Review of Vocational Education – the Wolf Report

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Summary

Prof. Alison Wolf (Professor of Public Sector Management at King’s College, London) has conducted a review on how to improve vocational education for 14-19 year olds and thereby promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher education and training routes. The review considered all formal qualifications for the 14-19 phase which include vocational content (as all except GCSEs, A levels, iGCSEs and the IB are required to), and all young people on courses leading to them.

Overview

Prof. Alison Wolf (Professor of Public Sector Management at King’s College, London) was asked last year by the Secretary of State to conduct a review to consider how to improve vocational education for 14-19 year olds and thereby promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher education and training routes. The review considered all formal qualifications for the 14-19 phase which include vocational content (as all except GCSEs, A levels, iGCSEs and the IB are required to), and all young people on courses leading to them.

Her report (145 pages plus Appendices – described by Secretary of State Michael Gove, in his Foreword, as “brilliant and ground-breaking”) sets out a very thorough analysis under three main headings: the social and labour market context; the educational context; and an audit of current provision. It makes 27 recommendations, all addressed to the Department for Education (DfE) or to the DfE and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – though many have implications for providers, employers and other bodies.

There are around 2.5 million young people aged 14-19 in England, almost all engaged in full or part-time education, and the overwhelming majority following courses with at least a vocational element. A small minority follow entirely academic courses; most 14-16 year olds take some sort of ‘vocational’ qualification (for some, GCSEs play quite a small part); post-GCSE, around one third take only A levels, and two-thirds spend all or some of the years from 16 to 19 on courses which are partly or wholly vocational. Whilst many of these are excellent, Prof. Wolf estimates that at least 350,000 young people in a given 16-19 cohort are poorly served: “Their programmes and experiences fail to promote progression into either stable, paid employment or higher level education and training in a consistent or effective way.”
The review proposes a fundamental simplification of the vocational education system for 14-19 year olds, in which coherent programmes of learning and activity for all young people should be the centre of attention for educational institutions, and for funding and oversight systems. Reaction to the report has been broadly supportive of many of its findings and recommendations, but there are some concerns that it will do little to reduce the ‘academic/vocational divide’, and that its proposals will not cater well for the (potentially) disengaged – though the report deliberately addresses both these issues.

This briefing will be of interest to all those involved with vocational education, as the Government is clearly going to act on its recommendations.

**Briefing in full**

**The Social and Labour Market Context**

The whole developed world, including England, is today characterised by:

- a vanishing youth labour market. Most countries also have very high unemployment among 19-24 year olds
- high returns, on average, to education and qualifications. The returns vary, however, not only by level but also by subject and type; and countries vary greatly in the level of absolute (as opposed to relative) returns to different types of qualification
- more or less universal aspiration to higher education. For example, among children born in the UK in 2000 (the Millennium Cohort) 98% of all mothers, and 96% of mothers with minimal or no formal qualifications, want their children to go to university
- high returns to employment experience and to apprenticeship
- rapid economic change with major implications for the job market. Much of this is in directions that were completely unpredictable thirty years ago, and significant aspects have been ignored or misunderstood by governments.

All of these have major implications for 14-19 education, especially vocational programmes. The report provides a detailed analysis of these points. Its conclusions include the following:

- there has been a marked increase in the proportion of young people staying in full time education until 18 (now the OECD norm), accompanied by an increase in youth unemployment rates. The idea that there is a severe skills shortage across the labour force cannot be sustained, though there are specific shortages (especially in quantitative skills, particularly mathematics). Rather, employers appear to view younger job seekers as potentially of ‘lower quality’, so many jobs once open to 18 or 16 year old school leavers are now graduate entry without having changed substantively; this is viewed as a way to target the top end of the market
- the English labour market offers very high returns (in absolute and relative terms) to degrees compared with most European countries, and very low (or even negative) returns to low-level vocational qualifications obtained in educational institutions or training schemes (outside apprenticeships). Also, employers tend to rely on a small number of familiar qualifications. So, degrees, A levels (especially maths), and English and maths GCSEs are...
highly valued; BTEC National Diplomas, established ‘craft’ qualifications (eg. City and Guilds) are also valued; but many low-level vocational qualifications bring no apparent income gain – and this includes many ‘level 2’ qualifications classified as equivalent to GCSE A*-C
• employers value work experience, including apprenticeship (for which demand greatly exceeds supply). The best predictor of future employment is current employment, but temporary or part-time jobs can be valuable stepping stones to more permanent employment. For young people, periods not in education, employment or training (NEET) has a long run, persistent effect; being in any kind of work is better than being NEET
• the assumption that ‘un-skilled’ jobs will largely disappear has driven successive governments to increase the numbers of qualifications acquired by young people and adults, but evidence suggest that our economy (and others) has moved towards an hour-glass shape, with growth at the top and bottom and shrinkage in the middle, though there is considerable variation across occupations
• research for the review established that young people are very likely to change not just jobs but occupations (or even sector) in their first years of employment and that, of those who take a vocational qualification, the lower level the qualification the less likely it is to be associated with employment in the sector concerned. Analysis of data on young people’s participation paths between 15 and 17 showed that, rather than a large number of 16 year olds becoming long-term or permanently NEET, the more common pattern is a high level of ‘churn’ as a significant group (between a third and a half of the cohort) move in and out of education, short-term employment and ‘non-activity’ – “struggling, very actively, to find appropriate courses and appropriate jobs which will give them a secure entry into the labour market, with prospects of continued progression...Improving opportunities for this substantial group of young people must be seen as a national priority”
• most of these changes are common to the whole developed world, and education has changed as a result. “Unfortunately, much of the English policy discussion has not taken account of these changes and refers to supposed practices in other countries which are in fact historical and long since superseded.” The general pattern is to delay specialisation, but England has earlier and more complete specialisation (in both the academic and vocational tracks) than any of its developed country peers. Elsewhere, a more or less common curriculum until age 16 is the norm, whilst England offers far more vocational options and courses in Key Stage 4.

The Educational Context

We need to recognise the historical strengths of vocational education in this country, and preserve and build on current strengths and achievements. However, the review found conclusive evidence of serious problems with current provision; large numbers of young people are not on programmes which will help them progress either educationally or in the labour market, and too much time and money is spent on counter-productive bureaucracy and regulation. It blames the problems on successive governments: “Unravelling this government-created tangle, and restoring clear, direct links between 14-19 vocational education on the one hand, and the labour market and higher level training and study on the other, is therefore a major priority for the future of millions of young people.”
The report describes the changes that have taken place, and key issues at KS4 and post-16, posing a number of questions arising from each. It describes key institutional features of 14-19 education in England which, compared with most countries, has far more separate qualifications and far more examining and awarding bodies largely independent of government (and previous attempts to rationalise the position have failed); England is also distinctive in using these qualifications (rather than government-set tests) as the basis for accountability systems (league tables) and for the funding of post-16 (non university) education. And it describes the current regulatory system which, again, differs greatly from those of other countries (particularly around the role of Sector Skills Councils, SSCs, and Ofqual), and is far more complex.

An audit of current provision

This sections begins with some examples of excellence, before considering the evidence of failures and the reasons under three headings:

The mis-match between labour market requirements and vocational education provision

The 21st century labour market makes it harder for young people to make a successful transition to stable employment, but the problem is exacerbated by the increased mis-match between labour market requirements and vocational provision, which is seriously ill-aligned in five key respects (especially post-16):

- the content of many qualifications is not valued by employers and the labour market
- the labour market recognises qualifications that are stable and familiar, but English qualifications have been subject to constant change
- young people’s employment patterns imply a need for fairly general vocational qualifications, but those they are increasingly offered are highly specific
- the English economy suffers from some important and specific skills shortages, particularly quantitative skills
- too little is being done to assist young people in gaining genuine workplace experience and employment-based skills

The mis-match between progression requirements and vocational education provision

The overwhelming majority of young people and their families have aspirations for them to progress within the education system, but a number of structural features militate against this:

- the performance indicators used to measure schools’ performance at the end of KS4 have led to an enormous growth in the number of young people being entered for vocational awards – to promote schools’ league table performance rather than the interests of young people within education or the labour market
- there is a particular issue about maths and English, which are of critical importance in securing progression in education or employment; the report is scathing about the negative effect of the funding and targets regimes (“It is shocking that English education should, in
Inadequate quality assurance and regulatory arrangements

Vocational education for 14-19 year olds is one of the most highly regulated parts of a highly regulated education system; yet it is also mis-aligned with the job market in some key respects, and fails to offer clear progression routes within education to many students; and some high quality, well respected qualifications are denied accreditation. The review identifies problems as being the role of non-statutory bodies (the Sector Skills Councils); the lack of opportunity for Ministers, under current legislation, to intervene over accreditation; and the role of Ofqual under its current remit. It concludes that major changes are needed that will simplify the system, clarify decision-making and increase transparency.

