

**Best of Both Worlds or Falling
between Two Stools?: The case of
hybrid qualifications in England**



Dr Gayna Davey and Professor Alison Fuller

Hybrid Qualifications – Increasing the Value of
Vocational Education and Training in the Context
of Lifelong Learning

Country Report: England

July 2011

CONTENTS

	Page
Section One: Introduction	1
<i>Definition and scope</i>	4
Section Two: Methodology	6
Section Three: Stakeholders' perceptions of hybridity	9
<i>Integrating theory and practice</i>	13
Section Four: Design, delivery and assessment of qualifications	16
Section Five: Student and provider perspectives	20
<i>Work experience</i>	21
<i>Tutor support</i>	23
Section Six: Perspectives from employment	25
<i>Clare's story</i>	25
Section Seven: Problems and barriers in the system	29
<i>Higher education</i>	29
<i>Labour market</i>	30
Section Eight: Good practice	33
<i>A hybrid degree programme</i>	34
<i>Enriching the BTEC National programme</i>	35
Section Nine: Themes	37
<i>Fragile identity within a segmented market</i>	37
<i>Logics, linkages and stratification</i>	39
<i>Hybridity through improvisation and creativity</i>	40
Section Ten: Conclusions and implications	42
References	46
Appendix A BTEC/OCR and Advanced Diploma	
Appendix B Project documentation	
Appendix C EDEXCEL tables	

Section One: Introduction

There is a long legacy of dissatisfaction with the status and role of vocational education in England. The research being undertaken as part of the EU Leonardo project on 'hybrid qualifications' has taken place against this backdrop. The latest attempt to address national policy concerns has been made by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, who commissioned Alison Wolf to conduct a review of Vocational Education. Professor Wolf's Review was launched on 3 March 2011 and the government has recently announced that it will accept all her recommendations (12 May 2011). In his statement to the House of Commons Michael Gove stated:

'Securing our country's future relies upon us developing our own world-class education system, from which young people graduate not just with impeccable qualifications and deep subject knowledge but also with the real practical and technical skills they need to succeed.' (Michael Gove, 12 May 2011)

The Secretary of State's rhetoric may be interpreted as offering a rallying call to the cause of hybrid approaches and support for the 'best of both worlds' rationale that can be associated with hybrid qualifications (HQs). However, as this report on the empirical phase of our research project outlines, 'best of both worlds' is just one amongst other competing and even contradictory views on HQs held by stakeholders representing a range of different standpoints. The report seeks to capture and illustrate the diversity of perspectives from key informants and stakeholders positioned across the educational, policy and employment landscape. (See Section Two for an account of our methodology and sample).

The aim of the empirical phase of the project has been to develop and deepen our understanding of issues which surfaced in the initial phase of desk-based research (Davey & Fuller, 2010). However, before turning to our empirical findings (Sections Three to Eight), this introductory section provides an opportunity a) to rehearse the overall aims of the cross-national project, and b) to summarise the findings and conclusions from the first country report on England, which provided the platform for the subsequent empirical study.

The cross-national project's overall aims are:

To examine the relationship between higher education, vocational education and the labour market, with a particular focus on the opportunity for transitions for those with vocational qualifications.

To explore the availability and currency of 'hybrid qualifications', which are those that are designed or viewed as providing vocational preparation for and access to the labour market and entry to higher education.

Drawing on a review of the academic and policy literatures, the first country report developed an account of the conceptual understanding and practical realisation of 'hybridity' within the English education system and qualifications landscape. The report included:

- An overview of the English education system
- A mapping of the relevant qualification landscape within the English system
- An account of the wider historical and policy context
- A quantitative overview
- An account of the currency and value of hybrid qualifications at Level 3¹
- An outline of their 'institutional realisation' including their design, pedagogy and assessment
- An overview of the funding system
- Conclusions to inform the design of the empirical phase

The report's conclusions can be summarised as follows:

- In mapping the qualifications and pathways which might be seen as 'hybrid', we found that transitions in England are characterised by a deep and enduring academic-vocational divide.
- Vocational provision is diverse with limited standardisation, and often unclear and weak currency for progression to HE or the labour market.
- The position of vocational qualifications is very much as 'other' to the more clearly-articulated, visible and established currency for progression to bachelor degrees associated with academic qualifications and pathways.
- With the exception of some well-established examples, vocational pathways (at Level 3) to the labour market are not clearly-defined, and the linkages are not well established.
- The worth associated with particular qualifications is often established in practice and over time. This may be in relation to other factors such as the reputation of the employer in which an apprenticeship has been completed, or the trust and familiarity HE institutions and courses have in relation to particular awards held by applicants.
- Amidst the policy imperative to widen and increase participation, the English higher education system remains characterised by a hierarchy of institutions and programmes. Undergraduate provision includes sub-bachelor level

¹ Level 3 is a broad category associated with a wide range of vocational and academic qualifications and for entrance to higher education. Individuals can attain qualifications which have been formally recognised as being *at* Level 3. However, there is also a notion of achieving a *full* Level 3 qualification and the benchmark for this is two passes at A-level or a vocational equivalent.

courses (Level 4 and 5) and bachelor degrees (level 6): 'non-standard' vocational entry level qualifications are less likely than academic qualifications to give direct access to bachelor degrees or to prestigious universities.

- There is a less developed concept and realisation of 'system' in the English education and training context than in comparator European countries.

In concluding our first report we argued that, above all, the English system is symbolised by its longstanding academic-vocational divide. It is a stratified education system where the majority of young people do not proceed to HE on completion of upper secondary education. The lack of standardised vocational pathways in a relatively loosely regulated labour market provides particular challenges for HQs. Whether as a concept or in practice, the meanings associated with hybridity have to be understood against this complex, fluid and dynamic context. The desk-based phase of the research enabled us identify and illuminate the nature, range and currency of HQs and their potential to disrupt the traditional academic-vocational divide. We concluded that the future development of HQs must be seen in terms of their potential to flourish, or to stand out within the confusing menu of provision available to those not following the academic pathway to HE via A-levels and, moreover, to transcend competing education and employment paradigms.

Our primary focus has been on qualifications or pathways at Level 3 in the National Qualifications Framework. This is the level of attainment expected for entry to HE, but as the initial report pointed out there is wide variation in the value attached to different Level 3 qualifications. Their rating (or not) in the UCAS tariff provides a concrete measure of their worth for entry to HE. Official figures presented in the report indicated that about half of those aged 19 in 2009 had achieved a Level 3 qualification of some sort. Of this group approximately 75 per cent had achieved this via the A-level route (including five per cent Applied A-levels) and about a quarter via vocational qualifications (mainly represented by BTEC Nationals). On the basis of our mapping of Level 3 provision, the following qualifications or programmes were proposed as candidates for hybrid status:

- Advanced Diploma
- BTEC/OCR Diploma, and
- Advanced Apprenticeship programmes.

These are summarised below and further detail is available in Appendix A.

Advanced Diploma

The Advanced Diploma forms part of a suite of National Diplomas which were introduced in 2008. Studied full-time, it is offered in a range of vocational areas and at three levels. The Advanced Diploma is positioned at Level 3 and is equivalent to three and a half GCE A-levels).

BTEC National/OCR Diploma

The qualification is available in three sizes referred to as Award, Certificate and Diploma (although Appendix A provides details of their renaming for inclusion into the Qualifications and Credit Framework). The three sizes are equivalent to one, two or three A-levels, respectively. It is common for the Certificate and Award to be pursued part-time, often as part of Advanced Apprenticeship programmes or to be pursued as part of full-time programmes where students follow a combination of vocational and academic courses. The Diploma is usually studied full-time and equates to three A-levels. These qualifications focus on a range of vocational sectors.

Advanced Apprenticeship programmes

The Advanced Apprenticeship is positioned as a Level 3 programme. It must comprise a knowledge-based component, a competence-based component, functional skills in English, Mathematics and normally Information Technology, personal learning and thinking skills, and employee rights and responsibilities. According to the recently implemented Specification of Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE 2011), for an Advanced Apprenticeship framework to be approved in must comply with the Level 3 requirements specified in the Qualification and Credit Framework.

Definition and scope

At the initial project conference in Konstanz (2009) the research teams had considered two definitions of 'hybrid qualifications':

Strong Definition:

Combination of accredited general (academic) and vocational learning and attainment that formally qualifies for entrance to HE and the labour market

Weak Definition:

Any kind combination of general (academic) and vocational learning provided for those aged 14 plus.

The definitions were reviewed at the interim conference in Southampton (2010), with the intention that the empirical phase would explore hybrid qualifications within the 'strong definition'. This was further refined, and is as detailed below:

Strong definition: full access to HE

- access to *all* HE institutions
- access to *bachelor* degrees (not only to sub-bachelor degrees)
- access to *all* subjects (not only to cognate subjects)

Strong definition: full access to the labour market

- access to the skilled labour market (beyond or within an occupational field)
- access to professional body memberships
- licence to practice
- wage return on qualification
- social partner recognition (e.g. trade unions, chambers)
- access to next level of training
- access to work-based career pathway.

Having used our existing knowledge and desk-based research to locate hybrid contenders within the English system, we concluded that none appeared to fulfil the criteria set out above. Instead they might be seen as fulfilling a weaker definition by, for example, providing access only to some HE institutions, to cognate subjects and courses and to sub-bachelor level. As currency to the labour market, HQs appeared to be valued as entry level qualifications by some employers in some sectors. Therefore although the intention was for the empirical phase to operationalise HQs through the stronger definition articulated above, from the English perspective we had to work with a rather weaker version of the concept.

Thus, working with our weaker, less tightly circumscribed definition, our aim with the empirical phase of the research project has been to explore how the concept is understood, perceived and experienced by a range of stakeholders. By so doing, we have aimed to achieve a finer-grained understanding of their specific or generalised value within the English transition system. In this second report we develop and refine our knowledge through the experience, practical and theoretical understanding of our key informants' perceptions of and attitudes to the hybrid idea and model.

The report is organised in ten sections. Following this Introduction, Section Two describes the research design and instruments used to explore these issues empirically. Sections Three to Eight present our findings and we develop themes and draw conclusions in Section Nine and Section Ten.

Section Two: Methodology

This section describes the methodological approach followed in preparation for and during the fieldwork. It provides an overview of the research instruments, selection of research participants, fieldwork and the analytical processes adopted (full details of which are contained in Appendix B). We provide an overview of the ethical framework within which the empirical activity was carried out.

The methodological approach was agreed between the project partners from the four participating countries and in line with what was possible within practical and budgetary constraints. It was recognised that awareness, experience and understanding of the term ‘hybrid qualifications’ and the concept of ‘hybridity’ would vary across the four countries. It was important then to adopt a qualitative approach to data collection that would facilitate in-depth exploration of the meanings and perceptions of a sample of key informants in each country. Members of the English sample were identified on the basis of their experience and knowledge of the system, and in particular, as far as potential HQs or pathways at Level 3 were concerned. Our aim was to ensure that the selection process captured stakeholders from across the spectrum of policy, practice and user engagement.

