

Research Article

Enhancing Vocational Education and Training in the UK Through Youth Mobility Schemes

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The problems of vocational education and training (VET) in the UK and, to some extent, around the globe seem to be perennial and continue to hinder the progressive development of apprenticeship and general VET schemes. After examining some of the key issues, this article goes on to argue that Youth Mobility Schemes (YMS) – lost to the UK along with the Erasmus and Socrates programmes due to the Brexit break with Europe – are useful and valuable vehicles for enhancing and upgrading the standing of vocational education. For this reason, the current moves in UK politics to extend its current schemes – which encompass 13 non-European (EU) countries such as Japan, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand – to EU states are well worth supporting. Against this background, the advantages of YMS are explored in relation to the ways in which such programmes can improve VET and enhance the status of vocational studies in general.

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1. Introduction: Policy Background

In a review of the relevant literature by the Social Mobility Commission in the UK^{**} in 2021, the authors outlined the current state of VET:

Between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort take low-level technical qualifications which generate little labour market value. These young people are disproportionately from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and when the routes they take are technical, they are less likely to achieve a wide range of educational and employment outcomes compared to their non-technical track peers^[1].

The title of this review – *The Road Not Taken* – tells a story in itself since the dire state of vocational studies reported in the survey follows decades of similar reports, policy changes, and short-lived VET schemes which attempted to address the key problems. Principal amongst the salient and recalcitrant difficulties are issues of lack of sufficient resources and funding^[2], the long-standing stigma which results in the subordinate and inferior status of VET against general academic studies^{[3][4][5]}, and the misalignment with industry and employment needs^{[6][7]}.

2. Vocational Education Policy in the UK: A Tragic Narrative

The story of attempts to remedy these difficulties of vocational education reads as a tragic narrative which involves so many failed initiatives, policy changes, and short-lived schemes^{[6][8]}. Writing in 2004, Lorna Unwin remarked that the UK system of VET:

is more confused and impoverished than ever, despite its central importance to contemporary society. Instead of celebrating skill and vocational knowledge, the United Kingdom has embroiled itself in tortuous debates about parity of esteem, while paradoxically attempting to reduce its once well-respected vocational qualifications to a thin gruel of competence-based checklists. In 2003, young people could still find themselves apprenticed to employers who would not be out of place in a novel by Charles Dickens^[9].

The key shortcomings adduced by Unwin – the prejudices which maintain the subordinate status of vocational pursuits, underinvestment by employers and government, and wastefully inept short-lived schemes – could have been applied to UK education at any time over the preceding half-century and are still as persistent today.

2.1. *New Vocationalism*

The period of the so-called ‘new vocationalism’ overseen by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in the 1980s and 1990s was a reaction to then British Prime Minister James Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech in 1976, which had called for an increased emphasis on the vocational and general economic function of education^{[10][11]}. The result was a disastrous series of mainly prevocational schemes, such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), based on a deficit model of learning on the assumption – supported by some questionable surveys of employers’

requirements – that school leavers lacked the basic skills necessary for employment. There is a general consensus based on research work in the field that all such developments failed to address the key problems and, indeed, may have had the counter-productive effect of aggravating the already precarious standing of VET^{[12][13][6]}.

2.2. Competence and NVQs

Underpinning such developments was the move from standard courses to competence-based education and training (CBET) programmes – National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – under the umbrella of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ, 1986–1997). The story of how CBET was introduced into VET in England through the establishment of the NCVQ in 1986 has been told by many commentators in the field^{[14][15]}. Following a number of critical reviews and reports about the work of the NCVQ throughout the 1990s^[16], the NCVQ was abolished in 1997 (general NVQs were phased out completely by 2008, and NVQs now play a much reduced role in the English system) and subsumed under the overarching Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). In my own critique, I argued that NVQs – and indeed all programmes and qualifications supported by CBET functional analysis – were ‘logically and conceptually confused, epistemologically ambiguous, and based on largely discredited behaviourist learning principles’^[11]. This conclusion was supported by philosophical argument, policy analysis, and empirical research, which pointed out the many shortcomings of NVQs in the areas of industry and employer involvement, serious problems of assessment, and inherent weaknesses of the behaviourist outcomes system^{[4][17]}.

