



Baroness Barran

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System
Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

19 October 2021

My Lords,

SKILLS AND POST-16 EDUCATION BILL: REPORT STAGE DAY ONE

I would like to thank you for your thoughtful and engaging contributions to the first day of the Bill's Report stage on Tuesday and further for your kind words welcoming me to my new role. I would like to take this opportunity to respond to questions raised during this session, ahead of our next day of debate on Thursday 21st October.

Local skills improvement plans

I know that there is a great deal of interest in local skills improvement plans. I am grateful that the government amendment on net zero was welcomed by your lordships. Ahead of COP26, the government will publish a Net Zero Strategy. We are committed to supporting green skills needs in key sectors and this Strategy will clearly set out how we are doing this through our skills reforms. We will continue to work alongside industry to see where the evidence tells us we might need to go further and faster.

Ahead of the Bill's Report stage, we shared the draft guidance for employer representative bodies leading the local skills improvement plan trailblazers in 2021-22. I hope this will help to answer some of your lordships' remaining questions. It sets out a range of key local stakeholders we expect the employer representative bodies to engage with, including technical education and training providers, Mayoral Combined Authorities and local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Careers Hubs.

Local authorities, Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority are important local stakeholders and a vital source of local intelligence. Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority play a particularly important role as commissioner and convener in their areas, with devolved responsibilities including for the Adult Education Budget, and their views and priorities should be taken into account. That is why the government is clear that employer representative bodies should engage and consult them as they develop local skills improvement plans.

I would also like to provide some further detail here on points that were made about ensuring local skills improvement plans are a success. The Department for Education plans to commission an independent evaluation of the trailblazers, which will collect evidence on what works and how employers,

providers and local stakeholders can work together effectively to develop a good local skills improvement plan and reshape provision. Mayoral Combined Authorities and LEPs in the trailblazer areas will be among the key stakeholders invited to participate in the evaluation research. This evidence will inform the development of statutory guidance and help ensure the plans deliver the policy's intended outcomes as they are rolled out more widely.

The Department for Education will put in place appropriate governance arrangements to monitor and review the performance of designated employer representative bodies in developing and refreshing the plans. Arrangements for effective ongoing monitoring will be informed by evidence from the trailblazers. In approving the plans, the Secretary of State should be satisfied that ERBs have had regard to statutory guidance.

We will also want to ensure that providers have had regard to approved local skills improvement plans. The plans will provide a source of information to strengthen Ofsted's monitoring and inspection of providers' performance and outcomes including their contribution to meeting the skills needs of the local area.

Employer representative bodies should engage with other relevant employer groups and sector bodies to inform and validate the development of local skills improvement plans and help ensure local technical education and training provision is responsive to employers' skills needs. They should also make effective use of existing evidence, including relevant local and national strategies. We expect the plans to be informed by, and in turn inform, national skills priorities as highlighted by the Skills and Productivity Board. We are working with the Board to determine how this can best work in practice.

The Government is currently working with LEPs to refine the role of business engagement in local economic strategy, including skills, and to ensure these structures are fit for purpose for the future, including looking at the right geographies. We expect the employer representative bodies developing local skills improvement plans to build on the good skills-related work that LEPs are currently doing, including via Skills Advisory Panels.

One of the areas we expect the trailblazers to consider is ways to improve access to high quality FE provision for learners from all backgrounds, including learners with special educational needs and disabilities, so that they can get good jobs by acquiring the skills in demand by employers locally.

Careers

During the debate on Tuesday, I received a few questions on careers information and guidance. I know this will be debated more fully in the House on Monday, but I thought it worth adding some detail now in response to those queries.

There are no plans for a new careers strategy because we continue to build on the foundations put in place by the Government's 2017 careers strategy. In the Skills for Jobs White Paper, we set out the next steps to achieve our long-term vision of a high-functioning, national careers system that is available to all. We will build greater cohesion in the system, improve our digital offer, sharpen school accountability and complete the national rollout of careers infrastructure for schools and colleges.

The expansion of the careers infrastructure, including Careers Hubs, is accelerating improvements in careers education and guidance, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks. Government is investing over £18.5 million to support the rollout of Careers Hubs across England. More than 2,260 (45%) of schools and colleges are part of a Careers Hub and, by August 2022, that number will increase to over 3,300 (67%).

The Careers & Enterprise Company established a personal guidance fund from 2018-21 which developed cost effective models to showcase the successful delivery of the personal guidance Gatsby Benchmark. The fund supported a range of activities including training for careers professionals and the development of a pipeline of qualified careers professionals for the future.

