

The case of hybrid qualifications in England: Findings and Themes

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

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Overview

- Transition systems and English context
- Data collection and sample
- Preliminary findings and themes
- Emerging Issues
- HQs, national logics and transition types

Hybrid Qualifications: a fruitful lens for exploring transition systems?

As Raffe says: '....research has focused largely on transitions into and within the labour market and has not connected closely with research on transitions within the educational system' (2008: 283)

- HQ-LLL research on hybrid qualifications/programmes is exploring both labour market and educational transitions, so helps avoid tendency to separate
- Potential of using transition system concepts to help compare the 4 countries via our qualitative research methodology and data sources?
- Focus on 'societal approach' exploring 'holistic interrelationships' among social & economic institutions (278)
- To identify national 'logics' and 'degree of coherence within each country' which can then be compared across our countries

Generic conditions for successful transitions

(6 'ingredients' after Raffe 2008: 291, OECD Thematic Review 2000)

- A healthy economy – no, 20+% of 16-24s unemployed, weak job sustainability
- Well organised pathways that connect initial education with work and further study – yes for academic route, quite well for some apprenticeships and VQs, not for the rest
- Widespread opportunities for workplace experience to be combined with education – not readily and widely available at Level 3
- Tightly knit safety nets for those at risk – no, especially at 19+
- Good information and guidance –longstanding weakness
- Effective institutions and processes – patchy, more effective for academic selection

Helps convey the transition context in which hybrid qualifications are located in England

Our key aim

- Our agreed aim was to explore both the conceptual understanding and the lived reality of ‘hybridity’ within the educational system, work-based training provision and the labour market
- This broad aim was articulated as eliciting key informants’
 - Perceptions of and attitudes to the hybrid idea and model
 - Experiences of hybrid qualifications

Context & scope of our fieldwork

Key informants were drawn from the following groups:

- Policy makers: Department for Education and Department for Business Innovation and Science
- Social partners: examination awarding bodies; UCAS (the organisation responsible for processing university applications);
- Further Education/Sixth-form colleges: programme managers/admissions managers/lecturers (focus group)
- Students on current BTEC National programmes (focus group)
- Higher Education: programme manager, admissions manager.
- Employers: a number of managers from a large, local public sector employer
- Total: 18 individuals interviewed and 12 individuals in 2 focus groups

Policy and institutional context

- Lack of standardisation across the system between curricula and qualifications leads to uneven transitions to further/higher education and labour market
- Role of private awarding bodies
- Stratification – selection through academic attainment produces tracking and different outcomes
- The devices of ‘level’ in national framework and tariff points in university admissions system have not created parity between academic and vocational qualifications
- Fierce competition for ‘best’ places in HE and LM (apprenticeships):
What effects will rise in tuition fees have on young people’s choices?

Findings: Policy context and hybrid qualifications (1)

- **Policy vacuum and lack of clarity - waiting for Wolf Review**

“I think in 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 and we have Alison Wolf, so we were expecting to head down one route... and now things are different again.” (DfE KI)

Findings: Policy context and hybrid qualifications (2)

- **Differing perspectives, differing expectations of provision for pre- and post-19s**

“...if employers in some sectors look at a qualification they want it to prove or provide reasonable evidence of someone’s ability to do a job. So they’d expect there to be a large element of competence-based assessment in it, that’s taken place in a real working environment rather than in a simulated environment or a classroom” (BIS)

Who are the target groups?

- **Those with average or above average attainment, not the academic high fliers or those with low levels of attainment**

“...um most people will have got sort of Bs and mainly Cs kind of grades...” (HE programme leader)

“Our students are people who don’t like exams! ...They want to do it in a practical one and that’s way they choose this type of course (BTEC lecturer)

“You don’t get the high fliers [on BTEC courses] but I think that a lot of that is down to parents as well (BTEC lecturer)

Example of innovative ‘good’ practice (1)

- **Hybrid innovation at degree level**

“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’s 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... (HE programme leader in health and social care)

Example of innovative practice (2)

- **Enrichment of a FT L3 BTEC programme**

“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 to out and coach, sort of thing.” (BTEC Sport and Leisure programme lecturer)

Positive Perspectives

- **The best of both worlds**

“We’ve always had this sort of...it’s a proper hybrid between the NVQ 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 (awarding body 1 talking about ‘their’ L3 BTEC)

“...you’ve got work experience and units that are relevant to what you’re doing, and it also adds up so you know what you want to go and do if it’s higher education or straight into working, they prepare you for that”
(BTEC student in health and social care)

Barriers and reservations (1)

- **Key purpose unclear**

“I don’t think it’s [hybrid qualification] 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, and that’s a fatal mistake to make” (awarding body 2)

Barriers and reservations (2)

- **The problem of weak legacy and government commitment to general vocational education**

