

14-19 qualifications strategy research

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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APPENDIX A: DIPLOMA DELIVERY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In September 2009, York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to undertake research to inform the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy, which set out four main pathways of qualifications: the general route – GCSE and A–Levels; Apprenticeships; Diplomas; Foundation Learning.
2. The focus of the study was the operation, role, and value of Vocational Qualifications (VQs) and Vocationally–Related Qualifications (VRQs) that are currently delivered as standalone qualifications and outside the four pathways.
3. The research activity comprised in–depth consultations with 14–19 partnerships in 10 local authorities (LAs), 50 providers (a mix of schools, colleges and work–based learning providers), 10 HEIs and discussions with learners on VQ/VRQ routes. While the research is essentially qualitative in nature and based on relatively small sample sizes, the consistency of message from the consultees across localities supports confidence in the robustness of key findings.
4. Throughout the report, for simplicity, we refer to VQs and VRQs as a single generic qualification. The distinction between the two is not always clear cut, nor is it directly relevant to our analysis. In terms of scale, the most prevalent VQ/VRQ, observed by some way, was the BTEC Diploma offered by EdExcel. Such is the popularity of this qualification, the majority of consultees would refer to a generic ‘BTEC’ rather than a generic VQ/VRQ.

Context: The 14–19 Qualifications Strategy

5. In 2005, the government published the White Paper *14–19 Education and Skills*, which set out a 10–year programme of reforms to transform the education system for 14–19 year olds in England. This included proposals to reform the qualifications offer, such as introducing Diplomas, a new suite of qualifications, and the expansion of Apprenticeships. Phased implementation of the Diplomas began during the academic year 2008/09.
6. In March 2008, a consultation document on 14–19 qualifications, entitled *Promoting Achievement, Valuing Success: A Strategy for 14–19 Qualifications*, was published. This emphasised the complexity of the existing qualification offer and set out proposals to reform 14–19 qualifications in England, with the intention of achieving a more rational and streamlined qualifications system by 2013.

The Current 14–19 Qualifications Landscape

7. The existing 14–19 offer in each of the partnership areas consulted as part of this research comprises a range of general, applied, vocational and practical learning options.
8. The general route (GCSEs/A–Level) is well established at 14–16 and 16–19. Provision in schools, in particular, is dominated by the general route, although a growing proportion of learners at 14–16 and 16–19 are now undertaking a general qualification in addition to a qualification from another route (e.g. Diploma) and outside of the four routes (e.g. a standalone VQ/VRQ).
9. Foundation Learning accounts for a smaller proportion of learners than the general route but, nevertheless, entry level and Level 1 provision is also well established. The provision may not yet be under the banner of Foundation Learning, but plans are being developed to move towards the Foundation Learning framework.
10. The proportion of learners in the Diploma route (at 14–16 and 16–19) is small, relative to the other routes and the provision currently outside the four main learning pathways. This reflects the phased roll–out of Diplomas, and lower than anticipated Diploma take–up. Apprenticeship provision accounts for a greater proportion of learners than Diplomas, but is still only a small proportion of learners and, to an extent, reflects a relative shortage of employers to support Apprenticeship places.
11. FE College provision is heavily dominated by standalone VQs/VRQs. In contrast, in work–based learning providers, most provision is Apprenticeships or Foundation Learning / Entry to Employment.
12. A range of factors have been noted as influencing the shape and balance of the 14–19 offer within providers, with the relative influence of these factors varying across partnerships and individual providers.
13. Of critical importance to partnerships and providers is the ability to offer a range of curriculum options which maximise learners’ chances of qualification achievement. It is evident that particular qualifications/ qualification routes are perceived to generate higher levels of learner success rates.
14. Ofsted Inspections or Area Inspections have prompted a widening of the curriculum for some providers/partnerships, in particular the expansion of vocational options. In other areas, the expansion of the curriculum dates

back to the introduction of programmes such as Increased Flexibility (2002) and Young Apprenticeships (2004).

15. In a number of cases, the offer is also determined, at least in part, by the offer of competing providers in the local area. At 16–19 this relates more specifically to the nature of the organisation (provider type and ethos).
16. Partnerships and providers are determined to offer a curriculum that fully engages all potential learners and meets their needs. This includes learners who are at risk of disengaging from school during key stage 4, or who may otherwise be NEET 16–19. Parental demand can also be a key influence (particularly on school and sixth form college provision).

Delivery of Standalone VQs/VRQs

17. Within the 14–19 phase, VQs/VRQs are available from entry level through to Level 4 and across a wide range of subjects and sectors.
18. At 14–16, there has been rapid growth of VQ/VRQ delivery in schools and through local collaborative arrangements. The majority of areas consulted reported increased VQ/VRQ take-up at 14–16. Typically (although not exclusively), VRQs (e.g. business, travel and tourism) are delivered in school. VQs (e.g. NVQs in construction, hair and beauty) are more likely to be delivered through collaborative arrangements with FE colleges, work-based learning providers or at centres with specialist facilities.
19. Delivery of standalone VQs/VRQs has not expanded as significantly at 16–19, but has still increased in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges over recent years, and looks set to continue to increase. VQs/VRQs account for a large proportion of provision in FE Colleges for 16–19 year olds. There is very little, if any, standalone VQ/VRQ delivery among work-based learning providers.

20. 16–19 VQ/VRQ provision typically includes more niche provision (e.g. aviation; gambling operations) and provision at Level 3 than at 14–16. There are also some VQs that have a specific occupational focus, and may be a requirement for entry to employment in particular sectors.

Profile of VQ/VRQ Learners

21. In order to better understand how VQs/VRQs are accommodated in an individual's programme of learning, we have segmented VQ/VRQ learners into the following broad categories.

14–16

- VQ/VRQ is a core part of the school curriculum for all learners
- VQ/VRQ provision is an alternative to GCSEs:
 - one or more VQs/VRQs are substituted for GCSE options
 - the VQ/VRQ forms part of a specific 'programme'
 - the VQ/VRQ has substituted a particular GCSE for a set group of learners only
- VQ/VRQ acts as curriculum enrichment

16–19

- a Level 1 or 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into employment in this area
- a Level 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into further education
- a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they wish to go on to pursue employment in this area
- a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to study it further in Higher Education
- a Level 3 VRQ acts as curriculum enrichment.

VQ/VRQ Learner Performance and Progression

22. Data from 14–19 partnerships indicates high levels of achievement on VQ/VRQ provision, which in turn has contributed to an increase in the proportion of learners achieving 5 A*–C GCSE or equivalent at key stage 4 over recent years.

23. However, while overall performance has increased, Maths and English achievement has not increased at the same rate. Specifically, some learners who achieve their VQs/VRQs (and possibly other GCSEs) are not achieving Maths and English at Level 2. Many schools have made reference to the use of ALAN¹ tests to provide learners with a qualification in Maths and English. On progression to further education or learning at 16–19, some learners may still need to re-sit GCSEs in Maths and English, particularly if they wish to go on to Higher Education (where ALAN tests are not valid for entry).
24. It has been suggested by partnerships and providers that participation rates 16–19 have increased (potentially as much as 10%) as a result of the VQ/VRQ provision available for 14–16 learners. Schools have cited examples of learners who they would not previously have expected to stay in learning (e.g. highly disaffected young people), progressing into further education at 16–19. This suggests VQs/VRQs may be particularly valuable for making progress towards *Raising the Participation Age*.
25. The progression value of the VQs/VRQs route can be significantly diminished if learners do not achieve Maths and English at Level 2. Concerns have also been raised about the currency of some qualification achieved at 14–16, for progression 16–19.
26. One of the distinguishing features of VQs/VRQs, identified by providers and learners, is their link to employment. However, literacy and numeracy requirements are commonly identified as skills gaps across many sectors, which suggests that while work-focused qualifications are valuable, greater emphasis should perhaps be placed on literacy and numeracy.

The Vocational Route to Higher Education

27. Vocational qualifications provide non-traditional learners with a very effective transmission mechanism to enter Higher Education. In theory, they have access to all parts of Higher Education but, in practice, are concentrated in FE Colleges and post-1992 universities. This, in the main, is determined by the vocational offer and project-based approaches available in these institutions.
28. Vocational learners are increasingly entering pre-1992 universities (including Russell Group Universities), although the numbers are relatively small. They do, however, require Distinctions and may find the support

¹ ALAN tests are Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy tests offered by the Awarding Organisation, Edexcel

structure less intensive than they are used to. Their qualification also needs to be from a subject 'relevant' to their degree course. Relevance is defined differently by different universities. It is important that vocational learners receive guidance at the point of selecting their qualification and are aware of its currency in the university marketplace.

29. According to admissions advisors, the main disadvantage that potential vocational entrants to Higher Education have, relative to A-Level candidates, is choice. The vocational qualification is specialised and specific to a particular subject. Its currency is not as transferable as A-Levels in the university market; particularly in Russell Group universities. This potentially poses a problem for learners deciding to switch their area of study.

Implementing the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy

30. Discussions with providers and 14–19 partnerships reveal that the value of each of the four pathways are recognised and individuals are able to observe benefits to learners who pursue those particular qualifications.
31. Any rationalisation of VQs/VRQs will inevitably increase the volumes in other pathways. For 14–16, it is likely to impact most on increased Level 1 and Level 2 Diploma participation, although many schools insist that they are more likely to fall back to GCSEs.
32. At 16–19, FE colleges are likely to experience an expansion of Level 2 and 3 Diplomas, plus Apprenticeships. School sixth forms and sixth form colleges would be likely to revisit applied A-levels (for their remaining shelf life). Work-based learning providers will seek to expand Apprenticeships, although they emphasise existing employer constraints. Of all providers, they are the least concerned about the implications of a rationalised VQs/VRQs offer.

Gaps in the Current 14–19 Offer

33. Despite these options for substitution, an overarching issue highlighted by the providers and partnerships consulted is that there are four key gaps in the offer:
- a ‘practical and vocational’ route for learners at key stage 4, who are borderline Level 1 / Level 2 or who have a spiky learning profile i.e. are learning at multiple levels;
 - a ‘practical and vocational’ route for learners at 16–19 who have not achieved sufficient at key stage 4 to pursue A-levels or pursue a Level 2 Apprenticeship (e.g. because of the key skills requirement).
 - a ‘practical and vocational’ route at Level 2 or 3 for learners at 16–19 who are not yet ready for an Apprenticeship (e.g. lack personal and social skills required for work placement), or are unable to secure an employer placement due to limited availability or because they are too young to work in the sector;
 - learners on qualifications at 16–19 that incorporate required industry training but where there are restrictions on learners gaining employment in particular sectors, until they reach the age of 18, or until they have a particular qualification.

Barriers to Implementation

34. While the needs of some learners could be met by the four pathways, partnerships and providers have some key concerns about the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy and a number of the implications associated with rationalising VQ/VRQ delivery.
35. ***Implications for learner performance*** – If VQs/VRQs were to be withdrawn or be significantly curtailed, there is potential it would impact on provider performance levels, particularly at key stage 4. At the same time, however, issues have been raised about the equivalence value of some VQs/VRQs and whether the VQs/VRQs provide learners with qualifications of real value. Nevertheless, taken at face value, rationalisation of the VQs/VRQs offer is expected to negatively impact on key stage 4 performance levels.

36. ***Diploma demand*** – Diplomas, on the whole, are not regarded as a viable alternative to VQs/VRQs. There are concerns that the value of the Diploma could be affected if learners unsure to this learning style pursue the option. The actual and perceived appropriateness of Diplomas to a wide range of learners is ultimately affecting Diploma take-up. This does not look set to change, unless views regarding the relevance are challenged across partnerships and providers, and better information provided to learners and their parents. It is evident that Diploma take-up is currently constrained by the popularity of alternative qualifications.
37. ***Loss of a valuable learning style*** – There is a common view that a valuable learning style would be lost by rationalising/withdrawing VQs/VRQs, due to some of the particular features of VQs/VRQs (e.g. style of learning, learning environment, incremental progression through levels, industry value).
38. ***Perceived value of VQs/VRQs relative to other qualifications*** – The four qualification pathways of the 14–19 Qualification Strategy are not regarded as substitutes for VQs/VRQs for many learners.
39. ***Quality of IAG*** – Partnerships feel that learners are not always receiving full and impartial IAG. They are not always being provided with sufficient information, advice and guidance about the full range of options available to them. This affects their views of particular pathways, and subsequent decisions they make.
40. ***Learner engagement and NEET prevention*** – There is a strongly held view that limiting the range of VQs/VRQs could damage the ability of providers to engage with learners who are not necessarily low ability, but are at risk of disengaging. They are also regarded as a way of engaging those learners who may be borderline Level 2 achievement at key stage 4. At 16–19, standalone NVQs and VRQs are pursued by learners that are not able to pursue a Diploma or get an Apprenticeship. There is concern among providers about what real alternatives there are for these learners.
41. ***Implications for learner choice*** – VQs/VRQs have been introduced to expand the options available to learners at key stage 4 and in 16–19 provision. While some learners can be accommodated in the four pathways, this will limit choice for learners. There may also be parental opposition.
42. ***Delivery challenges*** – Across all provider types in the 14–19 phase, a range of delivery challenges affect decisions about changes to the existing curriculum and the rationale (on the basis of funding or practicalities) for the existing curriculum. Some of these challenges have been presented as

key drivers for VQ/VRQ delivery and reasons for not delivering other types of provision in the four pathways.

43. Our analysis shows that while the four pathways in theory are capable of meeting the needs of the majority of learners, there is, in the main, strong opposition to a significant rationalisation of standalone VQs/VRQs. It is anticipated that this would have an adverse affect on both learner performance and learner choice. There is, however, recognition that the existence of standalone VQs/VRQs will potentially crowd out take-up of the four routes. Without market intervention, it is expected that the relative VQ/VRQ share of the market will continue to grow.

Recommendations

44. The recommendations below reflect consultees' suggestions about how, and where, VQ/VRQ rationalisation might take place, and actions which will be required to support implementation of the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy.
 45. **Refine the Structure of the Diploma:** Many providers recognised the Diploma as a valuable qualification, but felt that its current structure did not meet the needs of a significant cohort of learners whose needs are currently met by other VQs/VRQs. Refinements suggested included:
 - making it 'more like a BTEC' by taking some of the practical elements of the VRQ and the 'bite-size' components that learners particularly value;
 - introducing a more applied craft/vocational dimension;
 - making it more flexible such that there are potentially different routes through the Diploma.
 46. **Address Misconceptions about the Diploma and Ensure Effective Diploma Delivery:** Significant resistance to the Diploma exists among providers, and while some of this is based on experiences of exploring the potential to deliver the Diploma, there is a general underpinning issue about the extent to which there is a cultural willingness and commitment to the Diploma. Consideration should also be given to including VQs/VRQs as the Additional Specialist Learning (ASL element) (rather than GCSEs or A-levels) to make it more attractive to learners and provide them with a more varied Diploma experience. Attention should also be placed on ensuring effective delivery of functional skills.
 47. **Address Quality Standards:** Concerns have been expressed by partnerships and FE colleges about the quality of delivery of VQs/VRQs, especially in schools. By enforcing existing standards, or introducing more rigorous
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criteria, a self-selecting rationalisation could be achieved. This would have the double advantage of removing poor quality provision. In addressing quality, this review may also include looking at how functional skills can be integrated into VQs/VRQs.

48. **Remove 'Double' VQs/VRQs:** It has been proposed that schools (in particular) should not be allowed to offer double VQs/VRQs, i.e. those that are equivalent to 4 or more GCSEs, since their currency 16–19 has been questioned. Linked to this is the suggestion that only one vocational qualification should be counted towards the target for achievement of the Level 2 threshold (five GCSEs at A*–C).
49. **Head-to-Head Substitution:** The head-to-head substitution proposition is that any provider offering a Diploma should not offer a VQ/VRQ in the same subject. There is evidence that this is happening in some areas, although not wide-spread. Amongst some providers, there is an expectation that this ruling will be introduced.
50. **Address Exploiting Institutions:** There is a general consensus among partnerships that some providers (mainly schools) are exploiting VQs/VRQs to maximise performance. One strategy would be to identify and target those exploiting institutions rather than a blanket withdrawal of particular qualifications.
51. **Retain Some VQs/VRQs Regardless:** Consultees were reluctant to identify particular VQs/VRQs that could be withdrawn. They were, however, keen to emphasise those that 'must be saved'. These include subject areas not covered by Diplomas, the 'craft' VQs (which provide specific skills required for industry) and, what might be regarded as, niche subjects.

52. **Improve Consistency in Impartial IAG:** One of the key themes to emerge from our consultations with teachers, college staff and young people is the paucity of impartial advice and guidance available to young people. Young people choose subject areas, but are largely unaware of the merits of different qualification options available. Young people need access to impartial advice to make better choices and those informing their decisions also need better understanding of the qualification routes.
53. **Improving Outcomes at Key Stage 4:** Some of the arguments for standalone VQs/VRQs at key stage 4 and 16–19 are linked to learner achievements and outcomes at key stage 4. By placing different emphasis on outcomes achieved by learners at key stage 4, some of these issues could be minimised or eliminated for young people. This includes placing less emphasis on overall achievement at key stage 4, and focusing on learners achieving Maths and English at key stage 4 and developing personal and social skills.
54. **Engender a Culture of Challenge:** Regardless of the qualification routes available, providers need to ensure that this level of challenge always exists and that learners are guided onto provision that meets their learning needs.

1 CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

- 1.1 In September 2009, York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to undertake research to inform the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy. This report presents the findings of the research.

Context for the Research

The 14–19 Learning Landscape

- 1.2 In 2005, the government published the White Paper *14–19 Education and Skills*, which set out a 10-year programme of reforms to transform the education system for 14–19 year olds in England. This included proposals to reform the qualifications offer and in particular, to:
- introduce Diplomas, a new suite of qualifications, which would combine academic and vocational learning to provide an alternative to the traditional GCSE/A–Level route;
 - reform GCSEs and A–Levels to reduce the burden of assessment and increase stretch and challenge for the most able;
 - introduce a Functional Skills requirement in English and mathematics at Level 2 to ensure young people have the English and mathematics skills to deal effectively with everyday life and the workplace;
 - expand the number of Apprenticeships; and
 - provide better support for young people working below Level 2.
- 1.3 Phased implementation of Diplomas began during the academic year 2008/09.

The 2013 Vision

- 1.4 A consultation document on 14–19 qualifications, entitled *Promoting Achievement, Valuing Success: A Strategy for 14–19 Qualifications* was published in March 2008. This emphasised the complexity of the existing qualification offer for young people and set out proposals for reforming 14–19 qualifications in England, with the principal intention of achieving a more rational and streamlined qualifications system by 2013.

- 1.5 An implementation plan: *Delivering 14-19 reform: Next Steps* was published by DCSF in October 2008. This set out a number of very specific objectives for achieving the more streamlined qualifications offer by 2013.
- 1.6 In March 2008, DCSF published a consultation paper entitled "*Promoting achievement, valuing success: a strategy for 14-19 qualifications*". This paper set out the clear intention to move towards a more streamlined qualifications offer for young people aged 14-19. The strategy sets out the intention that by 2013 young people aged 14-19 will access qualifications through four national learning pathways:
- **general route – GCSEs and A-levels;**
 - **Diplomas;**
 - **Apprenticeships;**
 - **Foundation Learning.**
- 1.7 These are broad and flexible programmes of study which allow young people to tailor a learning package to fit with their needs and aspirations, whether those be theoretical learning, applied learning or a mixture of the two. All four routes are available for learners aged 16-19 and three routes for those aged 14-16. Apprenticeships are not available to young people under the age of 16, although young apprenticeship provision is currently delivered as a separate programme for the younger group.
- 1.8 Foundation Learning is currently being phased in. In some areas, provision already sits within the Foundation Learning framework, whereas in other areas, plans to incorporate entry level and level 1 provision into Foundation Learning are not as far developed.
- 1.9 The four routes are not intended to be mutually exclusive – a learner can work towards qualifications from more than one route. For example, a learner at key stage 4 may take a number of GCSEs, in addition to a Diploma.
- 1.10 From 2013, qualifications that are delivered as standalone i.e. not within one of these four routes, **will only be eligible for funding where they meet learners' needs which cannot be met through the four routes.** Achieving this requires a managed and gradual transition from the current qualifications landscape to the more streamlined system.

