

Comments on the Interim Report of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce (Part 1)



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I am responding to the invitation to comment on the Commission's interim report. My comments are made in a personal capacity.

Key messages

- New vocational pathways starting in the Senior Phase would be welcome, but they should be consistent with its broad educational role and they should not introduce divisive streams.
- Any new measures should aim for a small number of well-structured and interconnected pathways, not a 'seamless' system.
- Greater clarity of the objectives of vocational programmes, and of the respective roles of college-based and work-based pathways, is required.
- Lessons from earlier interventions need to be learnt before further changes are planned.
- The 'skills problem' lies as much with the demand and utilisation of skills as with their supply.

I welcome several aspects of the report's analysis and recommendations, including:

- The aim to raise the profile of vocational education and training for young people, and to encourage debate about its place within the wider education system;
- The report's refusal to treat the unemployment or poor employability of young people simply as a problem for schools and colleges. Relations between education and the labour market are a two-way process, and employers, together with other stakeholders, have roles to play;
- The aim to enhance the vocational content of the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age;
- The emphasis on developing better structured and more transparent pathways. The academic pathway through Highers to university is relatively transparent and well signposted; other pathways are less so, although they often cater for young people with fewer resources and information to navigate them.¹

However:

- Recommendation 4, that the new regional colleges should have a 'primary focus on employment outcomes and supporting local economic development', would appear to exceed the Commission's remit. While employment and economic development should be important elements of the colleges' work, other foci, notably relating to widening access and social inclusion, are also important.
- The materials published with the report include a useful summary of trends in employment and associated labour-market research. However, there is no parallel summary of relevant

¹ The lack of clarity of post-16 pathways has been associated with a widening of social inequalities in participation and attainment beyond 16: Raffe, D. et al (2006) Social-Class Inequalities in Education in England and Scotland, *CES Briefing* 40, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief040.pdf>. Inequalities narrowed, but did not disappear, under Higher Still: Croxford, L. (2009) *Change over time in the context, outcomes and inequalities of secondary school in Scotland*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/04/27160059/0>

educational research. Educational researchers appear not to have engaged with the Commission's work, possibly because its title obscured its interest in the education system.

- The lessons from previous policies and initiatives need to be learnt. Most of the issues identified in the report have been the subject of debates and interventions in Scotland – and elsewhere – over several decades. The fact that similar issues are still being identified suggests that these interventions have not been wholly successful. Before proceeding with any further reform it would be essential to review the history of recent policies in this area to find out what has and has not worked and what the experience of these policies can tell us about the causes of the problems and about possible strategies for tackling them. Otherwise this report could simply continue the tendency for policy to go round in circles.

Below I offer a few suggestions based on educational research and the lessons from earlier interventions.

1. Vocational education may have a variety of aims and objectives and it is important to be clear about which objectives apply in which contexts. It may aim to develop:
 - *A general preparation for the world of work*, not specific to an area of employment;
 - *Vocational capability*, a broad preparation for an area of work, typically to be followed by more specific training on the job;
 - *Occupational competence* in a specific occupation.

The first of these should arguably be a part of every young person's education, as part of a broad education to develop the 'four capacities' of Curriculum for Excellence. The other two are based on a choice, albeit provisional, of an occupation or occupational area; to the extent that they are provided within the school curriculum, they need to be delivered in a way that maintains curriculum breadth and does not close off future options.

2. Many vocational programmes have a further if tacit objective of engaging students who are disaffected and at risk of dropping out of the school system. This is undesirable for at least three reasons. First, it reinforces the low status of vocational learning and the perception that it is for learners who cannot handle an academic curriculum. Second, such learners may lack the maturity or the cognitive and personal skills required in vocational programmes. Third, the evidence suggests that vocational courses which engage disaffected learners tend to do so because of their resources, learning styles and personal attention rather than because of their vocational content.²
3. Within schools, the more occupationally-specific vocational options should be designed, not as stand-alone courses providing marketable vocational qualifications, but rather as possible first steps in vocational pathways. Pre-vocational or low-level vocational qualifications have little labour-market currency in their own right.³ Nor are they likely to be recognised for credit

² Spielhofer, T and Walker, M. (2008) *Evaluation of Skills for Work Pilot courses*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government; Steedman, H. and Stoney, S. (2004) Disengagement 14-16: Context and evidence. CEP Discussion Paper 654. London School of Economics; Howieson, C. and Raffe, D. (2007) *Skills for Work courses and the development of vocational and pre-vocational courses for school-age pupils: an issues paper*. Research and Information Services Bulletin No 28. Glasgow: SQA; Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education*. London: DfE.

³ The evidence reviewed by Wolf (2011, op cit) is primarily about England, but it describes the British labour market and is largely applicable to Scotland. See also Riddell, S., Edward, S., Raffe, D., Tett, L. and Weedon, E. (2008) *Skills Development Scotland: An Overview of the Policy and Delivery Evidence Base*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.

transfer into college-based vocational programmes or Modern Apprenticeships.⁴ They may, however, help young people to choose and prepare for such programmes and facilitate their access. If new pathways are to 'go with the grain' of the current system they should therefore be designed to emphasise this general 'preparation and access' function for their school components, rather than to generate significant credit for transfer into subsequent stages.⁵