The fact that the NVQ system persisted for so long – and, indeed, for a period was exported to other countries – can be explained by the aggressive marketing and commercialism of the international market for pre-packaged VET commodities^{[18][19]} combined with powerful political pressures concerned with face-saving (given the massive public investment in NVQs) and the irresistible appeal of apparently quick and easy solutions to difficult educational and economic problems. It was, for instance, obviously a rich mixture of largely non-educational and political vested interests which inspired the major project reported by Arguelles and Gonczi^[20], involving the mapping of the impact of CBET on educational systems in Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Costa Rica, France, and South Africa. The upshot of this massive public investment (with World Bank support) is summed up by Gonczi in the remarkably frank conclusion that:

Industrial survival in the competitive workplace depends on innovative solutions to improvement, which is the antithesis of prescribed procedures (as laid out in competency standards). We are left with the conclusion that the *foundation of the CBET system is shaky at best* (p.26, emphasis added).

In the major national review of all aspects of VET provision in England, the Wolf Report^[2] was highly critical of current provision – particularly for 16-19 year olds – declaring that ‘at least 350,000 get little to no benefit from the post-16 education system’ (p.7). The result is that ‘many of England’s 14-19 year olds do not, at present, progress successfully into either secure employment or higher-level education and training’ (ibid., p.8). In particular, the research conducted as part of the review concluded that:

low-level vocational qualifications, notably NVQs, have, on average, absolutely no significant economic value to the holders unless they are gained as part of a completed apprenticeship. This is especially true if they were gained on a government-financed scheme (ibid., p.150).

Amongst the many proposals for the improvement of practice, the report recommended the delay of specialisation in terms of vocational/academic tracks until age 16, the enhancement of English and Mathematics teaching for 16-19 year olds, and – in line with Continental systems of provision – the expansion of high-quality work experience and apprenticeships for young people (ibid., pp.160-171). Moreover, the de-skilling of vocational roles via the introduction of CBET strategies, which has reinforced the vocational/academic divide in Britain^[3], has additionally resulted in the further disadvantage of young trainees pursuing competence-based qualifications as against their more privileged academic peers^{[21][22]}.

2.3. Vocational Skills

Another key feature of this hectic period of vocational changes in policy and practice was an inordinate emphasis on the omnibus concept of ‘skills’, a perspective which has dominated the literature in this field for years and still informs policy and practice. There are a number of problems with an over-reliance on this concept, three of which need to be pointed out:

- i. Skill is not a clearly delineated or especially well-founded concept, and we need only think for a moment of the disparate ‘skills’ of the carpenter, musician, surgeon, and physicist to confirm this notion. A common mistake here seems to entail the category mistake of identifying features

common to vastly *different* skills and, from this move, inferring the existence of a *common* skill. As the philosopher of education, R.F. Dearden^[23], explained this error:

*There may indeed be features common to all skilled performance in virtue of which we call them skilled, but it does not follow from this that it is the **same** skill which is present in each case: in the skater, the juggler, the flautist, the chess player, and the linguist (p.78, original italics).*

Moreover, it is this fundamental philosophical error which underpinned the incorporation of ‘core’, ‘key’, or ‘transferable skills’ into VET discourse, which resulted in the ludicrous notion that the skills of the electrician, the plumber, the nurse, or the social worker could somehow be transferred from one workplace context to another independently of the vast and sui generis field of knowledge, understanding, values, and experience peculiar to each domain^[24].

