



# NFER Thinks

What the evidence tells us

## Evidence for Excellence in Education

### Changing attitudes to vocational education



This paper argues for a fundamental change to the way we view vocational education. Changing attitudes is the next key step in transforming our education system into the inclusive and productive one we need to prosper in the global market place.

Recent reforms to strengthen vocational education are welcome. But attitudes have not kept up with the pace of change, and it remains the poor relation of academic attainment. At the same time 16 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds are unemployed<sup>1</sup> and there is consensus that we need to provide the appropriate training to improve and complete the skills of our nation's workforce.



AND

BUT  
CONSIDER  
THIS

**8 out of 10 employers** believe skills shortages will limit the growth of the UK economy within the next three years (Princes Trust, 2014).

Employers worry that young people are leaving education without the right skills because the education system is **too focused on academia (49%)** and **does not meet the needs of businesses (47%)** (City & Guilds, 2014).

German students on pre-16 vocational courses were **more capable mathematically** than English young people of a similar age on academic courses (Skills Commission, 2014, p.18).

## Introduction

For our economy to thrive, England needs more young people to undertake high-quality vocational education so that we develop a broad mix of skilled individuals motivated to learn.

Alongside existing policy changes to establish sustainable structures and funding systems, and to provide high-quality vocational qualifications, we need to address entrenched views that academic routes are 'better'.

This change is necessary to give all young people the chance to fully participate in learning appropriate to their needs, fulfil their potential, find employment and secure future economic growth. Having developed a sound foundation of academic skills and knowledge, young people can progress on to vocational courses that will provide them with worthwhile benefits.<sup>2</sup>

So why is this not a straightforward aspiration to achieve?

## Challenges and opportunities

Challenges associated with vocational education are not new – indeed the path is littered with failed attempts to fully integrate it into the education system. Following a period of high youth unemployment and a weak economy in the 1970s, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) was launched in 1983. “However, rather than heralding, as promised, the ‘rebirth of technical education’ ... TVEI was seen as failing to secure the coherent, skills-related curriculum, 14–19, that had been intended.” (Richardson and Wiborg, 2010, p. iii).

In 1992 General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced, and then phased out between 2005 and 2007 following the introduction of the Applied (GCE) A level in 2005. In 2008, following the 14–19 Education and Skills White Paper (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2005), the composite Diploma qualification was introduced with 14 ‘lines of learning’; it represented ‘applied’ learning (the application of theory to practical situations). The Diploma was withdrawn in 2013 largely due to concerns over the perceived value and complexity of the qualification.

Underlying these failures are three main challenges to embedding vocational education as a viable alternative to more academic routes:

- establishing sustainable structures and funding systems
- providing high-quality vocational qualifications
- addressing entrenched views that academic routes are better.

A great deal of progress has been made in addressing the first two challenges. Ongoing reforms to simplify and improve structures, funding and the quality of qualifications are steps in the right direction and should be welcomed. Many of these have followed from the Richard Review of Apprenticeships (Richard, 2012) and Professor Alison Wolf’s review of vocational education. The Wolf review reported in 2011 that “at least 350,000 16–19 year olds were working towards vocational qualifications which were of very limited value, either to them or to employers” (Wolf, 2011). Her recommendations included that qualifications must meet rigorous new requirements; that study programmes should include high-quality work experience; and that all 16 to 19 provision should be funded on a ‘per student’ basis, rather than on a qualification basis.

Additionally, having noted the challenge to increasing the number of young people taking apprenticeships, Professor Wolf recommended that major efforts should be made “to provide greater access to the workplace for 16–18 year olds” (Wolf, 2011, p.12).

In 2014 apprenticeships increasingly offer viable alternatives to traditional academic pathways to securing employment. Lord Baker recently commented:

“At 14, young people should be able to take stretching technical and vocational qualifications as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. The government has strengthened technical and vocational qualifications taken by young people at 16 and 18, and they will be properly recognised in future performance tables. (Lord Baker of Dorking, 2014).

However, **without a change in our perceptions of vocational education, overcoming challenges of structures, funding and quality are futile.** Although a necessary first step to changing perceptions, the provision of better quality, more coherent vocational education routes is not sufficient on its own.

<sup>1</sup> Dar, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> A recent study estimates that those undertaking higher apprenticeships could earn around £150,000 more over their lifetime, comparable to the return for the average graduate (BIS/DfE 2013).



**65% of teachers** would rarely or never advise a student to take an apprenticeship if they had the grades required for university entry (NFER 2014).