Research Focus

1.11 This research focuses on the vocational qualifications (VQs) and vocationally-related qualifications (VRQs)² that are not currently in the four routes i.e. are delivered as standalone qualifications. It explores provider motivations to deliver these qualifications in the 14–19 phase and the value to learners, employers and Higher Education (HE).

1.12 The objectives of the research are to explore:

- **what motivates learning providers to offer particular VQs and VRQs to 14–19 learners;**
- **the approach providers take in offering the VQs and VRQs** (e.g. classroom-based, simulation etc) and how this affects the choices of qualifications they offer;
- **what learning providers believe motivates young people to take-up particular qualifications** and whether any restrictions operate on choice (perceived or real);
- **whether particular VQs and VRQs meet the needs of specific groups of 14–19 learners;**
- **the views of young people, employers and HE providers about different types of qualifications**, in particular high take-up VQs/VRQs and the extent to which they support access to learning, prepare young people for employment and enable progression to further and higher education.

Methodology

1.13 The research activity comprised three strands:

- **qualitative in-depth consultations with:**
 - **14–19 partnership leads/managers/coordinators³** in 10 local authorities (LAs);
 - **50 providers** across the 10 LAs;
 - **10 Higher Education Institutions;**

² The term VQ/VRQ refers to a wide range of different qualifications. Throughout the report this general term is used where appropriate, in addition to other references to specific types of VQs/VRQs e.g. NVQs and BTECs.

³ The title varies across the partnerships. For simplicity, the term 14–19 Partnership Manager has been used throughout the report to refer to the individual fulfilling this position.

- **discussions with learners on VQ/VRQ routes** (a total of 89 learners across the LAs);
- **a review of literature.**

1.14 The consistency of picture, irrespective of locality is quite astonishing for this type of qualitative research. This strong consensus reinforces our belief in the robustness of findings and the wider applicability to the national scene.

Research with Providers and Learners

1.15 A purposive sampling approach was adopted to identify the 14–19 partnerships and providers targeted for fieldwork. The 10 LAs were selected to provide:

- coverage of **all nine English regions**;
- differing levels of **involvement in Diploma delivery** – the number of Diploma learners at key stage 4 ranges from less than 200 to nearly 2,000;
- a mix of **urban and rural authorities**;
- a mix of **14–19 consortia arrangements** – single consortia and multiple consortia.

1.16 Discussions between YCL staff and each 14–19 Partnership Manager informed the identification of providers for the fieldwork. On average, this included two schools and one or two FE colleges. In some areas, a work-based learning provider and/or a sixth form college also formed part of the sample. The profile of the 50 providers that contributed to the research is presented in **Table 1.1** below.

Table 1.1: Provider Sample
13 FE Colleges
3 Sixth Form Colleges
24 Schools (12 with sixth forms, 10 without sixth forms, 2 Pupil Referral Units)
10 work-based learning providers (a mix of private providers and charitable organisations)

1.17 Within each provider, up to three members of staff were consulted. These included staff fulfilling the following roles:

- FE College – Principal, Vice Principal, 14–19 Manager;

- Sixth Form Colleges – Principal, Vice Principal, 14–19 Manager;
- Schools – Headteacher, Deputy or Assistant Headteacher;
- Work–Based Learning Providers – Chief Executives, Managers.

1.18 In providers where we have consulted with learners, we have also often had the opportunity to speak to course tutors to find out more about delivery of specific qualifications.

1.19 **A total of 89 learners have contributed to the research**, through one-to-one and focus group consultations. This includes learners aged 14–16 and 16–19, across a range of provider settings (school, FE college, and work–based learning providers). Learners were on a mix of Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 courses, with differing backgrounds (e.g. low attainment at key stage 4, high achievement at key stage 4) and with different aspirations about future progression (e.g. employment, university, Apprenticeships).

Research with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

1.20 Research activity has been undertaken with a sample of 10 HEIs to explore further the routes that learners take from VQs/VRQs into Higher Education (HE) and their experiences of HE. Consultations were undertaken with Principals/Vice Chancellors, admission staff and course tutors. A mix of HEIs were included: pre–92 universities (including Russell Group Universities), post–92 universities and FE colleges delivering Higher Education.

1.21 This element of the study was undertaken as an extension to the main fieldwork and in response to interim findings regarding potential HE progression issues for vocational learners. Consultations were undertaken three months after the core fieldwork with schools and colleges.

Review of Literature and Evidence

1.22 A review of literature relating to the supply of VQs/VRQs and learner experiences of VQs/VRQs has been undertaken. A full list of the literature is presented at the end of the report. We have also drawn on evidence from the Diploma Development Partnerships which provides insight into employers’ views of different qualifications. This has been incorporated into the report, as relevant, and is referenced as ‘DDP evidence’.

Reference to VQs/VRQs

1.23 Throughout the report we refer to VQs and VRQs as a single generic qualification. The distinction between the two is not always clear cut, nor is it necessary for our analysis. In terms of scale, the most prevalent VQ/VRQ, observed by some way, was the BTEC Diploma offered by EdExcel. Such is its popularity that the majority of consultees would refer to a generic BTEC rather than a generic VQ/VRQ.

Report Structure

1.24 The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Section Two sets out the **current and emerging 14–19 qualifications offer**;
- Section Three provides an overview of **delivery of standalone VQs/VRQs**;
- Section Four explores the **vocational route to Higher Education**;
- Section Five addresses the factors that will affect any **implementation of the 14–19 qualifications strategy**;
- **Section Six** sets out recommendations that could be considered in order to increase take-up of the four routes and to support rationalisation of the standalone VQ/VRQ offer.

2 THE CURRENT 14–19 QUALIFICATIONS LANDSCAPE

2.1 In this section, we provide an overview of the current and emerging 14–19 qualifications offer in terms of:

- **current take-up of qualifications across the four pathways;**
- **factors influencing provider supply of the 14–19 qualifications offer.**

Current Take-Up Across the Four Routes

2.2 The existing 14–19 offer in each of the partnership areas consulted as part of this research comprises a range of general, applied, vocational and practical learning options, across the four pathways set out in the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy and those positioned outside the four routes (i.e. standalone VQs/VRQs).

2.3 While the range of provision observed across the ten participating Local Authorities is broadly similar, more significant variation exists within each LA i.e. across different consortia and individual providers. The availability of Apprenticeships and Diplomas, in particular, is variable within areas by sector, level and locality. This reflects the phased roll-out of Diplomas, and also lower than anticipated Diploma take-up, plus a relative shortage of employers to support additional Apprenticeship places. Nevertheless, over time, this should be more consistent as areas work towards the 2013 entitlement.

2.4 Discussions with 14–19 partnerships and providers together with various literature sources have been used to provide an indication of the scale of take-up of different routes and the factors influencing the take-up. It is difficult to be entirely precise, as there is a certain amount of overlap between the routes (e.g. a learner may be working towards A-levels, in addition to one or more standalone VQs/VRQs) and there is no single source of data⁴ on take-up. Nevertheless, some clear patterns of take-up at 14–16 and 16–19 have been identified.

⁴ The main data sources (e.g. DCSF National Pupil Database and LSC Individualised Learner Record) record the qualification enrolments, but do not distinguish, for example, between whether the qualifications are delivered as standalone qualifications (i.e. outside of the four routes) or as part of an Apprenticeship or Diploma.

Provision for the 14–16 Phase

- 2.5 As would be expected, the **general route (GCSEs) is well-established**, and appears to account for the vast majority of learners at 14–16. In 2007, virtually all 15 year olds took GCSEs (Ryan, 2008).
- 2.6 Estimates from the 14–19 partnerships and providers indicate that, overall, a pure GCSE curriculum is the predominant route for learners, though a **growing proportion of learners are now undertaking GCSEs in addition to a qualification** from another route (e.g. Diploma) and outside of the routes (e.g. a standalone VQ/VRQ). The scale of stand-alone qualification delivery varies by school and can reflect the following three scenarios:
- it may be the case **for all learners** (e.g. where all learners undertake a BTEC First Certificate in Applied Science);
 - it may represent a **significant proportion of learners, but not all** e.g. where there are a range of options for learners to choose from within their school and the local collaborative offer;
 - it may be the case that **only a minority of learners** (e.g. less than 10%) will be pursuing a Diploma or standalone VQ/VRQ alongside their GCSEs.
- 2.7 The mix of GCSEs and VQs/VRQs followed by individual learners also varies. Some learners will be on a predominantly GCSE route, however there are also examples of learners who follow purely standalone VQs/VRQs instead of GCSEs. This is described in detail in Section Four.
- 2.8 Overall, a **small proportion of learners (potentially around 10%) are accessing Foundation Learning or other entry level or Level 1 provision**. Again, this varies across the schools, and typically reflects the learner intake and key stage 4 performance of the school. Those schools with higher percentages of learners achieving 5 A*–C at GCSE (including Maths and English) typically have very few, if any, learners at entry level or level 1 and those with lower achievement rates tend to have an identifiable cohort of learners at this level.

2.9 The **proportion of learners in the Diploma route is small**, relative to the other routes and the provision currently outside the four pathways. In the LAs consulted as part of this research, the number of learners participating in Diplomas in each area ranges from 50 to 1,200 in 2009/10⁵. In some LAs, this represents as little as 2% of the key stage 4 cohort. The vast majority of Diploma delivery for 14–16 year olds in the LAs in our sample is at Level 2.

2.10 The choice of qualification routes available to an individual learner can be dependent on the subject/sector, particular at the 14–16 range, as illustrated by the following example from one LA. Learners are not always able to choose from all four pathways.

Collaborative Offer at 14–16
A learner wishing to pursue Hair and Beauty at Level 1 has only the option of the standalone VQ/VRQ, since the Level 1 Diploma is not yet being delivered. At Level 2, however, the learners can choose between the Diploma or a VQ/VRQ alternative in Construction, Hair and Beauty, and Hospitality and Catering.

16–19 Provision

2.11 **School sixth form provision is dominated by the general route** – typically AS and A2 levels, alongside re-sits in GCSEs. As is the case with the 14–16 provision, the general route is most prevalent in those schools with higher performance. In a number of schools all learners are following the A-level route. In others, as many as 40% of learners are doing a mix of standalone VQs/VRQs (usually BTECs at Level 2 or Level 3) in addition to A-levels. A minority of learners in school sixth forms are undertaking standalone VQs/VRQs (and no A-levels).

2.12 Similarly, in **Sixth Form Colleges**, the predominant provision is a **mix of the general route and standalone VQs/VRQs**. This seems to vary depending on the nature of the area and profile of providers in the locality. In some sixth form colleges we visited, up to 50% of learners were pursuing more than one standalone VQ/VRQ. In others, the vast majority of learners were engaged in the general route.

⁵ Diploma Formula Grant 2009/10, DCSF

2.13 In school sixth forms and sixth form colleges there is very little, if any, Apprenticeship provision. Only one school sixth form we consulted delivered Apprenticeships.

2.14 **FE College provision is heavily dominated by standalone VQs and VRQs** outside of the four routes. For example, in one case, up to 80% of 16–19 provision is standalone VQs/VRQs – approximately 150 qualifications in total across 20 subject areas. FE Colleges have consistently noted that VQ/VRQ provision makes up the majority of their offer:

“Standalone vocational qualifications, including BTECs and NVQs, are the ‘bread and butter’ of our provision.”
(Curriculum Manager, FE College)

2.15 FE Colleges are also involved in delivery of A–level provision, however there is **much more variation in the scale of delivery across our sample of FE Colleges**. Two Colleges reported that they have almost stopped offering A–levels due to the provision available in local school sixth forms. Other colleges indicated that between 5% and 20% of their learners are studying A–levels, with those in areas where there is limited school or sixth form college provision, at the upper end of the scale. Some of these learners may be undertaking a VQ/VRQ alongside one or more A–levels.

2.16 For some FE Colleges, this specialisation has been a recent development having historically provided a more mixed offer. A college we consulted with the most significant A–level offer was located in an area where the local schools do not have sixth forms.

2.17 **Apprenticeship provision accounts for a greater proportion of learners than Diplomas, but is, nevertheless, still only a small proportion** (up to 10% of 16–19 provision in FE Colleges). Most are Apprenticeships at Level 2.

2.18 To date, **involvement in Diplomas at 16–19 is limited and there are mixed views about how this is expected to change** (as described later).

- 2.19 Among **work-based learning providers, most provision is Apprenticeships or Foundation Learning / Entry to Employment**. There are very few instances of learners following standalone VQ/VRQ routes. There is significant variation in the offer across work-based learning providers depending on the learner target group. Some are dominated by learners on Apprenticeships, whereas others focus much more on Foundation Learning learners including those who may be disengaged and may have challenging behavioural issues. The latter tend to be charitable provider organisations. Diploma delivery is also low amongst work-based learning providers.
- 2.20 This pattern of take-up across the four pathways is corroborated by other research. Research into opinions of individuals from the FE sector (Davies, Villeneuve-Smith, McKenzie, & Munoz, 2008) found that those surveyed would prioritise funding for vocational qualifications for young people foremost. Level 2 qualifications for people in work achieved a number two ranking, and Apprenticeships and other types of work-based learning were ranked number three. Diplomas were ranked lower down the list.

Factors Influencing Provider Supply of the 14–19 Offer

- 2.21 14–19 partnerships typically play some, but variable, roles in shaping the 14–16 offer within their LA. However, their primary influence is on the offer that is delivered collaboratively, with much less influence over the offer within individual schools.
- 2.22 At 16–19, the situation is somewhat different, particularly for the provision delivered by FE colleges and work-based learning providers, which was funded (pre April 2010) by the LSC. 14–19 partnerships are likely to play a more significant role in the future as a result of the transfer of some 16–19 funding to local authorities from April 2010.
- 2.23 The structure of the 14–19 offer, made available by providers, is determined by a range of influencing factors; operating differently at 14–16 and 16–19. While the relative influence of individual factors varies by both provider and partnership, the most prevalent are:
- (i) **learner performance;**
 - (ii) **curriculum widening;**
 - (iii) **opportunities across the local area and the nature of the provider;**
 - (iv) **learner and parent demand.**

(i) Learner Performance

- 2.24 Of critical importance to partnerships and providers is the ability to offer a range of curriculum options which maximise learners' chances of qualification achievement. Learner performance is a key factor influencing the offer at 14–16; particularly in schools. It does not, however, drive the design of the offer in other types of providers and for the 16–19 phase in the way it appears to have done at 14–16, although all providers do monitor learner performance and will review their offer where underperformance is evident.
- 2.25 14–19 partnerships believe the expansion of VQs/VRQs at Key Stage 4 has been driven by the impact they are perceived to have had on learner performance. For example, in one area with a growing VQ/VRQ profile, performance at key stage 4 has increased from 36% achieving the Level 2 threshold (the equivalent of 5+ A*–C GCSEs) to 52% over the last two years.
- 2.26 It is evident from discussions with partnerships and providers that particular qualifications/qualification routes (e.g. VQs/VRQs) are perceived to have a greater effect on learner performance than others. For example, some partnerships have noted that the Level 2 Diploma is not particularly effective at improving overall learner performance at key stage 4.

(ii) Curriculum Widening

- 2.27 At 14–16, there has been a significant expansion in the curriculum offer over the last five years – most notably in terms of vocational provision and more recently the 14–19 Diplomas. For some partnerships, the expansion of the curriculum dates back to the introduction of programmes such as Increased Flexibility (2002) and Young Apprenticeships (2004). In other areas, the expansion of the curriculum has been a response to Ofsted inspections or Area Inspections, which have been critical of the breadth of the curriculum offer.

2.28 School specialisms⁶ have also influenced expansion of the curriculum, in order to incorporate different types of qualifications reflecting a school's specialist status. Previous research (QCA, 2006) has also identified that the types of qualifications delivered at key stage 4 are determined by a provider's specialist status.

2.29 In only one area we visited was there no significant history of standalone VQ/VRQ provision. In order to widen the curriculum, this particular area has responded by introducing Diplomas. They are now, however, reassessing their options vis-à-vis standalone vocational qualifications, as learners taking the Diploma have struggled with the functional skills component.

2.30 The demand for certain types of VQs/VRQs, most notably BTECs, has been driven, in part, by the popularity of such qualifications at 16–19. The role of FE colleges in some of the early VQ/VRQ delivery (e.g. Increased Flexibility) has exposed 14–16 learners to qualifications that were previously primarily undertaken by 16–19 learners.

“BTECs are very well established 16–19, well-regarded and success rates are very good.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

2.31 There is a growing trend of VQ/VRQ delivery (mainly BTECs) in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges. There is also some evidence of growth of BTEC delivery in FE Colleges. The increasing supply is driven by demand from learners who seek appropriate progression opportunities after completing a BTEC at key stage 4. In most cases, the VQ/VRQ expansion is at the expense of A-level provision.

(iii) Opportunities across the Local Area and the Nature of the Provider

2.32 In many cases the provision offer is determined, at least in part, by the offer of other competing providers in the local area or consortium. At 14–16, this may take place formally through the 14–19 partnership arrangements, where it is agreed that certain providers will lead on particular qualifications or sectors.

⁶ The Specialist Schools Programme (SSP) helps schools to establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms and achieve their targets to raise standards. Secondary schools in England can apply for specialist status in one of ten curriculum specialisms.

- 2.33 At 16–19, this relates more specifically to the nature of the organisation (provider type and ethos), where there is recognition of the provision delivered by others. This is most evident in relation to A–level provision. Many schools with sixth forms have identified their primary role as offering an A–level route to those learners who wish to pursue A–levels. FE Colleges reflect this too, with many reporting that the focus of their provision is on vocational and vocationally–related provision since the main providers of general qualifications (typically A–levels) are the schools or sixth form colleges in the local area.
- 2.34 Work–based learning providers have highlighted their role in providing a vocational offer for all young people. Some, particularly, the charitable organisations, also refer to their ethos of being inclusive and the necessity to put together an offer that best meets the needs of all young people, particularly those who may be hard–to–reach or disaffected.
- 2.35 In some LAs, there is evidence of increasing recognition of the value to be gained from collaboration. Collaboration across school sixth form provision has helped schools broaden the choice they can offer to learners, improve efficiencies and support the development of specialist facilities.

(vi) Learner and Parent Demand

- 2.36 Partnerships and providers are determined to offer a curriculum that fully engages all potential learners. This includes those learners who are at risk of disengaging from school during key stage 4, or who may otherwise be NEET 16–19. Ensuring there is a wide curriculum offer is a critical part of the NEET prevention strategy by supporting learners to access provision that sufficiently engages them in learning 14–16 so that they can then identify a route to pursue 16–19.
- 2.37 16–19 providers report that they aim to offer a wide range of provision that includes opportunities for learners of all abilities and with differing prior experiences of learning. There is, of course, some variation between different types of 16–19 providers, with FE colleges offering a broader curriculum in terms of qualification types and levels, than sixth form colleges and school sixth forms.

2.38 The influence of parents/carers can be quite strong for schools and sixth form colleges (and much less so for FE Colleges or work-based learning providers). It is also most evident in providers where there are high levels of achievement and/or high aspirations in the local area (e.g. around progression to HE). It may also include parental concern about learners travelling offsite, which in turn will determine the balance and focus of provision delivered within the school.

3 DELIVERY OF STANDALONE VQS/VRQS

3.1 In this section, we provide an overview of the provision delivered outside of the four routes in relation to:

- provision outside the four routes: types of VQs/VRQs;
- profile of VQ/VRQ learners;
- VQ/VRQ learner performance and progression.

Provision Outside the Four Routes

3.2 Providers are involved in delivering a range of provision that sits *outside* of the four learning pathways. This VQ/VRQ route has expanded over recent years and the expansion appears to be continuing.

3.3 The term VQ/VRQ has been used to refer to standalone qualifications sitting outside of the four routes, which are vocational (VQ) or vocationally-related (VRQ). Vocational qualifications (as opposed to vocationally-*related* qualifications) can be described specifically in relation to their links to particular occupational sectors. The following definition (QCA, LSC, SSDA and SQA, 2006) describes their intended role.

Definition of Vocational Qualifications

A **vocational qualification** is: primarily designed to prepare learners for employment or specific occupations by increasing their knowledge, skill or proficiency in related subjects and therefore it has labour market value for entry to an identifiable occupation or set of occupations without additional qualifications. Vocational qualifications also include those designed to give enhanced labour market opportunities for people currently in (or qualified to enter) an identifiable occupation or set of occupations.

