

Vocational Qualifications

14-18 years [1992-2014]

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Key Features

Key Features: Vocational qualifications for 14–18-year-olds have been subject to multiple reforms across the period 1992-2014. Qualification iterations include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), Advanced Certificate of Education (AVCE), Applied A levels and Applied General qualifications. Significant vocational system reform often focusses on only qualifications' reforms and follow remarkably similar policy aims, suggesting poor policy and institutional memory. This is complicated by limited evaluation of vocational reforms.

Operation date: 1992-2014

Target population: 14-18 years [as vocational alternatives to GCSEs and A levels]

Purpose: Create parity of esteem to academic routes, delivered through redesigned vocational qualifications which provide quality and rigour; Provide progression to higher and employment in the 16-19 years space; Improve visibility of qualifications through improved Careers, Information and Guidance; and meet local employer needs through integration of employers in curriculum design and assessment processes.

Introduction

This review aims to capture lessons from five reforms of vocational qualifications for 14-19-year-olds from 1992-2014. Vocational qualifications are occupation-related qualifications which allow learners to acquire and demonstrate work-related knowledge, skills and behaviours identified by the National Occupational Standards 'to be competent at a job' (NOS, 2022). Vocational qualifications aim to support young people to progress to employment or higher education (DfE, 2022). This paper explores:

- National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs): operation 1986-2014
- General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs): operation 1992-2007
- Advanced Certificate of Vocational Education (ACVE): operation 2000-2004 {Also known as Vocational A Level or Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE)}
- Applied General Certificate in Education (Applied GCSEs): operation 2005 -2014 [replaced VCEs]
- Applied Generals: operation 2014-present [including BTECs and OCR Cambridge Technical]

The number of vocational qualification reforms and the short-lived nature of many qualifications are evident. In addition, 14-19 Diplomas were in operation from 2008 to 2010 and were explored in a standalone Learning from the Past paper (Jones, 2021).

The number of young people who take at least one vocational qualification is large: in 2020 Vidal-Rodeiro and Vitello's (2020) study of the National Pupil Database and vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4 and 5 estimated that 51% of Key Stage 4 candidates and 56% of Key Stage 5 candidates took at least one vocational qualification (Vidal Rodeiro and Vitello, 2020). Vocational qualifications are predominantly taken by those young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with these patterns persisting even where participants are controlled by prior GCSE outcomes (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) denotes the level of knowledge or competence at 14-18 years that qualifications demonstrate.

Level 1: Allows initial entry into employment or further education (equivalent GCSE (below a good pass))

Level 2: Allows progression to skilled employment or continuation of secondary education (equivalent GCSE – 'good pass')

Level 3: Qualified/skilled worker, Progression/Entry to higher education (equivalent A level)

Classification and pathway attribution suggests linear, visible pathways. But young people do not follow linear pathways. The Wolf Report (2011, p37) stated:

Young people change what they are doing frequently, and the changes are major ones. The young person who follows first a level 2 course in a vocational area, then a level 3 one, and then goes on to a long-term career in that sector is the exception, not the rule.....the lower level the qualification, the less likely it is to be associated with employment in the sector concerned.

In addition, classifications suggest educational parity of qualification outcomes and qualifications which have equivalent value. Despite frequent reforms and ambitions of parity, there are longstanding issues of vocational choices leading to similar career choices and economic returns to their academic counterparts (Wolf, 2011, p8). This is in direct contrast to the relative stability of the academic qualification system of GCSEs and A Levels which have maintained their core structure and value to young people in accessing future pathways (DfE, 2021).

Pember et al (2019) suggest vocational qualifications lead to increased economic returns from Level 2 upwards. However other studies have found lower or no returns for level 2 (Patrignani et al., 2017; Hupkau et al., 2017). Progression routes may not exist from level 2, with many qualifications presenting dead ends of opportunity for young people (Raffe, 2015; Ofsted, 2018). It is estimated that between 25% and 33% of post-16 choices are low-value courses which generate low economic returns (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Where studies find positive outcomes for Level 2, these maintain until age 25 for Level 2; 30 years for Level 3 and 45 years for Level 4. However, there is an age cap where these effects switch to a negative impact on earnings (Pember, 2019, p6).

