

# **Progression to post-16 education: the role of Vocational Qualifications**

Conference Abstract

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## Abstract

Many studies have highlighted large increases in the uptake of secondary-level vocational qualifications (VQs) in England over recent years (Wolf, 2011; Cook, 2013; Richards, 2016). However, during the same period, these qualifications have faced criticism over their quality and capacity to prepare students for further education, as well as being scrutinised with regard to the types of students who take them (Wolf, 2011; Crawford, Meschi & Vignoles, 2011; Hodgson & Spours, 2014).

In 2010, the Department for Education (DfE) announced their latest drive to raise the status of vocational education. As part of this overhaul, the DfE set out a new set of criteria that all VQs needed to meet to be funded and included in school and college performance tables. The approval criteria changed the nature of the VQs on offer, affecting, for example, their content, assessment structure, grading and progression requirements. Regarding progression, for qualifications at Key Stage 4 (KS4) to fulfil the new criteria, post-16 providers now have to accept them alongside GCSEs as an integral and equally regarded part of a student's programme of study.

A great deal of the research carried out into the progression of students with VQs has focused on participation in higher education and has been carried out before the latest reforms to vocational education were completely implemented (Connor, Banerji & Sinclair, 2006; Hoelscher *et al.*, 2008; Hupkau *et al.*, 2016; McCoy & Adamson, 2016). The aim of the current research was, therefore, to obtain an up-to-date view of the progression from VQs to post-16 education. In particular, this research investigated whether students with different programmes of study and different VQs at KS4 were equally likely to progress to post-16 education and, if they progressed, what routes and qualifications they took.

This study analysed data from the National Pupil Database (NPD). The NPD contains, for each academic year, qualifications and attainment at the end of KS4 and Key Stage 5 (KS5) for all students in England, and students' characteristics such as gender, type of school attended, ethnicity or income-related deprivation. Our analyses focussed on the cohort of students who were at the end of KS4 in 2014/15 (610,810 students). KS5 extracts for 2016/17 were used to investigate these students' progression within education.

Descriptive statistics were produced to understand the progression rates of students with VQs and multilevel logistic regression models were fitted to control for demographic and educational characteristics (*e.g.*, gender, prior attainment, income-related deprivation, ethnicity, type of school attended) associated with progression.

Analyses were conducted for individual qualifications (*e.g.*, Cambridge Nationals, BTECs), DfE-approved categories of qualifications (Technical Awards) and programmes of study (*e.g.*, academic only, mostly academic, mixed, mostly vocational and vocational only).

Some of the key findings from this research are summarised below:

- The overall progression rate for the KS4 cohort in this research was 82.4%. However, progression rates to post-16 study decreased as the percentage of VQs in the students' programmes of study increased. In particular, over 80% of the students with an academic or mostly academic background progressed to KS5. On the contrary, over 50% of the students with a vocational or a mostly vocational background did not progress.
- Students following programmes of study that included VQs were most likely to progress to mixed or vocational pathways. However, there was a reasonably high percentage of students who progressed to fully or mostly academic routes (14% to an only academic route and 20% to a mostly academic route). This shows that mostly vocational and vocational only pathways do not close students' options post-16, as students were either able to continue in a vocational programme or to progress to different pathways.

- Progression rates from Technical Awards were only slightly lower than progression rates from GCSEs. This suggests that the approved VQs students take at KS4 support progression to further learning at school/college.
- The students with the lowest progression rates to post-16 education were those who, during KS4, took non-approved VQs.

When trying to make sense of the above progression rates, one should note that VQs can provide progression not only to post-16 education at school/college but also to apprenticeships, employment, training, and other educational destinations that might not be recorded in the NPD.

This research has suggested that, although mostly vocational and vocational only pathways do not close students' options, progression to KS5 was affected by the proportion of VQs that students took at KS4. More research is needed to find out the reasons behind this association, and the extent to which this may reflect experiences with VQs at KS4.

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## **Full paper**

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