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What's in a Name? Vocational Education and Training: A Snapshot of Young People's Views in England and South Africa

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Introduction to the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development

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- We are not for profit, research and development body with a focus on vocational education and training
- We believe that skills are the cornerstone of economies and societies
- We aim to influence and improve skills policy and practice worldwide through an evidence based approach.

Background to the study

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- Improving perceptions of vocational education and training - a key area of interest for CSD.
  - Vocational pathways are valuable routes for many young learners and yet they are often not well signposted or not understood.
- *Skills Development: Attitudes & Perceptions (2008):*
  - A 9 country survey
  - Although esteem is particularly low in the UK it doesn't just affect us
- A limited amount of published research (UK and international) exploring young people's attitudes and perceptions towards vocational education and training.

The study

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- A qualitative research project which explores young peoples perceptions of and understanding of vocational education and training
- Delivered in partnership with in-country research partners.

- **Countries**
  - England, South Africa and the Netherlands.

- **Our research approach**
  - Individual country literature reviews to explore key themes
  - Focus group discussions and individual interviews
  - Fieldwork commenced in late March 2010
  - Talked to 14-16 year olds (schools) and 17-20 year olds (colleges or equivalent) drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations
  - Interviewed 40-60 students per country.

The study contd.

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- The study seeks to:

- Test young people's understanding of vocational education and training Explore the nature and availability of guidance in relation to vocational education and training
- Understand learning aspirations, career orientation and future plans
- Explore what makes vocational education and training attractive to young people
- Draw out the implications for policy and practice

Main findings

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- **Young people don't understand the term 'vocational education and training'**
  - Young people in both countries struggled to understand the term. Some even confused the term 'vocational' with 'vacational' (SA)
  - Clearer in their definitions of 'practical learning.
  - 'Practical learning is a way of exercising your knowledge – it is a way of seeing what you don't know'. (SA)
  - Practical learning is learning by doing'. (UK)

Main findings

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- **Young people place a high value on vocational education and training – despite wider societal perceptions**

  - ‘Enables you to experience and test your chosen field’ (SA)
  - ‘A chance to gain practical skills which can’t be taken away from you’ (SA)
  - ‘Practical experience provides you with the edge over your academic counterparts’. (UK and SA students)
  - ‘…bring skills back to our communities’. (SA)

Main findings

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- **Money, security and status ranked highly in terms of wants – but young people lacked a clear sense of direction (UK)**
  - School students and college students expressed similar wants but evidence of differences between *gender* and *class*
  - Secondary aspirations
  - Limited horizons and possibilities
  - Understanding of the term 'career' and career paths varied between age, group and subject areas
    - The higher the academic content – the more sophisticated their definition of career
    - *e.g Business studies = 'a long term commitment in an area.. Specialist skills and progression up the career ladder*
    - *'Beauty = 'a job for life'*

Main findings

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- **Many young people had a clear sense of direction and purpose**
  - A clear sense of direction and purpose in many instances
  - Motivations went beyond money, citing individual advancement, job satisfaction
  - Social benefit: a desire to ‘give back to their communities’
    - *‘I want to become a social worker to build a line of defense around our children’*

Main findings

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Teachers and family and friends ranked highly in terms of influence

- **UK**
  - Teachers and family and friends ranked highly in terms of influence
  - *'Teachers might be biased since the want you to pick their courses'*
  - *David, computing level 2 aspired to work for policy in their forensic IT department – he had been influenced by his uncle in this who worked for the police force.*

- Chance and contingent events play a big role.
- Choices aren't rational - neither do they follow linear paths often assumed by policy.

- **South Africa**
  - A similar story: family, friends and teachers often cited
  - Own initiative
  - Community benefit (rural)
  - A second chance - dislike of school.

Main findings

- **Existing careers advice and guidance provision doesn't signpost vocational routes effectively.**

  - FET colleges '*never visited our schools'* (SA)
  - Used IAG services when directed to do so (UK)
  - *'I think schools they don't really advertise colleges.'* (UK)

Main findings

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- **A stepping stone to higher education?**
- **South Africa** - Young people want and expect to progress to higher education to achieve their career and learning aspirations
- **UK** – HE required to get ahead Aware of the low exchange currency of vocational qualifications and societal perceptions.
  - *'People look down on you because of what you are doing...don't look at you in the same way as if in sixth form doing academic studies'.*

Key points

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- Young people's voices are often omitted from discourse regarding vocational education and training. Their views must be taken into consideration if the system designed for young people is to truly meet their needs.
- The term 'VET' is not part of their discourse. They generally preferred to use the term 'practical learning'.
- Student's understandings of their possible career paths vary in sophistication. Young people need help in mapping out and understanding the appropriate careers routes, options and outcomes associated with these routes if they are to fulfil their aspirations.
- VET viewed as a stepping stone to HE rather than a path in it's own right in both contexts – but different motivating factors.
- Young people's lives are fluid. Policy often assumes that young peoples lives take a certain trajectory, resulting in a lack of flexibility and availability of appropriate careers advice and guidance at critical decision making points.

Final thoughts - Implications and recommendations (UK)

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- Policy must take into account that **chance plays a strong part in influencing students choices** – they rarely follow linear paths and make rational choices as policy often assumes.
- **A little more honesty?** There is **a gap in students perceptions of their courses and the extent to which their courses prepare them for the world of work**
- Policy, IAG counselors and teachers have a role to play in **broadening young people's horizons of possibilities**. A first step is to understand the cultural factors and other influences mediating their choices.
- **A paradigm shift in the role of IAG?** Comprehensive IAG provided earlier (in schools)ie career planning, change management, identify where the opportunities are plus work experience and taster days prior to key decision making points
- A programme to actively engage and **educate both teachers and parents**.

Final thoughts - Implications and recommendations (South Africa)

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- **Comprehensive IAG must be provided earlier** – made available in schools and colleges i.e. one student hadn't heard of tourism or civil engineering courses in FET colleges.
  - Increased school and college collaboration and more support for guidance teachers.
- Progression to HE – **students must be made aware of the barriers to entry early on** – and more must be done to improve the articulation of pathways between VET and HE
- More must be done to raise the **'professional status of VET**'. Policy, IAG and teachers all have a role to play.
- A national programme to **raise awareness of VET and VET qualifications amongst employers – and parents.**

Where Next?

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- **Our report**: *What's in a Name? Vocational education and training: A snapshot of young people's views in England, South Africa and the Netherlands* will be available at the end of the year.

- Key findings to be shared with key policy makers and others with a stake in vocational education and training

- Email heidi.agbenyo@skillsdevelopment.org for further information – alternatively visit www.skillsdevelopment.org

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ANY QUESTIONS?

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