

Vocation, vocation, vocation...

Magnus Bashaarat, headmaster of Milton Abbey School, believes vocational qualifications should be regarded as a serious alternative to A levels

Vocational education – education that aims to prioritise practical, work-related, experiential learning – has suffered something of an image problem over the past decade, with many parents believing that such qualifications will not help their child get into a good university and find a good job. The tide is turning, however. A number of studies show that universities and employers look very favourably at vocational qualifications and that students are choosing to study vocational courses in the sixth form and at university in ever growing numbers.

It is time to have a fresh look at vocational qualifications and consider them as a serious alternative to A levels. In many instances the chance to study vocational courses in the sixth form is not only an experience that students enjoy but one that reaps dividends when looking at certain university courses and career choices.

The Business and Technology Education Council qualifications (BTECs) have been around since 1984 and are not particularly well understood by parents who remember their own educational diet of O and A levels.

At Milton Abbey we offer both A levels and BTECs in the sixth form. We talk about ‘parallel pathways’ to a common destination – that is, university, either via an A level route, a BTEC route or quite often a combination of both. We are unusual in this respect. Few other independent schools, where the traditional pathways of A levels or the International Baccalaureate (IB) still dominate, offer this level of choice. Much of the independent sector is finely tuned to supply a style of education that is in decreasing demand. As the UK population of 18-year-olds and the number of A level entrants decline, traditional academic courses are becoming less popular and newer vocational courses are being taken in ever greater numbers.

Last year more than 100,000 applicants applied through UCAS for university courses after having studied vocational courses. Approximately 95 per cent of universities and colleges now accept BTEC qualifications for entry to undergraduate courses. Last year one of our students studied a mixture of BTECs and A levels, and was offered a place at Durham University to read criminology.

BTECs are taken in vocational subjects but ‘vocational’ is misunderstood by many people only to apply to practical jobs – jobs like bricklaying, hairdressing or plumbing. It has been positioned by educational traditionalists to denote the antithesis of ‘academic’, which is itself a construct of people’s belief that ‘academic’ is difficult and ‘vocational’ is easy.

The reality is vastly different. A BTEC Extended Diploma is equivalent to three A levels in terms of the amount of teaching time and assessment involved. If you want to read environmental sciences at university and



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know that 112 UCAS points will get you there, then an Extended Diploma in Countryside Management will get you the points. Why would you do three A levels – geography, maths and biology, for instance – if only one of them is a subject you enjoy and has any relevance for your degree course?

The recent changes to BTEC specifications (thank you, Mr Gove), like those at A level, are designed to make the qualifications more robust and more in line with the expectations and requirements of universities and employers. They are built to equip students with the industry-specific skills they will need to progress after school, either through UCAS into a university or into the world of work. Hospitality and event management is a popular higher education course. Surrey University asks for grades of ABB for international hospitality management while Birmingham University asks for the same grades for English – so in

terms of university entry, vocational courses are not easier.

All BTEC courses now have externally and internally assessed components. The exact balance of externally assessed material is different for each BTEC but the general breakdown is consistent – externally set assignments comprising a mixture of written pieces on topics decided by the exam board and practical assignments which have to be completed during a set time period. The remainder of the course material is set and assessed in-house and can be tailored to meet the needs and specialisms of schools and pupils. Milton Abbey has its own pheasant shoot, so for our Countryside Management BTEC the modules on game bird rearing, firearm use and pest control are tailor made.

The most popular BTEC courses in the sixth form at Milton Abbey are Creative Media Production and Understanding Enterprise and Entrepreneurship. Both offer pathways to university courses such as business and management and new economy jobs in game design and digital effects. These are growth areas of the economy and undergraduates feel the courses are ‘a good bet’ when it comes to looking for work after university – because, let’s face it, university is a lot of money and a return on the investment would be nice. Our Entrepreneur in Residence programme, currently fronted by David Ross of Carphone Warehouse fame, brings real time business stories and experiences to complement the classroom learning.

A study by Pearson, using data from 1996 to 2011, showed that 89.8 per cent of people with BTECs and a degree had progressed into employment, compared with 88.1 per cent of those with A levels and a degree. Such statistics should allay parents’ fears that BTECs will not help their children find a job in an increasingly competitive market.

A levels remain important qualifications and are the best way of keeping your options open when it comes to course choices at university. Many students at Milton Abbey continue to choose A levels rather than BTECs as it suits their learning style better. However, more choice in the sixth form – offering A levels alongside BTECs and the IB – can only be a good thing educationally.

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Magnus Bashaarat says the term ‘vocational’ is often misunderstood