

## ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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***The Wolf Review of Vocational Education***  
***Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers***  
***Date: 29 October 2010***

ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers through partnership and by lobbying.

### **ATL policy**

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

### **ATL response**

We agree that it is a good time to review pre-19 vocational education. As with all education reviews, it cannot be done in isolation from the rest of the education system. Education is also linked to the economy, and must be reviewed in the light of changing needs and constraints on funding.

### **What is education for?**

ATL believes that education should develop the skills needed for citizenship, increase opportunities for young people and improve life chances across the spectrum. Being an active citizen includes employment, caring roles in families and in society, and democratic engagement.

At the end of compulsory education, young people should be employable, with useful skills they have the capacity to apply, and qualifications that are valuable and understood by employers. They should have options open to them to continue in education. Their education should have

developed the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions for them to be physical, moral, social and intellectual beings, responsible citizens and independent thinkers. It should have increased young people's self-esteem, their aspiration, and their competence to make choices and learn throughout their lives.

This is what **all** learners need. The education system must be accessible to all young people, and meet the variety of needs and desires that they bring.

### **What do we mean by vocational education?**

There is an unhelpful lack of clarity in the Government's thinking on vocational education. In some lights, vocational education is seen to be synonymous with apprenticeships, in others it is defined as practical or technical learning. It may be work-based; alternatively it may be about work – training for particular jobs or developing skills for employability. And it is further muddled by ideas of 'vocation' – law, education, health and politics could all be deemed vocational education.

Vocational education is not just about skills. Although Michael Gove is correct to extol the virtues of manual labour and craftsmanship, these are underpinned by theoretical knowledge. Hence, it will be helpful to separate out practical or applied learning and vocational education. Practical or applied learning is part of vocational education, and should also be part of general education for all young people.

The government is wrong if it considers apprenticeships to equate to vocational education in its entirety. ATL welcomed the concept of the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards in England to ensure the delivery of 'comprehensive programmes of vocational **and** academic training of the highest quality' (our emphasis). Expansive Apprenticeships<sup>1</sup> must be considered a valuable option for all and a high quality, aspirational route for young people who have the ambition to enter the workplace. But they should not be the sole way of learning in a workplace.

We might describe vocational education as developing aptitudes and skills, together with understanding, that are always realised in a task, or set of tasks, that are adequate to, accepted, and contextualised by a vocational area. It uses the context of employment to support and structure learning. At their highest level of social formation, such aptitudes, skills and understanding are termed 'professional' and can be considered exemplary in their field.

Few jobs and industries remain static. Nor does the national economy. We should not attempt to second-guess demands of future labour markets. In current circumstances, employers are unsure of their needs for the immediate future, let alone over the longer-term period of the working life ahead of today's teenagers.

No-one should be pushed away from vocational education, and if government – as we suspect – sees it as something for those deemed 'less academic', without paying enough attention to progression routes,

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller A, and Unwin L Towards Expansive Apprenticeships, TLRP

there is a grave danger of entrenching segregation and disadvantage and limiting aspiration for yet more generations.

Vocational education isn't about those deemed incapable at school, nor should it be seen as the exclusive preserve of the disengaged. Yes, provision of vocational learning can help those not in education, employment or training but it is little use to anyone to think it exists to prevent NEET numbers rising. Prevention can come before it may already be too late by a) understanding individuals' most effective and engaging learning methods and b) having a suitably broad curriculum and qualifications offer in place.

Irrespective of the labels given to them, different types of education are not mutually exclusive. Instead, students should have access to a holistic educational opportunity. It is essential for vocational education to be able to develop the ability to learn and to have sufficient skills for transferability between industries, jobs or employers.

