

THE STRATEGY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Please let me first introduce myself. I am Angela O'Donaghue, the Principal of City Of Sunderland College, a large publicly owned and funded College in the UK.

I am here to represent the ***147 GROUP*** of UK Colleges This group is recognised by the UK Government as a group of the 25 leading vocational education Colleges in the UK and, as such, is being funded by the Government to explore the transfer of the benefits of the UK system to Chinese Colleges. I am therefore addressing you not only on behalf of my own College but on behalf of all the 25 Colleges in the 147 Group.

Let us first explore a number of issues which are important to us all.

WHAT IS VOCATIONAL TRAINING?

The working definition by the UNESCO Convention describes vocational education and training as:

"All forms and levels of the education process involving, in addition to general knowledge, the study of technology and related sciences, the acquisition of practical skills, know-how, attitudes and understanding relating to occupations in the various sectors of economic and social life."

Accordingly the term "Vocational education refers" to the development of the knowledge and skills required to carry out a particular job ("occupation"). Its scope is, therefore, extremely wide. As in the rest of the world, UK vocational education and training includes training for:

- Commercial, technical and professional development as well as transferable personal skills.
- The specific skills required to carry out a specific job.

In today's fast-pacing environment, nothing stays still for long and that is because the skills needed by the economy are constantly evolving in line with global trends and technological advances. It is vital therefore that the education system ensures we can be responsive to meet these needs within a quality framework which ensures that standards are kept consistently high.

BACKGROUND TO THE UK VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM

The system of vocational education in the UK was initially developed independently of the state, with bodies such as the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and City & Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) who developed courses and set examinations for technical subjects. The Education Act 1944 made provision for a tripartite education involving secondary technical schools but by 1975 only 0.5% of British senior pupils were in technical schools, compared to two-thirds of the equivalent German age group.

Successive recent British Governments made attempts to promote and expand vocational education and in the 1970s, the Business And Technology Education Council (BTEC) was founded to confer further and higher vocational education awards. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were a number of Government initiatives, including the Youth Training Scheme, National Vocational Qualifications and General National Vocational Qualifications.

In 1994, publicly-funded Modern Apprenticeships were introduced to provide "quality training on a work-based (educational) route". Numbers of apprentices have grown in recent years and the Government has stated its intention to make apprenticeships a "mainstream" part of the education system.

Up until the end of the twentieth century, UK vocational education focused on specific trades such as for example, an automobile mechanic or welder, and was therefore regarded as being primarily associated with trade training. As a consequence, it was sometimes regarded as being at the lower end of the education system and in certain areas attracted a level of stigma.

However, as the labour market becomes more specialized and economies demand higher levels of skills, governments and businesses are increasingly investing in the future of vocational education through publicly funded training organizations and subsidized apprenticeship or traineeship initiatives for businesses. At the post-secondary level vocational education is typically provided by an institute of technology, or by a College of Further Education, such as my own, City of Sunderland College.

UK vocational education has therefore diversified over recent years and now not only exists in the trade areas I referred to above but in such areas as retail, tourism, and information technology. Furthermore there have been recently been significant developments in higher levels of vocational education in areas such as business management.

As a result, the UK vocational education system now includes all levels of training from the most basic life skills to basic and advanced trade training to postgraduate management training. The common factor is that all vocational programmes at whatever level are centred on training for work. The overall aim is that therefore that the trainee acquires the skills and knowledge required in a specific job.

Vocational education prepares learners for jobs that are based in manual, practical or professional activities. It is traditionally non-academic and is totally related to a specific trade, occupation or *vocation* (hence the term). It is sometimes referred to as *technical education*, as the learner directly develops expertise in a particular group of techniques or technology.

HOW DOES THE UK SYSTEM WORK TO-DAY?

The UK system of vocational education involves a number of facets:

- **Vision.** The vision **and commitment** by all partners in the vocational education system to identify needs and to develop training programmes to meet those needs.
- **Policies.** Workable and flexible policies set at the highest government level in consultation with all other partners for the development and funding of training opportunities.
- **Planning.** Planning, again at the at the highest government level in consultation with all other partners for the development of training opportunities at national, regional and local level.
- **Infrastructure.** There must be an adequate infrastructure in place to enable the training and assessment of skills and knowledge in a manner which is relevant to the real world of work.
- **Design of qualifications.** Vocational qualifications must be relevant to real jobs and, therefore, they must need to be designed in by the partners so as to guarantee this relevance.
- **Delivery of training programmes.** The training programmes must also be relevant to real work. Therefore, it must be carried out so far as is possible in real job situations – either “on the job” or in simulations. As a result, there is an emphasis in assessment on the *outcomes* (i.e. on what the trainee can do after the training) rather than the processes of learning. This is a further step towards ensuring that the qualifications are based firmly on the needs of employers.
- **Quality assurance.** The UK vocational education relies very heavy on the quality of its training. Therefore the Government has set up a number of regulatory bodies with powers of inspection to ensure this quality. I will deal with those bodies below.

