

OCR Policy Briefing

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Technical education is at the centre of the government's Modern Industrial Strategy

Skills development and technical education feature prominently in the government's strategy for a post-Brexit Britain.

Launching the government's modern industrial strategy, the Prime Minister set out her 10-point plan for future growth which included plans for an overhaul of technical education.

Following on from the [Skills Plan](#), the government plans to boost technical education and ensure the same opportunities and respect are given to those who pursue either technical or academic routes.

£170m of new funding will be given to develop Institutes of Technology responsible for delivering higher level technical education in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects, to provide a "credible alternative to the academic route for young people who choose not to go to university".

The government is also exploring a new 'UCAS-style'

way of searching and applying for courses in technical education to give clearer information and better support through the application process.

Other education highlights from the industrial strategy include:

- Further development of specialist maths schools to expand the provision of maths across the country
- Support for Further Education colleges to be centres of excellence in teaching maths and English
- Increasing STEM subjects in higher education and growing the number of STEM graduates
- Consideration of the role of lifelong learning. The government has also pledged to review the option to introduce maintenance loans for higher technical education.
- Addressing differences in skill levels between regions.

The Green Paper, [Building our Industrial Strategy](#) sets out the proposals in full.

Institute for Apprenticeships to "deliver the skills employers need"

Employers must continue to control the content and assessment of apprenticeships according to draft government guidance intended to give 'strategic advice' to the Institute for Apprenticeships.

The [draft strategic guidance](#) put out for consultation, proposes how the institute should carry out its functions which come into effect from April 2017.

The guidance puts employers firmly at the forefront of apprenticeship standards development although the importance of input from professional bodies, sector experts, providers, assessment organisations and apprentices themselves is acknowledged. It also sets out a series of 'core principles' which all apprenticeships must follow.

The guidance confirms the Institute's main functions:

- to set quality criteria for the development of apprenticeship standards and assessment plans
- to review, then approve or reject them

- to advise on the maximum level of government funding available for standards
- to ensure arrangements are in place to quality assure all end point assessments.

Under the measures set out in the Technical and Further Education Bill, the Institute for Apprenticeships' remit will expand to encompass all technical education, delivering reforms across both apprenticeships-based and college-based routes from April 2018. The strategic guidance makes clear that the Institute should be making preparations to assume this additional role and transition to the framework of technical education routes.

The DfE has also released a draft [operational plan](#) setting out how the Institute will take the lead on a number of on-going reforms to the apprenticeship system.

The DfE recognises that moving from existing systems to the Institute will be "challenging" but believes that an independent organisation led by employers will deliver the best results.

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DfE to set up technical education panels

The Department for Education is looking for over 100 industry experts to form [panels of professionals](#) to develop occupational standards for new technical qualifications.

As set out in the [Skills Plan](#), the new qualifications will fit into 15 routes covering all technical education, in both college and employment-based learning.

Panel members will collectively be responsible for developing the standards for specific technical occupations by determining the key skills, knowledge and behaviours that individuals should meet to become competent. These will build on, and incorporate, apprenticeship standards.

The panels will sit in the new Institute for Apprenticeships which will become operational in April 2017 and formally take on responsibility for technical education in April 2018.

Work placements to form part of technical education

Evidence of good practice in work placements is being gathered to inform reforms to technical education.

The [Skills Plan](#) has proposed that, from 2019, young people and adults studying on a two-year technical education college course will be required to complete a work placement lasting 1-3 months. The DfE has commissioned the Learning and Work Institute to consult with schools, colleges, employers and other interested stakeholders to identify what makes a good quality and effective work placement so that best practice can be developed and delivered.

Further details of the on-line survey and seminars can be found on the [Learning and Work Institute website](#).

FE can respond to changing policy landscape

Innovation in Further Education and skills can bring about positive change despite the current period of transformation for the sector.

This is the message from [Going Places: innovation in Further Education and Skills](#) which examines the leadership and innovation needed in FE to face the challenges of reforms. These reforms include the apprenticeship levy, Area Reviews and the Post-16 Skills Plan which will all impact significantly on FE and the wider skills system.

The report recommendations are based around four themes: serving learners, local employers and regional economies; delivering higher level skills and improved employment outcomes in a changing labour market; operating effectively in the digital world; and creating sustainable institutions and a thriving system. Recommendations for the sector include:

- Flexibility and responsiveness particularly when engaging learners
- Collaboration and strong partnerships with stakeholders
- Delivery that is underpinned by a clear sense of mission and understanding of who the provider is there to serve
- Engagement with employers and ownership of provision which should be at the forefront of the sector's approach to innovative practice and change
- The opportunities for innovation presented by new digital technologies
- Exploration of areas of specialisation.

The report comes after a ten month inquiry spanning the UK, focusing on the innovative practices in colleges up and down the country, and the potential for making this innovation more widespread across the system.

