

Passports to Progress

How do vocational qualifications help young people in building their careers?

Part One

Ben Richards

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FOREWORD

Much has changed in professional and technical education since the publication of Alison Wolf's landmark report into vocational education in 2011. The schools and colleges that offer vocational choices today can testify that this is a route that is now more rigorous in the classroom and more relevant to the workplace.

That is the immediate context for this excellent report.

In those five years we have seen a decline in the volume of vocational qualifications studied in schools at Key Stage 4 (GCSE equivalent) but an increase in students studying these qualifications post-16. And the SMF's analysis in this paper underlines the fact that this growth among post-16 learners is opening up a route through to success at university for a group that reflects the wider population – including, increasingly, high achieving academic students as well as those who need a second chance.

It is increasingly understood that study relevant to a career is one of the factors that is bringing a new, more socially diverse generation of learners into higher education. Today one in four learners entering university do so with a BTEC, and the fastest growing route of all is among students studying a combination of A Level and BTEC. The picket fence between vocational and academic study hasn't yet fallen down, but it has been breached.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge from this excellent report is that choice between 'academic' and 'career & professional' study is not binary. Too often education is beset by false dichotomies. And too often the debate around vocational study is about whether it enables further study or delivers skills for a specific occupation. Education is surely at its best when it keeps people's options open, enabling choice in how people make the progress in their lives that they want.

We can see the benefits of this approach in other countries, for example Singapore, where they celebrate a system of bridges and ladders. Most people opt for the career and professional route above the academic A level route because it leaves their options open; they can go to university or get

a job. In Singapore, students with good O level results choose this route, just as, increasingly, those with good GCSE results choose that route in this country too. That system of bridges and ladders is a vision that is within our grasp in the UK, one at the heart of this report, and one we can and do support at Pearson through our work on BTEC.

My thanks to Emran, Ben and the team at the SMF for their hard work in producing this excellent report.

Rod Bristow

President of Pearson in the UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The UK has struggled to provide the right balance of academic and vocational education to suit the choices of young people and the needs of the economy. In particular, vocational education has been under-valued and treated as second-best to academic qualifications.

In an attempt to correct the imbalance, successive governments have sought to expand and improve opportunities in vocational education. This research examines how take up has changed in recent years; how parents view vocational qualifications; and the issues school leaders contend with when deciding what courses to offer.

Later in summer 2016 we will be releasing further analysis on how vocational qualifications support young people in building their careers.

Trends in the take-up of academic and vocational qualifications

Using data from the National Pupil Database, we demonstrated some big changes in take-up.

- Over the last decade, the number of vocational courses completed at Key Stage 5 (KS5) rose by 179% to reach just over 400,000 in 2015. This rapid increase came alongside very steady take-up of academic courses: 935,000 academic KS5 courses were completed in 2015, compared to 933,000 in 2006.
- Much of the increase in vocational courses is due to increased take-up of BTECs. The number of pupils completing BTECs rose from 45,000 to 150,000 over the decade. This compares with an increase from 12,000 to 44,000 for other types of vocational qualification.
- Take-up varies by pupil background. 66% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) completed a vocational course in 2015, compared to 44% of pupils not eligible for FSM. However, take-up among non-FSM pupils has shot up, from 14% to 44%.

- There is also a big rise in the take-up of vocational qualifications among those who have done well at Key Stage 4. 37% of those who achieved 5 A* to C grades went on to do KS5 vocational qualifications in 2015 – up from just 8% in 2006.

Head-teachers' attitudes towards vocational qualifications

We interviewed nine head-teachers, from schools in nine of the ten geographical regions in England and Wales, to understand their views on vocational qualifications.

- Head-teachers emphasised the value of vocational qualifications in expanding the options available to pupils. Many thought it important to include vocational qualifications in their curriculum in order to create sufficient flexibility for pupils with different styles of learning, aspirations, and abilities.
- Vocational courses can have a crucial role in stimulating and motivating pupils. The effect on motivation can prevent pupils from dropping out and has a positive impact on their other studies. Head-teachers felt that, if pupils were unable to succeed in any of their subject choices, this can have a strong adverse effect on their motivation, well-being and mental health. Vocational courses can be very important in this regard to pupils achieving less well academically.
- Recommending a combination of vocational and academic courses to pupils is very common. Choosing an appropriate combination can lead to some students performing much better than they would have by following a 'pure' academic or vocational route. Some head-teachers felt the distinction itself between academic and vocational courses is misleading, since some vocational courses have significant academic content, and vice versa.
- Schools face staff, cost and demand constraints to offering vocational courses. For example, a particular vocational course can only be offered where a 'critical mass' of students wish to take it. However, schools can increase the number of subject choices they offer by allowing pupils to take vocational subjects externally – for example, at a local Further Education College.

- Concerns over the eligibility of courses for inclusion in league tables can have a very significant influence over head-teachers' curriculum decisions. The English and Welsh Baccalaureate requirements have created constraints for schools in terms of the subjects they feel able to offer. However, some head-teachers are continuing to offer courses that cannot be included in league tables because they feel it is the right thing to do for their students.
- Some head-teachers acknowledged that, prior to the recent policy changes, there had been some 'gaming' of league tables. For instance, there was acknowledgement that some schools had decided to offer vocational courses with equivalence to four GCSEs because of the advantages this gives for league table rankings, rather than the value of the course itself.
- Head-teachers thought that, since the Wolf Report was published, the quality of vocational courses has risen considerably. The improvement in quality is at odds with a continued perception that vocational qualifications are an 'easy option'.

Parents' attitudes towards vocational qualifications

We conducted a poll of parents with children aged between 14 and 18.

- Parents are more likely to think that academic qualifications provide students with a high quality education (77% agree) than they are to think vocational qualifications do (69% agree). 72% agree that a combination of academic and vocational qualifications taken together provide students with a high quality education.
- The pattern is different when parents are asked about the value of different qualifications for employment prospects. 74% agree that academic qualifications provide good employment prospects; 77% agree that vocational qualifications provide good employment prospects; and 79% agree that a combination of academic and vocational qualifications taken together provide good employment prospects.

- The differences are much larger when parents are asked about prospects of pupils going to a university of their choice. 84% agree that academic qualifications provide good prospects; but just 44% agree that vocational qualifications provide good prospects. A combination of academic and vocational qualifications is somewhere in between, with 55% agreeing.
- Parents in high income households are more likely to agree that academic qualifications provide pupils with a high quality education. 84% of parents in households with an annual income of £70,000 or over agreed; but just 70% of parents in households with an income of less than £20,000 did so.
- Differences also exist when parents are asked whether vocational qualifications provide pupils with good prospects of going onto university. 54% of parents in households with an annual income of less than £20,000 agreed; but just 36% of parents in households with an income of £70,000 or over did so.

Conclusions

The binary divide between academic and vocational qualifications is breaking down. Many more pupils are taking both types of qualifications; and an increasing proportion of young people who are meeting the standard of 5 GCSEs at A*-C are going on to take vocational qualifications too.

Parental attitudes lag behind these changes. Improving the perception of the quality of vocational qualifications is therefore of ongoing importance.

At the same time, we should recognise the challenges that some schools experience – for example, capacity, access to facilities and the demands of the accountability system – in providing vocational qualifications. Especially as we tackle the next stage of our research – analysing the returns from vocational qualifications and how effective they are in supporting young people to build their careers – we will consider how best to overcome these challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

For many years, the UK has struggled to provide the right balance of academic and vocational education that young students and the economy need. In particular, vocational education has been under-valued and treated as second-best to academic qualifications.¹

In an attempt to correct the imbalance, successive governments have sought to expand and improve opportunities in vocational education. For instance, in 2012 David Cameron spoke of the significance of boosting vocational education as an important element of a “rebalancing effort” for the UK economy. He also stated his ambition to create “a high-quality vocational system that rewards the values of aspiration and achievement”.² Such interventions are the latest in a long-standing debate over the relative merits of academic and vocational qualifications, whereby many politicians have claimed that there should be ‘parity of esteem’.³

At a superficial level at least, the five years to 2013 saw some advances towards these objectives with higher take-up of vocational courses at Key Stage 4, when pupils are usually aged between 14 and 16, and Key Stage 5, when pupils are usually aged between 16 and 18. Between 2008/09 and 2013/14 the number of students entered into a vocational level 3 qualification nearly doubled, from 100,000 to over 185,000.⁴ However, success cannot be measured in volumes of qualifications alone. It is just as important to understand who takes these courses and why, to know how students are combining different types of courses at the same time, and to be able to compare the quality of different qualifications. On these issues, we have much less evidence and the evidence we do have suggests we have some way to go.

Quality vocational courses

Part of the problem has centred around the variable quality of vocational courses. Existing research shows that both academic and vocational qualifications can help prepare young people for successful careers when the qualification is appropriate for them. A review of the evidence completed in 2015 found that there are significant benefits for learners, for business

and for the economy that derive from young people taking vocational courses.⁵ Benefits to the individual include a greater likelihood of finding employment, and higher wages.

Academic and vocational qualifications

Vocational education has been described as ‘a system of education which has, as its subject-matter, knowledge used within certain trades, occupations or professions’.⁶ Its value derives from preparing the student for working life as well as imparting skills and attributes that are advantageous outside the specific occupation. Vocational qualifications include BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council qualifications) and NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications). Qualifications can be taken at different levels such as entry level, GCSE equivalent, A-level equivalent and university degree equivalent.

Academic qualifications are typically taken at age 16 (GCSEs), age 18 (A Levels) and at university and include subjects such as maths, English and science.

However, the official review carried out by Professor Alison Wolf in 2011 identified significant variation in the quality of different vocational qualifications.⁷ It also noted concerns that some institutions were putting students onto easier vocational courses to ‘game’ the system, thus increasing the proportion of pupils that achieved the benchmark of 5 A* to C grades at GCSE or equivalent. In response, the Government has acted to incentivise take-up of good quality vocational courses. There have also been important changes to Government policy at GCSE level, including the introduction in 2010 of the English Baccalaureate as a league table measure, which prioritised subjects the Government saw as key to a good education, such as English, maths and science.

In the context of these reforms, it is important to understand how take-up has changed in more recent years as well as building a fuller understanding of the benefits that individuals derive from different vocational qualifications.

Existing problems in the vocational vs academic divide: why we should care about take-up and choice

More generally, the divide between academic and vocational education has created imbalances in the types of opportunity available to pupils from different backgrounds. This has occurred at two levels.

First, because of the curriculum on offer at the institutions they attend and the advice they are given, pupils may opt against a particular vocational or academic course despite its appropriateness to their career aspirations and proficiencies. Even with the increased take-up of vocational qualifications, take-up of vocational courses has continued to vary across pupils and across schools.⁸ For instance, past research has suggested that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to take vocational courses, and schools in more disadvantaged areas are much more likely to offer them.⁹ The available evidence also implies that students have often pursued the academic or the vocational route due to factors other than the suitability of the courses to the pupils in question. Parental background, careers and educational experience may play a significant role in determining the advice given to children as they make decisions on what qualifications to take. Schools and colleges – because of their institutional legacy, because of perceived local economic factors or because of bias among teaching staff – may steer pupils one way or the other. The curriculum may end up being more limited and advice narrower than pupils require. Societal norms could also affect the decisions that pupils take. Such factors may lead to some pupils selecting a set of qualifications that are not a good match for their aptitudes and work aspirations.

Second, there has historically been a sense that young people should be making a binary choice between going down the academic or the vocational ‘route’. Rather than being encouraged to choose a mix of academic and vocational qualifications, pupils have tended to be pushed down a single path. The roots of such a division stem in part from education reforms.¹⁰ But other factors are likely to be influential, including parental advice, school curriculum design, teacher advice and societal norms. Intentionally, or otherwise, government and education policy has often reinforced this division rather than broken it down.

The outcome is that many students are not selecting the optimal mix of qualifications, which will often be a combination of academic and vocational qualifications. Those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds may be particularly affected. The Queen’s Speech restated the Government’s commitment to its ‘Life Chances’ agenda of providing all children whatever their background with the education and opportunity to succeed in life.¹¹

It is therefore important to understand not only the volume of qualifications taken, both in vocational and academic subjects, but also the mix of qualifications taken and how that is changing over time, and how different groups of students are making choices. Is the key distinction between academic and vocational educational routes helpful? Or would a more nuanced understanding of qualification choices be desirable? In policy and political terms, we are at an important juncture whereby we can either reinforce the division between vocational and academic qualifications or we can promote a fluid, nuanced and personalised approach to curriculum choices.

