

Progressing to higher education:

vocational qualifications and admissions

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**Aimhigher London South
Kingston University
North East Aimhigher
West Midlands Aimhigher**

**Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance
London South Bank University
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Aimhigher Yorkshire and Humber**

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Kingston University
London South Bank University
Manchester Metropolitan University
Sheffield Hallam University
University of Sussex**

**University of Brighton
University of Hull
University of Leeds
University of Manchester
University of Salford
Staffordshire University
University of Teesside**

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Summary

This research study explored higher education (HE) admissions-related issues affecting the entry of vocationally qualified learners to degree study. A key objective was to provide a better evidence base on which to build future policies and improve current practice. It is an area which is of considerable interest at present as the development of new vocational qualifications and more effective vocational pathways for young people are high on the political agenda.

The research was undertaken primarily through discussions with staff at 14 HE institutions (HEIs) in England

The research was undertaken primarily through discussions with staff at 14 HE institutions (HEIs) in England, covering a wide range of courses. It also included analysis of UCAS data and a review of relevant research literature. The project was funded by a consortium of organisations including five Aimhigher areas and regions, a local Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) and two individual HEIs; project support and management was given by Action on Access.

Its main focus was on young people with Level 3 (L3) vocational qualifications (mainly BTEC nationals and AVCEs) and their progression to full-time degree study. These are widely quoted equivalent qualifications to GCE A-levels, and taken at schools and colleges. The research concentrated on one aspect of the student life-cycle, admissions, but inevitably it went much broader to include pre-HE entry activities and those in the first year of HE.

Key findings

There is a very uneven distribution of L3 vocationally qualified entrants to full-time degree courses across the HE sector, and overall they still represent a relatively small proportion of the overall intake, at a little over 18 per cent. This ranges widely between institutions, from over 30 per cent at some, mainly HE/FE colleges, to as little as a few per cent at others, mainly the Russell Group of universities where high GCE A-level grades dominate stated entry requirements. There is much higher representation in subject areas like maths and computing, business and administration studies and creative arts and design than in others, in particular, in some of the humanities and in medicine/dentistry.

The research study found this pattern to be a result of a number of factors:

- ▷ a continuing lack of parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways, leading to lingering prejudice against and negative valuing of vocational qualifications
- ▷ lack of awareness and knowledge in many HEIs about pre-HE vocational qualifications and their curricula
- ▷ frequently, a lack of clarity in the presentation of course entry requirements and difficulties for vocational applicants in working out how vocational qualifications will be treated in the admissions process and what grades are required
- ▷ perceptions by HE staff about subject relevance and 'curriculum fit' of some vocational qualifications
- ▷ practices of benchmarking against GCE A-levels to set course entry requirements
- ▷ misconceptions by some HE staff about the commitment of young people with different entry qualifications and their ability to succeed in the HE learning environment
- ▷ resource constraints within HEIs, leading to less time available to explore new ways of doing things or leading to shortcuts in selection practices

- ▷ concerns at a few selecting institutions about the possible impact of accepting vocational applicants on their academic standing and institutional image
- ▷ the quality of advice, information and guidance about HE given to young people on vocational routes, and also poor links between some HEIs and FE colleges
- ▷ personal barriers of low aspirations, lack of confidence, unfamiliarity with HE and admissions processes, and misconceptions about HE study and HEIs among vocational learners.

These were the key issues arising from our interviews in HEIs, and some of these issues have been highlighted also in previous research. Many of them act together to put off those on vocational pathways from applying to HE or applying to particular universities or courses. They can also lead to unintentional but unfair treatment at selection stage, and so re-reinforce negative perceptions about vocational qualifications as acceptable HE entry requirements.

There was little evidence found of overt discrimination against vocational qualifications in HEIs' admissions processes

There was little evidence found of overt discrimination against vocational qualifications in HEIs' admissions processes. Rather, it was more likely to be a number of indirect effects of certain aspects of recruitment and admissions which could work against those holding vocational qualifications in some places, coupled with widespread, deep-seated attitudes which give lower value to vocational than traditional academic (ie GCE A-level) qualifications. These negative attitudes are found both within HE and at earlier education stages.

The issues identified in the research were found to have a greater impact at some institutions and on some courses than others. In particular, for some institutions, mainly those which already had developed a more diverse student body, the key issues were less at the offer-making stage and more to do with attracting greater numbers of better qualified young people on vocational pathways to HE to apply to them.

As well as identifying problems, the research also identified some strategies which institutions were developing and examples of good practice in admissions of vocationally qualified young people. These included examples of:

- ▷ activities to support recruitment and encourage more vocationally qualified applicants, through Outreach work in schools and colleges, design of prospectus, web and recruitment materials, publicity, etc
- ▷ changing attitudes internally and improving awareness/knowledge of pre-HE qualifications, through staff development and training, and also through using results of monitoring and research on progress of students with different entry qualifications
- ▷ the development of teaching, learning and assessment practices aimed at maximising student success irrespective of background and entry qualifications.

These kinds of actions were evident at all our participating institutions but more likely at those which were recruiting institutions or recruiting courses within more selective institutions (ie 'recruiting' because they had low numbers of applicants to places).

Recommendations

Our main conclusions and recommendations from the research findings include a number of key messages to Government, HEIs, Aimhigher regions, LLNs, UCAS, LSDA, QCA and others. They suggest actions both at national, local and institutional levels. Some of the good practice we found was where admissions staff or other individuals had put into place

practices to counterbalance some of the structural issues identified above. Building on some of these, we recommend:

- ▷ the development of more positive attitudes among HE staff (and also more widely) so as to develop a consensus about parity of esteem of L3 vocational and academic qualifications. This is a key requirement for significant improvements to take place.
- ▷ the improvement of knowledge about vocational qualifications within HEIs, among all types of staff. This will require different approaches in staff development and information provision within institutions. A national information resource to provide consistent information and advice is suggested. More links and exchange of information by recruiting HEIs/courses with local colleges and schools on relevant L3 vocational courses would be useful also.
- ▷ The use of the UCAS tariff points system, while having had a positive influence on acceptance of vocational qualifications and making equivalences, needs to be used in a less simplistic way by HE staff to set course requirements. Other information on attainment and the performance of vocationally qualified learners on particular HE courses could be used more with the tariff to compute grade equivalences. The effect of the trend of rising GCE A-level grades on the tariff equivalences needs to be examined, as do other changes from year to year in pre-HE qualifications content, assessment and grade distributions.
- ▷ More consideration needs to be given to how young people with only 12 units at L3 (e.g. AVCE double) should be treated in admissions. If there are restrictions for some in this category to study more units to enable them to gain access to degree courses of their choice, then these need to be addressed by colleges and HEIs. More research is needed on the incidence of such restrictions.
- ▷ Research is needed on effective ways of describing and communicating information on vocational qualification attainment requirements in marketing materials (prospectus, websites).
- ▷ More resources need to be put to course-related outreach activity by faculty/department/course level staff to help increase applications from vocationally qualified people.
- ▷ Improvements need to be made in both UCAS and HESA data provision on entry qualifications, especially differentiating between different qualifications so that a more accurate picture can be seen and monitoring of admissions and progression used more effectively. This has been recommended by previous research studies also, but, as yet, little evidence of any improvement is visible.
- ▷ Exchanging views and practices on delivering courses where young people are recruited with different types of qualifications and pre-HE educational experiences should be encouraged. This might include examples of the use of different teaching and assessment methods, 'levelling up' modules, personal tutor support and specialist subject support.
- ▷ More research work needs to be focused at earlier educational stages also, on course choices and attitudes pre-16, and on how learners on vocational pathways make decisions about HE, course choices and institutions to apply to, and their views on HEI marketing materials. Additionally, there need to be improvements in the available statistics on trends in the supply of L3 vocationally qualified groups.

The effect of the trend of rising GCE A-level grades on the tariff equivalences needs to be examined



It was a small scale study, one of the first to look specifically at this area of widening participation, and inevitably it has only touched on some of the issues. It is hoped that it will be used as a basis for helping to provide more opportunities for more such people to benefit from higher education in the way that the overwhelming majority of equivalent A-level students do at present.



1. Introduction

The Government's commitment to widening participation in higher education (HE) and the advent of a mass HE system has encouraged the development of more and different pathways to HE study. HE entrants are now coming from a wider range of backgrounds than in the past, including more with qualifications other than GCE A-Levels, many of which, for example, BTEC awards, were not designed specifically for progression to degree study. More vocationally qualified young people are being encouraged to progress to HE (through initiatives such as Aimhigher and the creation of local Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)), but they are still comparatively small in number and spread unevenly across the HE sector (as recognised by Schwartz in the recent review on fair admissions to HE¹). While over 90 per cent of young people achieving at least 2 GCE A-Levels progress to HE by the age of 21, the corresponding figure for vocationally qualified learners (with an equivalent Level 3 vocational qualification such as BTEC National award or Advanced Certificate in Vocational Education (AVCE) also known as VCE A-level is estimated at only around half that². GCE A-Levels remain the key entry requirement for a large number of degree courses, especially where demand is very high and entry is very competitive (those that require high grades).

Various research studies have made suggestions about what might lie behind the barriers which vocational learners face in progressing to higher education. These include, for example, vocational learners' lack of aspirations to progress to HE and unfamiliarity with what to expect in HE, a lack of clarity about vocational pathways to follow and the way they are generally held in lower esteem than the academic route to HE, and problems in making equivalences between different qualifications for HE admission purposes. An earlier study on fair admissions³ identified some specific issues in the way applicants with vocational Level 3 qualifications were treated in the admissions process. In some cases these applicants rarely received an offer while in others their offer depended on them getting higher grades (if doing an AVCE).

To investigate this aspect of HE admission, and more broadly to explore in more depth with HEIs what lies behind the different pattern of degree entry of vocational and academic learners, a project was initiated during 2005 which obtained a broad spectrum of support from a number of Aimhigher regions, individual universities, Lifelong Learning Networks, Action on Access, and other organisations. It was envisaged in two stages – the first would be a research phase to explore admissions-related issues and the second a development phase to test out and take forward the research recommendations. This report presents the research findings of the first stage of the project. It is hoped that the second stage will be taken forward by those acting on the report recommendations.

¹ Schwartz S (2004) *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, DfES, London

² As reported by Action on Access (2005) *Progression to higher education from vocational, work-based and work-related learning. Making a Difference: The Impact of Aimhigher*

³ *Fair enough? Wider access to university by identifying potential to succeed* (2003) Universities UK



2. The study

2.1 Aim and objectives

The overall aim of the research was to investigate admissions-related issues affecting the entry of vocationally qualified learners to degree study, and so provide a better evidence base on which to build future policies and improve current practice. While there is increasing interest from Government, individual institutions and a range of other bodies in creating better opportunities for progression to HE by people with non-traditional HE entry qualifications, not much is known about them - ‘...there is an uneven awareness and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways to HE’ (as Schwartz commented in 2004⁴). Comparatively little specific attention has focused on this aspect of widening HE participation, more being addressed to the continuing wide social class gap in HE participation rates, though the vocationally qualified are recognised as being part of under-represented HE entry groups.

The main objectives of the research were thus to:

- ▷ explore statistically the pattern of intake to degree study of those with Level 3 vocational qualifications
- ▷ review existing research evidence on admissions barriers to HE progression of those with vocational qualifications at entry
- ▷ identify the inhibiting and enabling factors affecting admissions of those with Level 3 vocational qualifications, to include course and institutional factors
- ▷ provide recommendations on activities or interventions which would address admissions barriers, and collect information that would help facilitate change in participating HEIs and more widely
- ▷ report on findings in a national report and disseminate through conferences and workshops.

2.2 Funding and management

The project was funded by a consortium of organisations :

Aimhigher London South

Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance

Kingston University

London South Bank University

North East Aimhigher

Sussex Aimhigher

West Midlands Aimhigher

Yorkshire and Humberside Aimhigher

⁴ Schwartz Review, op cit, see footnote 1

and managed by Action on Access. The research was undertaken between May and December 2005 by a team of five researchers.

2.3 Scope and focus

The main focus of the research was on young applicants to full-time first degree courses who held Level 3 vocationally related qualifications

The main focus of the research was on young applicants to full-time first degree courses who held Level 3 vocationally related qualifications, taken predominantly at school or college, rather than work-based qualifications (such as taken in advanced apprenticeships). Entry to Foundation Degrees or other Level 4 courses (such as HNDs, Higher Diplomas) or part-time first degrees was not part of the research as these courses are much more likely to attract vocational learners.

The focus was further limited to qualifications with widely quoted equivalences to GCE A-Levels ie AVCEs or VCE A-levels, advanced GNVQs (which were replaced a few years ago by the AVCEs) and BTEC Nationals. AVCEs/VCE A-levels have changed to A-levels in applied subjects since September 2005. Applicants with this qualification will be first applying to university in 2006/07 so the old names have been used in interviews and throughout this report.

These boundaries were agreed for pragmatic reasons: there is a large number of other vocationally related qualifications, and although some have equivalences at Level 3 in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), admissions staff often have difficulty making equivalences with them for admissions purposes, even although more now appear on the UCAS Tariff Points System. Work-based qualifications were not included as their numbers are very small; and also the characteristics of work-based learners and their learning environment were thought likely to result in a different range of issues⁵.

Although this focus might seem narrow, many of the issues raised in the research and the research conclusions are much wider.

2.4 Methodology

The research comprised two main stages:

1. a desk-based stage comprising analysis of UCAS statistics and review of existing research evidence to investigate the evidence on participation in HE by vocational learners and
2. a fieldwork stage, comprising interviews with staff in 14 HEIs, to investigate admissions policies and practices relating to vocational learners, identify admissions barriers and explore examples of good practice.

In the desk-based stage, statistical analysis work focused on a specially requested set of UCAS data on the entry qualifications in the scope of the project. This was produced at a national level and a similar set of data was produced for each of the participating HEIs about their own applicants. A review of relevant research literature was undertaken by staff at the Higher Education Academy (HEA). This focused on identifying research on barriers faced by students with vocational qualifications and also strategies used by institutions to overcome them, as well as policy relevant to encouraging vocational learners to progress to HE⁶. Members of the research team also drew from other research in progress and sought out any research at

⁵ For a recent study specifically on progression of apprentices to HE, see Seddon V (2005) *Analysis of the progression of advanced apprentices to higher education in England*, a report published by, LSC and UVAC

⁶ We are grateful to Helen Harper and Helen May at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) for undertaking this literature review commissioned as part of this study.

participating institutions (but little of the latter was identified whose results could be shared.).