### **Problems with the current system**

The previous government's developments of education for 14-19 year-olds, with its four pathways, laid the foundations for an equitable offer to young people. ATL offered only qualified support, supporting the principles but not the practical implementation.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Complexity and misunderstanding*

The complexity of providing the 14-19 curriculum has increased dramatically and has eroded the fundamental principle of equity across the education system, with some pupils suffering more than others from this. At the centre of the difficulties for staff in education are the Diplomas. Delivering in consortia offers many benefits but also many barriers and the negative impact that things such as travel time between institutions can make was perhaps underestimated by policy-makers.

It has also become apparent that students themselves have not got to grips with the qualification, with many not understanding the nature of its combination of components or the importance of functional skills to achieving an award. Ofsted reports that many students see the principal learning strand not as one part of the Diploma but the whole of the qualification they are working towards.<sup>3</sup> This is not as simple as just being a failure in students' understanding.

Whilst developing, providing, and participating in Diplomas has been a multi-faceted challenge, assessment of the qualification has been one dimensional. Despite its multiple components, the vast majority of the assessments are – similarly to its 'rival' qualifications, GCSEs and A Levels – written examinations: often the precise style of learning and assessment that Diploma students were seeking to move away from.

#### *Avoiding a hierarchical academic-vocational divide*

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<sup>2</sup> 14-19 curriculum and its assessment – an ATL position statement, Spring 2010

<sup>3</sup> Ofsted, Diplomas: the second year – An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Diplomas for 14- to 19-year-olds, October 2010

Education needs to meet students' learning and skills needs. ATL does not believe that education for young adults will be equitable and meet the needs of all unless policy and political rhetoric can break down the false dichotomy between vocational and academic study. ATL's view is that the skills and knowledge associated with each are important and – suitable to their individual needs – young people should be engaged in both. For example, apprenticeships should not just be about the skills for a job, but skills for life, and about developing well-rounded citizens who can participate successfully in the workplace and in a society that benefits from their presence.

### *Functional Skills*

Functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills, which cut across both academic and vocational teaching and learning, are vital and can be key to the transferability of learning and experience. ATL thinks it essential that functional skills qualifications do not suffer from being seen simply as a qualification for low-achievers or those undertaking vocational learning. It is difficult for a qualification to become valued if it is battling for status from its introduction, and it is unfair for those students undertaking the assessment.

### *Gender, disability and ethnicity*

Disabled young people continue to be disproportionately excluded from further and higher education<sup>4</sup>; pupils from black and minority ethnic backgrounds find themselves unjustifiably channelled into less academically rigorous routes<sup>5</sup>; the TUC reports that white working-class boys tend to dominate apprenticeships; and girls still overwhelmingly tend to pursue low-paid, low status vocational options<sup>6</sup>.

Together, accessible vocational education and high quality careers education must challenge existing barriers and perceptions around male and female subjects and occupational sectors.

### *Rural disadvantage*

ATL is extremely concerned that rural schools and colleges are not able to offer and maintain a full range of post-16 courses. The funding of courses by volume of students at small town FE and sixth form colleges means that it is often not viable for these colleges to run any courses for fewer than 15 students. It is even more difficult for colleges serving rural areas to offer new courses, particularly those which require specific equipment, without at the same time dramatically increasing student participation rates. In practice, many small colleges have had to cancel a number of courses and students have effectively been forced into choosing different and often less suitable courses.

ATL members in rural areas also report a lack of employer engagement, inconsistent or patchy provision across institutions and insufficient availability of apprenticeships. This can make it difficult for young people

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<sup>4</sup> Nuffield Review working paper, 14-19 education and training and young disabled people: [www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents123-1.pdf](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents123-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ATL response to consultation on Local authority performance targets for under-achieving pupil groups, September 2008

<sup>6</sup> See: EHR, *Staying On*, June 2009; EOC, *Free to Choose*, March 2006

in poor rural households to gain qualifications and challenge inter-generational poverty cycles.