¹<https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

Economic returns are stratified by sector and gender, with young women, and lower academic ability young men and women at risk of low value, low return pathways in elementary low skilled jobs. Despite the large proportion of young people who take part in vocational qualifications, there is limited evaluation of qualification reform (Pember, 2019).

Policy Reforms and Vocational Qualifications in England²

Vocational qualifications for 14-19 years have been subject to successive reform over the past thirty years, often with short lived policy direction. In England vocational system reform is often equated by policymakers to vocational qualification reform, producing restrictive outcomes, "Government has a tendency to recreate policies and organisations on an alarmingly regular basis. New organisations replace old ones; one policy is ended while a remarkably similar one is launched" (Norris and Adam, 2017, p5).

The quality of vocational qualifications and the lack of parity of esteem with academic routes were noted in the 1991 White Paper on Education and Training for the 21st century (Her Majesty's Stationers, 1991). The same criticisms of the vocational qualification system repeat across the Dearing Review (1994), Wolf Report (2011), Sainsbury Review (2016) and the Augar Review (2018) (Keep et al., 2021). These recurring patterns of review, redesign and subsequent redundancy of vocational qualifications raise questions as to the efficacy of qualification design in meeting employer and young people's needs, with Bathmaker (2013) suggesting that there is limited evidence that the conceptualisation of knowledge in vocational qualifications reflects the skills required to be competent in a job role, or which are valued by employers.

English vocational policy context has three characteristics that intersect to create complexity and low-value vocational qualifications. First, rapid civil service and Minister changes in vocational education and training (VET), with each change in personnel producing new ideas and approaches to policy, with these changes often significant system change, as civil service promotion is based on high policy impact. Second the enduring low status of VET qualifications is reinforced through the expansion of participation in higher education to over 50% of under 25 years with academic routes perceived by schools, parents and young people as aspirational transitions to adulthood. And third, the quasi-market led approach to VET provision means providers are financially rewarded for completions, no matter the quality of their courses, meaning young people can be signposted into easy to complete qualifications which may not meet their or industry needs (Wolf, 2011). The Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022) is the latest government attempt to reframe the perceptions and quality of vocational qualifications. History suggests that such parliamentary approaches fail to learn from previous policy implementations and evaluations, where shape and form from past reviews and reforms in the vocational qualification space reappear and demonstrate poor policy and institutional memory (Hupkau et al., 2017).

General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) 1992-2007³

Key Features: GNVQs aimed to provide young people aged 14-18 years with experience of working life and sector knowledge and skills. GNVQs were taken alongside, or instead of GCSEs and A levels.

Operation date: 1992- 2000 (Advanced); 2007 (Intermediate and Foundation)

Target Population: 14-16 years Foundation (Level 1); Intermediate (Level 2); 16-18 years Advanced level equivalent to A level (Level 3)

Purpose: To provide a framework for vocational qualifications that would be recognised by and relevant to employers; increase employer engagement in qualifications through the Training and Enterprise Councils; promote 'equal esteem' for academic and vocational routes; promote links between schools and employers to build understanding of the world of work; clear pathways from improved CIAG linking schools and employers and improved knowledge and choice for post 16 for vocational pathways.