3.4 The theoretical distinction between a vocational qualification and a vocationally-related qualification is that the former addresses the skills and competencies relating to a vocational area, and tends to be employer-based, while the latter concentrates on the knowledge and is predominantly classroom-based. In practice they are often difficult to separate, as qualifications often contain elements of both. For the purposes of our analysis, our preference is to refer to a single generic VQ/VRQ qualification.

- 3.5 Within the 14–19 phase, VQs/VRQs are most commonly available from entry level through to Level 4 and across a wide range of subjects and sectors. Through this research, we have sought to identify those most commonly delivered and those perceived to be of most value to learners within the 14–19 phase. There are, nevertheless, a wide variety of VQs/VRQs.
- 3.6 In **Figure 3.1** we provide some examples of VQs/VRQs most prevalent in the areas we visited. As an illustration, we have attempted to classify by VQ and VRQ.

Figure 3.1: Examples of Typical VQs/VRQs	
Qualification	Examples
VQs:	
National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)	NVQ Level 1 in Catering & Hospitality NVQ Level 2 in Beauty Therapy NVQ Level 3 in Business & Administration
Other Vocational Awards (e.g. City & Guilds, VTCT)	CACHE Entry Level Certificate in Preparation for Childcare City & Guilds Introductory Certificate in Basic Construction Skills (Level 1) VTCT Level 2 Certificate in Hairdressing IMIAL Level 3 Diploma in Vehicle Maintenance and Repair
VRQs:	
Vocational A-levels	Performing Arts Engineering Health & Social Care
BTECs	BTEC Entry Level 3 Certificate in Skills for Working Life: Animal Care BTEC Introductory Diploma in Construction (Level 1) BTEC First Certificate in Sport (Level 2) BTEC National Diploma in Health & Social Care (Level 3)
OCR Nationals	OCR Level 1 National in Leisure and Tourism OCR Level 2 National Award in ICT OCR Level 3 National in Sport

VQs/VRQs at 14–16

- 3.7 At 14–16, VQs/VRQs are a growing part of the offer and are perceived to be critically important for some learners. Other research has also highlighted the rapid growth of VQ delivery in schools (The Edge Foundation, 2009). Schools accounted for 322,000 VRQs in 2007/08 at 14–16, which was more than double the number achieved in the previous year. Data from Edexcel (Pearson, 2009) also highlights the expansion:

BTEC enrolments have soared from 290,000 in 2004 to 775,000 in 2008, and are expected to top 1 million this year. The fastest growth has been in UK schools, where BTECs are now offered in more than 2,500 schools, up from 1,400 in 2005/06, as alternatives to GCSE qualifications.

3.8 We have observed this expansion at the local level, with the majority of areas consulted reporting increased VQ/VRQ take-up 14–16. For example, the VQ/VRQ provision delivered collaboratively in one area has risen from around 200 learners from the key stage 4 cohort in 2007/08 to over 600 learners in 2009/10.

3.9 Most VQs/VRQs for this age group are at entry level, Level 1 or Level 2. The types of VQs/VRQs can be categorised as follows:

- **Vocationally-Related Qualifications** – These are typically (although not exclusively) delivered in school or a classroom-based setting. They cover sectors/subjects such as IT, travel and tourism, performing arts, sport, business, and creative and media. Those most commonly achieved by learners at this age⁷ include:
 - **OCR Level 2 National First Award/Certificate in ICT (29%);**
 - **Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Certificate/Diploma in Sport (12%);**
 - **Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Certificate in Applied Science (6%).**

Overall, the subjects in which Level 2 VRQs are most predominant for this age range are ICT (41%), leisure, travel and tourism (15%), arts, media and publishing (13%) and science and maths (11%).

- **Craft Qualifications** – These include NVQs and other qualifications such as the IMIAL Level 3 Diploma in Vehicle Maintenance and Repair and VTCT Level 2 Certificate in Hairdressing. They are more likely to be delivered through collaborative arrangements with FE colleges, work-based learning providers or at skills centres with more specialist facilities. They cover sectors/subjects such as construction, hair and beauty, and motor vehicle.

3.10 Some learners will be pursuing these qualifications under the Increased Flexibility banner, and other learners may be on a Young Apprenticeship⁸.

⁷ DCSF, 2008: Data on vocationally-related qualification achievements.

⁸ Young Apprenticeships are currently funded as a programme in their own right. The intention is that they will be incorporated into the Diploma in the future.

3.11 The VQs/VRQs vary by qualification size. They may be equivalent to one or more GCSEs and are at a range of different levels. Examples of these qualifications, commonly available across the providers, are presented in **Figure 3.2** along with details of their GCSE equivalence.

Figure 3.2: VQs/VRQs at 14–16 and their Equivalences	
Qualification	Equivalence
OCR National Award in ICT at Level 2	2 GCSEs at grades A*–C
CACHE Foundation Award in Caring For Children Level 1	3 GCSEs at grades D–G
BTEC First Diploma in Science (Level 2)	4 GCSEs at grades A*–C
NVQ Level 1 in Construction	5 GCSEs at grades D–G

VQs/VRQs at 16–19

3.12 Analysis of the 10 partnership areas shows that delivery of standalone VQs/VRQs has not expanded as significantly at 16–19, but has, nevertheless, increased in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges over recent years; a trend that seems set to continue.

3.13 The literature indicates that the proportion of Level 3 learners studying for A-levels has declined over the last seven years. In 2002, 80% of learners achieving a Level 3 qualification did so through the A-level route (Unwin, 2004). In 2007, around 50% of learners in full-time education aged 16–18 were studying for A-levels (Ryan, 2008). However, in 2008, 25% of learners achieving a Level 3 qualifications did so through the vocational route (The Edge Foundation, 2009), suggesting the proportion of Level 3 learners studying A-levels has decreased by at least 5%. The reasons behind this expansion are set out in more detail in Section Five.

3.14 There is significant variation in the VQs/VRQs offer for 16–19 year olds, as it meets the needs of a wide range of learners with different backgrounds and prior attainment. The VQs/VRQs offer can be segmented by looking at a number of factors, including:

- **content/focus** – some qualifications cover a broad subject area (e.g. BTEC National Diploma in Business), while others are more specialist or niche (e.g. Vehicle Body and Paint Operations). For some sectors, this specialist knowledge is particularly valued by employers. For example, First Diplomas and National Certificates are recognised as developing a good knowledge base for the environment and land-based sector⁹;
- **occupational focus** – some qualifications provide a general introduction and overview to a particular sector, while others (e.g. CACHE Childcare) provide learners with specific skills and training required to work in that sector. Some qualifications are particularly valued by employers, such as the BTEC National Diploma in Travel and Tourism, which is highly regarded as preparation for employment in the travel and tourism industry and the NVQ Level 2 and 3 in Retail for the retail industry¹⁰;
- **qualification size** – as is the case at 14–16, VQs/VRQs vary in size. Some may account for a learner’s entire programme of learning, whereas others may be equivalent to, for example, one A-level, and the learner may undertake a number of qualifications side by side.

3.15 Data available on VRQ achievements¹¹ by learners at 17, 18 and 19 provides an indication of the scale of take-up of different qualifications and across different sector subject areas. It is important to note that this only includes VRQs, as equivalent data is not available for VQs. The data shows that:

- at Level 2, the **CAG/CITB Level 2 in CITB/City & Guilds Level 2 Intermediate Construction Award** accounts for nearly a fifth of all VRQs achieved by 17 and 18 year olds;
- the **BTEC First Diploma** (in a range of subjects) is a predominant qualification at **Level 2** for 17 and 18 year olds, and likewise the **BTEC National Diploma** is a predominant qualification at **Level 3**;
- qualifications in the **Health, Public & Care sector** are commonly taken at Level 2 and 3, by 17, 18 and 19 year olds;
- qualifications in the **Arts, Media & Publishing** sector are more common at **Level 3** than at Level 2
- qualifications in the **Construction, Planning & Built Environment** are more common at **Level 2** than at Level 3.

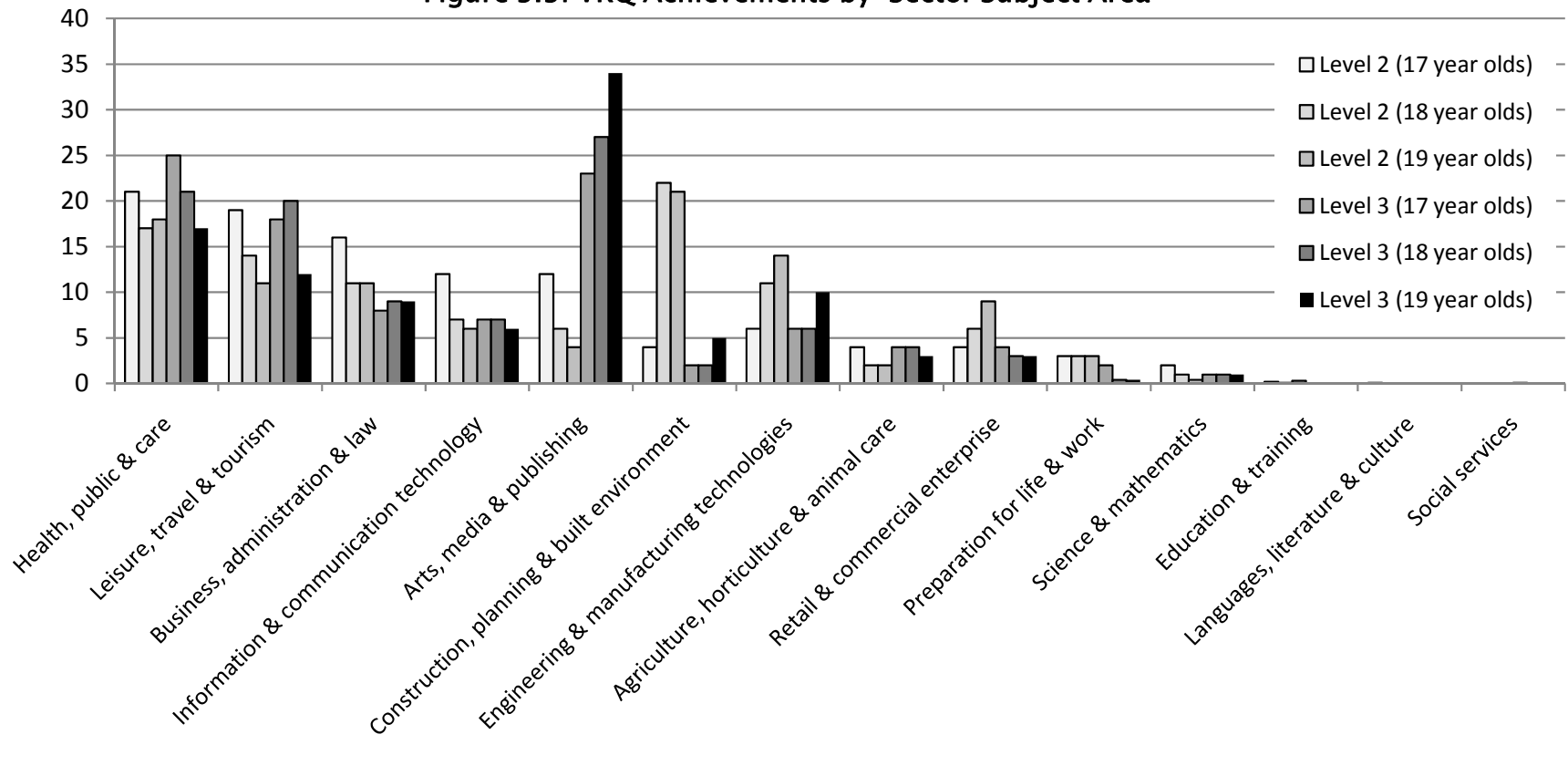
⁹ DDP evidence

¹⁰ DDP evidence

¹¹ DCSF, 2008: Data on vocationally-related qualification achievements.

3.16 **Figure 3.3** provides an illustration of VRQ achievements by sector subject areas, highlighting the popularity of VRQs in areas such as arts, media and publishing, health, public and care, and leisure, travel and tourism.

Figure 3.3: VRQ Achievements by Sector Subject Area



Source: DCSF, 2008: Data on vocationally-related qualification achievements.

Profile of VQs/VRQs Learners

3.17 In order to better understand how VQs/VRQs are accommodated in an individual's programme of learning, we have segmented the learner group by considering a range of differentials including:

- **level of learning** i.e. VQ/VRQ levels (ranging from entry level to Level 3);
- **type of VQs/VRQs**, recognising that there is a wide range of different qualifications available under the VQs/VRQs banner;
- **subject or sector**;
- **learner motivation** to follow a VQ/VRQ programme of learning;
- **learner aspirations and future plans.**

3.18 A series of learner scenarios are set out in **Figures 3.4 and 3.5**. These reflect evidence captured from 14–19 partnerships, providers and discussions with a selection of VQ/VRQ learners. The categories are intended to provide an illustration of how the VQ/VRQ is accommodated in the learners' programme of learning, while recognising that there will be additional variations.

14–16

3.19 In some schools a VQ/VRQ may form a core part of the school curriculum for all learners. In other cases, the increase in collaborative provision during the last five to 10 years means that many learners now choose from options which are available within their school and that are available through other local providers.

Figure 3.4: VQ/VRQ Learners at 14–16

(i) VQ/VRQ is a core part of the school curriculum for all learners

In some schools, the vast majority of learners within the school follow a particular VQ/VRQ. This may reflect the school's specialist status. There is no specific target group of learners and each learner may have limited choice in whether they pursue it or not. VQs/VRQs that are typically delivered in this way include:

- OCR National Award in IT (equivalent to two GCSEs at A*–C)
- BTEC First Diploma in Science (Level 2) (equivalent to four GCSEs at A*–C)
- BTEC First Diploma in Sport (Level 2).

Figure 3.4: VQ/VRQ Learners at 14–16

(ii) VQ/VRQ provision is an alternative to GCSEs:

- (a) one or more VQs/VRQs are substituted for GCSE options**, for learners who are expected to be borderline Level 2 in key stage 4. This is a key mechanism to ensure that the learner achieves a qualification. It may be a Level 1 or Level 2 qualification and could be equivalent to as many as four or five GCSEs. The learner will have chosen due to its links to a particular employment sector (e.g. construction, hair and beauty) and practical learning focus. The learner is not necessarily disengaged from learning but may have relatively low motivation and aspirations. The learner is likely to pursue a work-based route 16–19 or undertake a further qualification in the same sector at the local FE college (at Level 2 or perhaps at Level 3). In the longer-term they are likely to aim to move into employment in their chosen sector;
- (b) the VQ/VRQ forms part of a specific ‘programme’** (e.g. engagement programme) aimed at engaging the learner who may have shown signs of disengagement at key stage 3. The learners could be, but are not necessarily low ability learners, and may face a range of personal and social issues that are affecting their engagement with learning. The VQs/VRQs could be at entry level, level 1 or level 2, depending on ability;
- (c) the VQ/VRQ has substituted a particular GCSE for a set group of learners only.** These learners have been identified as those who would benefit from pursuing a VQ/VRQ alternative, rather than the GCSE which their peers will take. For example, in one school learners are placed in 8 groups:
- the top three groups all take the three separate science GCSEs;
 - the next three groups take the GCSE double science award;
 - the final two groups take the BTEC First Diploma in Science (equivalent to 4 GCSEs).

(iii) VQs/VRQs act as curriculum enrichment

The learner is working towards a number of GCSEs in school and accesses a VQ/VRQ available at the school or through the local collaborative offer. The VQ/VRQ is in a subject/sector that the learner has a particular interest in (e.g. creative and media, health & social care) and while it is a valuable addition to their programme of learning at key stage 4, their performance at key stage 4 is likely to be the same regardless of whether they follow the VQ/VRQ or whether it was substituted for (an) alternative GCSE(s). These learners tend to have a positive attitude towards school and learning and will be learning at Level 2.

3.20 In terms of learner characteristics, several studies ((NFER, 2006) and (QCA, 2006)) have shown that, at 14–16, learners pursuing vocational qualifications are more likely than their peers to be male, white, in receipt of free school meals, registered for school action or school action plus and to live in urban areas. While this may fit with the profile of learners in categories (ii) (a), (b) and (c), our observation, based on the areas we visited, was that learners in categories (i) and (iii) are typically the most representative.

16–19

3.21 At 16–19, learners pursue the VQs/VRQs in a range of contexts as outlined below.

Figure 3.5: VQ/VRQ Learners at 16–19

(i) a Level 1 or 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into employment in this area

The learner achieved some qualifications at key stage 4 (perhaps at Level 1 or a few at Level 2) but insufficient to be able to pursue a Level 3 qualification post 16. The learner is now pursuing a Level 2 VQ/VRQ, in an FE College, in a sector they would like to find employment in the future e.g.:

- Level 1 City & Guilds in Professional Cookery
- Level 2 NVQ in Construction
- Level 2 NVQ in Hair & Beauty.

They may also be re-sitting English and Maths GCSEs (to achieve Level 2) alongside these courses, or doing a key skills qualification. Following completion of the qualification, they are likely to pursue employment in their chosen sector.

(ii) a Level 2 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to go into further education

The learner achieved some qualifications at key stage 4 (perhaps at Level 1 or a few at Level 2) but insufficient to be able to pursue a Level 3 qualification post 16. The learner is now pursuing a Level 2 VQ/VRQ e.g.:

- BTEC First Diploma in Health and Social Care
- BTEC First Diploma in Sport.

They may also be re-sitting English and Maths GCSEs (to achieve Level 2) alongside these courses, or doing a key skills qualification.

There are also many learners who do three year 16–19 courses in order to support their progression. This may include doing a Level 1 VQ/VRQ in the first year and then a Level 2 VQ/VRQ in the following two years.

Following completion of the qualification, they may go on to a Level 3 course and possibly also to Higher Education – e.g. nursing, teacher training (PE); others may go into

Figure 3.5: VQ/VRQ Learners at 16–19

employment.

(iii) a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they wish to go on to pursue employment in this area

The learner has identified the VQ/VRQ due to a particular interest in the sector/subject. Examples include:

- Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Sport (equivalent to 3 A-levels)
- Level 3 BTEC National Certificate in Construction (equivalent to 2 A-levels).

They may have considered a Diploma (if available in the local area) or Apprenticeship but have opted for the VQs/VRQs as they wish to pursue a route they started 14–16, feel they are not ready to enter employment, or due to limited availability of Apprenticeships in the local area. They are likely to be attending an FE College, a Sixth Form College or a school sixth form. They are likely to progress into employment in this sector following completion of the qualification.

(iv) a Level 3 VQ/VRQ is their core programme of learning and they plan to study it further in Higher Education

The learner has identified the VQ/VRQ due to a particular interest in the sector/subject (as above). They may have considered doing A-levels or a Diploma (but not an Apprenticeship) but have chosen to pursue a BTEC. The BTEC may have been favoured so they can focus more on one specific subject (compared to A-levels) or because they have identified a relevant progression route to Higher Education with the BTEC.

(v) a Level 3 VRQ acts as curriculum enrichment

The learner is working towards A-levels in school, sixth form college, or FE college and accesses a VRQ within the provider or at another local provider. This VRQ is in a subject/sector that the learner has a particular interest in. E.g. Level 3 BTEC National Award in Business (equivalent to one A-level). The learner may then go on to higher education.

3.22 Other research (Hayward, 2008) has also identified similar categories and explored the characteristics of learners in two of the categories – curriculum enrichment and core programme of learning:

- curriculum enrichment – a high proportion of learners with combined courses (i.e. A-level plus BTEC) are in school sixth forms and their characteristics are similar to those learners following the pure A-level route;
- core programme of learning – learners studying all types of VQs/VRQs as a core programme of learning are from non-traditional FE backgrounds. They tend to be from lower socio-economic groups, are more likely to come from a non-white ethnic background and are more likely to be disabled.

3.23 Other studies have also identified the characteristics of learners pursuing vocational qualifications at 16–19. VQ/VRQ learners are more likely to have parents that did not undertake a degree (83% of learners studying for a BTEC at age 17 had parents that did not undertake a degree), and negative experiences of school 14–16 (Edexcel, 2009). This is likely to be the case for learners in categories (ii) and (iii) than (iv) and (v).

