

# **Secondary headteachers' experiences and perceptions of vocational courses in the Key Stage 4 curriculum: some implications for the 14-19 Diplomas**

Gill Haynes

School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter  
Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU

## **ABSTRACT**

In an attempt to address the low levels of engagement in post-16 education and training in the UK among some groups at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to enhance the skills of the future labour force, the UK government instituted an agenda of reform for the post-14 curriculum. Part of these reforms was the introduction in England of 'vocational' GCSEs, emphasising practical skills and the *application* of knowledge and understanding. In addition, the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) for 14-16 year olds provided a new opportunity for Key Stage 4 (KS4) students to have access to Level 1 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). In order to understand how these qualifications were being implemented and experienced, a survey of 301 secondary schools in England was undertaken. The findings of this survey raise important issues not only for those involved in the provision and delivery of 'vocational' GCSEs and NVQs, but also for the new 14-19 Diplomas introduced in England from September 2008.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Increasing disaffection and disengagement with education by some groups of young people and the realisation that the UK has historically been performing badly in comparison to nearly all other European countries in retaining young people in education or training post-16 has led successive UK governments from the 1980s onwards to reassess strategies relating to the post-14 curriculum.

One consequence has been the introduction of more vocationally based qualifications and a string of initiatives aimed at encouraging policy makers at local level, schools, teachers, students and parents to consider the benefits of incorporating a greater vocational dimension within the curriculum. In 1983 the five year Technical and Vocational Education Initiative was introduced (Gleeson, 1987; Holt, 1987; Miller et al., 1991). In the mid 1980s the National Council for Vocational Qualifications set up a comprehensive framework of post-16 qualifications, the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), covering a wide range of occupations and industries (Jessup, 1990). In the early 1990s, in an attempt to bridge the academic/vocational divide in schools and colleges, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced. These drew strongly on the theory and practice of competence-based education and training (Yeomans, 1998). Policy makers hoped these courses would retain those students who were disaffected by more academic studies (Williams, 2000) but GNVQs 'became embroiled in what might be described as an ideological and epistemological maelstrom over 'parity of esteem' and standards' (Ecclestone, 2000, p. 554) and failed to win recognition of quality from employers. Further Education (FE) tutors in one study commented that GNVQ students were not sufficiently prepared to cope with the demands of higher education (Williams, 2000).

A number of reviews took place in the mid 1990s including: the Capey Review of GNVQ assessment (Capey, 1995); the Dearing Review of qualifications for 16-19 year olds (Dearing, 1996) which supported the maintenance of the three-track system: an academic route leading to A levels, a vocational route leading to GNVQs and a craft or occupational route leading to NVQs; and the Beaumont

Review of NVQs (Howieson et al., 1997). Curriculum 2000, founded on proposals in the Dearing Report, was the first structural move on A levels, offering a range of new and revised qualifications. These included the new AS levels, the A2 leading to a full A level, 'vocational' A levels; and a new Key Skills qualification.

Although the last thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had seen a wide range of curriculum reforms intended to provide vocational alternatives for young people, the perceived problems with their content and/or assessment strategies, and the targeting of such courses to less able students had done nothing to challenge the academic/vocational, general/technical, education/training, theory/practice divides, which have historically characterised the English education system (Hyland, 2002), since the 1944 Education Act made 'secondary education for all' a reality. At that time, the intention had been 'to weld the three main forms of post-primary education into a true secondary system, differentiated in terms of their curricula, but equal in prestige' (Banks, 1955, p.7), but the tripartite system based on three different types of schools: grammar, technical and modern, with selection taking place at the age of 11 (the 11+ examination), was never fully realised. The provision of secondary technical schools was much lower than planned and by the mid 1950s in most areas the outcome was a bipartite system of grammar and secondary modern schools (SMSs) (McCulloch, 2002). Concerns about the quality of provision in SMSs, together with the findings of sociological research of a continuing pattern of class-based advantage and disadvantage (Jones, 2003), led the Labour Government of 1964 to promote a national policy of comprehensive education, with the combined aims of national economic efficiency and social justice. It did so by means of a Circular, 10/65,

instead of through legislation, enabling those LEAs which wished to do so to retain grammar schools, sometimes alongside the new comprehensive schools (McCulloch, 2002). Furthermore, there was no single template for the comprehensive school. Some provided post-16 provision, many did not. Some had been former grammar schools; some had been former SMSs and it proved difficult, particularly for the old SMSs, to forge a new identity. In terms of curriculum and assessment, the new comprehensive schools, while offering General Certification of Education (GCE) Ordinary (O) and Advanced (A) level examinations for the academically able, also offered the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) examinations for the less able, further echoing the former grammar/secondary modern divide (Goodson, 1992). 'The result was that disparities of esteem and outcome continued to be important, and issues of choice and privilege remained' (Jones, 2003, p.78).