**Only one-quarter of parents** judge vocational education to be worthwhile (Edge Foundation, 2014).

**70% of young people** turn to **parents** and **57% to teachers** for careers advice (Freshminds, 2014).

It will change nothing, and provide few opportunities, if vocational routes are not then *chosen* by a substantial number of young people. We face entrenched views that academic routes are better for all. These views have to change. This is not a straightforward process, as indicated in **Figure 1**.

NFER believes this is a challenge that requires urgent attention.

**So, how can we change behaviour?**

We are not alone in suggesting that the time is right for change:

“ There has been a very welcome focus at all the major party conferences on skills and on the importance of vocational education ... If political rhetoric is mirrored in broader opinion, the conference season may be one that signalled a shift away from seeing academic study as the only form of aspiration towards a broad acceptance that all educational pathways can lead to huge personal and economic success.  
Dr Lynne Sedgmore CBE, Executive Director of the 157 Group, October 2014.

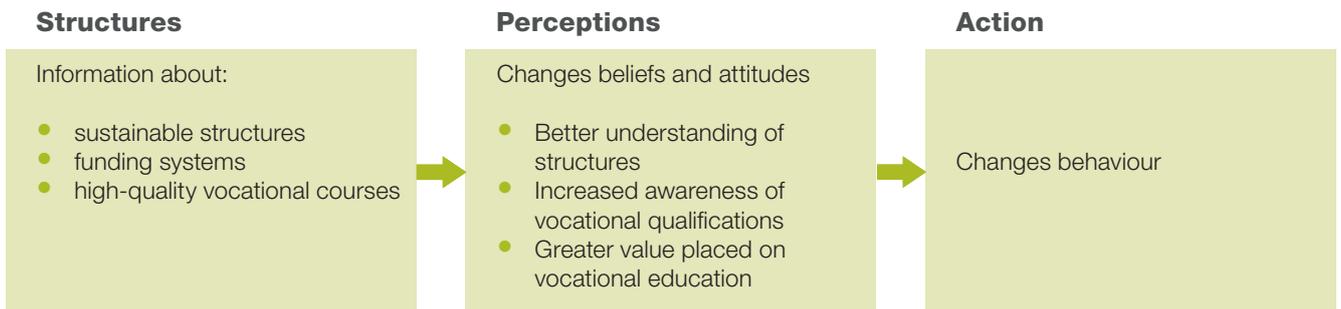
“ Our stated goal is for people to regard academic and vocational routes to higher educational attainment as equally valid – and for higher level qualifications, academic and vocational to be of equal prestige. This will continue to be an uphill battle ... We urgently need balanced careers advice, with schools as conscious and supportive of vocational opportunities as academic ones. There’s still a lingering view in this country that apprenticeships are for people who don’t make it to university. This is wrong, and it would be met with bewilderment in other countries ...  
Dr Vince Cable MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Cambridge University, April 2014.

The key to changing behaviour is to change perceptions of vocational education. Perceptions, based on beliefs and attitudes, are influenced by better understanding and increased awareness of vocational education (**Figure 1**). This, in turn, requires an understanding of the way in which young people develop their attitudes and make decisions.

The evidence points to three key factors in young people’s decision-making about what courses and qualifications to take: personal agency; the school environment, such as careers information (including from employers) provided in schools; and parental and teachers’ influence.

Personal agency includes a young person’s enjoyment of a subject and its perceived usefulness or motivation to pursue a particular career path (McCrone et al., 2005). They approach decision-making in different ways according to their mindsets (e.g. being a ‘determined realist’ or ‘unrealistic dreamer’) and their decisions alter over time (Blenkinsop et al., 2006), indicating the complexity and individuality inherent in decision-making.

Young people are influenced by their school environment. They are more satisfied with their choices, and fewer subsequently drop out, when they are in schools that provide balanced and impartial advice about options and courses (such as those available from alternative providers and employers); when they have sufficient time to make decisions; and when they have personalised support from informed teachers who know them (McCrone et al., 2005). Underpinning knowledge about, and ways to access information on, routes to careers is also exceptionally important in enabling young people to make the right decisions in years 9 and 11. Young people who make effective and successful transitions are more likely to have had good careers exploration skills and a sound factual knowledge of the course and routes open to them (Morris, 2004; Morris et al., 1999a and b).



**Figure 1:** How information and awareness changes perceptions, attitudes and actions



**41 out of 73 colleges** have difficulty offering work experience in some curriculum areas: “by far the biggest issue is lack of employers and capacity issues” (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2014, p.34).



