QCA Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Report on vocational learning provision at key stage 4

January 2006

Content

Background

The Green Paper, *14–19: Extending opportunities, raising standards* (Department for Education and Skills, 2002),[1] set out proposals to further increase curriculum flexibility, enable students to learn at an appropriate pace, and pursue individually focused programmes to help them fulfil their potential. The proposals aimed to create space within the key stage 4 curriculum by making changes to statutory requirements. A key element of this new, broader and more flexible curriculum was to be vocational provision.

GCSEs in vocational subjects were introduced in September 2002 to:

- promote vocational learning
- help prepare learners for employment, further education or training
- give all learners the opportunity to gain a broad understanding of work in a particular vocational area, such as art and design or engineering
- provide access to a different type of teaching, learning and assessment experience
- engage learners with something practical and give them a chance to learn by doing
- enable mixing and matching of a variety of types of courses.

The GCSEs replaced the Part One GNVQ in seven subjects; applied science made the eighth qualification in the suite.

In response to the Green Paper, the Increased Flexibility for 14- to 16-Year-Olds Programme (IFP) was introduced in 2002. It aimed to enable many more students to take vocational qualifications (including the new GCSEs) and to learn in college, with a training provider or with an employer.

In 2004, for the first time, Secondary School Achievement and Attainment tables included all qualifications approved for use pre-16. All of the qualifications were allocated points under a new scoring system. QCA's annual 14–19 Curriculum Monitoring programme (see below) revealed that this has removed the disincentive to use a wider range of qualifications, and that in some cases it may be a significant driver to do so. This project provides a baseline measurement of, and judgement on, vocational provision at key stage 4.

---

[1] Department for Education and Skills*, 14–19: Extending opportunities, raising standards. Consultation document* (Cm. 5342). The Stationary Office, London, 2002.

The project

This project sits within the policy context outlined above. Initially restricted to an evaluation of the new GCSEs in vocational subjects, its scope was expanded to include a wider investigation into the provision of all vocational qualifications offered to students at key stage 4.

The investigation aimed to:

- identify the different types of vocational provision available to students at key stage 4
- discover how and with what level of success vocational qualifications were being used at key stage 4
- explore the impact of the withdrawal of GNVQs, investigate how well prepared centres were for the withdrawal, and establish what alternative provision they were offering or intended to offer
- evaluate the success of the introduction of GCSEs in vocational subjects.

The information used in this report was gathered between February and April 2005.

It is supplemented by later findings from QCA's 2004/5 14–19 Curriculum Monitoring programme. While this programme is wider in scope and less detailed in areas of enquiry, it confirms the findings of this investigation in terms of the rationale for and nature of the increase in the vocational offer.

Data sources

It is our understanding that this is the only piece of research that attempts to look at the broad picture of vocational provision at key stage 4. It has necessitated use of a number of different data sources to ensure a comprehensive investigation and evaluation and the combination of large-scale quantitative data from the whole school population with quantitative and qualitative data from schools themselves. It benefited from the fact that 2004 was the first year during which all vocational results were collected as part of the performance measures. This encompassed entry level, levels 1 and 2 and qualifications of all types—general, vocational, occupational and key skills qualifications.

The sources include:

Centre visits

Twenty-nine selected schools were visited. The sample was taken from a list of 1,000 schools identified by the DfES as offering a significant vocational curriculum in terms of the number of students involved and/or the number of vocational courses offered. Structured interviews took place with the senior management team, subject teachers and key stage 4 students.

Questionnaires

- A questionnaire investigating vocational provision (IVP) was sent to 200 schools in addition to those visited. These 200 schools were considered to have the most extensive vocational provision available nationally, judged by the proportion of students gaining vocational qualifications or the number of different vocational qualifications they offered.
- Monitoring curriculum and assessment (MCA) questionnaires are issued annually by QCA. Questions on vocational provision were included and sent to a random and representative sample of 1,000 secondary schools in England. Three hundred and three responses were received.

Subject groups

Eight focus groups were held across England, one for each GCSE in a vocational subject. The structure of the meetings allowed teachers to express their views and observations on the qualification in their subject.

Qualifications data

The main sources of information about qualifications are:

- the National Information System for Vocational Qualifications (NISVQ), a database that relies on information provided by awarding bodies and offers nearly complete coverage of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and an indicative picture of Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs) and occupational qualifications
- DfES Achievement and Attainment Tables data
- DfES Statistical First Releases, statistical tables published on the DfES website along with national qualifications data.

A detailed methodology of each of the sources can be found at Annex 3. All data used relates to those students who were aged 15 on 31 August 2003 (ie 16 at end of 2004 academic year).

QCA Monitoring Programme

QCA undertakes an annual 14–19 monitoring programme to find out how and why the curriculum is developing. In 2004/5 the main development was an increase in vocational provision at key stage 4, including but not limited to the introduction of GCSEs in vocational subjects and there is some cross-reference with that finding in this report.

Wider use of vocational qualifications has been stimulated by policy, backed by initiatives such as IFP and Pathfinders, changes to performance measures and the demise of GNVQ and development of its successors. Nine of 10 schools included at least one vocational subject in their year 10 curriculum. In nearly 15 per cent of schools, all year 10 students were required to take at least one vocational course.

Evidence for these findings was derived from:

- Questionnaires to providers
  - ➢ 14–16 schools' survey with 431 responses
  - ➢ 11–19 schools' survey with 426 responses

- Seminars and meetings with representatives from 47 case study schools and visits to 10 of these, interviewing senior management, teaching staff and students
  - ➢ Conferences with representatives from most LEAs and LSCs
  - ➢ Focus groups with practitioners from special schools; sixth form and further education (FE) colleges; and training providers

- The GNVQ successor project and information gathered from nine Pathfinder centres as they choose and introduce new vocational qualifications.

Summary and policy implications

National picture

The national picture of provision of vocational qualifications is varied, particularly in relation to centre type. While 23.9 per cent of the student cohort achieved at least one vocational qualification, 40 per cent of all schools had no students achieving vocational qualifications. Nearly three-quarters of Community Technology Colleges (CTC) students achieve at least one vocational qualification, as do one-third in academies and one-quarter in state schools but only 3.5 per cent in independent schools and 3 per cent in selective schools.

GCSEs in vocational subjects, or 'vGCSEs', accounted for 54 per cent of vocational qualifications achieved at key stage 4. GNVQs, which are in the process of being withdrawn, accounted for just below 33 per cent. All the other vocational awards, including NVQs, accounted for about 15 per cent, or 24,500 of the 164,070 vocational qualifications achieved. This can be compared with nearly 5 million GCSEs achieved by this cohort of students. It is notable that, of the total vocational qualifications achieved, over 45 per cent were ICT-based.

Most schools surveyed expected to increase the number of vocational qualifications offered to their students, and the withdrawal of GNVQs was leading them to explore a wider range of vocational qualifications.

Schools offer vocational qualifications at key stage 4 because they have specialist status, staff with appropriate expertise and enthusiasm and in some cases because specific funding is available. Schools also expect vocational qualifications to raise achievement, motivate students and encourage progression to level 3 qualifications.

Teachers believe that vocational qualifications are most important for students in the lower- or middle-attainment quartiles and least significant to those in the upper-attainment quartiles. Visits and focus groups confirm that in many schools vocational qualifications are targeted at lower- and middle-attainment groups. Despite this, the average GCSE score for students with vocational qualifications is 36.4 points while, for those without, the average is 36.3 points. If vGCSEs and GNVQs are discounted from the qualifications achieved, most vocational achievement is at level 1, confirming the use of the other vocational qualifications for students in the lower-attaining quartiles.

