The case of England: vocational assessment's recognition problem

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Abstract

England has a well-established school examining system. Most of the school curriculum is academic in nature, preparing students for a university education. With a large volume of assessment of pupils, England has been criticised for having 'the diploma disease.' Recent reforms have reduced the number of assessments children take, as they were dominating their educational experiences. In parallel with this history of academic qualifications is a lesser known story of the availability and recognition of vocational qualifications. Yet another set of vocational qualifications is currently being designed, the T-levels, but they appear to be suffering from the same problems as the previous sets of reforms and are therefore doomed to failure. England's continuing struggle to design vocational qualifications at this level and its lack of recognition for such qualifications is an instance of social injustice through assessment practice, particularly since vocational education has been called on so readily as a motor for social mobility. In this chapter, we look at England's position, setting out an argument which explains England's poor record in this area.

Introduction

Educational assessment systems are bound with countries' social and historical contexts (Baird et al., 2018). As such, the issues raised in this chapter require socio-political, as well as educational explanations. Educational assessments are largely still a feature of the national or subnational context, rather than standardised or even easily classified (see Eckstein and Noah, 1993; Helms, 2015). Notwithstanding the globalising forces of supranational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, non-governmental organisations and edu-business, education and assessment are deeply political and often provision of the key, high-stakes examinations is a service of the state (Opposs et al., *in submission*). The four countries of the United Kingdom each have separate educational assessment arrangements, due to the devolution of government that has occurred this century in Wales and Northern Ireland and a longer history of maintaining a separate education system in Scotland (Furlong and Lunt, 2016).

In 2000, under a Labour government, the academic examination boards in the UK merged with vocational assessment bodies to produce the five organisations we have today. These mergers were required by government to produce more vocational education and followed publication of a Department for Education and Training consultation paper (DfEE, 1997). Since the Labour government lost office in 2010, the examination systems have been reformed, first under a coalition government of Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, and since 2015 under a Conservative party government. Politics has underpinned the values and purposes of the examinations and their reforms, with new governments seeking to emphasise different aspects of the education system. Examinations are used as a lever for policy in the education system, so individual ministers within the same government have made their mark through assessment reforms. With an average tenure of two years for a Secretary of State for Education in England this century, change is the norm. The history of examination boards in England is of regional boards merging to provide broader offers geographically, by qualification type and by subject matter (Tattersall, 2007).

England is distinctive internationally in terms of its provision of high-stakes, secondary school, academic examinations through a quasi-market in which five examination boards are able to offer the academic school-level examinations nationally (such as the GCSE and A-level examinations discussed later). These examination boards have different formal governance arrangements. For example, of the three examination boards based in England, one is a private company (Pearson), one is owned by the University of Cambridge (Cambridge Assessment) and one is a charity (AQA). The other two providers are based in Wales and Northern Ireland. A governmental examinations regulator, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates the market to ensure that there is public confidence in the examinations and standards are upheld.

For vocational qualifications, such as the T-levels discussed later, a governmental organisation, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, has been established to formulate their structure. Contracts are being awarded to awarding organisations to develop and deliver the T-levels, by subject area. At the time of writing, the first set of contracts has been awarded[1] for the *Design, Survey and Planning* and *Digital Production, Design and Development* T-levels subjects. The contract was awarded to Pearson, a British-based education and publishing company with a large international footprint, particularly in North America. Private ownership of vocational awarding bodies is not unusual. Two of the other examination boards in England – WJEC and CCEA – are formally charities, another is a standalone organisation (AQA Education) and the other being a subsidiary of Cambridge University (Cambridge Assessment).

In this chapter, we outline the issues surrounding vocational assessments in schools, as this is a particular case for social justice in England, where social class is the main driver of inequality. Vocational assessment at school level has had a turbulent policy history this century. The vocational assessment system is the focus of constant change (Keep, 2018), primarily in the name of skills development with the political aim of achieving 'parity of esteem' between the academic and vocational routes (Fisher and Simmons, 2012). Irrespective of whether parity of esteem has been framed primarily as an economic or social concern, the policy discourse about improving the quality and value of vocational education has a strong social justice dimension, as it was to bring those at the margins of society back into the fold (Avis, 2009). We seek to trace its history over the past 20 years or so, to look at the policy aims for the vocational assessment, reasons for their demise, the quest for parity of esteem for academic and vocational qualifications and current developments in vocational assessment reforms. We conclude by discussing ways of thinking about social justice in academic and vocational qualifications in England and what next steps are needed in this research area.

Parity of esteem

The distinction between vocational education on one side and general or academic education on the other reaches as far back as the beginning of Western civilisation. In Plato's *Republic* he explains that there are three types of people. Members of the lowest class are made for manual labour and the support of the upper two, ruling groups. An academic education is reserved for members of the highest class, who have the ability to engage in deeper, meaningful thoughts. Aristotle similarly argues that true education is the teaching of abstract, theoretical knowledge rather than concrete, practical skills (see *Politics*). According to Aristotle, people who enter vocational professions have to hire out their labour to gain a livelihood and can therefore never be truly free (Nightingale, 2001; Schofield, 2012), which shows how this kind of work has been seen by some as demeaning for centuries.