In the 1980s and 1990s, further reform took place. CSEs and O levels were replaced by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualification in 1986, in 1988 the National Curriculum was introduced and, as discussed earlier, GNVQs were added to the portfolio of qualifications in 1992. The Education Reform Act of 1988 also paved the way for a new type of secondary school: the City Technology College (Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2002).

Despite the reforms of the secondary curriculum and qualifications frameworks during the 1980s and 1990s, statistics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had revealed that nearly half of young people were still not achieving five A\*-C GCSEs at school and one in twenty were leaving at the age of 16 without a single GCSE pass. In addition, in international league tables, the UK ranked 25<sup>th</sup> out of 29

amongst developed nations for participation of 17 year olds in education and training, indicating that many young people were discouraged from continuing in education by their experiences at school. Estelle Morris, the then Secretary of State for Education, stated in a DfES press release on 26 June 2001 that 'we must end the culture of leaving education at 16', presaging a new emphasis on widening post-16 participation. The government's subsequent Green Paper, *14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards* called for the 14-19 phase as a whole to 'give young people a range of high-quality general, mixed and vocational options ... [offering] clear progression routes into further learning and employment, including higher education ... In particular, the large number of compulsory subjects leaves too little flexibility for other subjects and types of study such as work-related learning.' (DfES 2002, p. 8). The key aims of the 14-19 reform agenda were to 'broaden the skills acquired by *all* young people to improve their employability, bridge the skills gap identified by employers, and overcome social exclusion' (DfES 2002, p. 3).

It can be argued that, in principle, the Green Paper's 'vision' for 14-19 education represented a dramatic shift in government thinking about vocational education and a real attempt to confront the historical issues relating to parity of esteem. 'The emphasis on upgrading and enhancing vocational studies ... has never been so high on the political agenda' (Hyland, 2002, p.288). *All* young people, in principle at least, were to be given the opportunity to choose vocational courses from Key Stage 4 onwards. In addition, the newly founded Connexions service was to play a key role in the provision of enhanced *impartial* information and advice so that young people could make better informed decisions about their curriculum and career pathways. Perhaps most radical of all, schools and

colleges, historically often in competition, were expected to work in partnership to meet the needs of all learners. These collaborative networks were encouraged and funded through various initiatives including the Increased Flexibility for 14-16 year olds Programme (IFP); the 14-19 Pathfinders programme; Excellence in Cities; and AimHigher which sought to raise the aspirations of young people and increase numbers continuing into higher education from families with no tradition of involvement in this sector.

Part of the reform of the 14-16 curriculum in England was the introduction of eight new GCSE courses in vocational subjects. Originally referred to as 'vocational' GCSEs, this title was quickly dropped in an attempt to minimise any negative impact the term 'vocational' might have on young people's and their parents' perceptions of the courses. The new GCSEs were:

- Applied Art & Design
- Applied Business
- Engineering
- Health and Social Care
- Applied ICT
- Leisure and Tourism
- Manufacturing
- Applied Science

These GCSEs were designed to provide a more hands-on approach to learning, emphasising practical skills and the *application* of knowledge and understanding. They were designed as double award courses and were worth the equivalent of two established GCSEs. It was hoped that students who completed the courses

would progress onto higher level general or vocational courses in schools and colleges post-16, or into apprenticeships.

Alongside these new qualifications, the IFP also provided the opportunity for 14-16 year olds in some areas to have access to NVQ courses in occupational sectors such as motor vehicle maintenance; catering; hair-dressing; beauty; construction. The key objective of these reforms was to create a more flexible curriculum, more responsive to individuals' needs.

In addition, the government set up a Working Group on 14-19 Reform led by Sir Mike Tomlinson to scrutinise critically the current qualifications system of GNVQs, NVQs, GCSEs and A/AS levels and, if deemed appropriate, to develop a new system, for implementation in the longer term. When the Working Group published its recommendations for a Diploma system (DfES, 2004), there was a sense amongst many of those involved with the delivery of the 14-19 curriculum that here, at last, was an opportunity to replace a qualifications system which had been inappropriate and demotivating for a sizeable group of young people.