GCSEs in vocational subjects (vGCSEs)

Reactions to the introduction of vGCSEs have been mixed. Questionnaire respondents were generally positive about their experience, while teachers in the schools visited and those attending the focus groups were generally less satisfied. It is likely that this difference arises from the different approaches undertaken. As visits provide opportunity to discuss issues in detail, they may produce more evidence of problems.

Teachers of students in the lower-attainment quartile were more critical of the qualifications than those who taught more able students, as were teachers with previous experience of GNVQs who frequently described the new GCSEs as 'less vocational' than GNVQs.

There was general consensus that vGCSEs were most appropriate for more able students who can cope with the volume of written coursework and can research, explain, analyse and evaluate. The emphasis on written work was particularly problematic in more practical subjects such as applied art and design, applied ICT, manufacturing and engineering.

Yet, more able students were less likely to choose vGCSEs either because their size restricted the number of other subjects that could be studied and/or they were timetabled against more 'academic' subjects such as humanities or modern foreign languages. In some cases these students were discouraged from the choice.

There were many criticisms of the size, structure, content and assessment of vGCSEs. They were described by a number of teachers as boring, repetitive and inflexible. Some teachers did not believe that the qualifications were 'worth' two GCSEs.

Although many schools successfully introduced these qualifications, others found them difficult to implement and did not get the results they expected and/or had achieved with GNVQs. This was sometimes because of decisions made within the school, such as the wrong choice of target group, allocating insufficient time, use of non-specialist staff, inadequate training/support for staff and insufficient support from senior management. External factors also played a part. All schools found it difficult to make the necessary links with the workplace. A lack of resources, including the late arrival of textbooks and exemplar work, also caused problems. Some teachers complained of unclear and inconsistent guidance on assessment from the awarding bodies. Such incidences have likely been reduced with the passage of time.

Policy implications

Coherence of vocational provision

1. It is clear that beyond the 'families' of vGCSEs and GNVQs there is no coherence in the provision of vocational education. Achievement in over 550 different awards is reported just by the NISVQ, which admits to incomplete records. Most of these are taken only by a handful of students in the national cohort. It is likely that many of these awards will not be recognised by employers, and may not be helpful in terms of progression. There are also concerns about expertise in teaching and support for such a wide range of vocational qualifications, particularly for those offered to very small numbers.

The specialised diploma, likely to lead to a reduction in the range of available awards, should be helpful in streamlining the national offer and encouraging a more coherent approach. The Framework for Achievement is also designed to support a more coherent range of provision.

In the meantime, rationalisation of the number and range of qualifications approved under Section 96, based around an agreed planning framework for qualifications designed for use with 14- to 19-year-olds, would help to move towards more coherent provision.

Features promoting success

2. Teachers believe that students will be motivated by content that seems relevant to their current and future lives, and will achieve more through the teaching and learning styles and methods of assessment deployed in vocational learning. Other features believed to promote success are a unitised structure with clear and shared assessment criteria and a progressive framework of qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3.

    These features could apply to all qualifications, not just vocational qualifications. Any redevelopment of GCSEs should explore the extent to which these features could contribute to a new generation of GCSE qualifications.

Piloting qualifications

3. Problems with the structure, size, content, assessment and grading of vGCSEs might have been resolved had there been a longer period of development or piloting. A pilot also might have generated better quality and timelier exemplar material and given awarding bodies and others time to develop coherent and authoritative guidance and support for teachers before first teaching began.

    All new qualifications should be piloted and evaluated before they are introduced nationally.

Supporting schools in use of vocational qualifications

4. Government policy on broadening the curriculum at key stage 4 and the withdrawal of GNVQs are leading schools to investigate a wide range of vocational qualifications. Many schools had no experience in delivering vocational qualifications, others had experience only with GNVQs and some had experience only with GNVQ in ICT. The evidence

indicates that a significant number of schools were not able to implement vGCSEs successfully, particularly for the first cohort, and that schools with GNVQ experience were not always better placed to do so. Although most schools made a member of the senior management team responsible for the vocational curriculum, this did not always result in effective monitoring, support and guidance for staff delivering the new qualifications.

There is a continuing and urgent need to provide coherent guidance and support for schools on how to select and introduce appropriate vocational qualifications and to provide them with the management tools to monitor and develop their provision and staff.

There remains a question about the extent to which all schools should be expected to offer vocational qualifications, and to have the necessary expertise and resources required to offer them successfully.

Support for the introduction of new qualifications

5. All schools believed that the key to the successful introduction of vocational qualifications is having a team of committed, experienced and enthusiastic teachers. Many staff delivering vGCSEs did not have sufficient training either in assessment or in the vocational area, although the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and the awarding bodies ran a large programme of training events. There are barriers to staff attending training or taking part in the teacher placement scheme. Often, teachers are only able to attend awarding body training, which is appropriately focused on assessment. There are few opportunities for them to attend training in different teaching and learning strategies or develop their knowledge of the sector. Not all schools have appropriate internal continuing professional development programmes to supplement external training or as an alternative to it. Such programmes are particularly important where qualifications have a large component of internal assessment, as is the case with most vocational qualifications.

A large number of resources and guidance documents were produced to support the introduction of vGCSEs. Nonetheless, staff claim to have been confused by the number and variety of resources or not to have seen them.

Further research should be carried out to identify the most effective methods of supporting staff so that they can effectively respond to curriculum and qualification

change. This is particularly urgent in view of the planned introduction of specialised diplomas and changes to both GCE and GCSE.

Making vocational qualifications available to all

6.   In some cases, the manner in which schools introduced vocational qualifications to their curriculum has not ensured success from students of all levels of ability. Where vocational qualifications are available to higher-attainers, the offer tends to be restricted to vGCSEs. At the same time, a number of factors inhibit these students from choosing these qualifications, ranging from parent and teacher attitudes to the way choices are structured.

It is also true that the introduction of the vGCSEs has in some cases done little to help lower- and middle-attaining students become more successful with these qualifications than with others. Some of the factors relate to the design of the qualification and its assessment. Others are more centre-based, including provision of adequate time, an appropriate vocational context, motivating teaching experienced as somewhat different from that in general subjects and support for students who need it in coming to terms with assessment requirements.

If vocational provision is intended to be a universal option, there needs to be careful consideration of the issues involved as well as curriculum planning to ensure that vocational options are genuinely available to all. It should not be assumed that students can succeed in these qualifications without support, any more than they could when taking other qualifications. Teachers need to be encouraged to explore the available training and resources.

The development of specialised diplomas provides an opportunity to give parity to a broader range of skills than are currently recognized in vGCSEs, thus providing a more distinct offer.

Links with industry

7.   Virtually all schools regard establishing links with industry as a major challenge when introducing vocational qualifications. The demand for high-quality vocational links will continue to grow as more schools take up vocational qualifications and will not diminish when specialised diplomas are introduced.

There should be more coherent and better-publicised national and regional strategies to support schools in making these links. In many cases individual teachers have to make the necessary contacts, in addition to their existing responsibilities.

Further work related to this project

8. Some of the problems experienced in introducing and delivering vGCSEs are likely to be alleviated as teachers and schools become more familiar with their content and assessment requirements.

    Further research carried out on the results of the second cohort of students will help to clarify the extent to which problems are being resolved as the qualifications become more familiar. A more detailed subject-specific review of any titles still causing concern can then follow.

