

The United Kingdom's *Review of Vocational Education (The Wolf Report)* – 2011 and the government response

Introduction

The Secretary of State for Education commissioned Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London to carry out an independent review of vocational education. She was asked to consider how vocational education for 14 to 19-year-olds can be improved in order to promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher level education and training routes. She was also asked to provide practical recommendations to help inform future policy direction, taking into account current financial constraints.

The review (Wolf, 2011), published in March 2011, was informed by over 400 pieces of evidence from the public, a number of visits to colleges, academies and training providers, and interviews and discussion sessions with key partners in the sector.

In May 2011 a government response (Department of Education (2011)) approved all of the recommendations.

The analysis of the current situation

'Churning' youth

Evidence was up to a third of youth were moving in and out of short low-level vocational qualifications of little labour-market value and of use only for short term employment. They are described as being in a state of 'churn' between periods of unemployment, temporary jobs and ineffective study because of a lack of satisfactory options (rather than from decisions to opt out of the labour force, or, indeed, education altogether). Some data shows that many who take these inferior qualifications would have been substantially better off if they had not taken them at all, and been employed instead (indeed, being on government training courses may actually be harmful, presumably because it sends out poor 'signals' to employers).

There were fewer and fewer jobs for 16 to 18/24 year olds (an international trend) and the best way to get a job was to have one. Not being employed or in education and training (being a NEET) has a long term, persistent negative effect) and being in any kind of work is better. In modern labour markets education and qualification 'pay' and degrees and apprenticeships show high returns.

Because of growing job mobility students need general skills and access to education and training that responds quickly and flexibly to (labour market) change. Increasingly the average young person will change jobs, occupation and sector.

Lack of English and Mathematics skills

Lack of basic fundamental language and mathematical skills was a crucial negative factor. Although English and Mathematics at GCSE level were fundamental to young people's future employment and further and higher education prospects, less than 50% of students had attained these by the age of 18. They are a necessary precondition for access to the most desirable courses. In most European countries genuine skills shortages mainly apply to jobs requiring quantitative and especially mathematical skills.

Failure of the qualifications system

Unfortunately, the funding and accountability systems set up by government for vocational education create perverse incentives to steer youth into inferior alternative qualifications.

Well meaning attempts to treat all qualifications at a given level as substantially equivalent are described in the report as “nonsense” and efforts to get parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications has in practice meant making what is practical more academic, to the detriment of both. Downward pressure has been exerted on quality standards and reduced incentives to offer or protect quality programmes. The “perverse incentives created by performance measures combined with indiscriminate ‘equivalencies’ have resulted in large amounts of sub-standard education, in which many young people took courses that were in no sense truly ‘vocational’ or useful.” (p. 112).

A typical example of how this “race to the bottom” in standards” (p. 193) occurs is when a training provider (who is paid by results) takes the rational approach of getting students to take most study units from a really ‘easy’ awarding body, then uses these credits (which have to be accepted) when finishing the qualification with a reputable body who award the final certificate.

The prioritisation of (the often very costly) compliance with the jargon and structuring requirements of the written specifications of qualifications “did virtually nothing in determining what was “actually taught, let alone the standard and quality of the assessment.” (p. 102). Written specifications are an inadequate way of establishing quality standards.

The review saw this as a manifestation of a deeper problem – the government organisations responsible for vocational qualifications: the regulatory triangle of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), Awarding Bodies (ABs), and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) talk to each other, to the exclusion of the groups that should be central: school, colleges, training providers and employers. Yet, “quality and standards depend on establishing networks among users and assessors, and, in the case of vocational awards, ensuring that employers – the ultimate creators and guardians of standards – are actively involved at the level of delivery and judgment. Employer representation on national panels is no substitute for their active involvement with vocational education at the level of delivery.” (p. 103).