In 2005 the UK Government published the *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper* (DfES, 2005) which set out a ten-year reform programme for the education system which included the introduction of 14-19 Diplomas (at Levels 1, 2 and 3). The Diplomas have been developed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (formerly the DfES), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Sector Skills Councils and the Skills for Business Network in collaboration with higher education institutions. The Diplomas comprise the following elements: Principal Learning, Generic Learning and Additional and

Specialist Learning. Each Diploma is offered at three levels. Level 1 (Foundation) and Level 2 (Higher) is available in secondary schools as an alternative to GCSEs. The Level 3 (Advanced) Diploma is available for post-16 students and is worth 3.5 A levels in terms of UCAS points – the currency for access to higher education. The first five Diplomas were introduced in 146 Consortia (partnerships of local authorities, schools, colleges, employers, and higher education institutions) from September 2008 in the following sectoral areas: Engineering; Creative and Media; Society, Health and Development; Construction and the Built Environment; and Information Technology. These will be followed by a further five sectoral Diplomas in September 2009, and four in September 2010.

The introduction of these fourteen sectoral Diplomas provide evidence of the UK government's determination to provide a vocational pathway though to further and higher education for a wider range of young people but the government rejected the 14-19 Working Group's recommendation to replace GCSEs and A levels with the Diplomas. For the time being, these traditional qualifications remain. There is to be a further review of the qualifications structure in 2013.

## **AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

It was against this background of 14-19 curriculum reform that the University of Exeter undertook the 14-19 Curriculum Project. It had four key aims:

- (a) to investigate the implementation of vocational GCSEs and NVQs in a variety of settings in different regions of England;



- (b) to examine whether they were meeting the needs of the young people they were intended to engage;
- (c) to discover whether they were providing the clear vocational pathways envisaged;
- (d) to investigate whether they were achieving parity of esteem with traditional GCSEs in the views of students, parents and educators.

The project team undertook questionnaire surveys of Year 10 and Year 11 students in 12 secondary schools in two different regions; interviews with students, teachers of vocational GCSEs and NVQs, FE College tutors, and other professionals including Connexions Personnel; and a questionnaire survey of secondary headteachers.

In this article we report the findings from our survey of secondary headteachers. The questionnaires were sent to headteachers rather than other members of school staff for two main reasons: (a) headteachers are more likely to have access to the information regarding the take-up of vocational courses in their school and the type of students being targeted, or, if not, would be able to request it from colleagues; (b) they are pivotal in determining the direction, values and ethos of a school, so their own attitude towards vocational subjects is likely to be very influential in their school's decisions about what is an appropriate curriculum for its students.

One thousand questionnaires were distributed by post to a random sample of secondary school headteachers in England, together with freepost envelopes for their return. As the questionnaires were completed anonymously, it was not possible to send reminders to non-respondents. In total, 301 headteachers

participated in this survey (approximately 10% of secondary school heads in England).

The questionnaire used a combination of closed and open questions and sought to gather data from the headteachers on the following areas:

- the pattern of provision of vocational GCSEs and NVQs across secondary schools in England, and any obstacles to provision
- the numbers and types of young people opting for/being targeted for these courses
- delivery details: locations of learning; organisation of learning
- headteachers' perceptions/experiences of vocational courses

### ***Sample***

The landscape of secondary education in England, against which the research reported in this paper took place, is a patchwork of diverse administrative structures and institution types. Although most children transfer from primary to secondary education at the age of 11 at the end of Year 6, in some local education authority (LEA) areas a middle school/secondary school system still remains, with transition at the end of Year 7 or occasionally Year 8. Some secondary schools take children up to the age of 18, while in others children transfer to a tertiary college for post-16 education. Within many LEAs there are both 11-16 and 11-18 schools and, in a few, grammar schools (selecting on ability) remain alongside all-ability comprehensive schools, many of which now have specialist school status.