We gathered data using interviews and focus group discussions with key informants including those in government departments, awarding bodies and educational institutions, as well as learners, tutors and employers. We interviewed 18 key informants and additionally undertook two focus groups comprising 12 learners and tutors/programme leaders. The list below provides a summary:

Summary and classification of key informants

Policy makers	Department for Education; Department for Business, Innovation and Science
Intermediary Bodies	Examination awarding bodies; UCAS (the organisation responsible for processing university applications); National Apprenticeship Service
Further education college	Programme managers; tutors and learners
Sixth-form college	Senior manager
Higher education	Programme manager; admissions manager; policy expert
Employment	Managers from a large, public sector employer; apprentice

Our key policy and intermediary informants were located in London and the Midlands region of England. The employer, higher education, further education and sixth-form college participants were based in the South of England.

The key informants occupy diverse positions across the education/employment landscape and as such offer a wide range of perspectives and standpoints. Therefore we make no claims for their views to be comprehensive or universal and instead present the findings as illustrative and explicatory. Their accounts provide perceptions and experiences of the qualifications and programmes we identified as having the potential to occupy a hybrid space within the English system. As will be discussed further below, it is helpful to understand their articulations within the context of the very different positions they occupy within the English system.

The interviews comprised a mix of one-to-one or small group encounters, which ranged from 40 minutes to just over two hours in duration. Their format was guided by a topic schedule (see Appendix B) and questions generated through discussion with the project partners at our conference in Southampton (June 2010). The schedule consists of a list of core questions, as well as specific questions developed for particular types of respondent. Although our aim was to cover the range of questions provided by the interview schedule, it was not appropriate to address these in a rigid manner. Given that the interviewees had been chosen for their ability to act as key informants, it was important to allow the opportunity to develop ideas that were meaningful to them, and that generated fresh insights into the topic even if this resulted in a deviation from the schedule. Consequently, in practice some of the interviews were loosely structured.

Focus groups were organised for two types of participants: tutors/programme leaders in a further education college (FE) and students from the same college. We undertook one focus group with six tutors, two each from the curriculum areas of Health and Social care, Information Technology and Sport and Leisure; and one focus group with six students, two each from the same subject areas. The topic sheets used in the two focus groups are attached (Appendix B).

The fieldwork was undertaken between October 2010 and March 2011. It commenced once ethical approval had been provided by the University of Southampton. In gaining the necessary approval we addressed the following issues:

- How participants would be invited to participate
- The assurance of confidentiality and anonymity
- Their right to withdraw from the process
- Who to contact in case of query or complaint
- Compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Prior to carrying out interviews, participants were provided with information about the project, the nature of their own involvement and how their contribution would be used. (A copy of the participant information sheet is included in Appendix B.) Participants were invited to receive further information about the project as it continued, and we were encouraged by the degree of enthusiasm and interest displayed.

We have organised our presentation of the findings in six Sections (Three to Eight), each focusing on a different aspect of the evidence. The report ends by developing key themes and drawing conclusions (Nine and Ten).

Section Three: Stakeholders' perceptions of hybridity

In planning for the project's empirical phase it was decided to probe interviewees' perceptions of hybrid qualifications both as an idea and as a form of practice. However, as our findings show, key informants' responses tended not to distinguish between the two. Their views were often based on their longstanding roles and experience as particular types of stakeholder. Therefore, to articulate responses to hybridity at an ideational level is to a large extent inseparable from key informants' distinctive standpoints.

First, and very fundamentally, 'hybrid qualifications' as a term was one that did not sit comfortably or easily with the majority of key informants. For some, the term itself presented a barrier to their engagement with the concept. One, a university admissions manager, articulated a concern about the terminology being used in the project:

'I'm not too sure about it as a branding label. I come from a marketing background and therefore I'm thinking, how would parents, how would employers... relate to that brand?'

On the one hand, this is a response that 'missed the point' of our question. The key informant's interpretation of what was being asked was filtered by her career history in marketing. However, on the other hand, it is a response that is both illuminating and indicative of a recurring theme. The lack of an established and distinctive identity for hybrid qualifications was articulated by several key informants, and the metaphor of 'falling between two stools' was used more than once. The phrase, literally translated from the German '*zwischen zwei stuhle setzen*', and the Danish '*saette sig melle to stole*', captures the sense of attempting to do two tasks that would be achievable on their own, but together end in failure. A similar idea is conveyed through the following response, which was given by a senior manager of a qualifications awarding body:

'I don't think it's (hybrid qualifications) a great concept, no. I think they are happy accidents if you like um when they do coincide, but because qualifications are designed for a particular purpose you just need to be careful... you end up trying to be all things to all men [sic], and that's a fatal mistake to make.'

For this key informant, the concept was not a useful or realistic one. The narrative was dominated by a strong separation between the purpose and meaning associated with academic and vocational qualifications. The 'happy accidents' were illustrated through her knowledge of particular sectoral traditions, for example, in health and social care, where competence based entry qualifications were 'looked kindly' upon by some universities with a commitment to widening participation to students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The notion of certain sectors and certain universities adopting more positive approaches towards vocational qualifications is an important

theme that emerged in many different manifestations during the course of the fieldwork.

The overriding response to the concept of hybrid qualifications (HQs) at Level 3 was ambivalence, and the key informants' expressions of uncertainty could be read in the light of the latest attempt to bridge the academic–vocational divide. Perhaps anticipating failure of this most recent policy intervention, some key informant responses focused on the recently introduced Advanced Diploma. As we have noted previously (Davey & Fuller 2010), in its initial conception the Advanced Diploma was a promising candidate for hybridity. However, as we embarked on our empirical work in the autumn of 2010 the political landscape had shifted considerably and its future was unclear.

The previous Labour government had funded the development of the Advanced Diploma as a full-time Level 3 route to HE and the labour market for 16 to 18 year olds. It was launched by a high-profile campaign targeted at providers, students and their families. Despite the priority accorded this new qualification, the emphasis placed on its ability to qualify young people for entry to HE² and the substantial resources allocated to its creation and implementation, the first cohort of Advanced Diploma students was small, with only a few hundred students (594) completing the programme in Summer 2010 (www.icq.org).

The design and implementation of the Advanced Diploma provided the dominant theme for our interview with a policy expert. In her opinion, the qualification was unlikely to become widely popular because the concept of the programme – neither clearly academic nor vocational – made it hard to explain to students and their families, thus difficult for it to develop a clear value in relation to more established awards. The extract below represents disillusionment and ultimately lack of enthusiasm, perhaps a weary resignation from long-standing experience:

'...well, number one lesson for me is don't try and design a vocational qualification which is going to present itself as an equivalent academic or general qualification. What we've done is to present these qualifications that are allegedly vocational, but as we've gone along we have academicised them more and more, which I don't think fits either, academic or vocational – it's neither. So that's one lesson, don't design a vocational qualification and turn it into an academic qualification. You try to serve two masters and you've ended up falling between two stools.' (Policy expert)

Moreover, from this key informant's experience, the reconciliation of sometimes competing and conflicting perspectives during the design and development of a new qualification exemplified the diverse interests of key stakeholders, such as universities and employers. Since taking office the Coalition government has not

² For a detailed discussion on the potential of the new Diplomas to become an established route to HE, see Hodgson and Spours (2010).

indicated that it will continue to promote the new Diploma, which strongly decreases the chances of this particular experiment in hybridity surviving.

In some similarity with our policy expert, the informant from the department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) also expressed concern that HQs such as the Advanced Diploma would generally be treated with scepticism by employers and universities. This interviewee was concerned primarily with qualifications as facilitating transition to the labour market and in this regard he expressed concerns about the purpose and worth of the new Diplomas:

‘...the sort of 14-19 Diplomas are the classic example where they largely haven’t got much credibility with employers. There’s not much... uptake at Level 3 anyway and so they’re not much use in terms of HE provision.... So they’ve kind of ended up between two stools and they won’t actually, in my view serve anyone very well. So that’s the danger, you fall between two stools.’

This key informant’s focus on the relevance of qualifications to employers indicates that his views may be interpreted as sitting within the employment paradigm. The need for qualifications to ‘provide reasonable evidence of someone’s ability to do a job....’ and for a qualification to include time spent in a ‘real working environment’ were seen as important requirements for employers. For this participant the credibility of an HQ rested heavily on its ability to provide authentic evidence of competence in a practical skill and genuine job role, as opposed to evidence of learning about work through class-room based work-related activities. However, when the discussion turned towards the Advanced Apprenticeship, he perceived a much greater potential for hybridity:

‘Apprenticeships have actually got a much better chance in this, simply because you’ve got so many different combinations.’

He stressed that the strength of the Advanced Apprenticeship model is its strong linkage with employment, with progression to HE seen as more difficult:

‘Employers are convinced because people do it in the workplace. It’s convincing HE that’s the challenge.’

As we discussed in our previous country report the government-supported Advanced Apprenticeship programme is not a qualification as such, but is a framework of awards comprising ‘knowledge-based’ and ‘competence-based components’. Achievement of all the elements of an Advanced Apprenticeship framework has the potential to provide hybrid attainment in relation to the particular occupational area covered by the framework. Even though all Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks are positioned at Level 3, the currency of the available awards, particularly in terms of the knowledge-based component, varies widely and this affects their worth as entry qualifications to HE (see first country report for details). There are currently approximately 200 sector frameworks available, covering all the major areas of the economy.

From the perspective of our BIS informant, the key objective of apprenticeship frameworks is to reflect the requirements of job roles. This perspective was reinforced by the interviewee from the National Apprenticeship service (NAS), who also stressed the ‘employment logic’ (Iannelli & Raffe, 2007) underpinning the programme. For her, the overriding aim was to ensure that individuals were trained to be competent in their occupational role:

‘To be able to practice in the workplace, in the sector, to be economically viable. That’s the challenge, because for many who attain a knowledge and understanding – it’s applying it...’

Despite the interviewees at NAS and BIS emphasising that the key purpose of Advanced Apprenticeship is to provide an employment-based pathway for learning a specified job role, there is a major push within government policy (see for example, www.direct.gov.uk/en/educationandlearning) to present Advanced Apprenticeship as a route for progression to HE as well as within the labour market. It is this dimension of the hybrid goal that Advanced Apprenticeship regularly struggles to fulfil.

From the key informants’ perspectives referred to so far, the concept of hybrid qualification was problematic. Their accounts conveyed a sense of the sharpness of the academic–vocational divide, and often a belief in their incompatibility. However, there were some positive and enthusiastic responses to the concept. The perception offered by two interviewees from a major examining body provided a very clear articulation of the case for qualifications which are hybrid in character:

‘We’ve always had this sort of... it’s a proper hybrid between the NVQ³ on one side and the A-level on the other. I’ve always thought of this as a vocational qualification... it does bring the opportunity for the practitioner to have the best of both worlds. The rigour of an A-level but the flexibility of an NVQ.’

