

Vocational education and training in the spotlight: back to the future for the UK's Coalition Government?

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This paper examines the Coalition Government's plans for vocational education and training for 14- to 19-year-olds in England. It argues that new types of educational institutions will enable the emergence of new forms of segmentation in which the vocational track is likely to become split into 'technical education' and lower level 'practical learning'. Whilst the new government has increased funding for apprenticeship, it has so far failed to address the systemic problems which have kept this as a minority track for 16- to 18-year-olds. The paper argues that the government-commissioned Wolf Review of 14–19 Vocational Education in England provides support for segmentation.

Keywords: vocational education and training; apprenticeship; technical education; practical learning; segmentation; qualifications

Introduction

For anyone researching or directly involved in vocational education and training (VET) in England in the three years prior to the general election in May 2010, a significant window of opportunity opened up to contribute to the development of new ideas and policies. The fact that this opportunity was afforded by politicians (notably John Hayes and David Willetts) in the then Conservative Shadow Cabinet, rather than serving Ministers in the Labour Government was partly a reflection of the way shadow governments develop policies to put to the electorate, but also an illustration of how removed Labour Ministers had become from educational debate. In July 2008, the Conservatives published a policy paper on VET which drew on existing research evidence and submissions from key stakeholders (Conservative Party 2008). The paper painted a picture of a VET system that had become driven by the requirements of the government's funding regime rather than the needs of individuals and the economy, in which apprenticeship had become devalued, and where the public purse was paying for 'virtual' training (i.e., the accreditation of existing skills in order to boost qualification levels). The troubled history of VET in the UK as a whole has been and continues to be well documented (see, inter alia, Ainley 2007; Pring et al. 2009; Unwin 2004; Bailey and Stanton 2004), but by the end of Gordon Brown's premiership in 2010, it was clear that many aspects of the system still needed fixing. Of most concern, however, was the way in which Labour had privileged the attainment of centrally imposed targets over quality of provision and learner experience. The focus had been on growth – the more qualifications awarded, the more apprenticeship places created, the better.

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This paper¹ will examine the Coalition Government's plans for reforming and developing VET for 14- to 19-year-olds in England. The discussion is set within the wider context of historically high levels of youth unemployment, the raising of the 'participation' age to 17 (2013) and 18 (2015), the need to re-balance the British economy following the banking crisis of 2008, and the need to improve employer demand for and utilisation of skills. As the paper was being prepared, the Wolf Review of 14–19 Vocational Education in England, commissioned in September 2010 by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, was underway and its report appeared on March 3rd. We will argue that whilst Wolf provides yet another useful summary of the systemic problems besetting VET, it fails to provide a conceptual framework for the development of a new vision for VET for 14- to 19-year-olds. Moreover, Wolf's key recommendations can be seen as further ballast for Gove's radical shake-up of the educational landscape in England which has some resonances with the tripartite model of compulsory education laid down in the 1944 Education Act. In contemporary terms, new types of educational institutions signal the emergence of new forms of segmentation. We use the term, 'segmentation', in two senses. First, we are drawing on ideas found in theories of labour market segmentation, which help to explain how the entry to specific occupations and organisations and/or parts of the labour market more generally is both internally and externally controlled (see, *inter alia*, Wilkinson 1981). Second, we are reminded of how the concept of 'market segmentation' is used in marketing to create distinctive products aimed at distinctive markets. For the minority of 14-year-olds, the academic route is being reshaped around initiatives such as the English Baccalaureate and accelerated A levels. For the rest, the vocational track is likely to become differentiated within two broad tiers, technical education and lower level 'practical learning' with both being provided via new specialist institutions. The outlook for general comprehensive schools looks increasingly uncertain within the growing fragmentation of the 14–19 sector.

The paper will argue that the reappearance of the term 'technical education' and its juxtaposition with the terms 'practical learning' and 'craft skills' provide the leitmotifs for the way in which the Coalition Government is seeking to refashion the image and purpose of VET. In the final year of the Labour government, the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Peter Mandelson signalled to the Labour Party's annual conference in September 2009 that he too was starting to evoke the language of practical skills as part of a strategy to 'rebalance' an economy that had become too dependent on financial services and had neglected manufacturing. This was followed by the call in the BIS White Paper, *Skills for growth*, in November 2009, for the creation of a 'modern class of technicians, associate professionals and people with higher level craft and trade skills' (BIS 2009, 6) This was a significant shift for a Labour government that had focused heavily on the expansion of higher education and had refused to use the term 'vocational' when it launched a new work-related Diploma for 14- to 19-year-olds in 2007.

