



2010/35

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As she gets to work on her review of vocational education in this country, Alison Wolf faces a daunting task. Not only has she been asked to help solve a problem that has dogged the English education system for a century or more, namely how to create a genuine vocational alternative form of learning for young people, but she has to follow in the tracks of some illustrious predecessors who have been there before but for various reasons have had their hopes dashed. This time, Michael Gove assures us, it will be different; *“this review will be very different from previous efforts.”*

So how different will it be?

Some differences are pretty clear. **First**, for example, is the sense of urgency around the whole thing. Alison Wolf has been asked to prepare an interim report by the end of the year and a full set of recommendations by spring 2011. Even if spring comes late that's quite a demanding timescale to resolve *“an historic problem.”* It could be argued that many of the issues are well-known, that a strong infrastructure has already been built through local partnership activity and that Alison Wolf has well formulated ideas but Sir Mike Tomlinson who conducted the last major review of 14-19 learning needed some 20 months. The case for urgency was spelt out by Michael Gove in his recent Edge lecture; *“the ability to offer a genuine and high-quality technical education to young people in this country is no longer simply a desirable social goal but a pressing economic need.”* Many would agree but timescales have a habit of shaping outcomes.

Second, a different set of conditions now apply. The context for this is a huge fiscal deficit leading to a volatile labour market in turn seeking different skill profiles and working patterns. Unemployment may have stabilised at 2.47m according to the last quarterly figures but there's been a massive increase in part-time and temporary working which for young people means internships and different forms of work placements rather than steady career patterns. In addition many of the market drivers are in the so-called new industries, media and digital, green economy, pharmaceuticals and so on. A lot of the vocational reform programmes in the past have developed as a response to an economic downturn, the 1959 Crowther Report, the 1981 Employment and Training Act and the 1991 Education and Training White Paper to cite just a few but there's a deeper dip this time making the need to find the right form of vocational training even more pressing.

Third, this is a review that takes place within a wider strategic debate about the nature, cost and type of public services needed for the future. The Government is leading the charge towards a new model, moving in the words of Vince Cable from *‘a system of public consumption to private investment via the Big Society.’* The last major change to the skills system involved massive infrastructure change through what was known as *‘the machinery of government.’* It will not be the same this time; the Government is looking for simpler systems, more institutional autonomy and greater responsiveness, things that unlock the system and make it work better. *“How can we improve the organisation of vocational education for 14-19 year olds?”* the Government wants to know, where improve means make more open and efficient. The clue again lies in Michael Gove's Edge

speech; *“it is not going to lead to yet another set of unwieldy, Whitehall-designed, and short-lived qualifications, or a new set of curriculum quangos. Instead we want to establish principles, and institutional arrangements, which will encourage flexibility and innovation.”*

Fourth, and following on, Alison Wolf faces a more direct remit than has been the case in the past. Apart from wanting to know how to improve the organisation of vocational education for young people, the Government wants to know at what age young people should be *‘engaging in vocational education?’* how to improve the quality and responsiveness of vocational education and how to beef up progression routes for vocational education. All fundamental questions that lie at the root of good vocational education; there’s a recognition that there might be some lessons to learn from abroad but the remit sticks pretty closely to those four questions. This is not a remit that extends over the whole qualification offer for young people as Sir Mike Tomlinson was encouraged to do with his five set tests of *‘excellence, vocational, employability, employability, assessment and disengagement.’* A levels and GCSEs are out of the equation on this occasion, this is purely about vocational provision.

For the present, Alison Wolf has commissioned a call for evidence around the four key remit questions and no doubt is busy clearing the decks for the deluge that may follow. She’s also asking for people to let her know what they consider to be *“the two or three single most important problems with current institutional, funding and accountability arrangements and why.”*

As with other crowdsourcing forms of intelligence this may prove to be an interesting exercise. There was much disappointment in 2004 when the Blair Government turned a deaf ear to a key part of the Tomlinson recommendations, that for an overarching Diploma embracing both academic and vocational qualifications. As David Miliband recognised in his leadership speech in the summer, in many ways 14-19 reform never really recovered from this.

The message may be different this time but hopefully it will be listened to.

Arguably three areas may prove critical.

One will be the nature and shape of the vocational qualification system. It may need rationalising and it may need in the words of Michael Gove , *“an official quality benchmark”* as an assurance of quality but it needs to be seen as a framework every bit as structured and enabling as the so-called academic pathway of GCSE, A level and degree. Some vocational qualifications like BTECs already have such a stepped framework. Second, and more contentious, a new form of accountability needs to be found beyond the flawed system of equivalencies; vocational education needs to have its own recognition. Third, good vocational education like good academic education needs good teachers; this is every bit as important as specialist centres

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Wolf Review

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