This perspective suggests that there can be a distinctive hybrid space within the English qualifications landscape. In this interview, which has its focus on BTEC National programmes, we gain a sense of how a particularly well-established ‘brand’ has achieved widespread recognition and high status. Offering something which is distinguishable from the academically-focused A-levels and the occupationally-based NVQs, located at either end of an academic and occupational continuum, the BTEC National can make a realistic claim to be considered as an HQ.

However, as our interview continued we gained a sense of the qualification’s exposure and potential vulnerability to external forces. The examining body had to work hard to retain the distinctive identity of the BTEC National:

³ NVQ stands for National Vocational Qualifications, which are work-related, competence-based qualifications based on national occupational standards. NVQs are available from Level 1 to Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework.

‘...BTEC’s been pushed more and more down the academic route where we have to be as prescriptive as possible. We do try to ...we do deliberately, I think, try to resist that as much as we possibly can and say you know, these are the criteria and this is how you’ll be assessed, now here’s the content, now deliver, here’s some ideas but it’s down to you as the individual practitioner.’

The response from this examining body illustrates a positive articulation of the coherence between the idea and practice of HQs, and as encapsulated by the phrase, the ‘best of both worlds’. In many ways the interview shows how experience of a particularly successful qualification shapes perceptions at an ideational level. The BTEC National Diploma was provided as a model of hybridity through the power it exerted in the qualification market place. Appendix C provides data on the range and numbers associated with the BTEC National suite of qualifications. It also provides details of their renaming for inclusion within the Qualifications and Credit Framework. As a brand, it can be seen as dominating the vocational landscape. Moreover, it is an indication of how the supply – demand mechanism, which so powerfully shapes the English system, enables a means of overcoming the binary divide.

The concept as integrating practice and theory

Support for and recognition of the concept of HQs was articulated in terms of its ability to integrate theory and practice. This reconciliation was expressed by employers, tutors and learners, as we discuss below.

For the managers who were involved in workforce development of social workers, care assistants and care managers, the concept was ‘a very good idea’. On one level, the employers’ positive conceptualisation of hybridity was in response both to the regulatory requirements and the career entry and progression traditions that characterise this sector. However, it was also a response which conveyed a commitment to a particular style of learning and, as this respondent reflected:

‘If I look back to when I did my social work training, you’d say that was a hybrid qualification, in that, like nursing and teaching you have significant placements and that forms a significant part of your learning experience... actually you want people to understand the theory, actually do the practice and understand the job.’ (Workforce Development manager)

The hybrid concept offered something over and above theoretical learning alone. It was seen as enabling a continuous process of practice, skill, knowledge and reflection. Moreover, as this key informant observed, there were important professional and sectoral imperatives for the development of HQs:

‘...a whole root and branch review of what social work is about, how it should be approached, level of qualification, the continuous learning ethic... they’re trying to get back to the root of social work and make it something that is a

really reflective occupation and one that really adds some value rather than following a process...' (Strategic Workforce Development manager)

Similarly, for the learners and tutors involved in BTEC National Diplomas, the positive articulation of hybridity was expressed in terms of the ability to combine theory and practice. From this programme leader's perspective, the BTEC National Diploma offers a balance between theoretical and practical learning:

'...in Health and Social Care it's the work experience opportunity, because they get to do 100 hours in real settings, which means that 1) they get an opportunity to see what the job actually might entail, which is useful to them obviously, and they get a big opportunity to put theory into practice in real working environments.' (Programme leader, Health and Social Care)

From this student's point of view, the BTEC National Diploma in Information Technology offered 'something more practical' than what he could gain from textbook study alone:

'I do IT so we've sort of got our own room where we're building servers and running it as a helpdesk instead of what you have to do at uni... is just out of a textbook, which isn't always correct and doesn't usually work the way the textbook says...' (BTEC National Diploma Information Technology student)

Similarly, for this Sport and Leisure student the BTEC National Diploma's combination of theoretical and practical work was a more attractive option than studying for A-levels, which were:

'all from textbooks, and an exam on the end...' (BTEC National Diploma Sport and Leisure student)

As well as satisfying a preference for coursework, the BTEC National Diploma was seen to offer greater choice and was less rigid in contrast to A-level programmes. As one tutor put it:

'...they get a little bit of trying at different things, and also it's something where we can be a little bit flexible...' (Programme leader – Information Technology).

The practical experience offered as part of the BTEC programme was seen as a means to refine future employment decisions, too:

'...you get to explore like all the different areas that you might want to work in and it's just really nice, just to have that option of going out and working in an environment you might work in the future.' (BTEC National Diploma Health and Social Care student)

The findings discussed so far have provided a range of perspectives from stakeholders positioned in different locations with the English transition system. Their articulations of hybridity have been indicative of the diversity of these positions and interests. The way that they understand the concept of HQs cannot be removed from the contextual background within which their responses are set. Indeed, their narratives are in many ways expressions of their varying relationships to the fields of academia or employment. Moreover, this is a dynamic relationship, and one which has to be understood against the wider political, social and economic background. For one key informant, who works as a policy advisor to the Department of Education, the notion of hybridity was inseparable from her department's response to a new government taking office (May 2010):

'I think in terms of preparing for a new government we looked very closely at the Conservative party's manifesto, which talked about "salvaging the vocational diplomas"... and turning them back into true vocational qualifications, but we don't have a Conservative government, we have a Coalition government... we were expecting to head down one route... and now things are different again...'

This interview, which took place just six months after the Coalition came to power, illustrated the way that for this departmental official, the idea of HQs is one which she could only relate to through the prism of (party) political policies. The interview's dominant narrative was of uncertainty and indeterminateness while she waited for the new policy direction to be set. In particular, the Advanced Diploma that had been introduced and championed by the previous Labour government was set to be repositioned by the Coalition. With a change of power, the potential for creating an HQ route which lay in the design of the Advanced Diploma (whose framework allowed for both vocational and academic awards), was now left in limbo. At the time of writing the position remains unclear, however the following extract from correspondence between the DfE and Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations) shows that the programme's future will be determined by the supply/demand market mechanism that operates in the English system:

'The Government believes that where schools and colleges see that offering the Diploma is in the best interests of their students, they should be free to do so. However Ministers do not believe either that schools or colleges should be obliged to offer the Diploma, or that Government should provide support for the Diploma that isn't available for other qualifications.' (Letter dated 6 April 2011). <http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19/qualificationsandlearning/thediploma/a0064056/diploma-announcements>

As the evidence presented above has illustrated, as a term and at a conceptual level, HQs presented challenges for many of our key informants. In the next section we will look at how hybridity is reflected in the design, delivery and assessment of qualifications.

Section Four: Design, delivery and assessment of qualifications

Having introduced the concept of hybrid qualifications to elicit key informants' perceptions, our interview schedule guided respondents towards discussing issues relating to their design, delivery and assessment.

Overall, in thinking about the distinctive features of vocational or hybrid provision, respondents highlighted the importance of its practical dimension. In some cases, the foregrounding of the practical over the theoretical was seen as central to its appeal. As this key informant described:

'They [students] are sold it on the basis it's going to be a practical course, which is really very much about the hands on stuff, doing real stuff, and it won't be overly theoretical, it won't involve sitting down and writing lots of stuff.' (Policy expert)

A desire for practical, hands-on and 'real-life' learning was a dominant theme in our two focus group encounters. The focus groups comprised six tutors (group 1) and six learners (group 2) from BTEC National Diploma programmes in Sport and Leisure, Information Technology, and Health and Social Care, which were based in a further education college. Beneficial features of the courses included the flexibility they afforded tutors, for example, in how students were assessed. In this regard, one of the Information Technology tutors suggested that the BTEC National offered a choice for those learners for whom the traditional exam-based A-level assessment was unattractive:

'Our students are people who don't like doing exams! They want to do it in a practical one and that's why they choose this type of course.' (Programme leader, Information Technology)

As his colleague explained, the design of the course enabled greater flexibility than A-level provision as there was the option of tailoring it to individual students' needs:

'...If they're doing an A-level, it's here's the A-level and it's on THAT part and you're going to do THIS, this and this, and that's the exam... bye! Whereas we can go, well we're going to do these units, that unit and this unit, then we find that little John here is good at programming but not very good at the other things, so we can actually take the course more to meet what they want... there are obviously certain specialist areas that the various lecturers cover, but within our own remit... opportunity for working on projects...' (Tutor – Information Technology)

Students in our focus group also contrasted the BTEC National programme with A-level study:

'I quite like the BTEC because it prepares you for the industry you're going into rather than A-level which is all from text books, and an exam at the end.' (BTEC National, Sport and Leisure)

Moreover, as another student said:

'I thought about doing A-levels but I prefer the BTEC because it's more practical-based. It's actually real world learning instead of theory.' (BTEC National, Health and Social Care)

The perspectives of our students and tutors illustrate the distinction they made between vocational and academic qualifications as represented by BTEC and OCR Diplomas, and A-levels, respectively. The preference by some for practice over theory and the desire by others to combine practical, 'hands on' experience with theoretical learning were satisfied through the nature of the delivery methods and assessment arrangements associated with different types of qualification. In the case of A-levels, these are delivered by textbook, are increasingly unlikely to include coursework assessment and are subject to examinations taken over the two years required to achieve a full A-level. This contrasts with the coursework-assessed nature of BTEC/OCR National Diplomas, and which was enhanced through initiatives that integrated the programme. As this IT tutor explained, the additional elements offered a rich 'portfolio' to present to prospective employers:

'Well, what we're doing, the projects and things that our students do, if they go away then with that evidence, "this is what I did at College" it covered setting up servers, it covered whatever it might be, all the various bits including making ones... it's all that little kind of package...' (Tutor, Information Technology).

The tutor illustrates the way that the BTEC National Diploma programme is enriched through local practice, and we will illustrate this in Section Eight. However, it is worth noting here that capacity in the 'full-time' timetable makes this possible. The notion of full-time in the English system does not equate to five full days' study per week. Full-time students on a two-year BTEC National Diploma programme (or its academic equivalent of three A-levels) receive only 15-16 hours of classroom tuition per week to complete the course. Another definition of full-time study is offered by the rules on 'child benefit' for parents of 16-18 year olds. 'Child benefit' is a monthly financial payment from the State that usually ceases when the child reaches 16. However, it is continued until the age of 18 if the young person attends classes for at least 12 hours a week during term time.