The 301 headteachers in our sample led schools in a mixture of geographical locations: rural; small town; outer area of large town or city; inner area of large town or city. Headteachers were asked to indicate: (a) the characteristics of their catchment area from a list provided, ranging from 'economically disadvantaged' through to 'prosperous'; (b) the age range of the school; (c) whether or not students were selected for entry through some means such as faith or ability. These data allowed us to explore whether any of these variables affected students' access to the GCSE and/or NVQ courses.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Patterns of provision of vocational courses for 14-16 year olds**

The questionnaire sent to headteachers contained a list of the eight GCSEs in vocational subjects available from September 2002 onwards and a list of some of the most frequently offered NVQ courses. Heads were asked to indicate which, if any, of these vocational courses were on offer to students at their school. Space was also provided for them to indicate any other courses on offer but not included in the original list. Tables I and II give a detailed picture of how many schools offered the eight GCSEs and the five NVQs which we had identified, together with details of the location of their delivery.

Where the total of columns B and C *exceeds* the percentage in column A, this is because some headteachers had indicated that this course was being delivered at more than one site. This was, in almost all cases, because school campuses lacked the necessary workshop facilities and resources. The tendency was for

practical work to take place at the local Further Education college/training provider while theory elements were delivered in school.

**Table I: Provision of GCSEs**

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>A Schools offering this course (%)</b>	<b>B Delivered at school (%)</b>	<b>C Delivered at local FE college/training provider (%)</b>
Applied Art & Design	24	23	1
Applied Business	35	34	3
Applied IT	40	40	2
Applied Science	24	24	0
Engineering	21	13	12
Health and Social Care	51	46	7
Leisure and Tourism	47	45	5
Manufacturing	13	10	3

As Table I indicates, the majority of the GCSE courses were being delivered in schools, reflecting the similarity of these new courses to their more traditional counterparts, with an emphasis on written work. In the case of Engineering, nearly half the schools offering this GCSE were also making use of alternative providers in its delivery, reflecting the resource requirements of this particular course.

**Table II: Provision of NVQs**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Schools offering this course (%)</b>	<b>Delivered at school (%)</b>	<b>Delivered at local FE college/training provider (%)</b>
Motor Vehicle	35	0	35
Construction	34	1	33
Catering	30	3	27
Hairdressing	43	1	42
Beauty Therapy	28	1	27

Table II provides evidence that, only very exceptionally, do schools have the facilities required to offer NVQ courses which, unlike the GCSE courses, contain

a large practical element. In almost every case, colleges and training providers were the main deliverers of these courses.

### **Selective Schools**

Whilst almost every non-selective school in the sample (240 out of 244) offered vocational options, among the selective schools 25 per cent (14 out of 57) offered *no* vocational option. Where selective schools did have some provision, they were likely to offer a more limited range of vocational courses than non-selective schools.

### **Schools with/without 6<sup>th</sup> forms**

We also examined the data to see whether there were any differences in the pattern of provision between schools with 6<sup>th</sup> forms (i.e. with Years 12 and 13) and those without (see Table III). Of the 301 headteachers in the total sample, 12 (4%) had not indicated the range of year groups in their school, 168 (56%) had year 12 and year 13 students and 129 (40%) did not.

**Table III: Provision of vocational subjects in Key Stage 4: Schools with/without 6<sup>th</sup> forms**

	<b>% schools <i>with</i> 6<sup>th</sup> forms offering these subjects</b>	<b>% schools <i>without</i> 6<sup>th</sup> forms offering these subjects</b>
<b>GCSEs</b>		
Applied Art & Design	24	27
Applied Business	39	35
Engineering	19	27
Health & Social Care	51	57
Applied ICT	41	45
Leisure & Tourism	44	58
Manufacturing	14	14
Applied Science	29	23
<b>NVQs</b>		
Motor Vehicle Skills	35	38

Catering	26	37
Construction	34	38
Hairdressing	43	47
Beauty Therapy	26	32

With the exceptions of Applied Business and Applied Science, schools without 6<sup>th</sup> forms were slightly more likely to be offering vocational GCSEs than those with 6<sup>th</sup> forms, though this was not at a statistically significant level. Schools with 6<sup>th</sup> forms were also less likely to offer NVQ courses. All mainstream secondary schools have science facilities which may partly explain why Applied Science runs contrary to the pattern of provision for other GCSE subject areas. Applied Business does not require workshop-type resources and is therefore deliverable in a school classroom environment.

As Table II indicates, NVQs are mostly delivered at off-school locations, often FE colleges, giving students a taste of a different learning environment. It may be that headteachers without a 6<sup>th</sup> form are more willing for their school to provide the opportunities for students to undertake some of their learning off-campus because they do not need to try to encourage students to remain at the school for their post-16 education. Our research did not specifically address this issue so further research would be required to ascertain if schools' competition with FE colleges post-16 influences the advice and guidance given to their students.

