

To : **ACER Members**
Re : **Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report**
From : **Andrew Thomson**
Date : **2 March 2011**

Purpose:

This is a short note outlining the key features of the Wolf Report and indicating the way we may wish to respond to it, individually or collectively, in due course.

Outline:

- 1 The Report was commissioned by Michael Gove and it was published today: it does not invite responses as such. Like the Foster Report and the Leitch Review, it has been completed in the early stages of a new administration. It is described by Mr Gove as 'brilliant and ground-breaking' and it has 27 recommendations (attached in the annex to this note). Though any of these may have far-reaching consequences for colleges, there is no *obvious* equivalent of abolishing A Levels or trebling HE student fees that may attract attack.
- 2 The recommendations of the Report chime with key policies of the day: reducing or at least shifting the emphasis on vocational courses in schools; promoting apprenticeships; reducing the role of the state; the withdrawal of government from micromanagement; and at the same time providing more / better information to customers about the services they use. For all these reasons it is likely that the recommendations will be taken up by the Government: they have said they will now "consider how best" to implement the Report, though there is no indication of timing. The Report is worth reading: the opportunity to think as the Government decides what to do is one we should take. There is much in the Report that would accord with the wishes of many; there is some that strikes as radical; there is some that will be hard to take. But there does seem to be an abiding logic to the Report that much more could be achieved if the simple incentive was to serve students well.

The Report: An Initial Synopsis:

- 3 The requirement for the Report was to consider how we can improve vocational education for 14-19 year olds and thereby promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher level education and training routes.
- 4 There are some compelling reasons for acting:
 - the Review estimates that at least 350,000 get little to no benefit from the post-16 education system
 - less than 50% of students have both at the end of Key Stage 4 (age 15/16); and at age 18 the figure is still below 50%

Though the first of these may be contentious, the body of the Report makes the case that it is a system error: schools and colleges are driven by 'perverse incentives'.

- 5 I have looked through the Report by considering these questions:
 - Reach - who will benefit?

- Relevance - how will the economy benefit?
- Rigour - how will vocational education improve?
- Reputation - how will vocational education a path better trodden by those who could benefit?
- Will the recommendations work?
- What should colleges do?

Reach (who will benefit?)

- 6 The key for the Report is to find a new and better route for young people through vocational education. This is to be achieved by a mix of:
- better and leaner regulation of qualifications so that quality improves and progression to employment is much more likely
 - funding and accountability regimes that support flexible delivery of courses and innovation
 - everyone being able to access English and maths GCSE as a top priority
 - a focus on high quality work experience post-16 (and less of this pre-16, removing the current statutory duty) and promotion of apprenticeships
 - a system that causes providers and governments to be honest about what's on offer
 - making sure all qualifications lead to progression to employment

Relevance (how will the economy benefit?)

- 7 The Report recognises that our future prosperity depends on building an advanced economy founded on high-level technical skills. To achieve this, the recommendations cover:
- extending the power to influence qualifications to local employers and beyond simply SSCs , and so building in the capacity for horizon-scanning and future-proofing
 - prizing intermediate practical, technical skills, particularly those achieved at intermediate level by the age of 19
 - making Apprenticeships a key route to skilled employment and national prosperity
 - the need to understand that the youth employment market for skilled labour is a thing of the past, hence high quality vocational education matters more than ever
 - response to local demand and recognising it is the student, rather than government agency, who is customer and whose needs are to be met

Rigour (how will vocational education improve?)

- 8 The Report recommends that better vocational education will come from strengthening quality rather than revamping qualifications. The keys are:
- making sure apprenticeships are available (despite varying economic conditions), accessible and of the highest quality
 - a major rethink on what schools can offer – limiting the scope and ending the incentive to cram the curriculum with vocational qualifications that achieve little and lead nowhere

- enabling teachers to teach across the 14-19 range and making the legal right of colleges to offer a full KS4 curriculum from aged 14
- simplifying the system through reduced micromanagement, including funding per student rather than per programme (not as big a shift as it may once have been)
- the proposed changes to funding and accountability regimes should remove the perverse incentives which currently encourage schools and colleges to steer young people into easy options, rather than ones which will help them progress
- 16-19 year old students pursuing full time courses of study should not follow a programme which is entirely 'occupational', or based solely on courses which directly reflect, and do not go beyond, the content of National Occupational Standard

Reputation (how will vocational education a path better trodden by those who could benefit?)

