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Providing graduate-level excellence in vocational pathways - transcending the academic/vocational boundary in Europe

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Abstract

Despite the vocational education and training (VET) system offering value to individuals and the economy, it has suffered from a poor prestige and low status, particularly in comparison to academic education routes. Higher education is generally regarded with high prestige and has dominated as the default route for post-compulsory education increasingly so over the last few decades. Recently in Europe, higher-level vocational routes have been re-positioned, or new ones developed, giving them the same qualification level as the academic Bachelor degree. The paper draws on three research studies including: Meister qualifications in Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Sweden; Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) in Scotland; and Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in England. It explores why these have been introduced or developed, the impact on VET prestige and the challenges/benefits associated with these qualifications. The research draws on desk-based research, in-depth literature reviews, and semi-structured interviews with key informants from the study countries.

Full paper

The skills taught and developed through the technical and vocational training route are imperative for economic productivity and growth (OECD, 2017). Despite the vocational education and training (VET)

system offering value to individuals and the economy, it has suffered from a poor prestige and low status, particularly in comparison to academic education routes (Billett et al., 2019). VET often suffers from a lack of social standing among students and their families (Abrassart & Wolter, 2019). The academic-vocational divide is manifested across many countries across the world and often highlights social divides such as class and gender (e.g. Nylund et al., 2018). Conversely, academic routes through higher education are regarded with high prestige and have dominated as the default route for post-compulsory education increasingly so over the last few decades. This has particularly been the case in England, where in 2019 it reached the significant milestone of more than 50% of young people in England going to university.

In other European countries, particularly the German-speaking countries, the vocational pathway holds greater prestige and is regarded as a desirable alternative to academic higher education. However, the German system also feels the impact of academisation. At the same time higher-level vocational routes have been re-positioned, or new ones developed, giving them the same qualification level as the academic Bachelor degree. For example, Germany and Austria have a long history of the 'Meister' or master craftsperson qualification. These offer apprentice graduates the opportunity to deepen or widen their professional skills, and also enabling them to work in an executive position carrying out complex tasks, or being able to manage a company and train apprentices. In the last few years, Austria for example has legally re-classified their Meister qualifications to level 6 in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), in order to display the high esteem for the VET qualification. In Germany, Meister qualification has long been classified at level 6 but with the new training act (2020) Master craftpersons can use the title 'Bachelor Professional'. In Scotland and England, Graduate Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships have been introduced respectively in both countries. These industry-recognised and accredited qualifications combine on and off the job learning at a high level.

This paper draws on research on these higher-level VET qualifications across several European countries to explore:

- Why have higher level VET qualifications been introduced/further developed?
- What impact have these qualifications had on the perceptions and prestige of VET?
- What are the benefits/challenges associated with these qualifications?

The paper draws on three research studies that include: Meister qualifications in Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Sweden; Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) in Scotland; and Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in England. The research draws on desk-based research and in-depth literature reviews, along with a series of semi-structured interviews with key informants from across all the study countries. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviewees are not identified by their role or named in the paper to ensure anonymity. We followed BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018) in our projects. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to draw out common themes within the data (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research found that these high-level vocational qualifications, either those newly introduced or those well-established, aim to increase the perceptions and prestige of vocational education across many of the countries. However, for DAs and GAs this is still early days of their delivery, and given the perceptions of VET, from the outset more work needs to be done to change stakeholders' perceptions. Both, DAs and GAs are well set to achieve this. For some, namely the German-speaking countries, the level of prestige for vocational routes has been historically high and the re-status of the qualifications aimed at ensuring this further. For these, the recognition is based on a strong tradition of the Meister qualification that has permeated businesses and the economy, and more generally the whole society, for many years.

The research also highlighted that there is strong appetite for growth of these qualifications, particularly because of the positive view from employers who regard them as offering a number of benefits, for example being able to increase skills of employees and developing a more diverse workplace. However, challenges also exist for growing

these qualifications further, in terms of number of routes and candidates, for example in England and Scotland levels of awareness and lack of funding continue to be barriers for growth.

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