

Case study UK

This case study determines background factors that support or obstruct the use of e-services in the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) regarding education, training, and career opportunities in the UK. To this end, it provides an overview of (a) the structure of the vocational and educational training (VET) system in the UK, (b) the IAG system, and (c) the status of digitalisation. Thus, the case study provides insights into why the expected logic of intervention of GeGS ultimately might succeed or fail in the specific UK context.

The VET system¹

In the UK, the majority of programmes for vocational education and training (VET) start at age 15 and 16. Earlier introduction to VET or combining vocational subjects with general secondary study for school dropouts exist. VET qualifications can be obtained in a wide variety of sectors and prepare learners for work and further study. Programme duration varies by subject area, level of study and type of learning and is between one and four years.

Structure

Generally, VET can be distinguished either in school-based or work-based. School-based VET is provided in schools and colleges and includes predominantly school-based programmes that combine general academic study with VET elements, broad VET programmes, and specialist occupational programmes. Learning options in formal VET can vary from full-time to part-time (evening classes), from distance learning to in-company training on a block- or day-release basis, combined with an apprenticeship, where technical and occupational learning takes place on the job, or of the job.

Work-based learning (technical and occupational learning) may take place both in a VET provider setting and a workplace, in the form of (school-) workshops, in-company training for VET learners, or on-the-job apprenticeship training. A national qualification is awarded upon completion. Apprentices are employed and are taught core, transferable skills. There has been an increase of trainees the last few years, which raises the demands for apprenticeships as well as reforming them. There are more apprenticeships being developed at higher education level in response to current labour market needs.

There is a range of education levels and training providers within the UK VET sector, both public and private. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, providers include lower secondary schools,

¹ Cedefop; UK NARIC (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe: United Kingdom* [From Cedefop; ReferNet. Vocational education and training in Europe database]. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/united-kingdom>

sixth form colleges, further education (FE) colleges and higher education institutions in addition to private training organisations and work-based learning providers.

Vocational education and training (VET) in the UK is accessible to learners from the age of 15/16 onwards. However, it is also possible for individuals to enter VET at an earlier age if they have dropped out of compulsory schooling or if they choose to combine vocational subjects with general secondary study. VET programs are offered at both secondary and higher education levels, ranging from EQF levels 2 to 7. A majority of VET qualifications are taken at EQF level 3 and EQF 4 in the further education sector. The access to higher education is regulated and restricted by specific requirements. Applicants with an EQF level 4 VET qualification, or a combination of VET and general qualifications and subjects, may achieve access to selected university programmes. Regardless, there is no guarantee to progression to higher respectively further education since education providers and awarding organisations can set entry requirements for individual qualifications. The qualifications market in the UK is influenced by both government policies and private interests, resulting in a wide range of qualifications and awarding organisations to choose from.

Key players and stakeholders²

The UK government has decentralised the governance of VET to the administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Despite similarities in VET systems across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, ongoing reforms are leading to increased divergence. One notable difference is the varying qualifications and framework levels in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK.

England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland each have distinct governance, regulation, and quality assurance bodies. The UK VET sector operates within a comprehensive institutional framework. In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE) holds the responsibility for policy-making. In **Northern Ireland**, the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for the Economy are the authorities in charge of policy-making for VET. In **Wales**, the Welsh Government's Department for Education and Public Services, as well as the Department for Economy, Skills, and Infrastructure, oversee VET policies. Lastly, in **Scotland**, the Department of Learning and the Department of Lifelong Learning of the Scottish Government bear the responsibility for VET.

In England various public institutions provide education and training services. These include colleges, further education colleges, universities, and government-funded training programs that offer VET programs and career guidance services. Additionally, at the local and central government levels, there are organisations such as the **National Career Service** and the **National**

² Cedefop; UK NARIC (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe: United Kingdom* [From Cedefop; ReferNet. Vocational education and training in Europe database]. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/united-kingdom>

Apprenticeships Service. These two bodies are primarily responsible for overseeing VET programs on a national scale.

In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, **Further Education (FE) colleges** serve as the primary group of Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, catering to students aged 16 and above, including a significant number of adult learners. These colleges offer vocational education ranging from entry level (EQF 2) to higher VET (EQF level 7). Students have the option to enrol in FE colleges on a full-time or part-time basis, and they can also combine their studies with an apprenticeship.

In Scotland, VET programs are mainly offered in colleges that provide vocational education from EQF level 2 onwards, as well as by private training providers. Additionally, VET is available in secondary schools (EQF 2 – 4) and **higher education institutions (HEIs)**. The recent introduction of graduate apprenticeships has led to an increase in VET offerings by HEIs in Scotland.