Technical qualifications

On technical education, I am acutely aware of the passion and expertise in this area and I was grateful to hear these contributions in the House on Tuesday. I thought it worth providing some additional detail, which I was unable to do in the debate given time-limitations.

Level 2 technical qualifications

I would like to clarify what I said in debate in relation to level 2 technical qualifications. I was trying to explain that approval and funding for L2 BTECs will not be impacted by the introduction of T Levels, when I suggested that this legislation does not encompass level 2. The approval powers of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute) are level agnostic. The Institute's remit covers technical education and training that relates to occupations published in the Institute's occupational maps. This includes a number of occupations at level 2, therefore level 2 technical qualifications are within the scope of the Institute's approval powers.

We set out in our call for evidence on level 2 and below study earlier this year that we want to give employers the confidence that every qualification approved for funding at these levels is high quality. We will consult on proposals for the reform of level 2 and below study later this year.

The rationale for removing overlapping qualifications

In my remarks, I suggested that one reason why the 14-19 diplomas were not widely adopted was because GCSEs and A levels were widely recognised and trusted.

Though we do not believe that GCSEs and A Levels should have been replaced by Diplomas, I was aiming to highlight the difficulty of running multiple offers side by side. We want to simplify the qualifications landscape to make it easier to understand and to ensure that as many students as possible develop the skills that employers need. This is why funding will be removed for qualifications that overlap with T Levels.

Reforms to level 3 qualifications

A number of questions were raised in the debate about the post 16 review of qualifications at level 3, particularly the future of BTECs and other Applied General qualifications (AGQs), the impact of these changes, and the timeline for reform.

We are not abolishing all BTECs. I want to be clear that we will continue to fund some BTECs and other AGQs in future, and these qualifications will continue to play an important role for 16 to 19 year olds and adults as they do now. Whilst we want clearer, simpler choices for students, we are not moving towards a binary system of just A levels and T Levels.

As set out in our plans for reform of level 3 qualifications¹, students will continue to be able to study BTECs and other AGQs as part of mixed programmes alongside A levels, where they meet new quality standards and support progression to higher education, for example in areas such as engineering, applied science and IT. Students will also be able to study qualifications like BTECs as their full programme of study where there is no A level or T Level, in areas such as performing and creative arts and sports science.

Some concerns were raised in the debate about progression for students currently studying BTECs. These reforms are about strengthening the routes to progress into skilled employment or further study. For some students, A levels or T Levels will be the right option. For others, a mixed programme of A levels and BTECs may be right, and for others still a large qualification (that would typically be a students' full study programme) in areas where there is no A level or T Level, may be the right option to support their individual study and career aspirations. And it should be noted that for those that choose a T Level, higher education is also an option. They could either progress to Higher Technical Qualifications, or other higher education courses including university degrees, in related areas, instead of employment.

We have not confirmed the range of subjects or number of qualifications that will be funded alongside A levels in future. The final range of qualifications will depend on the outcome of the approvals process and an assessment against new quality criteria. These criteria are still in development and we will continue to work with sector experts to finalise these, including the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute), Ofqual, employers, awarding organisations and post-16 providers. Likewise, while we have been clear that we expect A levels to be the core of academic study programmes for most students, we have not published final study programme guidance. This is because we want to ensure that we consider the most up to date evidence for the value of alternative academic qualifications, including when taken in combination with A levels.

There were some concerns raised in the House about the findings of the impact assessment published alongside the Government's response to the second

¹ [Reforms to post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforms-to-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-in-england)

stage consultation on level 3 qualifications. I hope that I can reassure you that overall we expect these changes to have a generally positive impact. Students who are most likely to be taking qualifications that will not be funded in future will have the most to gain from these changes, because they are currently more likely to be taking qualifications that don't deliver the skills employers need. These students will have access to higher quality qualifications in the future, including new T Levels, putting them in a stronger position to progress onto further study or skilled employment.

The timeline for announcing reforms to level 3 qualifications

In the debate, it was suggested that these reforms had come out of the blue in January 2021. In fact, these reforms go back over a decade, building on the recommendations of the Wolf report of 2011 and the Sainsbury review of 2016.

We have undertaken extensive engagement with the sector throughout. The majority of respondents to the 2017 consultation on the implementation of T Levels supported our proposed principles for a review of qualifications at level 3. We confirmed plans to review qualifications at this level in the government response to the consultation on T Levels, launched in May 2018. Following this we launched our first consultation in March 2019 seeking views on the principles that should apply to post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England. We followed this up with a second consultation in October 2020 which developed those principles and asked for feedback on the types of qualifications that will exist in the future level 3 landscape. We have listened to feedback at each point of the review and our proposals have evolved to include funding a wider range of academic qualifications alongside A levels and extending the timeline for the introduction of reformed qualifications.

