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# **Faster, higher, stronger? A comparison of content coverage and teacher pedagogy in Technical Awards and GCSEs in sport-related subjects**

*Conference Paper Abstract*

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## **Abstract**

As part of the programme of qualification reforms in England and Wales, new GCSEs in Physical Education were introduced for first teaching in 2016. The Department for Education (DfE, 2016) has since released new guidance for Technical Awards (Level 2 vocational qualifications targeted at 14-16 year olds) in sport subjects. The guidance states that Technical Awards should be clearly distinct from the 'academic offer' of GCSEs (DfE, 2016, p.10).

This paper comprises a comparison of general and vocational qualifications targeted at 14-16 year olds in sport-related subjects. Its aim was to establish the extent to which the current qualifications are distinct from each other, focusing on three areas of potential distinction: content coverage; domains of knowledge and demand (Nisbet, 2014); and pedagogical decisions made by teachers related to assessment and the student cohort.

There were two methodological phases. In Phase 1, the learning outcomes and assessment documentation (e.g. specifications and sample assessment materials) of two currently available Technical Awards (Cambridge Nationals in Sport Science and Sport Studies) were compared at the unit (component) level with the GCSE in Physical Education. This comparison utilised an adapted version of Marzano & Kendall's (2008) taxonomy of educational objectives to determine which knowledge domains and levels of mental processing were being assessed within each qualification.

Phase 2 comprised semi-structured interviews with six teachers (based at different schools) who were responsible for the selection and delivery of the target qualifications. The teachers offered at least one of the two Technical Awards at their school in addition to offering the GCSE in Physical Education. The interview method enabled teachers to reflect on and compare their classroom practice for each qualification. Teachers were asked how the delivery of comparable content differed across qualifications, the characteristics of students and the skills learned, and their perceptions on how future qualification reforms will change their pedagogical approach.

The comparative taxonomy analysis in Phase 1 revealed a different pattern of cognitive domain coverage across the two qualification types. The two Technical Award qualifications overlapped to differing degrees with GCSE content. Where there was overlap, however, the content was often assessed differently; all of the Technical Award qualification units (bar one in each) used non-exam assessment (NEA) but their content typically overlapped with the GCSE exam component rather than its NEA component. The comparatively greater use of NEA in the Technical Awards was associated with different coverage of knowledge domains and levels of mental processing compared to the GCSE. The Cambridge National NEAs focused on particular knowledge domains more than the GCSE exams, especially mental and psychomotor procedures, and covered a wider range of levels of mental processing.

The teachers described many differences between the teaching approaches and assessment preparation used for the Technical Awards and the GCSE. The teachers related each qualification type to specific progression routes, and to particular student characteristics. The

Technical Award route was linked with the continued 'enjoyment' of sport for students, career progression, and the development of non-subject specific competencies (e.g. time management). The teachers associated these elements with the assessment models specific to the Technical Awards. The GCSE was associated more closely with formal academic progression (e.g. to A level), to students with a high level of practical ability in sport, or those who were perceived to be high performers in examinations. Teachers stated that they often made judgements on a student's suitability for the GCSE based on these criteria.

The differences between qualification types are indicative of the 'academicisation' of general qualifications in Physical Education (Casey & O'Donovan, 2015). The present research reveals a strong 'washback' effect of the assessment model for high-stakes Physical Education qualifications (van Vuuren-Cassar & Lamprianou, 2006). The findings are discussed in relation to conceptualisations of assessment 'rigour' (Nisbet, 2014), and the technical guidance recently proposed by the DfE.

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