University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and **Studio Schools** are vocational institutions in England catering to 14-19-year-olds. UTCs are established through collaborations between universities, colleges, and businesses to align with national curriculum standards and local demands, providing work placements. They offer a blend of fundamental skills, specialised subjects, and connections to higher education. Studio Schools, introduced in 2010, also serve the same age group, offering vocational and general qualifications, including GCSEs, alongside teaching through enterprise projects and work placements.

A network of **Institutes of Technology** is being established in England to address the demand for higher technical skills in the labour market. These institutes focus on skills development at qualifications framework levels 3-5 (EQF 4-5), sponsored by employers, registered with professional bodies, and aligned with apprenticeship standards. They have the authority and responsibility to create clear pathways to employment in collaboration with employers and professional organisations. Additionally, funding from the government and employers has been secured for five **National Colleges** in 2016, which concentrate on providing technical skills at levels 4 to 6 (EQF levels 5-6) in digital skills and other sectors.

While the UK has a significant number of colleges, many have merged in recent years to create larger regional entities, a consolidation process that was still ongoing in England before 2020.

The IAG system³

Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)⁴ is accessible in schools, colleges, higher education institutions (either directly or through specific contractors), and third sector bodies across the **UK**. Trade unions also offer careers advice, with Unionlearn focusing on supporting learners through their Union Learning Representatives, particularly those facing workplace disadvantages. In England, schools and colleges are obligated to provide independent careers guidance to students aged 12-18 and to 19- to 25-year-olds with an Education, Health and Care Plan. Government funding for careers provision is integrated into school and college budgets, with the decision on expenditure left to the education provider. Although local authorities are no longer required to provide careers guidance, they are still responsible for encouraging, enabling, and assisting young people in accessing education and training.

The **Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)**⁵ is an executive agency of the Department for Education (DfE) responsible for funding education and skills providers in England. ESFA also promotes adult further education and skills training in **England** through the **National Careers Service** and the **National Apprenticeships Service**. The National Careers Service aims to inform, advise and guide individuals on and in making decisions on educational, training and work opportunities. It can be reached via different channels (face-to-face, telephone, webchat, online), putting an emphasis on the online channels.⁶ Services are delivered by a network of community-based contractors which need to be accredited and are submitted to annual audits. Funding is based on outcome (payment by results).

The **National Apprenticeships Service (NAS)** is responsible for informing interested persons over the age of 16 on different types of apprenticeships, traineeships and jobs, with the goal of increasing the number of apprentices. It also supports employers in finding apprentices. While the most important point of contact to NAS is the website, consultation is also available through telephone or e-mail.

In order to foster the digital provision of labour market information in general and IAG in particular, the UK government, through the Department of Education, has installed '**LMI for All**'⁷, an online open data portal which connects and standardises existing sources of high-quality,

³ Cedefop; UK NARIC (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe: United Kingdom* [From Cedefop; ReferNet. Vocational education and training in Europe database]. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/united-kingdom>

⁴ House of Commons Education Committee (2023). *Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance - Fourth Report of Session 2022–23*. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 19 June 2023. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40610/documents/198034/default/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency/about>

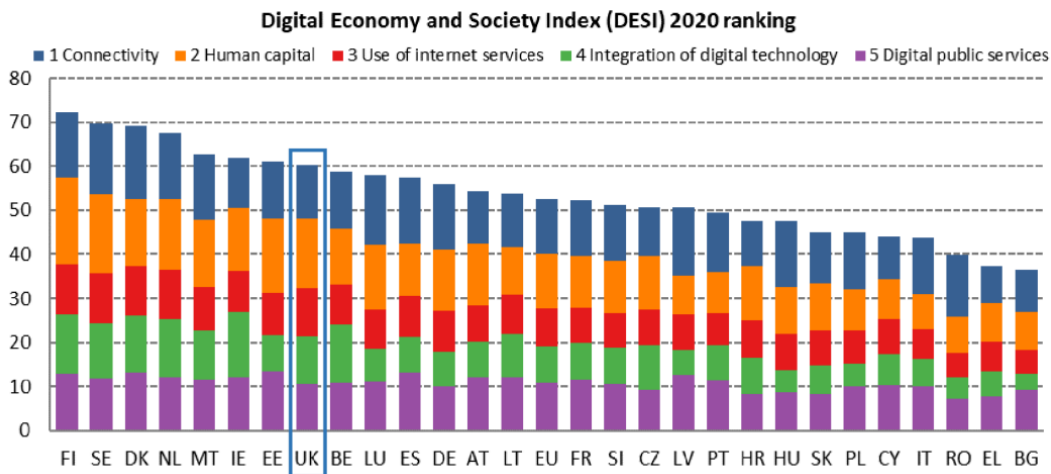
⁶ Considering the emphasis on online service provision highlighted above, it is important to be mindful of the possibility of further exacerbating the digital divide among those seeking help.

