
14-19 qualifications strategy research

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Executive Summary

1. In September 2009, York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to undertake research to inform the 14-19 Qualifications Strategy, which set out four main pathways of qualifications: the general route - GCSE and A-Levels; Apprenticeships; Diplomas; Foundation Learning.
2. The focus of the study was the operation, role, and value of Vocational Qualifications (VQs) and Vocationally-Related Qualifications (VRQs) that are currently delivered as standalone qualifications and outside the four pathways.
3. The research activity comprised in-depth consultations with 14-19 partnerships in 10 local authorities (LAs), 50 providers (a mix of schools, colleges and work-based learning providers), 10 HEIs and discussions with learners on VQ/VRQ routes. While the research is essentially qualitative in nature and based on relatively small sample sizes, the consistency of message from the consultees across localities supports confidence in the robustness of key findings.
4. Throughout the report, for simplicity, we refer to VQs and VRQs as a single generic qualification. The distinction between the two is not always clear cut, nor is it directly relevant to our analysis. In terms of scale, the most prevalent VQ/VRQ, observed by some way, was the BTEC Diploma offered by EdExcel. Such is the popularity of this qualification, the majority of consultees would refer to a generic 'BTEC' rather than a generic VQ/VRQ.

Context: The 14-19 Qualifications Strategy

5. In 2005, the government published the White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills*, which set out a 10-year programme of reforms to transform the education system for 14-19 year olds in England. This included proposals to reform the qualifications offer, such as introducing Diplomas, a new suite of qualifications, and the expansion of Apprenticeships. Phased implementation of the Diplomas began during the academic year 2008/09.
6. In March 2008, a consultation document on 14-19 qualifications, entitled *Promoting Achievement, Valuing Success: A Strategy for 14-19 Qualifications*, was published. This emphasised the complexity of the existing qualification offer and set out proposals to reform 14-19 qualifications in England, with the intention of achieving a more rational and streamlined qualifications system by 2013.

The Current 14-19 Qualifications Landscape

7. The existing 14-19 offer in each of the partnership areas consulted as part of this research comprises a range of general, applied, vocational and practical learning options.
8. The general route (GCSEs/A-Level) is well established at 14-16 and 16-19. Provision in schools, in particular, is dominated by the general route, although a growing proportion of learners at 14-16 and 16-19 are now undertaking a general qualification in addition to a qualification from another route (e.g. Diploma) and outside of the four routes (e.g. a standalone VQ/VRQ).
9. Foundation Learning accounts for a smaller proportion of learners than the general route but, nevertheless, entry level and Level 1 provision is also well established. The provision may not yet be under the banner of Foundation Learning, but plans are being developed to move towards the Foundation Learning framework.
10. The proportion of learners in the Diploma route (at 14-16 and 16-19) is small, relative to the other routes and the provision currently outside the four main learning pathways. This reflects the phased roll-out of Diplomas, and lower than anticipated Diploma take-up. Apprenticeship provision accounts for a greater proportion of learners than Diplomas, but is still only a small proportion of learners and, to an extent, reflects a relative shortage of employers to support Apprenticeship places.
11. FE College provision is heavily dominated by standalone VQs/VRQs. In contrast, in work-based learning providers, most provision is Apprenticeships or Foundation Learning / Entry to Employment.
12. A range of factors have been noted as influencing the shape and balance of the 14-19 offer within providers, with the relative influence of these factors varying across partnerships and individual providers.
13. Of critical importance to partnerships and providers is the ability to offer a range of curriculum options which maximise learners' chances of qualification achievement. It is evident that particular qualifications/ qualification routes are perceived to generate higher levels of learner success rates.
14. Ofsted Inspections or Area Inspections have prompted a widening of the curriculum for some providers/partnerships, in particular the expansion of vocational options. In other areas, the expansion of the curriculum dates back to the introduction of programmes such as Increased Flexibility (2002) and Young Apprenticeships (2004).

15. In a number of cases, the offer is also determined, at least in part, by the offer of competing providers in the local area. At 16-19 this relates more specifically to the nature of the organisation (provider type and ethos).
16. Partnerships and providers are determined to offer a curriculum that fully engages all potential learners and meets their needs. This includes learners who are at risk of disengaging from school during key stage 4, or who may otherwise be NEET 16-19. Parental demand can also be a key influence (particularly on school and sixth form college provision).