Using government-driven qualification design as the main policy and reform instrument in vocational education is a serious mistake. (p. 139). The review states “concentrating government intervention on qualification design leads repeatedly to officials and agencies concentrating on paperwork rather than on direct safeguards of quality and standards in assessment, which cannot be checked by sitting at a desk and reading submissions. This is always a major risk in bureaucracies, made even stronger by the current ‘audit’ culture which demands a paper trail, and is by no means confined to education. But it has been very strongly evident in the qualifications field, where hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of hours have been (and are) spent poring over the written specifications for qualifications, and scrutinising terminology, and even syntax. This occurs even **though the written specification for a qualification plays only a small part in the quality of the assessment, and in determining the standard of the award**, let alone in the quality of teaching and training of candidates” (p. 140)

A qualifications system unable to cope with complexity

The review also found that because of the complexity of a modern economy, attempts to impose a neat, uniform and logical structure of standards-based qualifications will always fail. The theory was that the government designed standards which qualifications now have to reflect would increase the labour-market relevance of the qualifications (and their attractiveness to employers). The review states that “it is inconceivable that a tiny number of central, government-sponsored organisations can reflect all the concerns and requirements of a fast-changing economy with strong local variations and of young people who will be in the labour market for another 50 years. Yet this is exactly what is being asked of Sector Skill Councils.” (p. 132). It also argues that Ofqual “cannot tell if a vocational qualification is of good quality – because that depends on specific sector and subject expertise which it does not and cannot have across the whole spectrum of awards.” (p. 133).

This highly regulated system may lead to good programmes being refused accreditation and inferior ones gaining it. “There is no way a national regulator ... can possess knowledge relevant to the thousands of qualifications, reflecting myriad occupations ...”. (p. 99).

Lack of progression

Because the standard-based units of these qualifications are supposedly ‘competence-based’, designed for pass/fail assessment and in which every part of each unit must be passed, they are intrinsically unsuited for grading. A competence based approach is seen as unsuitable for the education of the 14-19 age group, with its progression requirements (p. 133). It may be reasonable in an on-the-job context but not in an education system where it places a downward pressure on standards and assessment. As all units at a given level are meant to be of the same difficulty there is no room for progression within a course or qualification. The breaking up of qualifications into these smaller units also imposes heavy costs in time and money spent on assessing, recording, etc.

There was a lack of programmes that promote progression for low attaining young people.

Foundation learning courses (of which there were an astounding 1300 qualifications) had low credit value (and hence were not attractive to provider institutions as they brought in little funding) and were not attractive to employers (who value familiar qualifications and real work experience) and, “fit you to do nothing but take another qualification” (p. 94).

Making only courses that lead to qualifications eligible for funding also lead to dysfunctionality because of the shift of focus within sectors away from educational strategies to qualification strategies.

Need for a broad general curriculum

The review found that there was no indication that adding more vocational options to a common core curriculum motivated young people more or helped them achieve higher grades in their other subjects – young people drop out of vocational provision at much the same rate as they do from uniformly academic provision.

Because to receive Sector Skills Council approval a qualification must be directly related to specified standards most vocational qualifications have had to be comprehensively redesigned to be Qualifications and Credit Framework compliant. But this means that they reflect current practice in a particular occupation (which is alright for adults already employed in that particular occupation) and therefore are “entirely inappropriate for young people who are likely to change jobs, and who are entering decades of employment in a rapidly changing economy.” [p. 75]

The current United Kingdom system of funding of vocational education is on a complex and constantly changing payment-per-registered qualification adjusted by a payment by results. The results of this give government the power to fine tune the relative attractiveness to institutions of various qualifications and have lead to an increase of completion rates as well as an institutional steering of students into well funded and /or easy to pass qualifications. It provides no incentive to offer coherent programmes of study or to respond directly to the local labour market. It discourages the taking of ‘hard’ Maths and English courses.

