

Not just other people's children: what the public thinks about vocational education

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Previous SMF research has highlighted the relative neglect of Further Education in both the media and among policymakers. Some have suggested this reflects broader social and cultural perceptions that vocational education is less prestigious and desirable than academic education. To the contrary, in this briefing we present the results of a nationally representative survey which shows that the general public believe vocational qualifications to be just as useful and desirable as a university degree – if not more.

KEY POINTS

- Vocational education is seen as the best option for school leavers: 48% of people say they would prefer their child to get a vocational qualification over university or work.
- This appreciation for vocational education extends to university graduates and middle class people: almost as many people in the ABC1 social grade would want their child to take a vocational qualification (43%) as want their child to go to university (45%).
- However, there is an age divide, with 18-24 year olds significantly more likely to favour university to vocational education .
- People with vocational qualifications are believed to be more technically skilled, work-ready, adaptable, proactive and innovative than university graduates, though degrees are expected to bring greater financial gains.
- Most people think that vocational education should be at least an equal political priority to higher education, with one in three saying vocational education should receive more focus and less than one in ten in favour of prioritising universities.
- Recent Government policy is encouraging, promising more and better resourced vocational options, but more is needed to meet public expectations.

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CONTEXT: FURTHER EDUCATION'S INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Further Education (FE) sometimes has something of an inferiority complex. Not in terms of the quality of its teaching or of the benefit it provides to learners – on those scores, the sector is justifiably proud of its social contribution. Rather, the insecurity relates to how FE is *perceived* by wider society. There is a widespread sense that its value is not adequately recognised, and its role receives insufficient respect. That disgruntlement is exacerbated by the inevitable contrast with universities, which seem to receive far more praise and attention. Last year, we carried out a series of interviews with FE college principals and one theme that emerged was the notion that colleges have lower cultural status. As one principal put it: “Universities are seen as prestigious; colleges are seen as where other people’s kids go”.¹

These beliefs do not emerge out of nowhere. As we described in an essay last month, further education receives far less media attention than higher education: in the past ten years, there were over twice as many mentions of HE as there were of FE.² That relative neglect extends to policymakers, too: over the last decade, MPs have also made fewer references to FE in parliament than to HE.³ Funding levels and trends contribute to the sense that further education is a lower priority. £9,399 is spent per student in higher education in England, a 9% increase in real terms over the past decade. FE students typically receive a third less – £6,077 – and that amount has fallen by 4% over the same period.⁴

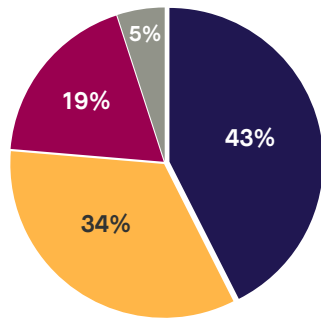
Providers of vocational education should take some comfort, though, from the fact that on this issue, politicians and journalists do not reflect the views of wider society. In this briefing, we present the findings of a survey asking the general public what they think of vocational education. We find little evidence of a clear cultural hierarchy – people see vocational education as every bit as worthwhile, useful and important as more academic qualifications, sometimes even more so. Large swathes of the population believe college or apprenticeships to be as good an option as university, for themselves or their children. That raises the question of how much longer policy discourse can continue to neglect vocational education and FE.

On behalf of the SMF and the Further Education Trust for Leadership, the research company Opinium surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,005 UK adults in September 2019. Admittedly, some time has elapsed since the survey was conducted, and critically the questions were asked before the Coronavirus pandemic occurred. However, the survey relates to perceptions and understandings of the education system that we would expect to be deeply held rather than transient, and so these findings are likely to still hold today.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IS NOT JUST FOR OTHER PEOPLE

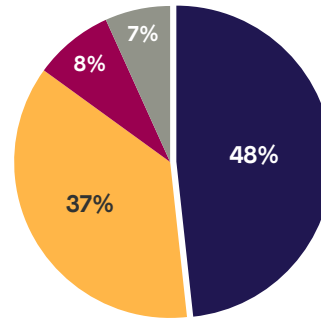
We found little evidence to suggest that the general public sees vocational education as something for “other people” or “other people’s children”. We asked survey participants to imagine that they were about to leave school, or that they had an 18 year old child about to leave school, and asked them whether they would prefer a vocation qualification, university or to get a job. Choosing for themselves, the most popular answer was a vocational qualification, favoured by 43% of respondents. For their children, the figure was even higher, with almost half of respondents saying they would prefer their hypothetical children to pursue vocational education over university or work.

