

Pocket Watch: What makes for excellent vocational teaching and learning?

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Introduction

“We need to put curriculum development and programme design back at the heart of vocational teaching and learning”

Last week the independent Commission which has spent much of the last year investigating good practice in adult vocational teaching and learning, issued its concluding **Report**. A further Report will follow, showcasing some of the rich material from the array of evidence submitted but for the moment, the Commission has done its best to distil the essence of what makes for effective adult vocational teaching and learning. In all, it comes up with an elixir that combines eight distinctive ingredients, ranging from the importance of contextualised learning to appropriate forms of assessment and feedback. At its heart is the concept of the dual professional, the teacher who can combine occupational expertise with teaching expertise, a rare skill often overlooked at this crucial stage of learning

Background

Raising the quality of adult vocational teaching and learning has been an integral part of the Government’s reform programme for the FE sector and this Commission, which was announced at the end of 2011, was set up to investigate good practice and report back. Vocational teaching and learning is often poorly understood and any analysis tends to suffer from two problems: getting bogged down in definitions and spending too much time looking for a magic formula. The Commission carefully avoided such pitfalls, in the first case by establishing that vocational learning was defined by having ‘a clear line of sight to work’ and in the second, by recognising that vocational learning is no separate potion but part of a wider VET system embracing a range of other dependencies

Headline messages

The Commission examined an impressive range of evidence and came up with a rounded ten recommendations but overall two key messages stand out. First, that as indicated, the best forms of vocational teaching and learning are characterised by having a clear line of sight to work; the strength of that line helps enliven the context both for learning and for the application of such learning. Second, “employers are not just customers of vocational teaching and learning but are engaged at every level in helping create and deliver excellent vocational programmes.” There should be in other words ‘a two-way street.’ The Commission also took in two further issues, one old, one new. The old one is the question of how best to teach English and maths, through subject experts or as part of the teacher’s normal role? The Commission calls for a specialist team in every college. The new one is the growing impact of technology on learning which the Commission believes should be researched and developed through a new Centre

10 recommendations

1. Adopt the two-way street rather than the provider-purchaser model
2. Apply a core and tailored approach to developing vocational qualifications
3. Strengthen professional development including using outside experts under Teach Too
4. Enhance employer presence in qualification design
5. Establish a national VET Centre with an R/D hub
6. Test and share best practice amongst providers
7. Exploit the growing power of technology
8. Create teams of specialist English and maths teachers in every college
9. Encourage stronger leadership of VET
10. Encourage a more collaborative approach amongst Government and key agencies

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