### *Proliferation of institutions*

These problems are not solved by increasing the institutions offering pre-19 education. FE colleges are long established as community institutions, schools are naturally familiar to everyone, and workplaces are a necessity in applied learning and vocational development. ATL questions whether we also need the many other institutions in the early stages of introduction, from university technical colleges to free schools via studio schools. Our concerns increase substantially if these new institutions are intended to segregate different types of people and different types of learner, sending each down a single track road with little flexibility to adapt or progress differently.

### *Equality of institutions*

ATL believes it is unacceptable for students and staff to be treated differently because of the institution they belong to.

All post-16 students should enjoy equitable funding. The current position whereby students receive different funding levels depending on whether they attend school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, FE institutions or work-based learning, simply must end.

ATL represents education staff across the board, and recognises that there are concerns around status differential. QTS and QTLS should be more closely related, and ways should be found for those with much needed practical and work-based knowledge to acquire Qualified Teacher Status'.<sup>7</sup> ATL believes these are worthy of further exploration, not least due to the fact the staff in schools, FE, and apprentice workplaces may be teaching the same students and may be working in each other's institutions. If staff are teaching the same programmes, there should be no reason for them to have to accept differential terms and conditions.

### *Money and disincentives*

Though we would argue that the government and its policy should not encourage education to be driven by concerns over money and earnings, we acknowledge that for many young people and their families, they have no choice. There is a risk that financial considerations disproportionately affect vocational students, and they undoubtedly are important to the most vulnerable.

The abolition of the educational maintenance allowance is a retrograde step and will mean that some students will no longer feel that they can remain in education after the age of 16. We are sceptical about the "more targeted" approach which we believe will amount to significant cuts and a reduction in the reach the EMA has. There is an ongoing issue around minimum wage standards for apprentices. We maintain our position that these should be consistent with the current age-related minimum wage rates. This would be fairer in itself, but would also likely have a positive impact on completion rates, and on tackling gender inequality in

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<sup>7</sup> Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, *Summary, Implications and Recommendations*, 2009, p11

apprenticeships – not just in terms of pay but the relationship of pay to gender stereotyping and occupational segregation.

School leaders will not be fooled by government spin on the sector being spared by the comprehensive spending review. If they are worse off, they will know about it. The cost of establishing vocational courses, and of purchasing off-site, is high for schools and colleges. In a culture of cuts, led by government, we fear there is a high risk that such courses will be sacrificed to make guarantees elsewhere.

### **What's good about current vocational education?**

Our members report some important benefits of vocational education:

1. The improved self esteem and learning of students who enjoy the specific field of learning and/or for whom an 'academic' curriculum did not suit their learning styles or ability.
2. Improved employment opportunities for students with enhanced qualifications that have clear GCSE equivalents but that reflect a skills-based curriculum e.g. hairdressing.

These benefits must be available to all pupils.

### **New vocational education in England**

Improving the vocational offer in our education system should recognise that people are different and should promote the importance of understanding *how* people learn, rather than diminishing one type of education in respect of another. The education available to everyone must provide opportunities for people to reach the same end by different means. For example, someone who wants to build aeroplanes may want to get their hands dirty from an early age, and work their way through an employer via an apprenticeship. But another may want to get their heads stuck into calculations, do a maths A Level and get a physics degree before reaching the same job with the same employer. The education and learning can be different – and what government facilitates, and schools provide, must be flexible to these differing needs – but the outcome the same.

ATL believes that a new and improved vocational educational offer can build upon ideas and practice already in existence.

#### *An overarching qualification encompassing applied learning*

ATL remains supportive of the principles of the Tomlinson Report which presented a detailed case for an overarching qualification which would subsume existing qualifications and offer both a broad curriculum and the opportunity to specialise, taking in development of essential skills, traditionally academic education, and learning in workplaces.