We conclude this section by focusing again on the Advanced Diploma which, as we have already outlined, has hybrid characteristics. Introduced in 2008, at the time of our fieldwork the scheme had just produced its first completions. It is early, then, to draw firm conclusions about its place within the English system. However, the key informants' responses on the design, delivery and assessment of the Advanced Diplomas were, in themselves, extremely insightful. We were given an insider

perspective on the way that the Advanced Diplomas had been created and how the process had been quite different to previous approaches:

‘They had what they called these Diploma Development Partnerships and they met regularly really to start to beef up the design of the qualification, to develop the content of what they wanted... you were trying to get buy in from employers as well as the HE community... so that’s why I say it was more like a hybrid because that is quite different from the other processes of qualification development.’ (Policy expert)

As the same key informant went on to say:

‘...they’ve never really involved employers from the absolute start of trying to think about the design of a new qualification, in the way that the Diplomas did...’

For this highly experienced informant, the close involvement of employers via the Diploma Development Partnerships was unprecedented.⁴

In similar vein, another key informant noted:

‘...all those different key stakeholder partnerships that came together and were funded under the DDPs... it’s the first time everyone’s who’s been involved in these qualifications has been in the room and they’ve found that really useful.’ (Examining body)

The Advanced Diploma, as we noted in our earlier report, provides the opportunity for students to combine vocational and academic qualifications within a framework. Through the work of the Diploma Development Partnerships we can see that an attempt to reconcile the interests of the labour market and higher education was integral to their development. However, for the key informants who had been involved, its practical realisation was ultimately considered ‘complex’, ‘overly messy’ and with ‘lots of hurdles’.

Through consideration of the delivery and assessment of a new suite of qualifications we can view HQs through a very practical lens. In its design, the Advanced Diploma is in many ways a model of hybridity. It includes principal learning that is sector- and subject-related; it requires level 2⁵ functional skills in English, Mathematics and Information Technology; and it includes an ‘additional and specialist learning’ component consisting of qualifications outside the student’s principal learning area and may include traditional, academic qualifications. Participants were also expected to complete ten days of work experience as part of the programme. The Advanced

⁴ For further discussion of this issue see Ertl and Stasz (2010), and Laczik and White (2009).

⁵ Level 2 equates to ‘passes’ (A to C grades) at GCSE, the qualifications pursued by young people between the ages of 14 and 16.

Diploma, with its blend of academic and vocational learning, was hence conceived and positioned as a hybrid qualification. However, the 'story so far' of the Advanced Diploma provides an illustration of the practical challenges encountered in trying to deliver the components of a new and complex programme to a consistent standard. The comments below are illustrative:

'I have seen stunning practice and dreadful practice and also teacher attitudes and if they are prepared to work with other people... Logistics come into it, access to workplaces... you know do students move or do the staff move... They have all the same specifications... You can open the specification and it will say principal learning, and how it should be done, there are networks galore, and sources galore, all that stuff, it will all be dismantled of course now with the government, but very much at the end of the day it comes down to the individual schools and colleges. Even individual teachers who've been given this stuff to do but they may not have a commitment to it. It's shocking. Then you can go somewhere else in the same city, and it's just chalk and cheese looking at the practice.' (Policy expert)

As this key informant reminds us, it is the translation of a programme specification into reality which influences the way in which students' experience a qualification. Lack of programme standardisation is a feature of the English transition system that we return later in this report.

Section Five: Student and provider perspectives

This section turns to the way that vocational qualifications, and specifically the BTEC National Diplomas in Sport and Leisure, Information Technology and Health and Social Care, are experienced and positioned within institutional settings. We begin by presenting the findings from our two focus groups within a further education college. We then discuss how the same programmes are understood in a very different way from the perspective of a senior manager from a sixth-form college.

The student participants were in their first year of a two year full-time programme at a college of further education. The college is known for its vocational provision, and it does not offer traditional academic programmes. Students were enrolled on one of the following BTEC National Diplomas: Information Technology, Health and Social Care, and Sport. The group was mixed in terms of gender, however the distribution was along traditional gender-stereotypical occupational lines, with females in Health and Social Care, males in Information Technology, and with Sport and Leisure being more mixed. The tutor participants comprised programme leaders and tutors from the same college and programmes. The group was mixed in terms of gender; however, as with the student group, its distribution was along traditional gender-stereotypical lines.

The student and tutor focus groups produced a very positive and dynamic set of responses that provided evidence of hybrid qualifications' practical realisation within this particular institution. Students were enthusiastic about their programmes, and the opportunities they offered for higher education and the labour market. This is encapsulated by the extract below:

'I quite like the BTEC because it prepares you for the industry you're going into... you've got work experience... units that are relevant to what you're doing... it also adds up so you know what you want to go and do if it's higher education, or straight onto working, they prepare you for that, the ins and the outs...' (Health and Social Care student)

This young woman's response captures the breadth of choices that she imagines will be open to her – specifically she sees the BTEC as opening doors to either HE or the labour market. She anticipates that her experience on the BTEC programme will prepare her for employment in her chosen sector through the specific forms of knowledge and experience she is gaining about the practices and routines involved in a specific occupation.

And as this programme leader explained:

'...we have a good track record of getting our students on HE programmes and because they have a wealth of experience within the Health and Social Care setting that they can talk about on their personal statement... it actually makes them very strong candidates at interview.' (Health and Social Care)

From the perspective of Sports and Leisure tutors, the programme offered a clear route into HE. They told us that typically half of the cohort progressed to sport or leisure related undergraduate courses. The trajectories of the other half were less clear:

‘Some go into the industry, so gyms, sports coaching, others I guess just fall off the radar!’

For the programme leader in IT, the student destinations were more diverse:

‘I’d say you’re looking at about 30 per cent go onto university. Probably about 30 per cent, another 30 per cent probably take up jobs in the industry and the last 30 per cent take up other jobs which might be slightly related to the industry... because everything’s got IT in it these days.’

We now turn to exploring how the evidence from the focus groups added to our understanding of the ‘lived reality’ of delivering or learning on BTEC National Diploma programmes.

Work experience

The group discussions explored the nature of the work experience available to students on the three programmes. The opportunity to gain occupationally relevant knowledge and to make links with real employers was highly valued and was contrasted positively with the text-based study at A-level.

‘So we do three placements and like 100 hours overall, that’s really good experience because you get to explore like all the different areas that you might want to work in an it’s just really nice, just to have that option of going out and working in an environment you might work in future.’ (Health and Social Care student)

Moreover, as this tutor explained:

‘...I think where our students do benefit is, as somebody who came through the A-level route, went into nursing without ever having a very good idea what adult nursing was all about, I really feel that our students come onto our programme and through study units, through their work placements, through having my students come back to talk to them about their experiences, it helps them make decisions about where they would like to progress to after their BTEC.’ (Programme Leader, Health and Social Care)

The BTEC provided an opportunity to have a ‘taster’ of a particular kind of work, and this was a sentiment that was echoed below:

‘I wanna be a nurse, but... when we went to the hospital I didn’t really... because I know that we’re on work placement so we can’t do the things that

the nurses do anyway, but I just didn't really like hospitals so I know I don't want to be... but then I did a community placement and I loved that.' (Health and Social Care student)

For this student, the course provided a way to refine decision-making and avoid becoming trapped in a pathway that was no longer of interest:

And as another Health and Social Care student said:

'When I was on placement I did change my mind about the area, because I thought I would want to be a paediatric nurse but then I... most of my placements that I did were based with mental health and I just broadened my knowledge.'

For the Sport and Leisure students, placements were something they were expected to arrange themselves. We were told about the well-established links with schools and gyms in the local area. As this student explained, support was given where there were problems finding a placement:

'...they sort of encourage you to find your own placement but if you're struggling and desperate for a placement they've got a contact list and they can help you...'

And from this tutor's perspective, securing work placements was depended on being able to accommodate employers' preference for regular, one day a week placements rather than longer blocks of time:

'...it's very hard, yeah every week throughout the year they go out... we use that purely for the fact is we have so many students that need to go out on placement and they all come from quite locally, so trying to get the placements for them all at the same time for a two week block or something is a lot hard than it is to get someone to do one day a week, because they actually use them then as a member of staff rather than the work experience person...' (Tutor, Sport and Leisure)

For the IT students, work experience was more difficult to organise as this tutor explained:

'We have a total block with employers, though we find it very, very difficult to get students in with them. Because of the security aspect of it. If they are going to work on something, they need the admin passwords, they need access to all these systems. Otherwise they just can't do anything.'
(Programme leader in Information Technology)

One IT student explained how he was fortunate that his father had secured work experience within his own organisation. Another relied on the college's own improvised arrangements. As an Information Technology tutor explained, the

security clearances and age of the students presented particular hurdles. As a result, the college's own computer support helpdesk was used to provide experience for its students.

Tutor support

The student focus group generated positive discussion about the nature of the support and pedagogical approach provided by programme tutors. When students were asked what they liked about the course, favourable comparisons were made with tutors at a nearby sixth-form college:

'I think the tutors as well... because one of my friends who goes to (sixth-form college), when her tutor came round to writing her reference to university, she didn't know who she was... I think they just focus on your grades, you come in you do your work and then you go – they don't really care about you as people... and sort of encouraging you to do other things outside of college like we are encouraged to do volunteering, that kind of stuff.' (Health and Social Care student)

The tutors were described as providing pastoral support, and we gained an impression of their commitment to nurture the young people beyond the narrow boundaries of the programme. As this student put it:

'I think the best thing about the course that me and [NAME] are doing is the experience that you get from it and the tutors would really help you a lot and they're really encouraging...' (Health and Social Care student)

The sentiment was echoed by a friend on the same programme, who in response to what she liked best, said:

'I think the tutors as well... sort of encouraging you to do volunteering – that kind of stuff!'

The nature of tutor support was very powerfully conveyed in the focus group data. With regard to student transitions to both HE and employment, we did not gain a sense that tutors privileged either route over the other. The role of the tutors and the college more widely was to equip students with a broad portfolio of skills and certificates. This meant that, in addition to pursuing the BTEC National Diploma, the students were given the opportunity to take other qualifications. For example, the Sport and Leisure students could take awards in life-guarding, fitness instruction and first aid, and those in Health and Social Care could obtain qualifications in first aid.

Having heard from tutors and students on BTEC National programmes within a college of further education, we were interested to hear a quite different perspective from a senior manager of a more academically focused sixth-form college. This college has a national reputation for academic excellence and as providing a track to traditional universities and high status undergraduate subjects

such as medicine. Although predominantly offering A-level programmes, the college offers a limited number of BTEC National Diplomas in Sport, Information Technology, and Health and Social Care. The findings below illustrate how the same subjects and qualifications are given quite different emphases depending on their institutional setting.

The interview with the senior manager was characterised by an emphasis on *all* programmes as providing credentials and currency for progression to HE. The BTEC National route was seen as a way of helping students to maximise the exchange value of their achievements at 18 as the design, delivery and assessment features of the course were seen to fit their abilities and interests, leading to their achievement of top grades.⁶ According to the college's senior manager, the BTEC Nationals provide an alternative way for some students to secure places in a competitive and selective HE system.

