

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Qualifications for 14-16 year olds and Performance Tables – a Department for Education consultation

Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

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ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgment, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light 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

ATL believes that our education system can and must serve *all* young people and give them a fair chance at learning, developing, and succeeding at what they are good at. We think it is important to remember what vocational education should achieve and the need to get right a proportionate system of accountability. Our response to this consultation sets out what we think is right with Professor Wolf and the government's approach; explains our principled opposition to changes which will undermine the spirit of education for all and weaken certain

young people's chances in life; and offers questions to be asked of the criteria for preferred qualifications.

Approaching vocational education in the right way

Before tinkering with lists of 'preferred' vocational qualifications, it is important to consider what vocational education is and what its role in the system should be – this should then be at the centre of the criteria used to build the new list for performance tables.

In our original submission¹ to the Wolf Review we described 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."

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.

It is essential that all young people have a chance to get the most out of their education and that they have access to a broad curriculum and set of qualifications. Vocational education should not be seen as something for those deemed 'less academic', otherwise there is a grave danger of entrenching segregation and disadvantage and limiting aspiration for yet more generations.

Where ATL agrees with the proposals

It is right to say that young people should not specialise too early in one area. This is a sound approach to a strong education, but also in today's context where they will be likely to change careers a number of times, it provides them a range of skills and flexibility for the future.

We agree too that 14-16 year olds should be taking qualifications that provide the foundation for them to progress to a broad range of qualifications post-16, rather than qualifications that limit their options to one or two occupational areas. We believe it is essential that there are clear paths of progression into, in the middle of, and out of vocational

¹<http://www.atl.org.uk/Images/ATL%20submission%20to%20Wolf%20Review%20of%20Vocational%20Education.pdf>

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 successful progression must become the norm so that students, educational institutions, and employers have confidence in vocational qualifications.

In Alison Wolf's foreword to the proposals, the emphasis on the tough circumstances of youth unemployment, worldwide economic change and the need for a broad set of skills is correct. Unfortunately, ATL is not confident that the route the government is following is in principle or in practice the right one to ensure all young people are best placed to succeed in twenty-first century life.

Education for all – maintaining the spirit and ensuring the practice

Avoiding a hierarchical academic-vocational divide

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, established with a basis in knowledge. Apprenticeships must also be about developing well-rounded citizens who can participate successfully in the workplace and in a society that benefits from their presence.

At times the Wolf Review, and the government's response, has appeared in line with this principle which sits at the heart of ATL's education policy work. But we still fear that a hierarchy and/or divide is exactly the direction politicians are heading towards. The language is clear in the consultation paper that in limiting the number of vocational qualifications per pupil that can be used for performance tables, there is a hierarchy between vocational and academic study.

Increasing the status of vocational qualifications is a sound aspiration. However, in increasing the status of certain vocational qualifications, it must be asked: what happens to those young people studying the remaining qualifications which are not given elevated status? The risk of alienating pupils outside of the mainstream seems high.

The external assessment-public accountability model is far from perfect

ATL is concerned about the excessive weight placed on the outcomes of pupil assessments. The use of assessment data in performance tables, by Ofsted and by government to 'name and shame' schools has perverse consequences for education, not least in the post-14 sector.

We know that performance tables dictate behaviour in schools. Though publicly contradictory on this, government also knows it is true and admits such in the policy paper for consultation:

"We will encourage schools to focus on GCSEs and a narrower range of high quality vocational qualifications by limiting the number of so-called

equivalent qualifications that count in the Key Stage 4 performance tables.”²

Precisely because of the dictatorial role that performance tables play, we believe that the desire to remove the majority of vocational qualifications from the tables is very likely to lead to both a drop off in the focus on vocational education in schools, and an implicit hierarchy between young people who undertake other vocational courses.

It is very difficult to see why the implicit criticism in Professor Wolf’s foreword that ‘league table points, rather than pupils’ best interests, become critical to decision-making’ will not apply to these new changes.