The review noted that most European countries have a far more general [academic] high school education than in the United Kingdom and this trend is growing with a steady decline in vocational high schools and approvingly quotes Steadman: “German employers are not in the least interested in any training the schools might give... but in the educational level of the applicants. Employers want the training to be done by them, not by a school or college. Schools do their best to get their students’ general education to a decent level.”

Overlapping and non-accountable centralised regulatory bodies

Sector Skills Councils, though non-statutory, are created by government and largely funded by it and are the main designers and accreditors of almost all non-higher education qualifications. There is also a Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual) which accredits individual qualifications and monitors their formally written standards.

The Review raises issues about whether important policy decisions have been delegated to non-accountable bodies (SSCs and other agencies), whether lines of authority are clear within government and these agencies, on whether the large and complex system is not overly costly and not responsive enough to those outside this regulatory structure. The bodies which articulate employers' views have consistently promoted very specific and narrow qualifications, even though employers have not, in practice, valued these.

In summary the Review notes that “governments have centralised decision-making on the content of vocational qualifications, vesting control in national-level official bodies and using these to obtain and feed employer content into qualifications. In the past, *there were far more direct links between employers and awarding bodies, and also between employers and their local colleges*. The evidence from the labour market indicates that centralising the development of qualifications has been a very ineffective approach. “But no centralised administrative body can possibly possess expertise in the hundreds and indeed thousands of specialist areas which vocational qualifications examine.” (p. 156)

It was concerned that far too many young people in the 16 to 19 age group “pursue courses and programmes which offer them little progress or even coherence, which are driven by funding considerations, and restricted by tight and universal design rules. This has resulted, in part, from entrepreneurial agencies and organisations pursuing their own agendas, encouraged by a lack of clarity over lines of authority.” (p. 114)

It notes that under current arrangements, heavy use is made of ‘training providers’ who operate as brokers and middlemen between employers and trainers or assessors. The review sees this as an inherently expensive and wasteful use of a third set of institutions, with additional overheads, employees, etc. Only employers and actual training institutions should be involved in apprenticeships.

It also notes that most European countries use inspection rather than formal regulation in order to quality-assure their vocational education systems.

The government response to this analysis

The Government published its formal response to the Wolf Review on 12 May 2011. This response (Department of Education, 2011) acknowledged the causes of vocational education system failure identified by the Review, namely that (p. 2):

- Indifferent teaching of highly specialised subjects from teachers who are not well enough versed in the courses they are leading.
- Young people taking courses and qualifications which have been designed to meet the needs of adults, already in employment, seeking to hone the skills they use every day – but which offer no route to further education nor entry to employment for those still in education.
- Perverse incentives, created by the performance and funding systems, encouraging the teaching of qualifications which attract the most performance points, or the most funding – not the qualification that will support young people to progress.
- Students without a solid grounding in the basics being allowed to drop the study of English and maths – the most vital foundations for employment - when these are precisely the subjects that they most need to continue.
- Not enough Apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds and a lack of incentives for employers to be involved in the programme.
- And underlying these problems, an attitude that vocational education is a second choice, easy option for the less able, which has been reinforced, not tackled, by claims of “equivalence” between qualifications which no one has truly believed.

Key recommendations

The Wolf Report made 27 recommendations, some broad in scope, some quite specific, **all** of which were accepted by the government and will be taken forward.

Information from these 27 recommendations is summarised below:

A broad general academic curriculum with progression

The review urges that 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. ... The period from 14-19 should be one when those remain alive, and not, as is so often the case at present, a time when options close and aspirations shrink. *We have no business, as a society, placing 16 year olds, let alone 14 year olds, in tracks which they cannot leave.*” (p. 141). Vocational education needs to be grounded in a broad academic education so that young people have the necessary basic academic skills to progress freely.

