

# THE IMPACT OF LEAGUE TABLE REFORM ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

**BRIEFING**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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IDEAS to  
CHANGE POLICY

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This month marks a year since the government announced the removal of the majority of GCSE-equivalent vocational qualifications from the school performance league tables. This was in response to the 2011 Wolf report, which argued that the previous weightings assigned to thousands of vocational qualifications were creating incentives for schools to encourage young people to take courses that were not necessarily in their interests.

Twelve months on from this change, IPPR is undertaking research to investigate the impact of this change on vocational learning in schools. This paper summarises the findings of a survey of senior teaching leaders in secondary schools across England. This shows that teaching leaders believe that the Wolf report was right to recommend action against perverse incentives in the league table system. However, there is also a widespread belief that the government has now created perverse incentives in the other direction, such that many valuable vocational courses are no longer being offered in schools because they do not count towards schools' league table positions.

## Summary

- 60 per cent of the school leaders said their school had either already reduced the number of level-two vocational qualifications on offer or was planning to do so
- 66 per cent of those who said their schools were reducing their vocational offer said that the reason for this was the changes to the school performance tables.

## Context

After the 2010 general election the education secretary Michael Gove commissioned Professor Alison Wolf to undertake a review of vocational education in England. Reporting in March 2011, Wolf argued that too many young people were taking courses which did not provide a strong basis for advancement in the labour market nor progression to further study or training. In part, the Wolf report argued, this was

because non-GCSE equivalent qualifications were given excessive weighting in the performance tables, creating incentives for schools to encourage young people to take up these courses.<sup>1</sup>

Previously, 3,175 equivalent qualifications counted in the performance tables; in January 2012, it was announced that that number would be reduced by 96 per cent to just 125. Wolf argued that those that remained had ‘fulfilled tough criteria ensuring that they lead to further study or employment’.<sup>2</sup>

There are concerns that this move went too far. Previously, vocational qualifications could be weighted as equivalent to one or more GCSEs in the calculation of league table scores, and there was a strong case for reassessing many of these weightings. However, the decision to remove entirely most of these qualifications from the performance tables has arguably created an equally powerful incentive for schools to stop offering vocational courses, even where they have genuine value for young people.

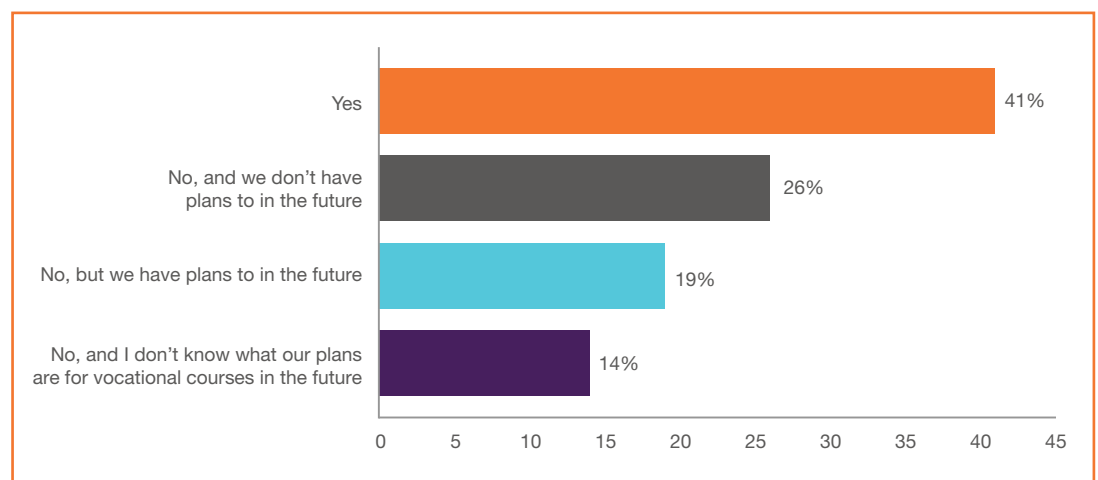
As part of a wider project to investigate the impact of these reforms on vocational learning in schools, IPPR commissioned a survey of teaching leaders in state secondary schools across England. This paper summarises the results of that survey and draws out their implications.<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

### Most schools either have or are planning to reduce the number of level-two vocational qualifications on offer to young people.