National Reference Test approaches for 300 schools

Further details have been released for those schools selected to take part in the National Reference Test (NRT) from 20 February to 3 March 2017.

This latest [update](#) provides additional information on the:

- arrangements the school needs to make
- access arrangements and the responsibilities for providing these
- confidentiality of the data collected from the test
- role of the test administrator.

Ofqual has appointed the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to develop, administer and analyse the test on its behalf.

Around 18,000 students will take the same National Reference Test in maths and English every year to establish if there is any change in how students perform at a national level over time. Ofqual believes that the test has the potential to provide valuable additional information to inform the awarding of GCSEs.

Ofqual explores inter-exam board comparability

A new approach to judging whether the grade standards of different exam boards are comparable has been researched by Ofqual.

The methods (Rasch modelling and Differential Step Functioning) have been used by the exams regulator to judge inter-board comparability in a subject, to make sure, so far as possible, that there is a level playing field for students.

The [research](#) on 16 subjects taken in 2015 finds that most of the cases of differences between boards were small – in most cases less than a fifth of a grade. In general, exam boards' grade standards were more in line at the higher grades than the lower grades.

The findings were consistent with the statistical screening carried out by the boards in the autumn following each set of GCSE results.

Comparable outcomes has limited impact on individual schools

An approach used to set GCSE and A Level grade boundaries in the UK does not prevent schools from demonstrating improvement to Ofsted, according to [research](#) from Cambridge Assessment.

Whilst some teaching unions have argued that the pegging of results to the performance of students from previous years comes at the expense of the requirement for schools to demonstrate year on year improvement, the research finds that the 'comparable outcomes' approach to grade boundary setting has a very limited

impact on individual schools.

This is because in most cases actively controlling grade inflation leads to grade boundaries that are no more than one mark more severe than they would have been without the comparable outcomes approach.

It is recognised that comparable outcomes is just one method to set, monitor and maintain standards, and can be particularly valuable when managing periods of change in qualifications.

Schools should do more to prepare pupils for employment

Schools should be doing more to prepare young people for the world of work according to a recent [report](#) from Ofsted.

The education watchdog says that England's economic prosperity is at risk because the majority of schools fail to prioritise enterprise education and work-related learning.

In the course of Ofsted's visits to 40 secondary schools, inspectors looked at how well schools and businesses were engaging with each other and how schools were promoting alternatives to university.

Key findings include:

- The extent to which schools prepared young people for the world of work was largely dependent on

whether school leaders considered it a priority

- Opportunities for meaningful work-related learning or work experience at key stage 4 were limited
- Business involvement in some schools relied too heavily on personal networks with a lack of local coordination and strategy
- Schools appeared to be more likely to promote apprenticeships than in previous years, but parents and pupils are concerned about the quality and reputation of apprenticeships.

The report gives a number of recommendations for the DfE, employers and schools to promote the importance of well-planned enterprise education. Ofsted itself plans to take greater account of work-related learning in future inspections.

New initiatives launched to attract and retain teachers as examiners

Award schemes and a new website are just two of the commitments made by a cross-industry group to encourage teachers to become and remain examiners.

The group which brings together school and college leaders' associations, major exam boards and the Joint Council for Qualifications, has released the [findings](#) of its research into how to attract and retain teachers as A level and GCSE examiners.

The group sought to identify how current challenges (such as reforms to qualifications, the expected rise in student numbers, issues around teacher shortages and workloads) to examining can be met and how best to

promote the benefits of examining to teachers, schools and colleges.

Alongside plans to raise the professional profile of examining and recognise more widely both its contribution to individual CPD and benefit to schools and colleges, two immediate steps have been announced:

- two new award schemes to recognise exceptional individual examiners, and schools' and colleges' contributions to the profession
- A new website for teachers and school leaders interested in learning more about becoming an examiner and sharing best practice.

DfE 'opportunity areas' expanded

The Education Secretary has announced the expansion of the opportunity areas programme to a further six areas across England.

In October, Justine Greening announced the first six areas - West Somerset, Norwich, Blackpool, Scarborough, Derby and Oldham - which the DfE had identified as in need of prioritised access to wider educational support.

Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire,

Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent have now been added to the list of areas which will see local partnerships formed with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, charities and local authorities in order to "break down the barriers to social mobility".

A new £3.5 million programme will also establish a research school for each of the 12 opportunity areas to lead on the development and dissemination of evidence-led good practice in local schools.

The Last Word

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

The 'modern industrial strategy' presented in the recent Green Paper is a meaty document with its 10 'pillars' ranging from topics such as Upgrading Infrastructure to Encouraging Trade. A whole pillar is dedicated to Developing Skills and offers an overview of skills policies in one place - mainly existing skills plans but sprinkled with the odd new announcement.

First out of the traps is the plan for technical education. Not surprisingly, it repeats the view that there is currently a 'complex array of qualifications' in the vocational space which needs to be replaced by new qualifications, developed with employers, and organised into a simplified 15 'routes' - more about that later.