The view that vocational education is inferior to academic education has not died with ancient philosophers but has much rather found its way into modern English society. England's history as a colonial power and with enormous class differences plays a part in this cultural approach to vocational education and training. In other countries, such as Germany and Scotland, there have been different histories, leading to more respect for occupations that may not be deemed suitable for the upper classes, such as engineering. Earliest political attempts to improve the quality and standing of vocational education were made by the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction in the last quarter of the 19th century. Policy-makers wanted to ensure Britain's economic competitiveness through a skilled labour force fitting of an industrialised era; a concern that was to remain a key factor in education reforms ever since (Hyland, 2002).

The term parity of esteem, which describes the idea that vocational and academic education should be regarded as equal, was first officially used in the English policy discourse in the Norwood Report of 1943. This government-commissioned report declared that the purpose of education is "to help each individual to realise the full powers of his personality - body, mind and spirit" (p xiii). The different abilities and inclinations of every individual should be fully utilized for society and the labour market through an improved education system. Norwood's suggestions for sweeping reforms found their way into the Education Act of 1944, which - among many other changes - increased the access of working-class children to secondary and further education (McCulloch, 1994; Batterson, 1999).

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/contracts-awarded-to-deliver-the-first-t-levels

Largely forgotten over the following decades, the concept of parity of esteem made a comeback in English education policy in the late 1990s. Historical concerns over the lack of skilled labour and insufficient economic competitiveness re-emerged, prompted by the pressures of globalisation (Fisher and Simmons, 2012). On the neoliberal reform agenda of the New Labour governments under Tony Blair, parity of esteem became a priority (Hodgens and Spours 1999, 2008; Hyland, 2002). With a focus on lifelong learning and through the introduction of new vocational qualifications learners were supposed to be able to progress more easily from the vocational education and training (VET) system into further education or employment (DfEE, 1999; DfES, 2006). David Cameron's coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats retained parity of esteem high on their education policy agenda (Hodgens et al. 2011; Fisher and Simmons 2012).

The reasons for the championing of parity of esteem over the years and across party lines are manifold but can mainly be grouped into economic considerations on one hand and a way of "addressing a range of social ills" on the other (Brockmann and Laurie, 2016, p. 229). Additionally, VET reforms in the UK should be seen in the context of international economic and political developments, since the European Union also advocates for the strengthening and standardisation of vocational education (Spöttle, 2013).

The supposed goals and benefits of VET reforms in England included ensuring high standards for all qualifications - which would then be equally worthwhile and equally valued - and that lifelong learning and the teaching of key skills would provide better opportunities for vocational learners while making them more qualified for the labour market (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). One avenue by which parity of esteem was to be established was through the publication of standards-based linkages, which provided official tables of equivalence between different types of vocational and academic education (Shields and Masardo, 2018). As Pring et al (2009) pointed out however, such tables would hardly suffice to improve the standing of vocational education, if further educational and labour market outcomes continued to be unequal. Yet, the improved opportunities for vocational learners that were promised did not always materialise, as discussed below.

The concept of parity of esteem itself and associated policies have been taken to task by many critics, both on normative as well as on empirical grounds. In their report on the future of 14-19 education Pring et al. (2009) contest that,

> Perhaps the search for parity of esteem […] is not so much a false as a meaningless aim. There are different kinds of learning experience, different kinds of courses. […] rather than pursue parity of esteem in a highly divided system (with all the fabricated equivalences which that entails), the basic structure of the qualifications system has to be addressed. (p. 7-8)

Arguments that reforms were not fundamental and far-reaching enough were also presented by other authors. Brockmann and Laurie (2016) proposed that it is the historical class divide in England which finds its continuation in today's education system, a degrading policy discourse, and a hierarchical labour market structure that together prevent parity of esteem from being achieved. A social stigma attached to vocational qualifications could not be overcome by merely introducing a new type of vocational qualification or claiming parity (Leatherwood and Hutchings, 2003). Rather than bridging the academic-vocational divide reforms have led to an "'academic drift' within vocational learning where, in order to achieve 'equal standing', qualifications become more like those with which they seek parity" (Raffe and Spours, 2007, p. 42- 43). Trying to improve VET by making it more like academic qualifications, betrays the underlying assumption that an academic education is in fact superior.

In addition to the normative arguments criticizing the parity of esteem agenda, empirical research has shown that claims about parity of esteem "fly in the face of evidence" (Robinson, 1997, p. 37). Individuals with vocational qualifications achieve worse outcomes on a number of levels. Firstly, qualitative research shows that there is a continuing view shared by employers, higher education institutions, and students that academic qualifications are more difficult and worthwhile (Avis, 2009; Hodgens and Spours, 2010; Shields and Masardo, 2018). Furthermore, those learners who enter higher education through a vocational pathway achieve lower grades, even when controlling for a number of socio-economic factors (Shields and Masardo, 2018). Lastly, a study that compared labour market outcomes of people with supposedly equivalent qualifications in England from the 1970s to 1990s showed that across different types of vocational qualifications, professions, and gender those with academic qualifications were consistently promoted more quickly and earned higher salaries (Robinson, 1997).

