

Apprenticeships inquiry launched

A new [inquiry](#) is set to look at how the Government proposes to achieve its target of 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020.

The Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy, formed by members of the Education Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, will also look into the implementation of the apprenticeship levy, the proposed Institute for Apprenticeships, routes to achieving higher level apprenticeship qualifications and the potential for apprenticeships to affect the UK skills gap.

The terms of reference for the inquiry also cover:

- The take-up of apprenticeships amongst 16–19 year olds and steps that can be taken to make more young people aware of available opportunities

- The process for applying for apprenticeships
- The quality of, and minimum standards for, apprenticeships, and how standards can be enforced
- Lessons from other countries' approaches to apprenticeships.

Neil Carmichael MP, Chair of the Education Select Committee, said: "Our education policy needs to change truly to recognise the value of technical and professional education to young people, to society and to the nation's economy. Young people need to be equipped with the skills to succeed and apprenticeships have a vital role in achieving this objective".

The deadline for written evidence is 18 March 2016.

Productivity plan is crucial but how will it be implemented?

The Government's *Productivity Plan* lacks clear, measurable objectives and largely amounts to an assortment of existing policies.

These are [the findings](#) of the Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Committee following its inquiry into the plan.

Whilst the Committee supports the thinking behind the plan it calls on the Government to set out how it is going to implement the *Productivity Plan* and measure the success of each of the policies included in the plan. These include the measurement of policies to improve the basic skills of the workforce and to enhance the employability skills of pupils/students as part of improved careers advice.

The BIS Committee inquiry, chaired by Iain Wright MP (Labour), focused on the main areas in the plan relating to skills including:

Apprenticeships

- The BIS Committee welcomes the desire to close the skills gap and encourage vocational training by setting an ambitious target of three million apprenticeship starts by 2020. However, it notes

the Government's apparent lack of consultation with industry on this policy and raises concern that this decision has been made with no consideration for what type of training businesses actually require.

The Committee calls on the Government to set out the rationale and evidence base for its three million target.

- The Committee recommends the Government consults with industry to ensure the apprenticeship levy allows sectors to invest in skills through different qualifications and training methods specific to their needs.
- It also recommends that the Government works with businesses and individual sectors to produce targets for higher-level apprenticeships to help fill the skills gap.

Further and Higher Education

- The Committee recommends that the Government does more to balance the perception of the benefits of college and vocational education against those of higher education. This would promote both higher and further education as attractive career paths and good drivers of productivity.

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Popularity of non-A Level progression to HE increases

Over a quarter of English students accepted to higher education in 2015 held at least one vocational qualification in their set of qualifications according to recent research from UCAS.

While the traditional set of 3 A Levels currently remains the most successful route onto the most competitive academic courses, the research signals a growing trend for the popularity of alternative qualifications as progression to HE.

UCAS' [Progression Pathways project](#) gives a picture of the skills and knowledge offered by different qualifications and examines the extent to which they can prepare students for higher education.

It also looks at how schools, colleges and universities can help young people choose between an academic, vocational or mixed portfolio of qualifications. The research calls on schools and universities to:

- Develop a complete understanding of the difference between the various qualification pathways and the implications for HE progression
- Set clearer higher education entry requirements to secure the right match between student and course
- Build partnerships between higher education and key feeder schools and colleges to develop a shared understanding of the qualification pathways
- Develop more transition programmes in HE as the number of students from less traditional routes increases.

Update on the National Reference Test

National Reference Tests are on target to be trialed in schools between 7 and 15 March 2016.

Ofqual has reported that over 300 schools have agreed to take part in this year's trial. At each school, up to 24 students will take the maths test and another 24 students will take the English test.

A few [examples of the tests](#) are now available to give students and teachers an idea of what to expect.

As reported in [December's OCR Policy Briefing](#), these

tests have been developed on behalf of Ofqual to provide additional information to support the awarding of reformed English language and maths GCSEs. However, students taking part in this year's trial are studying for current GCSEs, so as some of the material in the tests may not be quite as familiar, this will be taken into account when the results are analysed.

Legislation will come into force on 1 September 2016 with the first full National Reference Test taking place in March 2017.

Enquiries about results: pupils' views sought

Ofqual is running a short [survey](#) for pupils about the changes being proposed in Exam Boards' marking review and appeals systems for GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications.

This is the first time Ofqual has specifically canvassed the views of young people in this way, with the chance to win an iPad as an incentive.

