



The VET Curriculum: Reflections from Literature

Ramon Mangion

Curriculum Department, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, Malta

Abstract

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a vital socio-economic development tool in many countries. The general alignment of VET curricula with labour market needs is a topic that has attracted considerable critical interest from different scholars and stakeholders. Local policies, strategies, and initiatives emphasise the importance of the education system, particularly VET, in reacting to labour market needs. In contrast, such a stance can manifest as an overemphasis on addressing the immediate needs of industry while discarding the holistic needs of IVET students. The scope and purpose of the curriculum within a VET context are consequently questioned, as well as the different philosophies contrasting the VET curriculum from a utilitarian perspective against a more holistic developmental orientation. This paper reflects on these dynamics and the influence of different stakeholders on VET curriculum development, whilst situating the discussion within broader educational debates about the role of curriculum.

This paper forms part of a wider study that looks at current practices of industry stakeholder collaboration in VET curriculum development in Malta. Still in its early stages, the study adopts a qualitative approach to understand better the dynamics of industry stakeholder collaboration in VET curriculum development. The study aims to provide insights that could influence government policy and strategic decisions at various levels. It seeks to enhance academic and curricular planning by understanding the synergies between industry expectations and stakeholder needs.

Keywords: curriculum; VET; industry; stakeholders; Malta

1. Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a vital socio- economic component both in Malta and globally, as it equips the workforce with essential skills for a dynamic job market and offers opportunities for upskilling and reskilling (European Union, 2020). The World Economic Forum emphasises that technological change, including trends in AI, will continue to accelerate, and it is crucial to implement targeted reskilling and upskilling initiatives to address significant skills gaps. The latter is perceived as a primary barrier to business transformation (World Economic Forum, 2025).

At the EU level, reforms highlight agility and labour market alignment. Cedefop (2023) reports how member states are updating VET standards and curricula to better meet industry needs and support individual development. These initiatives and emphasis on labour market alignment stress the necessity of industry input in shaping VET systems and programmes. It is critical to continue to build bridges between education and industry to ensure young students are entering the world of work with the necessary skills and competences to make a positive impact (Zahra, 2023, p. 81).

Among various policy initiatives, the Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on Vocational Education and Training for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and Resilience calls upon EU member states to equip young people with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and competences required in a dynamic labour market and society (Council of the European Union, 2020). It also calls for actions and investments in implementing key principles based on agility, flexibility, innovation, attractiveness, equality and quality assurance.

Given this emphasis, this paper examines and reflects on the role of different influences in shaping an effective and holistic VET curriculum that meets both immediate workforce needs and the overall development needs of students and society. It is not based on new empirical data, however, a reflective synthesis of literature highlights contributions from curriculum studies, policy, VET and the broader educational sphere that can inform both policy and practice. This paper's contributions are part of a broader qualitative study on industry stakeholder collaboration in VET curriculum development in Malta. While the broader study is still in its initial stages, the reflections from literature contribute to the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the empirical phases. The study aims to:

1. Explore the industry's role in VET curriculum design, providing insights that could influence government policy and strategic decisions at various levels.
2. Enhance academic and curricular planning by understanding the synergies between industry expectations and stakeholder needs taking into consideration the context and different factors that shape such synergies.
3. Broaden understanding of industry-curriculum collaboration in VET.

As Vreuls et al. (2023) argue, responsive curriculum development approaches are essential for VET to keep in line with society's changing demands.

2. The Local Policy Context

The involvement of industry in the development of vocational education and training (VET) curricula is a pertinent research topic. In Malta, this recognition is demonstrated by the policy commitments and strategic directions adopted by the government and different educational establishments, such as Malta's largest public VET Provider, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The National Education Strategy 2024-2030 and MCAST's 2022-2027 Strategic plan both emphasise the need for establishing strong links between education and industry to enhance curriculum relevance (MCAST, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2024). One significant initiative is the government-funded budgetary measure titled 'Bridging the Skills Gap: Curriculum with Industry.' This is implemented by MCAST and involves dedicated events and meetings that promote structured dialogue between MCAST and industry to ensure the relevance and sustainability of the college's programmes. Industry is formally represented in the governance of VET providers such as MCAST and ITS, with strong support also expressed by national social partners (CEDEFOP & Ministry for Education, 2022).