Academics have also criticized the operationalisation of reforms to the VET system that were supposed to bring about parity of esteem. New qualifications are said to cater too much to the economy and employers rather than focusing on students and teachers. Additionally, the under-regulated, complex, and competitive nature of the vocational qualifications market makes it hard for all stakeholders to understand VET qualifications (Avis, 2009; Bathmaker, 2013). Hodgson and Spours (2008) argued that government efforts to raise the status of vocational education and qualifications have unfortunately not only failed to make the system more accessible and well-regarded but have rather added confusion about the structure and purpose of VET. The Wolf Report (2011) therefore argued that the failures of the VET system were,

> not despite but *because* of central government's constant redesign, re-regulation and reorganisation of 14-19 education. […] This is in spite of unprecedented levels of spending; and after thirty years of politicians proclaiming, repeatedly, their belief in 'parity of esteem' for vocational and academic education. (Wolf, 2011, p. 21)

If achieving parity of esteem is the desired goal, then achieving esteem for the vocational route is a key starting point, and this can only be done through a teaching and examination system that holds knowledge and assessment in the same manner as it does its other education and training routes (James Relly, 2019). Parity of esteem between the academic and vocational routes is a social justice issue, with the recognition issue relating to the need for various types of labour in the economy and the need for skills leading to employment for individuals in the labour market. As outlined above, parity of esteem alone will not fix inequalities in the labour market, nor indeed will it create employment for young people. Tackling the education system has been a much easier target for politicians than grappling with the structural inequalities that have come with globalisation, leaving many groups in society without an economic foothold.

Educational Assessment in England

Children start school in England in September and must be aged 5 before 31 August of the following year. They must attend school until they are aged 16, but they must be in education or training until they are aged 18, meaning that most young people (87%) stay in school or college until age 18 (House of Commons Library, 2017). In 2018, there were 3,436 state-funded secondary schools in England and 16,766 primary schools. There was a total of 2,320 private schools and 1,043 special schools (for children with special educational needs etc.) (Figure 1). The cohort size for national examinations is approximately 600,000 per annum. In total, there were almost 8.7 million pupils in the school system, with the vast majority (over 90%) in state provision. See Table 1 for a brief explanation of the different types of qualifications.

| Type of qualification	Descriptor
GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education	Exams taken by 14-16 year olds, usually in grades 10 and 11 in specific subjects, at a level below A-level
A-level – Advanced level	A subject based qualification used as an entry requirement to university, studied by 16-19 year olds
T-Level – Technical level	Two-year technical programmes for young people aged 16 to 19 to prepare students for entry into skilled employment, or higher-level technical study.
BTEC – Business and Technology Education Council	Specialist work-related qualifications often taken by 16-19 year olds
NVQ – National Vocational Qualification	Qualifications based on recognised occupational standards achieved through work-based and/or simulated work-based assessment usually taken by adult learners but sometimes taken by 16–19 year olds

Table 1: Types of qualifications

Millions of Pupils
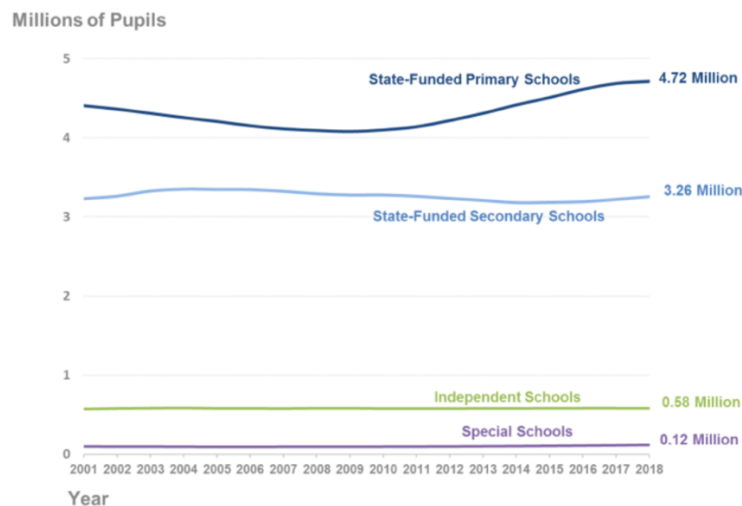
Figure 1. Number of pupils in schools in England

National assessments operate externally from schools at ages 7, 11, 16 and 18. At ages 7 and 11, the Key Stage Tests focus upon English and mathematics. There are plans to introduce a reception year baseline test in 2020, which will also focus upon early literacy and numeracy skills.[2]