“I just don’t think it will ever be more than marginal until the Government puts its money on a vocational or hybrid route ... and sticks with that, you know for twenty years.”
(university admissions system)

Barriers and reservations (3)

- **Falling between two stools**

“...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” (senior educational researcher)

“...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 progression...they won’t actually...serve anyone very well.” (BIS)

Barriers and reservations (4)

- **The dominance of the academic model**

“Whereas the A-level... was designed 50 years ago by universities specifically to support progression to HE and it’s a virtuous... 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.” (university admissions system)

Barriers and reservations (5)

- **It only works in a few sectors**
 - A few (OLM) sectors have well-organised and established transition pathways which include and recognise hybrid qualifications within professional career structures e.g. engineering and accountancy
- “...it only works as a progression to HE in a very limited number of sectors...it tends to depend on the quality and reputation of the main qualification... and Engineering is a classic example because it’s got the BTEC in it...” (BIS)

Emerging Issues

Hybrid qualifications as pathway to higher level study

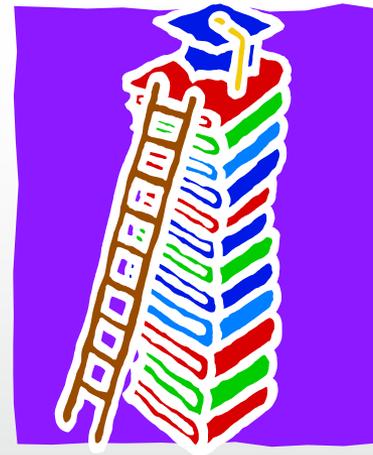
- Vocational/WBR

L3 → ? (4, 5, 6?)



Academic

L3 → **L6**



But weak linkages allows bottom up practices to emerge

- The limitations of the UCAS system were countered with ‘on the ground’ understandings of the value of particular VQs gained in particular context, by particular groups

“And we know that in health and social care for example that if they’ve got their Level 3 NVQ that hasn’t actually got any UCAS points, but it’s considered to be one of those qualifications that they [certain universities] will look kindly on, particularly for people who for example have been working in the industry for a long, long time...(qualification provider)

Voting with their feet

- Attempts by government to manufacture hybrid qualifications have poor record e.g. GNVQ, Advanced Diploma (AD)
- As a policy advisor explained, the aim of the AD was to bridge the academic/vocational divide but despite unprecedented consultation, publicity and funding, take up was extremely low
- The expected demise of the AD stands in stark contrast to the BTEC National Diploma which are seen to occupy a real space between academic and specific occupational qualifications
- Progression to HE from BTEC higher than any other VQ, positive correlation with employment and positive rates of return (London Economics 2010)
- BTEC provides a ladder of Vocational qualifications (L1,2,3,4,5)

Opportunities for work placements context-dependent

- Non-standard, ad hoc arrangements and experiences even within the same 'hybrid programme'
- Evidence suggests that where planned and integrated work placements and assessment perceived as highly beneficial for learning and progression by students, tutors, HE admissions and employers (focus groups with BTEC students and lecturers, interview with HE programme leader)

Paradox of loosely knit safety nets?

- Evidence on patterns of participation and retention indicate relatively low levels of participation post-16 and particularly post-17/18
- Loosely regulated youth labour market (but becoming tighter)
- Weak IAG system - focus has been a) on those most at risk of becoming NEET – stops at 19 and b) academic transitions, “my careers advisor at school didn’t talk about anything apart from A-levels (BTEC student)
- But availability of second chances illustrated by example of 21 year old BTEC student in our sample

The influence of competing interests

- English system allows for multiplicity of institutional provision (public and private providers) and private awarding bodies (see country report)
- Institutions and processes are subject to different funding arrangements and competing agendas leading to a fragmented transition system in which ‘hybrid qualifications’ inevitably have to compete for position

“Schools will jump on the bandwagon to keep students in their institutions...to increase their per capita...a very competitive environment” (policy expert)

National logics, distinct types?

- Iannelli and Raffe (2007) argue that ‘in systems with strong [institutional] linkages, vocational education follows an ‘employment logic’, and in systems with weak linkages follows an ‘education logic’” (Raffe, 2008:285)
- On this basis, hybrid route/qualifications in English system appears more readily to comply with notion of an ‘education logic’
- However, our early evidence suggests that the variability, dynamic & highly context-dependent nature of hybrid qualifications and routes challenges the idea of two neatly separable employment and education logics in the English transition system
- To what extent does the Leo HQ research provide a basis for challenging discourse of ‘national logics’ and x-country transition system typologies?

References

- London Economics, October 2010, Returns to BTEC vocational qualifications
- Ianelli, C. and Raffe, D. (2007) Vocational upper-secondary education and the transition from school, *European Sociological Review*, 23, 1:49-63
- Raffe, D. (2008) The concept of transition system, *Journal of Education and Work*, 21, 4:277-296