⁷ <https://www.lmiforall.org.uk/>

reliable labour market information. These data are made freely available for use in websites and applications.

Digitalisation

The UK achieves an above-average level of digitisation compared with the rest of Europe: With a score of 60.4, it ranks eight in the 2020 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).⁸ It should be noted that the UK was lastly included in DESI in 2020 due to the Brexit, which officially took place on the 31st January 2020.

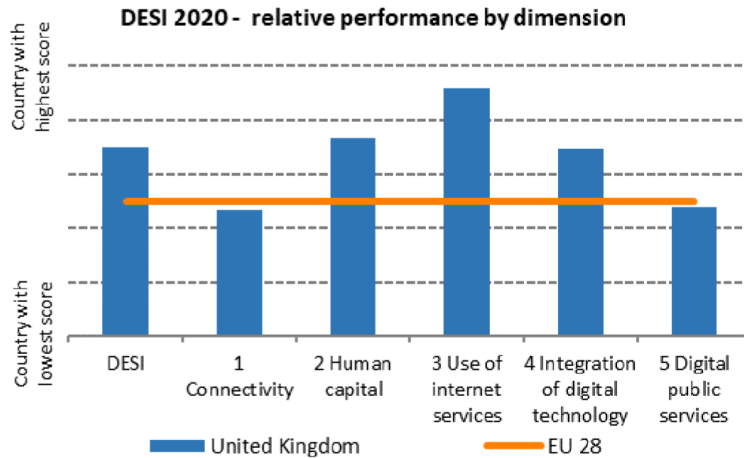


Source: Digital Economy and Society Index 2020 United Kingdom

Regarding the different dimensions of DESI, the United Kingdom scores remarkably in the use of internet services dimension (rank 5 out of 28). The UK also ranks 5th and above the European average in the human capital dimension. More than two thirds of the population have at least basic digital skills. Same goes for at least basic software skills. In comparison to the European average there are more ICT specialists, ICT graduates and slightly more female ICT specialists, too. The integration of digital technologies in enterprises is slowly evolving in the UK. None of the criteria, like for example using electronic information sharing or having a social media presence, are implemented for even half of the enterprises in the country. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom holds the 8th rank and is placed above the European average. A dimension in which the UK does not perform so well is connectivity (rank 20 out of 28 EU countries). Rural areas were not as well connected as urban ones back in 2020. The UK has since extended their digital infrastructure⁹. Lastly the public services provided to businesses and citizens in the UK are averagely digitalised compared to the rest of the EU. In contrast in 2020 a large proportion of internet users already made use of e-government services (89%) like the websites of the National Apprenticeships Service and the National Careers Service.

⁸ European Commission: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2020 – United Kingdom.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy#where-we-are-today>



Source: Digital Economy and Society Index 2020 United Kingdom

The UK government describes the current state of digitalisation in the UK as “a position of strength”¹⁰. In doing so they are referring to the flourishing digital economy. The digital sector makes up 9% of the national workforce and has tripled since 2015. This growth has been possible because of strong positioning in key areas. One of them is the digital infrastructure, which has been massively improved since 2019. Nowadays superfast broadband coverage is extended to over 97%. About 67% of UK premises have access to gigabit-capable broadband. In comparison in July 2019 coverage was only 8%. In addition, 92% of UK landmass is covered by a 4G signal. Another key area is the data market. The UK’s data economy grew rapidly in the 2010s and has the biggest overall impact of any EU country in absolute terms (£125 billion in 2021). Plans on expanding the data sector to create growth are already settled in the UK’s National Data Strategy.¹¹ Key areas where the UK is also advantaged are a thriving start-up scene and a vigorous investment community. Before the pandemic a new tech business originated every half an hour. Compared to other European countries the UK exceeds them in both the number of start-ups that have achieved ‘unicorn’ status (companies with valuations over \$1 billion) and potential future unicorns. In 2021, the UK had a total of 114 unicorns, more than France and Germany combined.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-data-strategy>

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