Availability of high-quality data

9. It has been difficult to obtain high-quality, comparable data across the different types of qualification. Although it is available for GCSE achievement (including vGCSEs), the same cannot be said for other types of award. National data relating to achievement in vocational awards has been aggregated to broad type and level for the purposes of performance table reporting, making it difficult to establish the subjects or individual awards taken.

    There is also inconsistency in describing the relative sizes of non-GCSE type awards. This makes it hard to bring together data that recognises the extent of vocational achievement.

    In order to look at details of qualification type, it was necessary to combine data from different sources (ie, DfES SFR data and NISVQ data). These were not completely compatible and do not provide a coherent picture.

    The current system does not allow for a detailed reading of the data about vocational provision, leading to findings that, because they are based on insufficiently secure data, cannot be expressed with total confidence.

Data gathering in relation to all qualifications approved under Section 96 for delivery pre-16 needs to be to a comparable standard and in consistent forms.

Progression

10. Most of the schools visited in this study reported that over the years vocational courses have led to increased numbers of students progressing to vocational options post-16. Pre-16 vocational courses were believed to give students a clearer understanding of progression routes into vocational courses at level 3.

This impression is confirmed by the evaluation of the Increased Flexibility Programme, which found that involvement in IFP appears to have been successful for many students in developing their social, employability and general skills and that 82 per cent of the students surveyed in spring 2004 intended to progress into further education or training after the end of Year 11.

This finding, if confirmed by later developments, is encouraging in view of the numbers of students at key stage 4 now taking vocational courses. It is important that data continues to be collected so that the impact of later policy developments, such as specialised diplomas, can be measured.

Chapter 1: Vocational provision at key stage 4

Overview of national picture

Data used

The figures quoted relate to students aged 15 on 31 August 2003 and to results data from summer 2004. All of the data was provided by the DfES Analytical Services Team. Details of data can be seen at Annex 1.

There was a total of 643,600 students aged 15 at the start of the 2003/4 academic year and taking their GCSEs and other qualifications in 2004. Over 95 per cent of them achieved at least one GCSE (excluding vGCSEs). In comparison, 23.1 per cent of students achieved at least one vocational qualification (including vGCSEs).

On average, students achieved 7.8 GCSEs (excluding vGCSEs). Using the same calculation for vocational qualifications, they would have achieved an average of just under 0.3 vocational qualifications each (including vGCSEs).

At centre level, 40 per cent of all schools achieving one or more qualification points have no students achieving vocational qualifications, including GNVQs and vGCSEs.

The data indicates that the vocational qualifications are spread thinly across the population. The scarcity of candidate-level information about vocational qualifications makes it difficult to see whether qualifications achieved within a centre are a result of several candidates gaining a number of qualifications or many achieving one each. It is hoped that this kind of information will be more readily available in the future.

Vocational provision at key stage 4 is clearly skewed toward the vGCSE and GNVQ, which together account for about 85 per cent of all vocational achievement.

Centre type and vocational achievement

Across school types, there is wide variation in the proportion of qualification points achieved from vocational qualifications. About a quarter of total qualifications points come from vocational provision in academies and CTCs; the proportion is about 8 per cent in other kinds of state schools and about 0.3 per cent in independent schools.

At student level, the picture is somewhat different. Nearly three-quarters of CTC students achieve at least one vocational qualification, a third in academies and a quarter in state schools. In independent schools the proportion is only about 3.5 per cent.

Selection and vocational achievement

It also makes a difference whether a centre is selective. In non-selective centres, the proportion of vocational points achieved as a percentage of all qualification points is about 8 per cent, whereas in selective centres it is less than half a percent.

At the student level, more than a quarter of students in non-selective schools achieve at least one vocational qualification, while less than 3 per cent do so in selective schools.

These findings appear to confirm on a national level our observations from fieldwork with schools: vocational provision is targeted at lower-ability groups of students.

Other factors and vocational achievement

Gender

An analysis of national achievement data shows little difference between females and males in terms of the amount of their vocational achievement.

Rural/Urban status

Analysis of achievement by rural/urban status shows a difference of about 23 per cent between the average number of vocational qualifications achieved by rural and urban students, if vGCSEs are excluded. This drops to around 15 per cent if they are included. Urban students achieve proportionately more vocational qualifications than rural students, but it is not possible to say whether this is because urban students have greater access to vocational qualifications or because of their characteristics.

Ethnicity

There is a substantial amount of 'missing' data in this area, likely due to the lack of data from independent schools. For groups that are listed, the average number of vocational qualifications gained per 100 students is highest for Pakistani/Bangladeshi students (36.5) and lowest for mixed ethnicity students (25.1).

Analysis of average key stage 3 and GCSE points score[2]

There was little difference between average key stage 3 point scores for those students with vocational qualifications (33.7) and those without (34.2). Similarly, their GCSE average point scores were similar: 36.4 points for those with vocational qualifications and 36.3 for those without.

The similarity in point scores between the two groups is interesting, given the difference in vocational achievement between selective and non-selective schools and the information from our fieldwork indicating that vocational awards were seen as appropriate for lower-attaining students. It was not possible to analyse these results excluding students achieving vGCSEs; such an analysis may have made a considerable difference.

Range of vocational provision

DfES Performance Tables data shows the total number of vocational qualifications achieved as 164,070. Of this total, vGCSE awards account for 88,574 (54 per cent) and GNVQs account for 51,110 (31.1 per cent)—a combined total of 139,684 awards or 85.1 per cent of all vocational qualifications. Of the 24,386 awards remaining, 11,110 (45.6 per cent) are key skills. Of the remaining 13,276 vocational awards, 1,753 (13.2 per cent) are NVQs and 10,889 (82 per cent) are Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs).

The DfES data does not allow for a detailed view at title level, but the NISVQ data (which tends to under-represent provision) enable analysis of individual qualifications. The 139,684 vGCSE and GNVQ that make up the vast majority of vocational qualifications are divided between 32 different qualifications at the individual subject level. The remaining 15 per cent, or 24,386 awards, are divided among more than 550 different qualifications. There is, obviously, far lower take-up of these awards, with many qualifications being achieved by only a handful of candidates nationally.

---

[2] Please note that for all figures above **[throughout report or this section only?],** students aged 15 with no GCSE or equivalent attainment were removed from the calculations. This was done in order to make the 'with vocational qualifications' and 'without vocational qualifications' groups more comparable. Only students with valid key stage 3 results were included in the above figures (this is likely to affect independent schools' representation in particular). Average point scores are calculated by adding together total points (key stage 3 or GCSE) and dividing by the number of subjects/qualifications.

Level of vocational provision

The overwhelming majority of vocational qualifications achieved were at level 2 (88.7 per cent), not surprising given that vGCSE formed such a large percentage. If vGCSE and GNVQ achievements are removed, the figures change dramatically, with 64.4 per cent of achievement at level 1. This means that vocational qualifications other than the two main types are taken mainly by lower-attaining students.

Lines of learning

The data given below is only indicative of possible patterns.[3]

For the purpose of this evaluation, we have categorised qualifications according to the 14 lines of learning proposed as areas for specialist diploma development: health and social care; public services; land based environment; engineering; manufacturing; construction and the built environment; information and communication technology (ICT); retail; hospitality and catering; hair and beauty; sport and leisure; travel and tourism; creative and media and business administration and finance. For the purpose of this evaluation, we have included a category of 'cross sector' for any qualification not specific to one sector, such as numeracy or GCSE double science. There is also an 'unknown' category. We included all qualification types, both general and vocational.