² https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/88/DD0677_-_Honourable_Histories_Feb_2022.pdf

³ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2015-uk-qualifications.pdf>

General National Vocational Qualifications were piloted in 1992, with Advanced Level (Level 3) operating until 2002, and Intermediate (Level 2) and Foundation (Level 1) until 2007 (UCAS, 2015). GNVQs aimed to provide young people 14-18 years with experience of working life alongside acquiring knowledge and skills, with GNVQs taken alongside or instead of GCSEs and A levels. At 14-16 years Foundation level GNVQ was equivalent to grade D-G at GCSE (Level 1) and Intermediate level equivalent to A* to C at GCSE (Level 2). GNVQs were designed to provide an alternative to BTEC First Diploma (14-16 years) which aimed to provide progression to BTEC National Diploma (the equivalent of A levels) and then onto higher education. At 16-18 years, Advance level GNVQs were equivalent to A level (Level 3) in fifteen broad vocational areas. Four GCSEs were equivalent to six GNVQ modules each of 60 hours. Assessment was two thirds internally assessed, with risks of teacher bias or system gaming by schools (Wellings et al., 2010). The spread of qualification levels offered by GNVQs was a weakness, simultaneously attempting to provide vocational alternatives to established academic GCSE and A levels.

GNVQs were criticised for creating early stratification of qualification choices into academic and vocational pathways and were disproportionately taken by young people who had lower prior attainment, with FSM and Special Educational needs over-represented (FFT Datalab, 2018). Wellings et al (2010, p3) describes them as 'motivational qualifications for the disengaged, with the vocational route firmly identified as one for lower achievers or unmotivated learners. The qualifications had persistent difficulties. Students were supposed to plan, assess, and monitor their own work, in an attempt to mirror workplace responsibilities, but which raised questions about standards and rigour. The redesigned qualifications increased academic rigour, moving the qualification further away from its vocational roots. Advanced GNVQs could not deliver an alternative, quality route to A levels, and were replaced in 2000 by the Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE). Intermediate and Foundation GNVQs continued until 2007 (Wellings et al., 2010).

GNVQs exemplify how attempts for vocational parity can produce qualifications of limited value to young people and employers. GNVQs were controversial because of their place in school performance tables in a quasi-marketised system, where the measure of five GCSEs in any subject A*-C were achieved through a pass in a full, intermediate GNVQ plus a single GCSE pass A*-C. In some schools, large numbers of pupils were entered into these qualifications; in 2003 out of 544,000 state school secondary pupils, 121,000 entered at least one GNVQ qualification (FFT Datalab, 2018). However, recent developments in longitudinal data analysis using the National Pupil Database and HMRC records by FFT Datalab (2018) produce a more complex picture of the Intermediate level qualification. Analysis of economic outcomes for young people who took GNVQs and GCSEs in 2006 showed there was little difference in long term economic outcomes, suggesting that Level 2 qualifications for the majority of young people provide a stepping-stone to further qualification.

Advanced General Certificate in Education (AVCE) 2000-2004

Key Features: Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education (AVCEs) were also known as Vocational A levels or Vocational Certificates in Education (VCEs), replacing the Advanced GNVQ in 2000, and formed the basis for future vocational Level 3 development. AVCEs were supposed to provide an alternative to academic A levels, with marking systems moving from the Distinction-Merit-Pass of Advanced GNVQs to grade A-E mirroring GCE A levels.

Operation date: 2000-2004

Target Population: 16-18 years

Purpose: the qualification aimed to bridge the 16-19 vocational gap at Level 3, providing a route to higher education and/or employment and was modular. Awards were AVCE double award (worth 2 A levels); AVCE single award (worth 1 A level), or ASVCE (worth one AS level).

Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education (AVCEs) were also known as Vocational A levels or Vocational Certificates in Education (VCEs), replacing the Advanced GNVQ in 2000, and formed the basis for future vocational level 3 development (Greatorex, 2001; UCAS, 2015). Emerging from the Curriculum 2000 review at a time that increasing numbers of young people were expected to access post-16 qualifications. AVCEs were designed to provide an alternative to academic A levels, with marking systems moving from the Distinction-Merit-Pass of Advanced GNVQs to grade A-E mirroring GCE A levels. AVCEs were supposed to bridge the 16-19 gap at Level 3, providing a route to higher education and/or employment and were modular. (Greatorex, 2001; Wellings et al., 2010).

