

## Response to “Call for written evidence: Technical and Further Education Bill”

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The Centre for Vocational Education Research is funded by the Department of Education and was launched in 2015. It is funded to produce high quality and policy relevant research on vocational education, with a particular focus on large-scale quantitative research in an economic framework. Our website is <http://cver.lse.ac.uk/> and email address is [cver@lse.ac.uk](mailto:cver@lse.ac.uk)

### Overall assessment of the Bill

We welcome the Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education led by Lord Sainsbury in April, the subsequent Post-16 Skills Plan in July and the measures contained in this Bill. The recommendations are consistent with our findings (reported in Hupkau et al. 2016), which illustrate the difficulty in simplifying the current post-16 education system for those undertaking vocational qualifications in general, and in particular those pursuing Level 2 qualifications (or below) as they enter post-compulsory education. That the system is overly-complex and difficult-to-navigate is very well established. Our report shows that over half of those starting out on Level 2 qualifications (or below) do not progress to Level 3 (i.e. equivalent of A-levels) within four years of leaving school. Furthermore, a significant minority undertake low-level qualifications for multiple years, raising questions about how well young people are being served by the education system before and after leaving school. Our ongoing research suggests that just failing to pass a grade C in English has very serious consequences for young people two years later (with a significant number not even starting a level 3 qualification by that time). This reflects very badly on options available for young people if they do not gain the important ‘Grade C’ in English (or indeed Maths). This affects about 30-40 per cent of the entire GCSE cohort each year.

Part of the problem is undoubtedly the confusing array of options, with uncertain pathways, that are on offer for young people after age 16. There must be a system that students, teachers, parents and employers can all understand. Otherwise it is difficult for young people to be matched up with courses that are suitable for them and for employers to understand what qualifications actually mean.

Over half of the cohort do not undertake A-levels and they are much more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds or indeed the group termed ‘just managing’. Post-16 educational reform

for these young people is crucial for addressing issues of social mobility as well as equipping the future workforce with appropriate skills to enable economic growth.

The planned Bill will address many of the major deficiencies in post-16 education and we hope that it will deliver the Post-16 plan. While we are broadly positive, there are a number of particular issues we would like to highlight here:

## 1. Awarding of a single franchise to deliver specific qualifications

The jewel in the crown of the Sainsbury Proposals and one which must be delivered is awarding a single franchise to deliver specific qualifications thus ending the damaging race to the bottom created by an irrational system of competing awarding bodies. Following the analogy of our railways, an awarding body would run the trains (qualifications) and the colleges would provide the track. There would be enormous benefit from this measure as outlined in the Sainsbury Report and the government's post-16 Skills Plan.

One potential benefit of this change is that the **Awarding Bodies** could be required to deliver employer engagement (as they used to do with Employer Panels) and the renewal of the franchise could be dependent on the degree to which this is achieved.

The Bill makes provision for the IFA to operate a single franchise by allowing the IFA to adopt and approve technical qualifications. Whether or not to do so appears, as we understand the Bill (Sections A2DA and A21A), to be at the discretion of the IFA and subject to the agreement of the copyright holders – presumably the Awarding Bodies. As we understand it, this may or may not result in a single franchise being awarded with respect to technical qualifications. There is a case for strengthening this Section of the Bill to ensure that the single franchise proposed by the Sainsbury Report and approved in the government's Post-16 Skills plan becomes mandatory for all technical qualifications.

## 2. The Role of Employers in the Institute for Apprenticeships

In the light of past experience with employer engagement, including Trailblazers, employer engagement needs to be carefully nurtured. It has been noted, in connection with the Trailblazer process, that employers have found it challenging to formulate coherently the underlying knowledge required for mastery of an occupation. It is difficult to see how employers could formulate a two year full-time syllabus. Employers have found the time required to scrutinise and set up new apprenticeship standards (Trailblazers) to be costly and difficult to combine with responsibilities to their own companies. A whole new raft of responsibilities with respect to technical education in addition to apprenticeship standards would strain the goodwill so far generated. There is a danger that employers could pull back from participation if asked to overcommit. If the franchised **Awarding Body** were required to consult widely and gain employer support for an approved technical qualification then the IfA would have a greater chance of success. But there are reasons to question whether the IfA should be driven to such a large extent by employers alone, which we discuss below.