VQ/VRQ Learner Performance and Progression

Overall Key Stage 4 Achievement

3.24 Evidence from school providers consulted indicates that VQ/VRQ provision is having a positive effect on overall key stage 4 achievement for some learners. This is driven primarily by high achievement levels on VQ/VRQ qualifications. Examples of data from 14–19 partnerships illustrate these high levels of achievement:

- in one partnership area, the pass rate for all provision delivered collaboratively through specialist facilities was 97% for 2008. This includes a range of Level 1 and Level 2 VQs/VRQs for 216 learners;
- similarly, in another area, 98% of the 94 learners participating in Level 1 and Level 2 VQs/VRQs achieved the qualification.

- 3.25 Ofsted also found that learners studying VQs/VRQs achieved better than cohorts who did not study VQs/VRQs and better than initially expected (Ofsted, 2007).
- 3.26 Partnership managers and schools have cited positive knock-on benefits from learners participating in VQs/VRQs. In particular instances, this has been observed to contribute to a combination of improved confidence/application; better performance in other subjects and reduced exclusion.
- 3.27 This learner engagement benefit is consistent with the findings of the early reviews of the Increased Flexibility provision (Ofsted, 2005) which noted that students responded well to the broader learning opportunities available and that it had resulted in improvements among a large number of students in their attitudes, behaviour and social skills at college and back at school.

Maths and English Achievement at Key Stage 4

- 3.28 While overall Key Stage 4 performance has been observed to increase, it is clear that Maths and English achievement has not increased at the same rate. Specifically, some learners who achieve their VQs/VRQs (and possibly other GCSEs) are not achieving Maths and English at Level 2.
- 3.29 A number of different arguments have been posed around the importance and value of Maths and English achievements relative to the value of achieving at least some qualifications during key stage 4.
- 3.30 Some providers consulted played down the importance of Maths and English for particular groups of learners. While clearly an advantage to secure these qualifications, the key benefit was that learners, through VQs/VRQs, were participating and succeeding in some form of qualification.
- 3.31 This was not a unanimous view. Many providers thought that the VQs/VRQs should be designed to tackle this issue by having a greater focus on Maths and English. Indeed, some providers went as far to suggest that low levels of Maths and English achievement have the potential to undermine the value of the VQs/VRQs route:

“It is clear that many students doing BTEC courses require additional support for English and Maths, which, in the main, they don’t get. For the BTEC to be credible, they have to get key skills achievement.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

3.32 Maths and English abilities are, however, also one of the main reasons why the VQ/VRQ route is preferred relative to the Level 2 Diploma; an issue we return to in Section Five.

3.33 Many schools have made reference to the use of ALAN¹² tests to provide learners with qualifications in Maths and English. These tests were initially designed for adult learners but are increasingly being used by schools as a backup qualification for those learners who it is felt may not achieve Maths and English GCSE. Some schools are entering all learners into the ALAN tests, while others will enter just those learners who are on the borderline of GCSE achievement. There are concerns about the use of the tests amongst some school staff:

“They get the ALAN test and then wonder why they still have to do the GCSE. The ALAN test is sold to learners as a GCSE but it isn’t.” (Deputy Headteacher, School with a Sixth Form)

3.34 Furthermore, on progression to further education or learning at 16–19, some learners may still need to re-sit GCSEs in Maths and English, particularly if they wish to go on to Higher Education. The ALAN test is not a recognised qualification by most HEIs.

16–19 Participation

3.35 The evidence and perceptions of the implications of VQs/VRQs on 16–19 participation are mixed. It has been suggested by partnerships and providers that 16–19 participation rates have increased (potentially as much as 10%) as a result of the VQ/VRQ provision available for 14–16 learners.

¹² ALAN tests are Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy tests offered by the Awarding Organisation, Edexcel

3.36 Indeed, many schools consulted noted that Level 1 VQ/VRQ learners will typically follow that route through to 16–19, having gained confidence from exposure to the local FE College or work-based learning provider. Other research (EdComs, 2007) has also identified the effect of vocational or work-based qualifications on participation 16–19:

The learning is hands-on rather than conceptual; the qualifications are relevant to the world of work they enter; the students can be put on a course at an appropriate level (e.g. Entry level or level 1) where they are more likely to get a pass, as opposed to a Grade D GCSE.

3.37 Providers consulted indicated that progression routes tend to differ depending on the type of VQs/VRQs pursued and the level of learning. The following are typical progression examples:

- learners on the Level 1 NVQ in Hairdressing have continued in this sector 16–19 – either on a Level 2 Apprenticeship in Hairdressing or an FE programme;
- the majority of learners who took a BTEC in media or business alongside their GCSEs have gone on to the local sixth form college to do A-levels or A-levels plus a BTEC, some of whom have longer-term aspirations to go on to Higher Education.

3.38 There is potential therefore that VQ/VRQ provision may be particularly valuable for making progress towards *Raising the Participation Age*. Schools have cited examples of learners who they would not previously have expected to stay in learning (e.g. highly disaffected young people), progressing into further education at 16–19.

3.39 However, there are concerns about what learners are realistically able to progress to within 16–19 provision, since the progression value of the VQ/VRQ route can be significantly diminished if learners do not achieve Maths and English at Level 2. **In some cases learners may need to progress onto another Level 2 VQ/VRQ or have to first pass English and Maths.** This has resulted in some learners being in FE for three years – doing another Level 2 in the first year and then progressing onto a Level 3 for a further two years. Some partnership managers noted that there has been significant take-up on the Maths GCSE at the local FE college, which has been necessary for those young people who wish to progress to Level 3 qualifications.

3.40 Some teaching staff challenged the current emphasis placed on the achievement of particular GCSEs and VQs/VRQs, suggesting the emphasis should be on core subjects like English and Maths:

“The key to effective progression is English and Maths, not BTEC or GCSE.” (Deputy Head, 11–16 school)

3.41 FE staff in particular raised issues about the value of some of the qualifications learners are gaining at key stage 4:

“They think they have a passport to Level 3 provision but depending on their combination of qualifications, they can only access some options at Level 3 and not others.” (Sixth Form College)

“A small proportion (5%) of Level 2 BTEC students go onto another Level 2 BTEC.” (FE College)

3.42 Some schools with sixth forms felt that qualifications equivalent to four GCSEs were not appropriate for progression to sixth form provision, and therefore did not deliver these at key stage 4 within the school.

Progression into Employment

3.43 One of the distinguishing features of VQs/VRQs, identified by both providers and learners, is their link to employment. For learners, undertaking a work-focused VQ/VRQ, it can support decisions about future options and provide experience of a particular sector of interest.

3.44 It is important, however, to reflect on employer demand for such qualifications and the particular skills and attributes employers look for when recruiting learners. Evidence from the Diploma Development Partnerships (DPPs) highlights that many employers report that learners are entering the workplace lacking essential transferable skills such as literacy and numeracy, as well as personal, learning and thinking skills, and communication. Literacy and numeracy requirements are commonly identified as skills gaps across many sectors (e.g. manufacturing, travel and tourism, retail, care, public services). Employers in the health sector noted that the learners frequently need to be supported in literacy and numeracy.

3.45 Furthermore, some of the DDP evidence also questions the work readiness of learners at 16, which has implications for progression at 16 into employment and potentially also to Apprenticeships. Concerns related to personal confidence among learners and their ability to apply knowledge outside of their comfort zone.

3.46 It is also important to recognise that while work-focused VQs/VRQs are, in general, regarded as of value to employers, in reality, there is much more variability. From the review of the Diploma Development Partnerships (DDP) evidence¹³ and other research a few key findings have emerged:

- **while qualifications are rated as important, they often rank below experience, skills, motivation and references.** This was also identified in other research (QCA, LSC, SSDA and SQA, 2006). Employers (e.g. in public services) are looking for evidence that learners are at the point where they are capable of beginning sector-specific training. In other sectors (e.g. hairdressing), work experience is regarded as essential for employment;
- **employer attitudes vary by sector.** For example, in general, VQs are more highly regarded in engineering and construction, than, for example, business and computing (QCA, LSC, SSDA and SQA, 2006);
- there are mixed views across different sectors about the relevance of qualifications to the sectors:
 - some qualifications do not meet industry needs, since they **do not support development of specialist industry-related knowledge** (e.g. manufacturing);
 - other sectors do value VQs/VRQs e.g. sport and leisure where **practical and/or certified qualifications were deemed particularly relevant**, for example coaching qualifications and fitness instructor qualifications;
 - in other sectors, the **qualifications are an essential part of being able to demonstrate occupational competence** e.g. the Level 3 NVQ in Hairdressing for employment in the hairdressing sector, and an NVQ at Level 2 for entry to the workplace in the health sector;

¹³ Various documents from the Diploma Development Partnerships (DPPs).

- employers are also **not necessarily fully aware of the full range of qualifications available** and what benefits they bring. This can lead to confusion as to what young people with different qualifications can actually do. This was raised as an issue for the travel and tourism, sport and leisure, retail and environment and land-based sectors.

4 THE VOCATIONAL ROUTE TO HIGHER EDUCATION

- 4.1 In this section we specifically explore the perceptions and evidence relating to the progression of learners from VQ/VRQ routes to Higher Education.
- 4.2 Throughout this section we use the term “vocational learners” to describe HE students who applied for or entered their course with predominantly vocational qualifications (primarily BTECs). “Traditional learners” are their counterparts possessing academic qualifications (primarily A-Levels).
- 4.3 The analysis is presented under the following headings:
- **Initial Hypotheses;**
 - **Heterogeneity of Higher Education;**
 - **The Vocational Qualification;**
 - **Scale, Trend and Characteristics of Vocational Learners in HE;**
 - **HE Entry Requirements;**
 - **HEI Choice and Course Type;**
 - **Vocational Qualifications: HE Advantage or Disadvantage;**
 - **HE Student Support;**
 - **HE Widening Participation Strategy;**
 - **HE Student Retention and Degree Outcomes;**
 - **HE Employer Engagement;**
 - **The role of Lifelong Learning Networks;**
 - **Overall Assessment.**

Initial Hypotheses

- 4.4 Our initial hypotheses, based on core fieldwork consultations with schools and colleges, and evidence from the literature, is that vocational learners are potentially disadvantaged in progressing to Higher Education relative to learners pursuing the traditional A-Level route. The disadvantage is in the sense that their options are narrower, both in relation to choice of course, and HE institution.
- 4.5 The following extracts from the Sutton Trust Submission on Widening Access to Selective Universities (Sutton Trust, 2010) sets out the proposition.

“Children from the less wealthy backgrounds are being pushed onto vocational courses because schools have low aspirations for them.”

“Many schools are acting as a break on social mobility and making brighter students take the vocational route.”

“The single most important factor contributing to the relatively low proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending elite universities is the level and nature of qualifications obtained by these students.”

- 4.6 The argument advanced is that it is less likely that students with vocational qualifications will gain entry to selective universities, compared to students with traditional qualifications.

Heterogeneity of Higher Education

- 4.7 It is important for our analysis to be aware of the diverse nature of the Higher Education sector. HEIs can essentially be classified into four categories:

- Russell Group Universities;
- Pre-1992 universities;
- Post-1992 universities;
- FE Colleges.

- 4.8 The universities who received their charter before 1992 are often described as selective universities because of their entry criteria and competition for places. Within this group of 54 there is a sub-category of 20 Russell Group Universities. These are the traditional research-based universities, often described as the ‘elite group’.

- 4.9 The 71 universities who received their charter after 1992 are often described as ‘recruiting’ or ‘widening participation’ universities. They differ from the pre-1992 universities in their course portfolio, which is largely vocational, and their entry requirements which are generally lower.

- 4.10 Many FE Colleges now offer vocational HE courses through association primarily with post-1992 universities.

4.11 The vast majority of students in pre-1992 universities will have come through the traditional A-Level route. While students in post-1992 universities and colleges will predominantly have a vocational background. Any potential HE access issues for vocational learners are likely to be confined to pre-1992 universities and, in particular, Russell Group Universities.

The Vocational Qualification

4.12 As evidenced earlier in the report, there is a wide array of vocational qualifications. As increasing numbers of vocational learners are progressing to Higher Education, admission tutors, particularly in pre-1992 universities, are often unsure of the entry relevance, suitability and tariff exchange of the qualifications these students hold.

“It is fair to say that there is some confusion regarding the range of qualifications that learners are presenting. It is often a challenge for course tutors to keep up with qualifications and be clear on the differences between BTECs and OCR awards and Diplomas.” (Pre 92 University)

4.13 It is not only admission tutors who are confused. It is suggested that many vocational learners themselves are not always aware of their worth or currency in the HE market.

“We are not convinced that some vocational learners understand the nature of the qualification they have attained. More guidance is required when they start on the route.” (Pre 92 University)

4.14 This is a key issue, as many vocational learners often choose their qualifications at key stage 4 and 16-19 before considering HE as an option.

4.15 In terms of entry to Higher Education, the most prevalent and the most specified vocational qualification by HEIs is the BTEC National Diploma.

4.16 Alternative vocational pathways into Higher Education include Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees and Diplomas. While we do not have details of relative volumes, our understanding is the numbers are relatively small. In terms of Apprenticeships, only 6% of those on Advanced Apprenticeships and 4% of those on Foundation Apprenticeships progressed to Higher Education (HEFCE, 2009). Foundation Degrees represent a much more successful route to Higher Education, with 59% of full-time Foundation Degree students progressing onto an Honours Degree course in 2008/09 (HEFCE, 2010); with two-thirds graduating in the same year.

4.17 Diploma applicants are on a rising trend, albeit from a very low base. We suspect that applications are clustered in post-1992 universities. In the main, Russell Group Universities will only accept Diploma applications if students have an A-Level in a relevant subject as their additional specialist learning. One university we spoke to had received three Diploma applications in 2010/11 and accepted all, another had received 12 applications and rejected all.

BTEC National Qualifications

4.18 The BTEC National qualifications consist of units of the same size as A-level and Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) modules. The qualification is available in three sizes, all at Level 3. Each qualification is graded pass, merit or distinction, with the individual units and the qualification as a whole being graded. **Table 4.1** shows the UCAS tariff points awarded to students at each level of achievement for each of the three qualifications.

Table 4.1: UCAS Tariff Points Awarded to BTEC Qualifications									
UCAS Tariff Points									
Type of BTEC	40	80	120	160	200	240	280	320	360
BTEC National Award	P	M	D						
BTEC National Certificate		PP	MP	MM	DM	DD			
BTEC National Diploma			PPP	MPP	MMP	MMM	DMM	DDM	DDD

P=PASS M=MERIT D=DISTINCTION

4.19 The BTEC National Award consists of six units, and is equivalent to one GCE A-level. Equivalent to two GCE A-levels, the BTEC National Certificate consists of 12 units. The BTEC National Diploma consists of 18 units and is equivalent to three A-levels.

4.20 While the BTEC was not initially designed with HE in mind, it is now recognised and accepted by all HEIs.

“The genesis of BTECs was a route into a trade. They were designed as an end point for employment, not necessarily as a progression route. Whereas A-levels from the outset were designed and owned by universities originally as a vehicle for learners to progress to higher education, now there is no demarcation and both provide sound but different routes into higher education.” (Post 92 University)

4.21 University applicants increasingly have combinations of vocational and traditional qualifications. For some courses, an A-Level is a requirement.

“We are now noticing more mixing between awards. For example you might now get learners with two A-levels and a BTEC which was fairly uncommon before. As long as candidates meet the subject requirements, such as having A-level in Maths to get in to engineering there is no problem.” (Pre 92 University)

4.22 This combination of vocational qualifications and A-Levels is increasingly prevalent, primarily among students entering through the traditional route. It is however more challenging for vocational learners, who might not have experience of the academic route, to pick up an A-Level in order to meet entrance criteria.

“It is very difficult to combine the traditional and vocational routes. While A-Level students find it easy to pursue BTECs alongside, it is almost impossible for vocational learners to pick up an A-Level alongside.” (FE College)

Scale, Trend and Characteristics of Vocational Learners

4.23 From our earlier analysis, it is clear that the number of vocational learners at key stage 3 and key stage 4 has increased exponentially over the past five years. This trend appears also to be reflected in Higher Education. In 1999, according to UCAS, 70% of applicants to universities had A-Level qualifications. This figure fell to 50% in 2009. While some of the change will be due to increased take-up of the International Baccalaureate, most of it, we suspect, is due to an increasing number of vocational learner applicants.

4.24 We have been unable to source reliable statistical evidence on this perceived increasing vocational trend from HEFCE, UCAS or individual HEIs we consulted. The most recent relevant published information is *Pathways to Higher Education; BTEC Courses'* (HEFCE, 2007). This study reports on the progression of a cohort of 2002/03 learners embarking on BTEC courses. It reveals that in 2004/05, 8,341 (24%) of the qualifying cohort entered an HEI to pursue a Degree course.

4.25 While the number of students entering Higher Education with a vocational qualification has increased, they are concentrated in specific pockets within the sector. The vast majority appear to be in FE Colleges or post-1992 universities.

“Virtually all of our HE students have come through a vocational route. They are students who decided not to do A-Levels, or who missed out on education, and who are now having a second crack at it.” (FE College)

4.26 In pre-1992 universities, the numbers are much lower.

“We estimate that approximately 20% of our students enter with only vocational qualifications.” (Pre 92 University)

4.27 In Russell Group Universities, the numbers are very small indeed; although latterly increasing.

“Vocational students represent a relatively small proportion of our student population – less than 5%. The majority are studying engineering, computer science and social work. A significant proportion are mature and/or international students.” (Russell Group University)

“Historically, we have had a relatively low level of application from vocational students. The numbers are, however, increasing.” (Russell Group University)

4.28 There is evidence that Russell Group Universities are taking more interest in the pattern of vocational entrants.

“In view of the increasing number of vocational applicants, we are now closely monitoring the trend. We have recently undertaken analysis of applications, offers and subject areas.” (Russell Group University)

4.29 Perceptions of the characteristics of vocational learners differ between post-1992 universities and pre-1992 universities. The former described a young less-academically able group, with strong practical skills.

“Our students are typically learners who historically have not done well in exams. They are not good at abstract theoretical approaches. Where they are strong is on practical creativity.” (FE College)

“Our learners are very often the first generation of family to go to higher education so our courses have to be relevant to them. They need to know that there will be a job at the end of what they are doing.” (FE College)

4.30 Pre-1992 universities were more likely to describe their vocational entrants as older learners returning to education.

“Most of our vocational students are over 21. Mature students are particularly suited to the vocational route and they’re in demand from employers.” (Pre 92 University)

“BTEC qualifications do attract older learners and employers value them.” (Pre 92 University)

4.31 This is an interesting perceptual difference which perhaps reflects the more competitive entry situation in pre-92 universities. Mature students are able to demonstrate wider interests and experience beyond the qualification entry requirements.

HE Entry Requirements

4.32 As might be expected, all HEIs thought that their entry procedures were open and transparent and in no way discriminated against vocational applicants.

“We give equal consideration to all of our specified entry qualifications, which includes GCE A-Levels, Scottish Highers, Irish Leaving Certificate, BTEC and International Baccalaureate.”
(Russell Group University)

“As long as students meet the tariff point requirements for courses they are considered/accepted for that course. There is absolutely nothing to suggest that it matters where students get their tariff points from.” (Post 92 University)

4.33 **Table 4.2** below provides an overview of the entry requirements for three different courses across the range of different institution types.

Table 4.2: Sample Entry Requirements			
	Engineering	Computer Science	Business Management
Russell Group	A-Level maths plus another science is mandatory A-Levels: Typically AAB BTEC: DDM in relevant subject area (320 UCAS points)	A-Levels: ABB inc Mathematics; or BTEC: 2 Distinctions across 12 units in relevant subject, plus Grade B in A-Level Maths (320 UCAS points)	GCSE Maths at Grade B required for all subjects A-Levels: ABB BTEC: DDM/DMM in relevant subject area (280 UCAS points)
Pre-92 University	Mathematics at A-Level or equivalent required 240 UCAS points. 'Applications from those with relevant vocational qualifications are welcomed'	GCSE Maths Grade B or C and English Grade C are expected 200 – 280 UCAS points at A-Level or equivalent	260 UCAS points
Post-92 University	280 UCAS points (or individualised offer based on interview) from at least two A-Levels or equivalent, one of which should include a significant content of an appropriate science or maths.	220 – 280 UCAS points	220 UCAS points
FE College	160 UCAS points or above in an appropriate discipline	140 UCAS points and/or relevant industry experience Students with an HNC/HND are eligible for direct entry to Year 2	HND or Foundation Degree in a relevant subject to enter final year Honours top-up. FD entry requires a minimum of 40 UCAS points plus 3 GCSE passes (inc English and Maths)

4.34 In situations where there is competition for places, HEIs argue that the Personal Statement, rather than the qualification type, is the deciding factor. Although vocational learners may require Distinction classifications.