The subjects available almost mirrored those of the GNVQ and the 14-19 Diploma: business, ICT, construction and the built environment, engineering health and social care, leisure and recreation, travel, and tourism. There is limited evidence that these qualifications matched occupational shortages, but schools and colleges were encouraged to focus on local industry. Wellings et al (2010) suggested that the introduction of AVCEs to replace GNVQs formed a significant shift in vocational policy in terms of student motivations for and perceptions of vocational pathways (p389). They suggest that AVCEs were positioned to challenge institutional and individual underachievement from GNVQs that reflected low ambition and qualification rigour. Inclusion in school and college performance tables in a quasi-marketised system would incentivise achievement and raise standards. Assessment encompassed formative elements but was exam based and academic in focus. In doing so, the AVCE was criticised for removing the vocational elements which made the GNVQ distinct from academic A levels. The qualification was short-lived: there were problems with student retention and achievement as Ofsted (2004) stated:

The AVCE is not well designed. It is neither seriously vocational, nor consistently advanced. The aims of the AVCE are not clearly understood by many teachers and students. We observed a good deal of work that was trivial, as well as some that was excessively demanding (p5).

Comparison with GNVQs found a drop in completions. The AVCE only lasted until 2005, half the time of GNVQs, and were replaced in 2005 by Applied A levels (UCAS, 2015).

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) 1986-2010

Key Features: National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are outcomes-based qualifications. NVQs cover a range of qualifications from Level 1 (Pre-GCSE equivalent) to Level 5. NVQs assessed a student's competence in the workplace through assessment of practical skills. Assessment was via a portfolio of evidence, with a final practical assessment with an assessor. Competences linked to the National Occupational Standards of the competences required to perform a job role.

Operation date: 1986 – 2010 [majority] withdrawn 2015

Target Population: For the purposes of this review, NVQs explored are those which are accessible from 14- 19 years Level 1-Level 3

Purpose: NVQs focused on including all young people whatever their starting point, building basic skills. They aimed to produce accountability of colleges linked to funding in the move to a marketised performance system. Outcomes measures aimed to reduce provider monopolies and create qualifications which reflected employer needs. They also importantly allowed existing employees to accredit their skills in a formal qualification.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were launched to address the confused and complex vocational qualification pathways that existed in the mid-1980s (Young, 2011). Introduced originally in 1986 following the demise of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), NVQs were introduced at a time where many jobs required few or no skills, with craft or technician routes for skilled workers. Vocational qualifications had reflected this. But changes to the labour market where skilled school-leaver jobs were disappearing, and apprenticeships reducing required new qualification approaches.

However, large numbers of jobs with few skills meant employers had not needed to consider qualifications and training (Young, 2011). The reality was many occupational sectors had no qualifications and vocational qualifications were focused on higher skill jobs. NVQs covered a range of qualifications from Level 1 (Pre-GCSE equivalent) to Level 5. NVQs assessed a student's competence in the workplace through assessment of practical skills. Twelve percent of the UK workforce in 2010 held an NVQ and importantly allowed existing employees to accredit their skills in a formal qualification (Young, 2011).

Assessment was via a portfolio of evidence with a final practical assessment with an assessor, linked to the National Occupational Standards of the competences required to perform a job role. Students were judged competent or not yet competent'. However, competency is highly subjective. The outcomes focus of assessment, has become an unquestioned pillar of vocational design, despite a lack of consensus on what constitutes value, or whether occupational skills can be represented as neat outcome frameworks (Bathmaker, 2013; Raffe, 2015; Winch, 2021). Parity was claimed between NVQ and academic levels, but NVQs were poorly regarded as comparators to A levels or BTEC Extended Diplomas, lacking the depth and breadth of study through being tightly linked to occupational profiles and practical demonstrable skills. NVQs did not qualify for UCAS points and could not contribute to higher education progression, stratifying access into vocational and academic pathways (Young, 2011; Winch, 2021).