The survey includes questions about whether it's ok for two examiners to give slightly different marks to the same answer and whether an appeal should consider if the original mark scheme was reasonably applied.

Survey responses will be considered alongside the current national [consultation](#) after the 11 March 2016 deadline.

Perceived career relevance deters students from maths and physics A Levels

Young people have a lack of knowledge of the many career paths dependent on maths and physics, despite employers calling for these skills.

This is the message from a [report](#) by the ‘Your Life’ campaign, which found that students are unaware of the opportunities that knowledge in these subjects can provide, and how study of maths and physics beyond the age of 16 is very relevant to the job market.

The report claims that these subjects can appear too abstract and theoretical to young people with little real-life application. Other reasons cited for lack of uptake

include:

- A lack of confidence in the ability to do well
- These subjects are only for the “ultra bright”
- The absence of adult encouragement
- Diminishing interest and enjoyment in these subjects, particularly where they become less practical
- A lack of appeal to girls where certain science-related careers seem to have a “masculine” image.

The report aims to help inspire change by providing an insight into students’ thinking and the choices they face, and encourages more information to help with A Level subject decision making.

Cambridge University to increase its use of admissions tests

Cambridge University will be introducing common format [written assessments](#) across a range of subjects for those applying for 2017 entry onwards.

The written tests, which will form part of the application process, will “provide admissions tutors with valuable additional evidence of applicant’s academic abilities, knowledge and potential to succeed in the Cambridge course for which they’ve applied”. The university claims that this move is in response to the need to develop new ways of maintaining a fair and effective admissions system during on-going qualification reform.

The tests, administered by the Admissions Testing Service (part of Cambridge Assessment) and free of charge to applicants, will be held for a range of subjects including Economics, English, Geography, History and Modern Languages. Administered by schools and colleges, the first tests will be in November this year, when students will be taking new A Levels in some subjects.

Meanwhile, the latest [research brief from The Sutton Trust](#), believes that the number of additional tests used by Cambridge and Oxford universities should be reviewed. It claims that admissions tests give advantage

to candidates who gain from extra tuition and support, and says that the tests make it harder for a bright student in an inner city school to succeed than for a student from a successful private school.

The Sutton Trust, which aims to improve social mobility through education, makes several recommendations for Oxbridge admissions including:

- Oxford and Cambridge universities should review their approaches to any additional exams applicants are required to sit, to ensure they are as fair, consistent and transparent as possible
- Universities rather than the colleges should control the admissions policies.
- Oxford and Cambridge should each standardise their admissions processes across subjects as much as practically possible, to help students and teachers who are unfamiliar with the process
- The restriction that students are only allowed to apply to either Oxford or Cambridge universities should be reviewed
- The government should strengthen the national careers service, ensuring that schools and colleges have access to professional advisers with specialist and up-to-date knowledge of entry requirements to all universities.

Calls for improved teacher recruitment

The Government’s spending watchdog, the National Audit Office, has warned that teacher shortages across the UK are growing, with particular issues in science.

Its report [Training New Teachers](#) found that secondary school teacher training places are proving particularly difficult to fill. Insufficient numbers of trainees are being recruited in the majority of secondary subjects: 14 out of 17 secondary subjects had unfilled training places in 2015-16, compared with two subjects with unfilled places in 2010-11.

In subjects with hard-to-fill places, providers are more likely to accept trainees with lower degree classifications. And in secondary schools, the report claims that more classes are now taught by teachers without a relevant post-A Level qualification in their subject.

The report calls on the government to do more to demonstrate how new routes and incentives for training new teachers are improving the quality of teaching in classrooms.

Changes to the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland intends to move to a single qualifications regulator.

Currently, Ofqual regulates vocational qualifications and CCEA regulates general qualifications in Northern Ireland, but from 1 April 2016, subject to the necessary legislative amendments, CCEA will become the [single qualifications regulator](#).

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland and the Department for Education in Westminster are seeking to amend the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act to remove Ofqual's statutory responsibilities to regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. These arrangements were put in place in 2010 as Ofqual was established, with a review scheduled so that the Northern Ireland Government could consider long-term arrangements.

Ofqual and CCEA are working together to ensure the necessary transition arrangements are in place, and this process will not result in any changes to Ofqual's statutory duties in England.