'Our [BTEC] students, partly by the way they work, the nature of the courses, they get grades far in excess of what they would if they were following a traditional A-level course.'

'A significant proportion of them go into Loughborough, which has got a particular sporting reputation.'

He described too how there were increasing numbers of students using the BTEC National (usually the Award which is equivalent to one A-level) to complement 'hard' high status A-levels in science subjects, as a means of distinguishing themselves for selection to medical degrees. The interview narrative, although of course from the perspective of a senior manager rather than a tutor, was dominated by the education paradigm with an emphasis on access to highly competitive undergraduate programmes. Entry to the labour market was implicitly understood as following university participation.

⁶ BTECs are graded Pass, Merit, Distinction, with Distinction accruing the same number of UCAS points as an A grade at A-level.

Section Six: Perspectives from Employment

We turn now to perspectives from employment and consider how vocational and Hybrid Qualifications facilitate entry to and progression within the labour market. The section gives voice to a number of individuals, all of whom work within the broad vocational area of Social Care. We begin with the story of a female apprentice, who we have called Clare. Her experiences are presented as one lived example of the fragility, serendipity and risk associated with education – work transition and progression in the English ‘system’. The section also includes findings from our interviews with managers in the local authority where she is employed.

Clare’s story

Clare is a care worker and is employed by a large local authority. Her name was mentioned by two separate managers who were interviewed as key informants from that employer. It was clear she had gained a reputation as a talented, hardworking and ambitious 22 year old. When we interviewed her she told us she was working in a care home and taking a foundation course with the Open University via distance learning. She had completed a Level 2 Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care some months earlier. For her employers, she represented a success story, a triumph of a young person who had faced significant personal challenges in caring for a sick father and whose pathway had been characterised by her personal resilience.

We asked Clare to describe how she had become an apprentice. Clare identified herself as ‘...(not) a bright student at all’ and she added, ‘I wasn’t in the like bottom sets or anything like that, but I was very average...’. Her transition to college from school was after having gained eight GCSEs (grades A* to C), which actually puts her firmly in the top half of the achievement range. However, after a year of A-level study in which she gained good passes at AS level (the first year of A-level study, she left college and joined the post room of a law firm. Clare described how she gained promotion to an administrative role and then enrolled on an evening course to compliment her legal work. She successfully completed the first year of a four-year legal studies course and gained a certificate.

Clare explained that she had had significant caring responsibilities for her father and this was one of the reasons that she left the legal firm. She said she had been inspired by a television campaign, ‘Be the Difference’, which promoted social work. Once she had seen that publicity, ‘she just clicked’ and she proceeded to tell the story of how she had eventually secured an apprenticeship in Health and Social Care:

‘...there was a telephone number on the advert [associated with the campaign] as well, so I registered with that but didn’t hear anything, then I registered on the website... you don’t even get a confirmation email or anything... I didn’t do anything for about three months... those three, four months that I hadn’t heard anything, between me applying... I think the next day I got a call about this interview, and the interview was for the following day!’

The interview resulted in Clare being offered a Level 2 Apprenticeship with a large local authority employer, although her prior level of attainment was appropriate for entry to a programme at Level 3. Having successfully completed the apprenticeship, Clare explained that there was no opportunity to progress to an Advanced Apprenticeship (Level 3).

It can be argued that there is a built-in barrier to progression in the Government-supported apprenticeship system, as illustrated by Clare's experience. A prerequisite for the creation of apprenticeships is the availability of a job role that includes a range of work tasks and skills commensurate with the level of the apprenticeship. In the first instance, the job vacancy that Clare filled was mapped to the Level 2 Apprenticeship. For an Advanced Apprenticeship to be created, there needs to be a more skilled job role available than for its Level 2 counterpart. This approach reflects the concept and design of apprenticeships as vehicles for developing and accrediting the skills necessary to perform in specified job roles. For the apprentice to have the opportunity to generate the evidence necessary 'to pass' their competence assessments and be able to complete their apprenticeship framework, they have to have the opportunity to participate in the appropriate level of tasks. The close-knit relationship between an apprenticeship and a job makes it unlikely that an individual can progress from Level 2 to Level 3 apprenticeship unless an appropriate role becomes available. It also helps explain why an individual with the prior qualifications to enter an apprenticeship at Level 3 will be unable to do so if the only job available has limited skill requirements that map to the lower level framework specification.

Notwithstanding the disappointment of being unable to progress to the Advanced Apprenticeship, Clare has been fortunate. Her employer has recognised her ability, evidenced not only by her performance at work but also by her academic background, that indicates a potential to progress to HE. At the time of the interview she was enrolled, with sponsorship from her employer, on the foundation year of a degree in Health and Social Care at the Open University. Clare hopes that the employer will be able to sponsor her through a bachelor degree in Social Work that will then enable her to progress to professional registration as a social worker.

That Clare's narrative was dominated by resilience and motivation was indicative of the problems and barriers in the English system. We gained a further understanding of these issues through our interviews with senior managers. We interviewed four senior managers from two divisions within one of the region's largest public sector employers. They were positioned in the broad field of Social Care and had responsibility for the strategic development of the organisation's workforce. The three females and one male articulated a strong sense of frustration as far as their ability to recruit and develop staff. All four expressed a clear belief and commitment to the concept of HQs as enabling professional development, and as we noted earlier, the integration of theory and practice was seen as holding the key to 'adding value' and moving beyond a model of competence compliance. However, whilst they expressed a powerful motivation to support staff such as Clare, the dominant theme

was frustration. Their interviews captured the sense of employers' need to negotiate very difficult and sometimes shifting terrain.

The employer interviews provided a perspective on recruiting and developing a workforce during a period when reductions in budgets necessitated a rethinking of current practice. For this manager, the cuts were leading him to question whether he could still afford to be paying for staff to obtain their training at university. In the following quotation he is wondering whether it might be possible to have the training he provides in-house validated at degree level, to minimise the amount of time staff have to spend pursuing university courses:

'It's definitely relevant to what I'm doing. I'm very interested in hybrid qualifications... and you know my budget has been cut, we've got to make what we deliver in house, we do a lot of training, and if we can get that to count towards what universities will accept to go onto a full degree, you know that would be fantastic.'

For this manager, HQs could help to reduce costs. He described how participation in university programmes was expensive and not always efficient as staff were often being certificated for knowledge and skills that they already possessed. This was a problem raised by another colleague, too:

'The biggest issue for us is how people progress and how the qualifications they achieve have currency... it's very complex because depending on which university you work with, they don't recognise that... and you have to start from scratch...'

For the employers, HQs presented a solution to particular difficulties associated with their strategic plans to develop their workforce with a reduction in financial resources: could new combinations of work-based training and university education lead to the level of expertise and qualification required for professional practice?

The employers were also faced with specific challenges relating to the external regulation of the social care workforce. Interviewees described a complex and changing story of the minimum qualification levels required for care workers, referred to as the 'sheep dip'. The idiom is one which conjures up images of identical learners, moving unknowingly and unthinkingly towards someone or something that marks them as 'fit'. One of our respondents neatly captures the vacuous, uniform nature of the process, admitting it is an approach that encourages employers to do:

'...the minimum we can get away with, [you] with any target driven framework what do we have to do to comply rather than actually what do we need to do to grow our business...'

The managers' accounts were dominated by frustrations at failing to achieve their strategic objectives of workforce planning and staff development. They articulated their desire to provide progression opportunities and how this were impeded by the

inflexibility of university and apprenticeship provision, the current financial context and a flawed regulatory system. In Section Eight we will outline an example of innovative practice that was introduced as a response to some of the sectoral hurdles being experienced. However, first we look more generally at the problems and barriers within the English transition system.

Section Seven: Problems and barriers in the system

This section raises some further systemic issues impeding the development of hybrid qualifications. We look first in relation to progression to HE and then in terms of progression to the labour market.

Higher education

We concluded in the first country report that progression by young people to HE in the English system was dominated by its traditional, academic qualifications, at Level 3 most visibly represented by the A-level. This finding has been reinforced by our empirical study. In talking to a key informant from the university's admission service (UCAS), the extent and administratively embedded nature of the dominance became even more apparent. As the following extract tells us, it was clear that the university admissions system itself was designed around that one, longstanding qualification:

'...so you look at the subject codes, you look at the UCAS application thing, you look at the predominance of A-levels and you've got this model... kind of shoehorned into the model and somehow it's not quite working... whereas the A-level was designed 50 years ago by universities specifically to support progression to HE and it's a virtuous or vicious, depending on your point of view, cycle that the confidence with which A-level is accepted and used... is success breeding success, and there's never been anything like that on the vocational or hybrid side.'

The tariff system⁷ is incomplete and reflects the dominance of academic qualifications, the standard route to higher education. Students holding A-level, BTEC Nationals and Advanced Diploma qualifications are able to use the tariff to see how many points they have been allocated, but admission to selective courses and universities is far more likely to be specified in terms of A-level grades. In addition, whereas the tariff includes all traditional academic qualifications, for some of the longer established vocational qualifications and the newer Advanced Diploma it is not comprehensive. For example, of the NVQ qualifications available at Level 3, only the Association of Accountancy Technicians (AAT) NVQ has been awarded tariff points. Vocational qualifications have recently been included in the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), but at present there is no requirement a) for academic qualifications to appear in the QCF; or b) for qualifications in the QCF to be awarded UCAS tariff points. Whilst other qualifications in the QCF have attracted tariff points, the small size of these awards has meant that they have not been given sufficient points to enable them to compete with A-levels or the more substantial vocational qualifications discussed in this report.

⁷ The UCAS tariff is currently undergoing a comprehensive review, particularly with regard to the inclusion of vocational qualifications. Whilst the review is ongoing, there is evidence that more vocational awards are appearing in the tariff, albeit often with a low allocation of points.

A further barrier to progression is associated with the limited data available on non-traditional routes to HE. The data on vocational qualifications was difficult to record and therefore to access within a system dominated by traditional qualifications:

‘HE has to break the mould that is characterised by all those academic subject codes... so if HE is still operating in a mode which goes back to the early days of A-levels, academic degrees... for the love of learning and so on...’ (UCAS informant)

For our UCAS informant, one of the key barriers was associated with the weak legacy of vocational qualifications and the failure of governments to make a long-term commitment to them. Another reflection of the fragmented, incomplete nature of the data available as far as young people’s transitions was presented during our interview with the senior manager of the sixth-form college. He was unable to answer a question about what happens to the eight per cent of young people at the college who ‘fall by the wayside’ between the first and second year of their A-level study. This is a response that on one level tells us about the college’s partial knowledge in this area, but on a deeper level reflects the widespread privileging of the linear pathway from A-level to university in the English system.

