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TRANSFORMING VOCATIONAL LEARNING: A CULTURAL REVOLUTION?

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I am pleased to have the opportunity today to talk about the importance of vocational learning. I'm also delighted to be sharing this platform with Digby Jones. I look forward to hearing his views on the importance of vocational skills in the world of business and enterprise.

Most people would agree that young people should have a broad and balanced curriculum: one that develops knowledge and understanding of different subjects and disciplines at the same time as helping them to make sense of society and its culture. But education also has a key role in meeting individual needs as well as the needs of society. And as part of that, it is vital that today's young people have the opportunity to learn the skills to prepare them for tomorrow's work place.

The world around us is changing ever more rapidly. The old glory days of heavy manufacturing on a large scale are no longer with us. As international trade continues to flourish, the market place for British business has become truly global, creating the need for a more highly skilled workforce. The young people of today need to be proficient in a number of areas and be able to acquire new skills as and when economic circumstances change. Many of today's workforce already find themselves working for several employers for varying periods of time, and many become self-employed. These changes are likely to continue. While UK Ltd in the sixties was forged in the "white heat" of technology, the new glory days will be shaped by cool heads, responding in a more enterprising way to the ever-changing conditions in the global marketplace.

So, success in general subjects is important. But young people also need an education that is vocationally relevant in order to acquire the necessary skills to become effective members of the workforce of the future.

In many of the excellent colleges of further education across the country, young people have access to high quality vocational courses. These courses are, above all, practical courses - underpinned by appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills that form the basis for future application within the world of work. A recurring theme in many of the good sessions we observe in colleges, is the positive impact that effective practical learning in vocational education has on the motivation, behaviour and attitudes of students, lower attaining and higher attaining alike.

A number of excellent secondary schools in this country also provide a first-class general education for young people including successful vocational courses for students aged 14-19. That said, I think it is fair to say that, compared to the provision of general education, schools have had mixed success in providing an education that is vocationally relevant for all youngsters.

Why is this so? I think the reason is partly because vocational education is held in such low esteem as compared to general education. For too long in this country, vocational courses have been regarded as second-class compared to academic courses, which are still seen as the main route to higher education and higher paid employment.

Why do we under-value vocational education so much? Is it because, unlike many of our international competitors, universities and employers have not been as closely involved with the development of vocational qualifications and thus fail to award the same status to vocational qualifications as general qualifications? Or, is it due to the vast amount of vocational qualifications available that cause employers and students

to be confused about their status and the lack of clear progression routes from one to another?

Is the lower status due to the disproportionate attention given to general education by the media perhaps? Take for example the annual furore over the examination results which has become a fixture in the English calendar. It sits between the start of the grouse-shooting season and the Notting Hill Carnival and signals the end of summer. Every year the media claim that the latest rise in standards is further evidence of exams “dumbing down” and Ministerial statements are issued claiming that it is in fact evidence of students and teachers wising up. The media, clearly, care about A-levels. But this attention isn’t extended to those thousands of pupils passing vocational qualifications each year and also going on to make up our highly skilled workforce.

Perhaps this lack of interest in vocational education accounts for the fact that few people have noticed that vocational education at the 14-19 stage is being transformed, quietly and without fuss. For example, in supporting its aspirations for vocational provision, the government has introduced measures to provide increased flexibility and choice in the curriculum for 14-16 year-olds, including work-related and enterprise learning as statutory elements. It has also introduced new general vocational qualifications such as GCSEs in vocational subjects and Vocational A-levels.

In addition, further significant opportunities to develop vocational provision at the 14-19 phase are provided by the Skills Strategy and the Success for All Strategy. Moreover, the recommendations of Mike Tomlinson’s working group on 14-19 reform include, among other things, the development of a more coherent qualifications’ structure to include high status vocational programmes.

As you may know, Ofsted has highlighted encouraging signs of progress. Despite these encouraging developments, however, we have reported a number of features that remain weak. The existence of these weaknesses means that we still have

some way to go before vocational education in this country can be said to match the best in the world. Nevertheless, I am convinced that there has never been a better opportunity to promote higher standards and greater coherence in vocational education. I believe improvements can and should be made to the current position in a number of key areas.

The first area relates to the issue I raised earlier - parity of value. The Tomlinson proposals seek to build on the strengths of good vocational provision and raise the quality of the overall vocational offer and provide opportunities for progression in the same ways as for academic studies. This will plainly depend on what he calls "equality of standing" between vocational and academic learning. As we reported last year, vocational courses in the countries we visited – Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia - are held in much higher esteem than they are in England. This is mainly because they are seen as providing clear pathways to higher education and employment. Students need to have confidence that vocational options are commensurate in value to general ones. They know about A-levels, but don't have enough knowledge about vocational alternatives. Schools should therefore provide some opportunities for vocational and enterprise learning pre-14 to give them sufficient understanding of the world of work to enable them to make informed choices about their options post-14.