The Welsh Baccalaureate is beginning to prove that an umbrella qualification that emphasises mixed types of learning and that has a skills-focussed curriculum at its heart, can actually work. Broad learning can be seen to prepare young people for life as well as employment and gives them a great opportunity to understand how they like to learn. Alongside

choosing options from the existing qualifications offer, students undertake a core programme<sup>8</sup> which includes:

- \* Key Skills – including transferable Key Skills through the other four components outlined below.
- \* Wales, Europe and the World – including a language module
- \* Work-Related Education – includes working with an employer and taking part in a team enterprise activity to help the student understand how businesses work.
- \* Personal and Social Education – including an activity in the local community.
- \* Individual Investigation – a research project

There is clearly a scale difference between England and Wales in delivering a component based qualification. The number of awarding organisations can also add layers of complexity and the government has failed to provide clarification on the long-term future of the diploma aggregation service currently run by the soon-to-be defunct QCDA. If the review were to recommend vocational education being integrated in a similar way to the Welsh Bac in England, it must ensure the lessons are learned from the experience of offering diplomas.

#### *Progression and the provision of guidance*

We believe it is essential that there are clear paths of progression into, in the middle of, and out of vocational education, linked not just to a job, but to higher education or a return to more academic-based learning. No-one should be directed away from vocational education but the regularity of successful progression must improve and become the norm for students, educational institutions, and employers to have confidence in vocational qualifications. Central to improving progression routes is the provision of high quality and impartial information, advice and guidance.

It is crucial that young people receive adult direction and advice to make choices. 19-year-olds should be ready to progress to employment or continue in education, with qualifications that are valuable and understood by both employers and education institutions.

The accessibility of high quality, impartial IAG to learners is critical. ATL has highlighted before<sup>9</sup> the importance that a holistic approach is taken to IAG that connects it with the curriculum and skills development. The sentiment of the Nuffield Review that young people must be taught to develop the 'competence to make decisions about the future in the light of changing economic and social conditions'<sup>10</sup> is crucial and highlights the importance of developing not-necessarily- vocational skills, such as decision-making, alongside knowledge of the education and employment landscapes.

The issue of value is both significant and problematic. We do not believe that value judgments should be made on the different routes through education and learning that people take. Information, advice and guidance

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<sup>8</sup> Paper No. 10/064 from the National Assembly of Wales' Members' Research Service: [www.assemblywales.org/10-064.pdf](http://www.assemblywales.org/10-064.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> 14- curriculum and its assessment – an ATL position statement, 2010: <http://www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policies/14-19-curriculum-assessment.asp>

<sup>10</sup> Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, *Summary, Implications and Recommendations*, 2009, p3

available to students must be able to tackle openly any status issues between different learning routes, whilst not undermining any particular route or qualification – thus allowing individuals to make informed decisions. If employers or educational institutions are failing to understand one type of qualification and favouring candidates with another, it is fair that students are made aware of this in such a way that they are not being guided down a particular route, but can avoid taking decisions that will have a negative effect on what they are trying to achieve. It is important that employers, universities, and other training providers are involved in the provision of advice.

ATL believes that careers education should raise aspiration, support participation in learning, help overcome inequality and assist in making goals achievable – whether someone is heading for a Cambridge college or a factory floor.

### **Building on what comes before**

ATL's curriculum policy, set out in *Subject to Change*, proposes 'a national curriculum model which starts with pupil needs and interests and is designed in terms of the skills and attitudes that we want pupils to acquire and develop.'<sup>11</sup> This new national curriculum would place under one umbrella the whole range of outcomes for all pupils expected by the state, including academic, work-related, practical, physical, social and metacognitive. We envisage refocusing the curriculum to provide the knowledge base for practical activity. This skills-based national curriculum should apply for all pupils to age 16. This means that all young people will experience aspects of both vocational and general education, it will allow all young people to develop the broad base of skills they need for employment, citizenship, adult life and further study. It should provide opportunities for practical and applied learning within a general education, enabling a more knowledgeable choice and specialisation after 16.