Delivery of Standalone VQs/VRQs

17. Within the 14-19 phase, VQs/VRQs are available from entry level through to Level 4 and across a wide range of subjects and sectors.
18. At 14-16, there has been rapid growth of VQ/VRQ delivery in schools and through local collaborative arrangements. The majority of areas consulted reported increased VQ/VRQ take-up at 14-16. Typically (although not exclusively), VRQs (e.g. business, travel and tourism) are delivered in school. VQs (e.g. NVQs in construction, hair and beauty) are more likely to be delivered through collaborative arrangements with FE colleges, work-based learning providers or at centres with specialist facilities.
19. Delivery of standalone VQs/VRQs has not expanded as significantly at 16-19, but has still increased in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges over recent years, and looks set to continue to increase. VQs/VRQs account for a large proportion of provision in FE Colleges for 16-19 year olds. There is very little, if any, standalone VQ/VRQ delivery among work-based learning providers.
20. 16-19 VQ/VRQ provision typically includes more niche provision (e.g. aviation; gambling operations) and provision at Level 3 than at 14-16. There are also some VQs that have a specific occupational focus, and may be a requirement for entry to employment in particular sectors.

Profile of VQ/VRQ Learners

21. In order to better understand how VQs/VRQs are accommodated in an individual's programme of learning, we have segmented VQ/VRQ learners into the following broad categories.

14-16

- VQ/VRQ is a core part of the school curriculum for all learners
- VQ/VRQ provision is an alternative to GCSEs:
 - one or more VQs/VRQs are substituted for GCSE options
 - the VQ/VRQ forms part of a specific 'programme'
 - the VQ/VRQ has substituted a particular GCSE for a set group of learners only
- VQ/VRQ acts as curriculum enrichment

16-19

- a Level 1 or 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into employment in this area
- a Level 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into further education
- a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they wish to go on to pursue employment in this area
- a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to study it further in Higher Education
- a Level 3 VRQ acts as curriculum enrichment.

VQ/VRQ Learner Performance and Progression

22. Data from 14-19 partnerships indicates high levels of achievement on VQ/VRQ provision, which in turn has contributed to an increase in the proportion of learners achieving 5 A*-C GCSE or equivalent at key stage 4 over recent years.
23. However, while overall performance has increased, Maths and English achievement has not increased at the same rate. Specifically, some learners who achieve their VQs/VRQs (and possibly other GCSEs) are not achieving Maths and English at Level 2. Many schools have made reference to the use of ALAN¹ tests to provide learners with a qualification in Maths and English. On progression to further education or learning at 16-19, some learners may still need to re-sit GCSEs in Maths and English, particularly if they wish to go on to Higher Education (where ALAN tests are not valid for entry).
24. It has been suggested by partnerships and providers that participation rates 16-19 have increased (potentially as much as 10%) as a result of the VQ/VRQ provision available for 14-16 learners. Schools have cited examples of learners who they would not previously have expected to stay in learning (e.g. highly disaffected young people), progressing into further education at 16-19. This suggests VQs/VRQs may be particularly valuable for making progress towards *Raising the Participation Age*.
25. The progression value of the VQs/VRQs route can be significantly diminished if learners do not achieve Maths and English at Level 2. Concerns have also been raised about the currency of some qualification achieved at 14-16, for progression 16-19.
26. One of the distinguishing features of VQs/VRQs, identified by providers and learners, is their link to employment. However, literacy and numeracy requirements are commonly identified

¹ ALAN tests are Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy tests offered by the Awarding Organisation, Edexcel

as skills gaps across many sectors, which suggests that while work-focused qualifications are valuable, greater emphasis should perhaps be placed on literacy and numeracy.

The Vocational Route to Higher Education

27. Vocational qualifications provide non-traditional learners with a very effective transmission mechanism to enter Higher Education. In theory, they have access to all parts of Higher Education but, in practice, are concentrated in FE Colleges and post-1992 universities. This, in the main, is determined by the vocational offer and project-based approaches available in these institutions.
28. Vocational learners are increasingly entering pre-1992 universities (including Russell Group Universities), although the numbers are relatively small. They do, however, require Distinctions and may find the support structure less intensive than they are used to. Their qualification also needs to be from a subject 'relevant' to their degree course. Relevance is defined differently by different universities. It is important that vocational learners receive guidance at the point of selecting their qualification and are aware of its currency in the university marketplace.
29. According to admissions advisors, the main disadvantage that potential vocational entrants to Higher Education have, relative to A-Level candidates, is choice. The vocational qualification is specialised and specific to a particular subject. Its currency is not as transferable as A-Levels in the university market; particularly in Russell Group universities. This potentially poses a problem for learners deciding to switch their area of study.