Of the 14 lines of learning, the most certificates were awarded in creative and media (466,005 awards). This number is heavily weighted towards GCSEs (including vGCSEs) and GNVQs, which make up over 465,000 of the awarded certificates. Once these have been removed from the totals, only 267 other certificates were awarded.

Manufacturing followed creative and media with the most certificates awarded, with a total of 257,847. This figure is also heavily weighted by GCSEs and GNVQs, with only 34 other certificates awarded.

---

[3] The NISVQ (National Information System for Vocational Qualifications) is the only database that permits analysis of qualification data in terms of subject spread. Data from performance tables or Statistical First Release (SFR) does not provide detail beyond level of qualification. For that reason, the following analysis is based on data from the NISQV and refers to students aged 15 on 31 August 2003. The NISVQ relies on data collected from awarding bodies that award vocational qualifications. It is not compulsory and as a result the data in some qualification areas is not comprehensive. NISVQ offers robust data for NVQs. Data on VRQs is collected from only 23 of the more than 80 awarding bodies that award VRQs. This gives only a rough indicator of possible patterns. Similarly, data collected for entry level qualifications is only to be taken as indicative. Data about other vocational qualifications (which fall outside of the National Qualifications Framework) is collected from the four largest vocational awarding bodies but, again, is only indicative. Similarly, although data on key and basic skills is collected by NISVQ, the numbers of key skills reported are so much lower than those given in the DfES SFR on awards of key skill qualifications 2003/4 that they, too, have had to be removed from the analysis (the SFR figures could not be used within this project because the data is given for 14- and 15-year-olds, rather than 15-year-olds alone). Data on single subjects was also removed as it was incomplete and unreliable.

The least popular line of learning in terms of the numbers of certificates awarded was retail, in which 87 certificates were awarded. This was followed by public services, in which 53 certificates were awarded.

When we remove all GCSE and GNVQ certificates and look at just the total numbers of entry, NVQ, VRQ and other vocational qualifications, the most popular line of learning was information and communication technology, in which 6,444 certificates were awarded. This is followed by business administration and finance, in which 2,298 certificates were awarded.

The line of learning with the most NVQs awarded was hair and beauty, in which 1,167 awards were issued across nine different NVQ titles. Engineering followed, with 505 awards across 10 different NVQs.

Looking at the number of certificate titles in each line of learning, it is clear that NVQs, other VQs and VRQs have a much larger number of different course titles across all lines of learning than do GCSEs and GNVQs (see table below). However, for VRQs, NVQs and other VQs, the mean number of certificates awarded per course title is significantly lower than the mean numbers awarded to GNVQs and GCSEs. The mean number of awards for NVQs, VRQs and other VQs barely reaches 50, compared to the hundreds and thousands of GNVQs and GCSEs.

Qualification type	Total titles offered	Total awards	Mean number of awards per title
NVQ	105	2694	25.7
Other VQs	195	6743	34.6
VRQ	162	6739	41.6
GCSE	46	4,623,067	100,501.5
GNVQ	25	48,333	1,933.3

Reasons why schools have introduced vocational qualifications

Many of the schools visited had a long track record of offering vocational qualifications. The main reasons why schools introduced vocational qualifications were to raise achievement and motivate students. They believed that students were more likely to succeed with the methods of learning and assessment offered by vocational qualifications.

One school described its students as 'turned off' before they introduced vocational options. One school introduced GCSE in engineering as a result of a student survey. Another school developed its curriculum in response to the needs of the local economy. Some schools were

responding to the socioeconomic background of their students. Other drivers were the availability of national funding, encouragement from the LEA and participation in a 14–19 Pathfinder.

Changes to the statutory requirements in 2004 also had some influence. The introduction of statutory work-related learning influenced a small number of schools. Changes to the status of modern foreign languages and design and technology made it easier to introduce vocational qualifications.

Although heads and deputies referred to DfES, QCA guidance and websites, they were very much influenced by the advice of other heads. Local colleges also were identified as an important source of advice.

Most of the schools visited expected to increase and strengthen their vocational provision in the future and a small number were considering having NVQs on site, possibly through skills centres.

Curriculum models and target group

Many of the schools visited had introduced vocational qualifications through the use of pathways within the key stage 4 curriculum. The number of pathways varied, but invariably more vocational options were offered in the pathways available to students in the middle- and lower-attaining groups. In some schools no vocational options were included in the pathway offered to the more able; in others only vGCSEs were offered. NVQs and more work-based qualifications were usually offered only to the lower-attaining groups or the disengaged (this supports the statistical findings discussed above).

Where curriculum pathways were not used, vocational options were usually, in theory, available to all students. In reality, choices were guided by teachers and based on ability, prior achievement and interest. Middle- and lower-attaining groups were thereby more likely to be directed to vocational options. Higher-attaining students were less likely to take vocational options because of their size, because they were timetabled against 'more academic' subjects and because of teacher and parental attitudes.

Eighty-six percent of respondents to the IVP questionnaire at key stage 4 said that this type of provision in their school had increased over the previous two years.

In terms of collaboration between schools and/or colleges, of the 106 respondents to the IVP questionnaire, the vast majority offering vGCSEs did so without any collaboration or partnership with other schools or colleges. Where schools did offer the subjects in collaboration, it was most likely to be with an FE college. The 14–19 monitoring programme confirms this finding.

The subject most likely to be offered in collaboration with a partner was engineering (49.4 per cent), followed by health and social care (19.6 per cent). Science and ICT subjects were the least likely to be offered in collaboration with other schools or colleges.

Among schools offering NVQs, collaboration was more frequent, with more than 62 per cent being offered in partnership with other providers. The 80 schools reporting that they offered 'other vocational qualifications' offered a total of 220 qualifications, of which 25 per cent were offered in collaboration with other schools or colleges.

Among schools visited, those that collaborated with other schools or colleges said that such partnerships enabled them to offer a broader range of qualifications to their students and share resources. These qualifications (as reflected in the questionnaire findings) were usually NVQs or other vocational qualifications. None of the schools visited offered vGCSEs in collaboration with partners. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) evaluation of IFP had similar findings: schools found benefits from collaboration when delivering NVQs and GNVQs, but not when delivering the vGCSE.

The IVP questionnaire asked schools about their links with employers. Education Business Link Organisations (EBLOs) and other agencies such as Connexions are involved with the majority of schools, helping to facilitate work experience for the majority of students. Their role in facilitating other employer/school links varies considerably between schools and areas. On the whole, respondents to the IVP questionnaire were somewhat dissatisfied with the level of support they received from outside organisations for arranging vocational links. Considering the results by subject, the majority of teachers of business, health and social care, leisure and tourism and manufacturing were satisfied with the level of support they received. The greatest degree of dissatisfaction was found among teachers of science; 73.3 per cent of these respondents said they were dissatisfied.

Respondents were asked which organisations helped to support the activities they offered as part of each qualification, such as industry days, visitors-into-schools days and enterprise days. Overall, respondents reported most support for the vGCSEs and least for other

vocational qualifications. Respondents said they got the most support from colleges, but LEAs and EBLOs provided the most support across all qualification types.