The fieldwork comprised four stages:

- ▷ Firstly, identifying HEIs willing to participate. Most were recruited by funder partners. In two cases this meant that all HEIs in the funder area were participants (ie in Sussex and Manchester areas), while in others one or two HEIs participated. An attempt was made to ensure that the group of HEIs represented the diversity of institutions in England. It proved more difficult to recruit pre-1992 universities to the research but, as can be seen below, the 14 HEIs which participated represent a wide range of different types of institution and geographical area:

University of Bolton	University of Brighton
University of Chichester	University of Hull
Kingston University	University of Leeds
London South Bank University	University of Manchester
Manchester Metropolitan University	University of Salford
Sheffield Hallam University	Staffordshire University
University of Sussex	University of Teesside

- ▷ The next stages took place in each of the participating institutions. Discussions were first held with central staff and others involved with recruitment and admissions centrally. These aimed to: discuss university policy on the admissions of applicants with vocational qualifications as well as perceptions of practice, issues and good practice; provide an overview of how admissions decision-making was organised at the institution; and identify three courses where practice and issues could be studied in more detail.
- ▷ Interviews were then arranged with admissions staff in each of three courses⁷. Courses were identified as participants in the research which met the following criteria:
 - either: courses with a relatively high ratio of applicants to places/with a relatively high tariff points offer/high average attainment at Level 3 of those accepted
 - or: courses thought likely to demonstrate good practice in the admission of vocational applicants.

A list of the subject disciplines of the courses participating in the research is provided in Appendix 1. They ranged widely from more specific vocational subjects such as sports science and nursing studies to more general ones such as social studies, economics and English. Inevitably the criteria used to identify courses have resulted in some subjects being represented in several institutions.

An attempt was made to ensure that the group of HEIs represented the diversity of institutions in England

⁷ At all but one university, where only one course took part



The report which follows primarily focuses on our analysis of the institutional findings

All the interviewees were invited to an institutional feedback presentation. For the purposes of the research this aimed to validate the evidence collected and the research conclusions. For the institution it helped to identify issues requiring action.

The report which follows primarily focuses on our analysis of the institutional findings. We identify and discuss in Chapter 4 a range of issues affecting vocationally qualified applicants at different institutions and in different disciplines. They include some issues facing a number of the institutions participating in the study, and some of more relevance to a few only or to certain disciplines or departments. We have also identified a number of strategies or ideas being considered to improve entry or minimise barriers for vocational learners, which are presented in Chapter 5. In the final chapter, we have drawn together our conclusions and recommendations.

While we were fortunate in having a large number and variety of institutions and courses in our sample, which helped to identify a good range of policies and practices, we cannot claim to have captured a representative sample of HEIs' experiences. The results therefore need to be interpreted in this light: they provide new insights into this area, but many point to the need for further research to be undertaken especially in HEIs and courses where there is less experience of recruiting vocationally qualified entrants.

But first, as a way of setting the scene and providing more context for this research, we briefly give (in Chapter 3) a description of the vocational qualifications which we focused on together with a description of some relevant policy developments. Also included in this chapter is data on the way the vocationally qualified entry profile varies across the HE sector (from our UCAS statistical analysis), and key findings of our research literature review on barriers identified for vocational learners progressing to HE.



3. Vocational qualifications and their significance in HE entry

3.1 Background and policy context

Vocational qualifications of one kind or another have been in existence for a very long time. Traditionally, there was a clear dichotomy in the English post-16 educational system between vocational qualifications and A-levels, with two main routes being taken by young people: an academic route leading to higher education (HE) and dominated by A-level study, and a non-academic (or vocational) route leading to employment (or taken with employment or part of an apprenticeship) and usually associated with college-based vocational qualifications⁸. Since the mid-1980s there have been various attempts to develop the vocational route in order to help address skill deficiencies, improve the quality of the workforce and prepare young people better for employment and, more recently, to help meet the Government's 50 per cent target by 2010 for young people's HE participation. These have included various changes to the vocational qualifications and curriculum on offer to young people.

The General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) was introduced in 1992 in England, at advanced, intermediate and foundation levels, with Advanced GNVQ (Level 3⁹ ie A-level equivalent) intended to be an alternative route to higher education. People at school (or college) would be able to mix Advanced GNVQs and A-levels, thus breaking down the previously distinct academic and non-academic routes. But GNVQs failed to attract large numbers away from more traditional A-level courses, and they failed to gain acceptance by employers in many sectors. Rather, the vocational courses such as BTEC National Certificates and Diplomas (previously known as Ordinary Nationals or ONC/ONDs), taken in subjects like engineering, construction, or art and design, continued to be popular with learners and employers.

A further attempt at reform was in 2001 when advanced GNVQs became the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education, AVCE

A further attempt at reform was in 2001 when advanced GNVQs became the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education, AVCE. These were deemed to be equivalent to GCE A-levels, and have come to be known as VCE A-levels (or AVCEs). They were introduced as part of 'Curriculum 2000', a Government initiative with an objective to broaden the Level 3 curriculum. It also introduced the modularisation of A-levels and their division into AS (three units) and A2 qualifications (three units), which together form the A-level (GCE or VCE).

Reforms were also made to the BTEC Nationals in 2002, with new qualifications based on different sizes (units) introduced – BTEC National Award (6 units), BTEC National Certificate

8 A distinction made by Williams, S. (2000) in 'The Paradox of Assessment: the effectiveness of the GNVQ as a preparation for higher education' *Journal of Education and Work* 13(3).

9 See Figure 1 for more details of levels of qualification based on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Recently, attention has focused on ways of improving progression pathways to HE through more joined-up working

(12 units) and BTEC National Diploma (18 units). Although some schools offer BTEC qualifications, they are predominantly taken at colleges.

Recently, attention has focused on ways of improving progression pathways to HE through more joined-up working, both at policy and operational levels. Proposals in the 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* led HEFCE, the Learning and Skills Council and the DfES to work together on a joint strategy to advance vocational and workplace progression (*The Joint Progression Strategy*). As a result of this HEFCE has established a number of local Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). These are local and regional collaborations between HE and FE which aim to provide greater guidance and support to learners on vocational pathways. LLN activities may include: mapping learning routes for different careers or sectors in local areas; providing a database and advice on different qualifications; helping to develop the vocational curriculum; improving credit frameworks to facilitate progression; or working with HE and FE in developing new Foundation Degrees. In addition, the Government's Aimhigher programme (and earlier the HEFCE/LSC Partnership for Progression, P4P, which is now part of Aimhigher) has been given specific funding to improve progression opportunities for vocational and work-based learners. Aimhigher regions have a number of ongoing projects ranging from improving guidance and information and raising aspirations of young people to encouraging partnerships between different learning providers (see for example, the ALPS learning pathways programme in West Midlands, and the ASPIRE project in South east London).

Despite these qualification reforms and policy initiatives, not a lot has really happened in how vocational qualifications and vocational pathways are viewed, especially in relation to their use as entry qualifications for higher education. There are still concerns that the 14-19 qualification framework and curriculum is not adequate to meet the UK's requirements of the 21st Century in the way it leaves the vocational routes as being perceived as 'the weaker path'. As the 2003-04 Nuffield Review stated¹⁰: *'there is the danger of polarisation between the academically successful on the more prestigious pathways (with clear progression routes into higher education and employment) and those on the 'weakly vocational' pathways (where progression is not clear and many drop out). Reform of 14-19 education and training must reverse this polarisation.'*

A Working Group on 14-19 education chaired by Mike Tomlinson produced a set of recommendations in 2004 which, at its core, had a new 14-19 qualification framework with a diploma at different levels and covering a range of 'lines of learning'. This was intended to replace the existing separate academic and vocational qualifications (from entry level to Level 3). Vocational options would be taken along with general and academic subjects in mixed programmes. The recommendations specifically sought to address the perceived lack of parity between vocational and academic qualifications, especially as entry qualifications to HE. However, the Tomlinson Group proposals have not been taken up fully by Government. The DfES 2005 White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills proposed a number of changes, including introducing a new vocational diploma. However, the GCSEs and A-levels are to remain as 'cornerstones of the new system'.

¹⁰ See summary of First Report, 2003-04, at www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk

Figure 1. Examples of qualifications at different levels in the National Qualifications Framework

Level	Qualification		
7	Masters degree/postgraduate diploma, etc		
6		BSc/BA/BEng, LLB	
5	Foundation degree, NVQ5	HND/HNC	
4	NVQ4		
3	Advanced Apprenticeship	AVCE, BTEC National, GNVQ Adv.	AS/A2 Access to HE, OCN L3
2	Apprenticeship NVQ2	GNVQ Int	GCSE grades A*-C OCN L2
1	NVQ1	GNVQ Foundation. BTEC Foundation	GCSE grades D-F OCN L1
	Work-based	Vocational	Academic

Source: based on the National Qualifications Framework (new edition), QCA

A number of other changes to the HE landscape are worth highlighting as context to this study. These have included changes to:

- ▷ the nature of HEI's provision - e.g. subject mix, more part-time
- ▷ teaching, learning, and assessment methods
- ▷ the use of IT and e-learning
- ▷ the development of more credit and modular systems
- ▷ the increasing diversity of the student population

More links have been developed between HEIs and FE colleges, schools and businesses often within their regions

More links have been developed between HEIs and FE colleges, schools and businesses often within their regions. Some of these are as a result of Aimhigher programmes and local LLNs (see above). Also, the new Foundation Degree has been introduced in England and Wales. This is intended to be part of the vocational and work-based progression ladder. Many of the new Foundation Degrees are delivered in partnership with local colleges.

While the HE sector has become much broader, it has also become more diverse. Some HEIs have changed more than others in the way they have embraced the widening participation agenda and encouraged more non-traditional learners to apply with a range of qualifications. There are other HEIs that have been content to rely on the increasing numbers of traditional highly qualified A-level applicants applying for places, and to develop a more international and research-led reputation.

Student funding has been another major area of change, with student loans replacing grants and students now making increased personal contributions towards the cost of their study. Many students face higher levels of debt on graduation, which can be off-putting for some, especially those from lower income groups or non-traditional HE backgrounds, considering embarking on a HE course. We are now moving into a new period of higher and variable student fees, whose outcome is uncertain in terms of effects on student demand and institutional recruitment marketing.



3.2 Current situation: qualifications at Level 3

Instead of one integrated system (as proposed by Tomlinson), what we currently have is a range of qualifications on offer to young people at 16, whether they stay at school or go to college. But two distinct educational pathways still tend to be chosen: the general academic pathway usually for those with better GCSE results, going on mainly to GCE A/AS levels; and the vocational pathway for others going on to vocational or work-based programmes such as BTEC, AVCE (or NVQ3 /apprenticeship if in work)".

The structure of qualifications at various levels is shown in Figure 1; at Level 3 the main ones currently include:

- ▷ GCE A-levels, taken in a range of subjects, externally tested by examinations but including a coursework component. There are two sizes of awards, AS (three units) and A2 qualifications (three units), which together make up an A-level.
- ▷ GCE A-levels in applied subjects/VCE A-levels/vocational A-levels/AVCEs. The GCE A-levels in applied subjects came into existence in September 2005. They take the place of similar qualifications variously called AVCEs/VCEs/vocational A-levels in existence since Curriculum 2000¹¹. All are graded on the same five-point scale (A-E) as GCE A-levels, but with a greater emphasis on assessment using work-related contexts. They are focused on a particular employment area (like health and social care, hospitality, ICT, leisure). They come in four sizes – a 12-unit award, known as AVCE Double Award and equivalent to 2 GCE A-levels; a 6-unit award, equivalent to one GCE A-level and a 6-unit award equivalent to two AS levels and a 3-unit award equivalent to one AS level.
- ▷ The BTEC Nationals, also in three sizes, focus more on particular industries (such as engineering, hairdressing, media and music). The BTEC National Award (6-unit) is intended to be roughly equivalent to one A-level, BTEC National Certificate (12-unit) equivalent to two A-levels or AVCE double, and BTEC National Diploma (18 units), equivalent to three A-levels. It is graded currently according to pass, merit or distinction.
- ▷ A varied range of other vocational awards specific to certain industries or areas of work, such as the CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education, the Diploma in Foundation Studies (Art and Design) and the Certificate in Financial Studies (IFS), but these were not part of the scope of the study.

The main difference between AVCE and BTEC is that the BTEC is a more work-related qualification, and an individual's knowledge and their ability to apply it is assessed, often through practical work and assignments (by the college and Edexcel, the awarding body). By contrast, AVCE is more knowledge focused, and emphasises evaluation, analysis and synthesis. Students taking a BTEC tend to have a significant amount of assessment by coursework, while AVCE students have relatively more assessment by exam. A higher proportion of students taking BTEC than AVCE are likely to be doing so at a FE college, though the numbers taking this qualification at school appear to be increasing. Inevitably those taking a BTEC National Diploma will tend to be studying together with the same group

A higher proportion of students taking BTEC than AVCE are likely to be doing so at a FE college

¹¹ See analysis in the Youth Cohort Survey, especially a report by Joan Payne (2003) *Vocational pathways at aged 16-19*, DfES RR501

¹² This report has used the old nomenclature for the qualification interchangeably.



The number taking AVCE double awards has been falling in the last few years

of students, unlike those taking smaller unit awards such as VCE or GCE AS or A2 where student groups are likely to change for different subjects. The grading structure for BTEC differs from that of GCE/VCE A-levels (see above). For some students taking BTEC and AVCE at FE college there are timetabling or other restrictions that can make the taking of these qualifications with a GCE A-/AS-level difficult.

It has been problematic to get accurate information on trends for these different qualifications as the official statistics on achievement by young people do not tend to identify them in one publication or table in this way¹³. Overall, attainment at Level 3 is increasing over time, but the proportion achieving Level 3 vocational awards does not seem to have changed much. The number taking AVCE double awards has been falling in the last few years, while the number taking GCE A-levels has been continuing to rise¹⁴. But those taking GCE A-levels considerably outnumber those taking VCEs: 784,000 GCE A-levels were sat by UK candidates in 2005 compared to 33,000 VCE advance double awards and 43,000 VCE advanced single awards. Put another way, around 56 per cent of 17-year olds are studying on a Level 3 programme, but 39 per cent are taking GCE A/AS levels as their main area of study, about 7 per cent an VCE and the remainder a NVQ3 or other equivalent vocational qualification¹⁵.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to get comparable data on trends for BTEC National awards as this information is not made publicly available by Edexcel, the awarding body, for commercial confidentiality reasons (though we understand discussions are in progress with the QCA about this).

3.3 Entry by vocationally qualified applicants to HE

While Government policy has stated that vocational qualifications (VCE and BTEC awards) should be entry qualifications for higher education, students with vocational qualifications still represent only a small minority overall of university entrants and they are unevenly spread across different institutions, qualifications and disciplines in HE. For example, Schwartz¹⁶ reported that: '... 16 per cent of young entrants ... were admitted on the basis of non-A-level qualifications such as Access or vocational qualifications and other criteria'. Research for the LSDA by Connor and Little¹⁷ which analysed HESA¹⁸ student data in 2002/03 estimated that only around 3 per cent of entrants to degree courses held a BTEC as their highest qualification, though it was higher on some courses such as engineering or computer science (and higher also when looking at mature students only). By contrast, around two fifths of first degree entrants held A-levels only as their highest qualification, and around one fifth held a mix of A-level and Level 3 vocational qualifications; a further one fifth, held Level 3 vocational qualifications but not A-levels.

¹³ Unwin L, Fuller A, Burbin J and Young M (2004) *What determines the impact of vocational qualifications: a literature review*. DFES RR 522, highlights the lack of detailed statistical information on vocational qualifications and pathways

¹⁴ According to statistics on GCE A-levels and AVCEs published by the Joint Council for Qualifications, www.jcqq.org.uk

¹⁵ Youth Cohort Survey : The activities and experiences of 17-year olds in England and Wales, 2005, SFR 48/05

¹⁶ Schwartz, S. (2004). op cit, see footnote 1

¹⁷ See Connor H and Little B (2004) *Vocational ladders or crazy paving? Making your way to higher levels*. London, Learning and Skills Development Agency.

¹⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency

However, the LSDA study highlighted the difficulties in analysing statistics on vocational entry qualifications, in particular in separately identifying all the different entry qualifications in HESA data. This is because entrants can have combinations of qualifications, and not all of them are easily identifiable in the HESA data classification system. This can make some estimates of individual qualification groups rather uncertain. A recommendation was made in the LSDA report to HESA to improve the collection of data on the qualifications held by students at entry; and also to LSC and HESA to improve the consistency of data collected on HE students in HEIs and FE colleges.

3.4 The statistical evidence from UCAS data

To investigate the pattern of intake of the young vocationally qualified applicant, and also to provide a national benchmark for universities to compare their own situation with, we analysed a specially requested UCAS national data set. We made this request so that we could work on a more useful breakdown of specific qualifications than was provided by HESA data¹⁹. As part of the project we also gave participating HEIs additional information about the offer stage, as well as about applications and acceptances (but ‘offers’ data was only available at institution level not in the national dataset). UCAS no longer publishes entry qualification data in its annual statistics, but instead publishes the range of attainment of entrants based on points (see discussion below on the UCAS Tariff Points System).

Our request to UCAS produced a special run of data identifying certain qualifications separately and in different combinations. From this, we could derive a more accurate estimate than had been done previously of the proportion of applicants who are vocationally qualified at Level 3 (as defined for this study, ie holding the qualifications of recognised equivalence to A-levels - AVCEs, BTECs and GNVQ adv).

The analysis shown below focuses on young UK-domiciled entrants, ie aged under 21 on entry to full-time courses (excluding Foundation degree) in English HEIs

3.4.1 Overall

The overall results show that, as expected, the vast majority of young applicants (almost 81%) have traditional academic qualifications, GCE A- or AS-levels, and a large subset of them, in fact 59 % of the total, have GCE A- or AS- level awards only as their highest entry qualification (ie they did not have any other qualifications for entry). Applicants holding our specified vocational qualifications - AVCEs or BTECs - either by themselves or in combination with GCE A-/AS-levels each represent, by comparison, very small percentages (see Table 1). Aggregating the numbers with the vocational qualifications of interest (and excluding all the other qualifications individuals might have) resulted in a total of 18.4 per cent of young applicants holding a BTEC, AVCE or GNVQ (by itself or in combination with a GCE A-level). A little over half of them (or 10.3 per cent of the total applicants) had a mix of vocational and GCE A-level qualifications, and 8.1 per cent had a vocational qualification but no GCE A-levels.

The overall results show that, as expected, the vast majority of young applicants (almost 81%) have traditional academic qualifications

19 Because HESA classifies A-level qualifications with some other Level 3 qualifications, and also its scope is limited to HEIs only.



Table 1. Highest qualification held by applicants to full-time degree courses, 2004 entry (Percentages of applicants aged 21+ and under 21 years with specified qualification or qualification combination)

	21 year +	Under 21 years	All ages
GCE A-level	35.6	80.9	72.0
GCE A-level only	12.8	58.8	49.8
GCE A-level in combination with a L3 vocational qualification:			
- BTEC National	1.5	1.4	1.4
- VCE A/AS	0.3	6.2	5.1
- AVCE double	0.6	3.7	3.1
- GNVQ adv	0.5	0.0	0.1
- any of these L3 vocational qualifications	2.8	10.3	8.8
No GCE A-level	64.4	19.1	28.0
No GCE A-level but has:			
- BTEC	6.1	4.5	4.8
- VCE A/AS	0.6	1.7	1.4
- AVCE double	1.5	3.1	2.8
- GNVQ adv	2.1	0.0	0.4
- any of these L vocational qualifications	39.8	8.1	8.5
Total with a L3 vocational qualification (BTEC, AVCE, GNVQ) *	12.6	18.4	17.2
<i>Numbers</i>	73,088	299,742	372,830

* may have A-level or other qualifications also.

Source: UCAS special analysis

This estimate (of just under one in five with vocational qualifications) is broadly similar to that found by other studies (such as the LSDA estimate above), but a couple of points need to be made on data interpretation and comparisons. Small variations in arriving at an estimate of this figure will occur depending on the range of qualifications included in any analysis (we have excluded some other qualifications with very small numbers here). Also the

scope of analysis can be different: here, we have focused on under 21-year olds but if we analysed the whole entry cohort (or all ages) the proportions with academic and vocational qualifications would be different (as Table 1 shows). Interestingly, older UCAS applicants (21 years or older) are less likely to be traditional A-level holders (as one would expect) but also less likely to hold vocational qualifications (the ones we specified) and much more likely to hold a range of other qualifications (which were outside the scope of this study, and not shown in Table 1).

The overall pattern of qualification varied according to student and institutional characteristics, in particular by type of institution and subject preferred, but also by region and gender. Some of these differences are inter-related.

3.4.2 Institutional variation

There are significant variations between institutions in the extent to which applicants with Level 3 (L3) vocational qualifications apply to them and are accepted. The data we could obtain and analyse by type of institution can only show the accepted institution of an applicant because applicants can make choices of several institutions to apply to. We classified institutions into four main groups, which are relatively familiar ones: Russell Group universities, other pre-92 universities, post-92 universities and HE/FE colleges. Although these groups have similarities, there are intra-group variations which should be borne in mind. However, the group averages do show some interesting contrasts, as Table 2 illustrates. Note, the largest group of young accepted applicants to full-time degree courses go to post-92 universities (a little over 50 per cent).

There are significant variations between institutions in the extent to which applicants with Level 3 (L3) vocational qualifications apply to them and are accepted

- ▷ Vocationally qualified L3 young accepted applicants at Russell Group universities are comparatively rare, comprising just 3 % of the total intake. By contrast, they are four times more likely to be accepted at other pre-92 universities on average (11 %) and most likely to gain a place at colleges, comprising almost a third of the intake to full-time degree courses there. (See Table 2 and also Table 3 in Appendix).
- ▷ Students with GCE A-levels are the majority regardless of the type of institution
- ▷ The main variation is between Russell Group and other universities. Russell Group universities have a greater concentration of GCE A-level students, with just 10 % of accepted applicants not having GCE A-levels compared to 16-20% at the others
- ▷ Also, VCE and GCE combinations are considerably rarer at Russell Group than other universities, around 3% have AVCE A/AS or AVCE double awards compared with over 7% at pre-92 and 11 per cent at post-92 universities
- ▷ Holding only a double AVCE, a relatively rare occurrence generally, is more likely at a post-92 university or college than a pre-92 university
- ▷ Holding a BTEC and no GCE A-level was much more likely at a HE/FE college (9 %) than a post-92 university (5%) or pre-92 or Russell Group university (under 2 %).

Table 2. Highest qualification held by young accepted applicants to full-time degree courses, 2004 entry (Percentages of applicants accepted with these different qualifications/combinations at different types of institutions*)

Qualification	Russell Group university	Other Pre-92 university	Post-92 university	HE or FE College
L3 voc qual (BTEC, AVCE)	3.2	11.2	19.9	30.1
GCE A-level only	71.2	64.5	58.9	49.1
L3 qual but no GCE A-level	2.8	7.5	11.4	17.0
L3 Voc - BTEC, AVCE A/AS or AVCE double, but no GCE A-level	0.5	3.7	8.6	13.1
Numbers	60,573	67,756	184,324	20,865

* more detail on different qualifications in Appendix Table 3

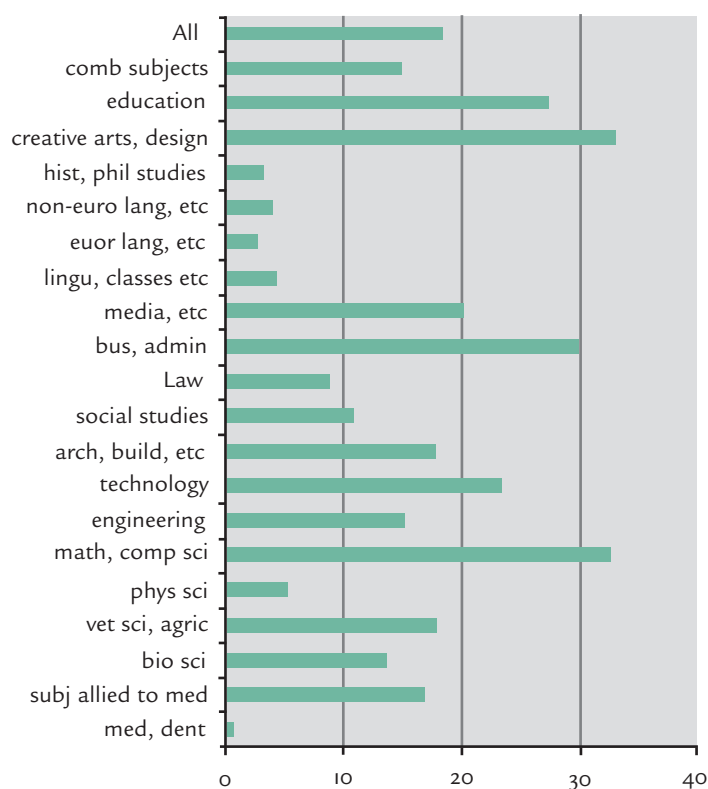
Source: UCAS special analysis



3.4.3 Subject differences

Differences between subjects were apparent also, as indicated in Figure 2. This shows the subject group to which applicants were accepted

Figure 2 Percentage of Accepted applicants in each subject area with L3 vocational qualifications



- ▷ L3 vocationally qualified young accepted applicants are rarest of all in medicine and dentistry (0.5%), and also comparatively rare in physical sciences (5%) and in some humanities, such as European languages, history, philosophy (3-4 %).
- ▷ But more likely to be found in creative arts and design (32%), education (28%), business and admin (30%), and maths/computing (33%), as figure 2 shows.
- ▷ With the exception of creative arts and design, where the minority of accepted applicants had only GCE A-levels (30%), they were the majority qualification in all the other subjects.
- ▷ The highest proportions of accepted applicants holding only GCE A-levels, over 70 %, were found in the humanities (history, philosophy, linguistics, classics, languages, etc) and also physical science, law and social studies, and the lowest in maths/computing, business and admin (all around 50%) and creative arts and design (30%)

- ▷ Holders of BTEC Nationals (but no GCE A/AS levels) were more likely to be students of creative arts and design (12%), veterinary science/agriculture and technologies (both over 10% of total acceptances) and education (almost 8%). Other subjects like maths/computing, engineering, and media had around 5% of students with BTECs and the rest had percentages below that
- ▷ Holders of AVCE double awards only were more likely to be students of maths/computing and business and admin (10% and 9% respectively), while most other subjects had under 3% of students with these qualifications.

Further details of qualifications held by accepted applicants in all subjects are shown in Appendix 2, Table 4.

3.4.3 Regional differences

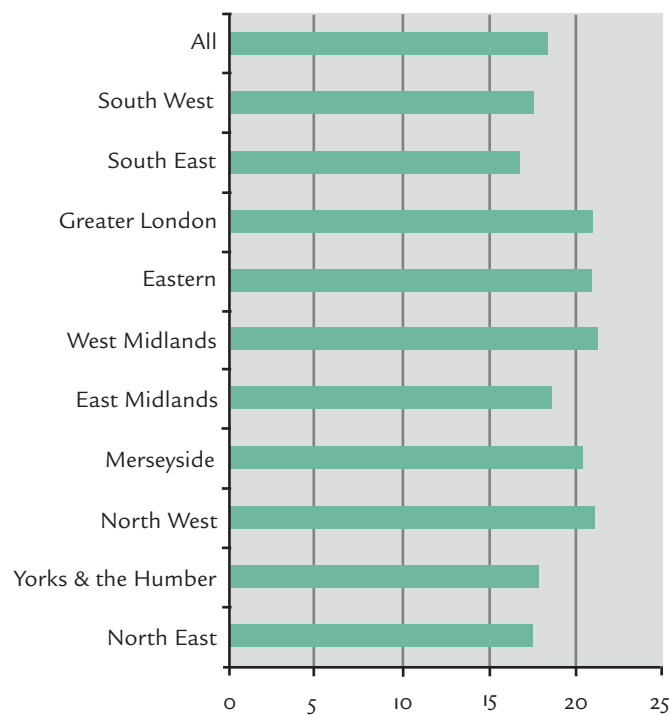
A number of regional differences were apparent. These were relatively small compared to some of the subject and institutional variations. Regional variations are likely to reflect the make-up of different types of institutions in each region of England and also subjects offered at them. They may also reflect the extent to which local vocational pathways into HE are established in different regions.

- ▷ The percentage of L3 vocationally qualified applicants accepted in each English region varies from just under 17% in the South East and 17.5% and 17.7% in the North East and South West respectively, to over 20% in the North West, Merseyside, West Midlands, Eastern England and Greater London (other regions are in between these figures)
- ▷ GCE A-level only entry ranged from 62 to 67%, with the highest in Yorkshire and Humberside and Merseyside.
- ▷ BTEC applicants were more likely to be accepted to full-time degree courses in the North West (5.8%), and the West Midlands and Greater London (5.2%), and least likely in Yorkshire and Humberside (3.2%)
- ▷ AVCE double award holders were more likely to be accepted in Greater London (5.2%).

Further details of regional breakdowns are shown in Figure 3 and Table 5 , Appendix 2.

A number of regional differences were apparent. These were relatively small compared to some of the subject and institutional variations

Figure 3 Percentage of Accepted applicants in each region holding L3 vocational qualifications



3.4.4 Gender differences

There were also some gender differences. These are likely to be mainly related to choice of subjects at degree level where gender imbalances exist. They are also likely to be a reflection of gender differences in types of qualifications taken pre-HE (but not investigated further here).

- ▷ Overall, female young applicants are slightly less likely to be L3 vocationally qualified than male applicants (18.1 v 19.0%),
- ▷ and also less likely to hold GCE A/AS levels only (therefore more likely to have other qualifications).
- ▷ Male applicants are slightly more likely to hold a BTEC (but not with a GCE A/AS) ,
- ▷ There is little difference by gender in propensity to have an AVCE double award only.

3.5 UCAS Tariff Points System

The UCAS tariff is a points system designed to help give comparability between different types of qualifications, as illustrated in Figure 2. Points are allocated to different qualifications and they can then be accrued to give a points score for an individual. Some



institutions use the UCAS points when advertising requirements and offers for different courses in prospectuses, websites and course-related recruitment literature. An example might be a course that requires 200 points. This could be achieved with:

- 2 Bs if doing a 12-unit AVCE OR
- 2 Bs at two six-unit GCE A-levels OR
- 2 Merits and a Pass in the 18-unit BTEC National Diploma OR
- 2 Ds and a C at three six-unit A-levels

(as illustrated in Figure 4)

The UCAS tariff has been adopted by a large number of HEIs. Even those that do not use it tend to use the tariff equivalences to work out requirements for vocational qualifications using A-levels as their baseline. Institutions not using the tariff tend to express their requirements in terms of grades (e.g. ABB).

Figure 4. Part of the UCAS Tariff, showing the qualifications of main interest in this study, and some of the grades

GCE/VCE			BTEC Nationals			Points
AS	A-level/AVCE	AVCE double	Award	Cert	Diploma	
					DDD	360
					DDM	320
					DMM	280
		AA		DD	MMM	240
		AB				220
	BB			DM	MMP	200
						...etc
	A	DD	D	MP	PPP	120
	B	DE				100
	C...etc					...etc
A	D					60
B						50
C ...etc						...etc

Source: UCAS

3.6 The existing research evidence on barriers to students with vocational qualifications

While there is now a substantial and growing body of research literature on widening participation in HE and factors which hinder the entry of certain under-represented groups, much less research has been undertaken specifically relating to those with vocational entry qualifications. This was a conclusion of the HEA's literature review. It identified two main overriding types of barriers affecting those with vocational qualifications:

- ▷ structural ones, such as attitudes to qualifications, links between HE and FE, and careers guidance and support at entry
- ▷ personal ones – individual student attitudes and behaviours.

The structural issue identified most often in the research literature is that of lack of parity of esteem. Vocational qualifications still tend to be less valued than GCE A-levels²⁰, and to be associated with the academically less able. In particular, the evidence on student choice at 14 and 16 suggests that students with lower (or expected lower) GCSE results tend to be more likely to be directed towards the vocational route at the end of Year 11²¹. This lack of parity is carried through to the labour market where rates of returns (as measured by earnings) are lower for vocationally than academically qualified people²². Although, as highlighted above, various attempts have been made to encourage equality of esteem, views are deep-seated, as this quote indicates: *'(they).. will have little impact unless they can change the underlying assumptions about the kinds of young people for whom the different tracks are appropriate'* (David Raffé et al.²³).

Schwartz, in the review of fair admissions²⁴, hypothesised that the uneven distribution of non A-level-qualified learners across the HE sector might be attributed to curriculum differences between some pre-HE entry courses and degree courses and also a lack of familiarity of admissions staff with some vocational qualifications. Other research has resulted in a similar finding; that tutors' lack of awareness of the range of vocational qualifications and pathways into HE, together with a lingering prejudice against vocational qualifications, has been linked to vocational students being less likely to be accepted onto degree courses than those with traditional A-levels²⁵. Additional concerns expressed by those in HE institutions include doubts about qualification equivalences²⁶ and the impact of taking vocationally qualified students on the maintenance of academic standards and institutional image²⁷.

Additional concerns expressed by those in HE institutions include doubts about qualification equivalences

20 See Action on Access study (2005), op cit, see footnote 2

21 See Payne J (2003), op cit, see footnote 11

22 See various studies, for example: Conlon G (2002). *The Determinants of Undertaking Academic and Vocational Qualifications in the UK*, Centre for the Economics of Education.

23 D Raffé et al. (2001). "Participation, Inclusiveness, Academic Drift and Parity of Esteem: a comparison of post-compulsory education and training in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland." *Oxford Review of Education* 27(2): 173.

24 Op cit, see footnote 1

25 See for example, Greenwood J. (2004) *Retention of GNVQ Advanced, AVCE and National Diploma students in comparison to 'A' level GCE students*; and Watt, S. and L. C. Paterson (2000). "Pathways and Partnerships: widening access to higher education." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 24: 107-116.

26 Forrest J and Gretton R (2005). *The Vocational Progression Pathways Project*, Aimhigher London South.

27 Op cit, Watt and Paterson (2000), see footnote 25



Vocational qualifications are not seen as meeting the criteria for HE entry by some courses and HE institutions, and so may not be promoted as a route to university²⁸. The lack of clarity and transparency in the admissions system can lead to confusion: for example, a UCAS study in 2002 found that all applicants except those with A-levels found it difficult to relate specific entry requirements to their qualifications²⁹.

Another factor affecting the uneven distribution of vocational entrants can be the quality of links between individual HEIs and colleges. While there is a growing number of good HE-FE partnerships being developed (and encouraged by LLN initiatives), previous research has highlighted that there can be a lack of dialogue between staff about the pre-HE and degree curriculum and also a lack of good support to students during transition. This can lead to a poor understanding of HE and the admissions process by some college students as well as a lack of knowledge of vocational L3 courses by HE staff. FE links are more likely to be developed by recruiting than by selecting universities³⁰.

In addition to these structural barriers, a number of personal ones have been identified in previous research studies, some already alluded to above. Students' background plays a role in determining post-16 pathways and choices. Vocationally qualified entrants are more likely to come from minority ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds than the academically qualified³¹, and so are more likely to be affected by some of the same issues which affect these groups in progressing to HE. These include effects of low aspirations, lack of confidence, unfamiliarity with HE and preconceived (often wrong) ideas about HE and the ability of non-traditional learners to progress to HE³². There is also a range of cultural and financial issues which affect choices at 16 and an earlier age, and also help support student transition to HE which research has shown can affect vocationally qualified learners.

It is worth noting that some of these barriers identified by other research overlap and can be mutually reinforcing.

Vocationally qualified entrants are more likely to come from minority ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds

28 Op cit Connor and Little (2004), see footnote 17

29 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (2002). *Paving the Way: Project Report*. Cheltenham, UCAS

30 See Gallacher, J. (2002). *Articulation links between further education colleges and higher education institutions in Scotland. A Research Review of FE/HE Links - A Report to Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department*. Osborne M. et al. (eds.) University of Stirling; Glasgow Caledonian University; Scottish Executive:4-17

31 See research by Connor et al (2004) op cit, see footnote 17, Archer, L. (2000) *Social class and access to higher education*. London, University of North London: 19.

32 See for example in Connor and Little (2004), op cit, see footnote 17.

4. Issues facing vocationally qualified learners applying to HE

It is clear from the statistical evidence that there is still a relatively small intake of young vocationally qualified learners to full-time degree courses, though it is higher for some subjects and also at some types of institutions than others. Some explanations for this pattern have been identified in previous research, as the previous chapter has outlined. This chapter focuses on explanations highlighted by our research on the HE admissions process as it relates to vocational learners. It includes some explanations which have been identified in previous research, and others which have not.

4.1 Overview

There was no evidence from our participating institutions of any overt discrimination taking place against applicants with vocational qualifications

There was no evidence from our participating institutions of any overt discrimination taking place against applicants with vocational qualifications. Most universities had a policy of treating VCE and GCE A-levels equally and so no distinctions were made in admissions decision-making. It was usual for institutional policy to state that vocational qualifications were taken as part of the evidence that could be accepted for entry and specific vocational qualifications not singled out for particular mention (though occasionally some were). In only one case, at a more selective, academic university, did we find that vocational qualifications were not specifically mentioned in the admissions policy profile, rather ‘...A-level qualifications or equivalent to Level 3 qualifications’. We could also see from prospectuses and admissions literature that the general principle was to welcome vocationally qualified applicants.

However, as discussed further below, the extent to which principles and institutional policies relate to admissions practices by staff within different parts of institutions can vary significantly. In particular, the extent to which prospectuses clearly and unambiguously stated their entry requirements in terms of A/AS level passes, AVCE awards, BTEC Nationals and other vocational qualifications varied considerably, as did the views within many institutions as to the kinds of vocational qualifications that were acceptable for particular courses. Such views often related directly to negative perceptions held by individual HE staff about the ability of vocational applicants to succeed. This was often combined with a lack of up-to-date knowledge about vocational qualifications and the pre-HE vocational curriculum as well as reliance sometimes on experiences from years past. Where we found examples of recognised disadvantage for vocationally qualified applicants, they tended to be indirect effects of aspects of the admissions process or ‘unintentional consequences’ of recent changes to the admissions process. In only a few cases did we find some conflict between the quality/image agenda and the widening participation agenda of the institution (an issue identified in the research literature also).

These issues are discussed further below. While a range of issues is identified, it should be noted that not all were found at all institutions, and some of the institutions with more diverse student populations identified few problems at the offer-making stage, their main issue being attracting in more well-qualified applicants from a range of backgrounds, including those on vocational pathways.

4.2 Staff attitudes and knowledge about vocational qualifications

A key factor affecting the acceptance of vocational qualifications as entry qualifications for degree courses is the generally negative attitudes of individual staff in many universities still towards vocational versus traditional A-level qualifications. Usually, such attitudes did not relate to any evidence collected by the institution about the relative success of students with different qualifications but were based on a general view about lack of parity of esteem of vocational qualifications and the likelihood that vocational learners were less able (as the research literature reviews showed) and/or would need more support in their learning and/or be less committed to study. There was also a view expressed in some interviews that since Curriculum 2000, GCE A-level students had become more 'instrumental' in their learning, expecting to receive required reading in the form of handouts and becoming used to being 'spoon-fed'. (Focus groups with admissions tutors for the Nuffield Review 2004-05 had similar findings.) The following is a quote from one admissions tutor:

There was also a view expressed in some interviews that since Curriculum 2000, GCE A-level students had become more 'instrumental' in their learning

'A-level students expect the work to be presented to them on a work sheet. They don't go to the library to get information. They also expect to be able to retake to improve their grades. There is no longer an ethos of independent learning. The format of the A-levels since Curriculum 2000 has taken any independence from them. We spend the entire first year of the degree trying to get these independent skills in place.'

Some admissions and recruitment staff interviewed had been very active, over many years in some cases, in trying to change attitudes within their institution towards vocational qualifications. They saw this as a key barrier to increasing their vocational learner intake overall and the commitment of the university towards vocationally qualified entrants. Admissions tutors can be put in a position however that, although positive themselves about vocational qualifications, they may receive pressure, subtle or not so subtle, from powerful colleagues regarding how these should be treated. Typical negative comments included:

'...(they're) perceived as the direction that less able learners were signposted into... generated difficulty in changing people's mindset, especially those who are used to always dealing with A-levels.'

'Vocational learners don't know how to write essays and anyway there is a lack of curriculum fit.'

'There is a common perception amongst the staff that AVCE students are less dedicated.'

It is likely that some of the negative perceptions arise from people being out of date with respect to changes to qualifications and being misinformed. For example, some of the vocational qualifications devised in the seventies and eighties got a poor reputation because of reports of lack of rigour of assessment. Although this has now changed, there are still some lingering general suspicions about vocational qualifications. We found this especially at the more selective institutions or departments where staff were used to seeing mainly A-level applicants, and did not question them (say in terms of content, assessment) in the same way as vocational qualifications. Confidence in new or less familiar qualifications was hard to build up and it was hard to change a 'bad' reputation built on historical information.



Because some admissions tutors were unsure about what was involved in vocational qualifications and thus how to treat them, there was a tendency under these circumstances to become risk averse, either finding ways of avoiding making offers to vocational applicants or setting higher standards for them (see quote in 4.3 below).

'I am aware that when we are over-subscribed, some staff will go for the more familiar A-level applicants.'

4.3 The admissions tutor role

Admissions tutors have a key role in changing practices towards vocational qualifications at a subject or course level, even when the process is managed very centrally (which happened at many of our participating universities). But many feel their role is undervalued and would benefit also from more training and help in understanding the different vocational qualifications in order to carry out this role effectively, and also to help 'educate' their colleagues.

Many admissions tutors feel their role is undervalued and would benefit also from more training and help in understanding the different vocational qualifications

Admissions tutors often have to weigh complex factors when coming to decisions about potential applicants, especially when an individual has a complex 'offering' (e.g. combinations of qualifications) or it is a marginal decision which has to be taken on the basis of poor candidate information and when they are under pressures to 'hit the recruitment target'. They have the opportunity to review and improve admissions practices, and they can determine exactly how reactive or proactive to be in identifying and tackling issues. In doing this they impact on the future of applicants as well as on that of the course they are recruiting to and their colleagues who teach on it.

'As admissions tutor I have a lot of power and there may be differences and changes between myself and the previous admissions tutor (in terms of how we deal with vocational qualifications).'

Throughout the research, instances were cited of the role being seen as a chore, something that someone would do for a couple of years and then pass onto someone else at just the point when they are coming to grips with it³³. In many instances there was no set training for undertaking the role, and where training was available it was on a voluntary basis and often not taken up. The skills and pitfalls of admissions mirror closely the skills and pitfalls of staff selection, especially in dealing with equality. Most universities are addressing the latter, but an equal emphasis was not found for those taking an admissions role.

'When I started as an Admissions Tutor I did not even know what a BTEC was. I was very suspicious of them and probably looked for more distinctions than were necessary. I have picked things up by trial and error. We still don't get many BTEC applicants.'

There is also the wider issue of how to get all staff, not just those taking on the admissions tutor role for a year or two, to be better informed about vocational qualifications and the type of learning involved in them. This can take some time and effort. The lack of training and systematic updating of information on qualifications at many institutions are clearly problems to be tackled, as well as the challenge of getting people to participate in update sessions or gain in-depth knowledge of all the different vocational qualifications (especially already 'stretched' academics). For example:

'You're told you're an admissions tutor on 1 Oct and then forms arrive on 10 Oct but you've had no training. We need more structure. I was surprised when I came back to admissions that I wasn't briefed on what had changed since I last did it.'

³³ This was also commented on in the previous research on fair admissions in 2003, see reference at footnote 3



'...it's an issue of time required to find out about different qualifications or changes to vocational qualifications. Anything the University does to simplify that, such as providing guidance, is found to be useful.'

Better information on the context of qualifications to help with decision-making would be welcomed:

'It's not just about what's happening with A-levels and their grading, but about patterns of applications (i.e. the profile of applicant, and the grading of vocational qualifications – how many people get D and M at BTEC compared with B at A-level. Also how are grades distributed for AVCEs?'

'It is difficult for academic staff to understand the differences in curriculum at A-level, let alone all the different modules in other qualifications. There is a lack of nationally available information such as which schools use a particular exam board for a subject.'

'In the past, students had to list their individual BTEC modules. That has now stopped and they just provide their predicted grade. This adds to the confusion.'

One interviewee spoke about how new staff had the opportunity to address some of the student diversity issues in the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning, but the same opportunity was not there for older academic staff who were generally not as aware of changes in pre-HE learning and teaching. However, in some cases staff had the advantage of having a FE background and so could bring more of their experience there to recruitment discussions.

4.4 Perceptions about subject relevance

Some subjects which vocational applicants have studied are considered very relevant for particular degree courses. More commonly though, some vocational learners are seen as being unlikely to have sufficient subject knowledge to take some degrees. This affects the extent to which such students are encouraged to apply as well as selection decisions, for example:

'The School of Languages says that vocational qualifications aren't very relevant. You can't do a vocational qualification in languages. ...while leisure, service management, business, computing – they have a lot of L3 voc qual students. These subject areas have a direct link to BTEC/AVCEs.'

'If a student has done travel and tourism, the admissions team in law cannot see the connection between that and embarking on a law degree. There are some vocational qualifications where the connection is more apparent, e.g. business and finance, and thus this vocational qualification is considered for entry to the course.'

Interestingly, at another university offering law there was no such distinction made by subject.

On some courses it is clear that prior knowledge is a requirement, but how this is dealt with by broadly similar courses varies. Engineering-based degrees require a sound grounding in Maths: some will specify that a good grade in A-level Maths is required, whereas others are willing to work with the Maths element contained in a science and engineering-focused vocational qualification so long as the appropriate modules have been taken.

'We get very few AVCE applicants and I can only think of one entrant who has come via this route. In addition to the AVCEs they need to have an A-level in Maths at grade B, I suspect that this combination is rare.'

On some courses it is clear that prior knowledge is a requirement

We also found admissions tutors making unnecessary or just simply wrong assumptions about young people's choices

Where some course leaders felt that vocational students would not have the required subject knowledge to start degree level study (for example in science) for a variety of healthcare related courses, places on foundation years could be offered to vocational learners. However, this meant at least four years of study to degree and the added costs involved in an additional year, which can be off-putting. Other universities offering the same subjects found other ways to compensate for perceived knowledge deficits (see 5.5 below).

We also found admissions tutors making unnecessary or just simply wrong assumptions about young people's choices. In the quote below, the view expressed is that a young person takes a vocational qualification as a well thought-out choice that would give them specific subject knowledge and practical skills leading onto further qualifications in that area only:

'This is not a typically vocational course. If someone applied with AVCEs I would definitely interview them to examine what seems to me to be a very confused career choice'.

By contrast, A-level subject choice was generally perceived as less prescriptive, and non-relevant subjects were thought to bring learning and thinking skills. This impacts where some courses specify that AVCE/BTEC qualified applicants need to offer specific course-relevant subjects, whilst A-level applicants can present with any subjects, as in the following example:

Specified entry requirements for a course:

- ▷ A-levels – 240 pts any subject
- ▷ AVCEs – 200 pts but must be in a relevant subject
- ▷ BTECs – must be in a relevant area (no points specified).

In terms of points requirements, it can be seen that the subject-relevant vocational learner is at an advantage. However the non-subject-relevant vocational learner is at a disadvantage in comparison to A-level learners.

4.5 Benchmarking against academic qualifications and making equivalences

High entry requirements on popular courses usually bear little or no relationship to what is necessary for successful student performance. The grade requirement is often set to help cut down on numbers of applications examined in detail by admissions staff and/or to maintain 'market image'. We found that some courses have been increasing the required number of points over the last few years as demand for places increased from those able to achieve the required predicted grades (partly because of A-level grade inflation). This is a relatively easy way of cutting down time for decision-making when resources available are tight. But an unintended outcome can be to put off some vocational students who find it difficult to achieve the higher points from their chosen courses.

'The courses have been raising their points scores.don't know if that's affected the numbers of vocationally qualified applicants. I think at the top end (280 points) this may be a stiff requirement for people with only vocational qualifications'.

In the example below, AVCE students doing only the double award are thought to have been affected by this kind of points inflation, and also BTEC applicants because of a perception that the grade distribution for BTECs was more 'bunched' to the mid point – Merit. Very few applicants were now received from these groups, as in this example:

'...this course now requires 300 points – 3Bs at A-level, it went up from 260 points three years ago. BTEC equiv is DDM. We raised points because of upgrading of A-level results, students were getting more A grades, more applied, so that resulted in us making the grade requirement higher to help with selection. We used to get AVCE applicants, now we get very few as the maximum they can get with a double is 240.'

On some highly competitive courses, we found a double whammy for vocationally qualified applicants. This was where an applicant's GCSE profile was considered alongside their Level 3 qualification. There has been some evidence in the past that the correlation between 'good' GCSE performance and degree performance is greater than that between A-levels and degree performance. Several admissions staff interviewed used this research evidence to justify the practice of considering GCSE attainment (only making offers to those with high numbers of high grades) in making offer decisions. This also helped to cut down the number of offers given. However, there is evidence that those with a less impressive GCSE record tend to be channelled into the BTEC route by schools and colleges. Thus, making offers on this basis is likely to have a negative disproportionate outcome on BTEC applicants, and be an example of inadvertent indirect discrimination.

'Extremely high entry requirements means that applicants' GCSE profiles are considered to see whether or not students are likely to meet the standard. The faculty looks for at least 6 GCSEs at A, A or B grades - it is perceived that most pupils who go on to do vocational qualifications would not fit that profile.'*

A-levels are also being used as the benchmark when deciding on qualification attainment equivalences. Most universities have welcomed the UCAS tariff as it has made it much easier to see equivalences across different qualifications. However, the tariff was being used in a simplistic way in many institutions to set course requirements. The most usual method was first to decide on what A-level points total is acceptable and then to use the UCAS tariff to apply this to other qualifications. As A-level performance continues to increase year upon year so the points requirement rises to maintain similar numbers of entrants. However, it is unlikely that the performance distribution of all qualifications will mirror the A-level trends and so raising their entry points too can result in fewer of these applicants gaining entry.

'The decision on what the entry criteria are for vocational applicants stems from the A-level criteria. Once the A-level criteria have been set there is a UCAS tariff table to work out the required grades for other qualifications.'

Many courses in the research required a higher number of points for BTEC applicants because BTEC points do not directly relate to all possible points attainable through A-levels on the UCAS tariff:

'...we ask for 300 points A/AVCE and then translate that into 320 points for BTEC (because there isn't a 300 point exact equivalent). It would be better, in the light of perceived difficulty for BTEC candidates to get this grade (DDM), if they went down 20 points to 280 – DMM.'

Not all institutions follow this kind of process. One university produced a matrix of entry requirements for each subject which was updated each year. These were negotiated individually between central admissions staff and departments. Staff involved said there was investment in time and commitment to set up in the first place but once up and running it was relatively easy to use and update regularly.

We found some lack of clarity about the process of translating equivalences for example:

'The offer is made as a points score by the admissions tutor in the department and then translated by central admissions to BTEC grades. I'm not clear how that translation works. Points don't relate directly to grades in several cases so translation is important. Do they go up or down?'



Sometimes the reason behind a particular requirement can be hard to fathom. An example was found of a lack of explanation for differential grades:

'The standard offer for A-level/AVCE applicants for this course is BCC (260 pts), whilst for BTEC applicants it is DDM (320 pts), but when queried, the rationale behind this discrepancy was not found.'

However, problems of equivalences were greater generally for qualifications outside the tariff (which the research was not focused on).

4.6 Internal institutional pressures

There can be problems in improving vocational entry when the widening participation agenda, in all its forms, comes into conflict with other aspects of the admissions agenda, as was highlighted in the research literature review. One way this can happen is when the status of the university in newspaper league tables (which are computed using a formula that takes into account students' A-level points on entry) takes precedence at an institutional strategic level. For example, in the case of one of our participating universities:

'The overarching university strategy is to be one of the top universities world-wide. One of the measures is league tables. Performance is measured against A-level entry. There is a perception that vocational admissions will not help raise the University's status in the league tables.'

There were also concerns that market competition would increase with the introduction of top-up fees, and it was important to maintain or increase positions in newspaper league tables. In another, also a highly selective institution, the external perception about quality of a particular course was paramount in setting admissions points, in terms of A-level grades:

'We set high grades of AAB. The university doesn't want to be second choice, higher offers are made to aid the perception that this is a good course.'

And in another, this time a popular course at a university that traditionally had a good record in attracting vocational learners:

'We have traditionally had entry requirements of BC (180 pts). We were happy with the calibre of students and have not encountered any issues. However after feedback that some potential applicants were being advised not to apply because it couldn't possibly be a good course with such a low entry requirement, we have raised this to BBC (280 pts).'

Another internal pressure is resource constraints and effects of efficiency savings on workloads. Some of the lack of training and knowledge highlighted above can be attributed to academics' time being increasingly 'stretched'. But pressure of high workloads has another effect - more of a 'head down', narrow, immediate task-focused approach being taken in admissions in some places, which can lead to shortcuts being taken to cut down on time spent on tasks. An example of this is the raising of UCAS tariff points on popular courses to cut down numbers, as discussed in 4.4 above. There can be little time available to explore more imaginative, effective ways of doing things, to proactively seek out and solve issues or even to find out more about the array of qualifications they could encounter. This can lead to decision-making that favours the more traditional applicant and thus can indirectly hinder the entry of those with vocational qualifications. Another factor here is the trend towards employment of more part-time staff to improve efficiency (sometimes the majority in a department), which means that interviewing applicants with non-standard qualifications has had to be cut back:

There can be problems in improving vocational entry when the widening participation agenda, in all its forms, comes into conflict with other aspects of the admissions agenda



'Several members of staff have left and have not been replaced. Ideally we need an Admissions Secretary who could keep us up-to-date on all these qualifications.'

'Several staff used to be involved in making the admissions decisions. We had a comprehensive tick list of things to look for. However, this did take time, so now the Admissions Tutor makes all the decisions by herself. She uses her judgement and not the tick list, it's quicker'

There is a tendency for some selecting courses, when resources are limited and numbers high, to inadvertently give preference to early applications

There is a tendency for some selecting courses, when resources are limited and numbers high, to inadvertently give preference to early applications, making offers on a 'first come, first served' basis. This practice tends to take place in situations of mass application where it is not practical or preferable to deal with applications in one batch. Offers are made as the applications come in and if the notional limit on offers is reached before the application deadline all remaining applicants are automatically rejected. This practice favours applicants who have been well advised by their school or college. The admissions staff where this happened suspected that it may have an indirectly discriminatory effect on those with vocational qualifications, as applications tended to be made later (but this would need further research to substantiate).

'I have a feeling that vocational applicants as a group may not have thought about the HE option as much as the A-level applicants. I think that they apply later.'

'The early applicants are the Oxbridge types with predictions of 5 As.'

4.7 Making entry requirements clear to applicants

What the entry requirements actually are on a particular course can be communicated well or badly by different universities. There were issues for all types of qualifications, not just vocational ones but there were also some additional issues for these. Issues for all qualifications include: differing terminology; differing statements of points requirements depending on which information sources were accessed; omitting key information for applicants.

At one institution, the terminology differed between the website and the prospectus: e.g. 'advanced GCEs' vs 'A-levels', 'national diplomas' vs 'BTEC NDs', which may cause some confusion amongst young people. At another there were massive differences between the information on the website and that in the prospectus, with interestingly the prospectus being the most accurate: When probed about the tariff points required for a certain course the Head of Department quoted 240, the Head of Central Admissions quoted 140, the prospectus stated 280 and the website stated 200.

At another, it was noticed that a course requires that certain relevant subjects are taken; however, both the website and the prospectus fail to make any mention of this.

Some institutions experienced difficulties in getting full and accurate information about vocational qualification requirements into the prospectus due to lack of space. It can be difficult to list all the vocational qualifications because of the large number and the risk of making mistakes or not being accurate and up to date. Some prospectuses appear to provide much more information about A-level subjects and points than for other qualifications, especially BTECs. It was often said that each application would be looked at on an individual basis, and this seemed to be backed up by applicants' actions:

'Vocational applicants seem to always want more information about the entry requirements.'

It seems likely that the lack of clarity on whether vocational qualifications are acceptable will

result in individuals with vocational qualifications either thinking they should apply elsewhere or attempting to clarify their acceptance. Those dealing with queries from potential applicants were often administrative staff with little admissions experience.

There can be conflicts between use of the prospectus as a marketing tool and being informative to a wide audience of potential applicants with a range of qualifications and circumstances. For example:

'We have tried to encourage each faculty to specify what non-traditional qualifications would be accepted but they argued that it would get too detailed because of all the different ways some qualifications can be made up (i.e. some combinations within a qualification would be acceptable and others would not).'

Being unclear or ambiguous about vocational entry requirements can reinforce existing negative perceptions about the value universities really ascribe to vocational qualifications and ultimately to suspicion that certain qualifications are not acceptable.

4.8 Perceptions about progression within HE

One way of helping to inform staff better and change misconceptions is to collect evidence about the progress of students with different entry qualifications. There is a common perception that those with vocational qualifications find it more difficult to adjust to HE, thus making admissions tutors look more closely at their applications.

'A-level students have learned the value of independent study and are used to using books as a resource. Other students want more spoon-feeding. Their approach is more narrow and focused, they use the web more than books and thus do not read broadly around the subject. A broader, more eclectic approach is needed on this course.'

However, we found little or no research evidence to back up these perceptions, and they are likely to have been influenced by negative attitudes generally towards the value of vocational qualifications. Interestingly, this perception is similar to that expressed by other admissions tutors about A-level learners and exemplified in the quotation in 4.2 above.

By contrast, we also found some specific comments about the particular value of vocational courses pre-HE, and the kinds of skills individuals learned, such as on this education course:

'It's difficult to get through the selection process - to do with presentation skills and commitment to the teaching profession. We're not necessarily looking for academic high fliers, we're looking for other skills such as the capacity to deal with young people.'

Most universities now undertake some monitoring of entrants by qualification as part of their retention strategy

Most universities now undertake some monitoring of entrants by qualification as part of their retention strategy, through the HESA management statistics. Although this is not always ideal (A-levels and AVCEs are generally collapsed together, and it can be difficult untangling combinations of Level 3 qualifications from the way HESA data is presented), it is available for use at course level. There is also UCAS data available, and often distributed by the central recruitment offices to schools and departments about applicants and acceptances. The typical process seems to be that the monitoring is done centrally and then fed to Admissions Tutors and Course Leaders to aid in planning and identifying issues. Not many seem to make use of the available data to analyse progress of differently qualified entrants.

Many relevant staff with whom we spoke were unaware of the data they could make use of, and thus do not use them in any effective way, being reactive rather than proactive to any issues that arise. Some can actually come to wrong conclusions about their intake, for example:



'Most students on this course have AVCEs/BTECs, it is a very practical course': a comment from an admissions tutor on a course where the statistics indicate that actually over 70% of students come in with A-levels!.

Often, though, there can be a discontinuity between admissions and monitoring of the progress of enrolled students, because it is done by different people or different systems. This can make it difficult to obtain good comparative evidence of the progress of students, say with similar UCAS points but from a different range of qualifications, without undertaking specific research studies which departments would need additional resources to do (and we found rarely done). Conclusions are often drawn about the relative success of students from academic and vocational backgrounds based on people's perceptions or anecdotes. For example:

'No difference in the achievement and progress of students with vocational qualifications has been noticed by the course staff to date. There is no evidence that entrants from a vocational route have coped any differently to other entrants. The most academically able student in the third year has come through a pure vocational route – from a modern apprenticeship'.

4.9 External issues

In addition to these admissions and recruitment issues, a number of other issues were raised which related to:

- ▷ students' personal background
- ▷ the quality of careers advice
- ▷ the implications of choices of courses at 16 on university choices
- ▷ influences of other people and organisations on HE participation.

Although these are not directly issues for HEIs, they link into some points discussed above, and also relate to the development of local progression pathways by LLNs and others in which HEIs play a part.

Social class, linked with financial aspects, was identified by one course as a factor affecting choice of longer courses by vocational students. A-level students were considered to be more likely to be from a higher social class,

'...The length of the degree may be one reason why there aren't many vocational applicants – a social class thing. A-level students are more likely to be middle class. It takes 7/8 years to become a fully qualified architect. That's a long time to study with very little pay and a high student loan'.

As the literature shows though, social class can be linked with many other issues including family experience of HE, school support, etc.

In addition there are perceptions that 'professional' courses need A-levels when in reality they usually do not.

'the course is controlled by our professional body and the outside perception is that a professional course equals A-levels. Professional equals old fashioned equals gold standard. This isn't true'.

This can affect numbers applying and what kind of vocationally qualified people apply. We found that on professional courses included in the study, the relevant professional bodies which gave course approvals were less interested in entry to the courses than curriculum content and teaching standards. For example:

Social class, linked with financial aspects, was identified by one course as a factor affecting choice of longer courses by vocational students



A common theme raised by HE staff was around the quality of the advice and guidance given to young people

‘..Professional Body has no requirement for qualifications at L3. Requirements relate to exit not entry and are about benchmarks. They determine the content of course and not teaching methodology’.

A common theme raised by HE staff was around the quality of the advice and guidance given to young people. Some universities reported that potential students were given little, or misleading, careers advice from their schools and colleges, for example :

- ▷ that only vocational qualifications in certain subjects would be accepted for certain courses where this is not the case
- ▷ that BTECs are not accepted for a particular vocational discipline when they are, and strong efforts were being made to encourage more BTEC applications
- ▷ that entry requirements are for 12 units so that students with a double AVCE are not encouraged to do any additional qualifications, despite the fact that their local selecting university is looking for 3 x six-unit awards for entry onto most of its courses.

Issues such as these had been uncovered by our interviewees in the course of their universities outreach work, often prompted by the widening participation action plan and Aimhigher work in schools and colleges. The quotes below give examples of the concerns that many had about the poor level of advice being given to those doing vocational qualifications by their schools or colleges:

‘Vocational students are being treated and advised totally differently to A-level students about what those qualifications mean. In some FE institutions and 6th forms there is still a hierarchy which sees A-levels as the standard entry qualification to any university and is less clear on vocational qualifications – students are often left to find out for themselves. People are often surprised that this University accepts vocational qualifications.

They are seen as a route for people that can’t do regular A-levels. The University believes that teachers, and parents particularly, need educating as well as the students. The University works with Year 10 parents about university generally and the routes through university’.

One of our interviewees emphasised the need to change assumptions about students on different education pathways. Many of the barriers were thought to go back to earlier education stages (a point also made in the research literature review.). In their outreach work in schools and colleges this institution often had a problem in even getting to talk to young people on ‘the vocational track’. They tended to be directed to A-level students only as there was an assumption by teachers that they would be the only relevant group of interest to the university visitors.

Needing academic qualifications in addition to vocational qualifications, and the opportunities available pre-HE to mix qualifications and move between pathways, was an issue discovered in some places. We found examples of points requirements worded in terms of one type of qualification or a mixture. For example:

The entry requirements for a course are:

- a. ABB – 3 A-levels
- b. ABB – 1 AVCE plus 2 A-levels or a double AVCE plus 1 A-level
- c. BTEC – to be considered on an individual basis,

implying flexibility in requirements. But we also came across some universities which would only accept a vocational qualification with an A-level along with it. This was a cause of concern for some in recruitment and admissions when they discovered that several local



colleges had stopped offering A-levels because they were perceived as ‘too hard and did not want their students to fail’. In other colleges, timetabling meant that it was impossible for some of their students to take vocational qualifications alongside an A-level. An example of the difficulty such restrictions caused to applicants was highlighted by a highly subscribed healthcare course which required a specified subject at A-level. Some VCE applicants to this course were doing the A-level at evening classes, as this was their only option locally.

Some admissions staff felt that mixtures of qualifications are becoming more common so it would be interesting to know more about how prevalent the advice is to mix qualifications and help keep options open, how much difficulty there is in doing so (from practical timetabling problems for example) and how much some of the examples we found are a real trend.

‘Very few AVCE applicants also have A-level – not even one a year. Will usually be Psychology or a Biology AS. No BTEC applicants have A-level’.

‘This is not a vocational subject, we specify a Grade B A-level. We would be happy to consider someone with AVCEs if they had the A-level as well, but we’ve never had an applicant with this combination’.

Quality of teacher references on UCAS application forms was raised by some interviewees as a general issue not solely pertaining to vocational learners. Teacher references are usually considered in making decisions about offers. The standard of references though was often poor, and the poorer ones (bland, useless, identical for all students) were more likely to come from colleges rather than schools. It was suggested that this may be due to the referees having less knowledge of the student or that they were colleges with little tradition of getting students into HE. This could be adversely affecting a higher proportion of vocational learners than A-level students with more of them likely to be at FE college. Thus there may be an indirect discriminatory effect. This issue would be worthy of further investigation as there were also examples of colleges providing particularly strong support to vocational students in their UCAS applications.

‘I have the impression that the quality of reference for those with BTEC is not as good as that from a 6th form teacher. Often it’s short and uninformative, as if the person doesn’t know the student. I’m judging the applicant and not the referee so I don’t take much notice of this in my decision but it’s an opportunity missed by the teacher’.

Finally, an issue was raised about the influence of employers on young people’s choice of degree study and employability. Many graduate recruiters still use A-level points as a selection filter. We also heard about degree courses where a placement is an integral part, experiencing employers turning down applications for placements because of a student’s lack of A-level qualifications. This attitude of employers can also rub off on some professional bodies where concerns arise as to the employability of non-A-level entrants, and their ability to acquire a professional training place, e.g.

‘The Law Society takes into consideration employability which means students have to get a 2.1 to get a training place at better law firms. Firms are looking at A-level grades, it’s become so competitive. We have not got evidence that vocationally qualified entrants do worse in getting a 2.1, but there is still academic snobbery’.

Many graduate recruiters still use A-level points as a selection filter

5. Examples of strategies to help improve entry and minimise barriers for vocational learners

The previous chapter has presented a number of issues identified in the interviews which affect the entry to degree study of the vocationally qualified. At some institutions, we found also some examples of ideas that had been put into practice or were being considered to help improve their participation. This chapter puts together these findings with some strategies identified in the research literature review. They cover the following broad themes:

- ▷ attracting more vocationally qualified applicants through changing attitudes, improving the ‘message’ and being clear on qualification requirements
- ▷ changing attitudes internally about vocational qualifications and improving information and guidance to HE staff
- ▷ improving the admissions process through changes in selection practices and decision-making on offers
- ▷ using research evidence better, monitoring admissions and progression
- ▷ improving curriculum ‘fit’ between degrees and pre-HE qualifications
- ▷ providing more routes through to degrees which require high grades at entry (cascading HE qualifications).

5.1 Attracting more vocationally qualified applicants

There are some universities that already attract a large number of vocationally qualified applicants

There are some universities that already attract a large number of vocationally qualified applicants. This is partly because of their culture and history as institutions that welcome a broad range of entrants, partly because they have had a policy in place for some time to treat VCE and GCE A-levels as of equal value and partly because of the continuing outreach work and partnership arrangements they have formed with local schools and colleges. It would be easy for such institutions to become complacent, but even within these there are departments and courses that receive no or few applicants of this nature. Additionally, most such institutions were of the view that they would benefit from attracting higher numbers of the better vocationally qualified young people across the institution.

Being attractive to vocational applicants is fundamentally about creating and building on the perception that the university or course actively welcomes applicants from all routes, that their applications will be treated seriously, and that students gaining entry via these routes enjoy the experience and progress well. These messages need to be sent via a variety of media and need to be consistent in nature; unfortunately it is much easier to build a poor image than it is a good one!

We found more examples of good practice in the area of attracting more vocationally qualified applicants than in any of the other areas listed above. It is an area in which even the more selective courses and institutions, that currently take very few if any vocationally qualified entrants, could make an impact, as shown in this example:

Positive messages in all publicity material

A university that has not traditionally attracted vocational applicants is working to change that situation. As part of this, it has reviewed all its publicity material to ensure that opportunities to send this message have not been missed. Their Young Person's Prospectus, aimed at school students in years 9 – 11 to help them make sound subject and qualification choices for their aspired-to careers, specifically highlights AVCEs and BTEC Nationals as routes into HE. There are profiles of students who came in to the university via a variety of routes, not just the traditional A-level one. In another booklet, Investing in your Future, which is a guide to student finance, a section on scholarships clearly identifies attainments necessary for vocational applicants along with those for students with academic qualifications.

In several institutions there had been a focus on providing better information in the university prospectus

In several institutions there had been a focus on providing better information in the university prospectus (and also on websites and secondary information/publicity in departments) to attract more applicants. The following is an example where a change in the admissions process had led staff across the institution to systematically consider their entry requirements in relation to different qualifications. It also helped to inform staff better about the qualifications and to change attitudes internally (as discussed in section 5.2 below):

Clarity of requirements in the prospectus

A university has recently changed the way in which it handles applications, moving from a devolved system in which all decisions were made in the departments to a centralised one in which all standard applicants are dealt with centrally with little or no departmental involvement. As part of this reorganisation, all departments were required to complete very detailed and explicit entry requirements for use by the central team in making offer decisions. As one member of staff said, this had a really positive effect on the way they treated vocational qualifications:

'It was really beneficial to complete the entry templates, as it forced us to sit down as a team and get really clear about what we needed. We sort of knew but had never formalised it in this way. It helped us to spot where we had been a bit inconsistent in the past in the way we had made our judgements, to challenge what we really did need and to be more confident as to where to draw the line.'

The work done in producing these has reaped benefits as these now automatically form the basis for the entry in the prospectus, the page on the website and the other departmental publicity which is produced for the courses. An example of entry requirements in the prospectus for an engineering related course is as follows:

- ▷ Advanced GCE level: 200 points including mathematics or a numerate science at grade C.
- ▷ VCE A-level: 200 points including grade C in engineering or science.
- ▷ BTEC ND/NC in science or engineering with merits including mathematics.
- ▷ Irish Leaving Certificate: 200 points including grade B in higher mathematics or a numerate science
- ▷ Scottish Highers: 200 points including advanced higher mathematics or a numerate science at grade C.
- ▷ IB 27 points including maths and physics at grade 5

We found a good range of outreach work being undertaken in most participating institutions

Another university had found that the work they had done on the UCAS entry profiles was beneficial in forming the basis of all information given to applicants. It ensured that it was up to date and consistent.

In another university the relationship that the central admissions team had built up over many years with academic departments helped considerably in information exchange. It meant that small changes to different qualifications and courses were accommodated easily in the admissions matrix produced each year – ‘we are all talking the same language on admissions’.

We found a good range of outreach work being undertaken in most participating institutions. However, some gave more attention than others in this to potential applicants from vocational courses. This ranged from having stalls at Aimhigher events to working with individual schools and colleges in a highly targeted way. Some had stronger partnership arrangements with local colleges and schools than others, but as has been pointed out in the previous section, even where partnerships are well established, it can be difficult to get the right messages over to the vocational course students as often teachers do not see them as a group which universities will be interested in. Some examples of the activities in this area are:

Outreach work with schools and colleges

- ▷ Reviewing the list of schools visited regularly to ensure that the full range of schools and colleges is visited and not just a select group that traditionally is a good source of applicants (but may not have many taking vocational qualifications).
- ▷ Running admissions forums externally to discuss the range of entry routes to HE.
- ▷ Running local events for school and college staff to inform them about current changes in 14-19 qualifications and curriculum, including the university’s views on new qualifications.
- ▷ Working with students in schools/colleges to expand their horizons and develop their awareness of and aspirations for higher level study, and to give hints and tips on the application process.
- ▷ Targeting those who write the references on application forms, to inform them about university requirements and selection criteria.
- ▷ Ensuring that partnership arrangements with local FE colleges feed into institutional curriculum groups, so that there is a good curriculum fit between their courses and those offered by the university.

Where outreach work is undertaken there is a feeling amongst recruiters that it is not only the direct positive messages that are sent that influence the perceptions of potential applicants but also the indirect ones; that a university does mean what it says if it is willing to spend time and money improving links.

When outreach is undertaken at a departmental or course level it can have greater benefit in raising the awareness of admissions and academic staff of what different L3 qualifications entail, allaying concerns about their value, and picking up detailed points of misinformation/perceptions held by schools or colleges which then can be directly tackled in any future information exchange. This can have resource implications for departmental staff but is seen to be of value, as in the following example from an admissions tutor in sports science.



'I was concerned that we were not getting applications for the course from BTEC students. I knew that the local college taught BTECs so I went down to have a chat. It turns out that people think that we don't accept these as valid entry requirements onto the course. We do, and as there is a highly vocational element to this course we feel that people with this background can bring a lot. We are now liaising with the college on an ongoing basis and looking at how we can work to alter this perception more widely.'

There has been considerable work carried out on articulating vocational pathways that includes L3 courses in FE and HE courses as part of the mapping exercise for Lifelong Learning Networks and under the remit of Aimhigher. These fell outside the remit of the vocational admissions research project, but include projects such as Building Pathways in South Yorkshire, the ALPS project in West Midlands, the UCLan Flying start project, and also other Access to HE projects. Some of these were identified in the research literature review.

5.2 Changing attitudes internally

The issue of changing attitudes within the institution towards vocational learners, including generalisations that they are less able or find it more difficult to adjust to HE than traditional HE applicants, has been tackled by several institutions. In some institutions a policy had been in place for several years to treat VCE and GCE A-levels the same way. This had been aided by the publication of the UCAS tariff that allocates the same points to grades in both qualifications but it had taken a long time to win over some staff.

In some institutions a policy had been in place for several years to treat AVCE and GCE A-levels the same way

Changing staff attitudes

At this university, internal work on changing attitudes had begun after the introduction of the advanced GNVQ (back in 1992, see qualification reforms earlier in section 3.2). It involved them in what was described as a 'long investigative journey' to find out more about the qualifications and students taking them. The university has now a widely accepted policy which treats AVCE and GCE A-levels as having the same value. There was some resistance to this at first from faculty staff, which was overcome through discussion and taking staff into colleges and schools. It was also helped by older admissions staff retiring and the recruitment of new staff, many of whom came from the FE sector.

Other universities have attempted to tackle the emotional aspect of attitude change by changing admissions decision-making behaviour. For instance, in one university, a course had been piloted aimed at departmental and course-related admissions staff. It was designed to meet learning needs in making consistent and fair admissions decisions for applicants from different educational backgrounds. Another HEI had issued new admissions guidelines as a means of ensuring greater consistency in approach among devolved admissions staff.

Attitude change can also be achieved by providing evidence that is objective and contradicts beliefs. One relatively widely held belief identified in the research was that students from vocational (particularly BTEC) backgrounds were less likely to be successful on degree courses than A-level students. This belief can be tested through the use of HESA statistics (see 5.4 below). One participating university was using the analysis of its admissions statistics in a staff development programme for admissions staff. It was also planning to run a conference especially for admissions staff.

5.3 Improving admissions practices to ensure fairness

Some admissions practices have been in place for some time and although they may have been tinkered with for practical or resource reasons they have not been systematically

reviewed to ensure that there are no unfair hidden barriers to entry. However in a few cases these reviews had been done and significant changes have resulted. For example:

Reviewing the admissions process

A highly popular course reviewed the entire admissions process 3 years ago. This resulted in:

- ▷ A change to the entry requirements to make it clear that BTEC National applicants were welcomed
- ▷ A more welcoming positive approach to non-A-level applicants when dealing with telephone enquiries
- ▷ A more competency-focused, systematic way of scoring the UCAS form when short-listing
- ▷ Not taking account of the wider GCSE profile beyond what is required for entry (as evidence is that this practice can indirectly discriminate against BTEC applicants)
- ▷ Diversity and interview training for all staff involved in admissions
- ▷ A structured, criterion-focused set of interview questions to be used with all short-listed applicants.

Since making the changes the department has found that the diversity of entrants onto the course has increased, not only in terms of entry qualification but also in terms of gender and age too.

There were several examples of admissions staff getting further, more relevant information via the use of assessed portfolios of work

Other courses recognise that the UCAS form in itself does not give sufficient information to distinguish between good and less good applicants. Previous educational attainment is only a small part of what makes a successful student and thus simply raising the academic entry requirements would be irrelevant. There were several examples of admissions staff getting further, more relevant information via the use of assessed portfolios of work, interviews and written exercises. Where these activities to collect additional information have been properly designed, they provide significantly more valid evidence on which to make decisions and thus lead to more confident decision-making. However, there were also examples where interviews were being used in informal ways to make judgments, without rigorous evaluations about their fairness.

5.4 Using research evidence, monitoring admissions and progression

Many interviewees reported that they would like more statistical information on how applicants with different types of qualifications progressed through the admissions process and on the subsequent performance of students with different qualifications once they were accepted onto their course. This information would help address some of the negative attitudes held generally towards vocationally qualified applicants. It would also help institutions and courses understand whether or not they have a problem in the recruitment of vocational learners. If they do, they could ascertain whether the problem relates to their offer decision-making, to applicants' offer acceptance or them achieving the offer grade, or perhaps to their ability to attract sufficient applications in the first place. One institution, with relatively small numbers of students, carried out an analysis of admissions for the courses in the study based on a 'hand' count. This proved to be of great interest to admissions staff and in one case went against staff perceptions of what was happening.

All participating institutions have received a new UCAS dataset (as part of this study) which should help them carry out more detailed analysis of qualifications patterns for their institutions as a whole and for the courses involved in the study. This provides additional information, especially on combinations of vocational and academic qualifications, to the management statistics which they receive annually from UCAS about their institution.

The evidence from the study of negative perceptions of the performance of students with vocational qualifications, and particularly those with BTEC qualifications, highlights the need to provide objective comparative evidence for those with different qualifications. At least two institutions in the sample had attempted a comparative analysis of student performance – one for the three courses in the study and the other as part of a university-wide study on student retention. Both exercises suggested problems with interpretation of findings where numbers of students with a particular qualification are small and successful performance rates differed from one year to the next. It is important that any exercises of this kind are based on large enough samples, say from aggregating several years' worth of data or sharing information between institutions on specific subjects, so that spurious conclusions based on small samples are avoided.

A particular issue worth investigating further is the effect of the rising A-level grade requirements on vocational application

A particular issue worth investigating further is the effect of the rising A-level grade requirements on vocational applications and offers made (an issue highlighted in the previous chapter) and the relationship between higher A-level grades and success on a course.

5.5 Improving curriculum fit between degrees and L3 qualifications

Some of the outreach activities described in 5.1 above have also had the effect of improving the fit between degree courses and L3 qualifications and could equally well be described under this heading.

In addition, there were many examples of degree courses in the study that offered diverse teaching, learning and assessment opportunities that went beyond the traditional combination of lecture, discussion seminar/tutorial, essay and exam model. Providing a range of opportunities inevitably allows those with a range of learning styles and previous learning experiences to learn and demonstrate learning. In addition, the provision of a broad range of experiences is likely to attract a broad range of applicants.

Offering diverse learning and assessment

In this health-related course, which caters for a very diverse student intake, the first year module in Foundation Studies is about the skills needed to do the degree. It includes study skills, team working, action learning and reflective practices. Assessment techniques are varied in order to take into account the different skills students come in with but mainly as a means of testing different skills required on the course. Assessments include a reflective piece, journals, portfolios, case studies, case-based exams, practical exams, presentations, multiple choice exams, traditional exams and a research paper.

Some courses also used the first year as an opportunity for 'levelling up' so that all students, irrespective of the subjects studied at L3, finished the year with the knowledge and skills base that would allow them to succeed in the final two years of the degree. Often this involved the provision of a dedicated module, as in the following two examples.



Levelling up

An LLB course recruits students from a very broad range of education backgrounds. It has a compulsory Year 1 Legal Studies Foundation unit, which equips students with the skills needed to study Law; e.g. how to read a case/statute and problem-solving. In the past, this was often left to the student to work out for themselves and some were better prepared for this from their previous education than others. The introduction of the unit has been shown to help with the student retention rate, and a high proportion of students go on to practice law, taking the skills with them.

An Architecture degree course recruits both BTEC and A-level students but found that they have been conditioned by the pre-HE courses they have been on. The first year of the degree course is about developing students so that they have the skills to succeed on the course. For BTEC students that can be about looking outside and developing a cultural sense; for A-level students it can be about self-directed learning.’

Some courses also provided first year personal tutoring systems that supported the learning of students from diverse backgrounds, as in the following example:

Learning support

The personal tutoring system goes alongside the Year 1 Legal Studies Foundation unit described above, and was developed at the same time. It requires compulsory student attendance. If students don’t attend, they don’t pass the Legal System unit. Tutoring aims to identify students’ support needs e.g. dyslexia or English and also provides help to them in understanding tutor feedback for coursework. It involves students attending two half-hour 1:1 sessions in the first semester. In the first session students and tutors look at a piece of written work to identify needs. In the second they go over the first piece of course work and tutor feedback.

‘We have evaluated the effect of making this change by looking at retention rates, which appear to have improved.’

In some cases the ‘levelling up process’ included the provision of very subject-specific input in areas of the curriculum that for other similar courses might be specified at L3. For example in a Pharmaceutical Science course, modules in year 1 did not assume all students had A-level Chemistry and so went over a lot of the knowledge in the A-level syllabus.

In other cases universities provided this subject-specific knowledge through pre entry courses in the summer before enrolment.

In order to improve ‘fit’ and help students adjust to degree study, one university has focused on the skills and knowledge requirements provided in L3 courses by their linked colleges:

‘Work has been done with local colleges to not only ensure that potential applicants take the right combination of subjects but also that the curriculum contains the essential elements of pre-learning for the courses.’

For some, the kinds of activities described above may feel ‘remedial’. They may be thought to cover deficits in attainment or knowledge that should have been achieved at an earlier stage in education and are assumed to be covered by the A-level curriculum. However, there are some well documented examples of vocational degree-level courses, such as veterinary

science, that provide ‘remedial’ development in Year 1 for A-level students of skills and knowledge that are covered by the L3 curriculum of vocational courses. We somehow do not seem to categorise this activity in the same way.

5.6 Providing opportunities for transfer from courses with different attainment entry requirements

The negative impact of rising A-level grade requirements for some courses on the recruitment of students with vocational qualifications has been discussed above. One way in which we found this effect had been remedied on courses in the study was through the provision of ‘cascading’ courses. Applicants with lower grades are enrolled onto courses that share a curriculum with those courses with higher grade requirements. They are offered the opportunity to transfer at the end of Year 1 and/or sometimes at the end of Year 2 if they achieve a set grade. The following are some examples of this practice:

Cascading courses

In an engineering department, the BEng and MEng degrees have different entry requirements but a common Year 1 and 2. Students can change from BEng to MEng or vice versa. They need to attain at least a 50% average at the end of Year 1 and 60% at end of Year 2 to change from BEng to the MEng.’

A Law department recruits more BTEC/AVCE applicants to the BA than LLB because their predictions are lower – most usually CCC. AVCE students doing just the double award are unable to achieve 300 points which is required for the LLB, so they would only be able to get onto the BA. However, if they get over 50% at the end of Yr1 they can transfer onto the LLB. (but it was not known how many of those that transfer are vocationally qualified)

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This research has attempted to delve under the skin of what is happening in admissions which is just one aspect of the student life cycle, namely admissions:

- ▷ Aspiration-raising
- ▷ Pre-entry activities
- ▷ HE admissions
- ▷ Induction
- ▷ Moving through the HE course
- ▷ Employment

In concentrating on the admissions process and how this impacts on vocational learners the research has inevitably highlighted issues and good practice relating to other aspects of the cycle.

This section of the report brings together the research findings and makes recommendations for action to:

- ▷ national and regional bodies
- ▷ higher education institutions
- ▷ FE colleges and schools
- ▷ individual courses.

It focuses on the issues and therefore inevitably highlights more the negative findings of the research. These need to be put into context. The research identified many examples of practice that supported the recruitment and admission of students with vocational qualifications as well as the development of teaching, learning and assessment processes that aimed to maximise student success irrespective of background. These practices are most evident in institutions that were not ‘highly selective’ and courses which did not have very high applications to places ratios. Some of the recommendations are built on these findings.

No overt discriminatory practice by individuals was found in the research.

No overt discriminatory practice by individuals was found in the research. Many of the issues identified have their basis in structural factors that require action at national or institutional level. Often admissions staff and academic staff, although possibly unaware of these factors, have put into place practices to counterbalance them. These are the basis of the good practice examples provided in Section 5.

The following describes issues raised in the research and relates them to recommendations for key stakeholders. Although recommendations are directed at improving outcomes for vocational applicants many will inevitably have a positive impact on applicants from a variety of educational backgrounds.



6.1 Parity of esteem of academic and vocational L3 pathways

A key overarching factor affecting the acceptance of vocational qualifications, as entry requirements for degree courses was the lack of parity in their treatment when compared with GCE A-levels. At national level the ultimate expression of this is the recent White Paper on 14 – 19 education, where the opportunity to integrate the academic (A-level) with the vocational stream was lost to the ‘status quo’.

Lack of parity was expressed in the following ways:

- ▷ A perception amongst some admissions staff that vocational learners were less able and prepared to succeed in undergraduate study and would need more support
- ▷ Use of GCE A-level attainment as a baseline for expressing the Level 3 requirements in terms of the UCAS tariff
- ▷ Those with vocational qualifications being required to attain higher UCAS tariff points than those with GCE A-levels
- ▷ Verification of relevant subject knowledge for L3 vocational qualifications that was not required for the A-level curriculum despite similar lack of information on knowledge content
- ▷ Prospectuses and other recruitment literature often providing clarity of requirements for A-level applicants but ambiguity particularly for applicants with BTEC qualifications
- ▷ An HE curriculum, particularly in the first year of degrees, based on the skills and knowledge needs of A-level students with those offering other qualifications perceived as requiring ‘remedial’ input.

The government’s message on vocational qualifications contains tensions and contradictions

The government’s message on vocational qualifications contains tensions and contradictions. On the one hand funding, resources and energy are being applied to encourage the progression of those with L3 vocational qualifications to HE through the Aimhigher programme and the more recent Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). On the other hand the message of the recent 14 – 19 White Paper continues to be of separate systems which bring the baggage of separate histories of progression to HE and acceptance as a prerequisite for HE admission.

Whilst Aimhigher is promoting the progression of those with L3 qualifications onto the full range of higher education courses, most Lifelong Learning Networks will identify and develop progression pathways for vocational learners in specific subject areas. Again this sends a message of separate and different pathways for vocational learners and underplays the importance of broader skills and personal development at higher educational levels.

It would be of great benefit to the development of more positive attitudes among some staff in HE and a consensus on the parity of esteem of vocational and academic qualifications at L3 if the government were to make this parity clear through its legislation on the shape of 14 – 19 qualifications and its activities to encourage vocational progression to HE.

However, the lack of a government and legislative level response should not prevent other stakeholders in the process acting to bring about parity through their initiatives.

Unintentional and indirect discrimination against vocational applicants can creep in at any of these stages

6.2 Improving admissions practices to ensure fairness

The admissions process involves a wide range of activities including: decisions on course and institution admissions requirements; marketing; responding to requests for information; making offer decisions using the UCAS form and perhaps also other forms of supporting information and making the offer. Unintentional and indirect discrimination against vocational applicants can creep in at any of these stages.

It is recommended that:

HEIs encourage the review of admissions practices at central and course level to ensure that they are equal in their effect (not just treatment) and that inequalities, as they relate to vocational applicants, are addressed. This will also involve monitoring the admissions process itself and its success in selecting successful students.

6.3 Improving knowledge of vocational qualifications

There were a wide variety of HEI staff involved in providing advice to potential applicants on the phone and in person and in making admissions and curriculum decisions. These included central staff in admissions, recruitment and widening participation roles as well as faculty and course related administrative and academic staff. Understandably, in view of the continuing changes, a need has been identified for information on the range of vocational qualifications, their equivalences, where to obtain information on them, curriculum content and assessment methods. This information need is likely to be necessary for all qualifications, including GCE A-levels (as expressed by some of those interviewed).

It is recommended that:

Higher Education Institutions bring together a variety of opportunities for staff of all types to acquire and then update this information since no one medium is likely to meet all staff's needs for knowledge or their time availability. Activities might include:

- ▷ Staff development events
- ▷ Information from these in the form of materials
- ▷ Relevant information updates
- ▷ Information on useful websites

Since much of the information needed is likely to be the same across HEIs it is recommended that national organisations such as QCA, LSDA or UCAS are providers. Some Aimhigher regions and LLNs have started to develop web based learning resources and databases on pre HE qualifications. Awarding bodies such as EdExcel and AQA also provide information. These need to be consistent across the country and any national information resource could build on them.

HEIs should promote, facilitate and co-ordinate contact between courses with little experience of recruiting vocational students and L3 providers. Local or regional Aimhigher partnerships and LLNs can also be useful sources of information, advice and contacts.

6.4 The UCAS tariff

The provision of the UCAS tariff appears to have had a positive effect on the acceptance of qualifications other than GCE A-levels - VCEs in particular - by admissions staff. However, one of the major issues highlighted by this research has been the use of the tariff to benchmark vocational qualifications against the A-level in a relatively simplistic way and the impact this practice appears to have had on the recruitment of applicants with vocational

qualifications. Even those institutions that are not using the tariff to describe offers are making use of the tariff values as a means of deciding on grade requirements for entry for those with BTEC qualifications, but using A-levels as the baseline. This practice has had two observable effects.

6.4.1 VCE double award applicants

There is concern that some applicants with AVCEs are only able to take the double award (12 units) because of constraints imposed by their place of study and are therefore unable to apply to courses requiring more than the equivalent of 2 As or 240 tariff points. There were examples of courses in the study giving grade (rather than tariff point) offers which required grades amounting to lower tariff points from those with 12 units. Whether this is an example of 'good practice' requires debate.

It is recommended that:

HEIs and courses consider the implications of high grade requirements on the recruitment of those offering only 12 units at L3, particularly where this is likely to be a reflection of the constraints of the provider rather than that of the applicant. The debate on whether and how to act on this information could be facilitated by Aimhigher partnerships and/or the Lifelong Learning Networks.

More research is required on the incidence of the practice of restricting opportunities to 12 units for students doing AVCEs. Those organisations operating locally, such as Aimhigher area and regional partnerships and LLNs, would be ideally placed to do this.