- ii. Linked to the above is the implication (also a failing of CBET mentioned earlier) that skills are in some way independent of knowledge, thereby belittling the role of cognition and general understanding in vocational learning. This downgrading of knowledge and understanding is, to some extent, responsible for its subordinate status in relation to general/academic pursuits, which place a great emphasis on the cognitive aspects of education. The perspective on knowledge revealed in the skills literature is similar to the behaviourist conception demonstrated in Bloom’s^[25] taxonomy of objectives, which was roundly criticised by John Wilson^[26] for its obsession with the notion that ‘knowledge is like a physical object that can be broken down or built up into a hierarchy of component parts’ (p.106). This conception tends to separate the theoretical from the practical and suggests that some workplace tasks require little or no understanding and knowledge.

James Gribble^[27] has criticised such perspectives on the grounds that even some basic propositions require quite sophisticated spheres of data and experience if the full conditions of knowledge are to be satisfied. As he explains:

Knowing something involves judging that something is so, and judgement is a complex mental operation. Mental abilities and skills are not separate from knowing something, for we are unable to specify mental abilities and skills independently of the various forms of knowledge (p.58).

Competences and skills need to be underpinned by knowledge and understanding, just as education needs a solid foundation of the appropriate training which – as Winch^[28] argues – can facilitate the ‘confident deployment of skill and technique in a wide variety of situations (p.324).

- iii. There is also an underlying ethical dimension to such perspectives on knowledge and skills in that the separation of theoretical from practical knowledge and understanding in skill talk, as Johnson^[29] puts the argument, tends to place ‘under threat rich and deep conceptions of teaching knowledge and the person’(p.211). In a similar vein, Hart^[30] explains that ‘certain activities stand in a peculiarly intimate relation to the people we are’ whereas ‘there is something peripheral in the exercise of a skill...skills are mere appendices to our humanity and not continuous with and constitutive of it’ (p.215.). The key idea here is that knowledge, understanding, and the moral values underpinning teaching and learning are integrally connected with ideas of personhood in ways in which skills and competences are not; thus, learning programmes which neglect or override such links fail to satisfy the conditions of knowledge and the ethical criteria of educational processes^[31].

In a recent critique of the skills discourse in contemporary VET against the background of the neoliberal economic status quo and the dominance of the notion of *homo-economicus* in education policy, Rosenblad & Wheelahan^[32] argue passionately for a change of direction if vocational studies are to be enhanced to embrace a more holistic conception of personhood. As they explain:

The present policy discourse contracts the understanding of the intrinsic value and worth of being because skills are disembodied, which then underplays the importance of values, knowledge, norms, emotions, and even compassion. We argue that rather than inequality by design, education should value human flourishing in which human agency and human dignity are available as a virtue, emerging from within that which is social (p.11).

The researchers go on – using examples from the Finnish vocational system – to offer recommendations for the improvement of practice. Such proposals for VET enhancement have come from many different sources over the last decade or so. It would be useful to examine some of the key examples before looking at ways in which expanded youth mobility schemes might contribute to and facilitate the principal recommendations for practice.

3. Enhancing Vocational Education and Training: Policy Trends

All of the recommendations for the enhancement of VET theory and practice can be said, in one way or another, to have a number of common objectives underpinned by relevant ideas and values. These may be outlined in the following spheres:

- a. An upgrading of the status of vocational pursuits to achieve parity of esteem with general/academic/liberal education^{[33][22][3]}.
- b. An enhancement of provision through government-led policy and curriculum development, often mediated by quangos such as the MSC or the NCVQ^{[10][12][14][2]}.
- c. Changing policy and practice through academic critical commentary, often inspired by comparative analysis of different VET systems^{[34][35][32]}.

It would be useful to explore the key ideas in each sphere before examining ways in which Youth Mobility Schemes (YMS) may contribute to the principal objectives in this field.

- a. There is a general consensus that the standing of vocational education in the UK has been defined by cultural and social class factors embedded in centuries of tradition. As Silver & Brennan^[36] expressed this point: ‘education and training, theory and practice, the liberal and the vocational – the polarities have centuries of turbulent history’ (p.3). Schofield^[37] locates the original source of such distinctions within Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the writings of Plato and Aristotle in which liberal pursuits aimed at intrinsically valued knowledge for its own sake were distinguished from learning linked to knowledge with extrinsic purposes such as trades and occupations. As Schofield remarked:

The passing of time merely emphasised the distinctions which Plato made. Studies which were valuable in themselves, especially the Classics, became associated with the privileged class or elite in society. They were directly related to the concept of a courtier, a gentleman, a man of affairs, and later the public schools. Liberal education always carried with it a suggestion of privilege and privileged position, of not needing to work for one's living^[37].