## 3. The Composition of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

It has been long recognised in new institutional economics (e.g. Hall and Soskice 2001) that education systems, which aim to provide less generalist and more industry/firm-specific skills, require better interaction between firms and other actors, more collaborative inter-firm relationships and generally more coordination. As a consequence, coordinated market economies, as in Scandinavian and Western European countries, have inclusive institutions and mechanisms involving all social partners in the development of vocational education, which ensure that the skills are relevant to firms and industries and meet common standards. There is also an important role for independent research to make good recommendations, as for example undertaken in Germany by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

An employer-led body as proposed by the Bill, in particular in the more competitive labour market of the UK, which does not engage with all relevant stakeholders, will not be able to achieve similar outcomes. The institute should bring together all relevant actors beyond the Department for Education and employers. Unions will need to be present because of their role in life-long learning in the workplace following individuals' transitions from initial vocational education into the workplace. Associations of colleges and learning providers need a clear role in the Institute, and student associations and associations concerned with the interests of particular groups (small business, women, disabled people, minorities) also need to be involved from the start. Careers advice and public employment services, which are essential to balance short and long-term supply and demand in the labour market, need to be similarly engaged. An active and internationally-leading research community needs to be involved to underpin recommendations and improvements by rigorous and impartial research.

The work of the Institute will only be successful if there is full buy-in into the new system and consistency in information about and implementation of coherent standards across all actors. Clear timelines about delivering the necessary change and an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the work of the Institute needs to be specified at the outset.

#### 4. Distinguishing between full-time Technical Education and Apprenticeships

It is very important that the rigorous technical route specified by the Post-16 plan is implemented. However, it would be misleading to claim that studying for a qualification leads directly to a job in the way that an apprenticeship does (as this allows an employer to assess many other attributes of an individual apart from their skill qualification). In other European countries full-time technical routes increase employment opportunities because they lead to post-secondary study (Level 4) in a related technical discipline (BTS in France, Fachhochschule in Germany, also similar in the Netherlands and Austria).

It should be noted that the characteristics of students currently undertaking full-time technical education and apprenticeships at the same age are very different and that only a small minority of students undertake apprenticeships between the age of 16 and 18 (e.g. see Hupkau et al. 2016). While a minority will progress to Level 4, for many young people, it is more likely that full-time technical education will prepare for an apprenticeship or a job. This will be determined in part by aptitude and previous attainment rather than a choice between freely-chosen alternatives at age 16.

We also question what is meant by 'bridges' between apprenticeship and full-time Technical Education as the models are very different following the establishment of the Standards-based approach. Standards-led apprenticeship provision is not a pre-planned 'course' but a sequence of skills/knowledge acquisition evaluated and validated by Apprentice Assessment Organisations.

The relationship between full-time technical education and apprenticeships will need to be carefully thought through and presented clearly to stakeholders (especially students).

## 5. The Remit of Post-16 ‘Technical Education’

All labour and education economists would agree that reforms should improve technical education to better match employer demand and ensure it has a “high value in the market place” (Recommendation 1 of the *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education*). There is good national and international evidence that high quality vocational education brings strong economic benefits to individuals and society (e.g. McIntosh and Morris, 2016). However, post-16 education (including those undertaking technical education) has a broader rationale and benefits students in terms of health (e.g. Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2012), reduced criminal behaviour (e.g. Machin et al., 2011), civic engagement, participation in elections and more generally, the functioning of society (e.g. Campbell, 2006 for a review). Furthermore, the significance of non-cognitive and soft skills has long been established in the economics literature (Borghans et al. 2008).

Both the *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education* and the Bill does not sufficiently reflect the importance of good (technical) education for these purposes. Values, behaviour, citizenship, trust in institutions and markets and the understanding that all of this can be improved are the very foundation of an economic system, which in turn can achieve innovation. And in order to increase productivity and prosperity in the long-term, capacity for innovation is more important than supplying the specific skills for an existing production technology.

With this in mind, the post-16 ‘core curriculum’ needs particular attention and needs to be sufficiently broad. Furthermore, the pace and direction of future economic and technological change is difficult to predict (especially over a long working life). Young people need the skills and knowledge to be able to re-engage with the education system though their working life.

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