Implementing the 14-19 Qualifications Strategy

30. Discussions with providers and 14-19 partnerships reveal that the value of each of the four pathways are recognised and individuals are able to observe benefits to learners who pursue those particular qualifications.
31. Any rationalisation of VQs/VRQs will inevitably increase the volumes in other pathways. For 14-16, it is likely to impact most on increased Level 1 and Level 2 Diploma participation, although many schools insist that they are more likely to fall back to GCSEs.
32. At 16-19, FE colleges are likely to experience an expansion of Level 2 and 3 Diplomas, plus Apprenticeships. School sixth forms and sixth form colleges would be likely to revisit applied A-levels (for their remaining shelf life). Work-based learning providers will seek to expand Apprenticeships, although they emphasise existing employer constraints. Of all providers, they are the least concerned about the implications of a rationalised VQs/VRQs offer.

Gaps in the Current 14-19 Offer

33. Despite these options for substitution, an overarching issue highlighted by the providers and partnerships consulted is that there are four key gaps in the offer:

- a 'practical and vocational' route for learners at key stage 4, who are borderline Level 1 / Level 2 or who have a spiky learning profile i.e. are learning at multiple levels:
 - a 'practical and vocational' route for learners at 16-19 who have not achieved sufficient at key stage 4 to pursue A-levels or pursue a Level 2 Apprenticeship (e.g. because of the key skills requirement).
 - a 'practical and vocational' route at Level 2 or 3 for learners at 16-19 who are not yet ready for an Apprenticeship (e.g. lack personal and social skills required for work placement), or are unable to secure an employer placement due to limited availability or because they are too young to work in the sector;
- learners on qualifications at 16-19 that incorporate required industry training but where there are restrictions on learners gaining employment in particular sectors, until they reach the age of 18, or until they have a particular qualification.

Barriers to Implementation

- 34. While the needs of some learners could be met by the four pathways, partnerships and providers have some key concerns about the 14-19 Qualifications Strategy and a number of the implications associated with rationalising VQ/VRQ delivery.
- 35. **Implications for learner performance** - If VQs/VRQs were to be withdrawn or be significantly curtailed, there is potential it would impact on provider performance levels, particularly at key stage 4. At the same time, however, issues have been raised about the equivalence value of some VQs/VRQs and whether the VQs/VRQs provide learners with qualifications of real value. Nevertheless, taken at face value, rationalisation of the VQs/VRQs offer is expected to negatively impact on key stage 4 performance levels.
- 36. **Diploma demand** - Diplomas, on the whole, are not regarded as a viable alternative to VQs/VRQs. There are concerns that the value of the Diploma could be affected if learners unsure to this learning style pursue the option. The actual and perceived appropriateness of Diplomas to a wide range of learners is ultimately affecting Diploma take-up. This does not look set to change, unless views regarding the relevance are challenged across partnerships and providers, and better information provided to learners and their parents. It is evident that Diploma take-up is currently constrained by the popularity of alternative qualifications.
- 37. **Loss of a valuable learning style** - There is a common view that a valuable learning style would be lost by rationalising/withdrawing VQs/VRQs, due to some of the particular features of VQs/VRQs (e.g. style of learning, learning environment, incremental progression through levels, industry value).
- 38. **Perceived value of VQs/VRQs relative to other qualifications** - The four qualification pathways of the 14-19 Qualification Strategy are not regarded as substitutes for VQs/VRQs for many learners.

39. **Quality of IAG** – Partnerships feel that learners are not always receiving full and impartial IAG. They are not always being provided with sufficient information, advice and guidance about the full range of options available to them. This affects their views of particular pathways, and subsequent decisions they make.
40. **Learner engagement and NEET prevention** – There is a strongly held view that limiting the range of VQs/VRQs could damage the ability of providers to engage with learners who are not necessarily low ability, but are at risk of disengaging. They are also regarded as a way of engaging those learners who may be borderline Level 2 achievement at key stage 4. At 16-19, standalone NVQs and VRQs are pursued by learners that are not able to pursue a Diploma or get an Apprenticeship. There is concern among providers about what real alternatives there are for these learners.
41. **Implications for learner choice** - VQs/VRQs have been introduced to expand the options available to learners at key stage 4 and in 16-19 provision. While some learners can be accommodated in the four pathways, this will limit choice for learners. There may also be parental opposition.
42. **Delivery challenges** – Across all provider types in the 14-19 phase, a range of delivery challenges affect decisions about changes to the existing curriculum and the rationale (on the basis of funding or practicalities) for the existing curriculum. Some of these challenges have been presented as key drivers for VQ/VRQ delivery and reasons for not delivering other types of provision in the four pathways.
43. Our analysis shows that while the four pathways in theory are capable of meeting the needs of the majority of learners, there is, in the main, strong opposition to a significant rationalisation of standalone VQs/VRQs. It is anticipated that this would have an adverse affect on both learner performance and learner choice. There is, however, recognition that the existence of standalone VQs/VRQs will potentially crowd out take-up of the four routes. Without market intervention, it is expected that the relative VQ/VRQ share of the market will continue to grow.

