational learning. They highlighted the need for policy-makers to understand the journeys individual students make, in making their choices at school and for future education and / or employment.

Young people’s attitudes

For young people, the research literature demonstrates that young people engaging in vocational courses report many different types of vocational and personal learning. In this context, a large-scale survey of participants would be useful, to help us understand who is choosing which subjects / vocational areas and why. There is also need for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of a sample of some individuals with different personal goals.

Other stakeholders’ attitudes

Data on attitudes of teaching and guidance staff is patchy, as evaluations of specific programmes tend to rely on the perspectives of those working in those programmes. Less is known about the impact of vocational learning on the wider culture and organisation of schools, and the views of teachers of non-vocational subjects who may influence pupils’ choices. Parents may have a key role in encouraging young people into vocational learning: the impact of their views on 16 year olds’ decisions is disputed, but recent survey research has convinced the Learning and Skills Council and the Edge Foundation that they are worth targeting. We note that employers are supporting collaboration with Scottish schools. Since very few pupils with experience of *Skills for Work* have filtered through to the workforce at this point, further research into their attitudes seems premature, but will be very important in future.

Suggestions for further research

To help establish whether the elusive goal of ‘parity of esteem’ is nearer to being achieved, we need more data on levels of participation of whole cohorts across the range of post-compulsory options, on an age group or year group basis. It would also be useful to determine whether positive reactions to vocational learning at school lead to career choices, and to explore the relationship between vocational / academic choices and socio-economic status. The OECD suggestion that we need to understand better how individuals construe their journeys from compulsory education to their eventual careers also seems worth pursuing. We need a better understanding of attitudes to different types of vocational learning; and of the cultural and organisational factors in schools and colleges which may limit pupils’ opportunities to benefit from vocational learning.

We identified a need for more **quantitative** research on:

- levels of participation of whole cohorts across the range of post-compulsory options, on an age group or year group basis.
- attitudes to subject options, including vocational options, across whole cohorts of young people

More **qualitative** research is called for on:

- young people's accounts of their 'journeys' from school to their 'destinations' in employment or continuing education
- the organisational impact of programmes of vocational learning for school-age young people, both on schools and on partner colleges
- attitudes to different types of vocational learning, distinguishing between different aspects of vocational provision, e.g. content, pedagogy, levels of resourcing
- how parents and family members from different social and ethnic backgrounds influence children's choices, and how these relate to the child's gender.

References

Keep, E. (2007) *Key future labour market and skills issues in Scotland (and beyond)*. Glasgow: Futureskills Scotland. www.futureskillscotland.org.uk

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2007) *Quality and equity of schooling in Scotland. OECD reviews of national policies for education*. www.oecd.org

Scottish Government (2007) *Skills for Scotland: a lifelong skills strategy*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/197204/0052752.pdf>

Further information

The full research report, entitled *Attitudes to vocational learning: a literature review*, is published by the Scottish Government and available at:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/233621/0063966.pdf>

Further information about the project is available from Sheila Edward, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Simon Laurie House, St John St, Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ sheila.edward@ed.ac.uk

All Briefings are available in hard copies or as an email or to download on www.creid.ed.ac.uk
If you would like to receive a briefing in a particular format or to be added to or removed from the distribution list, please contact Fannie Kong (creid@ed.ac.uk)