

Inequality of opportunity in equivalency

David Nicholls *looks at the challenge for vocational qualifications.*

Introduction

The 2011 Wolf Report sought to offer clarity and reform to a vocational qualification system which had seemingly lost its way - determining that more rigour and academia was required in order to bring these qualifications in line with their academic counterparts. Indeed, the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, prefaced the report with the statement that *'between a quarter and a third of young people between the ages of 16-19 are, right now, either doing nothing at all or pursuing courses which offer no route to higher levels of education or the prospect of meaningful employment'* (1). At a time when there were countless vocational qualifications to choose from, from diplomas to BTECs to OCR Nationals, the outlook of the report was to provide clarity, focus, and a real sense of fairness and meaning to these qualifications.

Now, though, in 2020, it seems that, despite Professor Wolf proposing these reforms, and the reforms which have since been undertaken in relation to vocational qualifications, we find ourselves in a more discriminatory system than ever before. Vocational qualifications reform shifted focus from 100 per cent practical assessment such as coursework which Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) qualifications offered students, incorporating an exam element into the new

Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Whilst a coursework element remains in these courses alongside the flexibility to assess through witness statements and, where appropriate, photographic or video evidence, the introduction of an exam element was designed to establish parity between A-levels and vocational qualifications.

Despite the focus on level 3 vocational qualifications, they are still not viewed as equal to A-level qualifications, the perceived 'gold standard' in attainment at this level. The students that choose to take vocational level 3 programmes are not provided with equal opportunities in their progression to higher education, despite parity measures in outcomes. Furthermore, due to the increased focus on the academia elements in vocational qualifications and consequential reduction in skills development, employers are now doubting their efficacy as a route to employment. Students completing vocational qualifications at level 3 can find themselves in a form of limbo, unsure as to what opportunities these qualifications actually present them with, finding themselves limited in progression to higher education degrees, and in achieving a suitable level of employment. Cranfield School of Management, in their report *The New Vocational Currency: Investing for Success*, found that only a third of employers value vocational qualifications as having a positive impact, and only 12 per cent of students agreed (2).

Post-16 vocational qualifications in England

Vocational qualifications in post-16 providers in England, such as sixth forms or colleges, specifically BTECs and CTECs, offer an overarching view of the subject area delivered in a way that is suited to students from all backgrounds, regardless of their previous academic attainment at GCSE. Given the flexibility in assessment methods, they often provide students with a route into and through sixth form which they wouldn't otherwise be offered, which has increased retention rates - 90.4 per cent of students in 2018 compared to 88.5 per cent in 2017 (3). This positive outcome should indeed be celebrated, and it must not be overlooked that they have provided numerous students with the equivalents of A-levels when otherwise they might previously have ended up as NEETs, or simply floundering on a course unsuited to their aspirations. However, the reform to vocational qualifications and inclusion of external assessment and A-level style questioning asks students to work in a manner which they are often simply not suited to, effectively cancelling out the positives provided by the initial flexibility on offer.

The two-tier vocational education system

The resulting new post-16 vocational qualifications have created a two-tier education system. This not only consolidates the disparity between vocational and academic qualifications at level 3, but also within vocational qualifications. This two-tier system not only disadvantages students but potentially dictates progression opportunities through decisions made at school or college level rather than by the students themselves.

The QCF format of vocational qualifications required no external assessment, with students assessed through coursework completed in centres, often by the teachers delivering the courses. Moderation of this work was often set aside for up to three years, sometimes purely based on the teachers themselves completing an online test, meaning that centres could assess and submit their own grades, claiming certification from the exam board without any real system to check the rigour of the levels awarded. This was an issue highlighted by Wolf, and so specifications were changed to incorporate an element of external assessment, meaning students were asked to sit an exam alongside completing their coursework, and external moderations were increased in order to check levels.

