

Well under half of young people in England complete A-levels, yet the baffling array of qualifications available for their peers is rarely discussed.

Sandra McNally, director of the newly established Centre for Vocational Education Research, describes the complex system of post-16 technical education – and calls for major reforms to address our collective need for improved skills and social mobility.

Post-16 educational choices in England

Theresa May, the UK's new prime minister, has outlined her vision of a country that 'works not for the privileged few but that works for every one of us... because we're going to give people control over their lives'. A good place for her to start would be to make sure that the government sticks to its promise to implement the 34 recommendations set out in a recent independent report that aims to simplify radically the education choices available for people after the age of 16.

The Sainsbury Review, published in July, sets out a blueprint for technical education for young people and adults.¹ The report is wide-ranging and ambitious, with recommendations that cover many aspects of the way that education is provided. The government's Post-16 Skills Plan, published on the same day, says that the Sainsbury recommendations will be accepted 'unequivocally where that is possible within existing budgets'.²

Nowhere is reform more necessary than in the options for teenagers after they finish their GCSE exams at age 16. As my colleagues and I have outlined in the first discussion paper published by the Centre for Vocational Education

Research (CVER), the system as it currently stands is obtuse – even for us 'experts'.

We begin by noting that most young people do not follow the 'academic track' (A-levels) after leaving school, and only about a third go to university before the age of 20. Those who do follow the academic track have much higher prior attainment and are much less likely to come from a disadvantaged background than the average young person.

Yet progression routes for the majority who don't take the academic track but instead opt for vocational post-compulsory education are neither as well known nor subject to the same degree of discussion among academics or the media. This is partly a result of the complexity of the vocational education system and the

difficulty of deciphering the data that are available.

While young people opting to take A-levels merely have to choose the subjects in which to take their exams, those on the vocational path face a much more diverse choice set. There are thousands of courses available, varying widely in length, level, degree of difficulty and specialisation. Many of them have uncertain value in the labour market or they offer low prospects for progression to higher levels of education for those who obtain them.

If we are to tackle longstanding problems of low social mobility and a long tail of underachievers, it is essential that post-16 vocational options come under proper scrutiny. The sheer complexity of the system is particularly important to address. Indeed, complaints about careers information and guidance may arise more from the attributes of the system itself rather than insufficient attention paid to it by educational institutions.

CVER has made a start on unravelling all of this. As a starting point, we use linked administrative data to track the decisions made by all young people in England who left compulsory education after taking their GCSE exams in the academic year 2009/10. We follow them

England's system
of technical
education
requires a radical
simplification

¹ <http://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/report-of-the-independent-panel-on-technical-education.pdf>

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536043/Post-16_Skills_Plan.pdf

The menu of options for young people not doing A-levels is diverse and the progression paths are unclear

through the next four years to the age of 20. We observe their educational choices at each stage.

We put the many different types of post-16 qualifications into several broad categories, and we look at the probability of achieving various outcomes by the age of 20, conditional on the path chosen at the age of 17. We also take account of the influence of demographics, as well as young people's prior attainment and secondary school.

We look at later educational outcomes known to have a positive return in the labour market: staying on in education up to the age of 18; achieving an upper secondary (Level 3) qualification; starting an undergraduate degree; attending a Russell Group university; starting some other form of tertiary (Level 4 and above) education; and starting an apprenticeship.

Because classification of post-16 activities is complicated by the fact that many young people pursue different qualifications simultaneously, we develop a methodology for classifying learners by their main educational activity at the age of 17. While this is fairly straightforward for vocational qualifications that are equivalent to A-levels (in the sense that they are Level 3), it has not proven possible to do this for most lower-level qualifications, which are too diverse to be put into simple categories.

We find that A-levels and vocational equivalents at Level 3 are equally strong

predictors of staying on in education up to the age of 18 and achieving a Level 3 qualification before the age of 20. This is known to be a positive predictor of earnings and employment.

A-levels remain the dominant pathway to university – and in particular to Russell Group universities. But according to UCAS (the central organisation for admissions to higher education), vocational equivalents ('Tech Levels' and 'Applied Generals') are increasingly used as entry routes to university, either to undergraduate degrees or other higher-level pathways below the level of an undergraduate degree (such as foundation degrees or certificates of higher education), although they account for a much smaller number overall.

Our findings are more troubling in relation to lower levels of learning. For those starting out on one of the broad class of qualifications known as Level 2 at the age of 17 (usually because they have not done well enough in their GCSE exams), there is no clear trajectory to higher subsequent levels of learning. Most people starting out on Level 2 qualifications don't progress any higher up the educational ladder: only about 44% achieve a Level 3 qualification by the age of 20. For those starting out at Level 1 and below at the age of 17, the proportion is even lower at only 16%.

Furthermore, many people starting out at low levels of qualification continue to study these low level qualifications for several years, even though these courses are often of fairly short duration (and might be pursued part-time). In just this one cohort, around 10,000 young people were working towards low levels of qualification for four consecutive years.

We need to ask if this is a cost-effective way of providing 'second chances' in the current system. We also need to ask whether it is as good as it could be for learners. This seems unlikely given the fact that the institutions offering the substantial number of young people who cannot access upper secondary (Level 3) courses at the age of 17 are less well resourced than those for higher-achieving young people.

Schools receive more funding per head than colleges of further education.



Most people starting out at Level 2 qualifications don't progress any higher up the educational ladder

Yet the young people attending colleges are much more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than the average. What happens to them should be a key concern for all who are interested in promoting social mobility. CVER will tackle these questions in detail once we have mapped the pathways from education to work.

Roughly a fifth of young people in this cohort were taken on as an apprentice between the ages of 18 and 20 (about 40% of whom are on advanced Level 3 apprenticeships). The 60% accessing intermediate or Level 2 apprenticeships are lower-achieving on average (in terms of GCSE performance) compared with the average person in the cohort. Although the people accessing advanced apprenticeships are a little higher-achieving than the average, they have a completely different profile than those who undertake A-levels and go to university: the latter are much higher-achieving and less likely to come from a disadvantaged background.

In public debate about post-compulsory education, it is often suggested that many of those undertaking A-levels should instead take up an apprenticeship. Our analysis suggests that this scenario is unlikely unless the type of apprenticeships on offer changes in such a way as to appeal to these high-achieving young people or that the relative benefits of entering into an apprenticeship compared with going to university become more obvious (especially in terms of options for further progression).

Of course not all apprenticeships are the same in terms of level, sector and type of workplace. It will be important to distinguish between the merits of different types of apprenticeships in much the same way as one distinguishes between university degrees according to subject and institution. Such investigation forms part of CVER's research agenda.

In the meantime, it would appear that the apprenticeships on offer over the period that we studied have been helpful to those who would not otherwise have had the chance to go to university given their school grades. To the extent that these apprenticeships improve young people's labour market prospects in the medium term, the system may well have served to promote social mobility.

This article summarises 'Post-Compulsory Education in England: Choices and Implications' by Claudia Hupkau, Sandra McNally, Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela and Guglielmo Ventura, CVER Discussion Paper No. 1 (<http://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverdp001.pdf>).

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Inadequacies of careers guidance arise more from the complexity of the system than from what individual institutions are doing

