

2011/16

13 May 2011

Policy Watch – The Government responds to the Wolf Review.

Introduction

The most obvious message that comes out of yesterday's Government [Response](#) to the Wolf Review of Vocational Education is just how much more still needs doing. Vocational reform it seems, remains very much work in progress, *"four consultations, three reviews, one investigation and one development of policies"* in progress as the FT put it

True, the Government accepted the Report in full, not just the *"letter but the spirit,"* but now the hard work begins. Page 15 in the formal Response highlights just how much. A peak of activity, for instance, in the second half of the year with important consultations on such highly charged areas as league table criteria, English and maths qualifications for 16-18 year olds and the nature of 16-18 programmes of learning, all critical to the shape of vocational provision in the future.

Background to the Response

The Wolf Review, it might be remembered, had been commissioned by Michael Gove last autumn with a remit to look at how vocational education for young people could be improved. It's a question that has dogged Governments for centuries and the Wolf Review, with its 27 recommendations laid out in a report published a couple of months ago was a reminder that this Government like so many of its predecessors was keen to tackle the issue.

Its starting point was that the current system was quite simply failing too many young people, swathes of good practice maybe but too often locked within a system of perverse incentives, poor recognition and confused purpose. The problems were laid bare in Michael Gove's 'Edge' speech last September and largely endorsed in her report by Alison Wolf. *"An audit of current provision,"* she wrote in her final chapter, *"identified a number of ways in which current arrangements create perverse incentives that serve young people ill, are unnecessarily expensive and bureaucratic and fail to recognise the needs of 14-19 year olds compared to adults."* Her conclusion was that less effort should be spent on designing qualifications and programmes that meet centrally prescribed requirements and more on providing for the needs of young people let alone the labour market. Evidence from the last few weeks which have seen unemployment figures for 16-24 year olds edge up 963,000, both big employer bodies raising familiar concerns about the skills levels of young people and the Governor of the Bank of England offering further gloomy predictions about how slow the economic recovery might be, suggest that she may have had a point.

Three key messages

For its part, the Government has singled out three key themes. First, ensuring that all young people achieve English and maths, *"ideally to GCSE A*-C by the age of 19."* Second, sorting out the way in which performance tables are put together so that false equivalencies and perverse incentives are removed while allowing for 'best' vocational qualifications to be recognised. 'Best' here is defined in terms of content, assessment and progression potential. And third, continuing to support Apprenticeships but to learn from international experience in particular how best to simplify them while at the same time strengthening the core components.

Each of these propositions raises huge questions. Is it appropriate for young people to keep resitting GCSEs in English and maths where evidence points to a fatigue factor after a while or should there be alternative qualifications for those aged 17 or 18 for example, and if so which? Which vocational qualifications should be used to generate points scores for league tables and how should values be attributed? How could greater take up of apprenticeships be encouraged; is it a question of stripping out bureaucracy, pumping in more money or simplifying the framework a bit more?

So what happens now?

The Government may be keen to get cracking, *"we are determined to act as quickly as possible"* and indeed has retained the services of Alison Wolf to keep them on the straight and narrow when it comes to implementation but in truth it's going to take some time before some of the more crunchy details can be resolved. The aim is to issue some information, such as on pre-16 enrolment in colleges, before the end of the summer term but other matters will take more time. Changes to work experience provision and the deployment of FE lecturers in schools for instance both require legislative change. In addition, there's a lot going on all elsewhere, consultation on school funding and 16-19 bursaries, changes to league tables, a new Education Bill, new UTCs and Free Schools, reform of the national Curriculum, changes to agencies and other bodies let changes in local Authorities, all may affect vocational developments in some way.

By way of summary, this, briefly, is how things stand in some of the key areas at present.

- 14-16 provision. Young people typically to follow a standard core curriculum but one able to be *"supplemented by a vocational element."* Consultation to follow over the summer on the criteria for determining 'best' vocational qualifications which in turn will be able to generate league table points and also further details to follow on how best to structure Key Stage 4 learning, to be offered as guidance rather than formal prescription
- 14-16 year olds in colleges. Pre-16 year olds can do this at present but further guidance will follow on procedures before the end of the summer term. The Government is keen generally to see greater choice and diversity in the school system and will also issue further information on UTCs and Free Schools over coming months
- Work experience. Local Authorities already have a duty to encourage work experience for 16-19 year old learners but consultation and potential legislation will follow on the central recommendation of shifting work experience provision from pre to post-16. Schools would still be able to offer work experience pre-16 but the duty to do so would be removed potentially from Sept 2012/13
- Voc teaching in schools. A change in the law to be brought forward as soon as possible to enable accredited FE lecturers to teach in schools while rules on the use of outside industry experts in schools will be clarified before the end of term
- Low attainers. Further work to be done on what works and why with an independent evaluation of Foundation Learning to be published this summer and a Dept commissioned review of the whole area by December 2011. Support generally for programmes that offer *"high quality"* work experience with English and maths
- 16-18 year old provision. Support for programmes of study that enable achievement in English and maths with consultation later this year on suitable qualifications in this area along with discussion with Ofqual on the nature of these quals in future. Consultation too this summer on the principles to be applied in designing suitable learning programmes that encourage progression as well as skill development
- Apprenticeships. Further consultation and review on how best to simplify as well as strengthen Apprenticeship frameworks, also how best to provide employer subsidies

Postscript

Interestingly on the day that Michael Gove was launching the Government's Response to Wolf, David Cameron and Nick Clegg were equally busy announcing a new £60m package of measures aimed at helping young people into work. The ['Supporting Youth Employment'](#) strategy promises a massive increase in work placements, a new £10m pa Innovation Fund specifically to support third sector activity with NEETs, a new Access to Apprenticeships pathway and new sector-based work Academies, dedicated to providing work experience and training for young people on benefits with the first one due to open in August for the hospitality and retail sector. The bark to Wolf's bite perhaps.

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Gov Response to Wolf May 2011