Clearly, such entrenched privilege and academic prejudice could not be remedied easily and, for this reason, VET reform over the years has been characterised by largely inept tinkering with policy

directives and curriculum development. There has, however, been some serious theoretical work which has attempted to shift the discourse in this sphere. An early example of attempted revisionism was revealed in Sir John Adams's *Modern Developments in Educational Practice*^[38] in which there is an insistence that 'all education must affect our future life, either adversely or favourably, and to the extent that all education is vocational, as preparing us for the vocation of life' (p.50). Similar values inspired Silver & Brennan's advocacy of 'liberal vocationalism'^[36] in university courses and, to some extent, Winch's argument that 'education needs training'^[28] in that all educational activities are ultimately dependent upon training in basic skills. In a similar vein, Dearden^[39] suggests that there are no *a priori* reasons why education and training should not be compatible since 'a process of training could be liberally conceived in such a way as to explore relevant aspects of understanding, and in a way which satisfies internal standards of truth and accuracy' (p.93).

Such sentiments also inspire Walsh's comment that 'once the real values of liberal pursuits are stated and classified...we can find the same values in practical pursuits'^[40]. Williams^[41] expresses such an approach to educational values in his contention that:

Learning for its own sake and learning for vocational purposes need not be conceived of as mutually exclusive activities. The distinction between liberal and vocational learning does not imply that what is vocationally useful cannot be personally satisfying and enriching or that what is personally satisfying and enriching cannot be useful^[41].

This approach turns on the significant notion, highlighted by Hyland & Winch^[6], that the one common unifying element in relation to the main divisions in this field – general/technical, theory/practice, vocational/academic, mind/body – is centrally and crucially the process of learning in all its forms. The rich and deep learning characteristic of craftwork^[42] provides an important bridging notion here, and is fully in line with John Dewey's broad conception of vocational education as a broad range of activities and processes intended to 'stress the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation'^[43].

- b. Government policy-making designed to improve VET in Britain goes back at least as far as the late 19th century when the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction was established and tasked with making proposals for the improvement of the existing systems in the light of the then perceived

superiority of Continental models^[44]. Since then, as Esland^[45] has remarked, the State's standard response to VET problems has been, in the main, one of 'crisis management...giving rise to schemes and initiatives designed to limit the social damage which followed de-industrialisation'(p.v). This pessimistic perspective has not been alleviated to any great extent by the short-lived strategies of the 'new vocationalism' period and beyond referred to earlier. The lifelong learning policy changes enacted by the Labour Government from 1997-2010 were characterised by an essentially economic conception summed up in *The Learning Age*^[46] – the definitive State policy document on educational reform in this period – by the statement that 'for individuals who want security in employment and a nation that must compete worldwide, learning is the key' (p.18).

However, the principal divisions between vocational and general learning remained untouched by the so-called lifelong learning revolution, and the central problems were again addressed by the Wolf review of vocational education in 2011. Concerned principally with what Hager called the 'front-end model'^[47], that is vocational preparation for young people in the 14-19 range, the Wolf Report sought to address a number of serious problems with the system. As the report's introduction noted:

many of England's 14-19 year olds do not, at present, progress successfully into either secure employment or higher-level education and training. Many of them leave education without the skills that will enable them to progress at a later date. The Review received many hundred submissions from individuals and groups with extensive knowledge of our vocational education system. Many highlighted its strengths and achievements. But none wanted to leave things as they are; nor did they believe that minor changes were enough. This is surely correct.(p.8).

