

Wolf Review of 14-19 Vocational Education – Evidence from the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 15,000 members of the leadership teams of secondary schools and colleges throughout the UK.
- 2 Many ASCL members are in the forefront of developing and providing vocational education and are pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to the interim report of the Wolf Review of 14-19 vocational education.
- 3 The overall structure of the present system reflects its piecemeal development over decades. The introduction of a variety of qualifications that have been labelled as 'vocational' has led to a lack of understanding by employers, politicians and sometimes teachers of their function and status.
- 4 It is essential that there should be an agreed definition of vocational education, allowing for its distinct nature in relating directly to the world of work.
- 5 Within the broad vocational category, practical as well as academic aspects of vocational qualifications require to be distinguished, to be given recognition of their distinctiveness and to be established in a place of respect within the range of qualifications on offer for young people.
- 6 ASCL was disappointed that the key point of the Tomlinson recommendation in 2004, that there should be an overarching diploma embracing both academic and vocational qualifications, was not accepted by the then government.
- 7 A structured framework that is clearly understood by learners, parents and employers, including academic and practical qualifications at all levels and according them due respect, will provide a strong foundation for young people. They can then make a clear, informed choice of their future learning pathway.
- 8 The Wolf Review should give serious consideration to the equivalence and status of different types of qualifications. If the vocational offer to our young people is to underpin national economic recovery, then this should be reflected in policy and funding at all levels.
- 9 The introduction of the Diploma has been supported throughout by ASCL. However, members recognise that there is a comparatively small uptake of this award, due partly to the uncertainty that has surrounded its inception and reception. There is, however, recognition of the unique nature of this qualification and general agreement that it can be highly enjoyable and motivating for young people.
- 10 Employers have also welcomed the Diploma as developing the skills and the awareness of the reality of the world of work which they value in employees. It would be a shame to abandon it at this early stage and ASCL hopes that in a revised form (probably as a slimmer qualification with less complexity of structure) it will survive.
- 11 Until employers are entirely convinced of the relevance and longevity of new qualifications, they will be reluctant to employ young people who have them and this has applied to many vocational and general qualifications over the years, not just to Diplomas.

- 12 In the recent history of our qualification system too many young people have taken qualifications which had a very short life and which now have no meaning or value for employers. This must not be repeated and any attempt to develop new qualifications or new structures must consider the sustainable nature of such a process.
- 13 Until teachers are convinced of the relevance and longevity of Diplomas, they will be reluctant to risk persuading young people to take a qualification that may soon lose its currency and, with that, possibly its credibility.
- 14 It is essential that any changes to vocational education by government as a result of the Wolf Review are established and retained for sufficient time for the young people who are participating in them to have a good foundation for work in future.
- 15 The proposed reliance on individual assessment organisations to collate modular qualifications (in the future absence of the QCDA) does not give ASCL confidence that young people will be able to select freely from those qualifications on offer, as cross-board collation may well cease.
- 16 Funding arrangements for the vocational curriculum are complex. To ensure that many 14-16 year olds receive truly vocational input, partnerships enter into financial agreements across institutions.
- 17 Often there is insufficient funding available to provide an optimum learning experience, particularly where expensive capital investment in plant or equipment is required, where transport is necessary or the funding is short lived and does not facilitate long term planning.
- 18 If the government is serious in its belief that vocational qualifications will improve the skills levels of the country, then consistent, long-term investment should recognise their importance.
- 19 If sufficient funding is unavailable, individual institutions will 'cherry pick' those aspects of the vocational curriculum which it is possible to offer in-house and without huge additional cost and the engineers, scientists, caterers and ICT specialists of tomorrow will be untrained.
- 20 In order to improve the organisation of vocational education for 14-19 year olds, it is necessary to recognise that there are large generic elements within the curriculum that can be taught across different vocational areas.
- 21 A core of essential learning with modules relating to specific specialisms would allow for greater timetabling flexibility and less waste. This concept underlies the fact that vocational training in one subject is recognised as useful for future work in another area, particularly with younger learners.
- 22 Although the concept of 'key' and 'core' curriculum has been largely replaced by functional skills, this area should be revisited as it has the potential to meet employers' needs as well as establish good practice for learners. Research shows that employers require the wider 'softer' employability skills above all else and are largely prepared to engage with developing the specialist skills in the work place.
- 23 The development of vocational qualifications should be led by specific employer organisations, working in partnership with providers.
- 24 The re-introduction of training levies to ensure that employers are truly committed to the development, support and delivery of vocational qualifications should be seriously considered.

- 25 ASCL members support the concept of an official and consistent quality benchmark for all vocational qualifications in order to provide a structured framework that will engender the same respect as that for general/academic qualifications.
- 26 The continued popularity of BTEC qualifications with learners, employers and teachers is good evidence to show that a recognised and regulated quality structure, if extended to all vocational qualifications, would be accepted.
- 27 In order for this to be successful, the number of vocational qualifications on offer would need to be rationalised, though the introduction of a rigorous quality mark should contribute significantly to this process.
- 28 It is essential that those teaching young people who are studying for vocational qualifications are well-trained and completely up to date in their knowledge of the subject and have opportunities for training within the relevant workplace.
- 29 At present, there is a disparity between school and college teachers' qualifications and payment and ASCL welcomes and supports the recommendations of the recent Skills Commission report, entitled *Teacher training in vocational education* obtainable at http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/fckimages/skills_report.PDF
- 30 The Wolf Review has the opportunity to recommend that qualified FE teachers should be employed in schools where appropriate for vocational subjects and should be given parity with school colleagues.
- 31 ASCL is particularly keen that Foundation Learning (FL) should be properly recognised and developed as a precursor to Apprenticeships and other relevant qualifications. At present there is a general lack of understanding of the nature of FL and the opportunities it provides, particularly for young people with learning disabilities and/or difficulties.
- 32 Foundation Learning has already proved very effective in retaining young people who might otherwise have been disaffected within education and it is important that the lessons learnt in the pilots are transmitted to areas which have not been involved.
- 33 ASCL has welcomed the removal of the entitlement for all young people to all diploma lines and all aspects of the other three pathways as the complexity and breadth of this offer was clearly going to be impossible to manage within a context of reducing resources.
- 34 However we are concerned that the removal of entitlement can produce a lack of equal opportunities and should welcome a structure for vocational qualifications which gives access for all young people to a full range of opportunities, regardless of where they live.
- 35 There is considerable good practice in offering vocational qualifications to young people in specialist local centres and ASCL members will be happy to provide case studies to support this if this would be helpful.

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