It is also recommended that providers of AVCEs who are currently restricting opportunities to 12 units consider how they might open up provision so learners are able to study more units e.g. an additional A-level. The message on the impact that institutional constraints may have on individuals' choices in HE could be passed on by those HE personnel doing outreach work and by local and regional Aimhigher partnerships and LLNs.

6.4.2 Grade distribution – differences across qualifications

A second area of concern is that the distribution of grades for A-levels, AVCEs and BTECs differ, with a trend for higher grades to be achieved by GCE A-level candidates than the two other qualifications. According to the UCAS website the decision on equivalence is made by an Expert Group. However, no information is provided on the basis for the decision. Was this criterion-based – around some equivalence of measured knowledge/skill outcome? Or was it norm-based – i.e. around some measure of the distribution of grades? Or was it done according to some other criteria?

It appears that the current system may be contributing to the low numbers of vocational applicants on some courses – they count themselves out. It could also be a reason for relatively low numbers of offers to vocational applicants on others.

It is recommended that

UCAS provide clarity on the basis of tariff equivalence and review their methodology in the light of trends of rising A-level grade achievement and changes in other qualifications.

Admissions staff use the information on basis of tariff equivalence together with internal research on L3 attainment and student performance to identify the grade requirements for those with vocational qualifications.



6.5 Attracting vocational learners

There were both recruiting and selecting courses in the research that commented that they had few applications from those with vocational qualifications. In most cases admissions staff expressed a wish to increase these applications.

6.5.1 Marketing literature and websites

One possible explanation for the lack of vocational applications could be the ambiguous descriptions of entry requirements

One possible explanation for the lack of vocational applications could be the ambiguous descriptions of entry requirements, particularly in relation to BTEC Nationals. In some cases it was not clear whether they were accepted for a course. In others the actual grades required were not clear. Often applicants were directed to a paragraph in very small print at the back of the prospectus for information on their eligibility. There could be differences between courses within the same HEI in type and amount of information provided.

Institutions suffer from severe space constraints when providing information to applicants in recruitment literature. This information is often difficult to collect for those putting together websites and prospectuses from relevant staff. However, a few institutions in the research had been successful in doing this, suggesting that it is not impossible.

It is recommended that:

Research be carried out by the new UCAS source of expertise and advice on admissions issues on the successful ways of describing vocational qualification attainment requirements used by HEIs in England. The aim of the research would be to provide a variety of templates that describe course entry requirements from those with vocational qualifications so that HEIs can choose the one that best meets their needs.

In addition, it is recommended that UCAS reviews the usefulness of Entry Profiles in enabling HEIs to articulate more fully their entry requirements and, specifically, their requirements for vocational learners.

6.5.2 Course-related outreach

Another highly successful method for increasing applications from vocational learners is through outreach work. This can be done by institutional and/or course level staff. There were several examples in the research of course level staff with a particular interest in this kind of activity who appeared to have had a very great impact on applications from vocational applicants. This seemed to have been a particularly successful activity but requires either that staff do this work in 'their own time' (often the case at present) or that additional resources are allocated to it.

It is recommended that:

Those allocating resources at institutional, faculty or course level consider time allowances to support course related outreach work. From September 2006 top-up fees will pay for outreach outlined in new HEI Access agreements. This is a possible source of funding.

6.6 Analysis of UCAS and HESA data

Most staff interviewed at course level expressed an interest in receiving statistical information on the applications process and on the progress of students as it related to their entry qualifications. Statistical information on the admissions process will help institutions and courses understand whether they have a problem in the recruitment of applicants, in their offer decision-making in relation to these applicants or in whether applicants accept the offer



or make the offer grade. The evidence from the study on negative perceptions of the performance of students with vocational qualifications, and particularly those with BTEC qualifications, highlights the need to provide objective comparative evidence for those with different qualifications.

However, currently there are problems carrying out this kind of analysis since both the UCAS data provided to institutions (for admissions analysis) and the HESA data (for performance analysis) group vocational qualifications with others.

It is recommended that:

UCAS and HESA investigate how they can provide data that will allow HEIs to differentiate by qualification type. The need for this data will be of increasing importance with the development of LLNs. Previous research has also made recommendations about improvement to HESA data provision. It would be helpful to know when changes can be expected to be introduced which enable monitoring of vocationally qualified entrants to HE to be undertaken more effectively.

When this is forthcoming it is recommended that HEIs monitor the admissions of vocationally qualified applicants as well as the progression of vocationally qualified students in comparison with those with other qualifications at an institution and course level. Specific resources should be made available by HEFCE to enable this work to be undertaken.

6.7 HE teaching, learning and assessment provision

Views were mixed about the ability of those who came into HE with vocational qualifications to succeed on degree courses. It seems likely that those with the most strongly held negative views were offering HE courses that were based around their view of the learning needs of A-level students, thus making the success of entrants from other educational backgrounds (including those with vocational qualifications) relatively more difficult.

It is recommended that:

HEIs provide the opportunity for staff to exchange practice and experience gained in delivering courses which offer opportunities to succeed to those from a variety of backgrounds. In terms of examples from research this would include courses offering:

- ▷ *a range of teaching and assessment methods*
- ▷ *first year 'levelling up' modules aimed to bring all students to the same level of skills and knowledge by the end of the first year*
- ▷ *skills- related personal tutor support*
- ▷ *specialist subject support either integrated into first year 'levelling up' activities for all, or offered to some as additional, pre-entry support (before start of Year 1) or during the course*

To reinforce this it is recommended that the HE Academy Subject Centres also provide a forum to exchange practice in the context of enhancing outcomes for vocational learners.

6.8 FE college/vocational learner and HE student perspectives

The focus of this research has been on admissions to undergraduate courses in HEIs. This has meant that good practice and issues identified are centred on the HEI perspective. Notably lacking and very relevant is the perspective of FE colleges and the vocational applicants and students themselves.

Views were mixed about the ability of those who came into HE with vocational qualifications to succeed on degree courses

It is recommended that:

The following research is carried out to investigate issues from other perspectives:

Background to decisions of students to follow vocational pathways at 16

How vocational learners make decisions on which courses to follow at HE

How vocational learners view HEI's marketing literature

Organisation of vocational curriculum

This research could be sponsored by a number of bodies, e.g. DfES, HE Academy, LSDA successor body, HEFCE (or through Aimhigher partnerships and LLNs), possibly in a collaborative way. It would be useful also to explore how existing longitudinal studies (such as the Youth Cohort Survey, Student Satisfaction Survey, new Young People's Survey) could be utilised to address these specific questions.

There also needs to be improvements made in the available information on the size of the pool of vocationally qualified learners at Level 3. We were disappointed that we could not find accurate data on the total annual output of BTEC National awards in the same way as we could for GCE or VCE A-level qualifiers. Making this kind of information more easily accessible is important for several purposes, not least of which is to measure the success of current policy to encourage vocational pathways.

6.9 Conclusion

This research has been based on interviews with staff in a range of higher education institutions across England. It has provided evidence of the large amount of good practice demonstrated both at central and course level in the recruitment, admissions and development of vocational learners. It has also highlighted some of the issues facing applicants with vocational qualifications. But this was a relatively small study with a limited budget and so we have been able only to skim some of the issues; many are worthy of further investigation and debate. It is hoped that this research will provide evidence on which to build future practice so that vocational learners with Level 3 qualifications will be able to progress to any undergraduate course at any institution and succeed with the same opportunities as those with equivalent qualifications.

Appendix 1:

Subject areas participating in research

- ▷ Architecture – 2
- ▷ Audio Technology
- ▷ Computers/IT
Computer Games Software Development
- ▷ Dance
- ▷ Economics
- ▷ Education
Education Studies
Early Childhood Studies
Primary Education Teaching
- ▷ Engineering
Electrical and Electronic – 2
Mechanical
- ▷ English
English Studies
- ▷ Fashion
- ▷ Healthcare
Child Nursing – 2
Nursing – general – 2
Podiatry
Physiotherapy – 3
- ▷ Health Sciences
Biosciences
Pharmaceutical Science
- ▷ Law
LLB – 4
- ▷ Media Practice and Theory
- ▷ Psychology – 2
- ▷ Social Sciences
Sociology
Social Work
- ▷ Sports related
Sports and Exercise
Sports Rehabilitation
Sports Therapy

Appendix 2:

Further UCAS data analysis

The population covered in these statistics is young, UK-domiciled, full-time degree (excluding Foundation degree) applicants to institutions in England in 2004 (main scheme).

We originally asked UCAS for 2005 entry data, as more qualifications were on the UCAS Tariff for 2005 than 2004. However, UCAS was unable to release the 2005 data to us before the end date of the project, so the analysis below is for the 2004 entry year. Our request to UCAS produced a special run of data identifying certain qualifications separately and in different combinations. From this we have been able to derive a more accurate estimate than has been done previously of the proportion of applicants who are vocationally qualified at Level 3 (as defined for this study, ie holding the qualifications of recognised equivalence to A-levels - AVCEs, BTECs and GNVQ advanced).

Table 3 Highest qualification held by accepted applicants to full-time degree courses at different types of institution, 2004 entry (Percentages at each institutional grouping with specified qualification or qualification combination)

	Russell Group University	Other pre-92 University	Post-92 University	HE/FE college
L3 voc qual (BTEC, AVCE,) *	3.2	11.2	19.9	30.1
GCE A-level	96.4	83.9	83.0	80.3
GCE A-level only	71.2	64.5	58.9	49.1
GCE A-level with:				
- BTEC National	..	0.6	1.6	3.1
- VCE A/AS	2.1	5.1	6.7	9.4
- AVCE double	0.6	2.5	4.1	6.1
- Any L3 voc quals	2.8	7.5	11.4	17.0
No GCE A-level but has:				
- BTEC	-	1.9	4.8	8.9
- AVCE A/AS	-	1.2	1.6	1.8
- AVCE double	-	1.7	3.4	3.8
- any L3 voc quals	0.5	3.7	8.6	13.1
Numbers	60,573	67,756	184,324	20,865

* may have A-level or other qualifications also

... = <0.5%

Source: UCAS special analysis



Table 4 Highest qualification held by accepted applicants to full-time degree courses in different subject areas, 2004 entry (Percentages in each with specified qualification or qualification combination)

	Medicine + Dentistry	Allied to Medicine	Biological Sciences	Physical Sciences	Maths+ Computing	Engineering	Veterinary Science/ Agriculture
L3 voc qual (BTEC, AVCE) *	0.5	16.8	13.7	5.2	32.7	15.3	17.8
GCE A-level	90.2	83.1	85.2	89.2	72.7	76.3	78.9
GCE A-level only	66.6	61.5	67.9	74.3	49.9	60.4	58.1
GCE A-level with:							
- BTEC Nat	..	0.6	1.0	0.3	0.8	0.9	1.5
- VCE A/AS	..	6.5	4.7	3.1	10.8	4.8	4.1
- AVCE double	..	5.1	2.0	0.8	6.5	2.2	1.1
- Any L3 voc quals	0.5	10.7	7.3	4.0	15.6	7.2	6.3
No GCE A-level but has:							
- BTEC	-	3.2	5.4	0.7	5.9	5.2	10.8
- AVCE A/AS	-	1.2	0.4	-	5.9	1.3	0.5
- AVCE double	-	2.8	0.8	0.5	10.1	2.6	0.5
- any L3 voc quals	-	6.2	6.4	1.2	17.1	8.1	11.5
Numbers	6,541	12,591	22,594	11,246	15,763	11,958	2,098

* may have A-level or other qualifications also

	Architecture Build	Social studies	Law	Business + Administration	Mass Comms	Linguistics, Classics, etc	European Languages
L3 voc qual (BTEC,AVCE) *	17.8	10.8	8.9	30.0	20.1	4.3	2.7
GCE A-level	79.9	88.5	88.7	76.6	84.4	96.1	93.1
GCE A-level only	59.1	72.2	70.4	52.3	64.4	78.1	73.3
GCE A-level with:							
- BTEC Nat	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.3	2.6	0.2	-
- AVCE A/AS	7.4	5.4	5.1	12.3	7.0	3.1	2.3
- AVCE double	3.6	2.5	2.1	8.9	4.1	0.9	0.6
- Any L3 voc quals	10.8	7.5	6.9	18.7	12.8	4.0	2.6
No GCE A-level but has:							
- BTEC	3.2	1.3	0.8	1.5	4.9	0.2	-
- AVCE A/AS	2.0	1.0	0.6	4.5	1.1	0.1	-
- AVCE double	3.5	1.7	1.0	8.9	2.0	0.1	-
- any L3 voc quals	7.0	3.3	1.9	11.3	7.2	0.3	-
Numbers	4,810	16,745	13,675	27,417	6,531	8,966	3,155

	History, Philosophy	Creative Arts and Design	Education
L3 voc qual (BTEC, AVCE) *	3.3	31.5	27.6
GCE A-level	95.1	78.1	77.7
GCE A-level only	79.8	29.6	51.5
GCE A-level with:			
- BTEC Nat	0.2	6.7	1.6
- AVCE A/AS	2.4	5.4	10.9
- AVCE double	0.6	5.2	6.6
- Any L3 voc quals	3.0	16.4	17.5
No GCE A-level but has:			
BTEC	-	12.4	7.6
- AVCE A/AS	-	0.7	1.3
- AVCE double	-	2.5	2.2
- any L3 voc quals	-	15.1	10.2
Numbers	10,767	26,957	7,937

* may have A-level or other qualifications also

Source: UCAS special analysis

Table 5 Highest qualification held by accepted applicants to full-time degree courses in different English regions, 2004 entry (Percentages in each with specified qualification or qualification combination)

	North East	Yorks + Hum	North West	East Mids	West Mids	East of England	London	South East	South West	M'side
L3 voc qual (BTEC,AVCE) *	17.5	17.9	21.2	18.7	21.3	21.0	21.0	16.8	17.7	20.5
GCE A-level	90.8	91.6	88.1	91.4	88.1	87.1	84.4	91.5	91.7	89.6
GCE A-level only	64.9	67.3	65.5	66.8	64.9	60.7	61.5	65.9	65.8	66.6
GCE A-level with:										
- BTEC Nat	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.2
- AVCE A/AS	7.8	7.3	7.0	7.7	7.2	6.3	4.9	6.0	6.8	8.6
- AVCE double	4.0	4.1	4.6	3.7	4.0	4.7	4.3	3.9	4.0	3.8
- Any L3 voc quals	11.5	11.3	11.6	11.9	11.6	11.6	10.1	10.7	11.4	12.4
No GCE A-level but has:										
- BTEC 3.4	3.2	5.8	4.4	5.2	4.6	5.2	3.9	4.4	4.3	
- AVCE A/AS	1.3	1.4	1.9	1.1	1.8	2.0	2.2	0.9	0.7	2.1
- AVCE double	2.3	3.0	3.3	2.1	4.0	4.4	5.2	1.9	1.7	3.3
- any L3 voc quals	6.0	6.6	9.6	6.8	9.6	9.4	11.0	6.1	6.3	8.1
Numbers	13,071	28,480	22,963	22,448	19,691	12,324	30,139	29,255	20,132	8,047

* may have A-level or other qualifications also

Source: UCAS special analysis



Notes



Notes



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