In the light of these persistent shortcomings, the report made the following recommendations for the improvement of practice in the field:

- all young people should receive a high-quality core education which equips them to progress, whether immediately or later, to a very wide range of further study, training, and employment.
- the system should enable and encourage variety, innovation, and flexibility, including different opportunities for specialisation: limited pre-16, much greater thereafter.
- our third major objective should be to recreate and strengthen genuine links between vocational education and the labour market; and especially, in the case of young people, the local labour

market. Employers are the only really reliable source of quality assurance in vocational areas, and, in spite of lip service, have been progressively frozen out of the way vocational education operates

- finally, we need to do far more, far more actively, to help young people to enter the labour market and obtain genuine employment experience. This will be the hardest task of all. Whereas the school-leavers of the 1960s and 1970s entered a labour market which was happy to offer young people a job, today's job market is very different.(ibid., pp141-143).
- All of these recommendations appear to be both sound and achievable, yet – in 2025 – the same problems of VET in Britain remain and are subject to critique and reform proposals. The most recent innovation – the introduction of T Level qualifications as vocational alternatives to A levels for 16-19 year olds not following the mainstream general/academic route – was introduced gradually from 2020^[48] and the results have been disappointing. As Susanna Rustin^[49] commented in a recent review, 'T Levels are a disaster – and young people are suffering because ministers won't admit it'. Drop-out rates remain high and completion and progression rates low compared with other vocational qualifications. As Rustin notes:

the central problem remains: T-levels are narrower and harder than the courses they are meant to replace, making them unsuitable for students without a specific job in mind, and also for those who passed GCSEs with grade 4s or 5s rather than 6s or higher. College leaders have repeatedly challenged ministers over which courses they think such students should take. They are waiting for an answer.(ibid.)

Although the current Prime Minister of Britain, Sir Keir Starmer, has spoken of a 'wasted generation' with 'one in eight young people not in education, employment or training'^[50], the only noticeable government response to VET problems has been to set up yet another policy review of the issues under the aegis of the ongoing curriculum review led by Prof Becky Francis^[49].

- c. In the light of repeated government failures to remedy VET problems through curriculum and policy reform, comparative educational commentators have sought to advocate the best vocational practice of other nations as potential models for UK reforms. Although the research shows that achieving the right strategy for vocational preparation is something of an international problem^[51], there has always been a marked tendency to highlight favourable aspects of the VET programmes of

other nations to make recommendations for improvements in the British system.

Christopher Winch^[52] has argued that European vocational policy frameworks – after initially following the flawed learning outcomes model of the NCVQ in Britain – are now moving towards a more flexible framework and eschewing narrow prescriptive objectives. The German so-called dual system of vocational apprenticeship is often advocated as a model worth emulating and – in spite of the nation's current economic and political problems – the system still seems to be in reasonable health. In a recent Cedefop Report^[53] on the German system, the reviewers commented that:

After a decline in the number of young people interested in VET since 2012, more young people are now opting for VET again. This includes both school-based VET programmes, which are mostly offered in the healthcare, education, and social services sectors, as well as dual VET programmes (apprenticeships). The number of beginners starting school-based VET programmes rose by 2.0% and those of dual VET programmes by 1.7%. In 2023, the number of apprenticeship graduates who were taken on by their former training companies increased to reach the pre-pandemic level of 77%. Over time, this has been the highest take-on rate since 2000 (p.1).

Apprenticeship training is often seen as a panacea for VET problems, and Wolf^[54] has recently renewed the calls made in her 2011 Report for an expansion of this field in Britain. As she comments:

far too few apprenticeships are available for young people. And we have not learned the core lessons from Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland, whose apprenticeship systems are world-leading. Local employers must be central and in control. This is what keeps apprenticeships not just effective in developing skills but in providing an alternative to an increasingly hierarchical higher education system (p.2).