Among the schools visited there was a range of experience in relation to employer engagement. Employers were usually referred to in the context of work experience/placements, and some schools had positive relationships with local industry and businesses. Sometimes this was associated with a work-related learning (WRL) coordinator or a similar figure who was responsible for managing school/employer relationships. Other schools felt that they did not have good relationships with employers. A number of respondents raised concerns about overburdening employers and 'employer fatigue'. Because of differences in local industries, some schools had good employer links for one subject but poor links for another. Where links were poor, respondents commented on the limiting effect on the subject's capacity to be truly 'vocational'.

Management of vocational provision

Around 20 per cent of schools in both surveys said they had a written policy on vocational provision and around 90 per cent said they had included vocational qualifications in their school development plan.

The majority of schools said they had a senior management team member with accountability (88 per cent of respondents to the IVP questionnaire) and/or a designated coordinator for vocational provision at key stage 4 (54 per cent of respondents to the vocational provision questionnaire and 63 per cent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire).

Links with industry

All schools recognized the need for links with industry to support vocational learning. Among students taking a vGCSE, the most common activity was visiting industries. The most common activity among those taking NVQs was extended work experience. The most common activity overall, as well as for students taking 'other' vocational qualifications, was bringing industry representatives into school.

Schools reported that on the whole they received the most support in establishing vocational links for vGCSEs from local education authorities (LEAs) and EBLOs. The most support for NVQs and other vocational qualifications came from colleges.

Progression

Just over half of schools reported improved progression onto post-16 vocational courses by students taking 'other vocational qualifications', one-third reported an increase in those progressing from NVQs and 34 per cent reported an increase from vGCSEs.

Among schools that had a history of offering vocational options, most reported that the vocational courses had, over the years, led to an increase in the number of students progressing to vocational options post-16. Respondents maintained that pre-16 vocational courses gave students insight into the progression routes into vocational courses at level 3.

Many schools highlighted relevant, clear progression routes as an important factor affecting progression and a number were further developing their post-16 options to offer more direct progression from pre-16 options. Where schools did not have a sixth form, it was clear that a positive relationship with the local FE college and other colleges was of great importance in providing relevant progression routes.

Factors contributing to successful implementation

Staffing

All schools said that committed and enthusiastic staff who believed that vocational qualifications were of equal status with 'more academic' qualifications was key to success. A number mentioned the need to overcome negative staff attitudes through strong leadership and a clear vision of the role and importance of vocational qualifications.

Many schools emphasised the importance of investing in staff, and a few had strong internal staff development programmes. One school had made use of the teacher placement scheme. In contrast, in another school, teachers were not allowed to take part in the teacher placement scheme because the school leadership believed that teachers should spend all of their time in the classroom. A few schools had specifically recruited staff with industry experience.

Training for teachers delivering NVQs was identified as a particular need. This raises a question about the circumstances in which NVQs offered in schools, rather than in partnership with other providers, can be successful.

Management

Senior managers at all the schools visited expressed a strong commitment to vocational education, and in most schools a member of the senior management team was responsible

for the vocational curriculum. In more experienced schools, responsibility for vocational provision was shared between a senior manager and a vocational coordinator, who oversaw provision across departments and mentored and supported staff delivering vocational qualifications. In other schools, heads of department were given responsibility for vocational provision.

A small number of experienced schools had developed highly structured ways of monitoring and evaluating the success of their provision.

> The vocational curriculum has been evaluated through take up, results, staff and parental feedback, guidance interviews and raising achievement initiatives. The results are analysed and then used to adapt the ever-changing curriculum to meet the needs of the students.
>
> Success is evaluated by take up, results, annual satisfaction surveys and rolling sampling. Feedback from mentors, college and work experience providers and parent governors is also evaluated. There is regular feedback from subject teachers through the line management system, with vocational learning being a regular senior management team agenda item.

Student and parent guidance

Most schools stressed the need for a structured and thorough programme of guidance.

> Students are guided in year 9 towards the most suitable pathway through a long process combining both objective and subjective data analysis. Senior management and teaching staff interview students and parents to identify the pathway that will lead to the greatest success for the student.

Some schools spent a great deal of time winning over parents when vocational options were first introduced. One school, which used taster days, induction days and parents' evenings to introduce the options available, reported that such events had led parents to become more involved with their children's study.

Timetabling

A few schools developed common timetables with partner schools and colleges to allow students to take advantage of vocational options at other centres. Schools felt that the use of separate pathways helped to minimise timetabling difficulties. One centre organised the curriculum so that all options were taught on the same two days. This created the blocks of time needed and enabled students to go to college without missing core subjects. In a small number of schools, however, students had to miss core subjects to take courses at college.

Industry links

Nearly all schools found it difficult to establish effective links with industries, yet very few had taken a whole-school approach to managing this. A small number had appointed a teacher in charge of vocational links across the school; one gave subject teachers administrative support to liaise with business. Support from LEAs and EBLOs appeared to be variable in quantity and quality.

Resources and funding

Many schools criticised the lack of additional funding to support the introduction of vocational courses. The uncertainty over the future of IFP funding restricted schools' ability to plan and develop their curricula.

Chapter 2: GCSEs in vocational subjects (vGCSEs)

Context

At least 86 per cent of respondent schools to both questionnaires offered at least one vGCSE at key stage 4. The subject most frequently offered was leisure and tourism, while the least common was manufacturing.

While the majority of respondents to the IVP questionnaire offered vGCSEs on site and to all students, the number of students taking one or more vGCSEs ranged from one to a whole year group of 360 students. Other monitoring has indicated that around 15 per cent of schools have a compulsory vocational column in their curriculum.

Of the 29 schools visited, 90 per cent offered vGCSEs. The most common was health and social care, offered by 73 per cent of the schools, and the least common were applied science and applied art and design, each offered by 23 per cent of schools.

Reasons for introducing vGCSEs

The most common reasons given for offering vGCSEs were staff expertise, the school's specialist status and student demand.

However, the most common reason given by teachers in the schools visited was to replace previously offered GNVQs or (in a minority of schools) GCSEs. Only one of the schools visited said that student demand had resulted in a vGCSE offer.

Raising achievement was an important factor behind the introduction of vGCSEs in some schools.

> The new course has been brought in … to raise achievement at the bottom end of the ability spectrum.

These vGCSEs were seen as being 'more practical and appropriate' for a number of students, and vocational options within the school curriculum were seen as an important way to support students with different learning styles and thus to improve student achievement.

A small number of respondents said that changes to the national curriculum had resulted in a much more flexible curriculum. The additional time available had allowed the schools to

introduce vocational options. Only one school visited said they had introduced a vGCSE as a result of participation in the IFP.

Teachers believed that vGCSEs were an important way to broaden the curriculum, introducing new qualification subjects, a vocational option and greater choice. A small number of schools talked about the importance of supporting students' progression as a factor that influenced their decision to introduce vGCSEs. One school introduced engineering to support the progression of able students to related courses post-16. Another introduced leisure and tourism to provide progression into post-16 GNVQ and VCE courses.

Target group

The majority of schools responding to the IVP questionnaire offered vGCSEs to all students, with the exception of applied science, which was more likely to be offered to selected groups. However, respondents regarded vGCSEs as most appropriate for the middle-ability quartiles and least appropriate for the upper quartile. They did, however, consider vGCSE to be the most appropriate of the vocational qualifications for students in the upper-attainment quartile.

The majority of schools visited stressed that vGCSEs were not seen as being suitable solely for students at the lower-ability end of the cohort. In most of these schools the qualifications were offered as an option to all and were seen as being able to affect the whole cohort, an important distinction from the GNVQs they replaced.