At age 16, the main examination, taken by almost all pupils, is the General Certificate of Education (GCSE). A market also exists in subject choice: a wide variety of subjects are available (53) and the highest entries are for GCSE English and mathematics.[3] Individual schools offer only a limited range of these subjects, which is the main constraint on pupils' choices. An average of eight subjects was taken by pupils in 2018, but this varied and almost a quarter of students took ten or more subjects. In 2018, over 5.2 million GCSE results were issued. Most GCSEs have two question papers and some of them have a coursework or performance component. The question papers are set and marked externally, but the practical components are usually marked by the teachers and a sample of them moderated by an examiner appointed by the examination board. Introduction of practical work into high-stakes, national examinations was an innovation in England in the 1980s and a move away from traditional paper and pencil tests. This form of assessment meant that a broader range of knowledge and skills could be taken into account in students' outcomes. However, concerns about pupils, parents and teachers cheating have meant that recent reforms have reduced the amount of coursework in national examinations (see Baird and Elliott, 2018).

The pattern of choice of GCSE subjects has been heavily affected by the government's School Performance Table ('school league table') measures, which since 2010 have included a measure of the proportion of pupils taking Ebacc (English baccalaureate) subjects (English, mathematics, science, geography or history and a language).[4] Critics have complained that the Ebacc has squashed the arts and humanities out of the curriculum. Since the creative industries are very important to the UK economy contributing 5.3% (or approximately £84.5 billion; Belfiore, 2018, p. 2) this is of significance economically, as well as educationally. As we discuss below, the return to traditional subjects also veered away from vocational assessments. At both GCSE and A-level, the examinations have been turned into end-of-course, linear examinations, as opposed to the modular structure that was in place in 2010. The modular examinations had allowed students to take parts of the assessment in a staged manner and to build up credit towards their final grade. These structural reforms were part of a drive to increase standards and reduce the dominance of examinations in educational experiences. Recent research has shown that the outcomes from modular GCSEs were not higher than those from linear examinations, once students' prior attainment and other factors were controlled (Baird et al., 2019).

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[2] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reception-baseline-assessment

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-gcse-reform

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc

A-level is the main assessment taken at age 18. 36 subjects are available[5] and on average students take 2 to 3 subjects.[6] In 2018, 2.1 million A-level results were issued.[5] The most popular subjects are mathematics, biology, psychology, history, chemistry and English.[7] The universities have clarified in recent years which subjects they believe best facilitate learning towards a degree-level programme; the so-called facilitating subjects: the sciences, English literature; geography; history; mathematics and languages. Nonetheless, psychology, sociology and art and design subjects have remained popular.

Although A-level is the traditional qualification for higher education, recent figures showed that one quarter of all applications to universities had at least one Level 3 BTEC, which is a vocational qualification (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018). This student body overly represented characteristics of disadvantage in terms of geography, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and educational capital. Economic disadvantage is more prevalent in the North, Yorkshire, Humber and the West Midlands, where many of these students came from. Almost half of black students accepted onto a university course had at least one BTEC and one third only had BTEC qualifications. Parents of this student body tended to work in routine or manual occupations. Additionally, this group of students tended to come from areas in which a low proportion of students progressed to university. Approximately 5% of 16 – 18 year olds take up an apprenticeship (DfE, 2018, p6), but 86% of them are at college (Figure 2). These figures demonstrate the importance of the vocational route for social justice. This student group is marginalised by the academic route, where they are deselected from success. A vocational pathway allows participation and is intended to lead to future employment, higher human capital in the workforce and a better economy in the country.
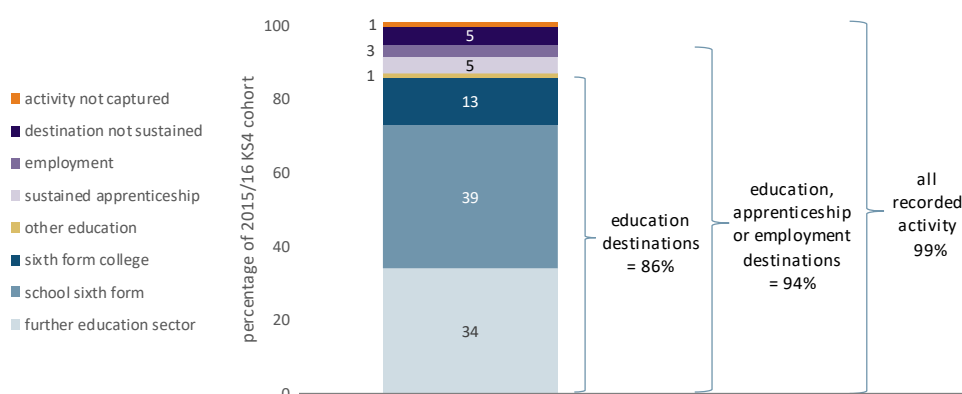

Figure 2. Pupil destinations in England after age 16 in 2016/17 (state-funded schools)

Source: DfE (2018)

Who are the examiners?