The reference to Finland here is significant and follows a number of recent proposals for curriculum reform, at both school and post-school levels, which highlight aspects of the Finnish system that may provide useful models for the enhancement of practice. Subrahmanyam^[55] has outlined the strategies used in Finland to improve VET. She notes that:

If the Finnish approach is anything to go by, technical and vocational education and training, or TVET, could provide a means of tackling youth unemployment. While a negative social bias has often prevented young people, in both developing and developed countries, from enrolling in vocational track programmes,

Finland's reforms over the past decade have made TVET popular, contributing to lower youth unemployment rates (p.1).

Her review went on to outline the key change policies:

Finland's success is based on external and internal policy shifts. Legislative reforms since 2000 allow TVET students to progress to further studies at the university or applied sciences level and provide its institutions with the same generous basic and development funding as general education institutions. Finland's curriculum has been restructured to include the national core curriculum required for access to university, as well as strong on-the-job training and lifelong learning components. Finally, TVET schools across Finland promote their services to parents by arranging regular visits and parents' evenings (ibid.,p.2).

Moreover, recent comparative research^[56] seems to indicate that the Finnish improvements have been consolidated. As the Cedefop overview reports:

Finnish VET is highly regarded: 90% of Finns think it offers high-quality learning, and 40% enrol in VET after basic education. The reasons include qualified and competent teaching, flexible qualifications, strong employment prospects, and eligibility for further studies. VET flexibility is one of the Finnish system's greatest strengths. Personal development plans are created for each learner at the beginning of studies. Learners study only what they do not yet know; the more they know, the shorter their studies. VET study can start at any time, depending on provider arrangements (p.2).

Many of these lessons from comparative studies can be implemented and followed through both at the national policy level and by means of Youth Mobility Schemes (YMS) discussed in the next section.

4. Youth Mobility Schemes

Although there are currently no systematic educational/cultural links with EU countries since Brexit came into effect in January 2020, there are youth visa schemes covering 13 countries which allow young people between 18 and 30 to travel abroad for 'working holidays' of up to two years. Up to September 2024, 312,000 visas had been issued, the vast majority involving Australia (58,800), New Zealand (55,400),

and Canada (49,000), with reciprocal arrangements for participating countries^[57]. Currently, there are proposals backed by politicians, academics, and campaign groups for the introduction of an EU-UK youth mobility scheme, which would allow 18–30 year olds to work and/or study in the UK or EU for a set period (ibid, p.1). The European Commission had called for a post-Brexit Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS) linking UK and EU nations in 2024 on the grounds that:

The withdrawal of the UK from the EU has resulted in decreased mobility between the EU and the UK. This situation has particularly affected the opportunities for young people to experience life on the other side of the Channel and to benefit from youth, cultural, educational, research, and training exchanges^[58].

At the time, the Conservative Government rejected the proposals on the grounds that it might represent the beginning of a slippery slope leading to general freedom of movement, which was anathema to the then Brexiteers who still dominated the Conservative agenda in this sphere. Since the election of a Labour Administration in July 2024, there is a much greater conciliatory attitude towards links of all kinds with Europe, though fears of a general return to freedom of movement are threatening to thwart the progress of a Parliamentary Bill introduced in January 2025 by James MacCleary MP (Lib Dem), which would require the government to negotiate the extension of the youth mobility scheme to individual EU countries^[59].

MacCleary argued that an EU-UK scheme would provide “opportunity and hope” for young people as well as “backing British business with the labour force it needs to grow”^[57]. In a similar vein, the campaign group *Best for Britain* stated that an EU-UK scheme would “facilitate cultural exchange” and “allow for increased flexibility in the labour market,” and The Migration Advisory Committee of the House of Commons has said that an expanded youth mobility scheme could be beneficial for the labour market, commenting that:

We have long argued that expanding the YMS to more countries, in particular those located close to the UK with which we already have close links, would be beneficial to sectors with a more fluid labour market such as hospitality. Such schemes also have the advantage of not linking the visa to the employer and so reduce the risks of exploitation, which tend to be more prevalent in low-wage employment^[60].