Teachers at the focus groups provided another perspective. Many felt that students not expected to achieve GCSEs grades A*–C in other subjects were being directed to vGCSEs. The expectation from senior management was that they would be more likely to achieve C grades because of the vocational nature of these courses. Despite this expectation, many centres did not allocate double GCSE time or try to support learners by reducing class size or providing additional learning support.

More able students were less likely to choose vGCSE subjects because their size limited the number of other subjects that could be studied, and because they were often timetabled against more 'academic' subjects such as humanities or languages.

Time allocation

The most common time allocation per vGCSE subject (in response to the IVP questionnaire) was 10 hours a fortnight, or 20 per cent of the time available in a 25-hour week, the norm for

most schools. Twice the usual time allocation for other GCSEs, this allocation follows recommendations. However, the average amount of time allocated each fortnight was between seven and eight and one-half hours. The range of time allocated was as low as two hours a fortnight (for ICT, engineering and leisure and tourism) and as high as 14 hours a fortnight (for art and design, health and social care and manufacturing).

The most common allocation to vGCSEs among the schools visited was equivalent to a double award GCSE of around five to six hours a week. Some of the schools felt that the vGCSEs ideally required a time allocation of one and one-half GCSEs. Respondents said that allocation equivalent to two GCSEs was too much and that students can become bored. One school expressed the desire to offer vGCSE as both a single and double option, so that it would appeal to the whole cohort. The school believed that more able students would be able to complete the course in a single GCSE time allocation.

In the focus groups, many teachers said that vGCSEs were not timetabled as two GCSEs, placing pressure on staff and students and limiting opportunities for activities, visitors or visits.

A number of schools named timetabling issues as one of the major challenges of implementing vGCSEs. Respondents highlighted the limitations that timetabling placed on their ability to arrange visits out of school. Timetabling in some schools, for example in hourly slots, did not allow for sufficient blocks of time; taking students on visits would cause them to miss other classes.

Staff training

Respondents to the IVP questionnaire were asked how satisfied they were with the training and support they received for vGCSEs. Although there were differences among subjects, at least 60 per cent of the teachers were satisfied or very satisfied with the time they had to prepare for the launch of the qualification, their access to training, the guidance from the awarding bodies on delivery and assessment and the exemplar materials and assessment. The exception was engineering, for which only 54 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the guidance on assessment.

The main training for teachers in the schools visited was that provided by the awarding bodies. However, teachers reported that the usefulness and quality of awarding body training courses varied significantly and also criticised the timing of some of the training on assessment.

> The inability to provide a training opportunity on assessment prior to March 2003 has created a lack of confidence regarding marking.

Respondents viewed training in assessment and moderation, run by awarding body moderators or examiners as opposed to awarding body officers, as the most useful form of external training. Visits to centres by awarding body examiners or moderators to provide advice on delivery and assessment issues were also generally well regarded.

A number of teachers had attended subject network meetings, which are organised on a regional basis. Such meetings were often viewed as the most useful form of training. Few teachers reported that they had attended LSDA training events.

Where staff had attended training, they were expected to 'cascade' what they had learnt to other staff in their centre. It was rare for more than one member of a department to attend external training events. Teachers said that a main benefit of attending training was the opportunity it presented to network with other colleagues.

Many of the teachers from the 29 schools visited had received little or no training. Although some teachers had previous experience delivering GNVQs (particularly teachers of health and social care), a number did not have any background in the vocational area they were teaching. Only a small number of staff reported that they had the opportunity to take part in work placements to develop their vocational expertise. A similar picture emerged from the focus groups.

Barriers to attending external training events included disruption to teaching time, distance and travelling time and cost of supply cover. IFP funding had been used in a few centres to fund staff attendance at external training events.

A small number of centres had put a great deal of effort into in-house training, mentoring and support, which in some cases was considered to be more effective than external training events.

> Training that is offered externally can be confusing and contradictory … leaving [staff] feeling confused and bewildered.

A few teachers were themselves awarding body examiners or moderators, and they felt that this gave them valuable insights into what was expected for the new courses.

Resources

The main resource teachers used to support the delivery of vGCSE was guidance provided by the awarding bodies. Although a small number of teachers complained that they had limited access to the Internet, many identified awarding body websites and other subject-specific websites as useful resources. Few staff delivering the courses used QCA or LSDA websites and support materials. Exemplar work, showing the standard of work expected by the awarding bodies, was felt to be the most useful form of guidance.

Although the majority of teachers replying to the questionnaire were satisfied with the exemplar work provided by the awarding bodies, teachers in the schools visited were critical of the first pieces of exemplar work because they were based on GNVQ work rather than the new specifications and because they arrived late. Truly representative exemplar work could only become available after units had been assessed for the first time, meaning that work had to be revisited.

A number of teachers expressed concern about the availability of suitable and appropriate resources to support teaching and learning in vGCSEs.

> Availability of resources such as text books varied from subject to subject but there was a real lack of resources which encouraged a practical approach to learning.

There were mixed feelings about the usefulness of text books. A number of teachers identified books they found useful; others said that existing teaching materials lacked vocational context and quality, affecting their ability to develop new and relevant teaching resources for the classroom.

Some teachers believed that text books were of limited value:

> In business the focus is on teaching from real life businesses through speakers, work placements, business awareness days and young enterprise.

Teachers felt that resources such as those developed by organisations or businesses such as Kew Gardens or the Royal Horticultural Society were more useful.

The number and variety of sources of information and guidance were felt by some teachers to be unhelpful. Some teachers reported that sources of information were contradictory and hence confusing, and suggested that a reduced number of better-quality resources would be more useful.

General concern over the availability of appropriate resources was compounded by the lack of funding. Increasing numbers of students taking the courses were also impacting on the availability of resources.

Vocational context

Overall, respondents felt that the specifications provided sufficient opportunities for teachers and students to make links with the workplace, although some teachers felt that more flexible assessment requirements and criteria would enable centres to respond to local circumstances.

Teachers in focus groups questioned the relevance of some of the content of the units. In particular, they felt that some content was beyond the life experience of the students and therefore not accessible to them, even though it was vocationally relevant.

Most schools tried to establish links with the workplace to set the teaching and assessment of the qualifications in a vocational context. The most frequently mentioned activities were visits to the workplace or having industry representatives visit schools. Respondents to the IVP questionnaire were generally less positive about their experience of developing the vocational context than they were about aspects of the qualification.

Teachers in the schools visited and in the focus groups identified a number of barriers to establishing vocational links. Principal among these was the time needed to make links with the sector, provide appropriate materials for research and case studies and arrange visits/placements. Respondents also identified the cost of visits and occasionally of visitors as another problem, since these costs fell to departmental funds or requests for parental contributions, which were not always forthcoming. The large number of students on some programmes made it particularly difficult to organise visits and find suitable work placements.

In some cases effective links could not be established because of the geographical location of the school or because of increased demand as more schools take up vocational courses and approach employers. Complying with health and safety requirements was time consuming

and discouraged some staff from taking students out of school. It was also thought that employers were less willing to become involved with 14- to 16-year-olds, largely because of health and safety issues.

Additional funding to support the establishment of vocational links was made available to some departments, and a few centres provided additional administrative support for teaching staff. Although some schools were supported by Education Business Partnerships/EBLOs or Connexions, others did not appear to have any support from other agencies when trying to make links with the workplace.

Several teachers felt that there was a need for smaller class sizes for vocational subjects, particularly for the more practical subjects, to encourage different teaching and learning strategies and make visits and links with the sector more manageable.