A recent survey of GCSE and A-level examiners gives us information on the characteristics of this workforce (Lockyer, 2018). There are approximately 60,000 examiners for these examinations and the survey responses included around one third of them. Almost all (over 99%) of examiners were teachers, although some of them had retired (17%). As in the teaching population, two thirds of them are women and there was a better representation of ethnic minorities amongst examiners (15% did not identify as White-British) than there was in the teaching population (9%). Examiners score students' work using a standard marking scheme on which they receive training and their marking is monitored for accuracy. Of course, teachers under-represent the social mix of the population in England, with fewer men, ethnic minorities and people from working class origins.

Who examines vocational qualifications is a much more complex picture. Vocational qualifications in the UK are competence-based, which means candidates must provide evidence to prove they have met the necessary level of competence to meet the standards in the qualification. Specially trained assessors assess the

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[5] https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-system/size-and-scale-of-the-system
[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guide-to-as-and-a-level-results-for-england-2018
[7] https://schoolsweek.co.uk/a-level-results-2018-business-studies-surges-in-popularity-as-geography-declines/

candidate's competence usually through observing their performance on-the-job and through a portfolio of work (documentary evidence) that the assessors evaluate against the standards of the qualification. Verifiers then verify the assessment of the assessors (Stasz, 2011). Assessors often work for the training provider, whether that be a school or further education college, and verifiers often work for the awarding organisation, which can be an awarding body or the training provider. So, while examiners of academic qualifications are seen as independent, there are problems surrounding who and how vocational qualifications are assessed:

> There is also a moral hazard problem for providers who also act as assessors where the [vocational qualification] is the unit of funding and where funds are dependent on its achievement. Although Ofqual approves and regulates the awarding bodies, the largest organisations are mainly private, for profit organisations (although some are registered charities). The processes adopted to develop and verify assessments linked to awarding of qualifications have not often been subject to independent research. (Stasz, 2011, p. 7)

There is much research on the processes of evaluating academic qualifications (see Baird and Elliott, 2018) yet as Stasz alludes to, the lack of research surrounding the evaluation of vocational qualifications underpins the tensions inherent in the standing of these qualifications.

Whose knowledge is assessed?

A smaller number of examiners set the questions for academic qualifications (8%), though there are significant constraints on the style and content of the questions that they must adhere to. The examinations regulator, Ofqual, sets out subject criteria and approves examination board syllabuses and sample question papers.[8] By law, the Secretary of State for Education can intervene on the content of the Key Stage tests. The most recent review of the curriculum, conducted in 2011,[9] was heavily influenced by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and the Secretary of State for Schools, Nick Gibb. Much was made in this review of comparisons with high-performing jurisdictions, identified through their performances on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) operated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). There are no easy answers from such comparisons of course because policy-borrowing across cultures with different histories and infrastructures is difficult. Two of the experts on the panel charged with advising the government on the 2011 curriculum review, Professors Mary James and Andrew Pollard, had misgivings about the pace of the review and its operation.[10] Consultations with experts in English, mathematics and science had been by-passed in writing the curriculum and a recent *Times Education Supplement* coverage has asked the question *Is curriculum design a dictatorship?*, with the Secretary of State for Education deciding when a review will take place, who will be involved and ultimately the content of the curriculum.[11] Over time, curriculum development has become more centralised in England and there has been less transparency about who is consulted or the process of decision making. Of the 11 Secretaries of State this century, only one did not attend university (Alan Johnson) and most of them attended elite universities: the University of Oxford (Damian Hinds, Nicky Morgan, Michael Gove, Ed Balls, Ruth Kelly) or Cambridge University (Charles Clarke). Vocational education is unlikely to come within the sphere of their personal or social experiences.

At the same time as the curriculum review on academic qualifications, Professor, now Dame, Alison Wolf, conducted a review of vocational qualifications. The Wolf Report (2011) opens with a foreword from then Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, who wrote that the poor quality and standing of vocational education meant that "young people are being deceived and that this is not just unacceptable but morally wrong" (p4). Highly critical of vocational qualifications, The Wolf Report showed low economic returns to an estimated 350,000 learners from low-level vocational qualifications. Most of the vocational qualifications were removed from the school performance tables (league tables) in response. Following this, there were revisions to the qualifications and an approved list are now included in the performance tables.[12] Moreover, in an attempt to improve quality in vocational qualifications, the current Government announced they will reduce funding to over 160 vocational qualifications, all at level 3 and below (Parker, 2019). With more than 12,000

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[8] See for example https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-subject-level-conditions-and-requirements-for-mathematics
[9] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175439/NCR-Expert_Panel_Report.pdf
[10] https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/national-curriculum-in-england-the-first-30-years-part-2
[11] https://www.tes.com/magazine/article/curriculum-design-dictatorship
[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2019-performance-tables-technical-and-vocational-qualifications

qualifications available, reducing the number is not immediately an issue. It is the opaque process and manner through which the changes to vocational qualifications occurred under the name of quality that is the issue.