Questions this research addresses

This research focuses on three aspects of the debate:

1. How have the trends in course take-up evolved over recent years? Is the distinction between separate vocational and academic ‘streams’ the most appropriate, or should we now be thinking in terms of combinations of the two – and of different types?
2. What is driving the differences in take-up of vocational and academic courses between different pupils? If the Government is committed to creating a “society where people have real chance to get on and get up - to escape the circumstances of their birth”,¹² then we need to know why such differences persist, and whether all young people are able to take courses best suited to them. In particular, how are decisions made on course choice? Are they determined in large part by the needs of the student, or by constraints such as the course choices available at their school?
3. What is the value of different types of vocational qualifications to young people’s career and higher education prospects? Given that the

Wolf Report¹³ identified a wide range of quality in different vocational qualifications, which types are most associated with good prospects in adult life, and how does this compare with different types of academic qualification?

This paper is the first of two reports on vocational education in England and Wales. It aims to answer questions one and two. It provides up-to-date evidence on trends in the take-up of academic and vocational courses at Key Stages 4 and 5, and evidence of how course choices are made. The second paper, to be published in August 2016, will analyse the third question and seek to understand how taking a vocational qualification affects young people's career prospects and achievement at higher education.

Structure of this report

This report is structured as follows. Section II examines how pupil take-up of vocational qualifications at Key Stage 5 has changed over the last ten years, and compares this with the take-up of academic qualifications. It looks at the pupil characteristics that are related to the take-up of vocational qualifications, including socio-economic background, prior attainment, and gender. Section III examines the same issues, but at Key Stage 4.

To do this we use data from the National Pupil Database (NPD), which gives a record of all pupils attending schools in England,¹⁴ including their background and attainment. The NPD offers a unique opportunity to understand the detail and nuance of trends in vocational education. We are extremely grateful to the Department for Education for giving the author permission to use this dataset; and to Education Datalab for partnering with us to offer their expertise.

Section IV examines take-up of vocational qualifications at the school level. The focus is on the characteristics of schools that offer vocational qualifications of different types, compared to those school that offer only academic qualifications. It also uses the National Pupil Database, but aggregated at the school level. In addition, Section IV presents the results of a regression model showing those characteristics most strongly related to vocational course take-up.

Section V searches for potential reasons behind the patterns identified in Sections II and III. It asks: what are the processes by which head-teachers make decisions on whether to include vocational qualifications in their school curriculum, and on whether or not to recommend a particular pupil takes a vocational course? We have conducted nine interviews with head-teachers, representing nine of the ten regions of England and Wales, and with a split between schools with high and low numbers of Pupil Premium eligibility (our proxy for pupil deprivation).

Section VI seeks to understand differences in vocational course take-up by looking at parental attitudes towards the relative merits of academic and vocational qualifications. To do this we conducted a nationally representative poll of parents with children aged between 14 and 18. We ask: are there systematic differences in the attitudes that parents have towards vocational qualifications that vary, for instance, by income or education?

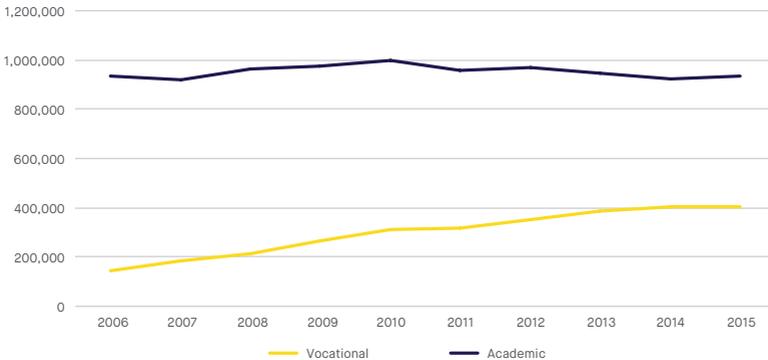
Section VII draws together the findings of the preceding sections, and concludes with our key findings.

II. TRENDS IN AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PUPILS TAKING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AT KEY STAGE 5

TAKE-UP OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS OVER TIME

Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the number of pupils taking vocational qualifications in England at Key Stage 5 (KS5), when pupils are usually aged between 16 and 18. Ten years ago, academic courses were much more common than vocational courses, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Roughly one million KS5 academic qualifications were taken in 2006, but fewer than 200,000 vocational qualifications. By 2015 the number of academic qualifications had remained relatively steady, but the number of vocational courses taken had more than doubled to 400,000.

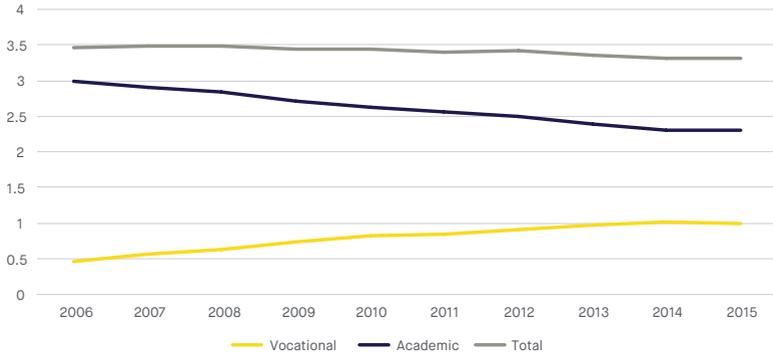
Figure 1: Overall number of English Key Stage 5 entries over time, by qualification type¹⁵



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

In the context of an overall increase in pupil numbers over this time, the trend is even more dramatic if one considers the average number of courses per pupil. Between 2006 and 2015 the average number of KS5 entries went down slightly – but this decrease was driven by a large decrease in the average number of A level entries, and occurred despite a rapid increase in vocational entries to an average of around one per pupil.

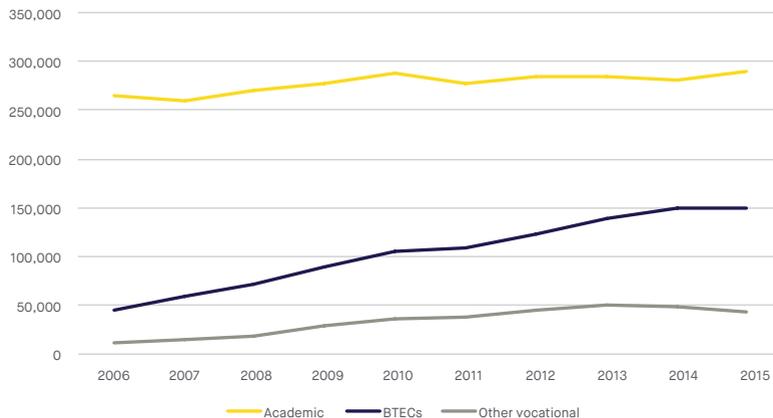
Figure 2: Average number of English Key Stage 5 entries per pupil over time (level 3 only)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

Much of this trend at KS5 has been driven by an increase in pupils taking BTECs. In 2006 fewer than 50,000 pupils took one or more KS5 BTEC course; but by 2014 this had risen to 150,000. There have also been very rapid increases in pupils taking other vocational courses, albeit from a lower base: from around 11,000 pupils in 2006, to a peak of 50,000 in 2013, and then down slightly to 44,000 by 2015.

Figure 3: Number of pupils taking courses at Key Stage 5 over time (level 3 only)



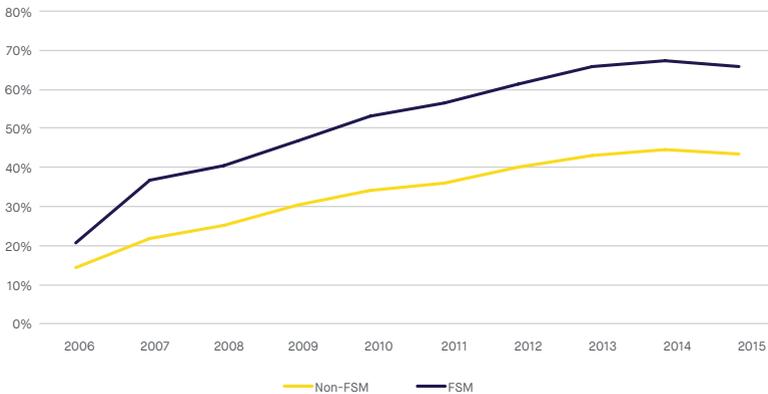
Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

WHICH PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS ARE RELATED TO TAKE-UP OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

These trends towards an increase in the take-up of vocational qualifications have not been uniform across different types of pupils. In 2006 there were key differences in types of pupils taking vocational courses; and these differences have evolved since then.

Pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM)¹⁶ have been much more likely to take vocational qualifications than pupils without FSM entitlement. In 2006, 21% of FSM pupils took a vocational course, compared to just 14% of non-FSM pupils. By 2014, this difference had widened to 67% of FSM pupils as compared with 45% of non-FSM pupils, before falling slightly in 2015.

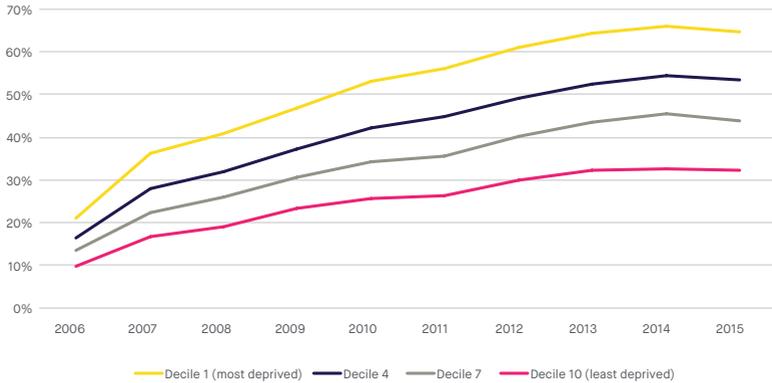
Figure 4: Proportion of Key Stage 5 pupils taking a vocational course, by FSM eligibility



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

Socio-economic differences in vocational course take-up are also apparent if one considers the level of deprivation in a pupil's local area of residence.¹⁷ Differences between local areas were already apparent in 2006, with pupils from more deprived areas being more likely to take a vocational course at KS5. Over time these differences widened such that by 2014, two thirds of pupils from the most deprived areas took at least one vocational course, compared to just a third from the least deprived.

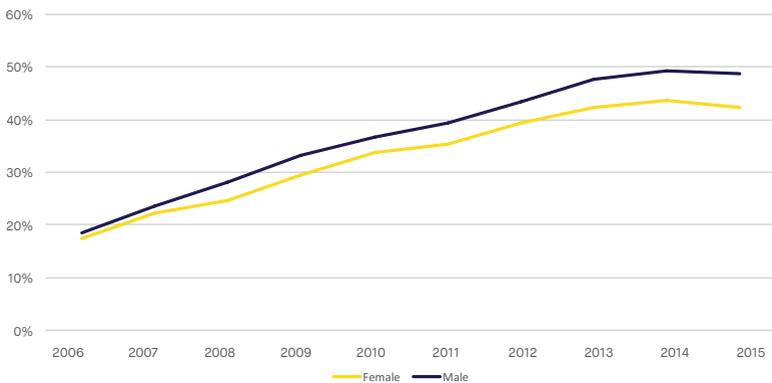
Figure 5: Proportion of Key Stage 5 pupils taking a vocational course, by area deprivation (deciles)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

Although in 2006 gender differences in take-up of vocational qualifications were very small, they have grown over time. By 2014 a gender gap of over 5% had emerged – with boys more likely to take vocational subjects than girls – and despite overall falls in take-up in 2015, the gender gap increased slightly.