60 per cent of the school leaders in our sample said their school either had already reduced the number of level-two qualifications on offer or was planning to do so. This supports anecdotal evidence that schools are now dropping many level-two vocational courses.

**Figure 1**  
In the last year has your school reduced the number of level-two (GCSE or equivalent) vocational courses and qualifications on offer for young people?



N = 252

<sup>1</sup> Wolf A (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*, London: Department for Education

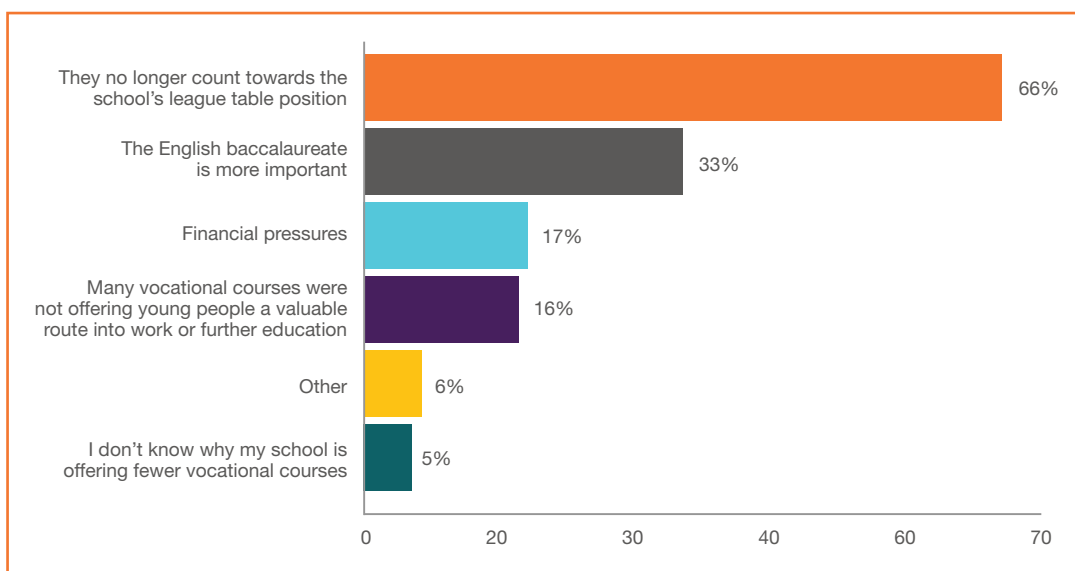
<sup>2</sup> Wolf A (2012) ‘An end to qualifications that have no real value’, *Guardian*, 31 January 2012

<sup>3</sup> Research was conducted online by Red Consultancy, 10–21 December 2012, and involved 252 senior teaching leaders in state schools in England (head teachers, deputy head teachers, heads of department, heads of year, senior teachers). The raw data can be downloaded from <http://www.ippr.org/publication/55/10247/the-impact-of-league-table-reform-on-vocational-education-in-schools>

**Changes to the performance tables are the most important factor in explaining this drop in the number of level-two vocational courses offered.**

66 per cent of those who said their schools were reducing their vocational offer said that the reason for this was the changes to the school performance tables. 33 per cent said the main reason was the introduction of the English baccalaureate. Just 15 per cent said that the reason for reducing the number of vocational courses was that they did not believe that the courses were valuable.