The nature of the UCAS tariff provided an indication of market principles that underlie the English system. Our interviews with the examining bodies and UCAS informed us that considerable financial cost was associated with qualifications being awarded tariff points. This can act as a deterrent to awarding bodies proposing new qualifications for inclusion. As this key informant from an examining body put it, the process was both long and expensive:

‘...we’ve flirted with the idea of putting UCAS points towards qualifications, but it’s a very tortuous process, very expensive... we know that they’re going to change the system of applying UCAS points, and if it looks easy, and if it looks inexpensive then we might consider it.’

Labour market

As we discussed in the first country report, for some sectors characterised by occupational labour markets, notably accountancy and engineering, there were clear transition routes from vocational qualifications to employment and within employment there were professional career and qualification ladders. For many other sectors where there was no particular tradition of entry qualifications or qualification-related career progression, the linkages between vocational qualifications and work were weak. With our empirical research with employers focusing particularly on the Social Care sector, we were able to consider progression to a very different sector of the labour market. One of the most striking findings was the barrier imposed by regulations on minimum age. As one manager explained, there were restrictions on the type of work those under 18 years of age could be allowed to do without supervision:

‘Because of the supervision, night time work and all that sort of stuff, we said she had to be over 18, but there’s no rule that says you have to be over 18 to do it, but it was just not practical for us to guarantee her supervision, and so there were limitations to do with that.’

As another manager explained, ‘the real dilemma for the sector’ was that staff under the age of 18 could not work with vulnerable people without themselves being supervised.

Whilst the barriers associated with age were not insurmountable in themselves, within the current context of severely stretched resources the additional supervision required for staff under the age of 18 meant it was impractical. Furthermore, the difficulties were amplified by the nature of the settings in which care assistants were typically employed. The local authority was responsible for many hundreds of small care homes, often with only 10 to 12 occupants and run by an ‘owner–manager’. Consequently, the practical implications of negotiating the age restrictions were exacerbated by the typically small-scale organisational setting.

The fragmented and dispersed nature of the workforce was seen as a further barrier to the development of a training strategy, with a manager explaining that ‘the workforce is disparate, it’s mobile, there’s no one body...’. Moreover, much of the work in the Social Care provided limited opportunities for progression to professional roles. Importantly, opportunities for progression (as was exemplified by Clare’s story) were associated with the competence-based components of the Apprenticeship programme and the sector’s regulatory requirements:

‘If you look at the focus on legislation, the framework, it is to safeguard, absolutely the right thing to do, but the unintended consequence is that it makes progression for the workforce more complicated...’

The sector was very clearly characterised by its polarised nature, with a gulf between low-status, poorly-paid jobs on one hand and better-paid professional careers on the other. As a manager observed, there was a sharp divide between staff with considerable experience but limited formal qualifications (as was often the case with care home managers), and registered social workers (now a graduate profession) on the other. The superior pay and terms and conditions associated with being a social worker were seen as unfair by care home managers:

‘Social workers and care managers, they’re doing similar roles, but one of them has got a degree and the other has probably got no qualifications... so they say I’m doing 90 per cent of the job, but paying £10K less...’ (Strategic Workforce manager)

Career pathways in the sector were characterised by cul-de-sacs and unevenness. With the recently introduced requirement of a degree as an entry to social work, the employer’s existing workforce was ‘skewed’ towards an older, experienced group of social workers who had entered the profession via a diploma or certificate. As such,

from the employers' perspective, the challenge was to find affordable ways to enable existing staff to climb the career ladder. This challenge was exacerbated by concerns about the gap between the content and competence-based nature of these employees' work-based qualifications (usually NVQs) and the level of academic attainment sought by universities. Hence, whilst the route for experienced care workers to move to social worker status was articulated, it was a progression which presented significant costs. Moreover, in supporting experienced staff to make that transition, the managers had to navigate the maze of complex entry requirements set by individual HE providers. Evidence from the key informant interviews revealed employers' motivation to develop their workforce, but at the same time highlighted the unconnected and incoherent nature of the links between prior education, labour market and HE.

We turn now to discuss how, despite the problems and barriers, our key informant interviews provided examples of good and innovative practice.

Section Eight: Good practice

This section presents key informant perspectives on, and experiences of, good practice and then goes on to consider how good practice was exemplified in two very different settings.

For our policy expert, good practice was as much about views and motivations as about systems. She stressed the variability of practice and how quality often depends strongly on the enthusiasm, creativity and commitment of individual teachers:

‘I’ve seen stunning practice and dreadful practice and also teacher attitudes and if they are prepared to work with other people...’ (policy expert)

For this key informant, an essential feature of good practice in vocational education was its ability to provide ‘proper’ work experience and with ‘real practitioners’. This was echoed by an interviewee from one of the examining bodies, who stressed the value of students having access to contemporary engineering facilities and equipment and engagement with practising engineers. As the quotation indicates, the sort of opportunity open to the group of Advanced Diploma engineering students being referred to in the example is not universal:

‘...in terms of access to employers... so we had an academy we were working with... they had access to real engineering equipment, real engineering facilities and real engineers to teach and what have you. Obviously this provides an entirely different experience for a student who is learning without that expertise.’ (Policy expert)

From the examples provided so far, we can see how good practice is understood through the language of authenticity, not only in terms of ‘real’ work experience but through tutors’ beliefs and motivations towards the principles of vocational education. From another informant’s perspective, good practice is about the combination of that practical, hands-on experience with academic, theoretical learning.

‘...that blending theory and the opportunity to take a step back and reflect and then putting into practice, and back into the educational setting, it’s a much, much more robust way.’ (Strategic Workforce manager)

Moreover, as her colleague commented:

‘...if I look back to when I did my social work training, you’d say that was a hybrid qualification, in that, like nursing and teaching you have significant placements and that forms a significant part of your learning experience...’ (Learning Development advisor)

In order to develop these findings further we will draw from two examples that emerged from our data to provide accounts of how good practice is generated 'on the ground'. The first is about how a motivated university programme leader worked with an employer to develop an innovative hybrid bachelor degree. The second example shows how the interests and motivations of tutors enriched and went beyond their students' BTEC National Diploma programmes.

A hybrid degree programme

Our interview with the programme director at a university provided an illustration of how that institution incorporated a competency-based qualification within its undergraduate programme. The university's profile is dominated by undergraduate provision in Education, the Arts, and vocational programmes. The key informant had wide experience of delivering NVQs in Health and Social Care at Level 3 and Level 4, and she had developed the university's work-based learning programmes. She described how an NVQ Level 3 qualification was incorporated into the bachelor degree in order to give students a 'practical utility' to employers.

'We set it up because local employers were saying, OK, people are leaving university with a degree, but under the Care Standards Act, actually we have to have an NVQ, so it doesn't matter how great they are in the degree, if they come to us without an NVQ... so that is why we decided... let's build an NVQ into the degree, so that students have a placement and on the placement they get observed, they can do knowledge work and they can present an NVQ portfolio, and get their NVQ so they leave here with two qualifications instead of one...'

As her narrative tells us, the way she has responded to feedback from employers about their workforce needs and sector regulatory requirements, illustrates how hybridity in the form of dual qualifications has been seen as a solution:

'So in a sense it's a hybrid concept, the degree programme, the employers are saying we value people educated to degree level, but in order to have a practical utility to us, you know because of the regulatory mechanisms, they need to have an NVQ3, but through your programme we've kind of got the ideal recruit, because they've got this ability to accelerate into more senior jobs, in at the same time do the work. So it's a kind of hybrid concept, very nice.'

The programme leader had utilised the facility of the work placement, which was part of the degree, to build in an occupational competency element. She explained how students have a twelve week placement from which they produce a portfolio of evidence derived through their experience of work tasks during the placement, which can be mapped to NVQ units and be accredited. Upon completion of their degree, the students were well-equipped to apply for jobs in the sector as they had achieved both a high level of academic attainment in their vocational area as well as the relevant competence-based qualification.

However, as our key informant pointed out, the usual entry point into the social care sector even for those with degrees is as care assistants and, as she explained, students' expectations were sometimes unrealistic:

'...it's unfortunate because of course in social care graduate jobs don't really kind of exist until you have more experience. So people are leaving here with a degree and going into support worker roles, which you don't really need a degree for ... but I think the nature of some students is very much, well I'm 21 and I've got a degree, so getting a job is going to be easy and they're going to employ me as a manager...'

The message from this example then was not that graduating with a dual qualification enabled individuals to completely circumvent the traditional pathway that expects new starts to begin in care assistant roles, but that it provided a platform for them to move much more quickly up the career ladder. As the interviewee observed, students needed to expect to 'start at the bottom', but the 'way up' was 'quicker and easier if you have a degree'.

The example highlights on one hand a very positive illustration of how hybridity emerges through practice but, on the other hand, it captures the fragmented progression routes that characterise the English system. The creativity and improvisation demonstrated through this university's hybrid programme is a response to some of the important problems and barriers which are embedded in the system.⁸

Enriching the BTEC National Diploma programme

Our second example is taken from our focus group encounter with tutors at the further education college. A particularly dominant theme was how tutors were motivated to enrich the experience of their BTEC National Diploma students:

'We do a lot of additional courses... not part of the official course but it's part of our course, so they've got to do all the coaching qualifications... so they've got to have their Level 2s, which means that they can actually then go out and coach, sort of thing.'

For this tutor in Sport, encouraging students to go beyond the programme's core requirements is a means of developing the employment logic of the programme, and is something which gives students the 'edge' over others. Similarly, for tutors in Health and Social Care, the students were given a certain something beyond the core programme:

⁸ We have also come across innovative practice at HE level in Australia, in terms of the development of hybrid approaches in construction management courses (McLaughlin & Mills, 2011).

'...we have a unit, a double unit that goes across the whole two years that's called Personal and Professional Development... obviously it's getting the best qualification grade you can... but you also get the opportunity... to see it for real and put your theory into practice, but also we encourage them to build a really good profile... that's not necessarily written in, as such, but that's what we push on, so they do an awful lot of getting... involved in self-development projects, charity, you know, fund raising that sort of thing, so they've got lots to talk about.' (Programme leader, Health and Social Care).

The tutors' comments reminds us that the further education college occupies a particular segment of the educational market, and one that is in contrast to the sixth-form college referred to earlier in the report (that was operating an education logic, with its predominantly traditional curriculum and strong university orientation). This college has created a niche as a place where local full-time students gained currency for the labour market on top of their main programme qualification. The enrichment of BTEC National Programmes, through additional work-relevant certificates, provides a way for the college to reinforce its position.

Section Nine: Themes

In this final section we identify and discuss the themes that may be drawn from our empirical research in England and that highlight some of the challenges facing the expansion of hybrid qualifications. The following broad themes will be discussed below:

- The fragile identity of HQs within a segmented market
- Logics, linkages and stratification in the English transition system
- Hybridity as emerging through improvisation and creativity.