Figure 6: Proportion of Key Stage 5 pupils taking a vocational course, by gender

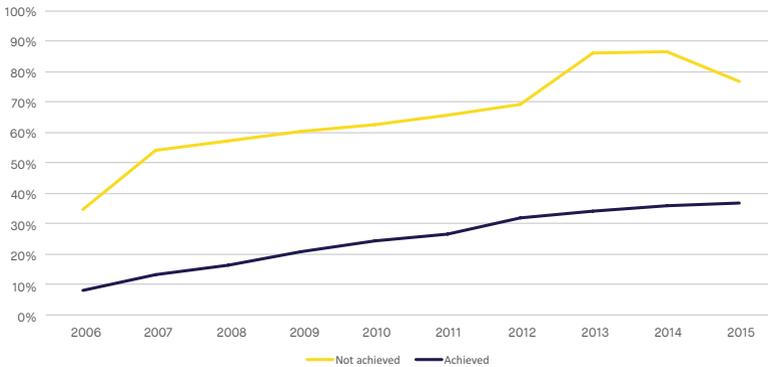


Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

Prior attainment is also strongly related to take-up of vocational qualifications at KS5. This was clearly apparent ten years ago: fewer than 10% of KS5 pupils who had achieved 5 A* to Cs at GCSE (including English & maths) went on to take a vocational subject at KS5; but more than a third of KS5 pupils who had not achieved this GCSE benchmark took a vocational subject. Over time the proportion taking vocational qualifications from both groups increased, but the large gap was maintained.

Nevertheless, what Figure 7 also demonstrates is the rapid increase in the numbers of pupils with a strong academic background taking at least one vocational course. The fact that well over a third of pupils achieving five A* to C grades, including English and maths, go on to take vocational courses at KS5 demonstrates just how common it has become to combine both the vocational and academic ‘streams’.

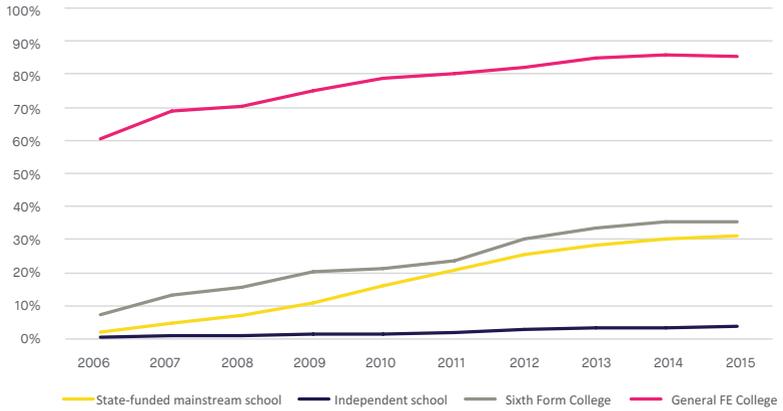
Figure 7: Proportion of KS5 pupils taking a vocational course, by GCSE attainment (5 A* to C, including English and maths)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

Another key factor in determining the likelihood of take-up of vocational qualifications is school type. Vocational courses are much more common amongst pupils attending Further Education (FE) Colleges, but take-up rates have also increased substantially among Sixth Form College and mainstream state school pupils. Pupils attending independent schools are much less likely to take vocational courses at KS5; although the rate has increased over time, it started at a very low base, and remains low.

Figure 8: Proportion of KS5 pupils taking a vocational course, by school type



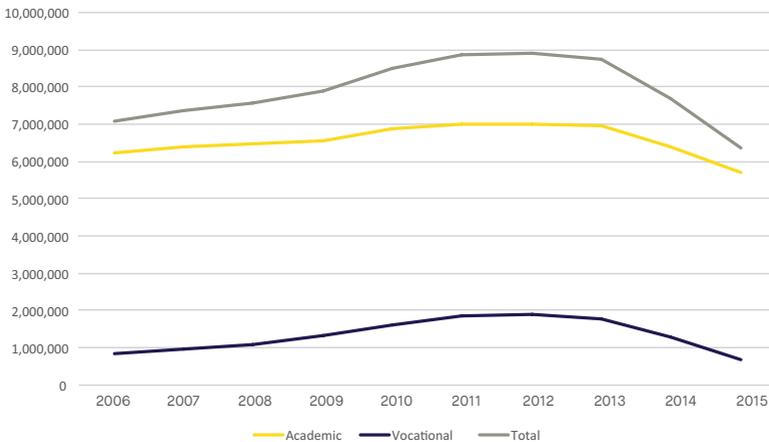
Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

III. TRENDS IN AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PUPILS TAKING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AT KEY STAGE 4

TAKE-UP OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS OVER TIME

At Key Stage 4 (KS4) – when pupils are usually aged between 14 and 16 – the trend in take-up of vocational qualifications has some similarities to KS5, but also has some very important differences. Between 2006 and 2012 the total number of KS4 vocational entries in England more than doubled – from around 850,000 to 1.9 million – and this was a key contributor to an overall large increase in the total number of KS4 entries. However, from 2013 onwards the total number of KS4 entries dropped sharply, with a particularly dramatic fall in the number of vocational entries – these fell to just 680,000 in 2015, a reduction of 65% on the 2012 high, and a lower figure than in 2006.

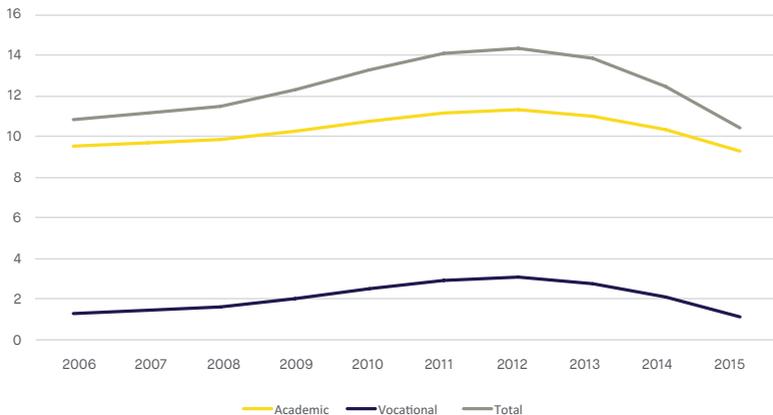
Figure 9: Overall number of English KS4 entries over time, by qualification type



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 - 2015)

What explains this sharp fall in vocational entries? Demographic shifts are unlikely to be behind it: Figure 10 below shows the average number of KS4 entries per pupil, and demonstrates a similar trend to Figure 9. However, it is noteworthy that the fall arrived at around the same time as significant policy changes were introduced regarding vocational qualifications at KS4. These included the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) requirements, which created a new school performance measure based on five 'core' academic GCSE subjects; the change in value of vocational qualifications in performance tables, so that all vocational qualifications are equivalent to one GCSE, no matter their size; and the reduction in numbers that could be included, such that a maximum of two could be included in the headline 5 A*-C measure. In addition, an approved list was introduced so that, from 2014, only qualifications on a list published by the Department for Education could be included in performance measures.

Figure 10: Average number of English KS4 entries per pupil over time, by qualification type



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 - 2015)

WHICH PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS ARE RELATED TO TAKE-UP OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AT KS4?

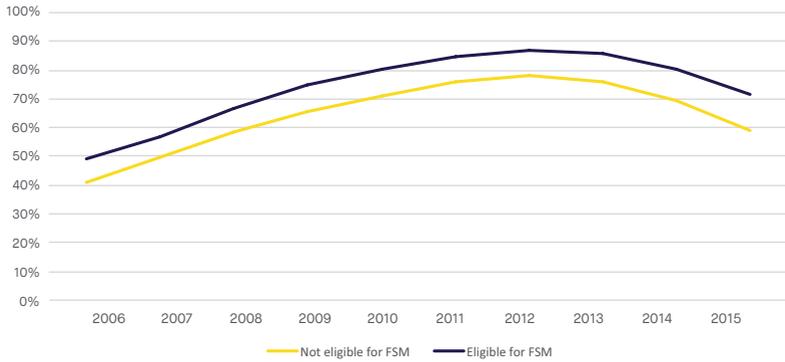
Take-up of vocational qualifications at KS4 differs by eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), with FSM-eligible pupils typically having a take-up rate around 10% higher than for pupils not eligible for FSM, as shown in Figure 11. The gap has widened slightly over time, although not nearly to the same extent as for KS5 pupils – by comparison Figure 4 shows a gap in take-up rates of over 20% at KS5.

It is also noteworthy that the proportion of KS4 pupils taking at least one vocational course has fallen much less dramatically than both the overall numbers of vocational courses taken, and the average number of KS4 vocational entries per pupil. This suggests that the reduction in the take-up of vocational courses is most marked for pupils taking many vocational courses at once; whilst the number of pupils taking a small number of vocational courses has remained relatively steady. The trend towards pupils taking a combination of academic and vocational courses therefore appears to have held relatively steady in the face of a reduction in vocational take-up overall.

This is highlighted by the fact that the average (mean) number of KS4 vocational entries per pupil fell from 1.3 in 2006 to 1.1 in 2015, demonstrating a fall in total take-up. However over the same period the proportion of non FSM-eligible pupils taking at least one vocational qualification rose substantially, from 41% to 59%.

Small differences in vocational take-up are also apparent by gender. The opposite pattern from KS5 is evident: at KS4 girls are more likely to take a vocational course; but at KS5 take-up from boys is more likely. However, the gender difference at KS4 is very small, with 61% of girls and 60% of boys taking at least one vocational course in 2015.

Figure 11: Proportion of KS4 pupils taking a vocational course over time, by FSM eligibility



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 - 2015)

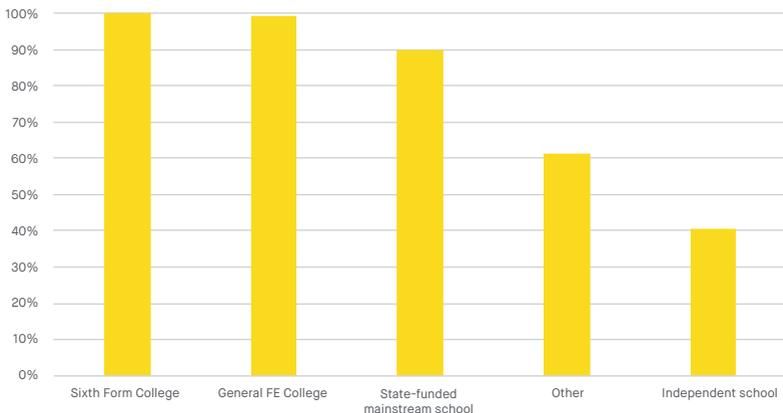
IV. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLS OFFERING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

What is driving these differences in vocational course take-up? One possibility is that there are differences in the types of course offered by different types of school. To consider the extent to which school curriculum might be a contributor to differences in the take-up of vocational courses, in this section we analyse differences in courses offered by school type. We define ‘school’ in a broad sense to include all educational establishments offering courses at Key Stage 5, excluding special schools.

Figure 12 looks at four common types of school in England: FE colleges; Sixth Form Colleges; mainstream state-funded schools; and independent schools. It shows the proportion of schools of this type that offer any (i.e. at least one) vocational courses at KS5.

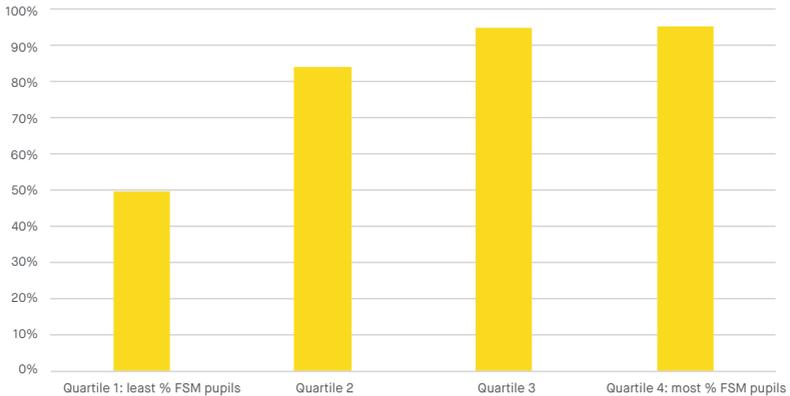
Almost all FE Colleges and Sixth Form Colleges offer at least some type of vocational education; and 90% of mainstream state-funded schools offer vocational courses. Around 40% of independent schools offer vocational qualifications.

Figure 12: Proportion of English schools offering vocational courses at KS5, by school type (2015)¹⁸



Source: Author’s calculations using the National Pupil Database (2015)

Figure 13: Proportion of schools offering vocational qualifications at KS5, by % of intake eligible for FSM (quartiles, 2015)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2015)

The proportion of a school's intake eligible for FSM is also strongly related to its likelihood of offering vocational courses. Figure 13 shows schools divided into quartiles based on the proportion of their FSM eligible intake. Schools with a relatively high FSM intake are much more likely to offer vocational courses. Of the half of schools with a high FSM intake, 95% offer vocational courses. Around 40% of independent schools offer vocational qualifications.