However, all such considerations – in addition to what is known from the past experience of YMS – are currently having to battle against fears of freedom of movement in a political climate obsessed with attempts to reduce migration of all kinds. Reports at the end of 2024 indicated that the EU was seeking to refine the proposal as a youth experience scheme or a cultural enrichment programme. In evidence to the House of Lords European Affairs Committee in December 2024, the Minister for EU Relations, Nick Thomas-Symonds, said that it was up to the EU to finalise any proposals it wanted to place on the table, and the UK's response would depend precisely on what was meant by youth mobility. He also reiterated the government's pledge to bring net migration down^[59].

For proponents of YMS concerned to enhance vocational education in Britain, there seem to be two principal strategies available to maintain political progress. First, there is a need to re-emphasize the substantial benefits, for VET students and providers, businesses, and society generally, of such schemes and, secondly, to demonstrate that the nature of YMS arrangements does not represent a return to widespread freedom of movement between the EU and the UK.

4.1. Benefits of YMS

The *UK Business and Trade Commission*^[61] outlined the benefits of YMS as follows:

- *Cultural benefits:* Youth mobility schemes increase cultural exchange through the sharing and trading of customs, traditions, and languages, as well as ideas, entrepreneurship, and innovation.
- *Social benefits:* Youth mobility schemes increase skills and knowledge sharing through internships, apprenticeships, trainee schemes, and seasonal work placements. As well as through the opportunity for young people to study and travel together. All are experiences that enrich the lives of young people and their wider communities and which boost UK soft power by strengthening international ties.
- *Economic benefits:* Youth mobility schemes offer young Brits invaluable opportunities to gain experience abroad, bringing that knowledge back to the UK with them. YMS can also help ease labour shortages for public services and British businesses – especially in the hospitality, tourism, leisure, and agriculture sectors – which in turn help to ease inflationary pressures and boost the economy. Allowing our young people to live abroad and allowing more young people from overseas to spend their formative years here helps build lasting connections, increasing future opportunities for international collaboration and foreign direct investment (pp.1-2).

The Commission also reported that ‘polling, carried out in March 2024, shows that almost two thirds of Brits (59%) think the Government should negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU. This includes 56% of those aged 55 and over’ (ibid, p.2).

In addition to such public, business, employment, and social considerations, there are also clear advantages of YMS in terms of attempts to remedy some of the principal shortcomings of British VET noted in earlier sections. It was noted above that certain Continental nations – Finland, Germany, and France, in particular – have invested considerably more resources and effort into VET development and thus have enhanced both the quality and standing of their systems. It is true that all European systems, to a greater or lesser degree, were initially influenced by the CBET and skills agenda, but, as Rosenblad and Wheelahan^[32], suggest, countries such as Germany and Finland eventually worked out a compromise whereby productive skills for employment were balanced against notions of personhood and general educational development. They argue that ‘the emancipatory potential of education hinges on broadening the notion of human being and human agency as this is intrinsic to education that can encompass the social, practical, and political world’ (ibid., p.376).

The German vocational concept of *Bildung* has been highly influential across European VET systems. Defined by Ruhi Tyson^[62] as a ‘concept which encompasses matters such as moral formation, aesthetic sensibility, autonomy, wide-ranging generalist knowledge, and, importantly for empirical research, all in connection with biographical developments’ (p.234), this notion has played a significant part in enhancing both the status and quality of vocational studies across Europe in the face of the minimalist skills agenda criticised earlier^[63]. YMS exchanges for VET learners can provide a much-needed taste for such wider concepts of vocationalism and add significant value to existing apprenticeship and general vocational programmes in Britain.

4.2. YMS and Freedom of Movement Issues

In reviewing the proposals for YMS, Prof Catherine Barnard^[64] states unequivocally that ‘it ain’t free movement’. She explains the scheme as follows:

The key elements of the offer are that the scheme would allow 18 to 30 year olds (in fact up to 34 years if starting at 30) to travel to the UK/EU member state for any purpose (e.g., study, work, volunteering, leisure, travel) for up to four years on condition that the individual has a passport, comprehensive sickness insurance, and sufficient means to support themselves.

Family members could join the individual exercising their mobility rights. Some form of visa or work permit could be required but at a proportionate cost (p.1).

She is adamant that ‘the proposal falls far short of free movement because it only allows individuals to come for a limited period and does not allow them to settle in the UK or EU member state’, and she concludes her analysis with the recommendation that:

any progress will require a mindset that focuses on how to improve relationships and not on refighting old Brexit battles. It would also be a good start not to use the language of ‘free movement’ when talking about a youth mobility scheme. *Because it is not* (ibid., italics added)

Similar sentiments have been expressed both by those in favour of greater ties between Britain and Europe and also by educators concerned with the loss of cultural links since Brexit was enacted. Research commissioned by the *British Council*^[65], for example, reported ‘evidence that international student mobility (ISM) builds trust and long-term relationships around the world’. Moreover, a wide range of benefits was recorded by the research team:

The development of language proficiency, intercultural understanding and ties, and global perspectives benefits the individual participating in International Student Mobility but also has wider benefits for institutions, domestic students, businesses, as well as nations. Nations reap the benefits of increased trust and long-term partnerships (pp.1-2).

In a similar vein, the *European Youth Forum*^[66] recommends the extension of non-formal learning exchanges via mobility schemes on the grounds that ‘learning mobility enhances cultural understanding, multilingualism, and citizenship, empowering young people with the intercultural skills needed for today’s interconnected world (p.7).

Speaking at a meeting of EU representatives recently, the Mayor of London, Sir Sadiq Khan, said proposals for a revised YMS ‘would help aid economic growth across London’ while giving under 30s the chance to work abroad. The Mayor also argued that closer ties with Europe would help counter the economic impact of President Donald Trump’s threatened tariff regime (*Best for Britain*^[67]). Moreover, Cary Mitchell, Executive Director of Operations for *Best for Britain*, confirmed that:

a reciprocal Youth Mobility Scheme is win-win not just for young people in the UK and Europe, but is incredibly popular across the UK, with our polling consistently showing that

most voters are in favour of it...A Youth Mobility Scheme is also well within the Government's red lines for the EU-UK reset because it is not the same as freedom of movement as some have claimed (ibid.,p.1).

Confirmation that such schemes are well within current British government guidelines has also been provided by Peter Stefanovic^[68], who has roundly criticised those opposing current proposals for EU-UK youth mobility schemes on the grounds that they are denying transformative work opportunities to British youngsters through the distortion of facts about freedom of movement.

5. Conclusion: Future Directions for YMS

The current political climate in Britain may now allow – providing that the myths and fears about unlimited freedom of movement can be dispelled – for a return to those valuable educational exchanges with European nations which have been of mutual benefit to students, institutions, and businesses over many years. It is now clear how much UK educational institutions at all levels have lost through the post-Brexit closure of schemes such as Erasmus and the failure of attempts to replace them^[69]. The benefits of YMS for VET in Britain are – as argued in the foregoing sections – widespread and highly significant in light of the current problems in this sphere.

As mentioned earlier, the British Prime Minister has recently called for a reform of the welfare benefits system in Britain in order to reverse the wasted generation of young people who are not in education, employment, or training^[50]. If we add to this bleak picture the increasing numbers of young people with a mental health condition – around 250,000 18-34 year olds on current estimates^[70] – there is clearly much to be done in terms of educational as well as welfare benefits reform if this wastage is to be realistically tackled. There is much of value to be learned from Continental systems of VET – both technical and in relation to the affective dimension concerned with emotional and personal development^{[17][32]} – and a resumption of YMS links with Europe could make a significant contribution in this area. For this reason – and with the vitally necessary continuing enhancement of British VET in mind – the current proposals for the re-introduction of YMS connections between the UK and the EU are worthy of widespread support and endorsement.

Notes

****** Although the article refers to the UK / Britain, it should be noted that educational matters are devolved into different regions, with England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland having slightly different systems. However, central educational policy-making resides with the UK Parliament in London, and the problems of vocational education and training are evident throughout all the regions of Britain.

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