A fragile identity in a segmented market

The difficulty some key informants expressed in accepting the idea of HQs reflected their weakness in relation to academic qualifications. Key informants' hesitancy and resistance to articulating hybridity as a positive and desirable concept may be understood as the legacy of a system in which A-levels continue to enjoy prominence and high esteem. In a system where access to most university places is highly competitive, good A-level grades remain the gold standard for selection. Responses to the concept of HQs, perhaps more than anything, were indicative of the established currency attached to A-levels and the perceived relative weakness of vocational alternatives. This was illustrated in our research through the strategy deployed in the sixth-form college to encourage the coupling of subject-based A-levels with the BTEC National Diploma. According to this approach, the value of the students' attainment of a BTEC National qualification can be enhanced with the addition of what the senior manager describes as 'crunching' qualifications, in other words an A-level in a traditional discipline. A combination approach produces a stronger version of hybridity in terms of providing access to a wider range of degrees, more selective courses and higher status universities. For these reasons, the practice of combining vocational and academic qualifications at Level 3 has been increasing nationally in recent years (Hayward et al., 2009). The coupling of academic and vocational qualifications is also arguably a means of strengthening the brand offered by the sixth-form college. From the college's particular standpoint, the strategy helped to reinforce its educational logic as it increases students' chances of being selected for a place on a competitive degree course at a competitive university.

The need to augment vocational qualifications through combining them with traditional A-levels brings us back to one of the key themes emerging from our key informant interviews, namely the difficulty most had in conceptualising HQs and their related concerns about their place and value within a divided English system. Whilst we have seen how a range of rationales coupled with the agency and commitment of individual practitioners and institutions enable hybridity to emerge through practice, our key informants' responses suggest that we need to find another way to define HQs, particularly at Level 3. The examples of successful innovative practice that we have uncovered suggested the concept of *dual* (separate vocational *and* academic awards), rather than hybrid qualification, may have more potential in the English context.

When the university admissions manager struggled to 'brand' HQs, she pointed to one of the greatest challenges. Her concern with the 'brand' may be viewed as a metaphor for the problems identified from our desk-based research and in particular how a hybrid model might transcend the long-term binary opposition between academic and vocational qualifications. The successful 'branding' of HQs could be achieved through their ability to create and retain a clearly defined space within the English system. Viewed from the admissions manager's marketing background, a positive indication of HQs' ability to occupy a secure space in the system would be evidenced through parents' and employers' ability to relate to that brand. Thus, in her misinterpretation of one of our research questions, we can grasp one of the significant difficulties for the expansion of HQs: their ability to find a place within a segmented marketplace.

From the phrase 'falling between two stools', there is a risk of fulfilling neither the requirements of HE nor the labour market. This is illustrated very clearly through the implementation of the Advanced Diploma, an award expected to 'wither on the vine' over the next few years. The creation and implementation of the Advanced Diploma involved employers and educationalists, and thus may be seen as an attempt to respond to the concerns of both constituencies. However, the qualification is cumbersome and poorly understood. Its complexity of design presented practical challenges for delivery, and variability in the student experience. The indications are that the qualification, introduced in a blaze of publicity and supported by huge, publicly funded investment, has been unable to establish an identity with key stakeholders and engage sufficiently high numbers of participants to prove its worth.

The precarious future of the Advanced Diploma was indicative of the dangers, as one key informant put it, of 'serving two masters'. The Advanced Diploma had been allocated university tariff points, but its work-related dimension was weak. Remarkably little time was mandated for student learning within the workplace. One way of explaining the likely demise of the Advanced Diploma is through reference to the characteristics of the English system and by drawing on the notion of the English system's particular 'logic'. Hannan, Raffe and Smyth (1996) argue that transition systems may be understood and typified by the relationships that exist between vocational education and the labour market. According to Iannelli and Raffe, an 'employment logic' defines those transition systems where such relationships are clearly articulated (2007) and, as Raffe points out, 'labour market signals to education are strong and clear' (2008). The findings presented here do not suggest that there are clearly defined progression routes for young people from vocational qualifications at Level 3 to the labour market, in the sense that employers across a range of sectors are not a) routinely asking for these sorts of awards as entry requirements or b) forced by regulations only to employ people with specified occupational qualifications, for example, through licence to practice arrangements.

The case of apprenticeship is rather different. Here, individuals have to be employed in order to be registered on an apprenticeship framework.⁹ In gaining an apprenticeship place, by definition they have to have entered the labour market. In this sense, apprenticeship and employment go hand in hand. Completing the apprenticeship and obtaining the specified framework qualifications via the work-based route helps to develop individuals' employment track record and occupational expertise. In a few highly regulated sectors such as electrical work, the apprenticeship qualifications provide individuals with a licence to practice. The problem for Advanced Apprenticeship in providing a hybrid pathway lies in two areas. First, progression through the Levels could be constrained by the availability of more advanced job roles. Second, progression to HE is often limited by the weak educational exchange value of apprenticeship framework qualifications. In many instances, the qualifications attract few if any UCAS points (Fuller et al., 2010). Overall, the apprenticeship route could be associated with an employment paradigm that, within a segmented and competitive system, is struggling to gain the 'cross-over' status needed to fulfil our hybrid definition.

Logics, linkages and stratification in the English transition system

Our evidence indicates the challenge for HQs to become established in a system dominated by 'education logic'. In the English system the relationship between academic attainment and higher education is strong, well-understood and transparent. Nearly all those who achieve three A-levels progress to higher education. In our research, we have seen this illustrated through the fragility of the relationship between employer and education provider. Despite having strategic interests and personal motivations to develop staff, the managers in the social care sector were faced with hurdles. This was most clearly indicated through the lack of availability of progression opportunities for experienced workers. Far from a social partnership, the relationship between employers and higher education providers was complicated by the competitive, market principle. Despite articulating strong motivations to develop their workforce, the key informant managers expressed frustration about the lack of transparency and consistency for entry to the degree programmes that had recently become a requirement for social worker roles. Their narratives drew our attention to the tensions that existed between formally acquired qualifications, practice and experience, and career progression.

The education logic was evidenced, too, through the narrative of the sixth-form college's senior manager. The emphasis in that institution was on facilitating progression to elite universities, and this was something that transcended the contours of the vocational programmes offered. In Bourdieuan terms, the college has established a doxic understanding of transitions, and which is captured by the

⁹ The recent Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2009) puts Apprenticeship on a statutory footing for the first time since 1814. The Act stipulates that all government-supported apprentices must have employed status. However, this includes the possibility of them being employed by an Apprenticeship Training Agency that then hires out apprentices to employers to enable them to gain work experience and participate in on-the-job learning.

sense of ‘what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying’ (1977b. pp. 165-7). The college creates what Davey (forthcoming) describes as an ‘institutional doxa’ through the legitimating of certain decisions over others. The college’s valorisation of transitions to traditional, ‘high status’ institutions may be seen as embedded within the fabric of its vocational programmes.

The typology proposed by Kerckhoff (2000) offers another way to conceptualise the overall character of national transition systems. He proposes that ‘type 1’ societies provide stratified and standardised education systems that offer specialisation within occupationally specific streams, with few opportunities to alter direction. By contrast, ‘type 2’ societies are characterised by less stratification and greater flexibility. The academic qualifications we have mapped onto the English landscape can be seen as having deeply-embedded routes that serve to direct young people towards differential locations within and between higher education and the labour market. In particular, we found that the GCSE examinations results at age 16 provide a signal for young people’s future transitions. Furthermore, there are clear linkages between the sort of educational pathways followed between 16 and 18 and future university or labour market participation. We can see that, for a minority, just over a third of the cohort, the transition from school to university is a clearly-defined, highly visible and linear pathway from GCSE, A-level to full-time university study. This contrasts with the much less certain and less well-understood trajectories experienced by the majority of young people.

For those young people whose transition from Level 3 qualifications is to the labour market or whose university participation is characterised by delayed entry, part-time learning, entry to sub-degree level study or interrupted progression, the system’s cracks and weak safety net become discernible. Vocational pathways can be defined as ‘other’, and by all that is signified by phrases such as ‘non-traditional’ and ‘non-standard’. For the sixth-form college to have no real understanding of the destinations of the eight per cent of students who leave mid-way through their Level 3 programmes was indicative of the invisibility of those young people who deviate from the ‘traditional’ pathway from school to college to university in a linear and non-problematic way. Played out on a national scale, it is reflective of a legacy of weak policy attention and institutional concern about the pathways and transitions of the majority of young people who do not follow the ‘royal’ academic route to university (Thomas & Quinn 2006).

However, and as illuminated through our key informant perspectives, the looseness and soft edges of some aspects of the English system produce some elements which are indicative of Kerckhoff’s notion of ‘type 2ness’, and enable flexibility and discretionary practices to emerge. In this regard, good hybrid practice can be developed through improvisation and creativity.

Hybridity as emerging through improvisation and creativity

Our key informants offered a number of examples of how practices rather than qualifications might be viewed through the lens of hybridity. These practices were

evidenced through the integration of an NVQ qualification within an undergraduate course, the enhancement of a BTEC National Diploma programme with discretionary courses and the negotiations between employers and higher education providers to create career pathways for staff in the Social Care sector. The examples can be seen as practices which challenge the idea of two neatly separable education and employment logics, and instead remind us of the notion of a continuum with its more nuanced and dynamic nature.

Furthermore, the illustrations of hybridity through practice turn our attention to the English system as a competitive arena, where supply and demand mechanisms operate and add further layers of complexity. Our key informant narratives were evocative of the marketplace where needs and interests are often conflicting and fragmented, rather than negotiated through a more common European social partnership model. A key driver in this is the existence of private awarding bodies whose success is bound up with the popularity of their awards. Hence, we have seen how despite the government support and resources that were invested in the Advanced Diploma, it struggled to compete with the established and well-understood brand of BTEC Nationals promoted by the EdExcel awarding body.

The students' perspectives offered insights into the motivations and aspirations of those who were in a sense swimming against the tide. The force of Clare's personality had created a hybrid pathway with the potential to provide her with academic and vocational currency. However, if this was achieved it would be through a combination of extraordinary motivation and some degree of luck. For the BTEC students, the preference for practical, real-world learning was fulfilled by a vocational qualification which a) attracts UCAS tariff points and so provides a sound basis for progression to higher education, and b) has a general recognition in the labour market that can be strengthened at a local level through the ties established between particular institutions, courses and employers. Importantly, our evidence revealed that it was the tutors' enrichment of those programmes and their desire to keep all options open for their students that created a hybrid and marketable experience for students.

