

2011/11

17 March 2011

Policy Watch – Is a case building up to support Wolf?

Introduction

Two weeks on from the Wolf Report on Vocational Education is a broad consensus emerging around much of the Wolf analysis let alone some of its recommendations?

Identifying the labour market premiums

First a Report from the think-tank Demos and sponsored by the Private Equity Foundation on the subject of the 50% of young people who don't go on to university. "[The Forgotten Half](#)," the Report describes them, the young people Wolf finds "*churning between education and short-term employment in an attempt to find either a course which offers a real chance for progress, or a permanent job, and finding neither.*"

There's been some debate recently amongst economists about whether young people have fared worse in this recession than in previous ones but what does appear indisputable is the long-term '*scarring*' effect of having 'no job, no hope, and no prospects.' Nor do things seem to be getting much better. The latest [stats](#) published this week show unemployment amongst 16-24 year olds running at an all-time high, up by 0.8% over the last quarter to 20.6% and unsurprisingly the subject of intense recent Ministerial discussion. According to Demos, if current trends continue, 20% unemployment will become the new norm unless drastic action is taken.

So what sort of drastic action is this Report proposing? Essentially it highlights five "*proven labour market premiums*" that young people should try and secure; these, it's argued provide "*the best insurance for young people at risk of becoming NEETs.*" Two of them, literacy and numeracy and experience of work feature highly in Alison Wolf's recommendations, the other three have been equally widely recognised in Reports elsewhere and include: a character premium, basically acquisition of the soft or wider skills; a technical premium, essentially a level 3 qualification and a graduate premium. Get the full set and according to this Report, you stand the best chance of progressing in the labour market.

Many of the specific recommendations in this Report, such as improving the quality of work experience and beefing up careers advice and guidance where "*our research suggests that there is little or no information provided in schools about apprenticeships,*" would sit comfortably with those put forward by Alison Wolf in her Report. Others such as the need to develop more practical skills at Key Stage 4 and support for Diplomas and embedding literacy and numeracy perhaps less so but in one critical area they are as one, namely that "*the current vocational and school offer is not equipping many young people with the skills and knowledge they require to find stable employment.*" It's a familiar message of course but the difference this time is the consensus building up around the need to match labour market needs better.

Understanding the signals

Reading the signals or at least understanding what it calls the "*morse code emanating from employers and top universities*" is very much the theme of a second [Report](#) also just out and on a similar theme. Written by Elizabeth Truss MP for the Centre Forum think-tank, this Report takes the Wolf line that we are developing an "*hourglass economy,*" that competitor countries have continued to recognise where we haven't, the importance of an academic core for all young people and that, disadvantaged students have been badly let down by being steered into low-value qualifications, both academic and vocational, that fail to gain them an entrée into the labour market let alone the opportunity for a decent wage-return later in life.

If much of the prognosis is Wolf like, the remedy is less so. For while like Wolf this Report is anxious to ensure that all young people are given the tools to create "*a clear path to the top jobs,*" the instrument favoured for this is very different. The view is that an elongated Bacc, an

EBacc that carries forward to an ABacc is what's needed. The ABacc would be *"a minimum of 3 rigorous A levels with at least an AS in maths and an AS in a humanity subject"* and would, it's argued become the *"central plank in both academic and vocational education to ensure transferability."* It's a plank that many people might find a bit too narrow although the idea of creating a defined 'college track' which the Report also alludes to, is something that might find more support.

General reactions

As for the Wolf Report itself, reaction so far has been generally favourable with most organisations finding plenty to welcome. Four examples make the point. The CBI, for instance, welcomed the focus on English and maths, a traditional concern of employers, *"around half of employers report problems with the literacy and numeracy of their staff, so we support plans for all to continue to study English and maths if they do not achieve A*-C at GCSE."* The Association of Colleges was naturally pleased with the central role accorded colleges, the Institute for Learning with the adoption of their recommendation on FE lecturers being able to work in schools while the National Union of Teachers supported the concerns raised in the Report about the *"distorting effect of league tables."*

A theme coming through many of the reactions and highlighted in Alison Wolf's Report was that constant fiddling with the vocational qualification system over the years had left it in a confused and uncertain state. She memorably defines it in her Report with not just one but four sweeping adjectives: *"sclerotic, expensive, centralised and over-detailed."* Many would perhaps therefore echo Mike Baker who argued in a [comment piece](#) in the Guardian that *"the best thing future governments can do is to just stop interfering and let schools, colleges, employers and awarding bodies work out what is best for students not aiming for university."*

Outstanding Issues

As for the sorts of issues beginning to crystallise around Wolf, perhaps four stand out at present.

First, is she right to suggest that 14-16 year olds should spend 80% of the time on core learning and 20% on vocational? The thinking here was to ensure all youngsters have sufficient time to cover the 'essential' subjects without being pushed into alternatives that might serve them less well. Yet, as Conor Ryan put it in his blog on Wolf, *"if we leave it until 16 before enabling young people to take a significant number of practical courses, they will simply disengage."* The nature of the 14-16 curriculum may yet come under further scrutiny.

Second, what is to be the compelling offer that encourages young people to participate post-16? We know from the Report some things that don't work and some things that should work but the expectation that in future programmes should be build around some yet to be defined *"general principles"* leaves a lot open to question. Third, the Report's recommendations for low-attainers, namely further review pre-16 and a focus on English and maths post-16, once again leave this group poorly served; an opportunity to build on existing good practice surely wasted? And fourth, what can we do to make sure that things work this time and that we don't have another review in a few years time?

For the present, Michael Gove has accepted four recommendations and in his Commons Statement singled out a further seven; a full Government response is expected in a couple of months. The Opposition has equally taken up the cause, Andy Burnham declaring in his ASCL [speech](#) last week, *"we need a proper debate on how to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which offers real choice for young people and prepares them for a modern world."* But arguably it's the labour market that might have the final word.

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)

Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning

It is also possible to follow some of the team with [Steve Besley](#), [Julie McCulloch](#) and [Louis Coiffait](#) on Twitter, and to subscribe to our [YouTube](#) and [Vimeo](#) channels.

Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.

The case builds around Wolf