

A combination of education methods could be the key for some students aiming for higher education

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Dr Geoff Hayward from Oxford University funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, who led the research points out, a high proportion of those with combined academic and vocational qualifications gained their qualifications in state-school sixth forms and have importantly similar backgrounds to the traditional academic applicants. Therefore, the increasing proportion of students applying to higher education with combined academic and vocational qualifications may be widening participation but not substantially.

'Students with a vocational background are particularly under represented in prestigious higher education institutions,' says Dr Hayward 'This is due to the self-limiting perceptions of the students and to the judgements about the competence of vocational students by universities.'

Applicants with a purely vocational background come from lower socio-economic groups, are more often male, older, disabled and from a non-white ethnic background. These are precisely the types of students that the government is targeting in its efforts to widen participation in higher education. In spite of this, these students are still being failed by the system. It is not just a question of ensuring more people from non-traditional backgrounds gain access. Widening participation is also about fairness of access and ensuring that the students are successful at university.

The study shows that students from vocational backgrounds tend to be in institutions with fewer resources and in institutions that carry less weight in the [labour market](#). Furthermore, their experience of higher education is often a complex and difficult process. Many feel they were not properly prepared at school or college for what is expected of them at university. They also have trouble with their particular subjects of study. Some of them find it difficult to balance academic work with family commitments and the work they have to do to pay for their studies.

'Students need to be able to draw on support to overcome these difficulties,' says Dr Hayward. 'Then again, many of the existing support mechanisms are only aimed at students with general academic qualifications. Others support mechanisms are too standardised for the particular needs of non-traditional students.'

The project is now working with a variety of stakeholders to determine the practical consequences of the research findings. The relative success of [students](#) who combine vocational with academic education may point the way forward for reform. Still, as Dr Hayward acknowledges, the greatest obstacle to widening [higher education](#) participation and to making access fairer is still the status inequality between vocational qualifications and traditional academic qualifications.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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