9 The Report asserts that young people being "deceived": performance tables, funding systems and regulatory compliance are all pushing (institutions) in the wrong direction and they and indeed the Government end up not being able to be quite honest about what is on offer, what good it does and where it leads. This all needs addressing. The enhanced reputation of vocational education will not be achieved by making vocational courses more academic; rather, by better qualifications and better information about them:

- making information available to everybody about the likely consequences of particular choices in education and about which courses and institutions are of high quality
- there should be much greater freedom for awarding bodies to develop qualifications and for institutions to offer the vocational qualifications they prefer for 16-19 year old students
- regulation should move away from qualification accreditation towards awarding body oversight: Ofqual to move from regulating qualifications to regulating Awarding Bodies
- there should be no obligation for vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds to be part of the Qualifications and Credit Framework.
- DfE should confirm and clarify that qualifications offered to 14-19 year olds and funded through YPLA will not in future need to be either QCF-compliant or belong to a specified group with additional approval criteria (GCSE, A Level, Diploma etc). They should, however, be offered by a regulated awarding body

Will the recommendations work?

10 It is "ground-breaking": some of the ground will be very hard and very probably worth breaking:

- Having better vocational qualifications, nourished by more power for education and industry locally to agree what is needed
- future-proofing qualifications by removing the limit applied by SSCs to the needs of *current* employers and making them capable of qualifying people for future occupations
- freedom for colleges to act with greater flexibility over the use of their funding and the nature of their qualifications that could encourage much better innovation
- abolishing Government micro-management of institutions

11 With the challenges come the risks:

- changing the funding and accountability systems so that they don't reward 'perverse' outcomes / institution-centredness is a big risk for a centralised power

- encouraging greater localism whilst advocating simplifying the system maybe tricky do achieve
- changing the focus of regulation from qualifications to awarding bodies may risk an expansion of expensive validating and verifying
- enabling colleges to run the 14-16 curriculum, and the question of impacts on schools / funding
- shifting the focus to the needs of students and industry, rather than the needs of government agencies, which requires the decentralisation of power to the level where responsibility is exercised: how will this work
- getting schools to give up doing things and letting colleges do them instead

What should colleges do?

- 12 This is a question I will want to take up with the board as we develop the ACER response. We are in a great position to think through how the ambitions of the Report for better vocational education for young people could be realised. I think this gives college principals the chance to think very clearly about what they want their colleges to achieve, and what they should do, in a way that really wasn't there with some other notable reports such as Foster and Leitch.
- 13 This is because of the questions begged by the Report as much as the recommendations it makes. For example, how would we help realise the main aims of the Report? How would help to make sure that **no** young people "get little to no benefit from the post-16 education system" (rather than 350000)?
- 14 What do you think about the value of the recommendations and how would each one work?
For example
- how would a college put in place a full KS4 curriculum?
 - what would have to change so that the "perverse incentives which currently encourage schools and colleges to steer young people into easy options, rather than ones which will help them progress", were removed?
 - how would you work with local employers to devise vocational qualifications to improve the prospects for young people and for their eventual employers?
 - How would funding need to change to give you the flexibility to plan programmes to meet students' needs better?
- 15 This is not to assume that the Report has got it all right. I am not sure it really says much about enterprise and entrepreneurialism. What should **we** be saying? It sets out a lot of challenging ideas to break new ground but where do you think it misses the point or sets out to do too much? How does the perhaps welcomed proposal to be more local and less micromanaged square with the need to meet national challenges, for example STEM?
- 16 It will be my intention to do a more thorough analysis of the Report and to work with you in establishing the ACER perspective: not just as a reasoned and valuable contribution to a great national debate; but as the means through which we can model, and so invent, the future: here.