Figure 1: Please imagine you were leaving school and deciding what to do next in life. Which ONE of the following do you think you would choose to do?



- Get a vocational qualification
- Go to university
- Get a job
- None of these

Figure 2: Please imagine you had an 18 year old child, about to leave school. Which ONE of the following would you want them to do next?

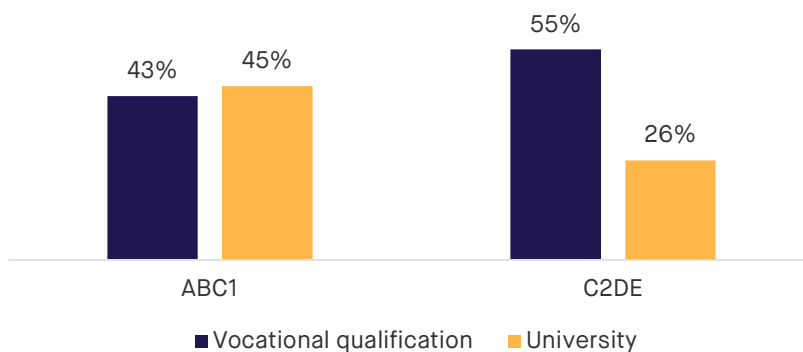


- Get a vocational qualification
- Go to university
- Get a job
- None of these

Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

Positive attitudes to vocational education hold across social grades, though they are more prevalent among the working class. Figure 3 shows that C2DE (working class) respondents were twice as likely to say they would want their 18 year old to do a vocational qualification as to they were to say they would like them to go to university. Perhaps more surprisingly, middle class people were almost evenly split on the question, with 45% saying they would prefer their child to go to university and 43% saying they would favour a vocational option. This fits with growing anecdotal evidence that middle class families are increasingly positive towards apprenticeships. That apparent trend has brought not just optimism about possible improvements in the status of vocation education, but also fears that those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are being squeezed out: in 2018, then Skills minister Anne Milton said that “fears of a middle-class grab on apprenticeships are valid”.⁵

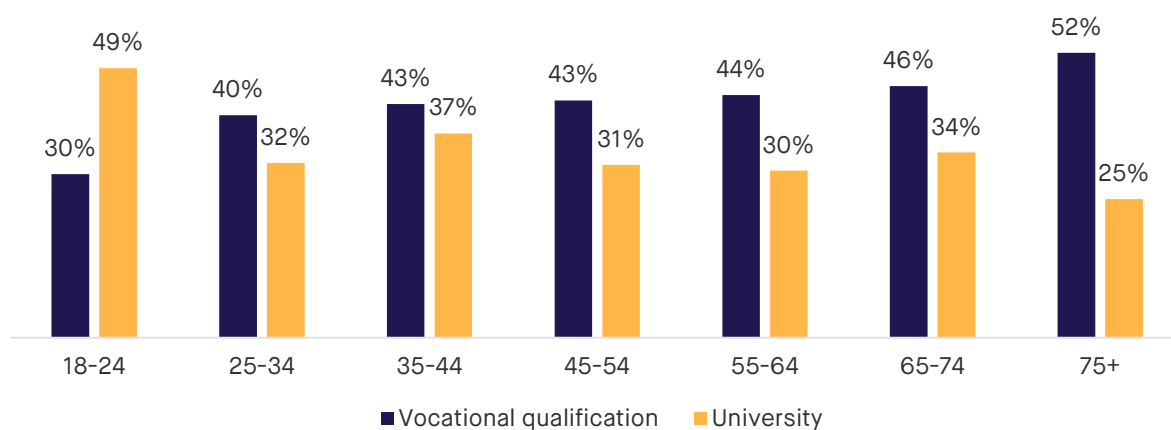
Figure 3: Respondents’ preferred option for their child, by social grade



Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

There is a generational gradient in attitudes, as Figure 4 shows. Older people tend to be more favourable towards vocational education over university. However, among 18-24 year olds, the age group for which the dilemma is most vivid and salient – having most recently faced it – the preference order is reversed, with more people favouring university over vocational education. Even in this group, however, just under a third of respondents rate vocational qualifications as the best option for them.