Vocational assessment

Whenever a new government comes into power, the vocational education and training system often comes under fire. A call for reforming the skills system through relevant, high quality vocational qualifications with an assessment system to match is usually underlined by politicians' fervour as to how the vocational route is imperative to improving economic prosperity and the life of millions of people (DfE, 2011; DfE/DBIS, 2013; DBIS/DfE, 2016); a form of tacit social mobility. And yet, it is the vocational system and its qualifications that have seen the most turmoil over the last five decades (Sykes, 2009, p. 27), often with each reform meaning that the qualification morphs into an academic qualification in terms of content and assessment. A large part of this turmoil in the UK can be traced back to the mid to late 1900s.

A series of government reports from the 1950's onwards led to many government-sponsored training initiatives introduced between 1965 and 1994. These culminated in the development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which were introduced in 1988 and Modern Apprenticeships in 1994. Yet, instead of enhancing the standing of vocational training schemes and qualifications, the opposite effect was felt; the 'schemes became associated with cheap labour, social engineering and the massaging of unemployment statistics' (Ryan and Unwin, 2001, p. 99). A key example of this was the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). However, the YTS was ultimately rejected due to an assessment system believed to be too bureaucratic and time-consuming (by employers). Raffe's (1990, p. 63) accurate prediction that YTS ran the risk of 'being stigmatized as a scheme for the less able, the less motivated and above all else the less employable, and thereby being sucked into the vicious circle of low status' rang true. The plethora of unrelated vocational education and training initiatives were strongly criticised for failing to add up to an overall national strategy or system of vocational education and assessment (Ainley, 1990), and for lacking an effective interface with formal schooling and higher education. NVQs, at the time, were the main vocational qualification available and received much criticism due to a burdensome assessment system (Wolf, 2002).

As a consequence, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced in 1992 in a direct response to the White Paper, *Education and Training in the 21st Century*. This paper specifically focussed on establishing a 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational qualifications. GNVQs were to be school- and college-based qualifications studied alongside academic qualifications with some work experience and assessed through projects and assignments. The standard was comparable to A-level with one vocational unit equivalent to one sixth of an A-level qualification. Despite their popularity (in 1994-95 there were 250,000 students registered on GNVQ programmes), the complex nature of the qualification meant that it was replaced in 2007 with vocational GCSEs and Applied A-levels (see Table 1 for a description of the qualifications).

While vocational GCSEs and A-levels are still available, from 2008 Diplomas became the 'alternative applied route' (Pring et al, 2009, p. 119). Concerns about the offer around the 14-19 curriculum led to the establishment of a working group chaired by Sir Mike Tomlinson. The *Working Group on 14-19 Reform* made a number of suggestions. One suggestion was,

> That all students should work towards the attainment of one overarching qualification called a 'Diploma'. Existing qualifications, such as A-levels, GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), should evolve to become part of the new Diplomas.
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> (Ertl and Stasz, 2010, p. 302)

They were offered in 14 'Lines of Learning' designed to have three elements: principal learning related to an occupational sector; generic learning consisting of personal, learning and thinking skills, a project and functional skills in English, Maths and ICT; and additional/specialist learning, which included other qualifications or units allowing learners to tailor their programme to meet personal aspiration (Pring et al, 2009, p. 119). This was the first time that traditional, academic elements, were required to fit into a more vocational pathway. As the Diploma was designed for 14-19 year olds, the vast majority of which were in school, the assessment regime was developed to fit into that context. An example is the fact that even though the route was designed to reflect a blend of general and applied learning in 'real world environments' the

work aspect culminated in only 10 days of learning in a work setting to account for the fact that the students were in school and releasing them would be problematic, particularly given the requirements of the other qualifications being wrapped into the Diploma. Unsurprisingly, the administration of Diplomas in schools hit many stumbling blocks and after over £300 million in investment in the experiment to combine the vocational and academic, we saw their demise by the coalition government in 2013. The vast bulk of 14-16 year olds continued with GCSEs, progressing to A-levels, numbers moving to apprenticeship at 16 did not really change, nor did the numbers of young people aged 16 moving to full-time vocational qualifications in FE. And so the status quo was maintained.

The most recent initiative is the introduction of T-levels (technical levels), which will happen in September 2020. T-levels are designed to be the sibling of A-levels and a follow-on from GCSEs. They have equivalent credit to three A-levels and include three compulsory elements:
- a technical qualification, which will include
  - core theory, concepts and skills for an industry area
  - specialist skills and knowledge for an occupation or career
- an industry placement with an employer of at least 315 hours (approx. 45 days)
- a minimum standard in maths and English if students have not already achieved them

Although T-levels can be offered in both schools and FE colleges, the vast bulk of the providers offering these qualifications are in the further education (FE) sector.[13] This is an important point because the status of the institution matters (Keep, 2018) and with it coincides certain assessment and grading systems. For example, GCSEs are generally assessed through written assignments and written exams graded 9 to 1; vocational qualifications tend to be assessed through observation of practical work scenarios or situations and some written assignments graded as competent/not yet competent or with a pass, merit, distinction grading bracket. T-level students will be awarded with a nationally recognised certificate showing an overall grade of pass, merit or distinction and will include (DfE, 2019):
- an overall pass grade for the T Level, shown as pass, merit or distinction
- a separate grade for the occupational specialism, shown as pass, merit or distinction
- a separate grade for the core component, using A* to E
- grades for maths and English qualifications
- details of the industry placement

The issue here is that the assessment system is not similar enough to A-levels for universities to consider it - Imperial College London and University College London have already said they will not recognise the qualification (Grylls, 2018). While the exact assessment methods have not yet been announced, before the qualification is introduced and even with some more traditional assessment modes incorporated in it, the risk is that T-levels will not be seen as the sibling to A-levels but the poor cousin.

