



Review of Vocational Education in England: The Wolf Report

Analysis, Recommendations and Government Response

► Commissioned to explore possibilities to improve vocational education for 14-19 year olds, the **Wolf Review of Vocational Education** was tasked with analysing the current state of VET in England and making recommendations as to its future development. Presented in the resulting **Wolf Report**, the Review's analysis and recommendations are best understood as falling under the following headings: outcomes of the 14-16 (compulsory) stage of education; the study of mathematics and English 14-19; outcomes of 16-19 (post-compulsory) provision for students enrolled on vocational courses; and the provision of apprenticeship places for 16-19 year olds. In this article, important results of the analysis and central recommendations of the **Wolf Report**, dealing, among others with questions of funding, management and assessment in English VET, are summarised and discussed along with the government's response to the Report.

The Wolf Report: scope and objectives

The Review of Vocational Education in England was commissioned by the incoming Secretary of State (Minister) for Education, **MICHAEL GOVE**, shortly after the Coalition government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) came to power in the election of May 2010 following 13 years of Labour government. The Review was commissioned because "for many years [the English] education system has failed to value practical education, choosing to give far greater emphasis to purely academic achievements. This has left a gap in the country's skills base and, as a result, a shortage of appropriately trained and educated young people to fulfil the needs of [English] employers" (Written Ministerial Statement 2010). In the light of these problems, the task of the Review was to consider ways of improving vocational education for 14-19 year olds (cf. box) by examining "institutional arrangements, funding mechanisms, progression from vocational education to work, higher education and higher level training, [and] the role of the third sector, private providers, employers and awarding bodies" (ibid.).

The Report which resulted from the work of the Review draws upon official reports, published research and statistics together with some statistical and research work commissioned for the Report. The author, Professor **ALISON WOLF**, also consulted widely and carried out a number of visits to schools, colleges and training providers. On this basis, **WOLF** presents an analysis of the social, labour market, and educational context (Parts Two and Three of the Report) as well as of current vocational education provision (Part Four). In doing so, the Report stresses the increasingly challenging labour market situation for young people. At age 16 in 2009/2010 94 per cent of 16 year olds, 85 per cent of 17 year olds and 45 per cent of 18 year olds were engaged in full-time education or education and training. At age 18 in 2009 16 per cent were out of the labour force, i. e. unemployed or inactive (cf. **WOLF** 2011, pp. 25-26). These figures hide the fact that around 20 per cent in each of these age groups "churn" – i. e. move back and forth without real progression – between education, unem-



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ployment and jobs.¹ The Report concludes by making 27 recommendations for the reform of 14-19 vocational education.

Vocational education in England

“There is no formal definition of ‘vocational education’ in England, and the term is applied to programmes as different as the highly selective, competitive and demanding apprenticeships offered by large engineering companies and the programmes which recruit highly disaffected young people with extremely low academic achievement [...]. The many ways in which the term vocational is used reflect the many different purposes which 14-19 education serves and its large and diverse student body. Some qualifications are highly specific, oriented to a particular occupation. Others are more general, and are referred to sometimes as vocationally-related and pre-vocational.” (WOLF 2011, p. 23)

Outcomes of the 14-16 (compulsory) stage of education

At age 14 most English pupils are enrolled in publicly funded neighbourhood comprehensive schools which are not permitted to select pupils on ability. Individual schools make great efforts to reach at least the national average of students achieving five or more passes in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations² at grades A*-C also known as “Level 2” at age 16 (similar to the German *Mittlere Reife*). A long-standing policy of both previous Conservative and Labour governments is that the proportions so qualifying in each school are published annually. Schools judged to be failing badly can be closed or otherwise penalised. This policy aims to encourage schools to raise the average standard of attainment in the school and to enable parents to identify successful schools. More recently, the previous Labour government allowed schools to include what might be characterised as very basic pre-vocational qualifications when calculating their ‘GCSE score’. As a result, the proportion nationally reaching their Level 2 standard shot up from 57 per cent in 2005 to 75 per cent in 2010 (cf. DfE 2010, Table 1). However, the Report highlights the fact that almost all the increase resulted from very basic pre-vocational courses³ which failed to develop pupils’ language, mathematics and science knowledge and understanding and left them ill-prepared to continue education and training after age 16. The Report recommends that only courses which adequately prepare pupils to progress on to academic or vocational education at age 16

should count towards the measurement of school performance, for example GCSE courses in science and arts subjects.