## **Recruitment to vocational courses**

### ***Targeting***

In schools where vocational courses were available to students, headteachers were asked *which* students in their school were able to opt for one of these

courses. As Table IV indicates, in a large majority of schools, *all* students were offered the opportunity to take one or more Applied GCSEs.

**Table IV: Students offered the opportunity to choose one or more Applied GCSEs/NVQs**

	<b>Applied GCSEs</b>	<b>NVQs</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
All students	84	35
Some students	16	65

The 16% of headteachers who had ticked the ‘some students’ box were asked to indicate which types of students were targeted. Their responses suggest that Applied GCSEs were seen by a majority of this group of headteachers as more appropriate to the less able or the disengaged. Typical responses included:

*‘Targeted C/D borderline.’*

*‘Targeted, potentially disaffected students.’*

*‘Lower ability range, risk of exclusion, poor attenders.’*

Some were less direct in their responses but their comments also implied targeting of less able young people:

*‘Groups who we feel might benefit from the course.’*

*‘Students are selected based on needs and ability – they do not opt for these.’*

This finding resonates with that of Office for Standards in Education’s (Ofsted) investigation of the introduction of the new GCSEs which found that ‘in some schools, the target group for the new courses is mainly lower-attaining pupils’ (Ofsted 2004, p.3).

Schools were even more likely to play a role in the selection process in relation to NVQs. As Table IV indicates, only 35% of headteachers said that *all* students

were able to choose an NVQ course. Where they had reported that a selection system was in place, we asked for further information. Of those who commented, over a third indicated that they advised *academically less able* students to take an NVQ, just over a quarter would encourage *potentially disaffected/disengaged* students, and just under a quarter said they considered a student's likely *career* pathway and advised accordingly.

### **Quotas**

Quotas limited the number of students able to take Applied GCSEs in 41% of schools participating in our survey; this figure rose to 76% of schools in relation to NVQ courses. Quotas for Applied GCSEs were in operation largely due to staffing and timetable constraints within schools.

Where demand exceeded quotas, just under a third of headteachers who commented indicated that they would endeavour to run additional groups – this was much more common for GCSEs than for NVQs. The remainder of schools adhered to the quotas set and allocated students through a selection process, either in negotiation with the students, and sometimes their parents, or independently using criteria such as aptitude, need, and previous engagement with study. In the case of NVQs, most of the places provided for these were funded through the Increased Flexibility Programme. The finite funding situation and the relatively high cost of these courses meant that not all students who wished to take an NVQ course were able to.

If the number of students opting for an Applied GCSE or NVQ fell below the quota for that course, just under half of schools indicated that they would



withdraw the course. Of the remainder, a third would continue to run it. Six schools mentioned the use of their collaborative networks with other schools/colleges as a means of ensuring provision.

### **Operational matters**

The importance of collaboration in developing a flexible, coherent 14-19 phase has been a central feature of the UK government's 14-19 reform agenda (Higham et al 2004, Higham & Yeomans 2005). This has necessitated institutions such as schools and colleges, which historically might have been in competition for students post-16, to work collaboratively to deliver vocational courses in Key Stage 4. Our questionnaire explored with headteachers the issues which had to be addressed in setting up these local arrangements. Many were related to practical matters; there were also some issues related to staffing.

#### *Logistical issues*

- Harmonisation of timetables across participating schools and the college: weekly and termly, including length of teaching periods.
- Transportation of students to other learning sites – organisation and funding
- Procedural matters:
  - induction of students to new learning sites
  - behaviour management
  - monitoring student attendance
  - dress codes
  - responsibilities for writing reports on the students' progress
  - contingencies for staff absences
- Health and Safety issues, where courses involve work placements

### *Staff matters*

- Professional development of college staff: e.g. some are not qualified to teach 14-16 year olds; others may need 'refresher' courses
- Staff pay and conditions – college staff pay and conditions of work are different to those of their colleagues in schools.
- Monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning

Seventy-three per cent of headteachers responded 'yes' to a question asking whether their school had experienced problems with vocational courses delivered at other institutions. The seven most frequently mentioned problems are listed below in rank order of the frequency with which they were mentioned:

- Teaching quality – perceived by the school to be at a lower level than at the students' home institution
- Behaviour management – schools commented on college/training providers' inability to cope with KS4 students
- Timetabling difficulties
- Communication problems between school and college/training provider
- Travel to learn - cost/supervision of students
- Reporting procedures
- Attendance/punctuality of students

### **Perceptions of vocational courses**

Much of the literature relating to vocational qualifications has identified their lack of parity of esteem with the more traditional and academic forms of

assessments. Vocational education and training in England throughout much of the twentieth century was distinguished by low status and marginality (Bates et al., 1998). Historically, the young people undertaking vocational courses have tended to be the less able ‘academically’.