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New education Bill central to DfE's five year plan

A new [education Bill](#) has completed its passage through parliament allowing new measures for swifter intervention by the Department for Education when a school is coasting or failing. The Bill will increase the pace of academisation, with failing schools forced to become academies - accepting new leadership backed by sponsors and high-performing neighbouring schools.

The Bill is at the heart of the DfE's objectives for 2015 - 2020 which have just been published. Plans have been set out by the Department for what it wants to achieve and the progress it is making. 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' is one of the main drivers for the Department's objectives, aiming to allow every child and young person access to high quality provision no matter where they live or what their background is.

The other two main priorities include:

- **Safety and Well-being:** aiming to protect children and support those who may be vulnerable
- **Preparation for Adult Life:** ensuring young people complete school or college with the skills and character to contribute to society and the economy. This objective includes plans for technical and professional education as a high-quality alternative to academic study post 16, with routes to apprenticeships or employment and supported by improved advice and guidance.

Departmental plans must be delivered within the expenditure limits set out in the Autumn 2015 spending

review, which for the DfE is £58.2bn in 2015-16.

The education Bill will now go to the Queen for royal assent which, when given, will turn the Bill into an Act of Parliament.

Meanwhile, over at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills...

Objectives from BIS have also been published covering business/enterprise, competitiveness/exports, science/innovation and labour markets. Priorities have also been set out for:

- **Apprenticeships and Skills:** these plans focus on the government's objective for 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020 (the current total stands at 268,400), the apprenticeship levy for larger employers, the establishment of a new Institute for Apprenticeships (although details of how it will operate have not yet been made clear), the roll out of more degree apprenticeships, and the development of a network of National Colleges and Institutes of Technology.
- **Higher Education:** objectives include increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, continuing funding reforms, abolishing the cap on HE student numbers from September 2016, encouraging universities to offer more two-year degree programmes and the development of on-line education.

All [17 departmental plans](#), including measurements of progress towards targets, are publicly available.

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

It was to be expected that the Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy would be taking a look at such a prominent part of this government's skills strategy as apprenticeships. It is quite right that such a flagship policy area should be subject to on-going scrutiny.

But this isn't the first time apprenticeships have gone under the microscope, nor will it be the last. In 2015 there were a spate of reports including from the Sutton Trust, the think tank Demos, and, more recently, from the All Party Parliamentary Group on the visitor economy, looking at hospitality apprenticeships. And we mustn't forget Ofsted's report on the the mixed quality of these programmes. Also, a BIS research paper (no. 255) expressed concerns about the apparent need for 1,500 separate apprenticeship standards, how they should be assessed, and the apparently opaque governance arrangements.

The rocky waters of apprenticeships are well charted, all the way back to a 2003 Institute of Directors' report which was concerned that the participation target (at that time 28% of young people) risked prioritising quantity over quality for, what was then, David Blunkett's flagship modern apprenticeship policy. Other issues in that thirteen year old report included treatment of maths and English, progression and completion rates, assessment, flexibility, employer engagement, and the quality of advice and guidance.

Admittedly, a lot has changed since then, including the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and planned legislation requiring schools to promote the apprenticeship route. Draft legislation for the creation of a governing Institute for Apprenticeships is also in train. It is important that the new inquiry goes beyond identifying the well-trodden challenges facing a state-sponsored

apprenticeship system and considers the potential effectiveness or otherwise of the current raft of policies.

The recent BIS inquiry into the treasury's *Productivity Plan* also spends time on the effectiveness of apprenticeship policy, but it also highlights the important role of Further Education in delivering the productivity agenda. It is critical that the role of non-apprenticeship FE is understood - to quote that old Institute of Directors' report 'there would appear to be merit in encouraging more young people to continue in vocational full-time education, complementing their technical and occupational learning with continued general education'. This challenges those who would portray the choices available to young people as either A Levels or apprenticeships.

Let's hope the Committee takes some time to consider the rich range of provision in FE and recognises that apprenticeships or A Levels aren't the only show in town. This is made clear in the findings of the UCAS progression pathways project which shows that over a quarter of students accepted to Higher Education held at least one vocational qualification. The trend for mixing academic and vocational provision should be better recognised and supported. It provides the option of routes to Higher Education but also to the kind of higher technical and professional qualifications which are becoming an area of growing policy interest.

Finally, it is good to see Ofqual embarking on an exercise in consulting young people. This may look a bit like tokenism - consulting on the appeals process after decisions about wholesale qualification reform have been and gone. But better late than never. We can all learn from this, including Select Committees.