The range of vocational qualification and the role of the regulator

Thinking through the approach government is taking to vocational qualifications and performance tables, four uncomfortable questions emerge:

1. If politicians determine what it is to be a high quality vocational qualification, what does this mean for the role of Ofqual, the independent regulator of qualifications?
2. If it is desirable to produce a short list of preferred vocational qualifications (and this is questionable), how does the government envisage maintaining its limited length? Is this not mutually exclusive with the development of high quality vocational qualifications, whether from new proposals or existing qualifications?
3. Does the government really back Alison Wolf’s belief that it is realistic to expect schools to continue to offer a wide range of qualifications in spite of the pressure put on them by league tables?
4. At the same time, why is the government proposing that young people should be allowed to undertake qualifications that are less than high quality? How does this serve the goal of offering an outstanding education for all?

ATL believes more thought should be given to these issues, and would appreciate answers to these questions.

Information, advice and guidance

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 before³ the importance that a holistic approach is taken to

² The FAQs provided alongside the consultation paper discuss the English Bacc performance measure and state that it is not compulsory and ‘that schools remain free to offer the curriculum that is right for their pupils’. We argue that it is a unique freedom with their hands tied behind their back.

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'⁴ is crucial and highlights the importance of developing not-necessarily- vocational skills, such as decision-making, alongside knowledge of the education and employment landscapes.

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.

We do not believe a government website will have the same impact and positive effect on young people that a proper and full face-to-face service can have. We deeply regret the government's dismantling of the existing provision of information, advice and guidance.

Further thoughts for the characteristics of qualifications for the headline KS4 performance tables

It is inherently subjective to simply deem qualifications as 'high quality' so it is right that government sets out how it will benchmark this and does so transparently. More work does need to be done on the four characteristics and the way they are evidenced, and we also propose an additional characteristic based around equalities issues.

The method proposed for assessing 'good progression' post-qualification appears to judge a current pupil on others' progression in the past. It does not account for any context such as the schools at which qualification x may have been taken, the pupils who took it, or indeed the value placed on it by 'gatekeepers' – all of which may have restricted the progression of individuals with the qualification in the past. That does not mean however that new pupils will be any less likely to be able to progress themselves.

It seems perverse to equalise the value 'one = one' in performance tables of GCSEs and vocational qualifications when setting only a lower size limit for the latter, and not an upper size limit. This leads to a major disincentive for schools to offer existing qualifications that take up three times the teaching time as a GCSE, irrespective of whether said qualification makes the preferred list or not. It is easy to infer from this that actually government does not want pupils in mainstream schools undertaking vocational study.

ATL believes the external testing is not the only credible way of assessing learning and development, that the emphasis on this is incorrectly exaggerated, and that the evidence that external assessment is always 'better' or 'preferable' is questionable.

The characteristic of 'proven track record' seems difficult to evidence. The required positive feedback from a range of stakeholders needs qualifying – in the current vague terms this could be found for any qualification. How

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

⁴ Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, *Summary, Implications and Recommendations*, 2009, p3

in assessing a qualification's track record do you account for context such as the range of 'gatekeepers' and how do you escape from subjectivity?

Questions arise regarding encouraging awarding organisations to develop new vocational qualifications. At what stage is the track record tested? Is piloting qualifications enough to pass the barrier that existing qualifications face? And who is to judge – politicians?

Finally, ATL believes that an essential characteristic for a high quality vocational qualification is its accessibility to all. If the government intends to create barriers for vocational qualifications to be part of the influential performance tables, then it is right that young people of all circumstances are able to take those qualifications. It will not be acceptable for a short list of 'preferred' vocational qualifications to be completely unrealistic options to (for example) disabled pupils.

Conclusion

Though there is some admirable language and aspirations within these proposals, ATL believes that the government must revisit this policy direction in principle and in practice. It is essential that these changes do not result in less vocational education being available to all pupils, and less value placed on those undertaking vocational study. We strongly advocate that all times, consideration is given to ensuring the development of a high quality education for all.