Further Education is accused of being largely made up of "a broad generalist curriculum at lower qualifications levels" and we are told that "the sector has too little provision of higher level technical qualifications". There are concerns about the low levels of teacher contact time in FE - fewer than 17 hours per week, when Norway manages 28 hours per week.

According to the Green Paper, there is a need to ramp up the volume of technical education in FE and to create new Institutes of Technology. These, we are told, will specialise in technical disciplines, "such as STEM", aligned with local skills requirements. Students will be provided with a new UCAS-style system to navigate their way to the courses that best suit them; the loans system for post 19 students is to be reviewed; and £170 million of capital funding will be available to establish the new Institutes. In order to increase the availability of new technical educators to deliver the new courses, the paper assures us, "we will attract more industry specialists."

There are other ambitious plans in the 'skills pillar'. Much is made of the need to improve basic skills in maths and English with tacit acknowledgement that the current maths and English GCSE re-sit policy isn't going to plan.

The solution, it hopes, lies in the ongoing revisions to Functional Skills *and* in supporting FE colleges to become 'centres of excellence for teaching maths and English'. There are also plans to create specialist maths schools 'across the country'.

A lack of basic digital skills is seen as being a problem for the adult population. 10 million adults, we are told, lack basic digital skills and a firm commitment is made to providing digital skills training *free of charge* to those adults who need it.

Although the strategy is unhappy about a dominance of low level, generalist learning that takes place at FE, it still acknowledges that not everyone will be ready at 16 to take the plunge into an academic or technical route. It takes up the proposals from the DfE Skills Plan for a 'transition year'. Rather than students churning through "a series of low level qualifications", it claims a transition year will give them an opportunity to "catch up with their peers". There is little indication what might be delivered in this transition year beyond "intensive support in maths and English".

The strategy goes on to look at what needs to be done to encourage greater uptake of STEM subjects and drops hints about the soon-to-be-published Smith review of post 16 mathematics. Here, references to technical qualifications disappear and, instead, the concern is about an insufficient number of people taking *A Level* qualifications in maths, sciences and engineering. Apparently, Professor Smith will point to disparities of take up between boys and girls and between regions – and we are given some startling statistics showing that, in Reading, 57% of post-16 students study some kind of Level 3 maths, but in Knowsley, the percentage is only 7%. It will be interesting to see if the Smith review envisages a model where technical qualifications are taken alongside some *A Level* choices.

A Research and Innovation pillar takes forward a strong interest in the importance of STEM for the future economy. Much is made, quite rightly, of things like graphene, solar batteries and autonomous vehicles. For those who worry about a lack of emphasis on our creative industries (worth £87 billion a year), there is some solace in the announcement that Sir Peter Bazalgette is to review how the UK's creative industries "can help underpin our future prosperity". There is no reference to how the EBacc performance measure is depressing the take up of creative subjects – perhaps that's something for Sir Peter's report.

In conclusion, this is all radical stuff and yet strangely familiar. None of the plans are remarkably different to previous initiatives under previous governments. The creation of specialist institutions has been a feature of education policy for decades, though maybe in a piecemeal fashion. Ministers of every hue have bemoaned the existence of a 'qualifications jungle' and have tried to simplify the system with the likes of GNVQs, Diplomas and the Credit and Qualifications Framework. Anyone who recalls the Gremlin adverts will know that Basic Skills has long been a hot topic. And the idea of putting employers at the heart of vocational education has been a mantra since the days of David Blunkett and before.

This isn't to say that these plans are just the same old recycled policies – history doesn't quite repeat itself and we face very new circumstances. However, the reasons why previous skills initiatives have failed are remarkably consistent. Here are some of the stumbling blocks:

- *Workforce capacity* – it is very difficult to attract enough specialist teachers and trainers at the best of times and the current shortages in teachers throughout the system is concerning;
- *Progression from Level 1 and 2* – policy makers always underestimate how long it can take for students who have underperformed at school to 'catch up'. It may well be that the system has been under ambitious for this large group of young people, but the so-called 'low level' and 'generalist' FE provision is a response to this need;
- *Simplifying the system* – technical education requires many, many different courses and qualifications, levels and specialisms so that all prior attempts at simplification have hit the buffers sooner or later;
- *Managing stakeholders* – often the very organisations set up to co-ordinate stakeholders and implement initiatives become part of a tangled confusion of overlapping roles and mixed expectations.
- *Staying power* – too often, plans and promises are abandoned when the going gets tough.

Every time we get a new set of plans to resolve problems in the skills system, someone has always warned us we are drinking at the last chance saloon, but the truth is, whatever the difficulties, committed people throughout the system have kept the show on the road. With Brexit comes a new urgency to get things right; even if things don't go quite to plan, let's hope these changes shake down into something that brings new opportunities to young people and plays a part in growing our economy.