

UK Eduscape commentary on the Wolf Review of vocational education for 14-19 year olds in England

Rather than rehashing the report in great detail by providing a detailed listing of its key recommendations and conclusions word-by-word, I have decided to assume a good level of prior working knowledge by readers of its recommendations and will instead offer a brief commentary on what I see as the key benefits and downsides of the report.

Professor Alison Wolf's final report from her independent review is available [here](#).

What are the key positives?

- A clear recognition that getting good GCSEs (A*-C) in both English and Mathematics is absolutely crucial to the future success and career choices of all young people and insistence that at post-16 phase schools and colleges focus more resolutely on ensuring that learners who failed to secure these grades at KS4 are given the support to achieve them as a core part of any learning programme they undertake, rather than diverting them to inferior qualifications that carry little real currency.
- Professor Wolf grasps the need for Government to continue to provide and if possible increase its investment in strategic initiatives that improve the quality of mathematics teaching, through better CPD programmes, in both school and college-based contexts.

By this we can presume she means the Government should continue to support key initiatives such as the brilliant National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics, the Further Mathematics Support Programme and the LSIS STEM Programme.

- A firm demand that Ministers move to end the damaging and unnecessary restrictions on QTLS holders from FE being able to work as teachers in state schools – given the reality that the last Government's Diploma programme hinged in many instances on schools sending their students to FE Colleges for part of the week, to receive the specialised vocational teaching and instruction, this restriction has never seemed particularly logical.
- Related to this issue, a good aspect of the report is that it urges the Government to clarify and evaluate rules relating to the teaching of vocational content by qualified professionals who are not primarily teachers/do not hold QTLS. As the report highlights "Many schools believe that it is impossible to bring professionals in to demonstrate/teach even part of a course without requiring the presence of additional, salaried teaching staff. This further reduces the incidence of high quality vocational teaching, delivered to the standards that industries actually require".
- A very clear recognition of the domain expertise of Further Education Colleges in terms of their proven specialisms in the most practical and technically complex of the vocational disciplines on offer to 14-19 year olds and backing for high quality FE providers to provide full KS4 programmes to more young people from 14 onwards.

- A clear endorsement for University Technical Colleges as a model that has the potential to be a game-changer in terms of providing a high-quality alternative pathway to success for 14-19 year olds who would be more challenged by intensely practical, enquiry led projects that immerse, rather than just simulate, learners in the real world challenges that they will face as professionals and technicians in the future.
- A clear expectation that all schools and colleges wishing to offer extensive vocational and technical education programmes should be extensively involving and catering to the needs of local employers and relevant trade associations and professional bodies in the design and customisation of their curricula, to make them as real-world in nature as possible.
- Recognition that, in future, the development of vocational qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks for 14-19 year olds should be driven through extensive collaboration between employers, trade associations and awarding organisations and that central government should play a much less prescriptive and limited role .
- Building on this a recognition that to truly cater to the diverse needs of the 21st century labour market, the roles of developing and approving 14-19 apprenticeship frameworks shouldn't simply rest with Sector Skills Councils, and are in some cases are too remote from some of the industries, professions and occupations clustered under their very broad sector designation.
- It demolishes the myth, often exemplified by the periodic half-attempts by Government to tightly regulate the market, that employers are perplexed and discouraged because of an over-supply of qualification brands and awarding organisations. Professor Wolf has never bought this 'qualification jungle' argument, and her report finds "no empirical evidence to indicate that employers, in the past, had any trouble understanding and evaluating the vocational qualifications *specific to their sector*", and indeed notes that many employers "recognise and value familiarity, often with the awarding body as much as with the particular award".

What are the negatives?

- Although Professor Wolf has made very valid points in saying that there are some very real quality problems to address in relation to a good proportion of vocational education courses and qualifications on offer for 14-16 year olds, her recommendation that vocational education should typically constitute at most 20% of a student's timetable at KS4 is too bald or unequivocal.
- Although she acknowledges the success of the Young Apprenticeships programme for 14-16 year olds she also feels that the cost of delivering the learning scheme is too high for it to merit further expansion. This is a shame – we should be doing whatever it takes to help young people most at risk of becoming NEET whose talents and aptitudes may be better exploited through a more blended learning programme with part of their week spent in real work environments where they can learn to be more disciplined and resilient.

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- Although it backs the creation of University Technical Colleges, the report doesn't urge the Government to raise its commitment to establishing them beyond the 12 it signed up to at the outset of the coalition agreement. Given that there are understood to be between 50-60 firm expressions of interest in to the Department for Education at present the 'cap' should be lifted now while the interest of leading national employers, universities and outstanding FE Colleges is piqued.
 - No call to create a Teach First equivalent for FE – this is something I've long felt is a key missing ingredient in the sector's improvement agenda, and the sustained success and present expansion of Teach First is clear testimony to the effectiveness of providing niche employment-based routes to encourage high-achieving graduates to enter the world of education.

Professor Wolf's review should have contained proposals to create a Teach First style programme to attract graduates and post-graduates with Firsts/ Distinctions in engineering, the sciences, and ICT-related subjects into teaching and lecturing positions for 14-19 phase programmes.