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How do vocational qualifications fit into students' programmes of study following recent governmental reforms to 14–18 education?

Conference Paper Abstract

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Presented at JVET 2019: Journal of Vocational Education and Training 13th
International Conference
Keble College, Oxford, UK
June 2019

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How to cite this publication:

Vitello, S., and Vidal Rodeiro, C. (2019, June). *How do vocational qualifications fit into students' programmes of study following recent governmental reforms to 14–18 education?* Paper presented at JVET 2019: Journal of Vocational Education and Training 13th International Conference, Keble College, Oxford, UK.

Abstract

The current decade has seen major reform to vocational education for 14–18 year olds in England, following the publication of the Wolf report (Wolf, 2011). This led to a more simplified qualifications landscape for students to navigate, with many of the pre-reform qualifications not meeting the Department for Education's new eligibility criteria (DfE, 2015) and therefore excluded from performance tables. The ultimate aim of these reforms was to improve the quality of vocational education. However, whilst provision and uptake of vocational qualifications (VQs) in schools and colleges has increased in recent years, vocational education in England continues to be under-valued and sometimes treated as second-best to academic qualifications.

This aim of this study was to investigate the role that VQs (e.g., Technical Awards, Applied Generals and Tech Levels) play in students' educational pathways in the post-reform landscape, by exploring who takes them, how they fit into students' programmes of study and how students progress with them. Considering all three of these aspects together will enable us to understand more fully the extent to which VQs constitute a valuable part of the curricula for 14–18 year olds.

The study analysed data from two different sources. The first was the National Pupil Database, which contains educational data on all students at different key stages in their education. In particular, we analysed data on whole cohorts of students in Key Stage 4 (14–16 year olds) and Key Stage 5 (16–18 year olds). The second was UCAS's university admissions data, which contains data on applications to Higher Education institutions in the UK made by students with specific VQs. For all analyses we used the most recent data available. In most cases, this was data on the cohort of students who were at the end of Key Stage 4 or 5 in 2016/17.

A range of descriptive statistics were produced to understand the place and value of VQs in students' programmes of study. Additionally, multilevel logistic regression models were fitted to understand the factors associated with the uptake of, and progression with, these qualifications.

The outcomes of the statistical analyses showed (1) personal characteristics (e.g., gender, prior attainment, income-related deprivation) of the students who took VQs, (2) students' programmes of study, including the number of vocational vs. academic qualifications and the subject overlap between them, and (3) progression with VQs to education destinations including progression in school/college and to university.

References

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