

Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications, student support and outcomes in UG degree programmes



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Context of the study

- Growth in range of qualifications available to 16 to 18-year-old students.

How well do different qualification types prepare students for studies in HE?

- Number of students entering HE with a BTEC qualification has risen steadily; estimates of annual increases in applicants ranging from 16-30%.
- While traditionally a vocational qualification aimed at direct entry to employment, marketing for the BTEC emphasises its flexibility and suitability for progression to HE.
- In this context, the study analyses how well students with vocational qualifications (VQs) are prepared for and supported in their studies at HE.

Methodology - Mixed Methods approach

- Quantitative analysis of data from HESA to provide overview of how VQs are distributed among the student population.
- Then uses statistical modelling to analyse whether students with VQs are as likely to achieve a first or upper-second class degree as their peers, controlling for demographic variables and entry tariff.
- Qualitative data obtained from student focus groups and staff interviews at two universities (teaching-focused/research intensive).
- Analysis examines how and why students chose secondary qualifications, and how well they feel they were prepared for university study.
- The extent to which academic staff at universities are aware of students' previous study & whether they adapt pedagogical approaches accordingly.

Findings

The quantitative analysis

- VQs are unevenly distributed in the student population: students with VQs more likely to be from areas with low participation in HE and demographic groups associated with lower outcomes.
- Compared to the rest of the student population, they have a higher average age, higher proportion of male students, and lower entry tariff. However, the statistical modelling reveals that even when these factors are controlled for, students with VQs are less likely to receive a first or upper-second class degree.

The qualitative analysis

- Complex and nuanced picture of how VQs prepare students for HE. It reveals the importance of avoiding a deficit model when thinking about vocational qualifications.
- Both students' self perceptions and the views of staff show that students bring a wide range of different experiences and learning abilities to their HE studies, and that all of these abilities can be useful in helping them to succeed.

The quantitative analysis provides evidence that students with VQs are less likely to receive a first or second-class degree, all else being equal. Yet, the qualitative analysis indicates that students with VQs are highly capable, and possess qualities of confidence, interpersonal skills and a sense of agency that can help them succeed at the highest levels within the HE environment.

This suggests that universities might better support their learning.

Recommendations - to academic staff, HE providers, sector bodies and government

Implications for secondary and HE relating to the marketing and regulation of qualifications, support for student success in HE, and widening participation in HE:

- 1 Need for better regulation and monitoring of secondary qualifications such as the BTEC. Particularly, claims that they prepare students for HE should take account of evidence on outcomes. Organisations such as Ofqual and the Competition and Markets Authority should monitor the marketing of post-16 qualifications in respect to the claims they make about HE.
- 2 Universities should do more to better support students with different types of qualifications. While tutors cannot be familiar with all types of secondary qualifications, teaching and learning enhancement teams within institutions can provide indications of the range of academic experiences that students will have across a range of different degree programmes. As the mix of qualifications varies by discipline, the HEA could support this awareness through its discipline clusters.
- 3 Efforts in WP should seek to ensure that students with VQs are prepared for studies in HE, and to provide appropriate advice about the success of students with VQs in their institutions. This could be co-ordinated through e.g. NNCO/NCOP.
- 4 Discussion on student retention/success should include VQs. While mentioned in the Department for Business for Innovation & Skills' (BIS) National Strategy for Access and Student Success in HE (2014), they are discussed mainly in relation to access. Students with VQs should be added to the demographic groups for which BIS monitors retention and success. BIS and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) should consider including students with VQs in their monitoring and reporting.

Linked publications

- Shields, R. and Masardo, A. (2015) Changing patterns in vocational entry qualifications: student support and outcomes in undergraduate degree programmes. Final report. York: Higher Education Academy.
<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk>
- Shields, R. and Masardo, A. (2017), False Equivalence? Differences in the Post-16 Qualifications Market and Outcomes in Higher Education. *Educational Review*.
- Masardo, A. and Shields, R. (In preparation) Qualification pathways, skill sets and learner identities: Implications for pedagogical strategies and student engagement in learning in Higher Education.