“Meeting tariff points is the key. If courses are oversubscribed then the university uses personal statements to differentiate between applicants.” (Post 92 University)

“BTEC applicants in the main require DDM in a relevant subject area, although in some subjects it will be DDD. The balancing factors are applicant experience and personal statement.” (Russell Group University)

4.35 FE Colleges thought that, despite the apparent level playing field, it was exceedingly difficult for learners with BTEC qualifications to get into pre-1992 universities; particularly Russell Group Universities. One college reported that they had only ever had one student secure a place at their local Russell university; and that was within the last 12 months.

“Let’s face it, where there is real competition for entry to universities, vocational learners will always lose out.” (FE College)

“The only way vocational learners will get into Russell Group Universities is once they have completed their vocational degree course. At a post-graduate level, particularly if students are paying their own fees, then there is no barrier to entry to the Russell system.” (FE College)

4.36 Most universities will not accept a Pass in BTECs as a standard entrant requirement to Degree courses. All accept some combination of Merits and Distinctions; many Russell university courses require triple Distinctions.

“We do not accept pass BTECs. Merits or distinctions are required.” (Post 92 University)

“BTEC applicants in the main require DDM in a relevant subject area, although in some subjects it will be DDD.” (Russell Group University)

“Everyone knows that you get a pass BTEC for turning up: we look for at least a merit award.” (Post 92 University)

4.37 Most universities, but not colleges, have a standard entry requirement of Maths and English GCSEs. This can be a stumbling block for some vocational applicants.

“All potential applicants need to have a GCSE Grade B in mathematics and a GCSE Grade C in English for general entry to university. Some vocational applicants have not been able to demonstrate this. They often have key skills qualifications in English and Maths which we don’t recognise.” (Russell Group University)

- 4.38 The BTEC qualification is very specific to a particular vocational area. Universities will accept them where they feel it to be relevant to the subject area to be studied.

“We emphasise in our prospectus that BTEC applicants need to fulfil the requirements of particular faculties in relation to subject areas. We can provide advice regarding what the relevant subject areas are in each case. Applicants are not always aware of this and, as a result, we feel there is a need for greater guidance at the point they embark on their BTEC qualification.” (Russell Group University)

“In courses like English or history it will be necessary for applicants to demonstrate achievements in these subject areas. Students with BTEC qualifications are unlikely to be successful unless combined with an appropriate A-level.” (Post 92 University)

- 4.39 In addition, some university courses will only accept a BTEC qualification in combination with a specific subject A-Level.

“We accept vocational qualifications at face value with the tariff points they are associated with. In some courses however there may be a specific entry requirement such as A-level Maths.” (Pre 92 University)

“Pharmacy requires students to have attained at least a C in A-level chemistry This is prescribed by the professional body that oversees it, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Other sectors have similar overarching requirements. Therefore the scope for entry flexibility can be limited.” (Post 92 University)

4.40 As competition for university places rises, this could increasingly become the norm for many courses and potentially disadvantaged vocational applicants; particularly in universities operating decentralised, faculty-led, admissions practices.

“As a result of increasing demand, the average tariff points required for entry is increasing. This is likely to have an impact on our widening participation agenda.” (Pre 92 University)

“Each department operates quite autonomously setting their own entry requirements.” (Pre 92 University)

HEI Choice and Course Type

4.41 Learners with vocational qualifications in the main apply to local HE institutions, which are predominantly FE Colleges or post-1992 universities. Many are advised by their FE College to take this route.

“Almost all of our FE and HE students are local. Those progressing to universities will target the post 92 universities within the region.” (FE College)

“Our FE students, thinking about progressing to Higher Education, know that they will not be going to elite universities. They don’t want to go. It’s entering the world they chose not to enter when they were 16. In the main, they would not survive there. Barring a few exceptions, you would be setting them up to fail.” (FE College)

“If learners come to our college it is because they have vocational background and want to take up a vocational route.” (FE College)

“In the main, vocational learners will be progressing to vocational universities, i.e. post 1992 universities. Russell Group Universities have made it pretty clear that they are not interested in vocational learners. They say they accept the qualification because they have to. They allow a few in for political reasons, but they do nothing to attract or support those who enter. Should we be surprised at so few applying?” (FE College)

4.42 Vocational learners are also attracted to FE Colleges and post-92 universities because their method of study reflects a BTEC project-based approach.

“I often visit schools to explain our HEI offer. I stress the point that we are different from other universities. I emphasise that we offer courses with more coursework and less exams but this doesn’t mean we are the easy option.” (FE College)

“Less academically able students thrive on BTECs. Typically because they don’t like exams. They prefer working on projects on a type of brief they may get from an employer.” (FE College)

“None of our Degree courses involve sitting exams. We don’t have a problem with this. Unfortunately the rest of education has been set up by and governed by people who do well in exams.” (FE College)

4.43 The majority of vocational learners progressing into pre-1992 universities tend to be clustered within a small range of vocational subject areas.

“The department that tends to receive the most applications from vocational learners are: computing; engineering; sports science; drama and music. This is because there are related vocational qualifications in these areas.” (Pre 92 University)

“Some BTEC students become disillusioned with a degree course as it is not as hands on as the course they have been used to. They do however tend to be more enthusiastic about the subject and committed to working in that area.” (Pre 92 University)

4.44 Foundation Degrees offer a very accessible route into studying HE courses through FE Colleges. Generally, the entry requirements onto Foundation Degree programmes are considerably lower than the requirements for a degree programme (a pass at BTEC is often accepted as a suitable entry qualification, for example). After completing a two-year Foundation Degree, students can often progress directly onto the final year of an Honours degree subject.

Vocational Qualifications: HE Advantage or Disadvantage

4.45 As might be expected, the institutions who recruit mainly vocational learners consider that vocational learners have advantages over learners entering with traditional qualifications.

“Vocational qualifications can be a significant benefit to gain access to media/performing arts courses. Also social workers are recruited more for their personalities than their academic attainment.” (Post 92 University)

“A straight A-Level student with no enthusiasm for the subject would struggle in vocational HE; A-Level students are trained to pass exams.” (FE College)

“On our media production course students who come through the BTEC route are much more confident technically in using the equipment than A-Level students.” (Post 92 University)

“In many ways the computing BTEC better prepares students for studying the subject at University. Learners who come through this route have a better understanding of networking and how the systems work than students coming through the traditional route.” (Pre 92 University)

4.46 Pre-1992 universities, in the main, take the view that vocational learners have potential disadvantages that outweigh any advantages; particularly in relation to exam technique and breadth of knowledge.

“We do not think that a vocational qualification confers a particular advantage to potential applicants. Depending on the course and the candidate, there are potentially more disadvantages. Vocational candidates have fewer alternative course options.” (Russell Group University)

“Our BTEC students struggle initially with essay writing skills which they have not been used to. But they can catch up.” (Pre 92 University)

“One drawback of BTEC students is that they can be narrow in their focus. Their knowledge is very specific to the area that they have been studying in.” (Pre 92 University)

“Students entering with A-Levels tend to be more confident and more autonomous. They require less support compared to learners coming through the vocational route.” (Pre 92 University)

HE Student Support

4.47 All HEIs agree that students in HE who have come through the vocational route require more nurturing and support relative to comparable A-Level students. FE Colleges and post-1992 universities seem more geared up to provide this and indeed it is a central part of their offer.

“We know for a fact that our students who have progressed to HE in other institutions have struggled. They have not received the same level of support that they were used to in the college.” (FE College)

“The key with vocational learners is to get them through the first term and convince them what they can do.” (Post 92 University)

4.48 Pre-1992 universities have noted the same trend and feel that some vocational learners have not been prepared for, what can be, quite a different approach compared to their BTEC studies. In some subjects, their BTEC qualification has lacked the depth of the equivalent A-Level. This applies particularly to Maths and some Science subjects.

“The Faculty of Engineering Computer Science has noted that students entering with BTEC qualifications are struggling with mathematics.” (Russell Group University)

“Our sports science course is quite scientific. Many vocational entrants were not expecting this.” (Pre 92 University)

4.49 As the numbers of vocational learners increases in pre-1992 universities, additional support mechanisms are increasingly being introduced.

“A Maths and Statistics Help group (MASH) has now been put in place to provide additional support for vocational students. As a result of this Maths issue, we are now insisting that BTEC applicants have a distinction in their further maths component.” (Russell Group University)

“There is a marked difference between those students that come through the HND route and our second to third year students. We have established a whole programme of support for that cohort of joiners because we know they will struggle. Even still a significant proportion fail or get a third.” (Pre 92 University)

4.50 Where vocational learner disadvantages have been noted, they apply mainly to the first year of study.

“The longer someone is here the less important the qualification origin becomes. Once they have been through the first year and into the second it becomes less important how they got on to the programme. That in itself provides a good argument for widening access to get at the pool of talent that is out there.” (Pre 92 University)

HE Widening Participation Strategy

4.51 Sir Martin Harris’s review of participation at highly selective universities (Harris, 2010) found that while the overall trend across all universities over the last 15 years has been to widen access to more disadvantaged students, this has not permeated into highly selective universities.

“The analysis shows that while there have been substantial increases in participation among the least advantaged 40 per cent of young people across higher education overall compared to the mid-1990s, the participation rate among the same group of young people at the top third of selective universities has remained almost flat over the same period.” (Harris, 2010)

4.52 In fact, the most advantaged young people now appear to have greater access to the most selective universities.

“Furthermore, increases in the participation rate of the most advantaged over the same period have led to relative differences in participation at these institutions increasing: the most advantaged 20 per cent of the young population were around six times more likely to attend in the mid-1990s but this increased to around seven times more likely by the mid-2000s.” (Harris, 2010)

4.53 FE Colleges and post-1992 universities appear to provide a more supportive environment for vocational learners. They regard themselves as active agents of widening participation and indeed local economic regeneration.

“We see ourselves as a widening participation university. 98% of our students are recruited from state schools and 50% come from the bottom two social economic groups. We have never been an A-Level only university.” (Post 92 University)

“You will find significant differentiation between ourselves and pre 92 universities. All of our provision is in vocational education: the social imperative here is to address the economic and human capital development of the local area. Vocational education is more comprehensible to our learners, employers and the learners’ families.” (FE College)

4.54 Vocational qualifications are regarded as the ideal vehicle to progress non-traditional learners to higher education.

“Vocational qualifications are very important to our widening participation agenda.” (Post 92 University)

“BTECs provide an alternative route for some young people who otherwise would have been turned off by education. It keeps them in education at 16 and provides them with an access route to higher education.” (Post 92 University)

“We are able to demonstrate that through vocational qualifications, time and support, almost everybody can aspire to Higher Education.” (FE College)

4.55 FE Colleges, in particular, have much more flexible entry requirements to Higher Education. They insist, however, that it is not a soft option.

“Widening participation is not an easy task. You can’t just set people up to fail. What we do is widen the entry gate rather than lower the standards.” (Post 92 University)

4.56 FE Colleges offer an internal progression model to Higher Education. This, they would argue, is the best way to maximise the skills potential of students who initially might have had low learning goals.

“For vocational learners, HE within FE is the ideal model – progression within the comfort zone. We push them beyond what they think they can achieve in a supported environment.”
(FE College)

“Our setup aids the transition from FE to HE. FE and HE courses run alongside each other to act as an aspirational and inspirational motivator.” (FE College)

“The vast majority of our HE learners have progressed from within the college. We offer 15 Foundation Degrees and 15 Honours Degree programmes.” (FE College)

4.57 HE budget constraints are causing concern within HEIs about the impact on their Widening Participation agenda. Some reported that they fear that the impact of increasing applications and fines for over-filling courses will mean that students with less academic backgrounds may miss out.

HE Retention and Degree Outcomes

4.58 We have been unable to access retention and Degree outcome information which will allow a comparison between vocational learners and traditional learners. Anecdotal evidence however suggests that retention rates for vocational learners are higher in FE Colleges and post-1992 universities than in pre-1992 universities.

“Our retention rate is close to 98%. The students like our approach to learning.” (FE College)

4.59 In terms of Degree outcomes, the general perception is that vocational learners do better than traditional learners on vocational degrees delivered in FE Colleges and post-1992 universities. This reflects their experience and expertise in undertaking more applied and, in some cases, work-based project activities.

“As part of our social work degree, we have entrants with both vocational qualifications and A-Levels. Our experience is that those with vocational qualifications do better.” (FE College)

“Our experience is that vocational students do significantly better than A-Level students on Foundation Degree courses.”
(FE College)

4.60 In terms of pre-1992 universities, the view is that for those completing degrees, there is no difference between the two groups of learners. The challenge for vocational learners in these institutions is getting over the initial first year hurdle. However, consultees commonly felt that the qualification of an individual was much less important than the socio-economic circumstances that they faced. A higher proportion of vocational learners appear, on the evidence collected, from more disadvantaged family backgrounds.

“The main reasons for student drop-out are financial and medical; few drop-out for academic purposes. If they struggle academically we can often support them through that; medical problems can affect anybody but, as you would expect, financial problems tend to affect those from lower socio-economic groups more.”

Employer Engagement

4.61 All the HEIs we spoke to thought that they had excellent relationships and inputs to their courses from employers.

4.62 FE Colleges argue strongly that, through their vocational emphasis, they are brought closer to employers. They feel that their small local employers understand and demand vocational qualifications.

“Employers prefer BTEC qualifications to Apprenticeships. They have confidence in the qualification because of its focus and flexibility. In comparison A-Levels are very rigid and put young people in tramlines: we do not see them as a gold standard. BTECs will enable us to expand the qualifications barbell, expanding skilled supervisory class.” (FE College)

“Employers drive what we deliver.” (FE College)

“If we deal with a large employer locally then the whole supply chain starts to pay attention and engage as well.” (FE College)

4.63 In terms of Foundation Degrees, the content is structured around particular employer needs.

“We have excellent links with employers through our Foundation Degree courses. They are involved in their development, provide placements and often recruit from the courses.” (FE College)

4.64 In some cases, FE Higher Education courses are funded by local employers.

“Some of our Degree courses are sponsored by employers. For example, the local authority sponsors the social work Degree programme and the health authority the podiatry BSc course.” (FE College)

The Role of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)

4.65 Lifelong Learning Networks are supported by the Higher Education Funding Council Strategic Development Fund to remove local barriers to higher education progression. They facilitate curriculum development, information advice and guidance, including learner support systems, and seek to establish area-wide progression agreements with HE institutions. Local Lifelong Learning Networks play an important role in brokering progression routes/agreement for specific vocational qualifications to Higher Education (HEFCE, 2009). These agreements can often have a catalytic effect in changing HE institutional culture and attitude towards vocational qualifications.

4.66 In 2009, 8,000 agreements were signed with HE institutions in relation to vocational qualifications. The majority of agreements related to BTEC qualifications and progression to foundation degrees and general undergraduate provision. Almost 20,000 students per year are expected to progress through this route. It is likely that the majority of agreements will be with FE Colleges and post-1992 universities.

4.67 The following is an example of a typical agreement.

The University of Reading has identified what BTEC National Diploma Animal Management Students need to achieve to be considered for entry to their Honours Degree in Animal Science Programme. The development of this National Agreement grew out of work between Reading and the local Further Education College to establish progression routes for local students. Once agreed, it is a relatively simple matter to extend the agreement to learners across the country. To date, 22 of these National Agreements have been developed.

4.68 With regard to employer engagement, a number of Lifelong Learning Networks have involved employers in the development of the curriculum. For example:

Western Vocational LLN has engaged heavily with SSCs such as Skillset, Skills for Health and Lantra. This has informed and shaped new curriculum offerings across the network.

4.69 Lifelong Learning Networks also provide vocational learners with IAG support. Many have developed electronic forms of IAG, underpinned by progression agreements. They have also worked closely with IAG providers to develop their knowledge of the opportunities in HE for vocational learners and are working with admissions staff at universities and colleges to ensure the potential applicants are receiving the best quality advice. It is estimated that in 2009, Lifelong Learning Networks distributed 200,000 paper-based IAG resources. A further 15,000 people have benefited from one-to-one IAG interventions and nearly 900,000 on LLN web-related IAG systems.

Higher Futures (Sheffield City Region LLN)

Higher Futures has funded an IAG practitioner in each partner organisation to deliver IAG and transitional support for vocational learners. The practitioners offer IAG to individuals and also provider IAG-related activities, tailored to the needs of their own institution and sectors, using the network to assist with transitional issues.

Overall Assessment

4.70 Vocational qualifications provide non-traditional learners with a very effective transmission mechanism to enter Higher Education.

- 4.71 Returning to our initial hypotheses, it is clear that vocational learners are not disadvantaged in terms of general access to the Higher Education market. Vocational qualifications provide non-traditional learners with a very effective transmission mechanism to enter Higher Education. They are, however, disadvantaged in terms of restriction in the range of courses they can pursue and the type of institution they can apply to.
- 4.72 Vocational learners are increasingly entering pre-1992 universities (including Russell Group Universities), although the numbers are relatively small. They do, however, require BTEC Distinctions and may find the support structure less intensive than they are used to. Their qualification also needs to be from a subject 'relevant' to their degree course. Relevance is defined differently by different universities.
- 4.73 The main disadvantage that potential vocational entrants to Higher Education have, relative to A-Level candidates, is choice. The vocational qualification is specialised and specific to a particular subject. Its currency is not as transferable as A-Levels in the university market; particularly in Russell Group Universities. This poses a potential problem for learners deciding to switch their area of study.

5 IMPLEMENTING THE 14–19 QUALIFICATIONS STRATEGY

5.1 In this section we explore the key factors that will have a bearing on any implementation of a 14–19 Qualification Strategy based on the four pathways. These are presented under the following headings:

- **Market perceptions of the four pathways;**
- **Feasibility of qualification substitution;**
- **Potential gaps in a rationalised offer;**
- **Practical barriers and implications of implementation.**

Market Perceptions of the Four Pathways

5.2 There is a mixed market perception of the four qualification components which make up the pathway, although a recognition of their general robustness. Discussions with providers and 14–19 partnerships reveal that the vast majority recognise the value of each of the four routes and are able to observe benefits to learners who pursue those particular qualifications. While there are still some concerns about the Diploma, in the main, there is agreement to the overall concept of the qualification:

“The Diplomas are high quality qualifications which offer applied learning based within a sector.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

5.3 The issue with Diplomas relates primarily to the perceived target group and the extent to which lower ability learners can meet the demands and challenges of the qualification (e.g. functional skills, achievement of all the elements).

- 5.4 While most providers were fairly confident that Foundation Learning would accommodate learners on entry level and level 1 provision, they did have a number of concerns regarding aspects of the qualification structure. There was a perception that it was more performance related than current equivalents (e.g. Entry to Employment), i.e. with a greater focus on achievement. It was also thought that it would require a different style of learning, with greater emphasis on teaching and classroom-based learning. In addition, although the benefits of the progression model are recognised, it was felt that some learners might struggle to progress to other Level 2 qualifications, such as Apprenticeships and Diplomas, and took the view that other standalone qualifications might be more appropriate.
- 5.5 Partnerships and providers also recognise that an appropriate curriculum offer at 14–19 is critical to the Raising the Participation Age policy. This will place particular pressure on the delivery of work-based qualifications as it is predicted that it is through these qualifications that those currently not participating will engage ((Rossiter, 2008) and (NfER, 2007)). The existing volume of standalone VQ/VRQ delivery is thought to be important in meeting the needs of the learners yet to be engaged 16–19.
- 5.6 Evidence from the Diploma Development Partnerships (DPPs) indicates that employers would welcome qualification rationalisation. It is apparent that employers are often confused by the range of qualifications on offer and what particular qualifications represent in terms of the skills and knowledge an individual learner will have developed. The evidence also suggests that employers would welcome a greater focus on the development of Maths and English skills.