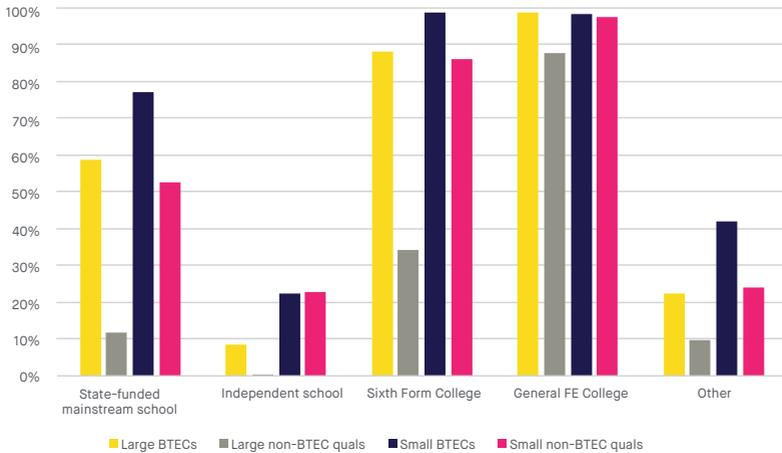
But exactly which vocational courses are schools offering at KS5? Figure 14 shows the proportion of schools offering different vocational options at KS5 by school type, and breaks down vocational courses into BTEC and non-BTEC, and small and large courses. Large courses are defined here as those that offer pupils 1.6 A level equivalents or more.

It's clear that of the large courses, BTECs are most commonly offered. Only FE Colleges consistently tend to offer alternatives to large BTEC courses. It is also apparent that most independent schools offering vocational courses opt for the smaller course types, with very few offering large courses.

Figure 15 shows the proportion of schools offering large and small vocational qualifications, broken down by the proportion of FSM-eligible pupils in the school’s intake. It demonstrates just how much more variation there is between schools offering large vocational qualifications, as compared with schools offering small vocational qualifications.

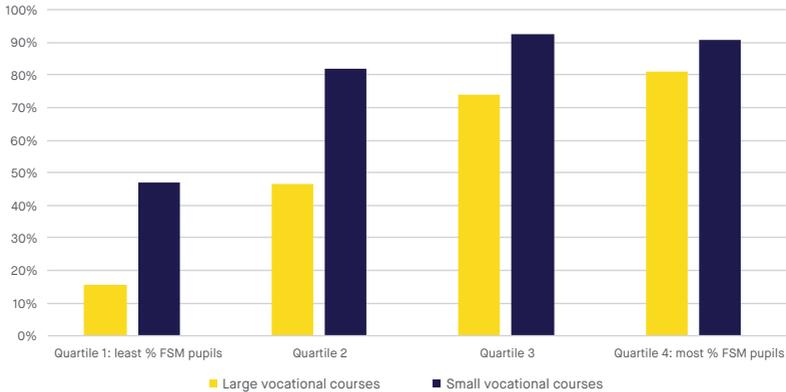
Around 90% of schools with a high proportion of FSM-eligible pupils offer small vocational courses at KS5. This compares with just under 50% of schools with a low proportion of FSM-eligible pupils. However, if we consider large vocational courses the differences are much larger: more than 80% of high-FSM schools offer large courses; but these courses are offered by just 15% of low-FSM schools.

Figure 14: Proportion of schools offering different vocational options at KS5, by school type (2015)



Source: Author’s calculations using the National Pupil Database (2015)

Figure 15: Proportion of schools offering large and small vocational qualifications at KS5, by % of FSM-eligible intake (quartiles, 2015)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2015)

Which pupil and school characteristics are most important in predicting vocational take-up?

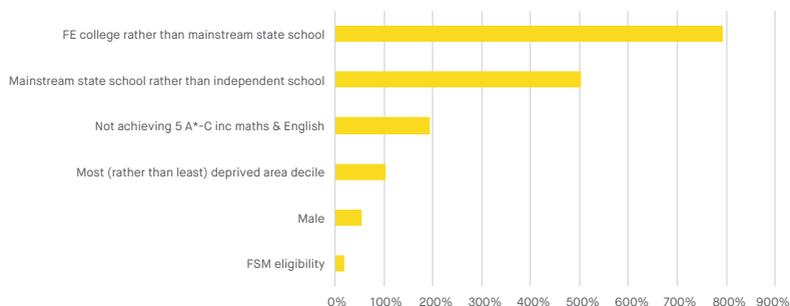
We know that pupils with certain characteristics are much more likely to take vocational qualifications than others, and that schools with a particular intake are much more likely to offer vocational courses at KS5.

But which characteristics are the most important predictors of vocational take-up? We use a regression model to investigate this. Regression is a particularly helpful tool given that many of the characteristics most related to vocational take-up are likely to be correlated with each other. For instance, pupils eligible for FSM are also more likely to live in deprived areas, and are less likely to attend an independent school. Regression analysis allows us to ask whether, given a pupil's other characteristics, one particular characteristic is important in predicting whether or not they take a vocational course. We know that FSM eligibility, deprivation, and school type are all important - but a regression model allows us to ascertain which is most important.

The regression model looks at the likelihood of taking a BTEC. The model shows that certain pupil characteristics are very important for predicting whether or not a pupil is likely to take a BTEC at KS5. FSM eligibility increases the likelihood by 18%, holding all other characteristics constant. Being male increases the likelihood by 55%, whilst residing in the most (rather than least) deprived area (in terms of deciles) increases the likelihood by 104%. Not achieving 5 A* - C grades at GCSE is a very powerful predictor, increasing the likelihood of taking a BTEC by almost 200%. However, school characteristics (particularly school types) are most strongly associated with vocational take-up. Attending a mainstream state school rather than an independent school increases the likelihood of taking a KS5 BTEC by 500%; whilst attending an FE College rather than a mainstream state school increases the likelihood by almost 800%.

Another important finding is that area deprivation is substantially more important in predicting the take-up of BTECs than FSM eligibility. Although FSM eligibility is important on its own, once area deprivation is controlled for FSM eligibility only has a relatively small effect. This means that, if we were to take two pupils living in the same local area, it would on average only make a small difference to their likelihood of taking a BTEC if one was eligible for FSM but the other was not. However, living in a more deprived rather than a less deprived area makes a big difference. Where pupils live matters more than their FSM status.

Figure 16: Increase in likelihood of take-up of a BTEC at KS5, by pupil characteristics (England)



Source: Author's calculations using the National Pupil Database (2006 – 2015)

V. WHAT ARE THE REASONS GIVEN BY HEAD-TEACHERS FOR RECOMMENDING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

There are many questions raised by the trends and differences in vocational course take-up shown in the previous sections. How are the decisions that drive these differences in course choice made? Why might some schools be so much more likely to offer vocational courses than others? What are the reasons for the differences apparent in offering large and small vocational courses at KS5? And why might it be the case that young people who would traditionally be considered to be on an ‘academic track’ – such as those achieving 5 A* to C grades (including English and maths) – have increasingly also been taking one or more vocational courses at KS5?

We interviewed nine head-teachers from schools across England and Wales in order to understand their views on vocational qualifications. The main purpose of the interviews was to understand the decision-making processes head-teachers go through when deciding whether or not to include vocational qualifications in their curriculum, and in deciding whether or not to recommend vocational courses to students. Questions were asked in four key areas: the school curriculum; the decision-making process in recommending vocational qualifications to students; perceptions of parental attitudes to vocational qualifications; and perceptions of Government policy.

To ensure good geographical representation of schools, we aimed to interview a head-teacher from each of the ten regions (defined as Government Office Region) in England and Wales. With the nine interviews we conducted we were able to represent nine of these ten regions.¹⁹ We also ensured a reasonably even split between schools with a large number of pupils from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, and schools without a predominantly socio-economically deprived intake.²⁰

In cases where there are quotes from more than one interviewee at once, this is indicated by different coloured text.

THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Head-teachers gave a range of views on how they decided upon the courses to include in their curriculum, and also on the types of vocational courses that were most appropriate. However, there were certain themes that came up repeatedly.

Head-teachers emphasised the value of vocational qualifications in expanding the options available to pupils

The majority of the head-teachers we interviewed saw vocational subjects as an important part of their curriculum. This point was emphasised in particular by head-teachers of schools with a very diverse intake. Sometimes the value that vocational subjects bring was framed in terms of offering a balanced curriculum:

“What we try to do is ensure that the curriculum is a balanced one, we are a comprehensive school and we have children with a full range of abilities ... so the curriculum is shaped to meet the needs of everybody.”²¹

Another head-teacher emphasised the importance of flexibility in the curriculum, particularly given the diverse mix of students in the school's intake:

“We very much make our curriculum meet the needs of our pupils. We first look at what their level is in Year 5 before they come in, and we have a differentiated curriculum all the way through KS3. In KS3 our top children do Latin, but we have about 60% who don't have functional literacy so some of them will have reading and writing on their timetable.

In KS4 we have as bespoke a curriculum as we possibly can. We have several different pathways.

Others may arrive who are very well educated but they just need to learn the English. So you find with them they end up doing Maths

AS whilst still doing fairly basic English qualifications. So when we were deciding which BTECs to put on, it was what we felt would meet the needs of the children.”²²

A third head-teacher also emphasised flexibility and choice in the curriculum, and saw this as essential in order to create sufficient choice for pupils with different styles of learning, aspirations, and abilities:

“There are all sorts of learners ... there are all sorts of outcomes. Society needs to be ... vibrant economically, but also [needs] people ... contributing to our culture in society as well as our economy. So governments have got to keep choice available to the generations of children because you've got different styles of learning, different aspirations, different abilities.”²³

In addition, having a range of different courses can provide students with a choice between being examined at the end of the course, or in stages as the course progresses:

“Traditionally there are kids who might have struggled with exams but are very good at doing the ongoing work that we do. I know vocational has changed over time, but it still works better for them, that's the key thing. If they are doing straight exam courses they don't do as well as the ongoing assessment, and even though there are more exam bits now it still works better for them.”²⁴

Schools face staff, cost and demand constraints to offering vocational courses; but can increase the number of subject choices they offer by allowing pupils to take vocational subjects externally

Several head-teachers explained the trade-offs they need to make in deciding upon their curriculum choices. For vocational courses in particular, these trade-offs include practical constraints – such as the availability of staff with expertise in that area – and cost considerations. These would need to be balanced against the demand from students, and it would only be viable to offer a particular course if there were sufficient numbers of

students interested in it. One head-teacher, for instance, described the decision-making process as:

“Looking at the facilities that we have here at the school, looking at staffing that I’ve got on our payroll, and also looking then at student need, and what they would like to do in terms of that combination of subjects. So it would be foolish of us to do something [like vehicle maintenance] that would cost thousands to set up, and you might only get a very small number of students wishing to do it. So we have to be pragmatic about this as well as making sure we meet student need.”²⁵

Another head-teacher, however, explained that, despite seeing the value in vocational course offerings for some students, his school was very restricted in the number and type of vocational courses it could offer due to cost constraints:

“We’re not able to offer BTEC or anything that would be a serious vocational alternative, and that’s because GCSEs are largely cheaper to fund. You have a teacher, you have textbooks, and a lot of it is classroom based stuff. Whereas the BTECs and NVQs we’ve looked into need more specialist provision, and are generally more expensive to provide in a school.”²⁶

Many head-teachers we interviewed explained that they were able to increase the choices available to pupils by partnering with a local institution, such as a Further Education College. This removed some of the barriers to offering a vocational course that only a small number of their pupils wished to take:

“We have some students that go off to the local FE College to do some specific vocational courses, so they have quite a range there that they can choose from, such as construction, and hair and beauty.”²⁷

Concerns over the eligibility of courses for inclusion in league tables can have an influence over head-teachers' curriculum decisions

Head-teachers generally thought it important that the courses they offered are included in KS4 and KS5 league tables. The introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) – a performance measure for schools, in which students must obtain a GCSE grade C or above in a core of five academic subjects – was particularly relevant to many head-teachers. For some it constrained the course choices they felt able to offer at KS4. Others discussed a trade-off they saw between doing what would be 'right' for the school – only offering subjects that would count positively towards its league table standing – and what would be best for students. Some head-teachers went so far as to reject the constraints they felt had been imposed on them by the EBacc, and decided to offer courses outside this benchmark anyway:

“But we've decided that because of the value of the courses and because they are much more appropriate for the ones that come in with lower range GCSE results, we are going to continue with them, and therefore we are going to do an applied science course that is a level 3 but isn't an A level, and won't be included in our results at the end of the process.”²⁸

“I have the philosophy as a head-teacher that we're going to do anything we can to meet the needs of our students. And if Ofsted and the DfE don't like it, well, you know, what are they doing to do? They're going to potentially make things look poor for my school in terms of the league tables, that could potentially trigger an Ofsted ... but I'm afraid my conscience is clear, my conscience tells me that we're doing the right thing for our students.”²⁹

Considerations on the quality of vocational courses include their suitability to students' interests and abilities, achieved levels of attainment, and progression

In deciding upon specific vocational courses to include in their curriculum, head-teachers were keen to balance several factors. These included the suitability of the course content for the demands of their pupils, pupils' prospects for attainment in that course, and pupils' prospects for progression. One head-teacher, for instance, described a preference for BTECs:

“We believe in this school that BTECs have a really strong reputation. We've got experience of students getting into Russell Group universities with BTEC qualifications, and we've been very satisfied with not only the programme content but also the success rate we've had with students doing those courses. So we're loathe to give those up, and we're really keen that we maintain them. So right now we're continuing them, even though we know some of the government messages, and league tables and so on, are quite anti vocational education.”³⁰

Head-teachers described processes within their schools for ensuring vocational courses are of good quality:

“We did that through the subject leaders, the heads of department that were proposing to do these courses, came along with the course that they felt was most appropriate for their anticipated cohort of students. They presented the evidence to us and we confirmed their choices.”³¹

“All of the senior leadership team will have a conversation with every single student at the time of their options, and with their parents, and the careers adviser will have a conversation as well, and will point them in the direction of what would be most appropriate to meet their needs in terms of further, higher, or job prospects beyond us, and that is taken fairly robustly and fairly seriously by us.”³²

RECOMMENDING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS TO STUDENTS

It's important to recommend courses that will give pupils a balance of being challenged and being able to succeed

Many head-teachers emphasised the importance of ensuring all pupils were able to take courses that would both challenge them and enable them to succeed. This balance was seen as a key factor when recommending courses to pupils:

"I have to say that it's good to take students out of their comfort zone and we clearly believe in doing lots of things that do that. But when it comes to their learning styles ... you've really got to maximise where their success routes are going to come from. Take PE for example, doing the BTEC PE or doing the traditional A level, we know that the BTEC course has a much stronger emphasis on the practical side of PE ... and not necessarily studying the anatomy and physiology of it all, so we know that we need to maximise their chances of being successful with the right course."³³

"I think they've got to be pitched at the right level, they've got to be engaging. The assessment process has got to be fit for purpose. We want them to feel challenged, but at a level where they can also succeed. And in some ways applied science has been the perfect example as well, because the subject content has been pitched at the right level, but the assessment has been quite rigorous ... And they're assessed at the level of other A levels, but because the course is accessible to them they are able to achieve."³⁴

Some head-teachers felt that pupils' past performance could give an indication of the types of courses a pupil is likely to excel at. When asked how the most appropriate options for a pupil were chosen, one head-teacher said:

"Well usually it's past performance in their subjects, so either at KS3 or KS4 that gives us an indication of their preferred learning

style. So when we've got all of that information together, and we've seen how well they've performed either under exam pressure or through coursework, we get a very clear picture of what's going to be playing to their strengths. And it's more important that we do play to their strengths than to continue down a pathway which probably won't work in the long run."³⁵

Vocational courses can have a crucial role in stimulating and motivating pupils

A key theme across most of the interviews was that head-teachers felt vocational courses had an extremely important role in motivating pupils, by providing them with a course that was stimulating and that they were able to excel at. This role was seen as particularly important for pupils who were performing less well in traditional academic subjects:

"My conscience tells me that we're doing the right thing for our students, and that's supporting them and keeping them in education. It means that they've got high attendance, and it means that they're being successful in their studies. That means then that their mental health and wellbeing and so on is fulfilled, and they're going to come out as strong adults. It's so much better for them to be doing things that they're motivated and engaged in, than just doing a set, or a suite of subjects that actually really really demotivates them, and they end up dropping out."³⁶

The motivating role that vocational courses could have for some pupils was also seen as having a potential knock-on effect for their desire to persevere in academic subjects:

"There are some really fabulous courses out there, take hair and beauty for example, it's a really great course for some of my students, they thrive on it. It means they're then motivated to come back into school to do their maths and science."³⁷

Concerns were raised that recent changes to Key Stage 4 qualifications could have a negative effect on pupils' wellbeing and motivation. One

head-teacher was worried in particular about the impact on policy changes in Wales:

“There’s a lot more focus on the academic qualifications, which is great for the academic children who would get it anyway. But doing nine [courses] and making seven of them having to be traditional GCSEs, for them to get the threshold, is really really hard.

I think it will affect them, in terms of how they feel about themselves ... Year 10s are the first year through, and we’re having a hell of a job to motivate them.”³⁸

Different views were apparent on whether vocational courses are primarily suited to pupils achieving less well in academic subjects, or whether they can be beneficial more broadly

Head-teachers had quite different views on whether or not vocational courses should primarily be seen as suited to less academically able pupils, or whether they should be seen as beneficial in their own right and suited to anyone with an interest in them. Some interviewees were explicit in their view that vocational courses were for ‘less able’ pupils:

“Well it was part of our planning for our KS4 curriculum that we were looking around for subjects that would interest and motivate less able pupils, and that was the driving motivation ... We do offer several subjects that are accessible to pupils who are below average ability at A level, in that they can do food, and art, textiles and business. These are subjects that accept the minimum qualifications for coming into our sixth form ... And it’s important that if we have a relatively low threshold level for getting into the sixth form that there are courses that the students can do when they get there.”³⁹

Another head-teacher, however, expressed a very different view:

“Vocational doesn’t mean easy, is what I’m saying. There are some very very academic vocational courses out there now which are not

the easy option. And yet the perception is that vocational means easy.”⁴⁰

Recommending a combination of vocational and academic courses is very common

Most head-teachers had students in their school taking a combination of academic and vocational courses at the same time, and were very comfortable with the idea of recommending a combination of courses to students. When asked whether he recommends combining academic and vocational courses, one interviewee said:

“Well we do. We do that all the time. We take a look at those and we have several meetings with students throughout year 11 looking at what their combinations could be based on the performance of what they’re doing at GCSE.”⁴¹

Another interviewee expressed similar views, highlighted the benefits to students he thought combining courses could bring:

“The students who come in with lower GCSE qualifications choose the subjects that are the ones we would have thought are appropriate for them. And some of them who achieve absolutely great A level results are taking a combination of A level and vocational courses. It’s really not unusual for students to get 2 As and a B who’ve got very modest GCSE qualifications, but then they’ve done the right courses that they’re really passionate about, and they’ve been well taught and they’ve worked really hard, and they come out with very good results at the end of it.”⁴²

Progression is a key consideration

A student’s opportunity for progression was another important consideration on whether or not to recommend a vocational course, whether that be progression to further study, to an apprenticeship, or into employment. When asked whether or not progression was a key consideration, head-teachers said:

“For us it’s imperative, because we want every one of our children to have a proper path into the next stage of their lives. As a result of what we do, at the end of Y13 we have no NEETS, [Not in Education, Employment or Training], so we must be getting something right, in terms of the path on which we put them. And last year [about half] of our children went to university, [about 90%] at their first choice, and [around a quarter] went to apprenticeships, some really good ones, Rolls Royce, British aerospace, and so on, and the rest went into further education, or employment.”⁴³

“We’ve done a lot of work ... in order to make sure that we’ve got progression routes for all of our students, which will allow them to go on to either college courses, university courses, or into employment ... We ask the students what they want to do, what kind of fields they can see themselves working in, and it turns out that IT, business, sport are the three main providers there.”⁴⁴

“When we do our options evenings one of the things that’s key in the booklet that goes out is about what the progression routes are post-16 ... So if you were to take a young student doing digital media, it talks about advanced apprenticeships, digital platforms, information and creative technologies, and then it goes into career opportunities in animation, broadcasting, editorial. What it’s doing is really demonstrating to parents that by doing this course you’ve actually got access to a much greater range of career opportunities than they would have if they did, [for example], a traditional French GCSE.”⁴⁵

Another head-teacher saw some vocational qualifications as offering specific training in an area that could lead directly into employment; but contrasted this with progression onto university, which offered the opportunity for keeping options open in order to make a career choice later:

“Students may want to do something like English or French or History at university, but with a view to being a lawyer. Some will not know exactly what they want to do but they see university as keeping their options open.”⁴⁶

PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS' ROLE IN MAKING DECISIONS ON VOCATIONAL COURSES

Parents – and particularly those with academic qualifications themselves – can have very negative views of the value of vocational qualifications for their children

Many head-teachers thought that at least some parents of their school pupils had negative views of vocational qualifications. Head-teachers thought parental concerns centred around a perception that vocational qualifications were for pupils of weaker ability, and around pupils' university and employment prospects:

“Their perception of vocational courses [is] that traditionally [they're] deemed for the children that are of a weaker ability, that's how they perceive it.”⁴⁷

“Sadly a lot of parents don't like vocational subjects, because they see them as being worthless, so quite often we've got to do a sales job on that, we've got to tell parents, employers, universities and so on will take these qualifications seriously.”⁴⁸

However, there was a perception that parents could be convinced of the benefits of vocational qualifications if their concerns around progression were assuaged:

“We have convinced quite a few parents because of course when you've got students who've proved that they're successful in doing a vocational qualification and going off to a Russell Group uni or something, really really good in their eyes, it suddenly weakens their argument. So we have done a lot of work over the years, and it's not been easy, I have to say I've been here now five years and you still get one or two families absolutely adamant that they don't want their child to do a BTEC.”⁴⁹

“I’ve got a good example. My own son, he did extremely well, he’s got 14 GCSE equivalents, A*s and As. But he did a BTEC course in engineering. So I can say, well he’s gone onto university, his chosen university. So it didn’t hold him back. It’s a good story to show your parents, that universities do value it.”⁵⁰

Negative views were seen as particularly common amongst parents who had themselves had an academic education. Speaking of parents’ views, one head-teacher described how:

“They are traditionally much more academic, they want their children to go into professions ... But it’s the insecurity of it, you see, that’s the issue, if a parent’s got their child to go on to do medicine, they can see that mapping out as a very smooth career for the rest of their child’s life. Whereas going to become self-employed and entrepreneurial in some way, and still making the same amount of money, they have an insecurity about that. And that’s quite hard to overcome, I don’t think I’ve cracked that one yet.”⁵¹

There was also a perception that frequent policy changes made it difficult for parents to have up-to-date information on vocational courses, such as progression rates into university:

“But you see there’s such a lot of instability in education at the moment, we’ve got so much change going on yet again with new specifications, new courses, new assessment criteria, I must admit it’s no wonder parents are feeling confused about things. They’re concerned when they hear of a child doing something different to GCSE or A level, they’re just seeing that as another layer of confusion. So I think it’s absolutely crucial that there is some really healthy productive information that is shared with parents nationally about the different qualifications and about the fact that they’re equally valued. We can do it as a school, but I think it ought to come from the DfE [Department for Education] and to families in a more robust way really.”⁵²

PERCEPTIONS OF RECENT AND FUTURE GOVERNMENT POLICY ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Head-teachers were well aware of the significant changes to the vocational choices available to schools since the Wolf Report. Many head-teachers agreed with the findings of the report:

“I think that the Wolf Report was really good in saying vocational courses are really important but rubbish vocational courses are just terrible. That is the problem with the vocational sector ... And I think that Alison Wolf was right, what is needed is really useful, helpful, worthwhile, valuable vocational courses that will attract students to do them and give them a qualification that’s worth having at the end of it.”⁵³

There were several other key themes about recent Government policy on vocational education.