**Figure 2**  
Why is your school offering fewer vocational courses?



N = 103

**The majority of school leaders believe that vocational qualifications are valuable to young people and that valuable courses have been lost as a result of the changes.**

Despite the fall in the number of courses on offer, most school leaders interviewed believe that vocational qualifications are beneficial to young people:

- 79 per cent agree that they offer a strong foundation for the world of work
- 69 per cent agree that they offer a strong foundation for further study or training
- 77 per cent agree that they are motivational for young people
- 70 per cent believe that many valuable vocational courses are no longer being offered because of the government's decision to reduce the number of vocational qualifications that count in school performance league tables.

**Many school leaders agree with the government that there was a problem that needed to be addressed.**

Notwithstanding the view that valuable courses have been lost, many school leaders agree with the government that there was a problem with the system in its previous form:

- 40 per cent agree that vocational qualifications generally lack rigour, as against 28 per cent who disagree and 30 per cent who don't know
- 67 per cent agree that schools encourage young people to take courses to improve their own position in performance tables

- 44 per cent agree that the government was right to cut the number of vocational qualifications counting as directly equivalent to GCSEs in school league tables as too many young people are taking vocational qualifications that have little value, as against 36 per cent who disagree.

However, 48 per cent also agree that some vocational courses should count as equivalent to more than one GCSE in the performance tables, as against 27 per cent who disagree.

### Implications

This survey shows us that the government may have correctly identified a problem, but has sought to tackle it with the wrong solution. There is support among school leaders for the government's view that too many vocational qualifications were being offered that were not valuable for young people, and that these were taken up mainly to improve schools' league-table rankings. Many school leaders therefore agree that the government was right to reduce the number of qualifications with direct equivalence to GCSEs in the league tables.

While there was a strong case for addressing the weighting of some of these qualifications, removing most 96 per cent of them entirely from performance tables has created a powerful incentive for schools to stop offering vocational courses which they believe are otherwise valuable. Given that subject choice at age 16 is heavily influenced by what students did pre-16, there are concerns that this may have an effect on the numbers taking up vocational courses beyond this age.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there is concern that a reduction in the provision of some practical key stage four qualifications – such as ASDAN's Certificate of Personal Effectiveness – as a result of their removal from league tables could hit achievement in maths and English GCSEs.<sup>5</sup>

This poll supports what education analysts have known for some time: that head teachers are highly sensitive to what the government measures in its school performance tables. While in a high-stakes accountability culture this is understandable, it is nevertheless of concern that the courses schools offer and promote are determined to a large extent by the league tables rather than what is in the best interests of young people. Indeed, the government itself has said that 'there may be pupils for whom the most appropriate qualifications are those not included in the performance tables. Where it is in a pupil's best interest, the school is encouraged to teach qualifications not included on the list.'<sup>6</sup> Our poll shows that in practice this advice from government is being undercut by league table pressures.

England needs a self-improving school system in which schools are able to offer learning opportunities that they are confident are in the best interests of their young people. This requires a reformed accountability system for schools that creates fewer perverse incentives and a qualifications and curriculum framework that is less vulnerable to changing political imperatives in Whitehall. Ultimately this will come from building a

4 Rodeiro CLV (2007) *A Level Subject Choice in England: Patterns of Uptake and Factors Affecting Subject Choice*, Cambridge Assessment. [http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/114182\\_Survey\\_Report\\_-\\_Final.pdf](http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/114182_Survey_Report_-_Final.pdf)

5 Harrison N, James D and Last K (2012) *The impact of the pursuit of ASDAN's Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) on GCSE attainment*, ASDAN and UWE Bristol. <http://www.asdan.org.uk/media/downloads/UWE%20report%20%20final.pdf>

6 Department of Education (2012) *Qualifications for 14-16 Year Olds and Performance Tables*. <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Post16Learning/Page1/DFE-00065-2012>

system that commands respect from young people, parents, business and teachers alike. This means rigorous qualifications that meet high standards (guaranteed, for example, through the number of guided learning hours and the degree of external assessment), that enable progression into work and further study, that actively engage young people in learning, and that form part of broad pre-16 education. Crude adjustments to the league tables do not help to achieve this.

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*IPPR will publish a paper exploring the relationship between the accountability system and the vocational offer in schools later this year.*