Figure 4: Respondents' preferred option for themselves at age 18, by age group



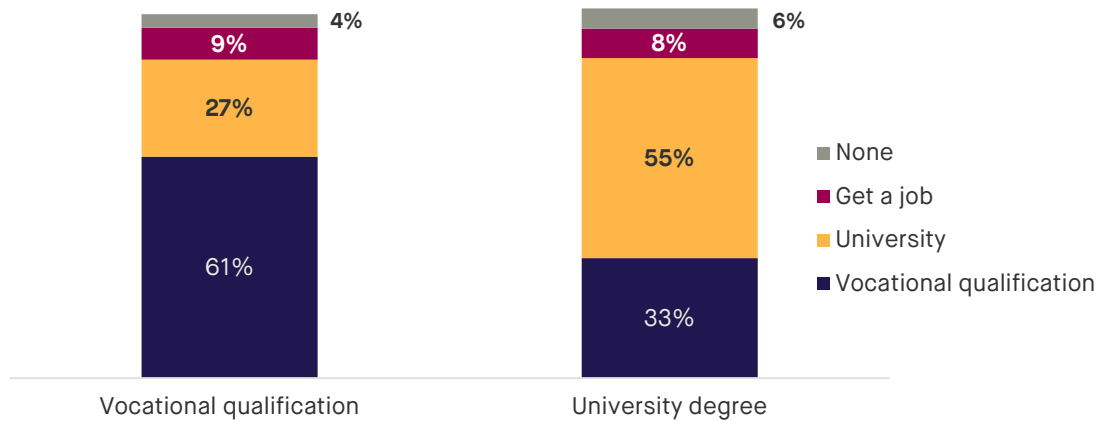
Source: *Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis*

It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer anything more than speculation to explain this age differential, and certainly to adjudicate whether younger or older people are more 'correct' in their judgements. This is certainly an important area for future research, though, given the possible implications as to whether young people are taking the best options. On the one hand, it is possible that younger people may be more aware of the benefits of university education compared to earlier generations that completed their studies prior to mass higher education and entered a very different labour market. However, that does not fit with the relatively low proportion of 25-34 year olds – who did study at a time of widespread university access – rating the value of university so low. It is also fairly plausible that older people with more work experience, many of whom will be hirers, managers and employers, have a better sense of the value of vocational education.

In any case, young people's stated preferences in the survey largely track their actual educational choices, although they also indicate that more young people would like to be in education – higher or further – than actually are. Compared to the 49% of 18-24 year olds that regard university as the optimal option for their 18 year old selves, 37% of 18 year olds in the UK actually entered higher education in 2020.⁶ Compared to the 30% that would favour vocational education, around one in four 18 year olds that had left school in England in 2018 were in further education or an apprenticeship.⁷

However, things are not just as simple as people retrospectively endorsing their own decisions. Perhaps relatedly, this is similar to the proportion of graduates employed in non-graduate roles: 37%.⁸ By comparison those with vocational qualifications are slightly more likely to say they would do it again, with 27% saying they would opt for a university degree instead.

Figure 5: Respondents' preferred option for themselves at age 18, by educational qualifications