3. Methodology and Scope

This paper presents reflections that are part of a broader qualitative study on industry stakeholder collaboration in VET curriculum development in Malta. A multiple-case study design, executed in two phases, intends to capture the experiences and feedback of identified stakeholders through a purposive sampling approach. The first phase involves mapping existing processes and gaining an understanding of industry involvement in VET curriculum development through document review as well as interviews and focus groups at both policy and sectoral levels. Participants comprise policy makers, employers and representatives, VET educators and students from the identified sector case studies. Once analysed, the data and the literature review will serve as the foundations for a framework outlining insights and mechanisms for industry engagement in VET curriculum development.

In the second phase, further interviews and focus groups will be used to validate the framework's applicability and identify any necessary adjustments for effective application. This will result in a final framework accompanied by practical recommendations for implementation.

The empirical phases are intended to focus on three sectors: hairdressing, aircraft maintenance and IT (software development). These sectors were chosen for their diversity in terms of structure, regulatory environment and distinct industry needs. Nonetheless, the final selection may be refined allowing for access and feasibility factors.

4. Understanding Curriculum: Definitions and Perspectives

Curriculum is a complex and contested concept that can have different meanings for different people (Marsh, 2009; Zhao, 2014). Winter & Hyatt (2023) highlight the constantly disputed nature of curriculum, since although "curriculum is at the heart of education" (Riddle, 2024, p. 101), it continues to be defined by the different expectations and educational priorities of different people. These definitions often reflect the values (Borg & Mayo, 2002) and social ideologies (Adamson & Morris, 2014) of their proponents.

Table 1 below presents selected examples of different definitions and perspectives from various periods reflecting both general and vocational-related literature, illustrating the multifaceted nature of curriculum. These are categorised in two distinct groups as suggested by Ellis (2003): Curriculum as Prescription and Curriculum as Experience. Ellis observes that efforts to define curriculum often take a prescriptive approach (curriculum as prescription), a descriptive approach (curriculum as experience) or a blend of both. The author denotes prescriptive definitions as emphasising what is intended, focusing on a plan, map, or prescription defining intended actions and outcomes in the educational process. (Cedefop, 2010) identifies the curriculum as a guiding document for planning learning experiences, emphasising a formalising role.

In contrast, the second category includes what Ellis (2003) refers to as descriptive definitions, as this perspective focuses on understanding and describing actual learning experiences rather than prescribing what should happen, with an emphasis on process. Finch & Crunkilton (1979), UNEVOC (1993) and Yeung et al. (2012) highlight a process, the experienced curriculum, supporting a holistic approach to learning. Glatthorn et al. (2019) combine both perspectives therefore, incorporating planned intentions with the realities of implementation.

Table 1 Examples of different definitions and perspectives about curriculum from different authors

Author/s	Year	Definitions and Perspectives	Category	Key point
UNEVOC	1993	An educational path that describes the learning process in a much more comprehensive and complex fashion than is possible with plans of learning content or learning material.	Experience	Curriculum as a process
Cedefop	2010	A curriculum is a normative document (or a collection of documents) setting the framework for planning learning experiences.	Prescription	Curriculum as a formalised and prescriptive document.
Finch & Crunkilton	1979	The sum of the learning activities and experiences that a student has under the auspices or direction of the school.	Experience	Emphasis on holistic learning
Yeung et al.	2012	All the planned learning opportunities offered to learners by schools or an educational institution, and the intended or hidden experiences that learners encounter when the curriculum is implemented.	Experience	Recognition of all the learning experiences.

Author/s	Year	Definitions and Perspectives	Category	Key point
Glatthorn et al.	2019	The curriculum is the plan made for guiding learning in the schools, usually represented in retrievable documents of several levels of generality, and the actualisation of those plans in the classroom, as experienced by the learners and recorded by an observer; those experiences take place in a learning environment that also influences what is learned.	Blended	Links planning and actual learning experiences.

