**Voice Scotland response**

**Educational attainment gap - Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce**

We welcome the recognition being given to vocational education and enhanced careers information, advice and guidance. Whilst much depends on the effectiveness of implementation strategies, we believe that implementing the recommendations of the Wood report are likely to improve provision and support for vocational education and have a positive impact on attainment and achievement. Pupils most likely to benefit would include those who have become (or are at risk of becoming) disaffected by the traditional emphasis of a narrow academic curriculum which has proved to be neither suitable nor relevant to their interests and abilities. Such pupils are not necessarily less able than their academic counterparts, but rather differently abled and, therefore, in need of a curriculum which is more tailored to their skills and learning preferences. At the same time, it is unhelpful to maintain stereotyped distinctions between academic and vocationally inclined students, as there are many students for whom vocational education reignites interest in academic work, because they benefit from seeing the practical relevance of academic skills applied in a vocational context.

We would, however, caution against an over-prescriptive approach to vocational education, whether tied to an age group (e.g. senior phase) or subject area (e.g. STEM). Flexibility is needed so that schools and colleges can tailor provision to match the needs of students rather than the needs of performance tables, funding agreements or curriculum requirements (all of which should be sufficiently flexible to allow for a tailored and best-practice approach, rather than giving incentives for perverse practices). Therefore, the question of how attainment is to be measured will also require consideration.

The present system, which emphasises ‘academic’ education, often with vocational education tacked on casually as a late addition, is wasteful of resources, including the human resource of young people caught up on both sides of the academic/vocational divide. Those who follow a traditional academic path up to Highers and then fail to obtain a university place are often ill-equipped to find an alternative pathway into employment, whilst many students who have entered vocationally training may end up being employed in a field unrelated to the ‘vocation’ for which they have studied. This situation can only be resolved by breaking down the false dichotomy between vocational and academic education.

We, therefore, support the recommendation to enhance vocational content “without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age”. It is probably a mistake to label an entire section of knowledge as ‘vocational’, thus identifying it as being ‘different’ (in some, possibly, indefinable way) from the rest of education. This inevitably leads to a ‘pecking order’ in which vocational education is seen as inferior. Content and application of knowledge should take priority over status and parity. The aim of all education (whether perceived to be academic or vocational) should be to develop cohorts of young people with key transferable competencies which will enable them to progress to generic roles in the economy and to move flexibly between these roles according to the exigencies of the labour market and their personal aspirations and interests. Whilst those who show a preference and/or aptitude for more specialised roles should be given the opportunity to progress to appropriate education or training courses, early specialisation should generally be discouraged as it often entails cutting off alternative options at too young an age. We would also submit that individual classes in whatever subject should be comprised of pupils of similar ability, to ensure that individual pupils’ needs are adequately met.

We welcome the recognition of the critical role to be played by further education colleges in the delivery of vocational options. The inclusion of professional staff with dual qualifications in both teaching and vocational specialisms will be pivotal to the effective delivery and success of vocational education in schools, colleges and the workplace.

It is important that appropriate support, funding and guidance is made available so that implementation of the recommendations is fully resourced, promoted and publicised. This should include properly resourced access to high quality careers information, advice and guidance, including one-to-one face-to-face provision, to ensure that young people are adequately assisted to make...
appropriate and well-informed decisions about which options to pursue. Specialist and dedicated support is particularly required to reach young people who are disengaged (or at risk of becoming disengaged) from education. Much of this support is already available through those further education colleges which are already experienced in reaching out to hard-to-reach groups, but more effectively tailored funding and resourcing will be needed to extend this facility to a wider clientele.

Waiting until the senior phase of education, whilst appropriate for dedicated courses, is too late to introduce access to work-related learning, as such learning should not be kept in reserve until all else has failed. Vocational elements should be included from the earliest years of compulsory education, with opportunities for all children and young people to engage with a wide range of crafts, practical science and technology, business and work with people during all stages of their education. It is important that this is not restricted to STEM subjects, as better links are required between vocational education and all sectors of the labour market. Social enterprise projects, or other kinds of business enterprise initiatives, can effectively foster a wide range of skills – in literacy, marketing, creativity, entrepreneurialism and working with people, as well as in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – and have been found to be especially effective in reconnecting disengaged students. Curriculum for Excellence provides an opportunity for embedding such inter-disciplinary initiatives and this should be fully exploited for all age groups.

Engaging with employers is a particular challenge especially as, in the current post-industrial age, the majority of workers are employed in small enterprises, all of which have diverse requirements (even when they are in the same area of economic activity). Whilst many employers appear to expect new workers to arrive fully trained (although there might be disagreement over what this ‘training’ should include), others believe that they have a unique approach to their trade or business and prefer to put significant resources into training new recruits in these distinctive methods. Therefore, more contact, interaction and networking between schools, colleges, private and third sector training providers and the widest possible range of employers must be encouraged by all available means.

The Wood report includes a very useful section on advancing equalities but, whilst (understandably) this section focuses on the protected characteristics of gender, ethnicity and disability, reference to socio-economic inequalities more generally is addressed only in relation to care leavers. This needs to be widened to include other vulnerable groups, such as children and young people in persistent poverty. Often, such children are required to find employment at an early age (often in a part-time capacity whilst still at school, and foregoing opportunities to engage in further and/or higher education). Such paid employment is often highly valued by employers (more so than work experience) and provides scope for the development of employability skills, so it would be helpful to draw on such experience to structure learning about the workplace and motivate students, especially those who are economically disadvantaged.

It is also essential to ensure that appropriate continuing professional development opportunities are provided so that school staff can “better understand employability and modern work skills”. This should include opportunities to network with further education colleges and employers, undertake short-term secondments (e.g. a week’s work experience in industry) and attending structured training events (including online learning). Teacher workloads and staff shortages also pose a considerable barrier in terms of time for staff to plan developments and will require consideration.

The question of whether there would need to be significant reorganisation in schools to accommodate all the proposed changes depends largely on what arrangements are currently in place in particular schools and the resource implications for any given area of the country. For example, in rural areas, travel costs and travel time can make working with colleges difficult in practice. Our members report timetabling being a particular issue, with school classes missed as a result of timetabling for a day out at college not proving possible. Our members also report that it is not uncommon for pupils to drop their college commitments in these circumstances, having found balancing school work and college work a struggle in practice. Truanting and disaffection are issues which our members report would require particular vigilance given the movement of pupils between different learning locations.

Some schools and local authorities already have well-developed and successful links with colleges and employers, whilst others are further behind in this process. Those that are further ahead will, no doubt, wish to maintain and further strengthen links (which may have suffered because of recent
austerity cuts), whilst those which are further behind will require more support to implement the changes. Schools with appropriate experience should be encouraged to disseminate and showcase good practice and, perhaps, provide mentoring support to other establishments. Adequate resource will be required to ensure that a larger scale strategy is successful in ensuring comprehensive delivery.

The whole process needs to be designed so that it is both intrinsically and extrinsically rewarding by celebrating the achievement of targets at each stage. This may include displays, presentations, exhibitions, competitions, awards (both group and individual), visits, residential experiences, and so on.

Please don’t hesitate to get in touch should you have any queries further to the above response.

I would be most grateful for acknowledgement of safe receipt of this e-mail.

Kind regards

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