**Approximately one-third of 14 to 15-year-olds** said they were quite likely to do an apprenticeship, but by **19 to 20 years old**, only **one-tenth** had actually done an apprenticeship. (Croll and Attwood, 2014).

**28%**  
**20%**  
**7%**

Only a minority of FSB members felt very or quite confident that **university leavers (28%), college leavers (20%)** and **school leavers (7%)** were prepared for the world of work (FSB, 2012).

Young people are also influenced by their parents, peers and teachers. A recent survey of parents<sup>3</sup> of teenagers commissioned by the Edge Foundation shows that parents’ knowledge of non-academic qualifications is increasing, but overall parents still know more about academic qualifications. In addition, there has been so much recent change to 14 to 19 educational routes, and a growing emphasis on the skills needed for the world of work, that many parents and teachers are not up to date with current and local education alternatives and employment opportunities.

So what does good advice about non-academic routes look like? The national evaluation of Diplomas revealed that the Diploma-related careers guidance valued by young people included detailed and specific information on its content (including details about assessment methods and locations of delivery); well-informed support from teachers, parents and careers advisers; and information provided in a wide range of different formats (for example, taster sessions and information from peers undertaking the course) (Wade et al, 2011). These elements are equally applicable to other technical, practical and vocational education or training courses.

## Policy solutions

Armed with knowledge on the ways in which young people make decisions, we need to raise awareness and understanding among teachers, parents and employers.

Parents want the best for their children, teachers want the best for their students and employers want young employees ready for the world of work. For the vocational system to work in this country we need all three of these groups to put aside historical prejudices and appreciate that there are many and different routes to achieving success – and that we all have a part to play in making it work.

Given the focus on social mobility, it is particularly important that young people from families with lower social capital (that is they have fewer social contacts and networks that give them access to opportunities) benefit from advice to ensure they follow the best route for them (Haynes, G et al., 2012).

**All teachers** need to be better equipped with a basic knowledge of the range of options open to young people and where to direct them for impartial information. This should be part of teachers’ professional standards. It would build on their awareness, developed through teacher training, that

young people learn in different ways. Through inclusion in ongoing professional development, and more interaction with employers, teachers would be able to continually update their knowledge on transition routes and the importance of young people receiving impartial advice. A College of Teaching could include in its services information on vocational routes to ensure that it meets the needs of teachers in this area.

**Parents** also need a greater awareness and understanding of current vocational qualifications and routes into employment. The introduction of an integrated application system for vocational and academic qualifications similar to that currently used for university entrance would help support this. It would serve to promote parity of esteem with academic qualifications. Other ways to increase understanding and ‘win hearts and minds’ could include a national government advertising campaign (and further local authority- and school-led initiatives) challenging perceptions of vocational education as ‘second-rate’ to academic education. Such a campaign could highlight success stories of young people’s preferred routes to employment and the vocational nature of many university courses.

**Schools, colleges and employers**, including corporate, small and medium-sized employers and microbusinesses, need to engage with each other to provide young people with information on academic and vocational routes to employment. They need to be supported to do so and may need financial incentives. Support could come from organisations such as sector bodies, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), education business partnerships (EBPs) and local National Careers Service contractors. NFER is currently carrying out research, in partnership with London Councils, South East Strategic Leaders and the London Enterprise Panel, to explore ways to strengthen engagement between schools and colleges and small and medium-sized employers and microbusinesses in London and the south-east.

## Conclusions

Ultimately there is no point in further developing one pathway if there is a general perception that it leads nowhere. Without a transformational change in attitudes, our young people will continue down the same routes, failing to take advantage of the full range of increasingly high-quality opportunities to develop their skills and reach their potential.

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## NFER

NFER is a charity with a reputation worldwide for providing independent and robust evidence for excellence in education and children's services. Our aim is to improve education and learning, and hence the lives of learners, by researching what is happening now. Our authoritative insights inform policy and practice, offering a unique perspective on today's educational challenges.

We work with an extensive network of organisations, all genuinely interested in making a difference to education and learners. Any surplus generated is reinvested in research projects to continue our work to improve the life chances of all learners from early years through to higher education.

### Tami McCrone



Research director Tami McCrone is a member of a new team that is leading efforts to ensure that NFER's research engages effectively with policymakers, teachers, and others involved in the education sector, and leads them to do things differently as a result.

She previously worked as a senior research manager in the Centre for Evaluation and Evidence in the Research Department at NFER.

Tami has led qualitative and quantitative research projects and literature reviews for government departments and educational agencies at local and national levels.

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