4. The low status of vocational education and training is not primarily a cultural problem. Many vocational pathways are less transparent and less predictable than other pathways, and lead to destinations with lower standing, remuneration and security; it is hardly surprising that they have lower status. Other vocational programmes, such as medical training and apprenticeships with leading employers, have very high status. The low status of less favoured vocational pathways is a problem in nearly all countries, not only Scotland or the UK. Policies which treat the standing of vocational learning as a cultural issue, and in particular those which seek to 'blame the messenger' who provides information or advice, are likely to be counterproductive.
5. The SCQF is a valuable tool for constructing progression pathways, but it should be used to support the development of well-designed pathways based on strong institutions and partnerships, rather than as a substitute for such development. The notion of an infinitely flexible, 'seamless' system, based on a liquid currency of credits that can be spent anywhere and accumulated in a wide variety of ways, is unhelpful. An effective system needs to be built around a small number of well-structured pathways, which interconnect and offer well-signposted choice points.⁶
6. There have been several previous attempts to promote school-college partnerships, at least since the 'Action Plan' of 1983. Successive studies have drawn attention to the challenges to be overcome, including the tendency for provision to be determined by the available capacity, issues of communication and coordination, the costs of travel, administration and double-staffing, the sustainability of partnerships under changing financial and organisational pressures, and so on.⁷ There is also a risk that cultural changes within schools will be less likely to take place if the vocational aspects of the curriculum are hived off to colleges.⁸ If the proposed new pathways are to be built around partnerships, clear and sustainable responses to these challenges will be required.

⁴ Howieson, C. and Raffe, D. (2012) *The paradox of Scotland: limited credit transfer in a credit-based system*. CES Briefing No 60. CES, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief060.pdf>. Full details in Howieson, C., Raffe, D. and Kinsella, A. (2011) *Credit Systems for Lifelong Learning: Final country report for Scotland*. CES, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/FinalReport.pdf>

⁵ Conversely, new measures which rejected this advice and introduced a school component leading to credits that were transferable to a vocational qualification, would need a clear strategy for overcoming the barriers to credit transfer. Our research identified institutional, epistemological (concerned with the type of learning) and political barriers; they are discussed in more detail by Howieson, C. and Raffe, D. (2013) *The paradox of Scotland: limited credit transfer in a credit-based lifelong learning system*. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39, 3, 366-384. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.806250>. Australia is the country where the approach of using school-based courses to generate 'marketable' vocational qualifications has been taken furthest, with mixed results.

⁶ Raffe, D. (2009) *The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: a case study of a very 'early starter'*, pp. 31-64 in Allais, S. et al *Learning from the first qualifications frameworks*. Employment Working Paper No. 45. Geneva: International Labour Office; http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcm_041902.pdf. See also Howieson, C. and Raffe, D. (2012, 2013) op cit.

⁷ For example, Spielhofer and Walker (2008) op cit, Howieson and Raffe (2007) op cit, and numerous HMI and research reports.

⁸ The OECD's report on *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (Paris, 2007) commended the 'North Lanarkshire model' for this reason.

7. Apprenticeship is an excellent entry route for many young workers. However, the UK and international experience shows that it is only effective under particular conditions, not all of which apply to all sectors of the Scottish labour market.⁹ Extending apprenticeships to areas where these conditions cannot easily be established would not only bring little improvement to those areas; it could undermine the Modern Apprenticeship 'brand' in areas where it is currently strong. The respective roles and rationales of Modern Apprenticeships and of college-based pathways such as National and Higher National awards are not clear. It would be helpful if the Commission were to propose a public statement of these roles which could inform future policy and funding decisions as well as the choices of young people themselves.
8. The recommendation to develop different brands for Modern Apprenticeships at different levels potentially reverses the 2006 decision to offer Modern Apprenticeships at SVQ2 as well as SVQ3 and above. Previously Skillseekers had been the main work-based programme at SVQ2. Have the lessons from this earlier change been learnt?
9. Employers and labour-market bodies have a role, not only in supporting schools and colleges to enhance the supply of skills, but also in addressing the demand for and utilisation of skills. The UK's 'skills problem' is not primarily one of supply, but a problem of the low demand and inadequate utilisation of skills.¹⁰ The Scottish Government has led the way, within the UK, in recognising this problem and seeking to address it.¹¹
10. Scotland's post-compulsory education and training system requires considerable skills of navigation, and this is likely to remain the case even if more transparent pathways are developed. Good career information, advice and guidance is required, and this requires an appropriate mix of face-to-face contact with careers advisers and written and web-based materials. Web-based support is a part, but only a part, of this mix, and learners who are uncertain of their career plans or of how to implement them need to have priority in accessing personal support.¹²

These comments cover only a handful of issues with which I am familiar. The need for a more rigorous review of research, and in particular an analysis of the lessons to be drawn from previous initiatives, remains.

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⁹ These conditions relate (among other things) to the nature and organisation of work, the capacity for joint action by (smaller) employers and the structure of the labour market. Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. (2009) Change and continuity in apprenticeship: the resilience of a model of learning. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22, 5, 405-416; Raffe, D. (2011) Cross-national differences in education-work transitions, pp. 312-328 in London, M. (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ See publications of the Centre for Skills Knowledge and Occupational Performance, eg Keep, E. and James, S. (2012) A Bermuda triangle of policy? 'Bad jobs', skills policy and incentives to learn at the bottom end of the labour market. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27, 2, 211-230.

¹¹ Scottish Government (2007) *Skills for Scotland*, and subsequent updates. Payne, J. (2013) Measure for measure: towards a measurement and evaluation framework for skills utilisation policy in the UK. *Journal of Education and Work*, 26, 2, 143-161.

¹² Howieson, C. and Semple, S. (2013) *What's the evidence? Comparing the impact of career websites and other career support*. CES Briefing 63. CES, University of Edinburgh. <http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/Brief063.pdf>.