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## Policy Watch – Making sense of Wolf.

### Introduction

Almost six months to the day since Education Secretary Michael Gove called on her to help him with “*a radical reform of vocational education*,” Alison Wolf has come back with a comprehensive [Report](#) laced with 27 recommendations. It challenges a number of traditional articles of faith about vocational learning, positions it within a sharper economic context and offers yet another gear change for an area Michael Gove called “*an historical weakness*.”. How much is adopted, and Governments have form in this area, remains to be seen.

### Two important themes

The intervening months have seen two noticeable trends emerge, each of which has helped shape the context for the Report. One has been an growing political conviction about the importance of a traditional subject core for all young people’s learning. The jury may be out as whether this is composed of 2, 3 or even 5 subjects let alone how it should be recognised but it’s been clearly evident in Ministerial speeches and runs as an obvious backbone through last autumn’s White Paper, the EBacc developments and the current National Curriculum review. The recommendations in the Wolf Report on English and maths are in part a response to this.

The other has been the growing concern about youth unemployment, evident for example in reactions to last month’s NEET statistics. As an avowed expert on labour market economics, Alison Wolf devotes large chunks of her Report to this very area. “*Today’s vocational education system*,” she argues, “*must respond to five key labour market characteristics*.” These include: a shift towards full-time participation up to the age of 19; a reduction in employment opportunities for 16/17 year olds; a growing emphasis on the importance of work experience; a consistently high premium on having English and maths qualifications; and a recognition of job mobility and flexibility. The emphasis on securing a better fit between what the education and training system offers and what the labour market needs is perhaps the most powerful theme in this Report.

### Were there any surprises?

Much of what’s in the Report was expected. The cutting back of low-level vocational qualification undergrowth, the recasting of league table equivalencies, the commitment to English and maths, the need for funding to follow the student, the support for apprenticeships, the simplification of the regulatory system and the linkages to the labour market, all were to be expected.

But there were some surprises. The pivotal role granted colleges, the importance attached to work experience for 16-19 students, the challenging of the conviction that what disaffected students need is a more practical curriculum, the distancing of 14-19 learning from the QCF, the proposal for a learning credit post-19 and the proposition that vocational lecturers should be able to operate across the whole 14-19 sector, all proposals perhaps less expected

### What are the main headlines?

#### On 14-16 learning.

- At 14-16 the emphasis should be on core learning, especially English and maths. This should take up 80% of the time with the remaining 20% given over to other options including vocational learning
- A challenge to the current belief that the best way to provide for ‘disengaged’ students is to offer more practical learning. The Report favours mastery of “*basic academic skills*”

#### On 16-19

- At 16-19, greater specialism but because this needs to be responsive to local labour markets; “*institutions should be free to offer any qualification they please from a recognised awarding body and encouraged to include non-qualification based activity.*”

- A requirement that post-16 students without GCSE English and maths should continue to study for them although it's not clear how far alternatives would be acceptable

#### **On apprenticeships**

- A proposal that employers should be eligible for subsidies when young apprentices undertake off-the-job training and education, and support for Group Training Associations

#### **On 'league tables'**

- An end to 'false' equivalencies and potential restrictions about which qualifications should contribute for performance measures. It's left to Government to declare which these should be but non GCSE quals should *"make a limited contribution to an individual's score"*

#### **On funding**

- Recognition of how complicated the current funding system is. Funding should follow the student with flexibility over the type of programme they should be entitled to follow

#### **On institutional arrangements**

- Colleges to be given a key role, with 'trainers' able to work in schools and colleges taking on 14-16 year olds
- A greater emphasis on providing work experience for 16-19 year olds

#### **On regulation**

- Awarding bodies playing a greater role in determining qualifications, Ofqual concentrating on regulating awarding bodies and greater clarity on the role of SSCs

#### **What's missing?**

Michael Gove has called it *"a brilliant and ground-breaking Report"* and immediately accepted four recommendations, others have generally welcomed it although Lord Baker has been less effusive. Yet the Report is light on some issues. It has little to say, for instance, on that traditional Achilles heel, the role of careers advice and guidance. There's little too on training for vocational 'instructors,' a feature of other well regarded vocational systems and one recognised in an important Skills Forum Paper last year. The Paper on SEN may be about to come out but there seems to be little understanding of the differences between special needs and disaffection and little indication of the sorts of vocational provision that actually would serve disaffected young people well rather than what wouldn't. Elsewhere, funding the student is fine but both pre and post-16 funding systems are under review so things may change. Also the value of BTECs and of some other proprietary vocational qualifications is recognised but one of the strengths of the BTEC system especially is the provision of a ladder of progression, something the Report fails to recognise in its consideration of L2 qualifications.

#### **Some issues**

Perhaps six issues stand out. First, the 80:20 core:option model proposed for KS4 runs the real risk of squeezing out the very skills that young people need to develop for the labour market. Second, recommendation 4 suggests further review of Foundation Learning leaving this group of learners still poorly served. Third, and also facing uncertainty are Functional Skills; we still seem to be struggling with a model for embedding such skills. Fourth, if as the Report recommends, a 25% ceiling is put on the contribution of non-GCSE qualifications, this will simply compound unhelpful perceptions of vocational learning. Fifth, and in a similar mode, the presumption about external assessment leaves the assessment of skills in an uncertain place. And sixth, reactions to this Report will tell us a lot about vocational learning in this country.

#### **Steve Besley**

Head of Policy (UK and International)

*Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning*

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