Some head-teachers acknowledged that, prior to the changes, ‘gaming’ of league tables had been happening

Several of our interviewees agreed with the finding of the Wolf Report that some schools were offering or recommending courses to pupils in order to take advantage of what was seen as an ‘easy’ way of achieving several GCSE or A level equivalents. Furthermore, some head-teachers acknowledged that this practice had been taken up within their own school:

“Well obviously the Wolf Report came out, we knew where that was going several years ago. I’m not denying there might have been some exploitation of some of the vocational courses. For example, there used to be a GCSE programme that some schools offered that was worth four GCSEs, and so they only had to do one other qualification, got their fifth, and then it made the school league tables look fantastic. I remember that. I never ever implemented it myself because I thought it wasn’t morally sound. And I was very glad that I stuck to my beliefs and values over that.”⁵⁴

“You could get three or four GCSEs for doing very little work. And we all grabbed those at the time. I’m thinking of IT, you could sit down and do a very small amount of work and get four GCSEs out of it, and it made schools look wonderful because their figures went up overall, and it made kids feel good because they walked away with four GCSEs.”⁵⁵

“The courses that have been produced, those GNVQ and BTEC courses that were supposedly worth so many GCSEs, people did them not for the value of those courses, they did them for the exaggerated qualifications that they got from them.”⁵⁶

Since the Wolf Report the quality of vocational courses has risen considerably

Despite acknowledgement that there had been some problems with low quality or ‘easy’ vocational courses prior to the Wolf Report, there was a perception that quality had improved substantially since then:

“Vocational doesn’t mean easy, is what I’m saying. Vocational, now, especially, with the new BTECs coming in, there is an exam element along with it, the quality of what is in there has been up, and people tar vocational education with some of the old qualifications that have long since left us. The academic content within the courses has really risen, hugely, and the requirement for extended writing as an outcome from those courses has also risen proportionally with that.”⁵⁷

There is a serious danger of recent policy leading to the exclusion of a minority of pupils

However, many head-teachers also expressed a concern that the changes to vocational courses and league tables seen in the last few years could create some unintended consequences. There was a perception that the changes had ‘gone too far the other way’, and in particular that there is a group of pupils to whom vocational courses are particularly well suited, and who could lose out from the reforms:

“I think it’s possibly gone too far the other way now. The government has restricted the amount of vocational qualifications that can count for a school’s league tables, and I think that’s unfair, because schools are therefore penalised for putting their students on some of the really good programmes that are out there.

So it’s a great sadness for me that the Government seems to think that everybody has got to be shoehorned into the same model. And I’m afraid the world’s not made up of people who are all alike, and surely we have a duty, a moral duty now to provide the right sort of courses for all of our students.”⁵⁸

“When you look at the academic offer, there’s about 20% of our kids that if you tried to force them through EBacc they would experience nothing but failure. It wouldn’t prepare them for the next stages in their life. It would allow them to come out of here with a series of E and F grades, which is not going to get them anywhere ...

I think there’s a group of students that are left with very little at the moment, if you’re not careful. I think there are students out there who will welcome the academic element to vocational courses and it’ll get rid of that easy label which is wrong. But I still think there’s a small proportion of kids at this school ... they’re not able to do these examinations at KS4, and there’s very little out there for them at the moment.”⁵⁹

Some head-teachers were particularly concerned about the changes made to league tables, and the way in which this could influence schools’ course recommendations to pupils. There was a perception that school concerns over their league table performance could take priority over what would be best for the pupil:

“Schools have dropped [ASDAN courses]⁶⁰ because they’re not worth very much when a school’s value is measured ... It’s a shame because there are some kids for whom that was the right course for them to do. But actually if you’re measuring it from a school’s perspective, an F grade in Geography is worth more to the school

that a diploma in social skills with ASDAN. I wouldn't say that the F grade in Geography is worth more to the kid, but it's whether you're doing it for the student's need or you're doing it for what the school is going to look better at delivering."⁶¹

"The Government rationale is that the EBacc for all will support the disadvantaged learners by ensuring that they are not overlooked when it comes to more academic pathways. But I think schools were getting their own house in order very well, and the qualification that we could put before our students served the communities and the wider world really well.

I think the EBacc for all initiative ... is the wrong way to go, because it will marginalise a lot of success that we create. [At the moment we] get within students and give them a completely different idea about what education needs to be for them. [The EBacc] will force them into subjects that they may have not got the interest in. Because politically, studying GCSE is seen as something more beneficial than studying engineering."⁶²

Asked if there was a particular message he'd give policymakers and politicians, a head-teacher responded:

"Tell them to teach some kids maths and see how hard it is. [Previously they] had an opportunity where they were so excited to come, and for which they would get jobs as well.

It's really dispiriting I have to say. I know the concept of the idea that everyone should have an academic education. But it's not practical really. And it's not helpful to these kids who have real chances otherwise.

To say 'you've now got to pass GCSE maths, and if you don't pass it we're going to put you through it again and again' doesn't do much to their mental health, or indeed their sense of self-worth."⁶³

Recent policy changes are at risk of over-emphasising the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications at a time when taking a combination of courses is becoming the norm

Another problem head-teachers saw with recent policy on vocational education was that the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications itself had been over-stated. For one head-teacher the distinction can be misleading:

“When you look at the EBacc offer, the ‘academic’ offer as it’s called – I disagree with that, I don’t think there’s academic and vocational, I think academic can be vocational so I think that’s misleading in itself ...

If you take the engineering GCSE which has been scrapped now as an example. There were a whole load of very high ranking academics and business people that worked on putting that GCSE together. It was I think one of the most academic GCSEs of its type, with a vocational label on it. They scrapped it because people didn’t understand it, in my view.”⁶⁴

A second head-teacher also downplayed the importance of a choice between academic and vocational courses:

“We don’t want to force them to make a choice between academic and vocational really ... they all lead to the same thing. So we really don’t make a distinction, we talk about subjects that are critical for students in terms of progression in career opportunities, and that match their talents.”⁶⁵

Another head-teacher explained how emphasising the distinction between academic and vocational courses is problematic given the benefits to students of taking academic and vocational courses in combination:

“The ability to do a mixture of A levels and vocational qualifications that has existed up to now has been a real benefit, and that’s being phased out ...

I do think that this obsession with equivalence of status, or whatever the phrase is, is a problem. And again I think that Alison Wolf was right in her report, that if the vocational qualifications are valuable in themselves, and lead to something, you don’t really have to worry about whether they’re regarded sufficiently highly amongst academic subjects. I think they should be able to look after themselves and stand up for themselves, and if the content of the course and the qualification you get from them is good enough and valid enough and credible, then I think they’ll work.

[However, if pupils take these subjects because the Government has determined their equivalence] then people do them because of their value in the league tables.”⁶⁶

VI. WHAT DO PARENTS THINK OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

From Sections II and III it is clear that take-up of vocational courses at KS4 and KS5 varies considerably by parental background. Two thirds of pupils eligible for Free School Meals – where eligibility is determined by their parents' income – take a vocational course at KS5. By comparison, just 44% of pupils not eligible for FSM take a vocational course at KS5.

Section V offers some insight into why such differences might exist. It explores the responses given by head-teachers into the ways in which they decide upon their school curriculum, and the ways in which they decide whether to recommend vocational qualifications to pupils. But another potential factor was also discussed by head-teachers: the attitudes of parents to vocational courses. Head-teachers described their perceptions that many parents – and particularly those with an academic background themselves – can have negative views of vocational qualifications.

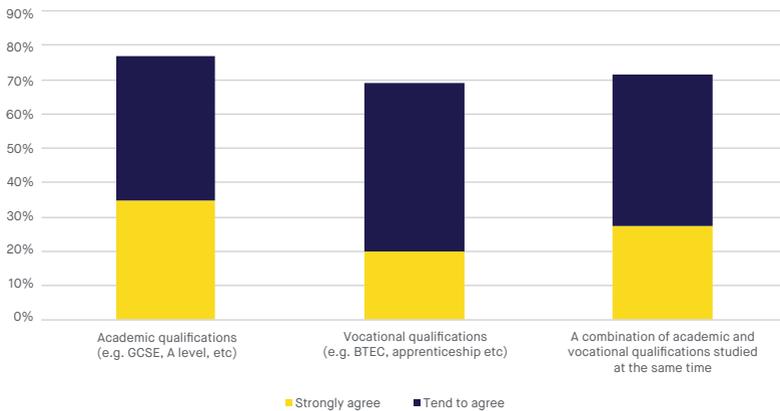
This section explores parental attitudes to vocational education by asking parents their views directly. It presents the results of an online poll conducted by YouGov of parents with children aged between 14 and 18 years.⁶⁷ Parents were asked their views on academic qualifications, vocational qualifications, and a combination of the two taken at the same time. They were asked whether or not they viewed each type of qualification as being high quality; whether they thought each type of qualification provides children with good prospects for progress, both for employment and university; and whether they have or would recommend each type of qualification to their own children.

PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC, VOCATIONAL AND COMBINED COURSES

Parents were asked whether or not they thought different types of qualifications provided students with a high quality education. Perceptions of the quality of academic qualifications are a little higher than vocational qualifications, with 77% of parents agreeing that academic qualifications

provide a high quality education, compared with 69% for vocational qualifications. Perceptions of the quality of a combination studied at the same time sit somewhere in between, at 72%.

Figure 17: Proportion of parents agreeing that the following qualifications provide students with a high quality education

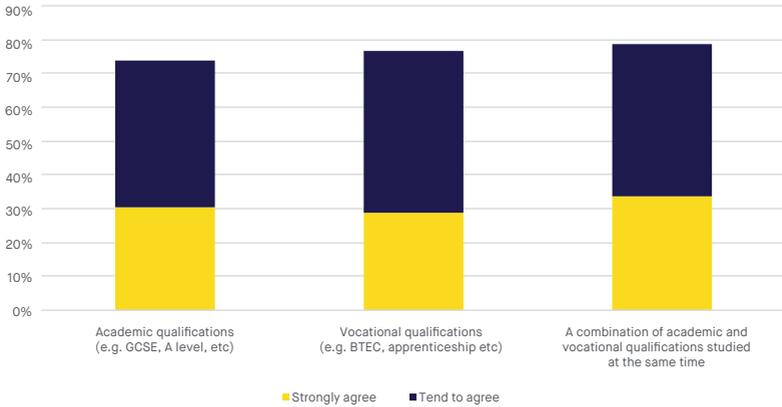


Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

The differences between those strongly agreeing that each type of qualification provides students with a high quality education are somewhat wider, however. 35% of parents thought academic qualifications provide a high quality education, compared to 20% for vocational qualifications, and 27% for a combination studied at the same time.

When asked about the importance of each type of qualification for employment prospects, however, the pattern is different. More parents agree that vocational qualifications offer good employment prospects (77%) than agree that academic qualifications do (74%). A combination of academic and vocational qualifications is viewed the most positively (79% agreeing – and with a greater proportion agreeing strongly). Again, however, the differences are not huge.

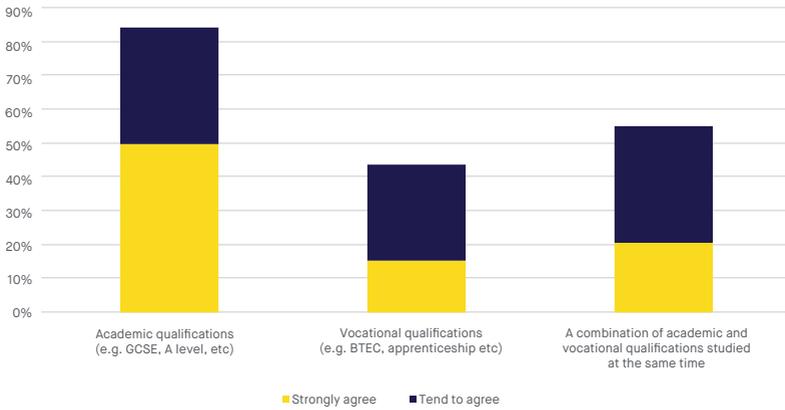
Figure 18: Proportion of parents agreeing that different types of qualifications provide students with good employment prospects



Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

Differences in parents' perceptions of qualification types are much larger when asked about whether or not they provide students with good prospects of going to the university of their choice. 84% of parents thought academic qualifications provided good prospects, but just 44% of parents thought vocational qualifications did so. A combination of academic and vocational qualifications sat somewhere in between, with 55% of parents agreeing.