These new qualifications may have incorporated an element of external assessment, but the system for checking internal assessment has remained largely unchanged, with small samples of work being requested by exam boards, and a labour-intensive, teacher admin-heavy means of claiming grades still in place, placing the onus largely on the teacher to ensure that everything is as it should be, rather than the student or the exam board.

However, despite these changes being ushered in, the exam boards themselves did not remove the old specification qualifications, and have continued to allow students to be registered onto these courses, and for grades to be claimed. This, alongside the new specification qualifications incorporating an exam, has now presented us with a cohort of students who have seemingly achieved the same grades but have studied different qualifications (QCF versus RQF). When this happens within a close geographic area it can result in students competing for the same jobs or opportunities with employers having no real understanding of how their qualifications differ, due to the two-tier system and mix of vocational qualifications created.

Vocational qualifications and higher education

The change in vocational qualifications to a more exam-focused and externally moderated approach has had a big impact on student progression to higher education. Students applying to university in the last four years with vocational qualifications pre-dating 2016 have been rejected based on an assumption that they lack parity with both their A-level equivalents and their current vocational qualification equivalent. The result of this is that students have not been offered places on degree programmes through no fault of their own, but because of vocational qualification reforms that have not been fit for purpose.

Entry requirements to degree programmes for students holding vocational qualifications have also become inflated in an attempt to demonstrate a notion of parity with the A-level equivalent. 79 per cent of 18-year-olds achieving A-levels move onto a further qualification by the age of 25, compared to 42 per cent of students on vocational qualifications (4), demonstrating a clear difference in progression opportunities. Vocational students have taken vocational qualifications in good faith, in the expectation of employment and/or progression to higher education, and have found themselves

disadvantaged, stuck in a system of unequal opportunities presented by equivalents.

Examples of inequality in access to higher education for vocational students are useful in considering the level of the problem. Royal Holloway ask for ABB-AAB from A-level entry students but demand D*DD from vocational students taking Computer Science and Maths, and the University of Kent require BBB from A-level entry students compared to DDM from vocational students who wish to study Health and Social Care. Some universities do not consider Level 3 vocational qualifications at all, such as Imperial College and Cambridge, or state they will consider them on a case-by-case basis, such as the University of Birmingham. Finally, universities such as King's College London state that they require a vocational qualification equating to three A-levels alongside two further A-levels, while Cambridge state that they will accept level 4 and 5 vocational qualifications only. These are degree level qualifications required for entry onto a degree. These inflated entry requirements, or outright refusals to consider vocational qualifications as an appropriate entry requirement for a degree, present an issue that simply cannot be ignored.

Vocational students deserve to be afforded the same opportunities and recognition as academic students. This can only happen if the qualifications they take are consistent in content and assessment to ensure parity in the qualification outcome. The current situation is that of a two-tier vocational education system where different routes to the same qualifications provide a disparity in outcome that is recognised by universities and employers. This lack of regulation of vocational qualifications by awarding bodies needs addressing. Reform of vocational post-16 qualifications has not achieved parity with A-levels and has in fact created this two-tier system.

Whilst we may refer to vocational qualifications as equivalents, the opportunities presented by them are far from equal, and something needs to change.

References

1. Wolf, A. (2011). *The Wolf Report*. Gov.uk. Available: shorturl.at/hnQV4.
2. HR Editorial (2013). 'Employers and employees divided over value of vocational training says research.' Available at short.url.at/hrwM6.
3. DfE (2019). Revised A-Level and other 16 to 18

results in England, 2017/2018 - Additional text. Available: shorturl.at/tPXZ9.

4. Robinson, D. (2019). 'Vocational progression must be treated like more academic options.' *FE Week*. Available: shorturl.at/dEKVW.

CAFAS Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards

- ◆ campaigns against the decline in standards
- ◆ defends individuals against victimisation
- ◆ gives moral support and legal advice
- ◆ investigates malpractice and publishes findings
- ◆ seeks to develop a support network with unions and other organisations.

For further information, contact the Secretary:
Ben Cosin
3 Halliday Drive
DEAL CT14 7AX
CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk