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Vocational qualifications for 14-16 year olds: exploration of knowledge, skills and teacher perceptions

Conference Abstract

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Abstract

Overview

Vocational education for 14 to 16 year olds in England is undergoing a period of reform. The reforms aim to ensure that students take rigorous vocational qualifications (Technical Awards) that have been developed with employer involvement, to equip them with knowledge and skills “essential in our growing economy” (DfE, 2015). Following Wolf’s (2011) review of vocational education, the DfE published criteria that Technical Award qualifications must meet to be included in school performance tables. These criteria concern content and skills coverage, assessment structure and student progression. Importantly, Technical Awards are expected to be distinct from the ‘academic offer’ of GCSEs but with equivalent rigour.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the types of content, knowledge and skills that students develop through Technical Awards. Four Technical Awards (Cambridge Nationals) covering three subjects (business, media and sport) were explored. First we analysed their specifications and assessment materials using educational taxonomies, to evaluate the breadth and level of demand for each qualification. We also directly compared Cambridge Nationals to GCSEs in equivalent subjects to evaluate the extent to which these vocational qualifications are distinct from the ‘academic’ offer. We then explored teachers’ opinions using interview methods. Teachers were asked for: (i) their perceptions of the skills their students acquire during the Cambridge National and GCSE courses (ii) whether students learn other skills that are not explicitly mentioned in the specifications and (iii) their opinions on Technical Awards and reforms more generally.

Cambridge Nationals were associated with a diversity of content, knowledge and skills, including ones related to high cognitive demand and employment. Various differences between the Cambridge Nationals and their GCSE equivalents were found; some were due to differences in assessment structure and pedagogical approach. Teachers expressed mixed views on how the reforms affected pedagogy and the reputation of vocational qualifications.

Methodology

The study comprised two phases. Phase 1 compared the learning outcomes and assessment materials of Cambridge Nationals and GCSEs. We used two well-established educational taxonomies of knowledge domains and mental processes (Marzano & Kendall, 2007; Hutchins et al. 2013) to determine each specification’s coverage of a broad range of knowledge types and skills. In Phase 2, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers to establish how the different demands revealed in Phase 1 were realised in classroom practice and to explore their views on a range of issues related to their perception and delivery of vocational qualifications.

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