The way in which the Wolf Review was carried out can help us reflect on the Coalition Government's plans for VET. Two points, which we touch on briefly here, are important for this paper. First, the fact that the Wolf Review was commissioned by Michael Gove at the Department for Education (DfE) and that Gove was the only minister who sat alongside Professor Wolf to launch the Review's findings, indicates how the DfE sees the education and training of the 14–19 age group as very much its responsibility. As was noted earlier, prior to the 2010 General Election, the generation of ideas about VET (for all age groups) had been very much driven by David Willetts and John Hayes. Both politicians had taken a particular interest in the state of government-funded apprenticeship and in the impoverished nature of low-level vocational qualifications. Their subsequent elevation to ministerial office in BIS and the new government's continuation of the previous government's demarcation of

VET between BIS (responsible for the 19+ age group) and the DfE (responsible for VET from 14–19) meant that researchers and VET professionals who had been having a productive dialogue with Willetts and Hayes now had to consider how to communicate with Gove. Whilst Willetts was made Minister for Universities and Science in BIS, John Hayes was given the considerable task of splitting himself in two: he is currently Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning in BIS and also Minister of State in the DfE with particular responsibility for apprenticeships, careers guidance and vocational education.

The second point regarding the way in which the Wolf Review was carried out concerns the process involved. In July 2010, just two months after being made Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove was being criticised for trying to rush through his planned reforms, notably his decisions to cancel existing contracts for the rebuilding of schools and to get new legislation (the Academies Bill) passed as quickly as possible to allow new types of schools to be established. Even the Conservative Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education, Graham Stuart, told BBC Radio:

To make changes to public services of this importance, ideally you would have longer to reflect on it and to suggest changes and improvements and make sure there aren't any problems which haven't been considered. (Stewart 2010)

The brief given to Professor Wolf reflected Gove's eagerness to act in yet another part of the education system. The Review was commissioned on 9 September 2010 and produced its final (and only) report on 3 March (Wolf 2011).

Although the report does not contain a section describing the methodological approach taken, certain facts are known. Wolf notes in the acknowledgements section of her report that she was supported by a 'secretariat' of one DfE civil servant and had 'substantial help' from one civil servant in BIS (*ibid.*, 3). This very small team had to deal with written material sent in to the Review by 'Many hundreds of people' in October in response to Wolf's call for evidence and also consider statistical information provided by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and the Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions (CAYT) (*ibid.*). There are brief references in the report to visits undertaken by Professor Wolf to talk to training providers (including large employers), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) in England, and to see VET in action in Denmark and France, but no detail is given as to which sectors of the economy were covered, what level of VET observed or what type of institutions and workplaces visited. In mid-December 2010, Wolf invited a selection of researchers and VET professionals to attend one of three meetings lasting two hours each at the DfE to give their views on a series of issues which she had identified as requiring further consideration. Notes of the meetings were taken by the DfE civil servant, but were not circulated to the attendees nor published, and Wolf personally consulted a few individuals in January and February on specific points in the final stages of preparing her report.

Given the eagerness of Michael Gove to refashion the educational landscape in England, the speed with which the Wolf Review was carried out and the circumscribed nature of its enquiry process do not necessarily mean that VET is being treated unfairly by the new government. As this paper will discuss in more detail below, however, the Review gives further weight to the DfE's focus on improving attainment in English and Maths and, as such, provides important clues as to how the new government intends to position VET in relation to its vision for education in the 14–19 phase.

The paper now proceeds in four sections. The first discusses the re-emergence of the concept of 'technical education' along with the language of 'craft' as part of an attempt to

reinvigorate VET in England. The second section discusses the role of vocational qualifications in the light of the Wolf Review, and the third section examines the Coalition's approach to apprenticeship. The fourth section presents concluding remarks.