5. Curriculum within a VET Context

5.1 Characteristics of VET Systems

The unique demands of vocational education necessitate a more specific focus. Gessler et al. (2021) point out the highly contextual nature of VET systems. They explain that while general and higher education are characterised by more homogeneous, comparable curricula, structures, and institutions, VET tends to have a national or regional orientation with varied structures, curricula, objectives, and practices. This enables curricula to be tailored to the needs of the local labour market but raises challenges related to comparability and recognition of curricula and qualifications. The complexity and heterogeneity of VET are also noted by Billett (2020). The author asserts that the status and perception of VET differ from one country to another. This is also observed in Pilz (2016), who describes the variations in national vocational education and training systems due to different nations having different political objectives for VET. Pilz also notes how, in contrast to general education, VET systems can cause confusion and challenges for international comparisons due to a lack of coherent structures. VET systems can also differ based on historical, cultural, economic and policy contexts, with a different mix between public and private provision, approaches and integration of work-based learning (Hager, 2019).

5.2 Defining VET and Perspectives on Curriculum

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) defines VET as “Learning which aims to acquire knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences – either job-specific or transversal – required in specific occupations or more broadly on the labour market”(Cedefop, n.d.)

In Malta, the MCAST Act similarly defines VET as “Education and training offered at MQF Levels 1-4 that aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market”(The Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology Act, 2023).

The act's definition is distinct from the Cedefop definition by also establishing a boundary for VET, limiting it to MQF Levels 1-4¹. This limitation excludes the higher levels, which are typically associated with higher education. For example, the European Higher Education Area Framework describes Level 5 as the short cycle that represents “the initial tier of Higher Education” (Malta Further and Higher Education Authority, 2024, p. 55). This range of levels for VET corresponds with Oliver et al. (2019), who locate VET as the “space between jobs requiring few skills and professional occupations requiring deep and highly underpinning knowledge” (p. 115). This classification aligns with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) descriptors for levels 1 to 4. The level descriptors show the progression of learning outcomes across each level, highlighting the level-specific expectations in terms of knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy.

EQF Levels 1 and 2 denote foundational stages of learning, characterised by introductory knowledge and basic skills, often associated with entry-level occupations. In contrast, Levels 3 and 4 correspond to more specialised skills expected from skilled employees across various sectors, with Level 4 also linked to supervisory responsibilities².

The above definitions and arguments align with the discussion by Nylund et al. (2017). In their reference to the Swedish context, the purpose of VET is described as to “match education supply with labour market demand to facilitate the transition of young people from vocational education to working life” (Nylund et al., 2017, p. 790).

VET is therefore often appreciated as a mechanism that can help prepare individuals to meet the needs of the labour market and for this reason, it tends to be primarily valued for its role in producing a skilled workforce. Nonetheless, its historical role highlights a broader societal purpose. Reflecting on the different points, one can also observe the role of VET in preparing individuals for a broader range of skills. This suggests that VET should not only meet immediate industry-mandated or job-specific skills needs but it should also foster transferable skills that are essential for societal participation, adaptability and long-term personal growth and social development.

5.3 Shaping the VET Curriculum: Development and Labour Market Demands

From a curricular perspective, similar considerations about responding to societal and labour market needs can be observed in Zhao (2014), who draws upon key studies to outline three major trends in the development of vocational education curricula.

1. Shift from discipline-based to curriculum development focused on the development of professional competence.

¹ These levels correspond to EQF Levels 1-4, given the alignment of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Malta Further and Higher Education Authority, 2024).

² Adapted from the primary descriptors which can be found at <https://europass.europa.eu/en/description-eight-egf-levels>

³ Tertiary VET should not be overlooked. In some countries, the boundary between academic and vocational education becomes less rigid. For example, advanced vocational qualifications at EQF Levels 5 to 7 can also be acquired at the tertiary level in both Malta and Germany.

2. Acknowledgement of the dynamic world of work and emphasis on long-term career development.
3. Growing focus on bridging the gap between learning and work and recognising the importance of the workplace as a learning venue.