Feasibility of Qualification Substitution

- 5.7 Our analysis has revealed virtually no support for a blanket withdrawal of standalone VQs/VRQs. However, if such a strategy were to be introduced there are clear substitution opportunities.
- 5.8 VQs/VRQs are extremely popular and are increasing in market share. The 14–16 and 16–19 provider market has invested heavily in them and is structured around their delivery. These providers have a significant vested interest in them remaining, which inevitably clouds their perception and opinion of alternatives. The strength of opposition to potential VQ/VRQ rationalisation has to be considered in this context.

5.9 Despite this, we believe consultees have been fairly pragmatic and open-minded regarding some of the potential weaknesses of the current offer. They have been prepared to consider alternatives and implications, even if they would not whole-heartedly support them.

5.10 Any rationalisation of VQs/VRQs will inevitably increase the volumes in other pathways. At 14–16, it is likely to impact most on increased Level 1 and Level 2 Diploma participation, although many schools insist that they are more likely to fall back to GCSEs.

“Learners not able for Diplomas would have to do GCSEs.”
(Deputy Head, School without a Sixth Form)

5.11 At 16–19, FE Colleges are likely to experience an expansion of Level 2 and Level 3 Diplomas, plus Apprenticeships. The FE sector will also need to mirror 14–16 delivery. At present, they are highly dependent on VQs/VRQs, partly because they are providing progression routes from these qualifications 14–16.

“VQs and VRQs are the bread and butter of college life. Removal would be extremely damaging for all.” (Curriculum Manager, FE College)

5.12 School sixth forms and sixth form colleges indicated that they would likely shift towards applied A-levels (for their remaining shelf-life).

“If BTECs are removed, we will revisit applied A-Levels.” (Vice Principal, Sixth Form College)

5.13 It is expected that if schools expand Diploma provision at Key Stage 4, 16–19 providers would follow suit and provide a progression route to the Level 3 Diploma.

5.14 Work-based learning providers indicated that they would seek to continue the expansion of Apprenticeship provision, although emphasised existing employer constraints. Of all providers, they are perhaps the least concerned about the implications of a rationalised VQ/VRQ offer.

“We are a commercial organisation so, whatever people want us to deliver, we will do it.” (Manager, WBL Provider)

5.15 From the analysis already presented, we can conclude that there are options for learners on existing standalone qualifications to be accommodated in the existing four routes, in particular:

- middle to upper ability learners on VQs/VRQs at 14–16 who could be accommodated on the Level 2 Diploma;
- provision at entry level and Level 1 that could be accommodated in Foundation Learning (assuming qualifications are on the QCF);
- learners on VRQs 16–19 could pursue a Diploma at Level 2 or Level 3;
- learners on some standalone VQs 16–19 could enter an Apprenticeship (not withstanding issues around employment of young people under the age of 18 in certain sectors).

Potential Gaps in a Rationalised Offer

5.16 While it is clear from the above that there are potential options for substitution, both providers and partnerships thought that VQ/VRQ rationalisation would leave a significant gap in the offer. A total of four key gap areas were identified:

- a **‘practical and vocational’ route for learners at key stage 4, who are borderline Level 1 / Level 2 or who have a spiky learning profile i.e. are learning at multiple levels:**
 - the Diploma is not regarded as sufficiently vocational (insufficient practical elements);
 - there are concerns about learner abilities to achieve functional skills at Level 2 for the Level 2 Diploma;
 - the size of the Diploma limits learners’ options to pursue other qualifications and subjects alongside the Diploma;
- a **‘practical and vocational’ route for learners at 16–19 who have not achieved sufficient at key stage 4 to pursue A-levels or pursue a Level 2 Apprenticeship (e.g. because of the key skills requirement).**
- a **‘practical and vocational’ route at Level 2 or 3 for learners at 16–19 who are not yet ready for an Apprenticeship (e.g. lack personal and social skills required for work placement), or are unable to secure an employer placement due to limited availability or because they are too young to work in the sector;**

- **learners on qualifications at 16–19 that incorporate required industry training but where there may be restrictions** on learners gaining employment in particular sectors, until they reach the age of 18, or until they have a particular qualification. For example:
 - learners in the health and social care sector can often not get employed until they are 18 and therefore are unable to do an Apprenticeship;
 - learners wishing to progress into hairdressing are required to have the NVQ Level 3 to demonstrate occupational competence;
 - in the passenger transport sector¹⁴ many occupations have strict age requirements or are based in dangerous environments therefore making work experience difficult.

Practical Barriers and Implications of Implementation

5.17 It is clear from the analysis presented so far, that the curriculum offer delivered by providers is driven by a number of factors around learner performance and choice. While the needs of some learners could be met by the four pathways, there are significant concerns that aspects of performance and choice will, in practice, be adversely affected through pathway implementation. There are also drivers within the current delivery framework that might constitute inbuilt barriers to full achievement. In essence, they are the factors perpetuating a strong market demand for VQs/VRQs. They are in the main, but not exclusively, provider driven. Albeit providers acting in the best interests of their learners.

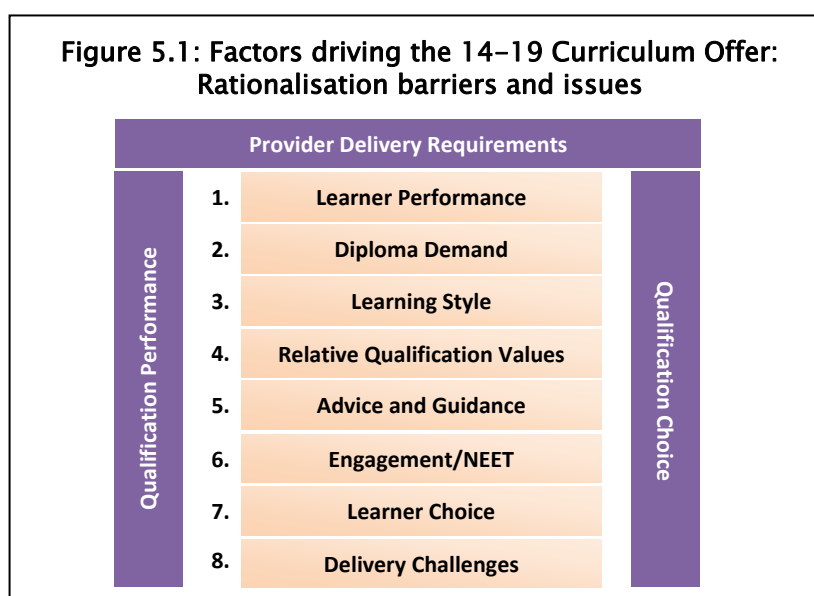
5.18 In **Figure 5.1** we present a three-dimensional framework which shows that the curriculum offer will be determined by:

- qualification performance – the ability of particular qualifications to achieve positive outcomes for learners;
- learner choice – individual preference for subjects and types of qualifications; including parental influence;

¹⁴ DDP evidence

- provider delivery requirements – the resource requirements/relative costs to deliver particular qualifications.

5.19 Within this potentially complex and interlinked set of behaviours, we have drawn out eight operational themes that individually and collectively could act to influence and potentially constrain a four pathway strategy. These are considered in turn.



1. Implications for Learner Performance

Learner performance levels will fall: If VQs/VRQs were to be withdrawn or be significantly curtailed, there is potential that it could impact on provider performance levels, particularly at key stage 4. At the same time, however, issues have been raised about the equivalence value of some VQs/VRQs and whether the VQs/VRQs provide learners with qualifications of real value. Nevertheless, taken at face value, significant rationalisation of the VQ/VRQ offer is expected to negatively impact on overall key stage 4 performance levels.

5.20 Supply and demand for VQs/VRQs, at 14–16 in particular, has been heavily driven by the impact they are reported to have on key stage 4 achievement. VQs/VRQs have emerged as options for academically less able or potentially disaffected or disadvantaged learners. As such, there appears to be a correlation between the historical 14–16 performance of an area and the standalone VQ/VRQ offer, take-up and rate of expansion, with poorer performing areas and schools having a more significant vocational element to their curriculum.

5.21 VQs/VRQs (e.g. BTECs) are considered especially important for the cohort of key stage 4 learners who may find it difficult to achieve at Level 2 through the GCSE route:

- opportunities for learners to pursue qualifications at Level 1 where they can achieve the qualification, rather than achieving grades D–G for GCSEs;
- enable some Level 1 learners to achieve a Level 2 qualification via the VQs/VRQs route due to the nature of delivery and/or assessment process:

“BTECs are like a driving test: learners can go at their own pace and take the test as many times as necessary until they pass. With the GCSE, they only get one shot.” (Assistant Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

- schools are more confident of putting SEN learners with spiky profiles of learning (i.e. where they learn at multiple levels) on a standalone VQ/ VRQ, than on a Diploma which is perceived to be too challenging.

5.22 The pressure to achieve performance targets means that school staff will often encourage young people to take the qualification that they will do best in. Partnership managers, however, are concerned that an increasing number of learners, capable of achieving GCSEs, are increasingly being encouraged to take VQs/VRQs instead. More able young people are also opting for VQs/VRQs because they are perceived to be more interesting, easier and can support achievement of a higher points score, than the general route.

5.23 VQs/VRQs have been observed to contribute to overall performance at key stage 4, measured through the average points score and contextual value added, as illustrated by the following examples:

- the average points score in one area is now close to the national average, which is regarded as a significant improvement and is attributed, at least in part, to the VQ/VRQ offer;
- VQs/VRQs were introduced six years ago as a mechanism to increase school performance following an Area Inspection:

“Schools were initially very resistant to this; however, once one school started and showed good performance, others followed.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

5.24 Where there is strong parental support for VQs/VRQs, which tends to be the case among parents of less-able learners, teachers report that parents have been delighted with the improved progress and achievements that their children have recorded through a VQ/VRQ supported route.

“Parents like VQs as, in the main, they are still doing the core curriculum alongside. There would be resistance to any alternatives that took up more GCSE space.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“If young people are taken off BTECs to do Diplomas and/or GCSEs then fail them, there will be a massive outcry from parents.” (Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

5.25 There is also increasing recognition of the impact of VQs/VRQs on 16–19 performance in schools with sixth forms and sixth form colleges and, hence, they are also potentially contributing to improved performance at 16–19.

5.26 Despite the positive impact on performance levels, issues have been raised about the credibility of VQs/VRQs at 14–16 in particular. Partnerships have indicated that the VQ/VRQ is, in some cases, a “soft” option 14–16 and that a Level 2 for example, equivalent to 4 GCSEs at grades A*–C, may not necessarily be justified. This can become even more evident when considering the perceived value of qualifications for progression at 16–19.

5.27 Some partnerships question the value of the learning experience provided by some VQ/VRQ provision:

“The expansion of BTECs has been driven by targets. Essentially, schools have expanded their BTEC provision to get the local authority and Ofsted off their back. It has been successful in doing both, but this is at the expense of real learning.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“We know that learners in other providers are doing courses that on paper mean they can’t do anything with them.”
(Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

5.28 On the other hand, there is strong support for VQs/VRQs that can give learners an experience that they would not otherwise get through the school curriculum which contributes to raising individuals’ self-esteem, re-engaging them in learning, and providing them with a sense of success.

5.29 Regardless of these issues, significant concerns have been raised about the impact any rationalisation or withdrawing of VQs/VRQs would have on the overall level of learner performance within an area:

“If BTECs were withdrawn, our progress on the five GCSEs A–C would collapse. We would immediately go back to a low 20%.”*
(Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“Without BTECs, our performance would fall out of the sky.”
(Teacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“The expansion of BTECs has been particularly high in National Challenge Schools. BTECs seem to be the way out of National Challenge status. This action is encouraged by Ofsted. What alternative advice might Ofsted provide? Would they say just do the Diploma and don’t worry about performance?” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

2. Diploma Demand

Diplomas are, on the whole, not regarded as a viable direct alternative to VQs/VRQs. There are concerns that the value of the Diploma could be adversely affected if learners unsuited to this learning style pursue the option.

The actual and perceived appropriateness of Diplomas to a wide range of learners is ultimately affecting Diploma take-up. This does not look set to change, unless views regarding the relevance of the qualification are challenged across partnerships and providers, and better information provided to learners and their parents. It is evident that Diploma take-up is currently constrained by the popularity of alternative qualifications.

- 5.30 At both key stage 4 and 16–19, VQs/VRQs are one of the main qualification routes of choice, with current levels of Diploma take-up lower than expected across partnerships and all provider types at 14–16 and 16–19.
- 5.31 This partly reflects the phased approach to the implementation of Diplomas (**Appendix A**), but also a combination of partnership and provider responses to this particular route and demand for Diplomas by learners. This is perhaps one of the most significant barriers to implementation of the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy.
- 5.32 On average, Diploma learners appear to account for less than 1% of all 16–19 year olds in Colleges. While an Association of Colleges (AoC) survey (Association of Colleges, 2009) found that colleges anticipated that the number of Diploma learners would double between 2009 and 2010, FE Colleges in our sample reported that Diploma take-up during 2009/10 has been much lower than they expected. For three FE Colleges this has meant that they have subsequently not delivered particular lines of learning they were planning to. In one case, the College was surprised by this, given the Diploma line was in a sector for which they have a strong reputation.
- 5.33 Low demand has been one of the key reasons why implemented Diplomas have not been implemented. Providers suspect that there would be insufficient learners for the Level 2 Diploma to justify the investment and the potential knock-on effect it may have on VQ/VRQ provision in the same sectors, which is regarded as essential for other learners.

- 5.34 Demand for Diplomas is a function of the perceived and actual appropriateness of the qualification for different learner cohorts. A survey of Headteachers (Haynes, 2008) found that teachers were initially deterred from delivering Diplomas due to the negative impact they could have on school results.
- 5.35 It is evident that demand (and take-up) has also been affected significantly by the extent to which partnerships and providers have bought-in to the Diploma concept. We have observed positive buy-in some partnerships and providers (four of the 14-19 partnerships), whereas others (a combination of both partnerships and providers) are more cautious or sceptical. There are examples of situations where providers have offered the Diploma but will admit that they have not actively encouraged learners to take it up.
- 5.36 Caution surrounding the Diploma has been compounded by the media. Most 14-19 partnerships, and some providers, made reference to an article in the Times Educational Supplement (TES Editorial, 2009). In particular, schools felt that they should delay making further decisions about the Diplomas in the short-term; and would rather wait until the picture is clearer. This has resulted in a desire to introduce minimal change in the short to medium term. The influence of media on the Diploma offer has been identified previously - the National Evaluation of Diplomas (O'Donnell, 2009) identified negative media coverage as a factor contributing to uncertainty among staff towards the Diploma.
- 5.37 It will be difficult for Diplomas to gain a significant foothold in the market while there is such scale VQ/VRQ delivery; they will simply be crowded out, particularly where providers are unable or not prepared to offer both, or have not fully signed up to the Diploma.

“As long as BTECs are in place, the Diploma will struggle to get off the ground. They are not, however, direct competitors.”
(14-19 Partnership Manager)

“BTECs will have to be removed before Diplomas can succeed. Especially as they are more expensive to run.” (14-19 Partnership Manager)

5.38 Despite the need to stimulate buy-in to the Diploma it is worth recognising that encouraging too many inappropriate learners onto the Diploma route could result in damage to its reputation. This would be a result of Level 1 learners, perhaps not suited to the method of study and unlikely to make the transition to the Level 2 Diploma, and an increase in learners on the Level 2 Diploma who may not achieve. It is also felt that the status of vocational qualifications in general might be adversely affected.

“A key risk associated with downgrading BTECs will be the potential implications for the value of other applied/vocational provision as a whole. It may reinforce stereotypical views about the value of such provision as a route for learners.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

3. Loss of a Valuable Learning Style

Loss of a valuable learning style: There is a common view that a valuable learning style would be lost by rationalising/withdrawing VQs/VRQs, due to some of the particular qualification design features of VQs/VRQs.

5.39 The following typical features of VQs/VRQs are regarded as particularly valuable to learners:

- **practical/vocational and/or applied focus:** the vocational emphasis of VQs/VRQs has been highlighted as one of their distinguishing features, particularly relative to GCSEs at key stage 4;
- **different learning environment:** the predominant feature of the VQ/VRQ experience at 14–16, as described to us by the 14–19 Partnership Managers, providers and learners is that they provide a different learning environment. This could be in the workplace, in a more adult environment (college or work-based learning provider) or in a different setting (e.g. with specialist equipment);
- **smaller group sizes:** group sizes for some offsite learning at 14–16 are much smaller than in school. This may be one of the reasons why it is reported that learners respond better to the style of delivery, particularly those learners who have previously found school provision challenging;

- **assessment approaches:** assessments are often practical, with evidence submitted in a variety of formats, including video. Assessment is also through units which provides two benefits: rewards in terms of achievement along the way and the option for units to be re-taken which means greater potential for learners to achieve the qualification;

“The BTEC Science is much more coursework focussed than the GCSE route and it has been very successful. All of the students we have put on it have passed. It requires hard work and they have to be constantly pushed along, but they do get there.”
(Assistant Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

“BTECs are made up of short-term units with coursework and assessment, and there is little emphasis on exams. Learners can see how they are progressing.” (Curriculum Manager, FE College)

“Less-able students learn in small chunks and in small units of success. BTECs provide this. Diplomas are the antithesis to this.” (Headteacher, School with a sixth form)

- **a variety of units (e.g. for BTECs) provides greater flexibility:**

“Level 3 BTECs appear to be much more flexible than Level 3 Diplomas. There is much more opportunity to pick and mix.”
(FE College, Vice Principal)

- **quick and flexible delivery** (e.g. for BTECs): there is the potential for learners to achieve the equivalent of two or more GCSEs in the time available for just one GCSE. Standalone NVQs can be delivered more intensively over a shorter period of time than an Apprenticeship framework, for example;
- **industry value:** VQs/VRQs, specifically, are regarded as qualifications that prepare learners for work, with FE Colleges noting the value of NVQs amongst employers:

“Employers expect to see learners with NVQs.” (Principal, FE College)

“NVQs are industry designed and hands-on.” (Principal, FE College)

- **style of learning:** VQs/VRQs provide an opportunity for learners to develop a different range of skills and to learn independently (relative to the general route in particular):

“We have A-grade students who have a genuine interest in subjects such as media. The BTEC First Diploma in Media [Level 2] delivered at the local sixth form college gives them an opportunity to do something they are really interested in. It can be academically rewarding to immerse themselves in the subject through the project-based activity.” (Curriculum Deputy, School without a Sixth Form)

“Vocational learning is easy to deliver via a BTEC and stimulates independent learning as the learners are given a task to find out about.” (Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

“It sounded interesting and was a break from the rest of my subjects which are all writing and text books. It can also help me get a Saturday job.” (Year 11 learner, Level 1 BTEC in Hair & Beauty)

“We feel more independent. We aren’t told what to learn.” (Learner, BTEC First Diploma in Business Studies, Level 2)

- **incremental progression through qualifications:** the nature of some VQ/VRQ delivery is such that learners can start on Level 1 and progress to Level 2 within the two years if they are able to. The following example, (from a school without a sixth form) illustrates the decision taken by one school to offer a VRQ equivalent instead of the applied GCSE:

“The school decided to replace the GCSE in Health & Social Care. The learner target group was described as Level 2 learners, at the C/D borderline and who find exams difficult. The BTEC Foundation Level 2 was favoured – it was described as a “lower risk qualification” compared to the alternatives, as learners can work through the requirements for Level 1 first and then move onto the Level 2 requirements for those learners able to.”

- 5.40 Despite the features described above, there are questions about the extent to which some provision is truly vocational or vocationally-related. One 14-19 Partnership Manager suspects that some of the VQ/VRQ delivery in schools does not provide the truly vocational benefits as it is delivered without specialist facilities. This was also evident in some of the visits to providers.
- 5.41 Quality assurance of VQ/VRQ provision is also a concern. In some areas, the 14-19 partnership plays a key role in quality assuring the 14-16 collaborative provision and is confident that it is of high quality. However, there are concerns that some school-site delivery is not as high quality (e.g. BTECs in business or IT) or as effective (e.g. hair & beauty).