Andrew Thomson

2 March 2011

ANNEX: Recommendations of the Wolf Report

Recommendation 1

The DfE should distinguish clearly between those qualifications, both vocational and academic, which can contribute to performance indicators at Key Stage 4, and those which cannot. The decision criteria should be explicit and public. They will include considerations of depth and breadth (including consultation with/endorsement by relevant outside bodies), but also assessment and verification arrangements which ensure that national standards are applied to all candidates.

Recommendation 2

At Key Stage 4, schools should be free to offer any qualifications they wish from a regulated Awarding Body whether or not these are approved for performance measurement purposes, subject to statutory/health and safety requirements.

Recommendation 3

Non-GCSE/iGCSE qualifications from the approved list (recommendation 1 above) should make a limited contribution to an individual student's score on any performance measures that use accumulated and averaged point scores. This will safeguard pupils' access to a common general core as a basis for progression. At the same time, any pointbased measures should also be structured so that schools do not have a strong incentive to pile up huge numbers of qualifications per student, and therefore are free to offer all students practical and vocational courses as part of their programme. (See also Recommendation 26 below)

Recommendation 4

DfE should review current policies for the lowest-attaining quintile of pupils at Key Stage 4, with a view to greatly increasing the proportion who are able to progress directly onto Level 2 programmes at age 16. Performance management indicators and systems should not give schools incentives to divert low-attaining pupils onto courses and qualifications which are not recognised by employers or accepted by colleges for progression purposes. (See also recommendation 28)

Recommendation 5

The overall study programmes of all 16-18 year olds in 'vocational' programmes (i.e. currently everything other than A levels, pre-U and IB, and including 'Foundation Learning') should be governed by a set of general principles relating primarily to content, general structure, assessment arrangements and contact time. Provided these are met (and see recommendation 6 below), institutions should be free to offer any qualifications they please from a recognised (i.e. regulated) awarding body, and encouraged to include non-qualifications-based activity.

Recommendation 6

16-19 year old students pursuing full time courses of study should not follow a programme which is entirely 'occupational', or based solely on courses which directly reflect, and do not go beyond, the content of National Occupational Standards. Their programmes should also include at least one qualification of substantial size (in terms of teaching time) which offers clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment. Arrangements for part-time students and work-based 16-18 year olds will be different but the design of learning programmes for such students should also be considered.

Recommendation 7

Programmes for the lowest attaining learners – including many with LDD as well as those highly disaffected with formal education – should concentrate on the core academic skills of English and Maths, and on work experience. Funding and performance measures should be amended to

promote a focus on these core areas and on employment outcomes rather than on the accrual of qualifications.

Recommendation 8

The DfE and BIS should evaluate the extent to which the current general education components of apprenticeship frameworks are adequate for 16-19 year old apprentices, many of whom may wish to progress to further and higher education. It does not appear appropriate, given this Government's commitment to progression through apprenticeship, that frameworks should, as at present, be drawn up entirely by SSCs, who conceive their role in relation to *current* employers, and current, occupationally specific job requirements. The review of frameworks should also consider ways to increase flexibility and responsiveness to local labour markets and conditions.

Recommendation 9

Students who are under 19 and do not have GCSE A*-C in English and/or Maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications, or which provide significant progress towards future GCSE entry and success. The latter should be based around other Maths and English qualifications which have demonstrated substantial content and coverage; and Key Skills should not be considered a suitable qualification in this context. DfE and BIS should consider how best to introduce a comparable requirement into apprenticeship frameworks.

Recommendation 10

DfE should continue and if possible increase its current level of support for CPD for mathematics teachers, and give particular attention to staff who are teaching post-16 students in colleges and schools. DfE and BIS should discuss the possibility of joint funding for post-16 CPD activities in English and Mathematics, especially as they relate to apprentices and to general FE colleges recruiting adults as well as young people.

Recommendation 11

Funding for full-time students age 16-18 should be on a programme basis, with a given level of funding per student. (This can and should be adjusted for differences in the content-related cost of courses, and for particular groups of high-need student.) The funding should follow the student.