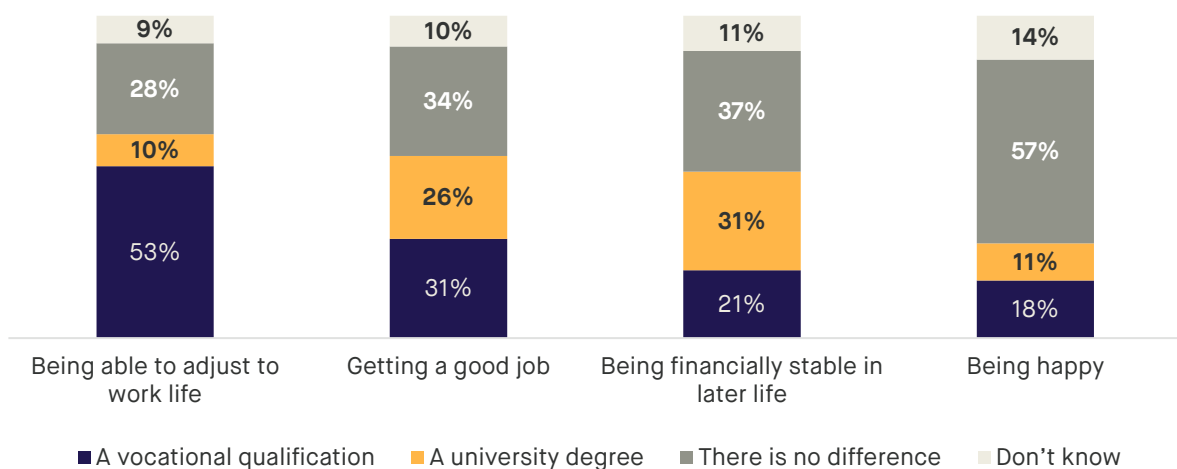


Source: *Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis*

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IS WELL REGARDED BY UNIVERSITY GRADUATES AND NON-GRADUATES ALIKE

These favourable attitudes towards vocational education reflect widespread confidence in the value and usefulness of the skills it imparts. Survey respondents were asked to consider how likely a technical qualification, as opposed to a university degree, would be to produce four different outcomes. Figure 6 shows that on three (adjusting to work life, getting a good job, and being happy), people believe that a vocational qualification will be more helpful. Only in the case of long-term financial stability is university education believed to have the edge, and even then, only a third of respondents believe it is better than vocational education.

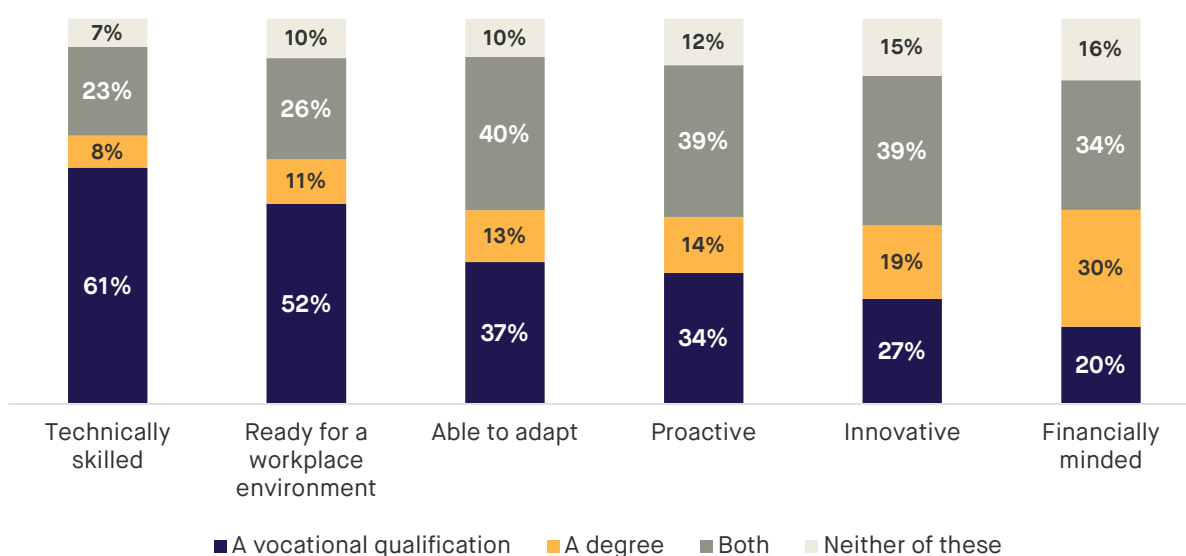
Figure 6: Generally speaking, do you think that a university degree or vocational qualification (e.g. a technical or practical qualification specific to a trade, including apprenticeship) is more likely to lead to each of the following, or is there no difference?



Source: *Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis*

Similarly, asked about the attributes they associate with employees of different education backgrounds, on almost every front those with vocational qualifications came out on top over university graduates. Figure 6 shows that vocational education is seen as producing more technically skilled, work-ready, adaptable, proactive and innovative workers. By contrast, the only category where degree holders are perceived to hold an advantage is in their ‘financial mindedness’ (which we specified as “having a good grasp of budgets, profit margin etc”). In every case, the proportion of respondents that believes that university graduates make for better workers is less than a third, and in many cases less than sixth.