“The quality assurance of BTECs in schools is very lax. Success rates are too good to be true.” (14-19 Partnership Manager)

“Schools are teaching to the assessment and not teaching to the curriculum content. If BTECs are taught to the specification they can be a very credible qualification, but some schools are ‘cutting corners’ in order to be more time efficient and maximise the number of qualifications that can be studied at Level 2.” (14-16 Centre Skills Manager, FE College)

One FE College we spoke to maintained that Edexcel are prepared to accept lower quality standards in schools than colleges. In Ofsted’s reviews of delivery of vocational qualifications at key stage 4 (Ofsted, 2005) (Ofsted, 2007), lower quality of teaching compared to other key stage 4 qualifications was identified, as were lower levels of quality assurance.

4. Perceived Value of VQs/VRQs Relative to Other Qualifications

The four qualification routes of the 14-19 Qualification Strategy are not regarded as substitutes for VQs/VRQs for many learners: One of the main factors influencing the scale of VQ/VRQ delivery across providers is the perceived value of VQs/VRQs relative to other qualifications – GCSEs, A-levels, Apprenticeships and Diplomas.

5.42 The response from learners to VQs/VRQs at both 14–16 and 16–19 has been very positive. There are strong views amongst partnerships, providers and learners that the four pathways do not provide comparable experiences for learners, and/or there are (perceived or actual) barriers to pursuing alternative routes (e.g. Diplomas, Apprenticeships):

“There are no alternatives to BTECs. Diplomas don’t offer practical learning and there aren’t enough Apprenticeship places.” (Vice Principal, FE College Manager)

“There is no point in setting up young people to fail. Moving them from the current system to the Diploma system is setting them up to fail.” (Principal, FE College)

GCSEs/A-levels

5.43 While GCSEs and A-levels account for most learners in schools and sixth form colleges at 14–16 and 16–19, the majority of schools and sixth form colleges consulted felt that there was a cohort of learners for whom VQs/VRQs provide a key benefit in terms of engagement and meeting their needs due to the factors outlined earlier and because:

- some VQs/VRQs have clear progression routes into further education or employment with training, for sectors of particular interest to the learners;
- vocational courses provide learners with an opportunity to improve their employability prospects, which is particularly important for those who do not currently continue in education 16–19:

“VQs are truly vocational and applied and allow learners to develop the skills and knowledge for the sector.” (Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

Apprenticeships

5.44 While it could be argued that many of the features of VQs/VRQs that learners value could be offered through the Apprenticeship route, it is the perceived suitability and accessibility of these other routes that affects take-up. Some Level 2 learners are not thought to be ready for the workplace (e.g. due to underdeveloped personal and social skills) and therefore a standalone VQ is a viable alternative to an Apprenticeship.

5.45 It is worth noting, however, that at 16–19 the VQs/VRQs learning experience may not be dissimilar to that of other provision available, particularly since learners on standalone VQs/VRQs could be learning alongside those learning as part of an Apprenticeship framework. Given close links with employers at 16–19, FE Colleges are conscious of the learning experience they provide:

“Some of our courses are heavily vocational. Employers have demanded that learners must have real-life skills. This means they must obtain proper work experience rather than work in a simulated work environment in the college.” (Vice Principal, FE College)

Diplomas

5.46 It has been argued that Diplomas have the potential to deliver many of the benefits that VQs/VRQs offer. However, there are some concerns about the suitability of the Diploma and demand for VQs/VRQs has therefore continued.

5.47 Whilst many stakeholders recognise that the Diploma is a challenging qualification that meets the needs of some learners (higher ability learners), they are keen to stress that the Diploma does not meet the needs of the majority of their current VQ/VRQ learners. Similarly, at 16–19, the Diploma has been identified as a qualification better suited to learners with average or above average prior attainment.

5.48 Findings from the AoC survey of FE Colleges (Association of Colleges, 2009) reported similar concerns to those raised by the providers consulted. These relate mostly to the size of the Diploma, the fact that it is not awarded incrementally (as many VQs/VRQs are) and that functional skills may not be achievable by the lower ability learners.

“Learners on BTECs are suited to a different way of learning, which is not available on the Diploma.” (Vice Principal, Sixth Form College)

“A number of SEN learners will potentially lose out, as they can still do a Level 2 qualification, but would struggle with the Diploma.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

5.49 Maths and English abilities are one of the main reasons why the VQs/VRQs route is preferred relative to the Level 2 Diploma. Providers are concerned that some learners are not able to achieve functional skills at Level 2, a requirement to achieve the Diploma award.

5.50 Some providers have had more success with delivery of Diplomas, addressing some of the issues/barriers raised by other providers. The experience of one provider consulted was that by putting greater emphasis on functional skills (and not assuming it can be covered through the Principal Learning) learners are better placed to achieve it. An evaluation of progress with Diplomas by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2009) highlighted that functional skills needed more attention, although the main subject learning of the Diplomas was generally going well. Specifically, they found that in half of the consortia visited, work in functional skills lacked coordination, which was impacting on the quality of teaching and learning.

- 5.51 In a minority of cases, the attractiveness of the Diploma may be affected by the choice for Additional Specialist Learning (ASL) in Diplomas, which has been heavily influenced by the associated costs of delivery (e.g. GCSEs/A-levels are less costly than other VQ/VRQ options). Delivery challenges should not conflict with the essence of the Diploma experience.
- 5.52 At 16–19, those learners wishing to go on to HE may be more likely to pursue a combination of VRQs and A-levels or just A-levels. The Level 3 Diploma is not accepted in its own right in some cases and must be combined with certain A-levels. This can make it a challenging route for learners to follow.

5. Quality of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

Learners are not always receiving full and impartial IAG: Learners are not always being provided with sufficient information, advice and guidance about the full range of options available to them. This affects their views of particular pathways, and subsequent decisions about qualifications to follow.

- 5.53 The robustness of IAG and understanding of qualification routes amongst key stakeholders must be a priority in supporting further development and implementation of the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy. There are some serious concerns about the extent to which learners are receiving full and impartial IAG, and evidence to suggest that some learners may be encouraged to pursue the VQs/VRQs route without full consideration of other options that may be available to them.
- 5.54 When it comes to making a choice, the evidence reveals that learners, at both 14–16 and 16–19, are typically choosing their qualification by selecting the sector or subject first. In some cases, the concept of choice between different types of qualifications may then be irrelevant. For example, if a learner wants to follow a particular sector at Level 1 there may be only one qualification choice. Similarly, at 16–19, many learners participating in VQs/VRQs 16–19 do so as a continuation from the route 14–16, rather than making an active decision to move to a different qualification route (e.g. A-levels or an Apprenticeship).

5.55 Where there are different qualification options, learners are then guided in their choice of qualification route. In some cases the guidance may be stronger than in others, with the qualification route being recommended to the learners, and the equivalence value of some VQs/VRQs being highlighted:

“Young people do not understand qualifications pathways or levels. We talk to them about sectors. Choose a sector, and we will advise you on the route.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“I chose to do this because I wanted to do something in beauty. I’ve always liked make-up.” (Learner pursuing a Certificate in Introduction to Therapies [Beauty] Level 1)

“I didn’t know there was a Diploma available in Engineering. I said I wanted to do Engineering and the school just told me I should do this course.” (Learner, Level 2 BTEC First Diploma in Engineering)

“Young people trust us to choose what type of qualification is best for them. They choose the subject, we select the qualification.” (Vice Principal, FE College)

“We explain vocational qualifications to students in relation to how many GCSEs they are worth. Some of them recognise that they have the potential to get more points through the vocational route than they would through the GCSE route.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

5.56 The VQ/VRQ route may also be presented as the most suitable option (by teaching staff, careers advisers and Connexions) where key stage 4 achievement has been lower than would have been desirable for 16–19 progression. This is illustrated in the following example (**Figure 5.2**).

Figure 5.2: Learner Route Through a VRQ

This learner had wanted to do A-levels but not had not done well enough in her GCSEs at school. There wasn’t option to re-sit her GCSEs at school so she approached the local FE College for advice. The college supported her to identify an alternative route – a BTEC Higher Diploma in IT (equivalent to 7 GCSEs) alongside a BTEC First Certificate in Business Studies. She was advised that once she completes this, she can progress to the BTEC Higher Diploma in Business Studies (Level 3) and then go on to higher education to do event management,

which is what she ultimately wants to do.

5.57 In one Local Authority we consulted, IAG for the collaborative offer (including Diplomas) is led by the partnership – a desire to ensure the learners are placed on the most appropriate programme of learning to meet their needs. In this area, entry criteria for different qualifications have also been agreed. Learners who will pursue Diplomas need to get Level 6s at key stage 3, and those who get Level 5s will do a Level 1 VQs/VRQs alternative.

“We are keen to raise the profile of vocational provision. We believe this is best achieved by ensuring that learners are on the right courses and that they do well. If learners end up on the wrong courses it may reinforce views that collaborative provision is for low-achievers. This could have a knock-on effect to the Diplomas and be really detrimental.” (14-19 Partnership Manager)

5.58 The accompanying information learners are given to support their decision-making processes is highly variable across different providers and while the vast majority of learners will receive option booklets/information about the courses available, fewer will receive more specialist information such as:

- **labour market information (LMI) about particular sectors** – a number of 14–19 partnerships have provided examples of LMI produced specifically for the local area highlighting the employment opportunities available to young people, however this is not necessarily consistently used across schools;

“The issue of qualifications being delivered to 14–19 year olds that have insufficient demand from the labour market appears to be an issue based on anecdotes from Connexions and employers.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

- **progression routes for each sector** which map the types of qualifications available at entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2, through to 16–19 provision and beyond.

5.59 An extract from the key stage 4 options booklet in one partnership area is presented below. This illustrates the information provided to learners to support their decision to follow a VQ/VRQ, specifically noting the potential to achieve GCSE equivalents through the VQs/VRQs route.

Figure 5.3: Choosing a VQ/VRQ at Key Stage 4 <i>Source: Extract from the options booklet in one partnership area</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You could study a specific area of interest e.g. Hairdressing or Beauty Therapy, whilst achieving a nationally accepted qualification.• You could study in a different environment for one day a week.• You could study a BTEC Diploma at a high level enabling you to achieve 4 grade A*–C grades in your chosen area.• You could study an unusual subject that a single school would not be able to offer.• You could follow a Young Apprenticeship scheme in which you would learn in a real working situation whilst gaining your qualification.	

- 5.60 The influence of the views expressed by teachers, parents and other learners should not be underestimated. Learners noted the value they place in the advice provided by teachers at their school, and parents/other family members. However, it is evident that some information they are given for decisions at 14–16 and 16–19 may be accurate and based on fact, but other perceptions (particularly on an informal basis) may be biased by inaccurate information or by lack of detailed understanding.
- 5.61 For some particular learners, and in some LAs more than in others, parental influence is significant. For example, in some areas there is evidence to suggest that learners have been steered away from the Diploma by parental persuasion due to concerns about the perceived value of Diplomas by Higher Education institutions.
- 5.62 It is clear that understanding of the differences between the different routes is not as good as it could be amongst not only learners, but also teachers in schools. A survey (YouGov/Edge, 2009) found that teachers' knowledge of Apprenticeships and Diplomas was limited relative to their knowledge of other routes such as GCSEs, A-levels, and VQs/VRQs. An FE College we have consulted also noted this, commenting that learners may not be taking up Diplomas due to the advice provided by teaching staff. There is also implicit evidence to suggest that Diploma take-up may be affected by the preferences of individual providers, staff members and LA staff.
- 5.63 The national evaluation of Diplomas (O'Donnell, 2009) identified that *“neither students, parents or teachers fully understand the Diploma.”* It also went on to highlight that there was scope for greater consistency across and within consortia in relation to IAG:

The majority of learners did not recall receiving key information about Diplomas and it was evident that some were basing their decision on whether to take a Diploma or not on a limited and sometimes inaccurate understanding of the qualification.

- 5.64 The same also applies to Apprenticeships. Awareness of Apprenticeships among learners is not as high as it could be. Our discussions with learners reveal that some are not pursuing Apprenticeships due to a lack of awareness or a lack of understanding of how to apply. In one group of learners we spoke to, nine of the 13 learners reported that they would have preferred to do an Apprenticeship. For some, there was an assumption that places were not available (only one had actually explored it in detail) and the others did not know how to go about getting one.
- 5.65 This is also evident through other research (Learning and Skills Council, 2009) which looked at the source by which learners first became aware of an Apprenticeship, for which the most common response (42%) was through an employer. Only 10% of learners had heard about Apprenticeships through Connexions and a further 10% through careers adviser/teacher at school. The Skills Commission raised this is a barrier to expansion of Apprenticeships, reporting that two-thirds of learners stated that more IAG on Apprenticeships would have made them more likely to apply (Skills Commission, 2009).
- 5.66 One further source of potential confusion is the offer of other qualifications with 'Diploma' in the title, such as the BTEC First Diploma. Providers have also referred to a qualification being developed by Edexcel which is intended to reflect many of the key features of the 14-19 Diploma.

6. Learner Engagement and NEET Prevention

Lower levels of learner engagement and increasing NEET numbers: There is a strongly held view that limiting the range of VQs/VRQs could damage the ability of providers to engage with learners who are not necessarily low ability, but are at risk of disengaging. They are also regarded as a way of engaging those learners who may be borderline Level 2 achievement at key stage 4. At 16-19, VQ/VRQ learners account for a large proportion of learners in FE Colleges, school sixth forms and sixth form colleges. Both standalone NVQs and BTECs are pursued by learners that are not able to pursue a Diploma or get an Apprenticeship. There is concern among providers about what real alternatives there are for these learners.

5.67 Providers have been keen to emphasise that there are some core groups of learners for whom there are no viable alternatives. VQs/VRQs are regarded as playing a unique role in engaging and achieving qualifications with less able learners (at both key stage 4 and 16–19). Some individuals have described them as the ‘fifth pathway’, since the scale of provision implies it is a providing for a large (yet diverse) cohort of learners. These views are based on the premise that other qualifications within the pathways are unable to fulfil this critical attraction and retention role.

5.68 Vocational and vocationally-related provision is regarded as important provision for those young people who may be at risk of becoming NEET 16–19. It is not necessarily for those learners who are most disaffected, but may be for those who have not found school particularly engaging 14–16.

5.69 Schools report that the availability of vocational provision allows learners to mix and match different types of learning, thus pursuing a more personalised curriculum. Schools, in particular, are keen to offer provision that they feel engages young people:

“Historically, not all pupils have engaged with the GCSE curriculum. Some learners don’t suit the exam style of assessment and have not been engaged by the content.”
(Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

“We use VRQs as a means of engaging young people and getting them four GCSEs. We say to them: you have already got four GCSEs, all you have to do is stick in with English and Maths because you’re nearly there. Without the VQs, there is no chance they would even consider trying English and Maths. They would simply drop out altogether.” (Deputy Head, School without Sixth Form)

“The BTECs help support performance, as they are keeping students interested who would not normally come into school or get bored easily. They are also used as enrichment for more-able students.” (Deputy Principal, School without a Sixth Form)

5.70 At 16–19, standalone VQs/VRQs account for a large proportion of learners in FE colleges and a growing proportion of learners in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges. It is argued that withdrawal of these qualifications could impact on participation rates and ultimately increase the size of the NEET cohort.

“If BTECs are taken away, what is there to fill the gap that appears? If a young person has four GCSEs where do they go? They can’t get onto a Level 3 Diploma course. At the moment they would do a BTEC. BTECs are very good courses for young people who are practical learners.” (14–19 Learning Manager, FE College)

“Without BTECs in place, where do Level 1 learners progress to? Most are not capable of doing a Level 2 Diploma.” (Deputy Headteacher, Sixth Form College)

“If BTECs were dropped, retention of learners would fall and I think we would see a lot of recycling of learners. Drop out increases in the Autumn term and we do a lot of one-to-one work and tuition to keep learners in college. This would have to increase even more if BTECs were removed.” (Principal, FE College)

“VQs and VRQs have played a key role in reducing NEETs. There are now literally only a handful that fall into this category.” (Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“Often low level VQs act as stepping stones to other types of courses and support the NEET strategy. Most of these on BTECs will either progress to higher levels, employment or university. Those doing NVQs will progress to higher levels or employment. These qualifications prepare learners for the workplace, which Diplomas do not.” (Principal, FE College)

“BTECs allow young people who may have struggled to achieve academic qualifications – a routeway to Higher Education.” (Deputy Headteacher, Sixth Form College)

- 5.71 FE colleges report that collectively, the general route, Diplomas, Foundation Learning and Apprenticeships, do not provide sufficient variation in provision to meet the needs of the wide range of learners in their catchment area. Specifically, there are many learners that are not ready/able to pursue an Apprenticeship but who wish to follow a work-related route. Some FE Colleges also operate flexible start dates to accommodate learners onto VQ/VRQ routes who have dropped out of the A-level route in local sixth forms.
- 5.72 Those work-based learning providers which currently offer very few standalone VQs/VRQs have raised concerns that not offering standalone VQs/VRQ has limited the range of learners they take in. This is a particular concern amongst the charitable organisations, which have previously promoted themselves as inclusive and feel that the learners who fall between Entry to Employment and Apprenticeships (in terms of prior attainment or abilities) cannot be catered for.

7. Implications for Learner Choice

Choice will suffer: VQs/VRQs have been introduced to expand the options available to learners at key stage 4 and in 16–19 provision. While some learners can be accommodated in the four routes, this will limit choice for learners. There may also be parental opposition.

- 5.73 A key reason for offering VQs/VRQs has been to expand the options available to learners at key stage 4 and in 16–19 provision, thus improving choice and meeting the differing needs of learners.
- 5.74 At the 14–16 phase, individual schools have taken steps to offer a wider curriculum to meet their learners' needs. The Headteacher of one school referred to the emphasis placed on "*getting the right students on the right courses*".
- 5.75 It has not only been low-performing schools that have expanded their vocational offer; high-performing schools have also done so, though perhaps more recently. In one such case, the introduction of VQs/VRQs was the response of a new Headteacher and Curriculum Deputy who reviewed what was a very traditional curriculum and identified opportunities to provide learners with a more personalised and flexible curriculum.

5.76 While some learners could be accommodated in other routes (e.g. those learners for whom VQ/VRQ provision acts as enrichment) this would nevertheless reduce choice. For example:

- for 16–19 learners on some of the niche qualifications, transferring to a Diploma or Apprenticeship would change their focus of study;
- for those learners at key stage 4 who enjoy the enrichment provided by pursuing a VQ/VRQ alongside their GCSEs.

5.77 However, not all providers share the concerns about limiting choice. This is most prevalent among providers actively involved in Diploma delivery and those who believe the four pathways can meet the needs of all learners. It is fair to say that this is a minority view, even among Diploma supporters; primarily for a combination of the other effects and implications outlined.

“It would not be a problem for us if there were no standalone qualifications outside the four pathways. It would be, however, for most of the schools in this area.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“There is no reason why other schools in our area could not achieve what we have done with the Diploma. It is about hearts and minds. They are looking for excuses not to do it, rather than opportunities to achieve it.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

5.78 It has been suggested that the withdrawal or rationalisation of VQs/VRQs could have a positive impact on progression by avoiding young people specialising too early and, therefore, restricting future options.

“The rationalisation of BTECs will avoid young people specialising too early, and improve progression to Level 3.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

5.79 Others would argue that VQ/VRQ specialisation is not an issue, particularly as the Diploma involves even greater learner specialisation at key stage 4 since the Diploma accounts for a large proportion of a learner’s options.

8. Delivery Challenges

Delivery challenges affect decisions about changes to the existing curriculum: Across all provider types in the 14–19 phase a range of delivery

challenges affect decisions about changes to the existing curriculum and the rationale (on the basis of funding or practicalities) for the existing curriculum. Some of these challenges have been presented as key drivers for VQ/VRQ delivery and reasons for not delivering other types of provision in the four pathways.