Evoking the golden age of 'craft' and the elevation of 'practical learning'

On the day he announced the commissioning of the Wolf Review, Michael Gove gave a speech to Edge, an organisation based in London and covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland, whose activities have become increasingly influential. Edge describes itself as 'an independent education foundation, dedicated to raising the status of practical, technical and vocational learning' (see www.edge.org.uk). Its origins and funding arise out of the privatisation of vocational qualifications under the Thatcher government in the 1990s and its activities today align closely with the Coalition Government's aims to involve the private sector in educational provision at all levels, including the awarding of degrees. In 1969, the Haslegrave Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations, which had been given two years in which to review courses and qualifications aimed at technicians in both industrial and commercial sectors, called for the establishment of two new bodies: the Technician Education Council (TEC); and the Business Education Council (BEC). The Committee was keen that the role of the technician be given greater status and for there to be a distinct layer of VET provision to ensure a supply of suitably qualified individuals. In 1983, TEC and BEC were merged to form the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC), renamed the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) in 1991, by which time it had become, along with City and Guilds, one of the two major awarding bodies for vocational qualifications in the UK (see Fisher 2004 for a detailed history). The replacement in the title from 'technician' to 'technology' is worthy of note given the re-emergence of the former in the discourse of VET policy today. It signalled concerns that the original title did not reflect the fact that BTEC awards were not just aimed at technicians and also that this term lacked meaning in the world of 'business'. BTEC was in essence a government quango, classed as a non-departmental public body with charitable status and whose chair and board were appointed by the Secretary of State for Education.

In 1993, BTEC was re-designated as an independent organisation within the private sector and in 1996 it merged with then London Examinations to form the Edexcel Foundation. In 2003, Edexcel and Pearson plc, the global publishing company that owns the Financial Times, announced they had come together to form a new organisation, but in 2004 Edexcel was sold to Pearson. This left the several million pounds worth of income held by BTEC as a registered charity, money which was used to establish the Edge Foundation in 2004. In its annual return to the Charity Commissioners for 2009/10, Edge declared that it had 'long-term investments' worth £39.73 million and 'other assets' worth £3.31m.

Since 2004, Edge has been both an instigator and sponsor of a range of activities designed to foster its mission, including surveys of young people's attitudes to education, public campaigns to promote vocational learning, and intensive parliamentary lobbying. In 2009, under the Labour government's policy for organisations, including private companies, other than local authorities to take over schools deemed to be 'failing', Edge sponsored two Academies in Nottingham and Milton Keynes and their websites emphasise that their pedagogical strategy is based on 'practical learning', 'learning by doing' and 'learning from real world tasks'. The Edge Hotel School (in partnership with the University of Essex and the Colchester Institute) is planned to open in 2012.

In 2010, Lord (Kenneth) Baker, who was Conservative Secretary of State for Education from 1986–1989, was appointed Chairman of Edge, a highly significant appointment as Baker, with the late Lord (Ron) Dearing, introduced the concept of the University Technical

College (UTC). UTCs are designed to be 14–18 ‘schools’, independent from local authorities yet in receipt of state funding, in which students study towards GCSEs in English, mathematics, science and ICT, and a vocational Diploma related to the particular vocational focus of the UTC they attend. Thus, UTCs are the direct successors to the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), which, as Secretary of State, Baker had introduced as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act. The school day for UTC students is longer than for their peers in the state system in order to accommodate the mix of general and vocational study as well as work experience and participation in sport. The latter is seen as important for building ‘team spirit’. On the UTC website (linked to the Edge website) there is a four-page leaflet explaining the UTC concept in which Baker describes how, in a conversation with Lord Dearing in 2007, they ‘both agreed that what was missing from the English school system were good technical schools. We had them in the 1950s but they were closed – a huge mistake’ (Baker 2011). In a speech to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in July 2010, Baker referred to how technical schools had ‘disappeared in the Comprehensive surge’ (Baker 2010).

The previous Labour government encouraged Baker and Dearing (through their Baker Dearing Educational Trust) to pursue their plan and the first UTC, the JCB Academy, was opened in Staffordshire in September 2010. JCB, the industry sponsor of the UTC, is one of the world’s largest manufacturers of construction equipment and was founded in Staffordshire in 1945 by an engineer, Joseph Cyril Bamford. This brief account of one set of relationships that are being developed in the 14–19 sector indicates how the reform of vocational education is providing fertile territory for the growth of distinctive institutions. It also provides an example of the new forms of private and third sector participation and funding in state education that Stephen Ball (2007) has highlighted. Ball makes the important point that these innovative types of arrangement are having a profound effect on the status, character and ethos of publicly funded education without a prior, inclusive and transparent public debate on the advantages and disadvantages (and for whom) of this approach.

