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**Vocational, technical and applied
qualifications within upper
secondary education in England:
Who takes them, how do they fit
within students' programmes of
study, and where do students
progress to next?**

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

In England, vocational and technical qualifications within secondary education have been subject to frequent debates over their purpose, rigour and value. Over the past decade, particular attention has been given to students' progression from secondary education into meaningful further study, training and employment, a key concern from both social justice and economic perspectives. For students holding vocational, technical and applied qualifications, reported rates of progression have often been lower than for students following purely academic programmes, even after controlling for demographic factors and prior educational attainment (e.g. Hupkau, McNally, Ruiz-Valenzuela, & Ventura, 2017; Smith, Joslin, & Jameson, 2015). This is despite demand in the UK and Europe more widely for high level technical skills, and acknowledgment of the need for 'permeability' between general and technical education.

Repeated rounds of reforms to vocational and technical education in England (Raffe, 2015) mean that studies frequently address assessments and curricula that are already out of date. Furthermore, although students in England currently undertake a diverse range of qualification combinations, previous studies have typically analysed students according to single qualification types, obscuring significant variation in students' actual programmes of study. For these and other reasons, there are notable gaps in our knowledge of how current vocational and technical qualifications fit within students' upper secondary programmes of study, and these students' subsequent destinations. The available evidence indicates that the number of students mixing qualifications of different types has recently increased at a faster rate than the number holding qualifications of a single type (UCAS, 2016b, p. 22), and that increasing numbers of UK students enter Higher Education (HE) having taken at least one BTEC, a particular class of applied and technical qualifications (UCAS, 2016a).

This presentation describes new research on students in England taking vocational, technical and applied qualifications at upper secondary level. The findings give a detailed picture of how these qualifications were combined with other qualifications in students' overall programmes of study, and of students' subsequent progression, for the most recent cohorts for which data was available. This was achieved through quantitative analyses of student-level national datasets in England, chiefly the National Pupil Database (NPD), which we linked to databases of participation in HE, other further education, and apprenticeships. For the most detailed analyses, we focused on Cambridge Technicals, a particular suite of applied and technical qualifications.

The findings emphasise that the labels "vocational" and "academic" are insufficient for describing current upper secondary pathways, and show that candidates who included vocational and technical assessments within their upper secondary programmes progressed at good rates to HE and apprenticeships. The presentation will consider these outcomes in light of major new reforms currently being implemented in England. These reforms will introduce new vocational assessments (T levels) and fundamentally alter upper secondary education by defining discrete academic and technical pathways, in strong contrast to current practice (DfE, 2017).

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