NVQs have been heavily criticised for promoting low skill, low value routes to young people (Raffe, 2015; Ofsted, 2018). NVQs were often in sectors with limited progression to mid and higher-level jobs, for example, retail, hospitality, health and social care. There were exceptions to this profile. In some professions such as accountancy and health, engagement by professional bodies with NVQ pathways created high quality, progressive routes. For example, the Accounting technician NVQ was supported by four out of five of the professional associations of accountants who were involved in the design and assessment of professional competences (Winch, 2021). Young (2011, p259) describes NVQs as 'the most widely known, widely copied, and most heavily criticised model for a vocational qualification framework in the world.' NVQs provide an example of how qualifications introduced to address a particular policy context continue as policy priorities change or labour markets reform.

Applied A levels 2005 to 2017

Key Features: Applied A Levels, or A' Levels in applied subjects aimed to prepare students for employment and/or progression to higher education. Their structure reflects that of traditional, academic A Levels, and both qualifications were known as GCEs

Operation date: 2005-2015 (final candidates 2017)

Target Population: 16 -18 years

Purpose: Applied A Levels aimed to build applied understanding of an employment sector through classroom learning coupled with work experience, case studies or young enterprise activities. Assessment was through a mix of coursework and traditional style examinations.

Applied A levels or A levels in applied subjects aimed to prepare students for employment and/or progression to higher education. They replaced the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education, or Vocational A level, and were in operation from 2005 until withdrawal in 2017 (UCAS, 2015). Their structure reflected that of traditional, academic A levels, and both qualifications were known as GCEs. Applied A level design reflects the National Occupational Standards at Level 3, linked to relevant sectors to equip students with up-to-date knowledge, skills and understanding. Learning was supposed to be active, learner-led, supported and directed by teachers and where relevant professionals and employers from the sector' (Wilkins and Walker, 2011).

Applied A levels ran alongside other programmes including academic A levels but provided students with vocational choices. They were available as single or double awards, equivalent to one or 2 GCE A levels. The numbers taking Applied A levels were low compared to academic A levels, for example, in 2009, 9022 students took the Applied A level against 31,674 who took A level business studies. There were twelve sectors represented, with the most popular subjects ICT, business and health and social care (Wilkins and Walker, 2011, p462). Access to these qualifications is significantly dependent on the institutional capacity to deliver them. Criticised for a lack of rigour from the coursework element, Wilkins and Walker (2011) suggested that academic A levels better-prepared students for university, against young people who want to take a vocational route being better served by Diplomas or National Vocational Qualifications, despite other research criticising these routes.

The policy direction of Applied A levels spoke to the desire for parity of vocational and academic routes which has been a central focus of vocational policy. But Wilkins and Walker's (2011) study suggested that parents, young people, schools, and university admissions tutors did not believe in parity, considering Applied A levels as lower value routes. This was despite that for the majority of students their GCSE scores would have allowed them access to traditional academic A' Levels, but they chose to pursue an applied course. Teachers reported high motivation, although there was agreement that if a student had lower GCSEs they would be encouraged onto the softer applied course. However, longitudinal studies suggest a mixed picture of what qualifications prepare young people for university study and success. Gill's (2018) study of how well different post-16 level 3 qualifications prepare students for university study found that students who took a mix of applied A levels and A levels, against only A levels, performed better with an argument was that coursework, rather than being a soft option, better prepared students for university study. Interestingly, "even when we found a significant difference between different qualifications... students' different personal choices...all lead to relatively similar outcomes once the effect of other factors is taken into consideration (Gill, 2018, p317). The qualification was withdrawn in 2017 as part of the government Level 3 reforms which saw the decoupling of coursework and a return to traditional examinations, together with a focus on what qualifications universities felt prepared students for university study (Long, 2017).

Applied Generals 2014-present

Key Features: Applied Generals are Level 3 qualifications which act as vocational progression to higher education, or standalone against A levels in their own right.