Recommendations

The review sets out interlocking recommendations for reform (27 in total), relating to how 14-19 education is conceptualised; the funding and institutional arrangements; the quality of provision; and its regulation and quality assurance – the rationale for which is clearly explained. Significant amongst them are (abbreviated):

- The DfE should distinguish clearly between those qualifications, both vocational and academic, which can contribute to performance indicators at Key Stage 4, and those which cannot
- At Key Stage 4, schools should be free to offer any qualifications they wish from a regulated Awarding Body whether or not these are approved for performance measurement purposes
- Non-GCSE/iGCSE qualifications from the approved list should make a limited contribution to an individual student’s score on any performance measures that use accumulated and averaged point scores
- DfE should review current policies for the lowest-attaining quintile of pupils at Key Stage 4, with a view to greatly increasing the proportion who are able to progress directly onto Level 2 programmes at age 16
- The overall study programmes of all 16-18 year olds in ‘vocational’ programmes should be governed by a set of general principles relating primarily to content, general structure, assessment arrangements and contact time
16-19 year old students pursuing full time courses of study should not follow a programme which is entirely \textquoteleft occupational\textquoteright\dots Their programmes should also include at least one qualification of substantial size which offers clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment.

Programmes for the lowest attaining learners – including many with LDD as well as those highly disaffected with formal education – should concentrate on the core academic skills of English and maths, and on work experience.

The DfE and BIS should evaluate the extent to which the current general education components of apprenticeship frameworks are adequate for 16-19 year old apprentices, many of whom may wish to progress to further and higher education.

Students who are under 19 and do not have GCSE A*-C in English and/or maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications, or which provide significant progress towards future GCSE entry and success.

Funding for full-time students age 16-18 should be on a programme basis, with a given level of funding per student.

Young people who do not use up their time-based entitlement to education by the time they are 19 should be entitled to a corresponding credit towards education at a later date.

At present teachers with QTS can teach in FE colleges; the FE equivalent – QTLS – should be recognised in schools.

DfE should encourage Ofqual to move as quickly as possible away from regulating individual vocational qualifications and concentrate on regulating awarding bodies.

DfE should introduce a performance indicator which focuses on the whole distribution of performance within a school, including those at the top and bottom ends of the distribution.

At college and school level the assessment and awarding processes used for vocational awards should involve local employers on a regular basis.

Other recommendations relate to CPD for maths teachers; payments to employers who take on apprentices; contracting arrangements for apprenticeships; grouping of small employers to become training providers; evaluation of work experience models; QCF-compliance for qualifications; the role of National Occupational Standards and the contribution of employers to qualification design; and the legislation governing Ofqual.

Conclusions and destinations

The report asks: What should we be trying to achieve for young people participating in vocational courses? The answers (very abbreviated) are:

\begin{itemize}
\item all young people should receive a high quality core education which equips them to progress, whether immediately or later, to a very wide range of further study, training and employment
\item the system should enable and encourage variety, innovation, and flexibility including different opportunities for specialisation: limited pre-16, much greater thereafter
\item a major objective should be to recreate and strengthen genuine links between vocational education and the labour market; and especially, in the case of young people, the local labour market
\end{itemize}
POLICY BRIEFING

- we need to do far more, far more actively, to help young people to enter the labour market and obtain genuine employment experience

It also, in each case, explains how the recommendations will promote these ends.

Comment

This is a very thorough report, backed by a considerable body of evidence (some from research done for the review), so it makes interesting and informative reading. It is hard to take any issue with its conclusions about what we should be trying to achieve, and it is pretty clear that its recommendations will be largely accepted – Secretaries of State don’t usually describe reports as “brilliant and ground-breaking” unless they plan to act on them.

The main thrust of the report – that the present system seriously short-changes many young people, and it is their interests, not those of institutions, that should drive reform – is very welcome. In taking forward its recommendations, Ministers will need to make sure they heed the warnings from the past and pay full attention to the actual evidence, rather than finding convenient examples to support their own prejudices.

The report specifically addresses the needs of low achieving, and (potentially) disengaged young people and the persistent problem of the vocational/academic divide. Ensuring flexibility and the opportunity for progression is vital to both, but there is a peculiarly English problem of perception that needs to be taken into account: the tendency to establish a hierarchy for almost every situation has to be resisted more effectively.

External links

Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report

Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government Response

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