

Reviewing vocational education and training in England: the emerging landscape

The role of vocational education and training and its contribution to the lifelong learning agenda has pre-occupied the United Kingdom Government for some time now. Following this year's review of vocational education and training in England by Professor Alison Wolf, the DfE published its response in May 2011, accepting Professor Wolf's recommendations for reforms to the current system in England.

(Note: As *Education* and *Skills* are under direct control of the Devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, their systems are subject to separate reviews and have not been commented upon within this article.)

The starting point for the Wolf Review of vocational education and training¹ was that the current mainstream educational system has failed too many young people, often resulting in young people pursuing courses which provide little opportunity for progression and which fail to recognise the different needs of 14-19 learners.

Three key themes emerge from the review:

- The need for more emphasis on the core academic skills of English and Mathematics, and the continued study of these subjects beyond Key Stage 4 (age 16), where the learner has not achieved the minimum standard
- The need to review and clarify the contribution that individual qualifications make to the Performance Tables at Key Stage 4 that are published as part of the accountability framework for schools – making sure that the best vocational qualifications are recognised, and that value is measured in terms of what opportunities for progression and employment the qualifications provide for the learners, rather than the number of qualifications taken and passed
- The need for continued support and promotion of Apprenticeships, balancing a requirement to simplify Apprenticeship frameworks with strengthening of the core components. To ensure Apprenticeships incorporate the right skills for the workplace, more direct involvement of employers at local level will be encouraged, to agree content, assessment and awarding processes.

The Wolf review concluded that "an audit of current provision identified a number of ways in which current arrangements create perverse incentives that serve young people ill, are unnecessarily bureaucratic and fail to recognise the needs of 14-19 year olds compared to adults".

Professor Wolf used the term "perverse incentive" in relation to ways in which schools are compared to each other on the basis of the performance of their pupils, who are awarded points in public tests and examinations at the ages

¹ Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report, Department for Education, March 2011
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011>

of 11 and 16 with all results published in national Achievement and Attainment Tables. It has been suggested that it has been common practice for schools to offer pupils alternative qualifications which score the highest points in the Achievement and Attainment Tables, whether or not these were most appropriate qualifications for the learner to take, in order to protect the school's performance ranking. This practice has meant that many young people have been wrongly guided onto courses which might have had a detrimental impact on their future choices.

The UK Government has accepted the Wolf Review recommendation to reduce the number of "approved" qualification types from 2013. The conclusion of the Review was that less effort should be spent on designing qualifications and programmes that meet centrally prescribed requirements, and more on providing for the genuine needs of young people and the labour market. Wolf insists that funding should follow the learner and that the choice of qualification should be determined by appropriateness for the individual and supported by effective information, advice and guidance in relation to progression pathways.

There is also a recommended change for England that affects teacher qualification status and acceptance. In England, those who teach in schools and those who teach in Further Education (FE) (age 14 and over, usually in relation to vocational subjects) take different teaching qualifications, leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for school teachers and Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills status (QTLS) for teachers in FE. This difference in status has previously created barriers for teachers in FE wanting to easily transfer to teaching in schools. In order to ease this transference the Wolf Review recommends that teachers who have successfully gained QTLS will be able to teach, with full parity, in schools in the future.

Wolf has also recommended that there should no longer be a requirement for all vocational qualifications to be developed within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), and that there should be greater emphasis on regulation of awarding organisations (rather than of qualifications), with a corresponding emphasis on self regulation of qualifications by awarding organisations.

With regard to Curriculum, there is a renewed focus in secondary education on determining what constitutes a suitable core curriculum. Alongside, but separate from the review of vocational education, school performance is being assessed against a new benchmark, the English Baccalaureate² (EBacc). The EBacc is awarded to young people who achieve a Pass Grade in the national core curriculum subjects at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE, Level 2) (ISCED Level 3C); English, mathematics, two sciences, history or geography. Wolf has also recommended that the current statutory duty to provide every young person aged 14-16 with a set amount of

2

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/theenglishbaccalaureate>

work related learning is removed, while schools and colleges should be encouraged to prioritise longer internships for 16-19 year olds.

A significant new development that has arisen within the English educational landscape is the establishment of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) in 2010/2011. UTCs have been created as free-standing colleges to cater for 14-19 year old students, through a partnership approach involving the Baker Dearing Educational Trust (BDT), the Department for Education (DfE), Universities, local employers and some Further Education (FE) Colleges. The founders of BDT are Lord Kenneth Baker (former Conservative Secretary of State for Education) and Sir Ron Dearing (the *Dearing Report on Higher Education*, 1997). There are believed to be over 130 local companies involved across England, and to date, 18 UTCs have been approved to operate, with a Government pledge to increase this to 24.

The 14-16 curriculum to be offered by a UTC must include at least one technical specialism alongside the national core GCSE curriculum and finance, business, entrepreneurial and employability skills. This has been shaped and influenced by the employers who will remain involved in order to keep it relevant to future jobs and needs of the local economy. They will also be a part of the colleges founding partnership with Universities and some FE Colleges in order to offer further support to a pathway choice involving Apprenticeships, Foundation and higher degrees.

Reference

Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report, Department for Education, March 2011
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011>