Figure 7: Generally speaking, do you MOST associate each of the following with an employee who has done a university degree or a vocational qualification (e.g. a technical or practical qualification specific to a trade, including apprenticeship)?

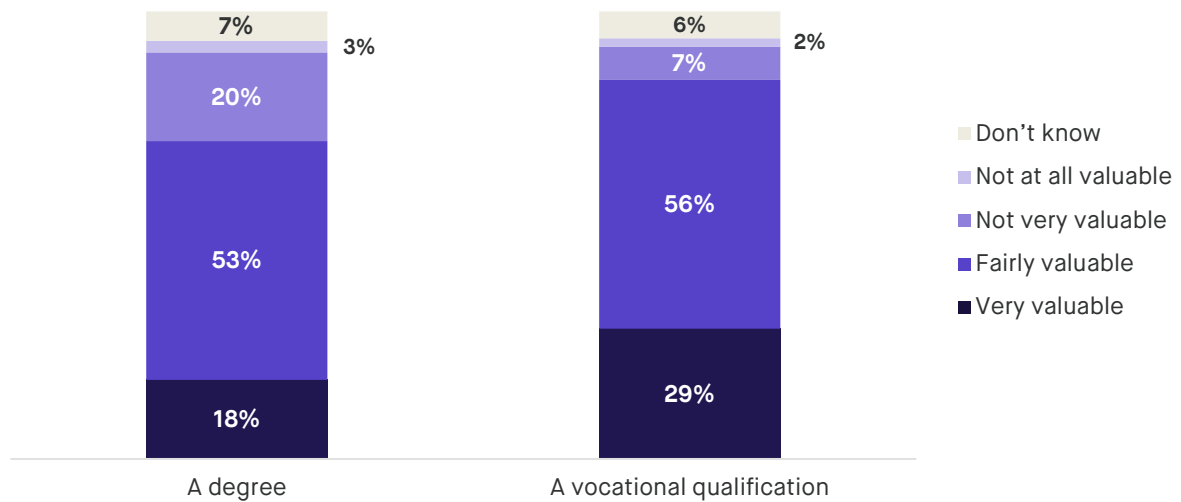


Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

Taken together, Figure 6 and Figure 7 suggest that vocational education has a range of benefits, but that perhaps its biggest perceived advantage relative to university study is in its ability to prepare people for the world of work. Conversely, they suggest that university degrees are seen as providing greater financial rewards.

Moreover, the implication of Figure 6 and Figure 7 is that respect for vocational education is widespread throughout society, and not limited to those with direct experience of it. If anything, they suggest that there are more people sceptical of the merits of a university education. Certainly, that is what Figure 8 indicates. An overwhelming majority of people – 85% – believe that a vocational qualification is valuable for those seeking a “good job”, with only 9% demurring. By contrast, over a fifth of people (22%) doubt that a degree is valuable in the job market.

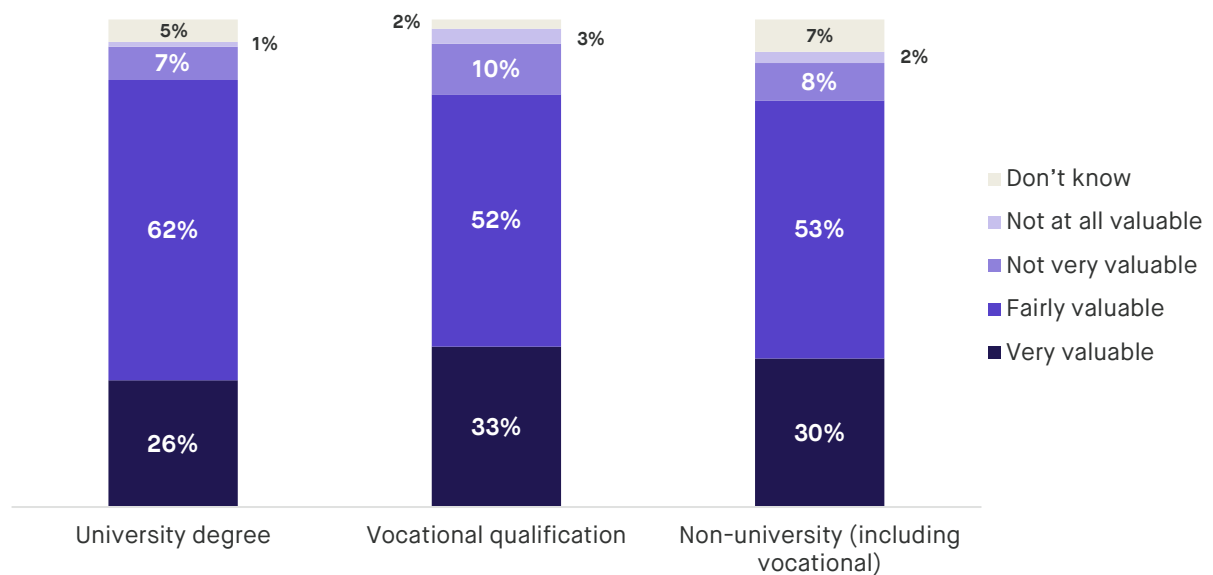
Figure 8: Overall, how valuable, if at all, do you think each of the following are to be able to get a good job nowadays?



Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

There is little evidence on the basis of this survey of significant snobbery towards vocational education from university graduates. Figure 9 shows that people are no less likely to say that vocational qualifications are valuable in getting a good job. Indeed, they are marginally more likely to say vocational education is valuable than holders of vocational degrees themselves.

Figure 9: Perceived value of vocational qualification in getting a good job by respondent's own highest qualification

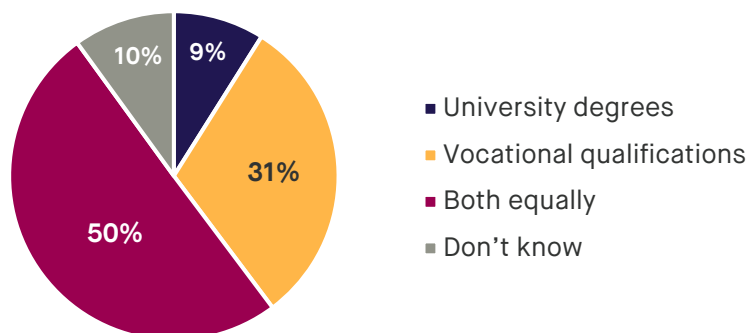


Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

PUBLIC OPINION FAVOURS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION BEING A HIGHER POLICY PRIORITY

These survey findings imply that there is a substantial discrepancy between the way that vocational education is thought of and treated in media and political discourse, and the respect it commands in wider society. Indeed, questioned explicitly about the Government’s political priorities, almost a third of people called for greater focus on vocational qualifications (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Overall, do you feel the UK Government should prioritise university degrees, or vocational qualifications (e.g. a technical or practical qualification specific to a trade, including apprenticeships), or both equally?

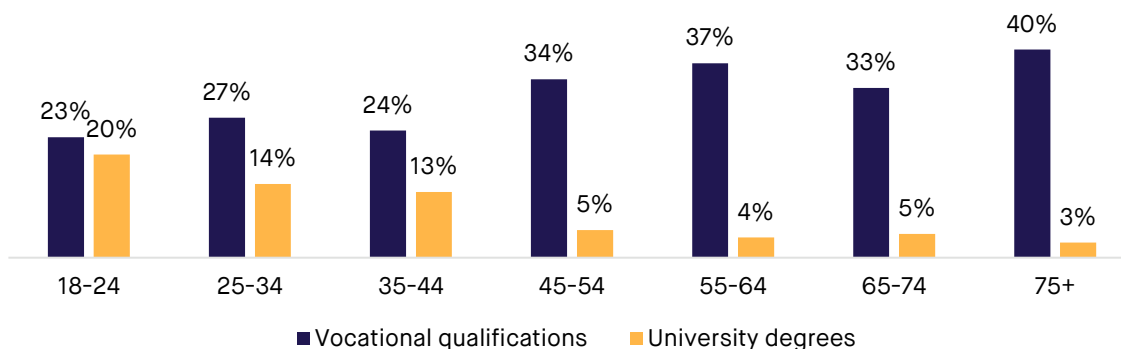


Source: *Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis*

That does not mean that most people favour greater support for vocational education *at the expense of* higher education. With 50% of people saying that the government should prioritise both equally, they are unlikely to look favourably upon efforts to set the two sectors against one another, as some recent government rhetoric and policy has seemed to do.⁹