All of these changes to vocational qualifications and their assessment regimes point to various Governments' beliefs that in order for the vocational and academic routes to have 'parity of esteem' the routes must become similar. This viewpoint belies the nature of the vocational qualifications and the purpose of the route, and attempts to equate vocational and academic approaches to education are fundamentally flawed because the learning involved in each is structured differently (Spöttl, 2013). If education is to have any result in equalising the potential of students, regardless of the type of qualification, to achieve to their full potential, then constant changes to vocational assessment is not the answer.

Assessment paradigms and social justice

The political masters of the schooling system broadly and assessment more specifically are not representative of society. Only 7% of pupils attended private schools in the population, yet 29% of the Members of Parliament (MPs) in the current parliament were privately educated, 20 of the 650 MPs attended the elite Eton school and one quarter of them attended Oxford or Cambridge universities (Montacute and Carr, 2017). Just over half of the MPs (52%) attended a state, comprehensive school. Notions of social justice permeating assessment policy decisions come from the perspective of this group, in a highly centralised policy-making

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[13] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/providers-selected-to-deliver-t-levels-in-academic-year-2020-to-2021/providers-selected-to-deliver-t-levels-in-academic-year-2020-to-2021

system, as outlined above. Whilst good cases could be made for the lack of voice of many under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, those with disabilities and so on, as discussed above, it is social class that we focus upon here as the key explanation for weak policy in vocational assessment.

As previously outlined, different forms of assessment are available in the years before leaving school in England (See Table 2). Vocational education has been described as a good idea for someone else's children (Wolf, 2002) because of its lower status. It therefore comes with stigma. To explore social justice and parity of esteem issues, we must first outline the differences between the academic qualifications and vocational assessments in more detail, as they are paradigmatically different (Baird, 2018; Baird et al., 2018). The different traditions of assessment are referred to as 'paradigms' because they fulfill the features of a paradigm as set out by Kuhn (1962). They have different approaches to what should be observed, the kinds of questions that should be asked, how the questions should be structured and how the results should be interpreted.

Type of qualification	Academic	Vocational
Assessment paradigm	Curriculum-related	Competency-based
Typical assessment formats	Written examinations	Observation of performance, portfolios
Outcome	Grade (eg A* to G)	Pass/fail
Main purpose	Selection	Fitness for job
Key concerns	Reliability	Authenticity
Main social justice focus	Distribution	Participation

Table 2: Different forms of assessment

A-levels and other academic qualifications fit a curriculum-based paradigm in which the attribute of interest is the student's knowledge and skills, demonstrated in an assessment performance. The assessments can be high-stakes for the students and schools. A broad, academic syllabus defines the educational matters that students are intended to learn. Typical assessment formats are written examinations which might include short-answer and essay questions. Often the outcome of these assessments is a grade, which summarises the general level of knowledge and skill for the main purpose of progression to the next stage of education. Social justice issues are typically framed as fairness, with consistency and standardisation being paramount. This derives from the main function of the assessments, as devices for selection. Given this primary function, the proportion of candidates being awarded high grades is of great interest, as students' access to life chances and resources flow, to some extent, from these examination outcomes. Social justice is positioned as distributive justice, with debates centring around whether groups of students have had the same opportunities to learn and a justification for this form of assessment is the standardised approach – that is, everyone has been assessed in the same way.

In contrast, BTECs and other vocational qualifications are from an outcomes-based paradigm, in which the attribute of interest is competency in the specified area, which is normally outlined in terms of success criteria. Observable performance and authentic assessments are emphasised far more in this approach. As such, assessment formats are more varied and typically include observation of practical skills such as food preparation, bricklaying or forestry management. Results are often conveyed in a pass or fail manner, though grades are used in BTECs. These qualifications are designed primarily for the labour market rather than as a selective tool for higher education. They should indicate to an employer whether the candidate is fit to practice at a certain level in the field of practice. The outcomes-based paradigm has been situated within widening participation and personalised learning agendas in both academic and policy narratives. It is often seen, especially in England, as a route for less academically able working class children. The proportion of candidates being awarded a particular grade or passing is of less concern in this approach. More focus is given to the proportion of students completing the qualification. In stark contrast to high stakes examinations in the curriculum-based approach, there are no expectations regarding pass rates and it would be deemed as fair (so long as the criteria were met) if nobody passed, or all students passed. In some courses, there is not a syllabus as such, but a set of criteria that the students must meet. This achieves a high level of transparency, but it can also decompose learning into discrete performances with little connection to broader educational matters. Learning by doing can mean that students experience little teaching in some courses and in these circumstances, the assessment approach can resemble accreditation as opposed to education (Torrance, 2007).