Recommendations

44. The recommendations below reflect consultees' suggestions about how, and where, VQ/VRQ rationalisation might take place, and actions which will be required to support implementation of the 14-19 Qualifications Strategy.
45. **Refine the Structure of the Diploma:** Many providers recognised the Diploma as a valuable qualification, but felt that its current structure did not meet the needs of a significant cohort of learners whose needs are currently met by other VQs/VRQs. Refinements suggested included:
- making it 'more like a BTEC' by taking some of the practical elements of the VRQ and the 'bite-size' components that learners particularly value;
 - introducing a more applied craft/vocational dimension;
 - making it more flexible such that there are potentially different routes through the Diploma.

46. **Address Misconceptions about the Diploma and Ensure Effective Diploma Delivery:** Significant resistance to the Diploma exists among providers, and while some of this is based on experiences of exploring the potential to deliver the Diploma, there is a general underpinning issue about the extent to which there is a cultural willingness and commitment to the Diploma. Consideration should also be given to including VQs/VRQs as the Additional Specialist Learning (ASL element) (rather than GCSEs or A-levels) to make it more attractive to learners and provide them with a more varied Diploma experience. Attention should also be placed on ensuring effective delivery of functional skills.
47. **Address Quality Standards:** Concerns have been expressed by partnerships and FE colleges about the quality of delivery of VQs/VRQs, especially in schools. By enforcing existing standards, or introducing more rigorous criteria, a self-selecting rationalisation could be achieved. This would have the double advantage of removing poor quality provision. In addressing quality, this review may also include looking at how functional skills can be integrated into VQs/VRQs.
48. **Remove 'Double' VQs/VRQs:** It has been proposed that schools (in particular) should not be allowed to offer double VQs/VRQs, i.e. those that are equivalent to 4 or more GCSEs, since their currency 16-19 has been questioned. Linked to this is the suggestion that only one vocational qualification should be counted towards the target for achievement of the Level 2 threshold (five GCSEs at A*-C).
49. **Head-to-Head Substitution:** The head-to-head substitution proposition is that any provider offering a Diploma should not offer a VQ/VRQ in the same subject. There is evidence that this is happening in some areas, although not wide-spread. Amongst some providers, there is an expectation that this ruling will be introduced.
50. **Address Exploiting Institutions:** There is a general consensus among partnerships that some providers (mainly schools) are exploiting VQs/VRQs to maximise performance. One strategy would be to identify and target those exploiting institutions rather than a blanket withdrawal of particular qualifications.
51. **Retain Some VQs/VRQs Regardless:** Consultees were reluctant to identify particular VQs/VRQs that could be withdrawn. They were, however, keen to emphasise those that 'must be saved'. These include subject areas not covered by Diplomas, the 'craft' VQs (which provide specific skills required for industry) and, what might be regarded as, niche subjects.
52. **Improve Consistency in Impartial IAG:** One of the key themes to emerge from our consultations with teachers, college staff and young people is the paucity of impartial advice and guidance available to young people. Young people choose subject areas, but are largely unaware of the merits of different qualification options available. Young people need access to impartial advice to make better choices and those informing their decisions also need better understanding of the qualification routes.

53. **Improving Outcomes at Key Stage 4:** Some of the arguments for standalone VQs/VRQs at key stage 4 and 16-19 are linked to learner achievements and outcomes at key stage 4. By placing different emphasis on outcomes achieved by learners at key stage 4, some of these issues could be minimised or eliminated for young people. This includes placing less emphasis on overall achievement at key stage 4, and focusing on learners achieving Maths and English at key stage 4 and developing personal and social skills.
54. **Engender a Culture of Challenge:** Regardless of the qualification routes available, providers need to ensure that this level of challenge always exists and that learners are guided onto provision that meets their learning needs.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.