As mentioned, UTCs should have private sector sponsorship, but they must be sponsored by a university or FE college. The JCB Academy is sponsored by Harper Adams University College, Staffordshire University, Loughborough University, the University of Derby and the University of Cambridge. Its prospectus declares:

This is the first of a brand new kind of school in the United Kingdom, focused on delivering high-quality engineering and business education – a University Technical College. Our motto is ‘Developing engineers and business leaders for the future’ and our aim is to ensure that our students have every chance to achieve success, whether they continue into further education, or move to further learning in the world of work when they leave here. (www.jcbacademy.com)

In its first year, the JCB Academy enrolled 160 students, of whom, 115 joined at age 14 (Year 10) and 45 at age 16 (Year 12). The gender split is stark: 11 girls in Year 10 and 7 in Year 12² Michael Gove has declared his enthusiasm for UTCs and wants to see at least 12 (one per major city) opened in England (Gove 2010). He also said, however, that UTCs are but one model for the delivery of VET for 14- to 19-year-olds as his Free Schools policy will enable a thousand vocational flowers to bloom. In that respect, he is also enthusiastic about Studio Schools, a concept developed in the United States and Denmark and designed to motivate disengaged young people by providing an environment focused on ‘practical learning’ (‘learning by doing’), access to workplaces and involvement of employers, ‘creativity’ and ‘enterprise’. Edge and the Young Foundation co-sponsor the Studio Schools Trust established under the previous Labour government. The promotional material for these schools

uses many of the terms and phrases found in that for the UTCs, but also considerable echoes from the numerous initiatives dating back to James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin Speech aimed at ensuring young people left compulsory education with the skills and attributes required by employers (Pring 1997; Dale 1985). In the contemporary rhetoric, the 'traditional pedagogy' associated with academic education is seen as alienating many young people and, hence, an alternative 'practical' pedagogy is seen as the organising principle for new types of institutions and forms of provision.

Whilst the creation of new institutions is promoted as a positive and creative response to meeting the diverse educational needs of young people, insights from the literature on comparative 'transition systems' suggest it will lead to a more stratified and non-standardised system (Raffe 2008). Without a clear consensus of what counts as good quality vocational education, it is not clear that young people and their parents will understand the different options and be able to make the most appropriate choices. Much lip-service has been paid by policy-makers over the past 30 years to the benefits of 'practical learning' for young people, but Labour politicians and some educationalists have raised concerns about whether its promotion would encourage a segregated educational system in which students considered to be 'less able' or 'not academic' would be the ones to 'learn by doing' (Pring et al. 2009; Young 2008). The Tomlinson proposals for unifying the academic and vocational were rejected by Labour, but the much criticised 14–19 Diploma has proved to be a problematic attempt to provide a vocational alternative to GCSEs and A levels. Two Coalition Government ministers are, however, sending out much clearer messages on their perception of the academic–vocational divide.

In his speech to the Edge Foundation, Gove outlined in very clear terms his belief that there is such a phenomenon as 'practical' or vocational education with its own traditions and purposes, something the previous Labour government had appeared to deny:

... under the last Government practical and technical education lost its way. And that is because, despite all the rhetoric, their heart wasn't in it. By heart I mean a passionate understanding of, and commitment to, the joy of technical accomplishment, the beauty of craft skills, and the submission to vocational disciplines which lie at the heart of a truly practical education. (Gove 2010)

A month after Gove's speech, his colleague, John Hayes, in a speech to the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in October 2010, also eulogised about working with one's hands:

I look back to the Englishmen who first raised the standard of craft skill as a force in the modern world – to Morris and Ruskin, Rossetti and Burne-Jones – and I think it's high time to create a new aesthetics of craft, indeed, a new Arts and Crafts movement, for Britain in the twenty-first century. (Hayes 2010)

In their speeches, both Gove and Hayes cited best-selling books by two Americans, the philosopher, Matthew Crawford (2009), and the sociologist, Richard Sennett (2008), both of whom have sought to elevate the status of practical skills and craftsmanship. Thus, whilst both ministers are strongly expressing their belief that vocational education is important for society, the economy, and individuals, their concept of the 'vocational' is very much framed in terms of craft skills, of people fashioning artefacts. There are two main difficulties with this framing. Firstly, there are limited opportunities for employment in the craft-based part of the country's economy and there are few apprenticeships available. To take three examples of craft-based apprenticeships, in 2008–2009 there were 100 apprentice starts in farriery, no starts in saddlery and none in sign-making. Secondly, although Willetts, Gove

and Hayes appear to have moved away from previous governments' preoccupation with the competence-based model of assessment, the limitations of which (particularly for young people) have been well-documented (Unwin et al. 2004; Wolf 1995), their vision of 'practical learning' does not include a concept of vocational knowledge (see Winch 2010) or recognition that this might be important in a reformed VET system. The way knowledge is conceptualised and integrated in vocational curricula is a critical indicator of the character of provision, including the extent to which it provides a platform for progression and supports the development of 'vocational practice' (Guile 2010).