A clear link with specific occupations and a direct correlation with the world of work characterises VET (Gessler et al., 2021). This is appreciated by Spöttl (2009), who highlights that considering the demands of the world of work is a minimum requirement for the modelling of vocational curricula, with such processes requiring the involvement of different partners in the shaping of curricula. In addition, Rauner (2009) delves into the distinction between occupational or vocational curricula and academic curricula, with the vocational curriculum directed towards vocational proficiency, whilst the university curriculum offers an occupational orientation. The distinction presented by Rauner (2009) indicates that the vocational curriculum is primarily aimed at equipping students with the knowledge, skills and competences required to perform specific tasks or roles in a particular trade or profession. The arguments by Rauner (2009) and Spöttl (2009) suggest that the vocational curriculum must be developed in response to the distinctive demands of employers (Young & Hordern, 2020). This argument further suggests that curriculum development in VET is strongly linked to labour market requirements. One of the reasons for such constant pressure for curriculum alignment can be found in Kebede et al. (2024), who mention that with the progression of information technology and industry, secondary-level VET providers must be able to adapt their curricula to align with evolving industry demands. The significance of the technological context in shaping the vocational curriculum has been highlighted for decades (Wellington J, 1993). Wellington underscores this by referring to the UK Crowther's Report:⁴

A boy who enters industry today will not retire until well into the next century. In that time, the odds are that he will see at least one complete technological revolution in his industry. The job he will hold when he becomes a grandfather may not exist at all today; it will be concerned with processes not yet invented, using machines still to be designed. This is true not only of the "progressive" industries such as chemicals and electronics. It is probably just as true of agriculture, of older industries such as printing and of services such as transport. It may even be true of large sectors of the retail distributive trades. Clearly, the first quality that is needed to cope with such a world is adaptability. (Crowther, 1959, p. 52).

Despite such needs, VET has also been criticised for becoming too focused on skills linked with employability and productivity while neglecting its key role in developing individuals' skills to transition into adulthood and engage as active citizens (McGrath & Yamada, 2023)

This section shows how different viewpoints reveal a strong work orientation, creating a distinct educational context when compared to general academic education. The shaping of VET curricula is ever more influenced by technological developments and trends linked with the labour market, further reinforcing the focus of VET curricula on occupation-specific

⁴ Wellington (1993) only cites the first two sentences of this quote. However, the author felt that including the full quote from the original report provides valuable context and insight, highlighting how certain issues have been debated for decades and how the technological context impacts multiple sectors, which ultimately comprises the VET context.

proficiency. In light of these pressures, the involvement of employers is often seen as essential to keeping the curriculum relevant. Nevertheless, a narrow focus on employability and immediate specific skills risks diminishing the VET curriculum’s key role in also fostering personal growth and supporting lifelong learning.

5.4 Politics of Vocational Education

Curriculum and teaching are situated in a broader societal context (Apple, 1979). Curriculum views and ideologies adapt to economic and political shifts shaped by individual beliefs about education (Yeung et al., 2012). Alvunger (2024) observes how little attention has been given to the role of local authorities, companies, trade unions, employer associations, universities and regional agencies in shaping VET curricula. He stresses the importance of this observation, given the implications for the VET curriculum and how political interests may influence the curriculum design and development process. Busemeyer & Trampusch (2019) highlight the need to study the political dimensions of vocational training, indicating its relevance for researchers, including educational scholars. Their work focuses specifically on initial vocational education and training (IVET). As shown in Table 2, their analysis illustrates a distinction between the actors “whose preferences and interests shape political conflicts about the design of education and training institutions” and the arenas “where these conflicts of interests are settled and processes of decision-making take place” (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2019, p. 137).