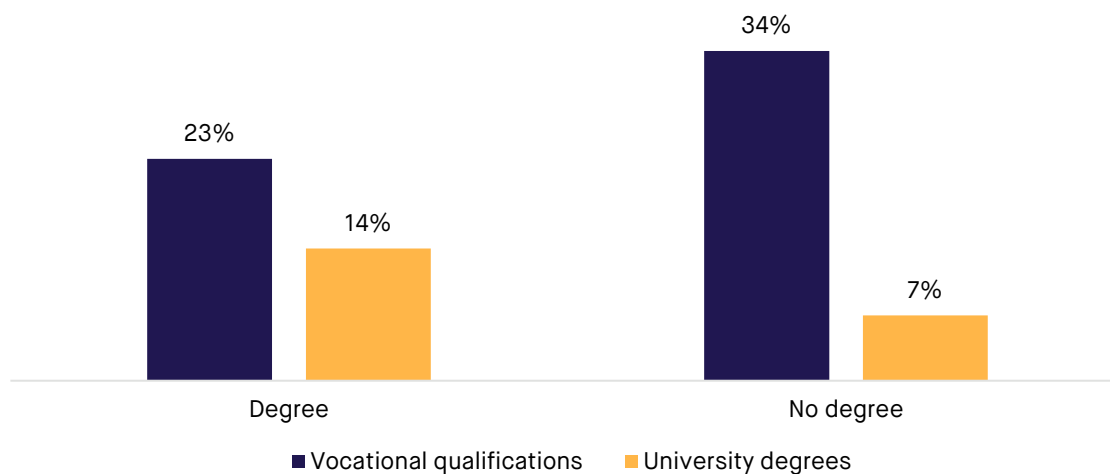
This is not a particularly polarised issue. Younger people and those with university graduates are slightly less likely than older people or non-graduates to say that vocational education should be prioritised. However, in every category, more people say that vocational education should be prioritised than say university education should be prioritised.

Figure 11: Should the UK Government prioritise university or vocational education? – by age



Source: *Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis*

Figure 12: Should the UK Government prioritise university or vocational education? – by respondent's education level



Source: Opinium survey Sep 2019; SMF analysis

Some might be sceptical of these survey responses and wonder whether they are subject to 'social desirability bias'. Perhaps there is greater prejudice and stigma towards vocational education than we have detected, but people feel unwilling to express their doubts because it is seen as 'politically incorrect' to denigrate non-academic pathways. If so, this would be remarkable in itself and would not necessarily undermine the argument of this briefing. It has been argued in recent years that "disdain for the less educated is the last acceptable prejudice".¹⁰ To find that social norms militate against excessive criticism of non-academic qualifications indicates that such disdain does not apply to those with vocational educations in the UK; indeed, they are valorised, often above those with university degrees.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

All of this suggests that recent UK Government measures – particularly those of the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper – represent a step in the right direction: promising greater provision of higher technical qualifications, equivalent financial support for such courses as for higher education, and investment in FE colleges.¹¹ Yet these plans come on the back of years of relative neglect – vocational education remains under-resourced and opportunities remain too few. A higher level of funding is needed, in a simpler and more stable form; more explicit recognition and elaboration of the role of different educational institutions, especially, FE colleges; and closer collaboration between different educational institutions, local and national government and employers to develop pathways that work best for learners.

None of that will come easily to a political class that has given vocational education too little consideration so far, but it is what the public expects.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bhattacharya & Norman (2021), “Study buddies?”, Social Market Foundation, <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Study-buddies-March-2021-1.pdf>

² Kirkup (2021), “Missing the story: the UK media’s neglect of Further Education”, Social Market Foundation, <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Missing-the-Story-the-UK-medias-neglect-of-FE.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Britton et al (2020), “2020 annual report on education spending in England”, Institute for Fiscal Studies, <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15150>

⁵ <https://feweek.co.uk/2018/03/13/fears-over-middle-class-grab-on-apprenticeships-are-valid-minister-admits/>

⁶ <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-2018#history>

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/12501employedgraduatesinnongraduaterolespartsoftheuk2015to2019>

⁹ Bhattacharya & Norman, op. cit.

¹⁰ Kuppens et al (2018), “Education and the irony of meritocracy: negative attitudes of higher educated people towards the less educated”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/opinion/education-prejudice.html>; f

¹¹ Bhattacharya & Norman, op. cit.