To what extent Liberal Democrats within the Coalition Government support Gove and Hayes is currently difficult to determine. Prior to the 2010 General Election, however, a policy paper from the Liberal Democrats' *Working group on 5–19 education* (Liberal Democrats 2009a) showed the party retained its support for the Tomlinson proposals by recommending the introduction of a General Diploma, to be taken by all pupils, incorporating GCSEs, A levels, and 'existing proven vocational qualifications'. The latter point refers to the party's concern that Labour's 14–19 Diploma threatened well-respected vocational qualifications such as BTECs. The policy paper also recommended that 14-year-olds be allowed to transfer from school to colleges of FE or other types of provider, one of Wolf's recommendations. In this regard, the Liberal Democrats agree with Gove that 14 is a suitable age at which to begin vocational learning.

In his speech to Edge, Gove declared:

I'm absolutely clear that every child should have the option of beginning study for a craft or trade from the age of 14 but that this should be complemented by a base of core academic knowledge. (Ibid.)

Although Gove emphasises the continuation of core academic subjects (by which he primarily means maths and English), his view that 14-year-olds can start to study for a specific occupation is clearly at odds with the Wolf Review which states that: 'the overwhelming majority of respondents to the Review were in agreement that there should be no substantial degree of specialisation before the end of KS4' (Wolf 2011, 107).

It is worth noting that debates about the age at which specialisation should start overwhelmingly focus on concerns that vocational specialisation might trap young people in following an occupational path that they might later regret. In the recent announcement that Gove is keen to see 14-year-olds bypassing GCSEs in order to start A level study suggests he is very happy for both academic and vocational specialisation to begin early and, hence, for there to be a clear division between the academic and the vocational in the system architecture for the 14–19 phase. As we argued above, however, so far the Coalition (or Wolf) has had little to say about what a vocational education curriculum might look like for this age group other than somewhat rosy-eyed references to the joy of craft and the more worrying advocacy of a knowledge-lite notion of 'practical learning'.

The dilution and cavalier use of vocational qualifications

In his Edge speech, Michael Gove anticipated the findings that form the core argument of the Wolf Review and which the Liberal Democrats, among others (see Pring et al. 2009) had also highlighted prior to the 2010 election. Gove pointed to the previous Labour government's policy of allowing some vocational qualifications to be used as alternatives to academic GCSEs, thus enabling schools to boost their position in national league tables for levels of pupil attainment at age 16. Using administrative data also used by Wolf in her

report, Gove was able to point out that between 2004 and 2009, the number of vocational qualifications awarded to 16-year-olds in England increased dramatically. The problem was that these qualifications did not have the same level of rigour as the 'equivalent' GCSEs and so could not provide young people with the same platform for progression to the next level of study. At the same time, these qualifications were also inadequate in a vocational sense as they didn't enable young people to reach the level of technical skill required for employment or for a higher level of vocational study.

Since the early 1990s, following changes to the funding of further education colleges in England, the delivery of VET has been driven by the attainment of qualifications (see Felstead and Unwin 2001 for a detailed discussion). Some qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks (e.g., in areas such as business administration and customer service) are much cheaper to deliver than others and so the profile and supply of vocational education has become skewed by the effects of the funding model. There are serious questions about whether the State should be funding vocational provision (for both young people and adults) which is doing little more than accrediting skills that are relatively easily gained in the workplace. In addition, at level 2, such provision is unlikely to be adding value by improving young people's basic skills and, hence, will not provide the platform required to advance to the next level. The Wolf Review has recommended that the current qualification-based funding model be replaced by the model used pre-16: 'Funding for full-time students age 16–18 should be on a programme basis, with a given level of funding per student' (Wolf 2011, 58). Wolf argues that this would bring England into line with other countries (and restore the pre-1992 arrangements) by placing the emphasis on meeting the needs of the learner rather than satisfying nationally set qualification targets. At the same time, however, Wolf also recommends that programmes of study should include at least one qualification of 'substantial size' and also GCSEs in maths and English. Qualifications are, therefore, still seen as central to 14–19 provision and, as such, will continue to exercise a powerful influence over the behaviour of institutions. At the time of writing, the DfE was still considering the recommendation to move to a programme-based funding model.