Lack of vocational experience was also an issue for some staff, who felt frustrated that they were not able to access training in the vocational area. One respondent said that the assessment requirements of the qualifications were difficult to interpret due to lack of knowledge of the industry.

Content and assessment of the qualifications

The majority (over 70 per cent) of respondents to the IVP questionnaire were satisfied or very satisfied with the size, structure, content and assessment of the qualifications. Respondents offering health and social care and leisure and tourism had the most positive overall experience of delivery and assessment.

Respondents offering manufacturing were least satisfied with the size of the qualification (45 per cent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied). Those offering art and design or applied science were least satisfied with the amount of coursework and the manageability of this for staff (35 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively, were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied). Those offering applied business, applied ICT or engineering were least satisfied with the amount of coursework and the manageability of this for students.

Although some of the teachers in the centres visited were positive about the vGCSEs, more were critical of the structure, content and assessment of the new specifications and the impact these had on teaching and learning. In some schools, even where students' results had met expectations, teachers felt that the specifications were too 'academic'. A number of teachers were looking to replace vGCSEs with more 'dynamic' qualifications.

There were a few criticisms of the external assessments, but more of the internally assessed units. A frequent criticism from teachers in the schools visited was that the specifications, and in particular their assessment, were less vocational than GNVQs. Students were being given the opportunity to find out what it was like to work in the sector, but were not being given the opportunity to develop skills relevant to it. There was too much emphasis on written outcomes and the use of technical language. Students have to refer to specific words and phrases to gain marks, and teachers believed that this requirement to use technical language was a barrier to those with low literacy levels.

Many teachers in the focus groups believed that the level of literacy required for the vGCSEs was inappropriate for students who were not expected to achieve higher grades. Students taking VGSCEs are expected to apply knowledge and understanding, use technical language, explain decisions and analyse and evaluate. For students with low levels of literacy these requirements are difficult to achieve and can be discouraging, particularly in subjects such as applied art and design, engineering, manufacturing and applied ICT. In such subjects, teachers argued that understanding, decision making or analysis could be inferred from finished plans, designs and products without supporting written evidence.

Focus group respondents regarded some of the assessment requirements as both unrealistic and restrictive, deemed the internally assessed units too long and repetitive and thought that there was insufficient emphasis on practical skills. A number of teachers believed that the amount of coursework required to meet assessment requirements was too great and created unrealistic demands. They did not think the coursework was sufficiently practical and felt that it was geared too much towards the top end of the ability range. As a result of this, respondents said coursework had a limiting effect on the course and on teaching:

> The amount of coursework was the greatest challenge when delivering the course (business) and was seen as unrelenting, limiting the scope of the course. The expectations of the portfolio were unrealistic…

Although the balance between coursework and external assessment was generally felt to be appropriate, many teachers in the schools visited would have preferred a structure with more, but smaller, units. Many in the focus groups also criticised the unit size, mentioning that students could become bored with the length of the assignments and discouraged if they were unsuccessful in one unit because it was such a large proportion of the course. The lack of optional units in some subjects also was criticised.

In the school visits, the content of the applied business and applied ICT specifications was frequently criticised as being repetitive and boring. Manufacturing was criticised because of the apparent mismatch between the specifications, which seemed to offer a practical approach, and the assessment, which demanded that everything be written down. The lack of international travel and tourism was criticised in the leisure and tourism specifications.

In the focus groups, the following concerns about the specifications were raised:

- Applied art and design: the small extent to which assessment of the units can be integrated; the amount of annotation expected; the balance between breadth/quantity and quality of work; the lack of clarity of assessment requirements
- Applied business: lack of breadth within the qualification; the assessment requirement to investigate all aspects of a limited number of organisations, rather than examining different aspects in different businesses
- Applied ICT: the emphasis on ICT and its role in society; repetition in the assessment requirements; lack of practical skills
- Applied science: the number of experiments required for assessment
- Engineering: lack of clarity of assessment requirements; emphasis on written evidence; lack of practical skills
- Health and social care: relevance and accessibility of unit 1
- Leisure and tourism: manageability and appropriateness of unit 3
- Manufacturing: the extent to which units 1 and 2 can be integrated; overlap between units 1 and 2; the extent to which the units accurately reflect industry practice; breadth required for externally assessed unit 3; lack of clarity in assessment requirements; emphasis on written evidence.

Some teachers in the focus groups criticised the inflexible design of the qualification. They pointed to the lack of separate certification of level 1 and level 2 achievements and the failure to recognise partial achievement (students cannot achieve a short course or single GCSE if they do not complete the qualification).

A number of teachers in the centres visited and in the focus groups expressed a preference for GNVQ grading, with the awards of pass, merit and distinction at levels 1 and 2. Although initially some teachers had welcomed the move to GCSE with the single grading scale, they had found many students were more motivated by a pass, merit or distinction grade at level 1 than by low GCSE grades.

Many teachers also disliked the move away from grading criteria to marking criteria with grade boundaries determined by awarding bodies' awarding committees. Some teachers did not understand how to interpret the mark bands and did not appreciate that grade boundaries were not predetermined. In one case awarding body guidance encouraged this misunderstanding. Many teachers felt that if grade boundaries were predetermined they would be more motivating for students, who could clearly see what they had to do to achieve the grade.

Although respondents to the questionnaires were generally satisfied with the guidance provided by the awarding bodies on assessment, there was a general view from teachers in the focus groups and in the schools visited that the awarding bodies had not communicated assessment requirements clearly or consistently. Teachers found the vGCSEs more difficult to assess than the GNVQs due to lack of information and guidance on assessment. When further guidance had become available, the remedial work some students and teachers had to do to meet assessment requirements was demoralising.

Few teachers in the schools visited reported using a different range of teaching and learning strategies to deliver vGCSEs than they had used with more traditional GCSEs. Although a small number used imaginative practical activities and group exercises to deliver the content of the specifications, others said that they felt obliged to revert to traditional teaching techniques for vGCSEs to ensure that students had covered the necessary information. Interviews with students, however, suggested that students felt that they were taught differently and took part in different activities in their vGCSEs and were developing different skills. Like their teachers, students were concerned about the amount of coursework required and the skills they needed to produce portfolios.

Results

Most schools/teachers reported that the results their students achieved were either as expected or below the expected grade. However, respondents to the IVP questionnaire reported a large percentage of students achieving below their predicted grades in applied ICT and manufacturing. The subjects that appeared to achieve most grades in line with predictions were in applied business and applied ICT. (This question was not included in the MCA questionnaire.)

A number of schools were disappointed with the results achieved; one school reported that it would drop ICT as a result of such disappointing results. In some schools students had

achieved Intermediate GNVQ (often in ICT) when they had not achieved level 2 in other subjects. This was not replicated when GNVQs were replaced with vGCSEs. On the other hand, in a smaller number of schools students on the whole achieved much better results than they had in the past and than they were expected to.

Schools' experience with moderation also varied. Some schools visited said they had a negative experience of moderation. A number of teachers had sent work to the awarding body and received no feedback. Where feedback was provided, it was not of a high quality and in some cases was received too late. Some schools found the moderation process demoralising and did not think that the awarding bodies had provided the support needed for them to improve. However, other schools expressed a positive experience of moderation and had found the awarding bodies to be supportive and constructive.