There should be incentives to young people to take the most valuable vocational qualifications pre-16, while removing incentives to take large numbers of dead-end over-specific vocational qualifications to the detriment of core academic study. Accurate and useful information to all so that young people can make sound decisions

Principles should be introduced to guide vocational study programmes for young people post-16 to ensure they are gaining skills which will lead to progression into a variety of jobs or further learning, and, in particular, to ensure that those who have not secured a good pass in English and mathematics GCSE are required to continue in serious study of those subjects taught by qualified teachers.

Learning programmes for young people should be different from occupationally specific training for employed adult workers and should include at least one qualification of substantial size (in terms of teaching time) which offers clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment.

Only employers who offer general broad transferable education and training rather than specific skills training should be subsidised

The government response says that for those aged 14 to 16 should be broad and balanced with an academic core supplemented by a vocational element. The GCSE should be reformed in order to reduce modularisation and re-sitting and ensure that exams are typically only taken at the end of the course. Apprenticeships should include a broad programme of study. Premature specialisation would be avoided. The vocational qualifications should be clearly defined, valuable, respected and support progression to further learning and skilled jobs. They should be comparable in terms of rigour of content and assessment (including a percentage of external assessment) to other qualifications that will count in the tables and have subjects that are recognised by employers and higher education.

Stop providing language and mathematics lite

The review found that so-called ‘key skills’ courses (intended to provide generic skills related to communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving) and ‘functional skills’ courses (which supposedly ‘embed’ English and mathematics (and information technology) in real life examples) to be “conceptually incoherent” and “valueless” in progression terms (p. 170). They are liked by providers because they are ‘easy to pass’ options. Teaching English and maths in particular contexts is actually very difficult to do, because it demands that the teacher of the subject knows a great deal about a wide range of contexts, and can develop high quality materials for each. In practice “they embed to the point of vanishing” (p. 170).

The government response states that key skills courses are not suitable qualifications and will be phased out and only the GCSE and Functional skills courses (practical skills in English, mathematics and ICT) will be retained as recognised pathways to achieving the compulsory English and Maths elements of an apprenticeship. The programmes for 16 to 18 year-olds should follow a broad, rigorously assessed, programme, including English and maths where

they had not yet achieved to GCSE level by age 16, so that they have a secure foundation with which to progress. All young people must leave school or college with good English and maths skills. It has also asked the regulator to consider how spelling, punctuation and grammar can be strengthened in GCSEs. It wanted study programmes for young people to offer high quality, genuine work experience and focus on achievement of English and maths.

Funding and performance measures should be amended to promote a focus on these core areas and on employment outcomes rather than on the accrual of qualifications.

Avoid over specification

The review argues that the system should enable and encourage variety, innovation, and flexibility and that “ means moving away from highly detailed prescription of the content and format of qualifications, which inevitably creates delays and rigidities, and does little for the quality of provision.” (p. 142). Indeed, the detailed central specification of qualifications is a bad idea. The government response agreed that current provision at NQF Entry level and level 1, which presently shapes much of what is taught to this group of young people, is too rigidly structured and qualification driven.

The regulatory framework should move quickly away from accrediting individual qualifications to regulating awarding organisations.

What really matters is teachers and we should stop over-estimating what can be achieved through a written qualification outline.

The requirement that all qualifications offered to 14- to 19-year-olds fit within the Qualifications and Credit Framework should be removed as it has had a detrimental effect on their appropriateness and has left gaps in the market.

Avoid creating new, highly detailed and very complex programmes on a national scale when there are already well established qualifications and qualification pathways.

The government response said that it will develop a new qualification regulatory framework, including new conditions of recognition, by mid-2011 (though Ofqual will continue to intervene in individual qualifications if necessary, based on an assessment of risk, notably to secure that standards are maintained). Policy will remain that only qualifications regulated by Ofqual will be eligible for use in the maintained sector, so that schools, colleges and young people can have confidence in their quality. Certain valued qualifications that have not been approved by SSCs will be funded as a temporary measure.