Table 2 Actors and Arenas in the politics of vocational education, adapted from Busemeyer & Trampusch (2019)

Actors	Labour market demand side Representatives: Firms, employers and their associations.
	Supply Side Representatives: Labour interests and trade unions.
	The State: May intervene in the provision and financing of skills through public policies.
Arenas	The Economic sphere of the labour market: training activities of firms and workers, collective action problems that employers and unions are facing, actors’ decisions on skills investment and the impact on cooperation and bargaining in labour relations.
	The political-administrative arena: Where the politics of vocational training pertains to political decision-making processes in vocational training, employment and social policies, which in turn are affected by party politics, state traditions and institutional legacies.

Curriculum development is not a neutral process and is not limited to pedagogical or technical considerations. Political interests may impact curriculum design and development. Political priorities influence what is prioritised in the curriculum. As highlighted earlier by Pilz (2016), different nations may also have different political objectives for VET. Recognising such influences is important, given the conflict that can arise between the needs of various stakeholders and the need to strike a balance among them.

5.5 Relevance and Tensions in the VET Curriculum Process

Education policy has been increasingly influenced by the belief that education solves economic and societal problems. Allais (2014) attributes this to the idea that education must be relevant to the economy's needs. Whilst education is seen as a tool to enable people to become employable and be active members of society, its relevance is often questioned. Others such as Lapinsky (2000) also discuss the diverse and often controversial views about business involvement in education. Such issues further solidify the need for a more critical understanding of relevance within educational settings, particularly VET.

The curriculum is dynamic and continually evolving incorporating contributions from different stakeholders to ensure that it remains relevant (Proches et al., 2025). Different stakeholders have varying degrees of power and influence. A relevant curriculum within a VET setting can be described as “a curriculum that provides students with the opportunity to develop vocational knowledge in their chosen occupations” (Hiim, 2017, p. 13). Examining the role of VET curricula in economic development, Mouzakitis (2010) highlights the importance of an adequate and effective curriculum that prepares persons for employment or existing employees to enhance their qualifications. In the context of engineering education, Lyng & Nortcliffe (2024) highlight the need for agile curricula that are responsive to forecast industry needs and to develop new skills.

The question of curriculum relevance is particularly important when considering the broader context of VET and how relevance is defined and interpreted by different people. Nylund et al. (2017) highlight several noteworthy points, notably the policy discourse in countries such as Germany and England, where market principles lead vocational education; a trend that continues to shape this sector today (Lucas, 2018). Their study further suggests that the Swedish upper secondary curriculum supports an international neoliberal policy trend emphasising competition, employability and employer influence over the curriculum. In another study focused on the Swedish context, Köpsén (2022) mentions further neoliberal trends and a persistent dichotomy between industry and educationalists. Industry bodies view VET's purpose as providing a skilled workforce, whilst the educationalists argue that qualifications are too tied to jobs and not broad enough from an educational perspective. Similarly, Proches et al. (2025) observe how industry input may be more consistent with a skills-based approach, while academic experts may stress theoretical depth. In his study of the Maltese context, Cassar (2021) critiques the National VET Policy (2015) for its constant emphasis on market needs over student needs. This leads to the assumption that VET is aimed at skills acquisition to build a country's human capital, reflecting an instrumentalist perspective focusing on the question “what can people do with the education that they are getting?” Allais (2014,p.1). Like the Swedish case, Cassar (2021) concludes that the policy is based on both neoliberal and communitarian needs, yet with a substantial focus on market needs. The author comments that “Neoliberal policies are justified by claims that what is good for the economy or finance is necessarily good for the country as a whole, and that the state has no other option but to devise policies to satisfy the global market” (Cassar 2021 ,p29).

Equally, in their work on the Australian context, Down et al. (2019) argue that a predatory global capitalist system increasingly influences young people. Furthermore, they elaborate on

the narrow and instrumentalist view of competency-based VET and the criticism that schools are failing to produce job-ready workers who possess the necessary behaviours, attitudes, and skills as demanded by employers.

This is consistent with Sultana (1997), who examined the influence of employers on educational policymaking and their demands on educational institutions. Notably, employers expect to find the people they need, with the appropriate qualifications and experience, when they need them (Borg, 1997). This perspective underlines a subjective interpretation of relevance, where relevance is primarily defined by what is deemed important for the employer. Such a perspective often leads to tensions, as highlighted by Proches et al. (2025), who discuss the conflict between industry and academic staff given differing views on what is relevant and important for the curriculum. They emphasise the importance of establishing a balance to have a holistic curriculum that targets the needs of the job market whilst at the same time developing broader skills such as critical thinking, creativity and active citizenship.