Progression

Approximately 33 per cent of schools responding to the IVP questionnaire reported an increase in progression onto vocational courses post-16. Slightly more schools said that vGCSEs had no impact on progression or did not know what the impact was.
Many of the schools visited said that it was too soon to judge the impact of vGCSEs on progression post-16 and a number of centres had not yet completed their first cohort of vGCSEs. Centres that were disappointed with their results for vGCSEs said that they were unlikely to increase participation and progression post-16.

It was felt to be too early to judge the impact of vGCSEs on progression to VCE post-16, although some centres expected there to be an increase. Some centres were looking to extend the range of titles offered post-16 as a result of the broader curriculum at key stage 4. Interviews with students showed that, while some planned further study and career paths in the vocational sector studied for their GCSE, others were not intending to continue study post-16 or planning a career in the sector. Responses differed somewhat by subject studied. For example, students appeared less likely to continue with applied ICT or applied science, presumably because they were a compulsory part of the curriculum at key stage 4. Students were more likely to continue with health and social care post-16, which they had specifically chosen as an option at key stage 4.

Meeting expectations

Teachers in the schools visited had varied experiences with vGCSEs. Schools/teachers expressed satisfaction with one subject and not with another; where one school was unhappy

with a subject, another school felt that the same subject had met its expectations. A number of schools, although they said that a course met their expectations, were not entirely satisfied. Many had concerns with the qualifications, similar to those discussed above.

A number of schools expressed concern that the vGCSEs were not suitable replacements for GNVQs because they did not suit the same type of learner and generally were suited to students of a higher ability level than those who had previously taken GNVQs. Teachers had expected the courses to be more like the GNVQs they replaced. Schools were concerned that the courses were too academic and too similar to traditional GCSEs, and that the practical and vocational content found in GNVQs had been lost in these new qualifications. Schools did not feel that the courses were suitable for the whole ability range and raised issues regarding the amount of written coursework, the level of the language required and the complex content, all of which were seen as being too advanced for lower-ability students.

Similar concerns were raised by many teachers at the focus groups.

Yet, a number of schools visited did feel that the course had met, and in a couple of cases, exceeded their expectations. These schools expressed satisfaction with the improved achievement they saw in their students. Some teachers at the focus groups also were satisfied with vGCSEs.

Fifty per cent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire and 38 per cent of respondents to the IVP questionnaire said that they planned to increase the number of vGCSEs they offer. Forty-three per cent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire and 35 per cent of respondents to the IVP questionnaire said that the number they offered would remain the same. Around 9 per cent of respondents from both samples said that they would decrease the number of vGCSEs offered.

Chapter 3: GNVQ withdrawal, NVQs and other vocational qualifications

Students at key stage 4 take a wide range of vocational qualifications. However, the number of students taking them is very small.

The schools contributing to this study were generally positive about the vocational qualifications. They said that vocational qualifications had lead to improvement in students' behaviour, achievement, confidence and satisfaction and had a positive impact on retention rates and progression to post-16 courses.

The current national pattern of vocational provision appears to be that, apart from vGCSEs and GNVQs, a large number of qualifications is taken by a very small number of students. The lack of robust matched candidate data in this area means that it is difficult to identify whether there are a small number of centres with reasonable numbers of students, or fewer students in more centres. It will be interesting to see whether and how the embedding of vGCSEs within the curriculum affects the numbers of other vocational qualifications awarded.

Both the IVP and MCA surveys asked about schools' future intentions in terms of vocational provision, and the overall picture indicates a potential increase across all types of award. ICT is the most popular vocational qualification and is the sector that has most qualifications (other than GCSEs) awarded. Business and creative and media are the next most popular sectors, but are both some way behind (in terms of the numbers of qualifications awarded). Annex 2 includes a complete analysis of GNVQs, NVQs and other vocational qualifications.

GNVQ withdrawal

Most schools regretted the withdrawal of GNVQs, though a number of teachers commented that GNVQs, particularly GNVQ in ICT, were out of date. In a number of centres, staff had offered Intermediate GNVQ to students across the ability range and some were successful in it, although they did not achieve level 2 in other subjects. Schools were considering separate level 1 and 2 provision.

Some schools had decided to retain GNVQs as long as possible, and in a few cases had reverted to GNVQs from vGCSEs. Most senior managers felt that their schools were well

prepared for the withdrawal of GNVQ and expected a smooth transition to the new qualifications.

A number of schools were reviewing their entire key stage 4 curriculum. Schools were looking at a range of different qualifications to replace GNVQ, such as BTEC First Diplomas, BTEC Introductory Awards, OCR Nationals and OCN qualifications. Most of the schools visited were offering vGCSEs, but many did not consider them an appropriate replacement for GNVQs. vGCSEs were frequently described as too academic and insufficiently vocational (see Chapter 2). One centre said that vGCSEs were a replacement for other GCSEs, not for GNVQs.

When choosing a replacement qualification, teachers were looking for a qualification that was the same size as GNVQ, had a similar unit structure and range of assessment methods, was not too prescriptive and was part of a framework at levels 1, 2 and 3.

One school was looking to replace GNVQs with BTEC awards rather than vGCSEs because of their flexible size (1–4 GCSEs), the lack of external exams and their more interesting and work-related context.

One school, however, complained of the 'onerous BTEC approval process' and another was worried about their ability to meet the requirement for work placements in BTEC qualifications.

NVQs

Reasons for introducing NVQs

Seventy percent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire introduced NVQs because of their schools' specialist status.

Many of the 29 schools visited introduced NVQs as part of an individualised approach to learning that enabled lower-ability students to achieve and gain qualifications. NVQ pathways usually were developed for students with behavioural problems, who were disengaged or at risk of exclusion. Schools saw NVQs as a component of a curriculum pathway that could succeed in engaging and capturing the imagination of disaffected students. Respondents to the IVP questionnaire saw NVQs as being most highly significant to students in the lower-attainment quartile and least significant to those in the upper quartile.

A number of schools also said that they introduced NVQs to enlarge the range of courses on offer to their students.

Around a third of schools responding to the questionnaires offered at least one NVQ; the most common subjects offered were hairdressing and catering.

The majority of schools said the NVQs they offered were taught off site, most commonly in collaboration with an FE college.

Forty-eight per cent of MCA respondents and 38 per cent of IVP respondents said their school would be increasing the number of NVQs offered over the next year.

Other vocational qualifications

Reasons for introducing other vocational qualifications

Seventy-three per cent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire introduced other vocational qualifications because of their schools' specialist status.

Many of the schools visited introduced other vocational qualifications because of the withdrawal of GNVQs.

As with NVQs, schools said they had introduced other vocational qualifications (initially GNVQs and more recently BTECs and OCR nationals) to offer a more individual and appropriate curriculum and improve student achievement and performance table ratings. Schools believed that the other vocational qualifications were a good way of engaging disaffected students (although it was not uncommon for whole cohorts of students to be taking a GNVQ in ICT) and increasing motivation levels.

Teachers responding to the IVP questionnaire reported that other vocational qualifications were most significant to students in the lower-attainment quartile and least significant to students in the upper quartile.

Seventy-six per cent of respondents to the IVP questionnaire said that they offered at least one 'other' vocational qualification to their key stage 4 students (compared to 40 per cent of respondents to the MCA questionnaire). Among schools offering 'other' vocational subjects, the most common was ICT.

Around 60 per cent of schools said they would be increasing the number of 'other' qualifications offered.

Around 60 per cent of respondents to both questionnaires reported that the 'other' qualifications they offered were taught on site.