The headteacher plays a pivotal role in English schools, shaping the ethos of the school; determining the values it espouses; deciding on the nature of its curriculum offer, within the constraints imposed by the national curriculum. Our questionnaire provided a list of statements about the new GCSEs and NVQs, to investigate this group’s views of these qualifications in the KS4 curriculum. Headteachers were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with these statements. The results are set out in Table V.

**Table V: Heads’ perceptions of Applied GCSEs/NVQs: responses to statements**

<i>Headteachers’ perceptions of GCSEs and NVQs</i>	<i>Strongly agree/ Agree</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Disagree/ Strongly disagree</i>
Applied GCSEs are suitable for students from across the full range of ability	67	8	25
NVQs are suitable for students from across the full range of ability	57	14	31
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Year 10 and 11 in my school who chose Applied GCSEs did so mainly because they thought they would be easier than established GCSEs	15	26	59
Year 10 and 11 in my school who chose NVQs did so mainly because they thought they would be easier than established GCSEs	34	15	50
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Year 10 and Year 11 students in my school taking			

Applied GCSEs generally view these courses as relevant to their future careers	81	15	4
Year 10 and Year 11 students in my school taking NVQs generally view these courses as relevant to their future careers	89	8	2
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Applied GCSEs could be improved by including more practical work and less written work	78	20	3
NVQs could be improved by including more written work and less practical work	3	18	78
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The majority of students in my school, whether taking Applied GCSEs or not, regard Applied GCSEs as being of lower status than established GCSEs.	15	24	61
The majority of students in my school, whether taking NVQs or not, regard NVQs as being of lower status than established GCSEs.	48	25	26
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Most students in my school taking Applied GCSEs will find it challenging to obtain a grade C or higher	46	10	44
Most students in my school taking NVQs will find it challenging to be successful with these courses	51	16	33
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Year 10 and 11 students in my school taking Applied GCSEs are generally pleased with the amount of vocational content and activity in these courses	43	37	20
Year 10 and 11 students in my school taking NVQs are generally pleased with the amount of vocational content and activity in these courses	75	17	8
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Applied GCSEs are less helpful than established GCSEs if a student wants to go onto higher education	15	28	58
NVQs are less helpful than established GCSEs if a student wants to go onto higher education	40	12	48]
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Students taking Applied GCSEs have shown improved motivation levels generally	52	35	13
Students taking NVQs have shown improved motivation levels generally	66	20	14
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This survey of headteachers suggests that the historical lack of parity of esteem between vocational courses and the traditional academic subjects remains, but that the Applied GCSEs have to some extent bridged the gap. Applied GCSEs are considered by more headteachers to be suitable for students *across the full range of ability* than are NVQs. Forty-eight per cent of heads surveyed believed

their students regard NVQs as being of lower status than established GCSEs. Forty per cent believed that NVQs are less helpful than established GCSEs for students with higher education as their goal. This figure was lower in relation to Applied GCSEs, only 15% of headteachers surveyed felt these qualifications were less helpful for students aiming for higher education. These findings suggest an hierarchy of esteem with traditional GCSEs at the top, NVQs at the bottom and Applied GCSEs in a position just slightly lower than traditional GCSEs.

The lower position of NVQs should not obscure the fact that these qualifications were considered a valuable element of the curriculum offer at KS4 for some students. A large majority of heads (75%) believed that the emphasis on practical work in NVQ courses was a strength and that the students on these courses were pleased with the amount of vocational content and activity. For some young people, the opportunity to undertake a vocational course away from their home institution had resulted in higher levels of engagement. Forty per cent of headteachers said that students' levels of attendance had been slightly or much better at non-school sites. Although attendance is only a very crude measure of engagement, our interviews with and questionnaire surveys of young people supported the headteacher survey data. Year 11 students taking NVQs reported enjoying learning through practical 'hands-on' activities. They also commented on the relationship with their tutors in the FE colleges, appreciating the privilege of using the tutors' first names, and 'being treated like adults'. The FE college tutors interviewed felt that learning away from school allowed students to make a fresh start. One said it enabled students 'to leave behind the baggage they had acquired at school'. Our research supports the findings of

Attwood et al (2003) whose study of 26 14-16 year olds found that a vocational curriculum delivered in a non-school setting can re-engage young people previously disaffected with school-based learning.

