

Vocational education needs a new toolkit

T levels could finally fix the academic-vocational divide, writes **Mary Curnock Cook** – but the needs of pupils need to be addressed much earlier

THE ACADEMIC-VOCATIONAL divide needs bridging with new approaches to literacy and numeracy.

Academic subjects are easily defined and relatively stable over time. Vocational disciplines, by contrast, range over an ever-changing landscape of sectors, technologies, techniques, and working practices. Awarding bodies attempt to cover this landscape by creating hundreds of vocational qualifications that many students and employers don't understand – falling back time after time on the trusted currency of GCSEs and A levels as the lead indicator of capability to progress to higher education or to learn and adapt on the job.

Leaving aside qualifications that are, in effect, a licence to practise, many employers use qualifications as a broad pointer to capability and a measure of "intelligence". Stripping this back a bit, it's probably true that employers are using qualifications as a proxy measure of

literacy and numeracy. GCSEs in English and maths, check. A couple of A levels in arts and humanities subjects, check. Some science and maths qualifications, check. Once into the realms of vocational or applied general qualifications, many will struggle to translate these to commonly understood standards of literacy and numeracy.

NVQs, GNVQs, vocational GCSEs and applied A Levels, applied generals, diplomas, and other attempts to design qualifications – that would have the same credibility and currency for progression as GCSEs and A levels – have foundered over the years.

They've done so because they were often seen as second-rate qualifications for lower ability students. A plethora of vocational titles and levels, more modular, internal assessment, less synoptic, external assessment and lower levels of numeracy and literacy not only produced less exacting standards for students to



DAVID PARKINS

meet, but also made meaningful regulation difficult. Grade inflation added to lack of confidence in these qualifications, calling their currency for progression into question.

The vocabulary of academic study – exams, syllabus, levels, subjects that are "studied" – sits awkwardly in a vocational learning context. In an attempt to create equivalence and "parity of esteem", we've tried over generations to use the academic assessment model for vocational learning and then wondered why it doesn't produce 'job-ready' students.

Limited options

The apprenticeship model should, in theory, be the ideal model for vocational learning. Confine the learning of knowledge to the classroom with appropriate assessment, and learn the requisite skills in a real job, earning while learning.

But the apprenticeship model has its flaws, too, especially for younger or lower-level apprentices, whose choices of career path are already severely limited by their lack of qualifications and low levels of literacy and numeracy. These are the students who would

do better to stay in full-time education and who most need meaningful programmes that bridge the academic-vocational divide.

The most limiting of all are the deficits in the keystone skills of literacy and numeracy. Forcing 16-year-olds to resit English and mathematics GCSEs is already widely seen as policy needing a rethink, given that less than 30 per cent of resitters achieve the required grades 4 or 5 (Grade C in old money).

Continuing to create, regulate and fund vocational qualifications that can be achieved without appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy will never support a technically qualified workforce that can progress to higher levels and which the economy so badly needs.

Many vocational qualifications are seen as below par because they can be achieved without the matching levels of literacy and numeracy that are necessary to undertake even relatively low-skilled roles, let alone the more exacting, complex, or technical jobs.

The critical ingredient to bridging the academic-vocational divide is the development of new approaches to literacy and numeracy. What is needed is a contemporary

curriculum with a context for learning that both motivates and engages students in developing their numeracy and literacy. That context for learning can itself be vocationally orientated, so that literacy and numeracy are developed as part of learning skills and knowledge that are relevant to the workplace.

New 'gold standard'

The government is currently preparing a new qualification-led initiative designed to be a "gold standard" in technical education – this time through T levels, created around 15 vocational pathways.

Bringing together employers, awarding bodies, stakeholders and teachers to agree content and standards for any sector is a task requiring so many compromises that the resulting qualification risks being too generic to support job-readiness.

If, however, these pathways provide a relevant and contemporary context for developing articulacy, literacy, quantitative literacy, technical fluency and cognitive agility at appropriate levels, they will have a chance to establish themselves as valuable qualifications

that will attract students less motivated by the traditional academic curriculum.

If they are successful, T levels should be an attractive alternative to A levels and other Level-3 study programmes, such as BTECs. To do so, they will have to be radically different in their approach. But transferring Level 3 learners from one qualification programme to another will not increase national skills levels overall. Arguably, fixing vocational education at Level 3 before addressing deficits at Level 2 is like asking someone to scale a ladder with a few of the lower rungs missing.

What is being done for the approximately 250,000 16-year-olds who need new ways to get back on track after failing to secure GCSEs in English and mathematics? This is the most urgent task for bridging the academic-vocational divide. ●



Mary Curnock Cook is chair of governors at Kensington and Chelsea College, and former chief executive of Ucas. She tweets @MaryCurnockCook

Join the debates

The UCL Institute of Education (IoE), in partnership with Tes, has launched a series of live debates on the key issues in education.

The debate series "What if..." will be free to attend and will reflect on the current status quo in education, celebrate progress and consider how we can improve things.

The panel is chaired by Professor Becky Francis, director of the UCL IoE. She says: "We're creating

a stimulating, outward-facing events programme that will bring these debates to the public, to education practitioners and policymakers, as well as to parents and students. We want to bring some fresh thinking to pivotal debates in the field."

Ed Dorrell, head of content at Tes, says: "The IoE has long been one of Britain's most influential homes for educational discussion – and so has Tes. It's a natural fit. I fully expect both the series

and the partnership to become firmly established on the education landscape."

Coming up in the series, we will discuss how to overcome the academic-vocational divide (28 November) and how to transform teaching as a career choice (5 December).

If you're not able to attend in person, you will be able to follow the debates on Twitter (search for #IOEDebates), as well as being able to watch live on the Tes Facebook page.

For more information, visit: bit.ly/TesIOEDebates