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Examining the use of technical qualifications within Key Stage 5 programmes of study

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Overview

Although secondary level students in the UK are not formally separated into academic and vocational education, concerns exist about the ‘tracking’ of certain students into VET pathways. Studies have repeatedly found that students from areas of deprivation and students with low prior attainment are over-represented in VET within the UK. Furthermore, reported rates of progression from VET to Higher Education (HE) and technical training are often low, 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.

Evidence from the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)¹ shows that increasing numbers of UK students enter HE having taken a VET qualification during Key Stage 5 (KS5 – upper secondary education). Reporting from UCAS, however, identifies only one class of VET qualification (BTECs) and one form of post-secondary education (HE), and can thus provide only a partial view into VET qualifications within KS5 and students’ subsequent progression.

The present research contributes new evidence on the uptake and role of VET qualifications within KS5, focusing on one particular suite of technical qualifications, Cambridge Technicals. We found that candidates were typically middle-attaining relative to their Key Stage 4 (lower secondary) cohort, and studied Cambridge Technicals alongside a diverse range of other qualifications. Around half of candidates combined Cambridge Technicals with A levels, and over a third combined Cambridge Technicals with BTECs. Whilst some candidates pursued a purely vocational programme of study, most combined VET with general qualifications, raising questions about the description of candidates as ‘vocational’ or ‘academic’. Candidates achieved median UCAS point scores approximately equivalent to ABB at A level, and many progressed to HE, apprenticeships and further education, frequently in the same subject areas as their Cambridge Technicals qualifications.

Methodology

We carried out quantitative analysis of student-level national datasets in England, chiefly the Key Stage 5 National Pupil Database (NPD). The NPD lists student and school characteristics, prior attainment (at age 16), and qualifications achieved at upper secondary level, for all students in England. In order to examine student progression, we linked the Key Stage 5 NPD to the Individualised Learner Record (detailing participation in Further Education and apprenticeships) and Higher Education Statistics Agency records (detailing participation in Higher Education). Our research questions were answered using detailed descriptive statistics.

¹ UCAS (2016), End of Cycle Report 2016.
<https://www.ucas.com/file/86541/download?token=PQnaAI5f>.