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), introduced in September 2010, is likely to exacerbate concerns about the currency of vocational qualifications and parity of esteem with academic awards. This is partly because the QCF does not include academic qualifications and partly because it comprises units which are allocated credits. Individuals accrue credits which can be grouped into full qualifications. There are three sizes of qualifications in the QCF: 1 to 12 credits is counted as an Award; 13 to 36 credits as a Certificate; and 37 or more credits as a Diploma. One of the problems is that these do not map easily on to existing recognised vocational qualifications, which makes it difficult for candidates and recipients to gauge their worth and exchange value, for example, for progression to further study. In addition, because the QCF does not include academic qualifications, it is more difficult for individuals to understand how their qualification 'compares' or what it might be worth in relation to well-understood academic benchmarks including GCSE and A level passes. This raises questions about the ability of young people to progress on the basis of their attainment in the QCF. For example, could a young person who has gained a level 3 QCF Diploma with say 47 credits (10 more credits than necessary to achieve their Diploma) enter higher education to pursue further qualifications in their chosen vocational area? The answer is probably no. Currently most level 3 vocational qualifications (including those in Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks) are not in the UCAS tariff and those that are (and that are recognised by universities) attract far more than 47 credits. For example, a BTEC National Certificate (confusingly renamed as a BTEC Diploma in the QCF), which accrues

tariff points equivalent to two A levels, attracts 120 credits in the QCF – nearly three times as many credits as those achieved by the young person in our example.

There isn't space here to review the troubled history of vocational qualifications in the UK over the past 30 or so years since they became instruments of government policy (see Unwin et al. 2004), but the problems look set to continue. The Wolf Review was explicitly asked not to deal with the content or design of vocational qualifications and her recommendations, accepted by Gove, are for further deregulation to allow providers to offer whichever qualifications they choose. The issues raised in this section for vocational qualifications also raise problems for apprenticeships.

The future for apprenticeships

In the introduction to this paper, we noted the Conservative Party's strong advocacy of apprenticeship prior to the 2010 General Election and policy papers from the Liberal Democrats (2009b) shared similar recommendations to those of the Conservatives. In government, the warm words and statements (from both the DfE and BIS) of intent to expand apprentice numbers in England have continued (and strongly supported in the Wolf Review). Similar statements can be seen emanating from the governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, the latest announcement is for there to be 100,000 more apprenticeship places by 2014, of which 25,000 will be for 16- to 18-year-olds, with the rest classed as 'adult apprenticeships' (Cable 2011). Yet, so far, ministers in the DfE and BIS have given no indication of how apprenticeships for 16- to 18-year-olds might differ to those for adults. Just as under the previous Labour government, it is difficult to keep track of the numbers (and related statements on funding) as the administrative data on apprenticeship remains highly problematic due to constant changes (and omissions) in the way statistics have been kept since the state began directly funding apprenticeship in 1994 (see Fuller and Unwin 2010; see also 2008). Judging the extent to which the Coalition performs better or worse than its predecessors will be tricky. For the moment, however, apprenticeship is firmly part of the new government's strategy not only for education and training, but more centrally for economic growth and the rebalancing of the economy. As this section will argue, however, the role of apprenticeship in the 14–19 phase is characterised by deep-rooted problems and there is little sign that the Coalition is willing to carry out the required reforms.

Table 1. Apprentices by top ten framework sectors and age, 2008–2009.

Sector framework	16–18	19–24	25+	Total starts
Customer service	3760	9860	8920	22,540
Business administration	8300	6460	6030	20,790
Children's care	9980	4970	2300	17,250
Construction	11,090	4930	760	16,780
Hospitality	4390	7700	4710	16,800
Hairdressing	12,080	3250	830	16,160
Engineering	8840	5210	1200	15,250
Health and social care	2500	4510	5270	12,280
Retail	2830	4820	3290	10,940
Management	190	2980	6750	9920
Totals	63,960	54,690	40,060	158,710

Source: Derived and calculated from personal correspondence National Apprenticeship Service – most recent confirmed figures.

In comparison with a number of other European countries, apprenticeship as a pathway for young people is astonishingly under-utilised in the UK despite the policy rhetoric and investment afforded to it over the past few years. In relation to Apprenticeship for post-16s, figures for England for 2008–2009 show that around 5.2% of the 16–18 cohort is in apprenticeships. This breaks down into 1.5% in Advanced Apprenticeship (level 3) and 3.7% in Intermediate Apprenticeships (level 2³). British employers are much more inclined to recruit people over the age of 18 to apprenticeships, as Table 1 shows.