### **Summary**

This survey of secondary headteachers in England found strong evidence that individual students' opportunities to access vocational courses were differentiated at the school level. Influential factors included: whether a school was selective or not; whether it included post-16 provision; the headteacher's attitude towards vocational courses; the institution's level and quality of collaboration with other locally based educational providers and employers; and the availability of funding.

Eighteen headteachers reported that KS4 options in their school did not include either Applied GCSEs or NVQs. Fourteen of these schools were selective (25% of the selective schools included in the sample). The remaining 75% of selective schools were less likely to offer their students the opportunity to take an NVQ course in KS4, suggesting that this qualification is seen as inappropriate by these institutions for young people aspiring to higher education.

The England and Wales Youth Cohort Study had found that young people in the middle third of GCSE results in 2001 were much more likely to take vocational qualifications than those in the top third of GCSE results and, in the bottom third of GCSE results, almost all who were taking qualifications had chosen vocational options (Payne, 2003). In general, across the schools taking part in the research reported in this article, the less able, disaffected and disengaged young people were those being targeted for NVQs, though to a much lesser extent for the

Applied GCSEs. The Applied GCSEs, which were intended by government to provide a vocational but equally esteemed alternative to the traditional GCSEs, appear to have had some success in this respect, with only 15% of headteachers in our survey indicating that they did not feel these to be as appropriate to students aiming at higher education.

Students in schools with catchment areas described by the headteacher as 'Largely economically disadvantaged but with pockets of prosperity' or 'Economically disadvantaged' (51% of the total sample) were more likely than those in relatively prosperous areas to find vocational courses available to them in KS4, particularly NVQs. This appeared to be due partly to the funding available through the IFP initiative, partly to vocational courses being perceived by schools in those areas as a means of re-engaging disaffected and disengaged young people with learning - an over-represented group in economically deprived areas - and partly to the availability in these largely urban areas of work-related learning placements facilitating the provision of vocational courses.

Where schools had embraced the broader, alternative curriculum available to 14-16 year olds, there was evidence that the different types of learning opportunities on offer were effective in re-engaging some young people who had been displaying characteristics of disaffection with education during Key Stage 3. Ofsted (2004, p.4) had reported that 'in most schools, teachers ... believe that the new GCSEs have improved pupils' behaviour in school, including that of formerly difficult pupils'. Over half the heads we surveyed believed that taking a vocational course had improved students' motivation levels generally, although

the impact was seen to be greater on students taking NVQs, perhaps because this group included greater numbers of students who had previously been particularly disaffected or disengaged. This improvement was attributed, in part, to the vocational relevance of the courses and, where courses were taught jointly with colleges and/or training providers, to the adult ethos of the learning site and the opportunity for students to 'make a fresh start'. Our research project did not gather data on individual students' post-16 destinations, but two thirds of the headteachers participating in our survey reported that over half of their students taking a vocational course in KS4 had continued with a vocational strand post-16.

Logistical issues related to delivery in settings away from a student's host institution have been identified, including timetabling difficulties, constructing joint behaviour management policies, funding and organising 'travel to learn', health and safety issues for 14-16 year olds. Some headteachers raised concerns about the quality of teaching in further education colleges. The lack of parity between school staff and further education sector staff in terms of pay and conditions was also recognised.

## **THE NEW DIPLOMAS**

In September 2008, the first five Diplomas - in Engineering; Creative and Media; Society, Health and Development; Construction and the Built Environment; and Information Technology – were introduced in England. This new qualification comprises three main elements: Principal Learning (sector specific knowledge and skills); Generic Learning (including functional skills in literacy and numeracy); and Additional and/or Specialist Learning (intended to provided



breadth and/or depth), together with a minimum of 10 days work experience (unassessed). The UK government had indicated, prior to the introduction of Diplomas, that it expected 40,000 learners to take the opportunity of studying a Diploma from 2008, with 10,000 of these at Level 3.