Figure 19: Proportion of parents agreeing that the following types of qualification provide students with good prospects of going to the university of their choice

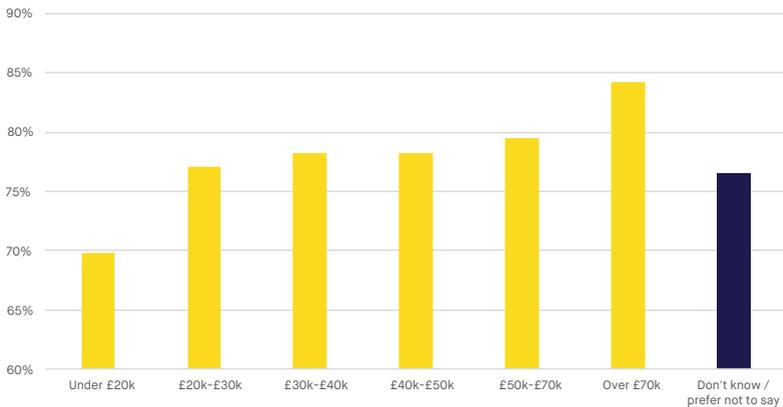


Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES BY THE HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF PARENTS

However, attitudes are not uniform across parents of different backgrounds. Parents living in higher income households are considerably more likely to agree that academic qualifications provide a high quality education than those living in lower income households. Less than 70% of parents living in households with income below £20,000 a year agreed; but almost 85% of parents living in households with income over £70,000 a year did so.

Figure 20: Proportion of parents agreeing that academic qualifications provide students with a high quality education, by annual household income⁶⁸



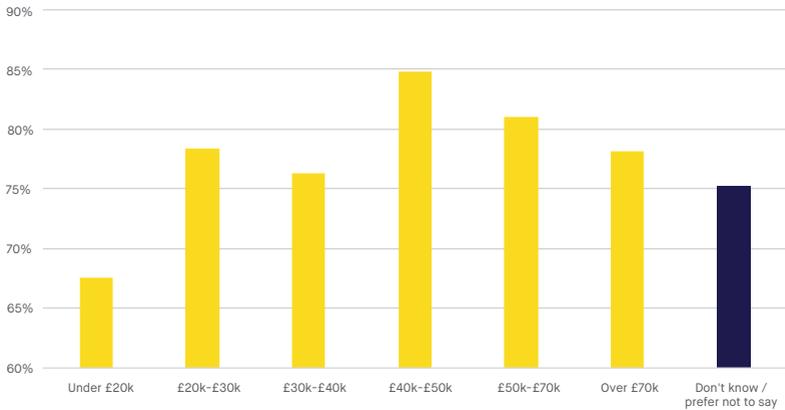
Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

Attitudes to how qualifications contribute to the employment prospects of students exhibit a different pattern (see Figure 21). When answering this question, it is parents with household incomes between £40,000 and £50,000 who are most likely to agree, with parents both in poorer and richer households being less likely to do so.

When asked whether vocational qualifications provide students with good prospects of going to the university of their choice (see Figure 22), the pattern is broadly the opposite of Figure 20 above. Parents in richer

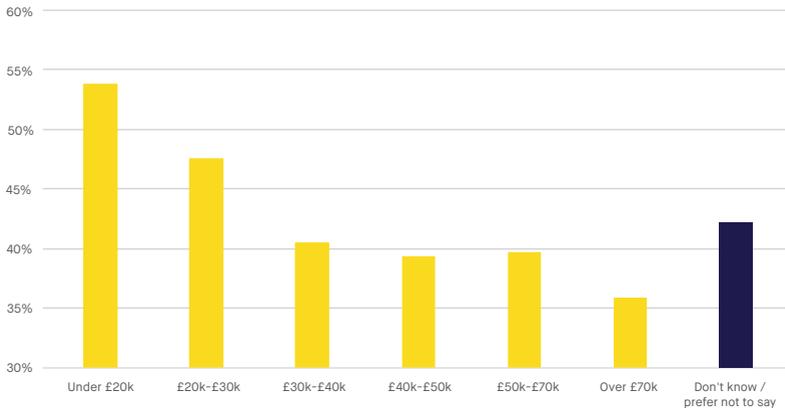
households were less likely to agree that vocational qualifications provide students with good university prospects.

Figure 21: Proportion of parents agreeing that vocational qualifications provide students with good employment prospects, by household income



Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

Figure 22: Proportion of parents agreeing that vocational qualifications provide students with good prospects of going to the university of their choice, by household income

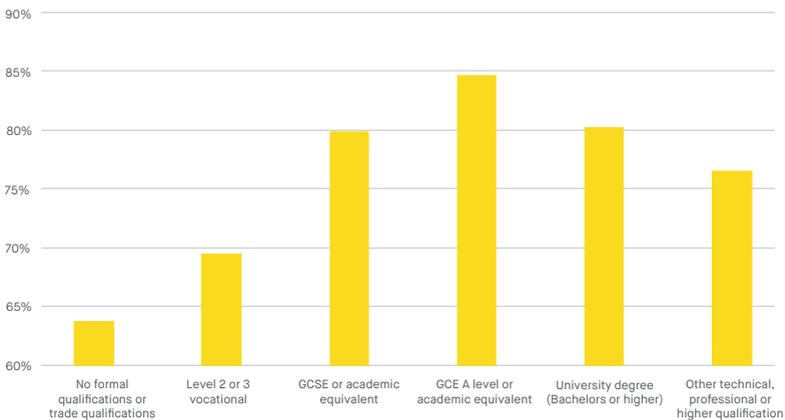


Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES BY PARENTAL EDUCATION LEVEL

Differences in attitudes also vary depending on parents' highest educational qualification. Considerably more parents with A level qualifications (85%) agree that academic qualifications provide students with a high quality education than those without formal qualifications, or with trade qualifications (64%). However, those with a university degree were no more likely to agree than those with GCSE-level qualifications, and were slightly less likely to agree than those with A levels as their highest qualification.

Figure 23: Proportion of parents agreeing that academic qualifications provide students with a high quality education

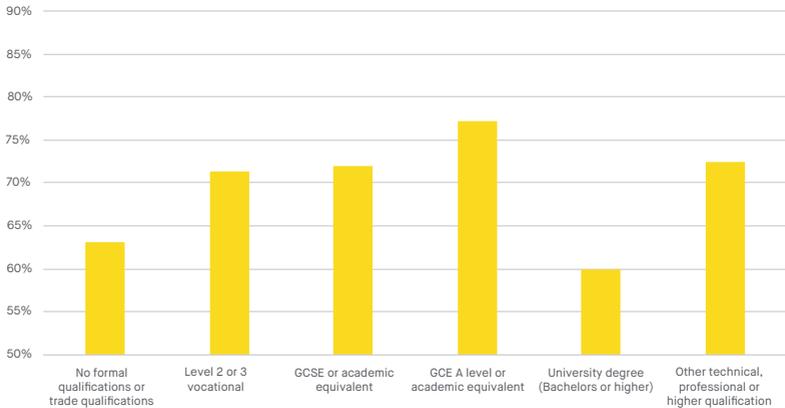


Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

Parents with A levels are also more likely than those with no or few qualifications to agree that vocational qualifications provide students with a high quality education (see Figure 24). However, parents who have been to university are substantially less likely - just 60% agree, compared to 77% of parents with A levels as their highest qualification. By contrast, attitudes are much more evenly distributed when parents are asked whether vocational qualifications provide students with good employment prospects, although

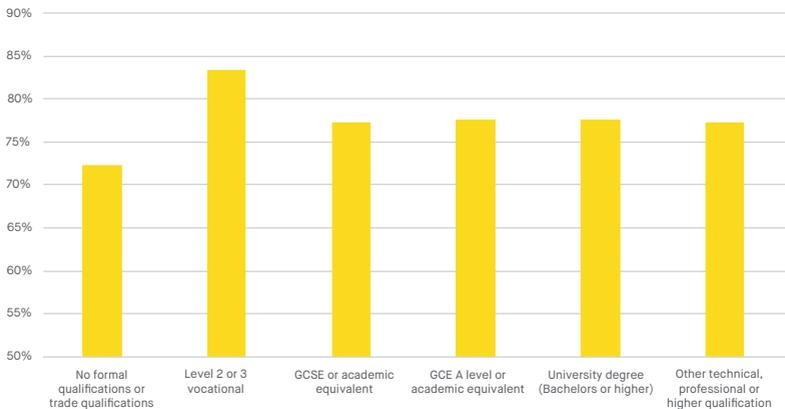
parents who themselves have vocational qualifications are considerably more likely to agree (see Figure 25).

Figure 24: Proportion of parents agreeing that vocational qualifications provide students with a high quality education



Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

Figure 25: Proportion of parents agreeing that vocational qualifications provide students with good employment prospects



Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18

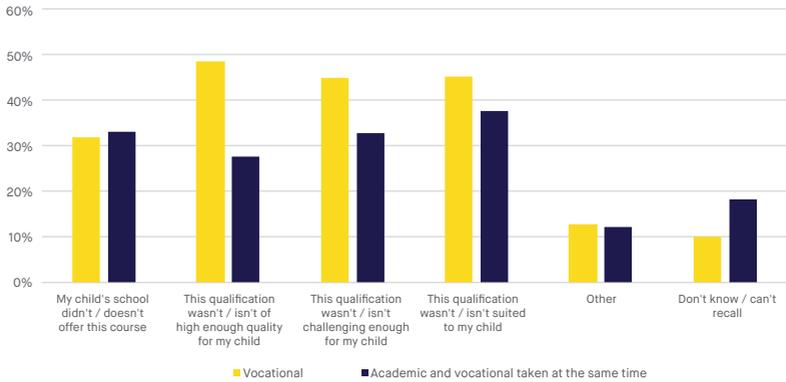
PARENTS' ATTITUDES TO CONSIDERING VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR THEIR OWN CHILD

Parents were also asked whether or not they would encourage, or had encouraged, their child to consider different types of qualifications. The vast majority (87%) said they would encourage or had encouraged their child to consider academic qualifications. However, this figure was lower (66%) for vocational qualifications; and for academic and vocational qualifications taken at the same time (65%).

Those parents that hadn't or wouldn't consider these qualifications for their children were asked for their reasons why. The number of parents not considering academic qualifications was too small to be able to reliably report. However, Figure 26 shows the reasons parents gave for not considering vocational qualifications, and for not considering a combination of academic and vocational qualifications taken at the same time. Parents could pick a number of reasons simultaneously.

Nearly a third of parents did not consider vocational and combined qualifications because their school does not offer them. Quality considerations, suitability, and concerns over courses being challenging were also important reasons, particularly as reasons for not considering vocational qualifications. For instance, nearly half of parents thought vocational qualifications were not of high enough quality for their child.

Figure 26: Parents' reasons for not considering vocational courses for their child(ren)



Source: YouGov/SMF poll of 959 parents with children aged 14 to 18⁶⁹

VII. CONCLUSIONS

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1. Ten years ago a dramatic increase began in the take-up of vocational courses at both Key Stage 4 (KS4) and Key Stage 5 (KS5). However in the last two or three years there has been a sharp fall in vocational take-up at KS4.

Take-up of vocational courses at KS4 and KS5 increased very rapidly after 2006. At KS4, however, there has been a sharp fall in take-up from 2012 onwards, such that by 2015 take-up was lower than in 2006. This is likely to be because of the significant changes made to KS4 course choices. These include the change in value of vocational qualifications in performance tables, so that all vocational qualifications are equivalent to one GCSE no matter their size; and the reduction in numbers that could be included, so that from 2012 a maximum of two could be included in the headline 5 A*-C measure. They also include the new EBacc requirements for KS4 league tables; and the introduction of an approved list, such that only qualifications on a list published by the Department for Education can be included in performance measures. This latter measure reduced the number of qualifications available to schools by around 90%.

At KS5, take-up of vocational qualifications has levelled off over the last couple of years, rather than declined substantially. It remains to be seen whether the changes seen at KS4 will affect take-up rates at KS5.

Finding 2. The number of students taking a combination of academic and vocational courses has increased substantially at KS5, and remained relatively steady at KS4, calling into question the relevance of the binary choice between either an 'academic' or 'vocational' route.

At KS5 the number of pupils taking both academic and vocational qualifications has increased substantially over the last decade, from just 3% in 2006, to 17% in 2015.

At KS4 the total number of vocational courses taken has fallen much faster than the number of students taking at least one vocational course. This has important implications. It shows that the strong trend towards pupils taking a combination of academic and vocational qualifications has remained relatively steady despite the changes in policy that have reduced overall vocational take-up. This provides evidence that a 'combined' route – of pupils taking both academic and vocational qualifications at the same time – is firmly entrenched. It also calls into question whether there is an over-emphasis on the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications in Government policy. The traditional concept of pupils having a binary choice between an 'academic' or 'vocational' route is less relevant now than it once was, with a combination of subjects being more common.