Mathematics and English education 14-19

The Report articulates a growing concern in England that many young people leave education and training with little or no capacity for everyday mathematical tasks essential in almost all occupations and lacking facility in the use of English. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commented on WOLF: “Around half of employers report problems with the literacy and numeracy of their staff, so we support plans for all young people to continue to study English and Maths if they do not achieve A*-C at GCSE” www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2011/03/cbi-responds-to-vocational-education-report/; cf. also CBI 2010). England is almost unique among developed industrialised nations in not requiring any student to study mathematics or the English language beyond the age of 16. At age 16 just under half have reached the required standard in mathematics and English of a GCSE pass at grades A*-C and at age 18 half are still below this standard (cf. WOLF 2011, p. 8, drawing on 2008/09 figures for GCSE passes). The Report recommends that all those who fail mathematics and English at age 16 be required to continue to study mathematics and English to the age of 18 with the aim of reaching the standard of a GCSE pass at Grades A*-C.

Provision and outcomes of post-compulsory VET

After 16 young people in England are entitled – but not compelled – to enrol in publicly funded education full-time in Further Education (FE) college, in a school ‘sixth form’ (school classes for 16-18 year olds) or in apprenticeship. Just over half (53.4 %) of all 16 year olds gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C including mathematics and English in 2009/10. Of this group, most will choose to study to A-level (university entrance qualification).

At age 16-18 6 per cent are in apprenticeship (cf. DfE 2011, Table 4). The benefits of the apprenticeship route for earnings and employment can be clearly demonstrated and, while concerns remain over content and assessment of apprenticeship (see below), the main policy issue is to find enough places to meet demand.

The remaining 16-18 year olds are guaranteed a place for further study. The Report focuses on young people in this group enrolled on low level full-time courses of vocational education (Level 2 and below). Almost all (87 %) of these study in FE colleges (cf. DfE 2011, Table C13). These

¹ Cf. *ibid* p. 38, based on special analysis of data from the *Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and Youth Cohort Survey (Cohort 13, DfE, December 2010)*.

² At age 16 school students sit separate examinations in the main school subjects studied and are graded on a scale from A*-G for each subject.

³ E. g. courses such as “Key Skills in Working with Others” or “Certificate in Preparation for Working Life,” offered by awarding bodies such as ASDAN or AQA (cf. WOLF 2011, Appendix 1).

students choose from a very large number of vocational qualifications many of which offer few opportunities for progression to higher level study. Little or no guidance on labour market opportunities associated with these qualifications is made available to them. The Report points out that many vocational qualifications at Level 2 and below cannot be shown to result in higher earnings (p. 32, based on DEARDEN et al. 2004). The unsuitability and inadequacy of this type of 16-19 provision and proposals for change lie at the heart of the Report and account for many of the Report's 27 recommendations.

FE colleges are multipurpose and individuals over 16 of any age may and do attend. The college offers the same range of academic qualifications and many of the thousands of recognised English vocational qualifications to both the young and to adults. In order to give central government control over which courses the colleges may offer and which students should be encouraged to attend through subsidy to the college, colleges are funded on the basis of a complex funding formula which reflects the complexity of the purposes that the FE college is required to fulfil. Thus, institutions are funded "by individual qualification" rather than on a per-student basis, and "[t]he amount paid is partly a function of the actual qualification/learning aim; and partly a function of a complex weighting factor" also taking into account student success (WOLF 2011, p. 58). It follows that "if a student (or apprentice) does not gain their formal qualifications from an awarding body, the institution receives less money" (ibid., p. 60).

This has unintended but highly damaging consequences for students, as colleges may allow the need to ensure the financial viability of the college to override the best interests of students. The funding formula encourages colleges to steer students on to 'easy' qualifications because if the student fails to complete the course the college will suffer a financial loss. There is no requirement in the formula for students to progress from one level to the next or follow courses in related fields. Students may be allowed by the college onto a series of courses which have been shown to bring no rise in earnings (because the standard is at Level 1 or 2; cf. WOLF 2011, p. 32). The courses need not constitute a coherent learning programme. Thus, a student could choose sport at Level 1 followed by health and beauty at Level 1 and then leave. As pointed out earlier, there is no requirement to study a general education programme of mathematics and English when following these courses.

While it is, of course, possible for the Report to point to much good work and some excellent vocational provision in English FE colleges, overall the conclusion of the Report is that the full-time vocational offer to all young people needs to be more coherent. All 16-19 students should be required to continue the study of mathematics and English

to a recognised level and should be required to progress to the next level of difficulty after completing a first course. All courses should be constructed in such a way that they provide a solid platform for progression from one level to the next and from there to higher levels of education and training. Funding of colleges should be adjusted so as to bring about these outcomes.