This has an impact on pedagogy. A skills-based curriculum implies a practical approach to learning, with pupils engaged in much more active learning. In the early years of education, evidence shows that children learn best through 'real-world activities'. As they mature, it is still the case that practical, real-world experiences, whether related to employment, hobbies, citizenship, parenting or other activities, can be underpinned by theoretical knowledge, and can provide a context for learning that makes sense to the vast majority of pupils. Any changes to vocational education pre-19 must build on a practical, skills-based curriculum and pedagogy from the earliest ages.

At the age of 16, when pupils begin to make more specialised choices, those seeking to tread what will inevitably be labelled a vocational path should also be undertaking education in functional skills, such as numeracy, literacy and IT, ideally made appropriate for their workplace or vocation. Young people choosing this route through their education should not be hived off in separate institutions from those taking academic GCSEs and/or A Levels.

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<sup>11</sup> ATL , *Subject to change: new thinking on the curriculum*, 2006

### **CPD/vocational pedagogies**

Changes established in 14-19 education in recent years have happened quickly and have far-reaching implications for ATL's members. There are significant aspects where training and development of those working in schools and colleges has lagged behind change. For many, applied learning lies outside their comfort zones; many would like to develop further their ability to devise different assessments appropriate to different learning. The difficulty of identifying and measuring 'knowledge transfer' from one environment (say, workshop) to another (say, classroom) is yet to be adequately resolved. A comprehensive programme of continuing professional development is not just desired but necessary to keep up with changes already made, let alone more which may follow this review.

### **Accountability**

ATL is concerned about the excessive weight placed on the outcomes of pupil assessments. The use of assessment data in league tables, by Ofsted and by government to 'name and shame' schools has perverse consequences for education, not least in the post-14 sector. These high stakes can lead schools to push students away from academic qualifications where there is a risk that they might fail, or indeed to push students towards a proliferation of 'easier' qualifications in order to boost league table ratings. In this context, the attempts to establish 'equivalence' between academic and vocational qualifications, whilst admirable in their intention, can exacerbate the problem. Schools have an incentive to place pupils in either an 'academic' or a 'vocational' stream based on their ability to pass exams rather than on what is in pupils' best interests. Unfortunately, Michael Gove's intention to remove vocational qualifications from the league tables is more likely to lead to a drop off in the focus on vocational education in schools.

The problems of accountability are starker still where vocational education can be taught across a range of institutions. It is particularly complex where pupils are registered with one institution (the maintained school) but access vocational education through an FE college and with an employer. And the proliferation of institutions, to include university technical schools and studio schools as well as free schools and Academies will lead to increased competition, and an increased risk that pupils will lose out on education that meets their needs.

This is clearly not what we would like to see happen. Whilst it is not for this review to design a new accountability system, we urge the review to recommend to the Secretary of State that he considers all other aspects of the education system which may impact upon the quality of vocational education.

### **Conclusion**

Though a government commissioned 'independent review' always has specific terms of reference, we believe it is vital to take a holistic view of the context in which vocational education sits. Our submission has attempted to address as many relevant issues as possible – not least that vocational education must add to a fair and equitable education system

that focuses on learners and not simply UK plc; delivering for them not just during compulsory education but for the whole of their lives.

We would like to see vocational education as an element within the education of all pupils. As pupils come to choose how they will best learn, and what routes to take to meet their aspirations, we believe they are entitled to make genuine and informed choices, not class or gender-based ones. Those choices should not be irrevocable: there must always be routes between general, academic and vocational education.

ATL members across schools and colleges are clear that to do their jobs and provide a top class education to their students, they need stability in the qualifications and curriculum landscape. Building productive educational relationships with other institutions and employers gets harder with each rapid change to the offer. Involvement for employers in particular becomes an increasingly risky investment of either time or money. If this review is to make radical recommendations then it must also stipulate the need for government to get it right first time and stick with such as new system for vocational education and applied learning. We are confident the answers are already out there.