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Comparing different types of qualifications (e.g. vocational versus academic)

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Abstract

Thousands of qualifications of various types have Ofqual accreditation. Generally, research comparing qualifications uses quality of candidates' performance and demand of examination questions as comparators. For vocational qualifications data samples can be insufficient for robust research, so alternatives are sought. Alternative comparators infrequently used by the awarding bodies and Ofqual are returns to qualifications and educational taxonomies. This presentation highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each comparator to facilitate choosing robust research methods.

Returns to qualifications measure how much more (or less) on average is earned by people with a particular qualification compared to people with similar demographic details who do not have the qualification. It is used to compare the economic value of the skills, knowledge, competence and personality attributes. There is an established literature about returns to qualifications which influences policy, for example, the Wolf report. An advantage of returns to qualifications research is it enables comparisons between different types of qualifications, occupations and progression routes, which other established methods cannot adequately achieve. However, returns to qualifications research is limited, for instance, results can depend on how the statistical models are specified.

There are many educational taxonomies, perhaps the most famous is Bloom's taxonomy. Some taxonomies are authoritative guidelines for judging which qualification's content is more or less demanding, because these taxonomies are based on research about learning and development. This is a strength as research comparing qualifications can struggle to explain what is more and less demanding. However, educational taxonomies are open to different interpretations which makes them a limited comparator.

The presentation was based on:

Greatorex, J (2011) Comparing different types of qualifications: an alternative comparator, *Research Matters: Special Issue 2: Comparability A Cambridge Assessment Publication*, 34-41

Nadezda Novakovic and Jackie Greatorex (2011) Comparing the demand of syllabus content in the context of vocational qualifications: literature, theory and method *Research Matters: A Cambridge assessment publication*, 11, 25-31.