Given the primary function of outcomes-based assessment as a route to employability, social justice is framed economically, with discussions focusing upon the economic return to the learner (as seen in The Wolf Report, 2011) or the employer. Taking just one employment sector as an example, the building trade, there is a shortage of skills in England, but training and apprenticeships are not funded well enough to fill the need. Migrant workers have taken up the opportunities over the past few years, though England is now a less desirable place to live for immigrants, with the pound being weaker and Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit) having loomed over society for the past three years. Construction companies changed their employment policies many years ago, such that workers are self-employed. They turned their backs upon any responsibility for training the young and providing the workforce of the future. Large construction companies were floated on the stock market and are not owned or held responsible locally or nationally for the effects of these policies. Indeed, from a neoliberal perspective, this is all in the natural order of market forces. Since England has had neoliberal governments for forty years, the lack of recognition of the social needs of the working classes and their communities is to be expected. However, there is an underlying issue of social justice in terms of recognition of the disadvantaged in this approach, due to the widening participation agenda that underpins it.

Conclusion

The quest for parity of esteem appears well-intentioned, if wrong-headed. Seeking social parity through the bureaucratic mechanisms of credit frameworks could only go so far. Economic parity could not be resolved through the education system at all, as it depended upon labour market effects and nothing was being done to address them. The notion of parity of esteem is itself under-developed. Questions of the kinds of parity to be achieved are not well explored as yet. Different kinds of credit are set up in the various educational structures that assessment processes interact with. For example, school and college funding bodies have criteria regarding how much money flows into budgets depending upon the kind of qualifications that students are studying. School performance tables (league tables) have points relating to each qualification that gain credit. Within schools and colleges there will be policies, however informal, regarding class sizes, teaching hours, teacher allocation and other resources for different qualification types. Universities have a points system for qualification grades, although not all institutions use this approach. Within this system, not only are there different currencies at play, but there are different actors with stakes in the qualifications taken by students. Students, teachers, head teachers, qualification providers, private training providers, the examinations regulator, the Department for Education, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, employers and politicians all have stakes in the qualifications taken by young people and each of these groups has very different motives and perspectives. Further, the actors, their motives and the general ecosystem is likely to be different across sectors: health care and banking have different structures, institutions and practices. Ultimately, though, parity of esteem is an abstract concept and one that is not necessarily recognised internationally. A significant and serious issue is whose esteem matters. Taking this argument further, esteem itself is not the important factor if vocational education and assessment are under-resourced. Disadvantaged young people are twice as likely to attend further education colleges than school sixth forms, where teachers earn on average £2,500 less per year, producing a situation where 90% of further education colleges reporting recruitment difficulties (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Vocational education and assessment are central to a well-functioning society. Yet, in England we generally have very weak approaches to VET because the designers of the system fail to formulate a cross-party consensus to build a system that will last. Part of this approach would need to be significant engagement with employers through lasting structures, as is the case in Germany. Recognition of the needs of society for these skills and jobs is a major oversight. With our attention turned to the global, local communities have suffered and withered and people have become disenfranchised. As argued above, understanding the different perspectives of the various actors and the currencies at play with respect to vocational education and training is important if better structures are to be created that recognise local, personal and civic needs for the kinds of skills developed through this kind of education. High quality vocational assessments that were available, funded and led to the prospect of jobs with living wages would provide better social justice in modern England. For successful vocational qualifications to be introduced, we need to learn the lessons of previous rounds of reform, but that is a long list:
- establish sustainable fora for sector-specific employer engagement

- ensure the qualification is not overly complex
- consider quality criteria for the qualification as part of the design process, including utility matters such as economic return to the learner and prospects for educational progression
- address the manageability and availability of work placements
- create a development process that ensures both vocational education and assessment expertise are utilised
- tackle the inadequacy of funding for the further education sector, who are most likely to deliver the qualifications
- articulate expectations of the qualification in relation to different currencies within the education system (learner progression, learner earnings, school and college league tables, university points systems, school and college funding points, qualification credit framework points, etc.) to prevent the qualification being revised to fit with academic assessment expectations
- produce a development process that has cross-party appeal, with prospects for longevity

At the current point in the reform process, the above list is likely to be unwelcome and to be read as 'do not start here', but if the history of vocational qualifications in England teaches us anything, it is that another round of reforms will begin shortly, bringing another opportunity to learn these lessons. Of course, reformed vocational qualifications will not magically bring about social justice in England in themselves. A recent report showed that people from family backgrounds with professional parents were 80% more likely to get a professional job themselves, compared with those from less privileged backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Currently, there are debates regarding the extent to which expansion of education has reduced the power of educational qualifications to produce social mobility (Goldthorpe, 2013). However, recent research utilising educational assessment measures across the lifespan using British Cohort Study data suggested that the effect of social class of origin did not have a direct effect upon social class destination but was instead mediated through educational attainment (Sullivan et al., 2018). Educational assessment still matters for social justice in England.

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