Recommendation 12

There should continue to be no restrictions placed on a young person's programme in terms of which level or type of qualification they can pursue. If it is appropriate for a student or apprentice to move sideways (or indeed 'downwards') in order to change subject or sector, that is their choice.

Recommendation 13

Young people who do not use up their time-based entitlement to education (including apprenticeship) by the time they are 19 should be entitled to a corresponding credit towards education at a later date. The existing system of unique student numbers plus the learning accounts being developed by BIS should make this straightforward. **Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report**

Recommendation 14

Employers who take on 16-18 year old apprentices should be eligible for payments (direct or indirect), because and when they bear some of the cost of education for an age-group with a right to free full-time participation. Such payments should be made only where 16-18 year old apprentices receive clearly identified off-the-job training and education, with broad transferable elements.

Recommendation 15

DfE and BIS should review contracting arrangements for apprenticeships, drawing on best practice internationally, with a view to increasing efficiency, controlling unit costs and driving out any frictional expenditure associated with brokerage or middleman activities that do not add value.

Recommendation 16

DfE and BIS should discuss and consult urgently on alternative ways for groups of smaller employers to become direct providers of training and so receive 'training provider' payments, possibly through the encouragement of Group Training Associations (GTAs).

Recommendation 17

At present teachers with QTS can teach in FE colleges; the FE equivalent – QTLS – should be recognised in schools, which is currently not the case. This will enable schools to recruit qualified professionals to teach courses at school level (rather than bussing pupils to colleges) with clear efficiency gains.

Recommendation 18

Clarify and evaluate rules relating to the teaching of vocational content by qualified professionals who are not primarily teachers/do not hold QTLS. 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.

Recommendation 19

Make explicit the legal right of colleges to enrol students under 16 and ensure that funding procedures make this practically possible. Colleges enrolling students in this age group should be required to offer them a full KS4 programme, either alone or in collaboration with schools, and be subject to the same performance monitoring regime (including performance indicators) as schools.

Recommendation 20

All institutions enrolling students age 16-18 (post-KS4), and those offering a dedicated entry route for 14-year old entrants, should be required to publish the previous institutions and, where relevant, the qualifications and average grades at the time of enrolment of previous entrants. (This should be done on a course-related rather than an institution-wide basis)

Recommendation 21

DfE should evaluate models for supplying genuine work experience to 16-18 year olds who are enrolled as full-time students, not apprentices, and for reimbursing local employers in a flexible way, using core funds. Schools and colleges should be encouraged to prioritise longer internships for older students, reflecting the fact that almost no young people move into full-time employment at 16; and government should correspondingly remove their statutory duty to provide every young person at KS4 with a standard amount of "work-related learning".

Recommendation 22

DfE should encourage Ofqual to move as quickly as possible away from regulating individual vocational qualifications and concentrate on regulating awarding bodies. When there is reason for concern about a particular qualification, Ofqual should continue to intervene.

Recommendation 23

DfE should confirm and clarify that qualifications offered to 14-19 year olds and funded through YPLA will not in future need to be either QCF-compliant or belong to a specified group with

additional approval criteria (GCSE, A Level, Diploma etc). They should, however, be offered by a regulated awarding body. As an immediate and temporary measure the Secretary of State should use his powers, under Section 96, to approve the funding of key established qualifications which have not been approved by SSCs, and have therefore not been accredited, but which are recognised by DfE as playing an important role in the country's vocational education system, and which are clearly valued by employers and/or higher education.

Recommendation 24

DfE and BIS should discuss and consult on the appropriate future and role of National Occupational Standards in education and training for young people, and on whether and how both national employer bodies – including but not only SSCs – and local employers should contribute to qualification design.

Recommendation 25

The legislation governing Ofqual should be examined and where necessary amended, in order to clarify the respective responsibilities of the regulator and the Secretary of State

Recommendation 26

DfE should introduce a performance indicator which focuses on the whole distribution of performance within a school, including those at the top and bottom ends of the distribution.

Recommendation 27

At college and school level the assessment and awarding processes used for vocational awards should involve local employers on a regular basis. Awarding bodies should demonstrate, when seeking recognition, how employers are involved directly in development and specification of qualifications.