Given the lack of sufficient apprentice places for all young people who want one, the Report also recommends that colleges/sixth forms should prioritise finding substantial periods of unpaid work experience in relevant occupational areas for their students.

Apprenticeship – management and funding

English apprenticeships are, on average, of shorter duration, more narrowly vocational and require less off the job education and training than apprenticeship in the rest of Europe. As is the case for the qualifications offered in FE colleges, there is no age limit for receiving public funding of apprenticeship training and employers have recently shown a distinct preference for offering apprentice places to their existing adult employees⁴ (25+) rather than to young people so that only a minority of apprentices are under 19 (cf. WOLF 2011, pp. 29-30; Appendix VII).

The Report emphasises the benefits of apprenticeship for young people, especially in the current situation of high youth unemployment. Research quoted in the Report shows that apprenticeship increases earnings and improves future employment chances (MCINTOSH 2007 qtd. in WOLF 2011, p. 153). It is highly sought-after by young people. However, inappropriate management structures prevent apprenticeship from realising its potential.

The Report particularly criticises the management of apprenticeship by the many central government agencies tasked with this responsibility. Acting for government, these agencies transfer government funds for the training element of apprenticeship to for-profit training companies who act at local level on behalf of the agencies. These training providers then recruit employers to employ apprentices, and carry out training and assessment. Employers, in particular small and medium-sized employers, are thereby excluded from actual apprentice training, becoming simply apprentice employers. Accordingly, the Report recommends "review[ing] contracting arrangements for apprenticeships ... with a view to increasing efficiency

⁴ Apprentices must have employed status, i. e. have the same status as other employees.

and ... driving out any frictional expenditure associated with brokerage or middleman activities that do not add value" as well as discussing "alternative ways for groups of smaller employers to become direct providers of training" (p. 126).

The Report also takes issue with current assessment practice in apprenticeship. There are no externally-set tests or examinations for the apprenticeship certificate which includes a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), and consequently, every competency specified in the NVQ must be assessed in the workplace. There is criticism in the Report of the management of this process whereby trainers attached to a training company must travel long distances to assess apprentices' competencies. These activities could and should be simplified and be undertaken by the apprentice employer with external verification.

Since, if these changes were made, employers would be operating in part as educators, the Report argues that "they should therefore be recompensed for this part of their role, directly or indirectly" (p. 122). This argument is based on the fact that, since 16-19 year olds are entitled to free full-time vocational education in FE colleges, if this is provided in a workplace by an employer, some or all of the same payment should be made to the employer as to the college.

More pragmatically, the Report points to previous pilot projects where relatively small payments were made to employers as an incentive to employ a young (16-19 year old) apprentice. This pilot showed that even small payments (ranging from £ 1000 - £ 2500) directly to employers could rapidly produce more apprentice places for young people and concludes that, realistically, this is probably the only way in which the demand for apprenticeship from young people can be met (cf. BMG Research 2011).

The government response

The government response to the Report, published in May 2011, was highly positive. The Report's recommendations were accepted and the response sets out how these will be taken forward. In particular, the government identifies three key themes from the Report and undertakes to 'deliver' on all three.

The first of these is the study of mathematics and English 14-19. The government aims to ensure that all young people study and achieve an acceptable (GCSE Grade A*-C) level in mathematics and English by the age of 19. On outcomes of 16-19 (post-compulsory) provision the government undertakes to reform funding rules which result in students studying for qualifications which have no value for progression into work or further education. The third undertaking is that the government will "Look at the expe-

rience of other countries to simplify apprenticeships, remove bureaucracy and make them easier for employers to offer" (Government Response 2011, p. 3).

Conclusions

The Report and its recommendations were welcomed by teachers in schools and FE colleges as well as by the CBI. The solutions put forward in the Report are radical and challenging. For 30 years vocational provision has been based on the assumption that young people should be offered the same vocational qualifications as adults. The Report calls for new thinking to recognise the extent to which young people's education and training needs in fact differ from those of adults – particularly in the field of apprenticeship, where 16-18 year old apprentices should have the status of learners rather than of employees. Employers will need to assume more responsibility for determining training content and undertaking apprentice training if the Report's recommendations for simplifying apprenticeship delivery are to be realised. The changes proposed are long overdue and the difference they will make to the lives of young people has never been more urgently needed. ■

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