The UK government's political and financial investment in Diplomas is large. In addition to the 'sectoral' Diplomas, three further Diplomas will be introduced in 2011 in Humanities, Science, and Modern Foreign Languages. A Level 3 Diploma is currently equivalent to 3.5 A levels; in 2011, an Extended Diploma will be introduced which will be equivalent to 4.5 A levels. There is no doubting the UK government's commitment to the Diploma qualification and it is possible that if recruitment to the Diplomas meets government targets and the qualification is received positively by students, schools and colleges, parents, employers and higher education institutions, that the review of qualifications scheduled for 2013 may recommend the abolition of GCSEs and A levels.

At the time of writing this article, the level of recruitment to the first five Diplomas beginning in September 2008 was not known. Our research into vocational courses in the 14-16 curriculum suggests that, if Diplomas are to be embraced by young people and their parents as a credible alternative to the 'gold standard' of A levels, the role of headteachers and their staff will be central in promoting the Diploma to students and their parents as an appropriate qualification for young people of *all* abilities and a secure route into higher education.

A survey of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference group of independent (private) schools in 2007 had revealed only two of its member

institutions were 'seriously considering' including Diplomas in their curriculum options; 47 per cent said that they would not introduce them (Frean, 2007). It is possible that some selective state schools may adopt a similar position, as our survey suggests this sector is currently less likely to offer Applied GCSEs and NVQs than mixed ability schools. On the other hand, it can be argued that a significant finding of our study was that 75% of selective schools in our sample are now offering at least one vocational option. Also, the independent sector and selective schools form only a small portion of the secondary sector. The evidence from headteachers of the state comprehensive schools suggests that vocational courses are now considered a worthwhile alternative for many students.

A key to the Diploma's success will be its acceptance by 'end-users' such as employers and higher education institutions (HEIs). Historically, vocational courses have not been seen as pathways to higher education. Entry requirements for vocational courses at undergraduate level, such as medicine and law, have demanded high grades in traditional A level subjects. The Government identified the need to address this issue and has striven to include HEIs in Diploma design, development and implementation, both at the national and local level, to try to ensure that the subject knowledge contained in Diplomas and the types of skills inculcated will match those required for undergraduate study.

Demographic changes may also influence HEIs' response to the new qualification. From 2010 the number of 18 year olds will begin to fall, so the 131 HEIs in England will be competing for a smaller pool of applicants. For

'recruiting' courses, most commonly located in the 'post-1992 universities' (originally polytechnics, granted university status in 1992) but also in some of the research-intensive universities, the Level 3 Diplomas will potentially provide a new source of applicants with the types of knowledge and skills which should facilitate transition to undergraduate study on existing degrees.

Findings from a study undertaken in June – December 2007 of senior managers and admissions tutors in the nineteen '1994 Group' of universities (which includes Durham, Warwick and Exeter) were encouraging for the government (1994 Group, 2008). Senior managers in all these institutions identified undergraduate courses that could offer progression from the content of one or more of the first five Diplomas. While vocational courses have historically attracted less cultural capital than their more traditional counterparts and have therefore failed to recruit higher ability students, the findings from the 1994 Group research suggest that the Diploma qualification may have more success in bridging the academic/vocational divide. If high status universities display a willingness to take applicants with the Diploma, this is likely to encourage any headteachers and their staff currently sceptical about the new qualification to reassess their views.

There is, therefore, a possibility that the introduction of Diplomas could break the traditional mould of 14-19 education by creating genuine parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning. Although the NVQ qualification is perceived by headteachers as mainly appropriate for students who struggle with a traditional academic curriculum, the research reported in this article suggests that Applied GCSEs are providing a bridge across the academic/vocational

divide. The Diploma with its combination of Applied, Generic and Additional/Specialist Learning may well appeal to the type of students who have opted for Applied GCSEs in the past and would offer an alternative pathway to students who would rather take a vocationally-oriented route into higher education. Changing perceptions - amongst headteachers and amongst higher education establishments – will be essential to ensuring the success of Diplomas, but there is some evidence that this is occurring. Our research into the delivery of NVQs and Applied GCSEs suggests that there will also be many practical issues to address, such as common timetabling, travel to learn, the availability of off-school and industry-based opportunities for students. These will require effective collaborative working from staff within the consortia introducing and implementing the Diplomas.

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