It can be seen from this table that the largest share of 16- to 18-year-olds is in two sectors, construction and hairdressing, followed by business administration, children's care and engineering. Thus, in relation to the whole economy, apprenticeship opportunities for young people are severely limited. Furthermore, 75% of 16- to 18-year-olds are in level 2 apprenticeships where access to the kinds of vocational qualifications that demand the level of knowledge and skills required for progression is variable. In the top recruiting sector, Customer Service, the vast majority of apprentices are over the age of 19 when they start. Colleges, private training providers and awarding bodies all accept that Customer Service is the cheapest apprenticeship to deliver as qualifications are easily and quickly acquired on-the-job. Given that the majority of 19+ apprentices are already employed when they begin their apprenticeship (they are classed as 'conversions'), the Coalition Government needs to ask questions about why and what it is paying for in relation to adult apprenticeships.

As part of the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act, 2009, the previous Labour government introduced the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE), which the Coalition Government is continuing to implement. Unfortunately, SASE will not address the lack of rigour in many of the level 2 apprenticeships or ensure greater consistency in terms of apprentices' access to quality training. As such, the new government appears to be back-tracking on the commitments to improving quality made by both Conservatives and Liberal Democrats prior to election. Prior to the SASE, Apprenticeship and Advanced Apprenticeship were clearly positioned as leading respectively to 'full' level 2 (equivalent to five GCSE at A* to C) or level 3 attainment (equivalent to two A level passes). As a minimum, this was guaranteed through the inclusion of an NVQ2 or NVQ3 and enhanced through the inclusion of a Technical Certificate. The SASE requirements are much looser. Rather than successful completion of a framework clearly leading to *full* level 2/3 attainment, it now leads to attainment *at* level 2/3. Given that progression from level 2 to level 3 and level 3 to level 4 (higher education) is already very weak, this drop in the exchange value of many apprenticeship frameworks can only serve to undermine the 'brand's' currency and credibility as a substantial programme of learning and attainment. Rather than tackling the inadequacy of SASE, John Hayes has suggested the following ways to boost the image of apprenticeship: (a) hold 'graduation' ceremonies for apprentices; (b) introduce an apprentice 'roll of honour'; and (c) create alumni-type associations for former apprentices.

In relation to the points made earlier in the paper regarding the new government's fondness for the language of craft and technical skills, and the engineering-dominated focus of the proposed UTCs, there is a sense that Ministers may be viewing VET through a masculine lens. If this were true, then long-held concerns about gender segregation in apprenticeship may be overlooked (Beck, Fuller, and Unwin 2006; Fuller and Davey 2010). There are two significant reasons why we should be concerned about continued gender segregation in apprenticeship. First, there is the issue of apprenticeship wages. Current available data for apprenticeship pay shows that, whilst the median pay gap between men and women for the whole economy in April 2007 was 11%, for apprentices it was 21%. In the two highest paid sectors (electro-technical and engineering manufacture), the vast majority of apprentices are

males, whereas in the three lowest paid sectors (hairdressing, health and social care, and early years), the vast majority of apprentices are female. In addition to being financially disadvantaged, women are also more likely to be restricted to sectors where it is difficult to progress. The service sectors, where women dominate, tend to offer far more level 2 than level 3 apprenticeships. To progress beyond level 2 can be difficult in sectors where less value is placed on qualifications and where the vocational knowledge being deployed is less codified and the skills tend to be regarded as 'soft' or 'interpersonal' and, hence, equated with so-called feminine attributes. We have calculated that around 30% of 16- to 18-year-old female apprentices are in hairdressing. Whilst hairdressing provides a useful career for many young women, government needs to ensure they are able to progress both within and beyond this predominantly low-paid sector.

The Young Apprenticeship programme for 14- to 16-year-olds, regarded as an option for those on course to achieve good GCSE grades, has been available as 'a pilot' since 2004, but it too has been criticised for perpetuating gender segregation. It has been taken by approximately 43,000 young people (personal correspondence with official in DCSF, May 2010). A three-year Ofsted (2007, 5) evaluation said the programme 'continues to provide a successful alternative to traditional routes through Key Stage 4 for average and above average ability students' and that participating employers were impressed. The DfE has confirmed funding will continue for the next two years, but the Wolf Report (2011, 109) commented on how 'courses with a very strong practical and vocational element tend to be costly when offered to small numbers of school-based pupils', declaring Young Apprenticeships to be 'extremely expensive'. Tony Blair understood that last point when he declared at a conference in 2004:

Vocational education isn't a free good: it is expensive, and rightly so because for the individuals involved, and their economic potential, it is vital they get the skills they need. (Blair 2004)

Conclusion

Michael Gove has so far responded to the report from the Wolf Review by immediately accepting four of its recommendations: (a) to allow qualified further education lecturers to teach in schools; (b) to clarify the rules on allowing industry professionals to teach in schools; (c) to allow any vocational qualification offered by a regulated awarding body to be taken by 14- to 19-year-olds; and (d) to allow 'established high-quality vocational qualifications' that have not been accredited within the QCF to be offered in schools and colleges from September 2011 (DfE 2011).

The first of these recommendations has long been called for by the FE profession and will no doubt be welcomed by schools wanting to expand their VET provision, and also, of course, by the emerging UTCs and Studio Schools. Professional parity of esteem must, however, be matched by parity in employment conditions. Vocational teachers in further education colleges and private training providers are paid less than school teachers and have less generous terms and conditions. Much more needs to be done to create stronger professional communities and status for vocational teachers, including giving them a much stronger role in the design of VET programmes and qualifications. The second recommendation will also enable schools to more easily make use of local expertise to help deliver VET programmes. The third and fourth recommendations are designed to restore greater autonomy to schools and colleges, enabling them to provide qualifications they regard to as being appropriate for their learners, and, importantly, those which employers appear to value. This potential 'freedom' would, however,

require a fundamental change to the existing funding regime and also the way the state regulates qualifications.

The Coalition Government (again supported by Wolf) is continuing the 'employer-led' rhetoric of the previous government with regard to its approach to VET in that it continues to treat employers as an homogenous group whose 'needs' are filtered through so-called employer bodies such as Sector Skills Councils and the CBI. Its benchmark employer is Rolls Royce, the UK's world-class engineering manufacturing company that has hosted countless visits from government ministers for many years and which still runs an apprenticeship programme of the highest quality. Yet Rolls Royce is one of very few companies whose vision of VET and skills training more broadly would match that of other European countries such as Germany and Finland where young people experience a much more consistent approach regardless of the sector or level of programme. In stark contrast, the new government's vision is of a differentiated VET system in which quality becomes, like beauty, a concept in the eye of the beholder (i.e., the sole criterion for quality being that it is 'fit for purpose', however narrowly defined by individual companies).

Having reviewed the Coalition Government's record so far in relation to VET for 14- to 19-year-olds in England, we conclude that it is unclear how the best of existing VET provision will be built on and expanded, whilst, at the same time, it is highly probably that the worst will continue and may thrive. In her report, Wolf (2011) states that VET programmes for 16- to 18-year-olds, 'should be governed by a set of general principles relating primarily to content, general structure, assessment arrangements and contact time' (Recommendation 5). Yet the report gives no indication as to what these principles might be. In addition (Recommendation 6), the report states that, 'Arrangements for part-time students and work-based 16- to 18-year-olds will be different but the design of learning programmes for such students should also be considered'. Again, no further clue is given as to what this 'difference' might amount to.

We would argue that a new coherent and consistent approach to VET for 14- to 19-year-olds would be to use a 'dual system' or 'alternance' model of upper-secondary education and transition, with programme options lasting for between three and five years depending on vocational area and level. We are not arguing that England should simply import or copy a model from Germany or France. Rather, we are proposing an approach that combines work-based and 'classroom-based' tuition and experience, with a planned transition from 14, in which programmes consist of a broad general education and some vocational education, building towards a point where the latter became the dominant core (with some general education maintained to the end). Such an approach would be within a framework of career progression so that young people had a vision of how they might progress within both the occupational field they were currently attached to and in the labour market more generally. This would enable young people to gain vocational knowledge and occupational expertise, plus the underpinning general education required to progress, and with the understanding and confidence that, although, they may have initially selected an occupational field, they had sufficient depth and breadth to change direction. Thus, the concerns of some that vocational education might restrict young people's horizons at too early an age would be minimised as would the restrictive segmentation alluded to at the start of the paper.

Notes

1. This paper is based on research being carried out in the ESRC-funded Research Centre, LLAKES (Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies) based at the Institute of Education – grant reference RES-594-28-0001.

2. Figures provided in telephone call to the Academy.
3. The level 2 apprenticeship was renamed Intermediate Apprenticeship in the new Specification of Apprenticeship Standards in England (2011), it was previously known simply as Apprenticeship.

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