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The impact of KS4 vocational courses on disengaged young people's engagement with education 15-18

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This study investigated the hypothesis that offering vocational options in Year 10 can help improve levels of educational engagement and subsequent outcomes among young people disengaged from education. However we found little evidence to support this claim. Disengaged young people who reported following vocational courses did not differ from those who chose not to take these courses in terms of their subsequent engagement or destinations post Year 11. There was evidence that those taking vocational courses were more likely to achieve Key Stage 4 Level 1 although not Level 2. We also investigated an additional hypothesis that young people with borderline attainment (achieving 1 – 4 GCSEs grades A*-C) who follow vocational as opposed to academic pathways post Year 11 may have better outcomes. We found no evidence to support this case.

Data for the research comes from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), a comprehensive study following the lives of a cohort of young people through the last three years of their compulsory schooling and into their subsequent destinations. Definitions of disengagement included in the study comprise underachievement at Key Stage 3, having poor attitudes to school, aspiring to leave education and training at the age of 16, and playing truant.

The vocational course subjects relating to Year 10 options that were asked about in the LSYPE questionnaire reflect the titles of vocational GCSEs, and also match well with the titles of GNVQs that were offered at the time (GNVQs ceased to be offered in 2007). The LSYPE cohort analysed in this study completed Key Stage 4 in 2006, when there were still relatively few Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs) taken in schools at Key Stage 4. The results presented in this study will therefore largely relate to young people taking vocational GCSEs or GNVQs rather than VRQs.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first stage was designed to provide timely evidence to feed into the Wolf review of vocational education and provides a first look at the relationship between vocational courses, young people's subsequent engagement and other educational outcomes. Here we compared

levels of engagement, attainment and destinations between disengaged young people who reported taking at least one vocational course in Year 10 and those who did not, examining differences in Years 9, 10, 11.

These initial findings suggest that disengaged young people who took at least one vocational course in Year 10 were more likely to show signs of disengagement over time compared to those who took no vocational courses. However, those who took vocational courses were also more likely to achieve basic qualifications at Key Stage 4, although they were less likely to achieve higher levels of qualifications. At age 17, they were less likely to be in full time education, part time education, or on a training course or apprenticeship, and more likely to be in full time work or doing something else. But by age 18, these differences in destinations had all but disappeared. Overall, where differences did exist between disengaged young people who did and did not take vocational qualifications, these tended to be very small and most were not statistically significant.

In the second stage we re-examined this relationship in more detail using more sophisticated statistical methods that enabled us to examine change in engagement at the individual level and take into account other factors that might otherwise explain any differences found. We found no evidence to suggest that taking vocational courses in Year 10 helps to re-engage young people who are already disengaged from education. Neither did we find any evidence to suggest studying vocational courses makes matters worse. The finding that young people who take at least one vocational course in Year 10 are more likely to achieve Key Stage 4 Level 1 remained, however there was no relationship between subject choice and Level 2 achievement, or young people's destinations at age 17 and 18.

In a final step we explored an additional hypothesis that students with borderline attainment (those achieving 1 – 4 GCSEs A*-C) who follow vocational instead of academic pathways post Year 11 may have better outcomes. However our analysis, which examined the relationship between course choice and the probability of experiencing NEET by age 18, found no support for this hypothesis.

It is important to note that we cannot entirely reject the idea that vocational courses may help foster improvement for some young people under some circumstances on the basis of our research alone. Firstly, the data comes from a cohort of young people who began their Key Stage 4 studies in 2004/05, early on in the expansion of the 14-19 curriculum and prior to the very broad rollout of new vocational type qualifications. It is therefore possible that today's experience of vocational education, including its methods of teaching, assessment and curriculum are different to those we were able to examine in this research. Second, it is also possible that vocational study may be of more benefit to young people who are less disengaged than those that we studied here. Nevertheless, for the type of vocational courses and the particular kinds of disengaged young people that were examined, there appears to have been little impact, at least in the relatively short term.

Finally, whilst it is not central to this study, our research also confirmed previous findings, that disengaged young people were more likely to be male, from a lower social position and have poorly qualified mothers. Ethnic groups tend to differ in their disengagement. White young people were more likely to have poor attitudes to school and to want to leave education and training at 16, whilst young people from minority ethnic backgrounds (especially Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Mixed race young people) were more likely to underachieve and/or play truant. Disengaged young people were also more likely to opt for vocational courses than other young people. The reasons young people gave for selecting vocational courses in Year 10 were both strategic and self rewarding, i.e. the courses were needed for future study or employment, because the young person thought they would do well in the subject, or simply because they thought they would enjoy them.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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