The reduced relevance of the academic vs vocational distinction is supported by our interviews with head-teachers, and by our polling of parents. Some head-teachers found the distinction misleading, describing vocational courses with significant academic content, and vice versa. Parental attitudes towards a combination of academic and vocational subjects also appear to be positive. More parents agreed that a combined academic and vocational choice of subjects provides students with good employment prospects than they did for either academic or vocational subjects taken alone.

Finding 3. Many students are not taking courses that fit their aptitudes and aspirations.

It would be preferable, both for the economy and for students themselves, if students were to take courses that are well suited to their aspirations and aptitudes. However, we find evidence that suggests courses may be chosen based on background and school characteristics, rather than based purely on aspirations and aptitudes. School characteristics and pupil background are both strongly related to pupils' subject choices. If pupils' aptitudes and aspirations were distributed randomly, one would in theory expect pupil background to be unrelated to pupils' subject choices. School characteristics would in theory also be unrelated to subject choices, unless schools were highly segregated by particular specialisms that pupils could choose freely between.

School characteristics are a very important predictor of pupils' course choices. For instance, a pupil attending an FE College rather than a mainstream state school is 800% more likely to take a BTEC course, after controlling for other characteristics.

Pupil characteristics are also strongly related to course take-up. For instance, pupils residing in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to take a BTEC course as pupils residing in the most advantaged areas, after controlling for other characteristics.

These findings suggest that students may not always be studying the courses most suited to them. This could be happening in a variety of different ways: it may be that pupils from more advantaged backgrounds are taking academic courses rather than a vocational course that may be better suited to them; or it may be that pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are not taking academic courses to which they would be well suited.

Why might this be happening? We find two main issues.

A. Pupils may not be taking courses to which they are best suited because of the ways in which school curricula are decided upon.

A school's curriculum determines the course choices available to its pupils. The fact that the likelihood of offering vocational courses is so differentiated by school type means that pupils going to different schools will face very different sets of options to choose from, and this may lead to pupils taking courses that are not ideally suited to them.

Theoretically, school choice could ensure that pupils attend schools with the course choices most suited to them. However, in practice school choice can be limited for many pupils and parents, for instance due to house price constraints in the catchment area of their preferred school.

That the school curriculum can restrict choices available to pupils is demonstrated by our polling of parents. Around a third of those who had not considered vocational courses, or a combination of academic and

vocational courses, for their child cited their school not offering these courses as a reason.

Our research provides evidence on how school curricula are decided upon. Schools face a wide range of constraints in matching their course offerings to the aptitudes and aspirations of students. These include:

- Student numbers. For practical reasons it is necessary for a ‘critical mass’ of students to wish to take a course before it can be offered. Several of the head-teachers we interviewed described how this consideration impacted upon their curriculum decisions. It is, however, noteworthy that some schools were able to increase the number of courses they could offer by partnering with another institution – such as an FE college – such that pupils were able to take some courses externally.
- Cost. Some courses, in particular vocational offerings, are considered to be prohibitively expensive by some head-teachers. This can be true in particular if the school does not already have relevant staff expertise and suitable equipment available.
- Parental expectations. We find evidence that some parents have negative views of certain types of course, and some can be highly resistant to the idea of their child taking vocational courses in particular. This not only impacts on their child(ren), but can also interact with the need for demand from a ‘critical mass’ of students in order to provide courses in the school curriculum, such that schools find it harder to offer some courses for other students as well. For instance, very few pupils take vocational courses at independent schools. We find evidence that head-teachers can face pressure from parents to prioritise academic courses in their curriculum. This could potentially result in a poorer fit between pupils’ subject choices and their aptitudes and aspirations.
- Concerns over league table rankings. Including subjects that count towards a school’s league table ranking was an important consideration in making curriculum decisions for the head-teachers we interviewed. Particularly since the introduction of the EBacc, which created a performance measure based on a set of five academic subjects at KS4,

head-teachers had changed their curricula to ensure subjects taken by students counted towards the league tables. Some head-teachers described a trade-off between what was good for the school (a high league table ranking) and what was good for a particular student (taking a course that wouldn't count in the league tables). Some head-teachers decided to offer courses that wouldn't count anyway, because they thought they were such an important offering for some students. However, given the importance of league table rankings for a school's reputation it is important to note the strong constraints league table considerations have on a school's curriculum.

B. Pupils may not be taking courses to which they are best suited because of the recommendations made by schools and parents.

We find evidence that the influence of schools and parents may, in some cases, lead to pupils taking courses to which they are not best suited. There are several aspects to this:

- Parents differ in their attitudes towards the value of vocational qualifications. Parents with higher academic qualifications are particularly likely to have a negative view of vocational qualifications. Parents with lower levels of qualifications are more likely to place greater weight on the value of vocational qualifications. Without the right advice, when making course decisions, children of academically educated parents could be in danger of missing out on a vocational course to which they may be well suited; and children of less educated parents may be in danger of not taking academic courses to which they are well suited.
- Some head-teachers we interviewed saw vocational courses as being primarily suited to 'less able' pupils. This could lead to pupils not considered 'less able' being deprived of the opportunity to take a vocational course to which they are well suited; and to 'less able' pupils being overlooked for academic study.
- The effects of pupil background on course choices are demonstrated by our findings from the National Pupil Database data. FSM-eligible pupils,

and pupils residing in more deprived areas, are substantially more likely to take vocational courses, even after controlling for characteristics such as prior attainment and school type.

Finding 4. Vocational courses can help motivate pupils. There is a danger that recent policy reforms will have a negative impact on the education of less academically able students.

We find evidence of ‘gaming’ of league tables prior to the reforms, with many of the head-teachers we interviewed describing ‘gaming’ either in their school or in other schools they were familiar with. We also find evidence of problems caused by poor quality vocational courses, with many head-teachers describing how some vocational courses offered in past years were of little value to students. The reforms over recent years have attempted to remedy some of these issues.

However, there is a danger that the reforms may have unintended consequences. The head-teachers we interviewed warned that recent policy reforms will have a negative impact on a minority of less academically able students. They drew attention to the importance of all students being able to succeed in at least some of their courses, and highlighted the impact this had on their motivation. Increased motivation could have beneficial effects in other subjects, with students succeeding in a vocational course also being more likely to persevere with academic subjects. Interviewees highlighted cases in which students were highly successful in a vocational course in KS4, and this motivated them to continue at KS5 where they also decided to re-take English and maths GCSEs. This motivation effect may be particularly important for disadvantaged students – such as those eligible for FSM or residing in a disadvantaged area – since these students have been, prior to the recent changes, more likely to take vocational courses.

It is, therefore, crucial to ensure that all students are offered courses that are best suited to their aptitudes and aspirations, and that they are able to succeed in.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper is the first of two reports on vocational education in England and Wales. It seeks an answer primarily to the first two of our three key questions (see Section I). However, our third question – on the returns to different qualifications for employment and higher education prospects – will be investigated in more detail in our second report.

This second report will ask:

- What are the benefits of different types of vocational qualifications in terms of progression, earnings, and employability?
- How do these benefits compare with the benefits of academic qualifications of different types?
- How do the returns to earnings and employability of different qualifications vary by sector?
- What are the benefits of different types of academic and vocational educations for progression into further and higher education?

The second report is due to be published in August 2016.

ENDNOTES

1. House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility, Overlooked and left behind: improving the transition from school to work for the majority of young people, (2016)
2. David Cameron speech, Friday April 20 2012. <https://toryspeeches.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/david-cameron-apprenticeships-speech.pdf>
3. Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report (2011). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf
4. Department for Education and Office for National Statistics, Statistical First Release 23rd Oct 2014, (2014).
5. National Foundation for Educational Research, A literature review of the value of vocational Qualifications, (2015)
6. John West and Hilary Steedman, Finding Our Way: Vocational Education in England, (2003).
7. Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report (2011). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf
8. Wenchao Jin, Alastair Muriel and Luke Sibieta, Subject and course choices at ages 14 and 16 amongst young people in England: insights from behavioural economics, (2011).
9. Wenchao Jin, Alastair Muriel and Luke Sibieta, Subject and course choices at ages 14 and 16 amongst young people in England: insights from behavioural economics, (2011).
10. John West and Hilary Steedman, Finding Our Way: Vocational Education in England, (2003).
11. Queen’s Speech 2016, Cabinet Office. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-2016>
12. David Cameron speech, Friday, April 20 2012. <https://toryspeeches.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/david-cameron-apprenticeships-speech.pdf>
13. Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report (2011). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf
14. The Department for Education states that the National Pupil Database provides “detailed information about pupils’ test and exam results, prior attainment and progression at each key stage for all state schools in England. The department also holds attainment data for pupils and students in non-maintained special schools, sixth form and further education colleges and (where available) independent schools.” https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/472700/NPD_user_guide.pdf
15. Years shown indicate the year a qualification was completed. The National Pupil Database data used in this report is for England only.

16. With data for Key Stage 5, a pupil is shown as eligible for free school meals if they were eligible at the end of Key Stage 4. Pupils can be eligible for school meals if their parent(s) or guardian(s) are in receipt of Income Support, income-based Jobseekers' Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, or Universal Credit. <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>
17. Areas are grouped into deciles by level of deprivation shown by IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index).
18. A school is defined as having offered a course if at least one pupil has completed a qualification of that type.
19. We interviewed head-teachers from schools in the East of England, Wales, Yorkshire & the Humber, the South West, the West Midlands, the North East, London, the North West, and the South East. We were unfortunately unable to conduct an interview with a head-teacher in the East Midlands.
20. We used the proportion of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium as an indicator of the socio-economic composition of a school's intake.
21. Data from interview 6.
22. Data from interview 2.
23. Data from interview 3.
24. Data from interview 5.
25. Data from interview 1.
26. Data from interview 3.
27. Data from interview 1.
28. Data from interview 4.
29. Data from interview 1.
30. Data from interview 1.
31. Data from interview 4.
32. Data from interview 6.
33. Data from interview 1.
34. Data from interview 4.
35. Data from interview 1.
36. Data from interview 1.
37. Data from interview 1.
38. Data from interview 2.
39. Data from interview 4.
40. Data from interview 7.
41. Data from interview 1.
42. Data from interview 4.
43. Data from interview 6.
44. Data from interview 7.
45. Data from interview 8

46. Data from interview 9.
47. Data from interview 1.
48. Data from interview 7.
49. Data from interview 1.
50. Data from interview 5.
51. Data from interview 1.
52. Data from interview 1.
53. Data from interview 4.
54. Data from interview 1.
55. Data from interview 7.
56. Data from interview 4.
57. Data from interview 7.
58. Data from interview 1.
59. Data from interview 7.
60. ASDAN is an approved awarding body “offering programmes and qualifications to students that explicitly grow skills for learning, skills for employment and skills for life”. <https://www.asdan.org.uk/about>
61. Data from interview 7.
62. Data from interview 8.
63. Data from interview 9
64. Data from interview 7.
65. Data from interview 8
66. Data from interview 4.
67. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 959 parents with children aged 14 - 18 years old. Fieldwork was undertaken between 14th - 22nd June 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
68. These annual household income categories are rounded. The exact categories are: less than £20,000; £20,000 to £29,999; £30,000 to £39,999; £40,000 to £49,999; £50,000 to £69,999; and £70,000 or more.
69. Of the 959 parents that were polled, 254 wouldn't encourage their child to consider vocational qualifications, and 212 wouldn't encourage their child to consider academic and vocational qualifications taken at the same time.

Passports to Progress

How do vocational qualifications help young people in building their careers?

The UK has struggled to provide the right balance of academic and vocational education to suit the choices of young people and the needs of the economy. In particular, vocational education has been under-valued and treated as second-best to academic qualifications. In an attempt to correct the imbalance, successive governments have sought to expand and improve opportunities in vocational education, but problems remain.

Passports to Progress examines how vocational take-up has changed in recent years; how parents view vocational qualifications; and the issues school leaders contend with when deciding what courses to offer. It presents up-to-date analysis from the latest year of the National Pupil Database, along with new and original polling results and interviews with head-teachers, to show how the binary divide between academic and vocational qualifications is breaking down.

The effects of recent policy changes, however, are complex and can create difficulties for pupils and schools. Drawing on its key findings, *Passports to Progress* demonstrates the most pressing issues for policymakers to overcome in the years ahead.

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