End the perverse incentives caused by indiscriminate equivalencies and the funding of qualifications

There must be an end to the perverse incentives to institutions created by performance measures combined with indiscriminate ‘equivalencies’ that divert students (especially weak ones) into dead end courses and qualifications.

Institutions should be funded on the basis that they provide a coherent overall programme of study (governed by a set of general principles related primarily to content, general structure, assessment arrangements and contact time) rather than on the basis of individual qualifications (and remove the perverse incentive to pile up large numbers of (easy option) qualifications for ‘accountability’ or ‘profit maximisation’ or ‘minimise effort’ reasons)

There should not be restrictions against students or apprentices moving sideways or even downwards if appropriate

The government response said that there would be a break away from the old equivalency based performance tables. Performance indicators should not inadvertently lead to schools concentrating on particular groups of pupils (whether the less academically successful or the more able) at the expense of others. Hence performance measures should capture the full range of outcomes for pupils of all abilities. At the same time, any point-based measures should also be structured so that schools do not have a strong incentive to pile up huge numbers of qualifications per student, and therefore are free to offer all students practical and vocational courses as part of their programme.

Schools serving the age group 14 to 16 should be free to offer any qualifications they wish from a regulated Awarding Body whether or not these are approved for performance measurement purposes, subject to statutory/health and safety requirements.

Decentralise and simplify management and regulation

There should be a move away from the over-centralised and structurally over-complex management of vocational education with multiple over-lapping agencies.

Government should focus on its key roles of monitoring and ensuring quality, and providing objective information, and withdraw from micro-management.

Apprenticeship frameworks should not be drawn up entirely by Sector Skills Councils, who conceive their role in relation to **current** employers, and **current** occupationally-specific job requirements.

There is a need to recreate and strengthen genuine links between vocational education and the labour market (and especially, for young people, the local one). Employers are the only really reliable source of quality assurance in vocational areas, and, in spite of lip service, have been progressively frozen out of the way vocational education operates.” (p. 143). Employers should be directly involved in quality assurance and assessment activities at local level.

The government response states that the bureaucracy associated with apprenticeships will be removed. A more transparent process for funding apprenticeships, particularly for smaller businesses, will be developed.

Generally the government is committed to reducing the regulatory burdens placed on educational institutions and ensuring that they have as much flexibility as possible to decide for themselves how to deliver a high quality education that meets the needs of their pupils.

Funding recommendations

Funding should be for programmes and not qualifications and the funding should follow the student to institutions rather than to qualifications.

Funding mechanisms should make it easier for institutions to collaborate.

Funding should be on a per student basis (and should follow the student) (and there should be a unique student number to track use of study time credits)

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 funding credit towards education at a later date.

Only employers who offer general broad transferable education and training rather than specific skills training should be subsidised

The government response said that perverse incentives to accumulate qualifications rather than provide sensible, balanced and broad programmes of study must be removed. Funding should be on a programme basis. A review will consider how to move from a formula based on qualifications to one based on funding learners. Funding rules should also allow a person to move sideways or down when this is appropriate. There should be no time limit on people to take up English and Maths study opportunities up to the age of 24.

Strengthening vocational teaching in schools

Schools will be given the right to appoint qualified vocational teachers to teach in schools.

Further Education lecturers and professionals should be enabled to teach in schools, ensuring young people are being taught by those best suited. The rules relating to using these qualified professionals who are not primarily teachers or qualified as such have to be revised..

The government response noted that the single most important factor in giving every learner a good education is to have good teachers delivering good teaching and stressed the importance, therefore, of attracting and retaining high quality teachers in all subjects, with a particular emphasis on science, mathematics and other high-priority subjects, is paramount.

Work experience

All young people should be able to gain real experience and knowledge of the workplace.

The government response said it would consider how local employers could be reimbursed. However, the statutory duty on schools to provide every 14 to 16 year old with work-related learning will be removed as it was not serving its purpose.

References

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