Such tensions continue to show in literature with authors who also comment on the need for a curriculum that extends beyond addressing market and employer demands (Spöttl, 2009). It must be responsive to the labour market whilst also meeting the diverse needs of employees/apprentices and the learning process. In its report on Learning for Jobs, OECD likewise recognises the need to have the right balance of skills that go beyond a particular occupational standard, with the need to find a balance between occupational skills for easier access to the labour market and broader transferable skills (OECD 2010).

Lastly Hager (2019) critiques the neglect of curriculum in the current VET system, in favour of a narrow focus on competency checklists, which are often mistaken for the curriculum itself by VET Providers. Curriculum refers to a process, whilst competencies refer to a result. As Hager (2019) argues, the influence of market forces on VET and, ultimately, the curriculum cannot be discounted.

However, as VET become captive to market forces, curriculum seems to be regarded as an expendable luxury compared to the real business of competitive funding, fee levels, and soft qualifications. In such a climate, spending resources on planning a better learning p

rogram and deliberating ways to deliver it effectively can easily seem like wasteful extravagance (Hager, 2019, p. 109).

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The elicited reflections from literature and the resulting outcome of the more exhaustive study carry implications for policy and practice. Literature shows how multiple, sometimes conflicting stakeholders contest the curriculum, indicating that consultation processes need to incorporate diverse voices. Whilst industry input is vital in a VET context, the literature indicates that the feedback by educators and other stakeholders are likewise relevant. At a policy level, a key implication is that the political interests have a tangible impact on curriculum processes. Recognising the influence of political agendas is necessary to understand how VET curricula are negotiated.

In practice, a curriculum in a VET context requires a balance between labour market relevance and holistic learner development, suggesting that mechanisms are needed to negotiate the tensions that arise in the process. A clear implication is that relevance in the VET curriculum is based on different interests, expectations and beliefs about what the curriculum should entail. Policymakers and practitioners hence risk neglecting curriculum as a process of learning and development in favour of market-driven, immediate skill requirements that focus only on outcomes. It is suggested that such a reductionist view detracts from the value and potential of VET to offer a balanced and holistic curriculum that equally fosters essential transversal skills.

While this paper does not delve into sector-specific factors at this stage, it is essential to acknowledge that different economic sectors may have distinct structures and, consequently, require different engagement approaches. The reflections from literature and the forthcoming empirical data will inform the development of a VET-industry synergy framework to enhance industry collaboration in VET curriculum development. This framework has the potential to support policymakers and practitioners in structuring engagement and enabling mechanisms that may be applicable in different economic sectors.

7. Conclusion

Curriculum has different influences and meanings. In line with expectations and perceptions about VET, it is often framed as a tool for labour market preparation and workforce supply. A constant theme in the literature is the search for balance between the needs of industry, educators' expectations, and the broader purposes of education. Yet this balance is challenging to achieve since conflicts emerge between the beliefs and priorities of different stakeholders. Employers expect workers with the right skills for their sector and are often guided by a profit motive. At the political level, governments have their political objectives and propose policies that align with broader economic and social agendas. We also need to consider educators or those who want to prioritise the holistic growth of individuals and students. Although not explicitly mentioned in this paper, we must also recognise the role of parents and even students themselves and how their expectations can influence the process. Furthermore, while recognising the distinct country and context-specific aspects of VET, various issues are transnational and common in different countries.

Lastly, this paper has limitations which need to be acknowledged. The reflective analysis is based on a synthesis of existing research. Since the main study is still in progress, primary empirical data has not yet been collected; consequently, no novel findings are presented. However, this paper provides value through a reflective perspective that establishes a conceptual foundation that informs further empirical work. Additional research and the collection of empirical data will generate practical insights and support an evidence-based framework.

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