Operation date: 2014 – present, but subject to reform 2016 and again in 2021-22

Target Population: 16-18 years

Purpose: Applied Generals aim to provide "rigorous advanced (Level 3) qualifications that allow 16–19-year-old students to develop transferable knowledge and skills" (DfE, 2016, p3) The target audience was students who wanted an applied, vocational element to their academic study.

Applied General qualifications were introduced in 2014. The reform created two tracks of vocational qualifications at 16-18 years: Applied General and Tech levels. The rationale for reform was that routes to employment and higher education from the 14-19 years Diploma were poor. The target audience are students who want an applied, vocational element to their study, but academic in content which allows students to develop transferrable knowledge and skills (DfE, 2016). Twenty Applied General qualifications meet the DfE criteria for inclusion in performance tables. This aims to signal quality and prestige to employers, schools, and young people. Forty percent of assessment must be by external examination (UCAS, 2015).

Applied Generals are known by their commercial provider names of BTEC (Pearson), City and Guilds, OCR Cambridge Technical; the commercial nature of providers means providers have a significant monetary stake in their qualifications being successful, leading to conflicts of interest about value and quality. BTEC and OCR Cambridge Technical account for approximately 75% of Applied General Qualifications (UCAS, 2015; Kelly, 2017). Research shows that Level 3 BTEC qualifications form an increasingly important aspect of entry to higher education particularly for disadvantaged groups including Black and ethnic minority students (Kelly, 2017). Level 3 vocational qualifications are an increasingly important route to higher education: 'a quarter of Asian students (24%), just over one in five (22%) of mixed students, and 37% of black students were accepted to university after completing only BTEC qualifications at Level 3' (House of Commons Library, 2021).

Applied Generals aim to be a progression to higher education, or standalone qualification against A levels. But in common with previous curriculum reforms that sought to increase quality and provide parity of esteem via vocational qualifications, their inception and delivery have been subject to considerable criticism, and conflicting policy viewpoints in an increasingly academically polarised English education system. The review has formed part of ongoing questioning of the value of some Level 3 qualifications (DfE, 2021). The introduction of T-levels seems to lead to defunding those qualifications that are perceived to duplicate T-levels.

Conclusion

Examination of the reform rationales for vocational qualification 14-19 years presents repeating narratives over time. The present Applied General BTEC debate of three qualification's perceived value against T-Levels and as a progression to higher education are repeating narratives from the vocational reforms of the past (Raffe, 2015). In learning from the past there is limited consensus on what constitutes vocational value. VET system reforms are often reduced to VET qualification reforms and ignore other aspects of the VET systems, such as, institutional set up, funding. Qualifications do not operate in vacuum. The centrality of sector job quality appears a missing aspect of vocational reform.

Longitudinal Economic Outcome data is allowing exploration of past 'failures' of vocational qualification reform, producing a more mixed picture of long-term economic outcomes. There are broad trends that the different iterations of vocational qualifications at Level 3 over time provide very similar outcomes to those of A levels in specific sectors: engineering, manufacturing; digital; business and accounting. All of these sectors offer decent jobs and good progression routes to well paid jobs for young people either via vocational or higher education pathways (Pember, 2019). The success at degree level appears little different, with some evidence suggesting that, for example, applied A levels produced better outcomes for young people (Gill, 2018). These are sectors with strong professional networks and associations which protect young workers' interests from providers and employers (Winch, 2021). Less successful are those industries, often service sector which emerged from the heavy industry retrenchment of the 1980s, whose quality work pathways are fewer, and who have less well defined and established professional routes from vocational pathways (Pember, 2019).

Learning from the past suggests that a blanket sector wide reform of vocational qualifications serves little purpose. Vocational parity will only come from occupational parity of outcomes, including higher education access to higher level vocational qualifications as well as three-year academic degrees. More policy resources should be allocated to synthesising prior evaluations and building in on-going qualitative and longitudinal quantitative data collection, identifying what aspects are working well and taking those aspects forward.

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