With all this in mind a range of *National occupational standards* have been developed for each occupational area in all industrial, service or commercial sectors. The standards detail what is expected of people working at different levels in those sectors, from the most basic and routine to the most senior management levels. The standards define what employees, or potential employees, must be able to do and know, how well they must do these things and the circumstances in which they have to use the skills or carry out the activities.

HOW IS THIS ACHIEVED?

In the UK there are Vocational Partnership networks across the whole system of vocational education. The bodies and organisations involved in those partnerships bring a range of capabilities and expertise which that embrace the whole system from policy to implementation and practice and which accordingly ensures the relevance and quality required.

The partners are:

- **UK Government** – responsible for the development of education and training policy, including setting national training targets and approving and funding the whole system
- **Learning Skills Council [LSC]** – a government organisation which operates regionally to ensure strategic integration, planning and funding of all post compulsory learning below higher education
- **Sector Skill Councils [SSCs]** in all occupational; areas – another government organisation but which includes employers’ representatives and are responsible for the development of occupational standards, occupational mapping and functional analysis as well as facilitating national training targets
- **Awarding Bodies [ABs]** (e.g. Edexcel, CGLI, RSA) – which issue certificates for the qualifications and are responsible for the approval of centres which deliver vocational training programmes.
- **Training Inspection bodies** – other government bodies which are responsible for the development and implementation of inspection frameworks for ensuring the quality of training and the effectiveness of learning
- **Regulatory bodies** e.g. Qualification & Curriculum Authority [QCA] / Scottish Qualification Authority [SQA] - qualification systems and accreditation and quality assurance systems.
- **Delivery and consultancy organisations** such as City of Sunderland College – which are responsible for the delivery and assessment of the training and development programmes and for the development of the curriculum and assessment materials involved.

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS IN THE UK SYSTEM

As I have already said a vocational education programme can only be effective if it is relevant to the world of real work. Therefore, the involvement of the employers in the development of standards, training programmes, and assessment methods and in the management of quality is absolutely essential. This involvement is guaranteed by employer representation on all the bodies I have referred to.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR ACHIEVEMENT

An increasingly important aspect of the UK vocational education system is that trainees should be concentrating on developing skills and knowledge in areas where they are not competent, rather than on areas where they already have an adequate level of competence. In the latter case, this clearly affects the industrial relevance of the training, as trainees would be learning just to receive an award rather learning to carry out a job.

As a result, the system has inbuilt facilities for the recognition of prior learning and existing competence without the need for the trainee to undergo further training in those areas and this can be used as a partial (or sometime full) credit towards) the vocational or other awards.

However, the trainee will only be awarded this full or part credit if he or she can produce valid independent evidence (usually in writing) that he or she has the required knowledge or skills. Naturally, as well as being independent, the evidence must also show that the knowledge and/or skills are relevant and still current.

WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF THE UK VOCATIONAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR CHINA?

As will be appreciated, the UK vocational education experience has now been developed over a period of some 50 years and many lessons have been learnt in that time. At first, development in the UK was slow, but over the last 20 years, there has been significant and increasingly speedy development of which we are rightly proud. There is no doubt that it has led to a significant increase in the skills base of the UK.

However, the system is not restricted to a national or regional area. It can be adapted to meet the need of any industrial country, which naturally includes China as one of the most significant industrial countries in the world. China has the same need as all other industrial countries to keep pace (and to ensure that its training keeps pace) with the fast moving and regular changes in global economies. Therefore, I am entirely confident that, if it is so adapted, the same increase in skills levels as we are experiencing in the UK will quickly be seen in China.

The benefits of UK experience are readily available to any organisation in China which is interested in adopting it. The programmes cover all occupational areas and at all levels of training from the most basic life skills to basic and advanced trade training to postgraduate management training.

HOW CAN CHINESE COLLEGES BE INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE UK SYSTEM IN CHINA?

In a spirit of mutual co-operation, the UK Government is now encouraging its larger and more effective public-sector Colleges to enter into collaborative agreements with their Chinese counterparts. These agreements will enable the latter to benefit from and utilise the experiences and developments which have taken place in their UK counterparts over the last 20 years or so.

In certain cases, the UK Government is funding these developments in line with an agreement it has entered into with the Chinese Government. That is why I am here to-day, being funded by the British Government.

The Colleges in my group are very interested in taking forward collaborative agreements with all interested Chinese Colleges on a college-to-college basis. This will enable the Chinese Colleges to have immediate access to the best vocational education Colleges in the UK and also to have the facility to deal with a number of those UK Colleges so as to ensure they work with a College which is the best match for their programmes.

I would therefore invite any interested College to contact me:

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Thank you.