

## POLICY WATCH

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### Edge sketch out six steps to raise the profile of vocational learning

How do you change ingrained social attitudes particularly about something as fundamental as vocational learning?

That's the question Edge, the independent education foundation dedicated to raising the profile of vocational learning, set out to resolve with its latest report on the topic released recently in the form of a '[Six Steps to Change](#)' Manifesto. The sad thing is that in reality Edge should be pushing at an open door. Its own research shows that many kids are bored at school and want to do something that's more practical or related to the world of work: *'56% of 15/16 year olds are worried that school doesn't do enough to prepare young people for the world of work.'* In addition, organisations from the [Sutton Trust](#) to the [Talent Challenge](#) are constantly trying to stress the value of different forms of learning that can bring forth the latent potential of young people while Ministers from the Prime Minister down are rushing to promote the value of vocational training during the current economic downturn. *"The best form of help right now" the Prime Minister told the recent Jobs Summit, "is investing in a stronger future, giving people the skills for the future by investing through the downturn to prepare the upturn."*

Nor are these isolated examples. Any number of Reports over recent years have said much the same; the [Edexcel/CBI Skills Survey](#), the [CIHE Report on Graduate Employability](#) and the LSN's '[Employability Skills Explored](#)' being just three obvious examples on an already groaning shelf.

So where does it go wrong? Where does the attitude come from that says it's OK for Wayne to take a vocational programme but not for William? People point to all sorts of things: the league tables, the Russell Group of universities, school segregation, teacher perceptions, media headlines, the school gates and the dinner table but in truth it goes back a long way, some would say back Victorian times and it's extremely hard to break down. The Edge Manifesto offers some perspectives of its own as to why it's still prevalent including a lack of employer involvement, poor advice and guidance and the lack of a strong vocational pedagogy in schools.

The problem as the recent '[New Opportunities](#)' White Paper' on social mobility identifies, is that *"the attainment gap determined by poor backgrounds opens up very early. It narrows only slightly in primary school and widens again after age 11."* This suggests that from an early age aptitudes let alone attitudes about learning are seared in which is perhaps why the underlying theme of the Edge Manifesto is that *'there are many pathways to success.'* It may seem ironical that at a time when Government is keen to set out prescribed pathways within organised qualification frameworks that Edge talks of *"a more diverse system"* but as it says *'bold action is needed if we are to fulfil the potential of all students.'*

So what are the six steps in Edge's Manifesto?

**Step 1** is to develop a broader curriculum diet up to the age of 14 so that young people can start to experience different forms of learning and develop skills and interests at an early age. This is not, as Edge hasten to say, about forcing young people down a particular career path at an early age but it is about '*building up a body of knowledge*' before important option choices are made that might affect their future. The Government might argue that this is already happening through the new programmes of study at Key Stage 3 let alone the introduction of initiatives such as that on school-HE/business links proposed by the National Council for Educational Excellence. Edge argue for two specific features: the incorporation into the curriculum of 'soft' skills and of more employer based activities. There are of course life skills on school curricula, indeed 6 of the 12 current national targets cover life skill matters such as healthy eating but that's the problem: such skills are preset around Government targets not personal needs.

**Step 2** takes us into the world of SATs. Like many before, Edge find an obsession with testing repressive and antithetical to how young people develop. They favour instead a student profile with three features: attainment, life skills and interests. Before anyone shouts National Record of Achievement, it's worth remembering that the proposed [School Report Card](#) does include categories on attainment, wellbeing and the narrowing of gaps so perhaps is a start.

**Step 3** involves a more open set of options at Key Stage 4. Students would study core subjects but would then "*chose from a variety of pathways each of which would have a different balance between theoretical and practical learning.*" The aim is not just a better fit but a better chance of kids not being turned off at a vital stage in their career. The Government might claim that its [14-19 Qualification Strategy](#) provides for the sort of flexibility that Edge envisage but equally many would agree that there is still some fuzziness at the centre of the Strategy about the nature and position of vocational learning.

**Step 4** is about resources and capacity. In bygone days it was always said you didn't need to ask where the vocational class was, you just went to the hut at the back. Things are very different now but Edge suggests facilities for vocational learning still compare unfavourably with those in many other competitor countries. It believes specialist vocational centres should be set up, either stand-alone or attached to a school or colleges so that students don't have to go on day release with all the logistical problems this can cause. It also is keen to see such specialist facilities staffed by teachers with recent 'world-of-work' expertise, able to pass on the skills and experience gained by being out there and having done it.

**Step 5** takes us on to age 16 where Edge believes students should be able to specialise, change pathways or enter employment with training. To some extent the current clearer focus of school sixth forms, Sixth Form Colleges and general FE colleges allows for such diversification but Government presumptions about certain types of institution and the new planning and commissioning arrangements at 16-19 make freedom of choice more difficult to implement.

**Step 6** completes the ladder with a proposal that at age 18, "*students would have the opportunity to study at degree level in a centre of vocational excellence endorsed by employers.*" Acceptance of particular forms of learning by universities is a blessing to many but, it seems, a curse to vocational learning leaving such learners uncertain of the value or destination of their learning. Time surely to lift the curse.

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