Wolf Review of Vocational Education

The independent Wolf Review into vocational education, commissioned by Education Secretary Michael Gove, was published on March 3 2011

Professor Alison Wolf reports that her conclusions are that;

- Many 14 to 16 year olds are on courses which the league table systems encourage but which lead children into dead-ends. Many young people have not been told the truth about the consequences of their choice of qualification.
- A quarter to a third (300,000 - 400,000) of 16 to 19 year olds are on courses which do not lead to higher education or good jobs.
- High-quality apprenticeships are too rare and an increasing proportion are being offered to older people not teenagers.
- There are many good quality courses and institutions but they exist “in spite of” the current funding and regulatory system. Attempts to fix the system over the past decade have failed. For example, the Diploma was intended to solve the long-term problem but did not (there has been less than one per cent take-up).
- Only 45 per cent of the cohort get a ‘C’ in GCSE English and maths at 16 and very few (four per cent) of those who fail then go on to achieve this from 16 to 19.
- There has been a growing crisis in the youth labour market for years.
- There is no evidence that vocational qualifications for 14-16 year olds motivate them to succeed in other subjects and prevent them becoming NEETs

Professor Wolf recommends a radical change of direction.

There are four main principles for reform:

- The system must stop ‘tracking’ 14 to 16 year olds into ‘dead-end’ courses
- The system must be made honest so young people are not pushed into damaging decisions
- The system must be dramatically simplified to remove perverse incentives
- We should learn best practice from countries doing things better than us, such as Denmark, France and Germany

The proposals include:

- Ensuring anyone who fails to achieve at least a ‘C’ in GCSE English or maths must continue to study those subjects post-16. This would apply to about half the annual cohort
- Removing the perverse incentives, created by the funding system and performance tables, to enter students for low-quality qualifications. High quality vocational qualifications can and should be identified by the Government. Only those qualifications - both vocational and academic - that meet stringent quality criteria should form part of the performance management regime for schools. **This is then to say that ministers and not Ofqual should decide which qualifications count in school league tables** However, schools should also be
free to offer whatever other qualifications they wish from regulated awarding bodies. It is also the case that existing courses could also be amended to meet the new criteria and thus become eligible to be included in performance tables

• Making performance measures reinforce the commitment to a common core of study at Key Stage 4, with vocational specialisation normally confined to 20 per cent of a pupil’s timetable; and should remove incentives for schools to pile up large numbers of qualifications for ‘accountability’ reasons.

• Making funding on a per-student basis post-16 as well as pre-16.

• Regulation moving away from qualification accreditation towards oversight of awarding bodies.

• Removal of the obligation for qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds to be part of the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

• Increasing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for maths teachers.

• Allowing 14 to 16 year olds to be enrolled in colleges so they can benefit from high-quality vocational training available there.

• Employers being directly involved in quality assurance and assessment activities at local level, which is the most important guarantor of high quality vocational provision.

• Recognising that high quality apprenticeships offer great opportunities but there are problems with the system. The Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills must work together to fix the funding and other problems

• Work experience should wait until post 16

• Subsidising employers if they offer 16 to 18 year old apprentices high-quality, off-the-job training, and an education with broad transferable elements.

• Essential general subjects must not be crowded out

Mr Gove said Prof Wolf’s report was “brilliant and ground-breaking”. He immediately accepted four recommendations:

• To allow qualified further education lecturers to teach in school classrooms on the same basis as qualified school teachers.

• To clarify the rules on allowing industry professionals to teach in schools.

• To allow any vocational qualification offered by a regulated awarding body to be taken by 14-to19-year-olds.

• To allow established high-quality vocational qualifications that have not been accredited to be offered in schools and colleges in September 2011.

Michael Gove said he would now consider how best to implement Professor Wolf’s remaining recommendations.