Many of our grandparents had trades to be proud of, trades which, in a lot of cases, have died out over the last generation. Our young people should also be able to feel proud of opting for and developing a career in a particular vocational area, trade or profession, one that has high status and pays well as a reward for excellence, as is the case in other countries. We need to believe in our own potential and to learn from the outstanding practice that exists in our colleges as well as looking forward to further improvements, especially in our schools. Perhaps the newly introduced Young Apprenticeship Initiative for 14-16 year-olds will nurture a new generation of highly skilled tradesmen and woman who can play their part in developing Britain's enterprising future

This will also mean that students should have access to objective careers advice about such options. It seldom benefits lower attaining young people when teachers “guide” them towards vocational options that don’t interest them, simply because they struggle with general subjects. Vocational options for our able, ambitious youngsters should not be seen as second-class but as premier options. They should be encouraged to emulate our practically-minded, architects like Lord Foster, fashion designers such as Stella McCartney and Ozwald Boateng and chefs like Jamie Oliver.

Secondly, teachers of vocational courses should have a relevant qualification in the vocational subject they are asked to teach, and be required to have industrial experience, regularly updated through short-term placements in industry. This will help to ensure that teaching is firmly embedded in current industrial practice and that strong links are forged with employers. All teachers, whether they teach in secondary schools or colleges, should have sufficient training in vocational education, starting with their initial training at college or university, or as part of their institutionally-based training.

There is of course the issue of having appropriate vocational facilities in schools which we point out in our *Pathways to Parity* report. I am in favour of more school-based centres of vocational excellence. Tomlinson highlights this issue as well and rightly asserts that not all institutions provide appropriate facilities, especially schools. This, of course, depends on the vocational area of provision. It is generally not a problem in some, e.g. business, leisure and tourism, health and social care - although it is in others such as engineering. Clearly, I think it is debatable. Collaboration and partnerships is an option but we must recognise that:

- partnerships are complex, time-consuming, not easy and tend not to be sustainable;
- schools will want to establish their own capability for particular vocational areas where they can effectively compete with colleges.

Thirdly, vocational qualifications, whether they are vocationally-related or occupationally-related, should nevertheless be sufficiently vocational. In other words, teachers should emphasise the practical nature of learning, rather than trying to water it down in pursuit of spurious academic respectability or in an attempt to gain greater credence among students. Good vocational learning is, above all, 'practical', which is, plainly, its distinguishing feature when compared with academic learning, (which is, of course, a big part of the reason why vocational learning is held in lower esteem). Tomlinson rightly says that vocational programmes should not attempt to fit into the academic mould, but recognise "what is distinctive and valuable about vocational learning and ensuring that it is respected and valued in its own right".

Finally, without engaging employers in many of the areas I have mentioned, the current developments in vocational education and the improvements required in the future are unlikely to create the added-value needed to achieve the best for our young people.

In the three countries my inspectors visited recently, Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia, employers are much more directly involved in determining the content and assessment of vocational courses than in England. This helps to give the courses and associated qualifications currency and status. It also helps to ensure that vocational provision is more closely aligned to the needs of the economy. Perhaps the new Sector Skills Councils and the Skills for Business Network generally might play a strategic role in this connection by helping to articulate what employers are looking for by setting relevant benchmarks required at various levels.

As in England, most young people undertake some work experience during their time in compulsory education. However, in other countries structured work placements are a much stronger feature of vocational courses than they are in this country. This helps to keep them relevant and strengthens the applied vocational dimension. Experiences of work should not only be an enjoyable encounter for students, it should also help them understand what it is like to work and to make

informed career choices. There remains considerable scope to improve work experience in this country, especially by ensuring that its purpose is crystal clear to all parties and that learning outcomes are suitably assessed and recognised.

Of course, the demands on business from education are already considerable and a substantial amount of support is being provided already. Several companies, large and small, not only provide experience of work for young people and their teachers, but also invest time, money and energy on a vast range of initiatives.

That said, there is a case for developing a more strategic approach to the development of vocational education in this country partly through improved collaboration and partnership between education and business. I believe a national partnership, which is regionally and locally focused for example, could provide leadership and direction for the development of vocational education pathways and a national champion for the teachers involved. It could also support the work of the Tomlinson review by developing and supporting the vocationally-related strands of the diploma proposals that, who knows, could become the envy of our international competitors. I understand that Ivan Lewis, Government Minister for Skills and Vocational Education, has asked the LSC to consider such a strategic and coherent approach to current developments as part of its review of vocational education and education business links.

To sum up, I believe that the future prosperity of this country depends substantially on having a highly educated, skilled and enterprising workforce that is responsive and adaptable to change. Effective vocational education at 14-19 can help develop such a workforce. Therefore, all young people should have an education that is vocationally-relevant.

The business community can play a crucial role by collaborating further with the education system. It can do so through taking part in strategic partnerships that champion the importance of vocational education and support our many excellent

teachers in colleges and schools to develop enterprising young people who can compete with the best in the world, now and in the future.

A quiet transformation of vocational education is now taking place, giving grounds for cautious optimism. However, we still have some way to go if we are to overcome the issues associated with parity of value and promote the virtues of practical vocational education as much as general education and turn Britain into the high-skill workshop of the world. It's a big challenge and we all have part to play. But perhaps more than ever before, I sense that the country is up for it.