Section Ten: Conclusion

In turning to how hybridity was defined in the project, we have to concede that our desk-based analysis and the empirical findings suggest that all the contenders for hybrid status we have considered fall short of the criteria specified in the strong definition (see Introduction). The contenders for strong hybrid status at Level 3 that we have explored do not provide full access to HE or the labour market. However, it is important to put this finding into context. In England, full access to HE has not been part of the concept of advanced level education for the 16-18 age group and, indeed, may be viewed as a somewhat alien idea. A-levels, with a legacy from the 1950s, have primarily been conceived as specialist subject-based qualifications offering a curriculum designed to prepare the student for degree level study in that subject. Despite attempts in recent years to broaden and increase the number and range of A-levels that students take, the vast majority still only pursue three subjects to completion. The three will typically consist of cognate subjects, for example, arts or sciences. Hence, even academic high flyers are unlikely to aspire to, or achieve, a range of A-levels that will qualify them for entry to all degree programmes.

The notion of progression from Level 3 to cognate subject areas in HE is well-established and there was no evidence in our study to suggest that stakeholders perceived this as a problem, or as something that should be changed. This having been said, the UCAS tariff provides a generic framework for measuring Level 3 attainment that in theory offers a mechanism for transcending currency by subject. This is because grades, irrespective of subject, carry the same number of points: a B grade at A-level in Maths carries the same number of points as a B grade in A-level Sociology. Universities have the option then of simply stipulating that candidates should achieve a certain number of points without specifying from which subjects or types of course. Although in recent years strenuous efforts to widen participation to HE to 'non-traditional' groups has encouraged what are sometimes termed 'widening participation universities' to adopt more flexible approaches to recruitment, the principle of prior attainment at an appropriate level in a cognate subject is still a strong factor underpinning the practices of admissions tutors.¹⁰ The currency that students accrue from achievement of HQs in terms of entry to HE is delineated by the nature of the subject area and market position of the HE institution.

Turning to the issue of full access to the labour market, we found that the extent to which qualifications and pathways provided currency for those entering skilled employment was determined by the conditions that underpin the English transition system. These include factors such as the degree of labour market regulation; the extent to which there is a well-established apprenticeship; the extent of educational stratification; aspects of a market-based system including the existence of private awarding bodies, lack of programme standardisation; wide-ranging sectoral and

¹⁰ It is also likely to be exacerbated by the recent announcement (June 2011) by the Secretary of State for Education that universities will be able to expand the number of candidates they accept with high A-level grades (ie, three passes at grades AAB).

occupational differences; the extent of employer involvement, and so on. As such, the value attached to qualifications was usually contingent and dynamic.

Within our study, Advanced Apprenticeship was the nearest of our contenders to meeting the criteria for full access to the labour market by providing the clearest pathway to skilled employment within an occupational field. However, the key factor determining the value attached to completion of the programme was sectoral and occupational differences. In broad terms, 'full access' was associated with those sectors with a long tradition of using apprenticeship as a vehicle for skill formation, career progression, as an externally recognised symbol of qualification in an occupation, and with regulated labour markets and pathways to professional status. Such sectors and occupations would include: engineering, electrician, accountancy, and some aspects of health and social care and construction. It follows that the type of labour market (external/occupational; internal/firm specific; secondary) characterising sectors and occupations underpins employers' approaches to recruitment, training/apprenticeship and workforce development and the value they attach to particular qualifications. In the English context, therefore, understanding the value and worth of hybrid or indeed other sorts of qualifications as entry routes to the skilled labour market needs to be established through the lens of (changing) sector and occupational traditions and characteristics (Fuller & Unwin, in press).

In this study we have focused on HQs at Level 3 as this is the level of attainment normally expected for entry to HE in England and is the level traditionally associated with skilled employment. However, as we noted in our first country report, the notion of level is problematic. There is no universal agreement or understanding about what Level 3 means as it encompasses a wide range of awards that vary in terms of size, process, academic content, mode of delivery and attendance, UCAS points and so on. This lack of standardisation is particularly challenging for qualifications seeking to become established in a landscape that at Level 3 is usually viewed through the lens of the academic benchmark (A-levels). We have already suggested that, for England, the concept of dual qualification may have more resonance and potential than hybrid qualification at Level 3. Alternatively, thinking about HQs at Level 4/5 (sub-bachelor degree) may have more potential for meeting a stronger definition of hybridity. At this level, qualifications such as Higher Nationals and Foundation Degrees are both vocationally specific and facilitate progression to full bachelor degrees, albeit usually in cognate areas and over a longer time span than for the academic pathway.

We conclude that against an economic context in which youth unemployment in the UK is at a record high (20 per cent) and higher education is becoming both more competitive and more expensive, there is potential for hybrid or dual qualifications to appear as the 'best of both worlds'. However, achieving a distinctive place in the English transition system and not 'falling between two stools', is likely to remain a challenging task for HQs at Level 3.

Implications for policy

In this final section we identify in summary style a number of implications for policy that our research suggests:

Cohort profile, pathways and potential

1. Currently, less than four out of ten 19 year olds progress directly from full-time education to HE and less than five per cent of 16-18 year olds are pursuing Level 3 Apprenticeship programme (Davey & Fuller, 2010). About a quarter of 16 to 18 year olds are pursuing hybrid programmes at Level 3 and about 30 per cent are pursuing Level 2 courses (Wolf, 2011), and may well wish to progress to Level 3 hybrid routes in the future. There is then a large minority of those in the 16-18 cohort for whom a hybrid route and qualifications provide a potentially promising option and whose participation in the education system merits the policy attention and support currently directed at those participating in the academic and apprenticeship routes.

Length and intensity of provision

2. In a competitive HE and labour market situation, the quality and consistency of hybrid programmes and qualifications is a key concern. Currently, a full-time hybrid programme at Level 3 is expected to take the same amount of time as its academic counterpart (that is, approximately 16 hours a week contact time over two academic years to complete three A-levels or its vocational equivalent). In this period, HQs are expected to fulfil the role of providing a route not only to HE but also to the skilled labour market. A key question for policy raised by our research is whether the length and intensity of programme currently 'delivering' HQs in England is sufficient to fulfil its dual aims. Drawing on our European comparisons, Austria for example offers a highly established successful hybrid route where young people take five years (14-19) to complete a programme that provides them with the credentials to enter any course in any university, or to enter the skilled labour market. This compares to the four years it takes their 'grammar school' peers to achieve university entrance qualifications. In terms of intensity, the indications from all our European partner countries (Germany, Austria and Denmark) was that full-time study equated to far higher levels of weekly contact time than in England. In the Austrian case, the contact time for those on the hybrid programme is between 30 and 40 hours per week, depending on the vocational area of study.

System logics

3. An important finding from our research is that the post-16 English transition system is dominated by an education logic and an employment logic, but that these two logics do not apply well to the experience of many young people inhabiting the in-between or middle space. In this current situation, the possibility of achieving the level required to enter HE and the skilled labour market is more likely through the attainment of a combination of academic and vocational qualifications rather than an integrated hybrid award.

4. The research suggests that policy makers need to rethink the pathways being offered in terms of their aims, attributes, and the quality of experience and outcome they provide for which groups of young people. The notion of 'transition system' and the relevant underpinning concepts such as 'standardisation', 'stratification', 'segmentation', 'permeability', and 'progression' provide useful tools for thinking about the opportunities and challenges for reform, and the consequences for creating a more equitable system.

Existing policy drivers

5. There are various factors in the recent policy landscape that could offer a 'moment' for policy reform. These include the Wolf Review and the response to it by the Government, both of which appear to support the development of vocational education, likely to support progression to HE and, or into the skilled labour market. The raising of the participation age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 reinforces the challenge for policy makers and providers to offer high quality and value programmes that will appeal to young people (and their families), as well as to the colleges, universities and employers that will be choosing between applicants.
6. From the perspective of changes in HE, the recent Browne Report and Government's White Paper is also shifting the context of recruitment and selection for HE providers. In a highly competitive HE market place and with increased tuition fees, many universities will have to work even harder to establish their position and appeal to students. For some this may precipitate a more open approach to the realities of employer needs and the needs of part-time work-based students, who are more likely to have or be interested in hybrid attainment. In this regard, there is potential to grow HQs at undergraduate level in areas such as social work and accountancy, where individuals can work and study in pursuit of qualifications that attract professional recognition.

References

Government publications

Gove, M. (2011) Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government Response, <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0077253/government-publishes-response-to-the-wolf-review-of-vocational-education>

Options at 16, http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/14To19/OptionsAt16/DG_4001327

Grey literature

Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Wolf-Report.pdf

Joint Council for Qualifications (2010) Table of Results for England (August) www.icq.org

Academic references

Bourdieu, P. (1977b) *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davey, G. (forthcoming) Beyond a binary model of students' educational decision making. *Sociological Research Online*, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/>

Davey, G. & Fuller, A. (2010) Hybrid qualifications: Leonardo Project. England: Country Report. <http://hq-lll.e./presentations/countryreports.html>

Ertl, H. & Stasz, C. (2010): Employing an 'employer-led' design? An evaluation of the development of Diplomas, *Journal of Education and Work*, 23 (4): 301–317.

Fuller, A. & Unwin, L. (in press) Vocational education and training in the spotlight: Back to the future for the UK's Coalition Government? *London Review of Education*, 9 (2): 191-204

Fuller, A., Turbin, J. & Wintrup, J. (2010) *Finding their Way? Advanced Apprenticeship as a Route to Higher Education*. Southampton Education School: University of Southampton.

Hannan, D., Raffe, D. & Smyth, E. (1997) Cross-national research on school to work transition: An analytical framework, in P. Werquin, R. Breen & J. Planas (Eds.) *Youth transitions in Europe: Theories and evidence* (Documents Séminaires No. 120). Marseille: CEREQ, 409–42.

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2010) Vocational qualifications and progression to higher education: the case of the 14–19 Diplomas in the English system, *Journal of Education and Work*, 23 (2): 95–110.

Hoelscher, M., Hayward, G., Ertl, H. & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008) The transition from vocational education and training to higher education: A successful pathway? *Research Papers in Education*, 23 (2): 139–151.

Ianelli, C. & Raffe, D. (2007) Vocational upper-secondary education and the transition from school, *European Sociological Review*, 23 (1): 49–63.

Kerckhoff, A. & Hallinan, M. (ed.) (2000) Transition from school to work in comparative perspective, *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, pp. 453–474, Kluwer: New York.

Laczik, A. & White, C. (2009): Employer engagement within 14–19 diploma development, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 14 (4): 399–413.

McLaughlin, P. & Mills, A. (2011) Combining vocational and higher education studies to provide dual parallel qualifications, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 35 (2): 233–245.

Raffe, D. (2008) The concept of transition system, *Journal of Education and Work*, 21 (4): 277–296.

Thomas, L. & Quinn, J. (2006) *First Generation Entry into Higher Education: An international study*. Open University Press: SRHE, Buckingham.