5.80 Provider decisions to deliver certain types of qualifications are driven by a range of practical factors associated with delivering the provision. These include:

- **manageability** – delivery of most VQs/VRQs (BTECs, NVQs, City & Guilds) is regarded as manageable, specifically relative to the multi-element Diploma. Schools perceive that the Diploma requires learners to spend two days offsite. While timetables can currently accommodate one day offsite, two days offsite is regarded as problematic to fit into current arrangements;
- **employer engagement** – for some VQs/VRQs (e.g. BTECs, NVQs) is not essential and a key attraction for 14–16 providers in particular. However, at 16–19 FE Colleges and work-based learning providers are keen to expand employment opportunities to meet strong demand for Apprenticeships from learners;

- **cost effectiveness:**
 - at 14–16, economies of scale and generating viable group sizes are of crucial importance. It would appear that collaborative approaches do go some way in enabling viable group sizes to be generated across a number of providers in a locality;
 - FE Colleges report they will not be directly funded for such collaborative delivery, which affects decisions around involvement in Diplomas and other collaborative provision;
 - schools and sixth form colleges feel they are restricted to a select number of courses and sectors or subjects, as they are unable to benefit from the perceived cross-subsidy that exists in larger providers such as FE Colleges;
 - work-based learning providers tend to invest in facilities for particular sectors (e.g. construction, childcare, motor vehicle) and will therefore focus their offer around these core areas. One work-based learning provider also reported that since all their tutors are from industry, they are less flexible to delivery of tangential sectors/qualifications;
- **requirement for specialist facilities** – some VQs/VRQs (mainly BTECs) are regarded as cost-effective as specialist facilities are not always required. This was most evident for schools (key stage 4 and sixth form provision) rather than amongst work-based learning providers and FE Colleges;
- **school desire to retain learners onsite** – some, although not all, schools consulted have expressed their preference to keep learners, particularly at 14–16, onsite for learning. Their choice of qualification offer is determined, at least in part, by what facilities and staff skills they have available within the school. This has tended to lead schools to deliver certain VQs/VRQs (e.g. BTECs);
- **staff preferences** – it is evident across providers (at 14–16 and 16–19) that staff preferences have the potential to significantly influence the offer. This ranges from the influence that a new Head or Principal may have on the offer, and the ease with which changes can be implemented within providers due to staff preferences;

- **historical offer** – FE Colleges made reference to their experience of what provision ‘works’ for learners, facilities they have developed over time (which may be quite specialist for some sectors), and gaining returns on the investments they have made. This may also include preferences for certain types of qualifications and Awarding Organisations.

Assessment

5.81 Our analysis shows that while the four pathways in theory are capable of meeting the needs of the majority of learners, there is, in the main, strong opposition to a significant rationalisation of standalone VQs/VRQs. It is anticipated that this would have an adverse affect on both learner performance and learner choice. There is, however, recognition that the existence of standalone VQs/VRQs will potentially crowd out take-up of the four routes. Without market intervention, it is expected that the relative VQ/VRQ share of the market will continue to grow.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 In this final section, we present a series of options that could be considered in order to increase take-up of the four routes and to support rationalisation of the standalone VQ/VRQ offer.

6.2 The recommendations reflect consultees' suggestions about how, and where, VQ/VRQ rationalisation might take place. They also reflect the analysis presented in the previous sections which points to actions which will be required to support implementation of the 14–19 Qualifications Strategy.

6.3 The following recommendations are highlighted:

- (i) refine the structure of the Diploma;
- (ii) address misconceptions about the Diploma and ensure effective Diploma delivery;
- (iii) address quality standards in VQ/VRQ delivery;
- (iv) remove 'double' VQs/VRQs;
- (v) head-to-head substitution;
- (vi) address exploiting institutions;
- (vii) retain some VQs/VRQs regardless;
- (viii) improve consistency of impartial IAG;
- (ix) improve outcomes at key stage 4;
- (x) engender a culture of challenge.

(i) Refine the Structure of the Diploma

6.4 Many providers we consulted recognised the Diploma as a valuable qualification, but felt that its current structure did not meet the needs of a significant cohort of learners whose needs are currently met by other VQs/VRQs. The primary concern expressed is that a Diploma, as currently structured, is neither suitable nor attractive to less-able learners.

6.5 In order to present the Diploma as a viable alternative to standalone VQs/VRQs, suggestions were made as to how the Diploma could be refined. Suggestions included:

- **making it ‘more like a BTEC’ by taking some of the practical elements of the BTEC and aspects that learners particularly value:**

“An alternative strategy might be to put the best parts of the Diploma into the BTECs.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“If BTECs are reduced, Diplomas will need to be reborn. They would need to become more like BTECs. However, this would change the whole approach to Diplomas. It could be a Catch 22.” (Principal, School with Sixth Form)

- **introduce a more vocational/craft dimension:**

“If BTECs were to be removed, there would be a need for applied learning at Level 1. The Level 1 Diploma is too wide, so something more limited would be needed”. (Deputy Principal, School without a Sixth Form)

“The Level 1 Diploma needs to become much more vocational and something has to be done to avoid pupils failing the whole qualification if they don’t achieve functional skills.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

- **make it more flexible such that there are potentially different routes through the Diploma:**

“Diplomas would have to change and provide different pathways at different levels. We need vocationally-based interactive programmes that develop employability skills.” (Vice Principal, FE College Manager)

“If the Government is serious about getting rid of BTECs, then they need to introduce an intermediate Diploma, which is more technical than academic. They need to bring BTECs into the Diploma.” (Vice Chancellor, FE College Manager)

“One option is for the Principal Learning of the Diploma to stand as a qualification in its own right. For example, the Principal Learning of the Engineering Diploma is closely related to the BTEC Engineering – could this not be valid as a qualification alongside?” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

- allow **incremental achievement** of Diploma components (as is the case with vocational qualifications) as suggested by other research (Association of Colleges, 2009).

(ii) Address Misconceptions about the Diploma and Ensure Effective Diploma Delivery

- 6.6 It is evident from our consultations that there is considerable resistance to the Diploma among a wide range of providers. While some of this resistance is based on experiences of delivering the Diploma or exploring the potential to deliver the Diploma, there is a general underpinning issue about the extent to which there is a cultural willingness and commitment to the Diploma.

“Our Diploma position looks good on paper; however there is little real commitment to Diplomas amongst schools and colleges. The drive for Diplomas comes from the local authority. The local authority is almost seen to own Diplomas.”
(14–19 Partnership Manager)

- 6.7 Part of the issue relates to the fact that the Diploma target group appears to be small and providers do not feel they can justify the investment. Other providers, however, have made a success of the Diploma and some of the barriers and issues cited by some providers have been overcome.

“If they can do the Diploma for 2 days then they put up with the other 3 days. They are much more engaged and the teaching is very good, which they appreciate.” (Deputy Principal, 11–16 school)

- 6.8 This indicates that the Diploma does have the potential to meet the needs of those learners that have been described as benefiting from some form of enrichment, which it is thought standalone VQs/VRQs provide.

6.9 It is important that providers are encouraged to engage with the Diploma and support those learners who have the potential to benefit from it. This includes ensuring consistency in the provision of IAG and raising awareness and understanding of the Diploma amongst all stakeholder groups (provider staff, IAG staff, parents and learners).

6.10 Additional consideration should be given to the Additional Specialist Learning (ASL) element of the Diploma. ASL is commonly GCSEs for learners undertaking Diplomas at key stage 4. At 16–19, ASL is either A-levels or BTECs, but as one FE college noted the Diploma could be perceived to be more attractive by thinking more carefully about the ASL content:

“Diplomas could actually be more practical if BTECs were used as the ASL.” (Director of 14–19, FE College)

“BTECs need to be the ASL element of Diplomas if they are to be sustainable.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

6.11 The delivery of the functional skills is also an element that requires attention. Providers with experience of delivering the Diploma have identified that the elements of functional skills that are in the Principal Learning provide insufficient focus, and dedicated functional skills teaching is required. This must be encouraged across all providers delivering Diplomas to ensure learners’ chances of achieving the full qualification are maximised.

(iii) Address Quality Standards in VQ/VRQ Delivery

6.12 As outlined earlier, concerns have been expressed about the quality of delivery of VQs/VRQs, in schools in particular.

“BTECs delivered in schools do not offer the same learning experience as BTECs delivered in colleges or with specialist providers.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“There is a need to change the assessment regime of BTECs.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“In the colleges BTECs are run by tutors who come from industry. In schools BTECs are mainly taught by teachers who mainly teach traditional GCSE subjects. The employers dimension is lost in schools.” (Principal, FE College)

6.13 By enforcing existing standards, or introducing more rigorous criteria, a self-selecting rationalisation could be achieved. This would have the double advantage of removing poor quality provision. This would impact primarily on schools rather than FE colleges or work-based learning providers.

6.14 Addressing quality may also include looking at how functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills can be integrated into VQs/VRQs. Evidence from employer consultations (undertaken as part of Diploma development¹⁵) indicate that employers place great value on personal attributes and skills, and commonly identify literacy and numeracy requirements as skills gaps (e.g. in the manufacturing and travel and tourism sectors).

(iv) Remove 'Double' VQs/VRQs

6.15 It has been proposed that schools (in particular) should not be allowed to offer 'double' VQs/VRQs, i.e. those that are equivalent to 4 or more GCSEs, since their currency 16–19 has been questioned.

"Schools should be discouraged from offering double BTECs."
(Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

"The BTECs worth four GCSEs are the real problem. They really devalue the currency of GCSEs. It would be better if pupils at least had to do two different BTECs in different subjects to get four GCSEs; rather than just doing the one double qualification." (Assistant Head, School with Sixth Form)

6.16 Linked to this, is the suggestion that only one vocational qualification should be counted towards the target for achievement of the Level 2 threshold (five GCSEs at A*–C or equivalent). Both these suggestions would reduce the volume of VQs/VRQs delivered by, or on behalf of, schools.

¹⁵ DDP evidence

(v) Head-to-Head Substitution

6.17 The head-to-head substitution proposition is that any provider offering a Diploma should not offer a VQ/VRQ in the same subject. There is evidence that this is happening in some areas, although not wide-spread since some provider staff stand by the assertion that Diploma learners and VQ/VRQ learners are often a different type of learner.

“If we do the Level 1 Construction Diploma, it is likely we will stop the City and Guilds course, even though the Diploma isn’t hands-on enough.” (Deputy Principal, School without a Sixth Form)

“From our position, it would not be practical to run Diplomas and BTECs in the same subjects.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“We would like to discourage BTECs operating alongside similar Diploma lines.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

6.18 Amongst some providers, there is an expectation that this ruling will be introduced, although a transition period of dual running would be required.

“The best way to progress is to deliver Diplomas and BTECs alongside each other, until Diplomas are tried and tested.” (Principal, FE College)

(vi) Address Exploiting Institutions

6.19 There is a general consensus that some providers (mainly schools) are exploiting VQs/VRQs to maximise performance.

“No-one would argue against BTECs in moderation, however, it is being abused by schools. There are young people doing BTECs who should be doing more challenging provision.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“As long as Headteachers’ pay is linked to school performance, the BTEC route will flourish.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“All students take the OCR National ICT qualification as an equivalent to two GCSEs, when they only get one for doing the ICT GCSE.” (Assistant Headteacher, School with Sixth Form)

6.20 One strategy would be to identify and target those exploiting institutions rather than a blanket withdrawal of particular qualifications.

“If some schools are exploiting the system through over-use of BTECs then they should be stopped, rather than withdrawing BTECs altogether.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

(vii) Retain some VQs/VRQs regardless

6.21 Consultees were reluctant to identify particular VQs/VRQs that could be withdrawn. They were, however, keen to emphasise those that ‘must be saved’. These include subject areas not covered by Diplomas, the ‘craft’ VQs (which provide specific skills required for industry) and, what might be regarded as, niche subjects.

“If you are serious about rationalising stand-alone qualifications, the only ones I would keep would be the craft VQs. These are very practical and are in demand by both learners and employers, who may not want to progress/need a qualification at Level 2.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“Subjects like Animal Management are quite niche, and learners on these courses would not easily transfer to other programmes (Diplomas or Apprenticeships).” (Curriculum Manager, FE College)

“There is no alternative to the Health and Social Care BTEC.” (Assistant Principal, FE College)

“There is no clear alternative to Dance and Drama BTECs. The Creative and Media Diploma doesn’t come close.” (Deputy Headteacher, School without a Sixth Form)

“Getting rid of the Science BTEC would be a disaster. They give a particular sort of student a way forward outside of the GCSE route.” (Assistant Headteacher, School with a Sixth Form)

“Key BTECs to be retained – Construction and Food and Hospitality.” (Principal, FE College)

6.22 There is strong support to retain VQs which, in the main, are craft qualifications linked to occupational training and provide direct access to the workforce; particularly at Level 2. Less support for many of the volume VRQs (mainly BTECs).

(viii) Improve Consistency in Impartial IAG

6.23 One of the key themes to emerge from our consultations with teachers, college staff and young people is the paucity of impartial advice and guidance available to young people. Young people choose subject areas, but are largely unaware of the merits of different qualification options available. Teaching staff choose the one that they think is best suited to the learner.

6.24 Young people need access to impartial advice to make better choices and those informing their decisions also need better understanding of the qualification routes.

“Ultimately, young people across the consortium receive an inequitable level of guidance support, regardless of their chosen pathways at 14–16 and beyond.” (14–19 Partnership Manager)

“I wanted to do an Apprenticeship, but was only told about the mechanics one, which the school delivers. Nobody said anything about the others.” (16–19 Learner on BTEC First Diploma in Business at an FE College)

6.25 If learners are capable of pursuing the A-level route, they will typically be directed towards this route by school staff and careers advisers. Discussions with learners reveal that those who do not achieve the grades required for sixth form provision within their school, receive less support in their decisions about 16–19 options. In such cases, the learners have particularly valued the advice provided by staff at their local FE College.

6.26 There is a strong consensus across a broad range of providers that the profile of Apprenticeships needs to be raised, as learner awareness of this route is currently low. This will, however, need to be supported by steps to increase the number of Apprenticeship places available.

6.27 Labour market information should also be used as part of the IAG process.

“We recognised that we were churning out too many plumbers. Those wishing to do craft courses are now challenged on the popular areas and we often find that they are in fact interested in alternatives.” (Assistant Principal, FE College)

(ix) Improving Outcomes at Key Stage 4

6.28 Some of the arguments for standalone VQs/VRQs at key stage 4 and 16–19 are linked to learner achievements and outcomes at key stage 4 (and possibly earlier). By placing different emphasis on outcomes achieved by learners at key stage 4, some of these issues could be minimised or eliminated for young people.

6.29 This includes placing less emphasis on overall achievement at key stage 4, and focusing on learners:

- **achieving Maths and English at key stage 4** – there is potential that some learners’ programmes of learning are crowded by GCSEs and other VQs/VRQs meaning that there is insufficient focus on Maths and English achievement. Ensuring learners achieve Level 2 prior to leaving school would increase the opportunities available to learners when they are 16;
- **developing personal and social skills** that equip young people for the workplace, should they wish to pursue a vocational qualification. This would make the Apprenticeship a more suitable option, rather than the standalone VQ which learners who are not thought to be ready for the workplace will take.

6.30 This may also include adding the functional skills requirement to standalone VQs/VRQs.

6.31 Clearly this represents a significant challenge and there are some young people for whom there may be wider issues. However, these must be considerations in the context of designing a qualifications offer to meet the needs of young people and fully prepare them for further education, employment and training.

(x) Engender a Culture of Challenge

6.32 Regardless of the qualification routes available, providers need to ensure that learners are guided onto provision that meets their learning needs, whilst also providing sufficient challenge. A qualification that allows learners to maximise their potential, no simply accrue a positive outcome.

A critical area for IAG is to ensure that learners do not end up on the wrong course, which in some cases may mean that it is too low for their capability.

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APPENDIX A: DIPLOMA DELIVERY

Figure A1.1: Diploma Delivery

Diploma Line	First Teaching
IT	September 2008
Society, Health & Development	
Engineering	
Creative & Media	
Construction & the Built Environment	
Environmental & Land-Based Studies	September 2009
Manufacturing & Product Design	
Hair & Beauty Studies	
Business Administration & Finance	
Hospitality	September 2010
Public Services	
Sport & Active Leisure	
Retail Business	
Travel & Tourism	

Analysis of VRQ Achievements

The data presented in the following tables is taken from a combination of LSC ILR data and DCSF NPD and PLASC data for 2008. It includes vocationally-related qualifications (VRQs) only. Vocational Qualifications are difficult to identify through these data sources since those on standalone VQs are not distinguished from those on VQs as part of an Apprenticeship or other framework.

This analysis is therefore not a comprehensive analysis of VQ/VRQ take-up but can be used to support a better understanding of the different types of VRQs learners pursue and some of the characteristics of those learners.

The following tables are presented:

- **Table B1 – VRQ Achievements Summary**

There are a wide range of different VRQs. The tables present a list of those qualifications that account for 90% of all VRQ awards achieved by learners at the given age and level.

Table B1: VRQ Achievements Summary	
Qualifications ¹⁶	Most Prevalent Sector Subject Areas ¹⁷
<i>Level 2 VRQs achieved by 17 year olds</i>	
Sports Leaders UK Level 2 Award in Community Sports Leadership (5%)	Health, public and care (21%)
Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Diploma in Sport (5%)	Leisure, travel and tourism (19%)
Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Diploma in Health & Social Care (5%)	Business, Administration and Law (16%)
Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Diploma for ICT Practitioners (4%)	Information & Communication Technology (12%)
Edexcel Level 2 First Diploma in Public Services (4%)	Arts, Media & Publishing (12%)
<i>Level 2 VRQs achieved by 18 year olds</i>	
CAG/CITB Level 2 in CITB/City & Guilds Level 2 Intermediate Construction Award (19%)	Construction, Planning & Built Environment (22%)
City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Electrotechnical Technology (3%)	Health, Public & Care (17%)
	Leisure, Travel & Tourism (14%)

¹⁶ The percentage figures in brackets indicate the percentage the qualification accounts for of all VRQs achieved at that level for the given age.

¹⁷ The percentage figures in brackets indicate the percentage the sector subject area accounts for of all VRQs achieved at that level for the given age.

Table B1: VRQ Achievements Summary

Qualifications ¹⁶	Most Prevalent Sector Subject Areas ¹⁷
Edexcel Level 2 BTEC First Diploma for ICT Practitioners (3%) Sports Leaders UK Level 2 Award in Community Sports Leadership (3%) City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Basic Plumbing Studies (3%)	Business, Admin & Law (11%) Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies (11%)
<i>Level 2 VRQs achieved by 19 year olds</i>	
CAG/CITB Level 2 in CITB/City & Guilds Level 2 Intermediate Construction Award (17%) City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Electrotechnical Technology (4%) BIIAB Level 2 National Certificate for Personal Licence Holders (3%) EDI Level 2 Certificate in Business and Administration (Organisations and People) (3%) City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Basic Plumbing Studies (3%)	Construction, Planning & Built Environment (21%) Health, Public & Care (18%) Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies (14%) Leisure, Travel & Tourism (11%) Business, Admin & Law (11%)
<i>Level 3 VRQs achieved by 17 year olds</i>	
VTCT Level 3 Diploma in Health, Safety, Security and Employment Standards (13%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Award in Sport (9%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Award in Uniformed Public Services (5%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Award for IT Practitioners (5%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Award in Business (5%)	Health, Public & Care (25%) Arts, Media & Publishing (23%) Leisure, Travel & Tourism (18%) Business, Administration & Law (8%) Information, Communication & Technology (7%)
<i>Level 3 VRQs achieved by 18 year olds</i>	
Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Sport (4%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Performing Arts (4%) CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Child Care and Education (4%) Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Certificate in Sport (4%) VTCT Level 3 Diploma in Health, Safety, Security and Employment Standards (3%) Edexcel BTEC National Diploma in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art & Design (3%) • Public Services (3%) • Early Years (2%) 	Arts, Media & Publishing (27%) Health, Public & Care (21%) Leisure, Travel & Tourism (20%)

Table B1: VRQ Achievements Summary

Qualifications ¹⁶	Most Prevalent Sector Subject Areas ¹⁷
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media (2%) • Sport & Exercise Sciences (2%) 	
<i>Level 3 VRQs achieved by 19 year olds</i>	
<p>Edexcel Level 3 BTEC Foundation Diploma in Art & Design (10%)</p> <p>CAG/CITB Level 3 CITB/City & Guilds Level 3 Advanced Construction Award (3%)</p> <p>CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Child Care & Education (3%)</p> <p>VTCT Level 3 Diploma in Health, Safety, Security and Employment Standards (3%)</p> <p>Edexcel Level 3 BTEC National Diploma in Sport (3%)</p> <p>City & Guilds Level 3 Certificate in Electrotechnical Technology (3%)</p>	<p>Arts, Media & Publishing (34%)</p> <p>Health, Public & Care (17%)</p> <p>Leisure, Travel & Tourism (12%)</p> <p>Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies (10%)</p>

Ref: DFE-RR055

ISBN: 978-1-84775-818-7

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November 2010