Some concerns were raised about the Institute's experience of technical qualifications, and I would like to reassure your lordships that we are very confident that it has the expertise to implement the reforms to technical qualifications. The Institute has gained considerable experience since taking on responsibility for T Levels in 2017 and for Higher Technical Qualifications in 2019, working closely with awarding organisations to ensure that approved technical qualifications are of a high quality and meet employers' needs.

T Levels

I would like to provide some clarification on points that were made about T Levels, including their content and assessment, and the environment in which T Levels are delivered. Firstly, the point was made that T Levels are only suitable for students with GCSEs at grade 7 or above, but we do not agree with this assessment. T Levels are designed to support a range of prior attainment, but we know that the first T Level providers have recruited students who typically have GCSEs at grade 4 and above. For students who are not ready to start a T Level but have the potential to progress onto one following additional preparation, the T Level transition programme has been put in place.

T Levels are occupationally focused and based on the same standards as apprenticeships. The content, assessment and structure of the programme are designed to support the development of occupational competence.

The T Level technical qualification comprises of a core component and an occupational specialism. The core covers the breadth of the knowledge, skills and behaviours that are shared across occupations within a sector area. It is assessed synoptically through exams and a practical, employer-set project which simulates a work-based scenario.

The occupational specialism forms 50-80% of the technical qualification and is designed to develop occupational and technical skills that are relevant to a specific occupation. The level of competence that young people are expected to achieve through the specialism must be sufficient to enter skilled employment. Awarding organisations will use assessment methods that allow judgements to be made about whether students have met the level of competence expected. To ensure students have sufficient time to develop skills to the expected level of competence, occupational specialisms have much larger specified guided learning hours than traditional qualification units. Examples of occupational specialisms include Civil Engineering (in the Design, surveying and planning for construction T Level) and Data Technician (in the Digital business services T Level).

T Levels are not intended to be delivered wholly in typical classroom settings, but will include a significant amount of skills development in genuine and simulated work environments and in specialist facilities. To date, £268 million in capital funding has been made available to providers to help them prepare for T Levels with industry-standard facilities and equipment. T Levels also include a 45-60 day occupationally-focused industry placement with an external employer. This substantive 'on-the-job' experience is a key part of the T Level programme. It gives students the opportunity to develop relevant and up-to-date technical skills related to their occupational area, alongside the behaviours and attitudes expected in the workplace. Students develop meaningful connections with local employers are well-prepared to progress into skilled employment following the completion of their T Level. As we continue to roll out T Levels, there is considerable interest from employers of all sizes in offering industry placements, and I am delighted to confirm that the majority of students on T Levels have secured their industry placements already.

T Levels have been co-designed with employers to ensure learners develop knowledge and skills that hold genuine labour market currency. This means that T Levels are more stretching programmes than most current technical and vocational programmes. We are delighted that there was a considerable increase in the number of students starting a T Level in September with over 100 schools and colleges now offering them. As I said at the debate, we want as many young people as possible to benefit from T Levels, and we have introduced flexibilities across all elements of the programme for learners with special educational needs and disabilities. We have also introduced the T Level Transition Programme to support young people who are not ready to start a T Level at age 16, but could progress to one following a tailored preparation programme.

Apprenticeships

The final amendments discussed on Tuesday related to apprenticeships.

I received specific questions on the public sector apprenticeships target which has no age bracket attached to it. The target requires all prescribed public sector bodies (including those with 250 or more staff in England) to employ at least 2.3% of their headcount as new apprentices between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022. The percentage of employees in the public sector who were apprentices rose from 2.5% to 3.1% in 2019-20. This includes apprentices who began in previous years. We do believe employers should decide who should be an apprentice and we do not want to restrict their ability to do so by setting targets by age.

The funds that employers see in their apprenticeship service accounts are different to the DfE's budget. The budget funds training and assessment costs for apprentices in all employers, additional payments and the incentives for new apprenticeship hires. I welcomed the positive support from your lordships on increasing the number of apprenticeships in for those working with and in this House. I understand there are currently 4 apprentices in the House of Lords. I know that that the Leader's office has already set a model example by having an apprentice in their office now and have benefitted from the scheme over a number of years now.

Finally, I incorrectly referred to "standards" when responding to Amendment 26. For the record, when referring to the role of FE providers with learners with special educational needs, I should have said that they should make reasonable adjustments to prevent such students (as opposed to standards) being placed at a substantial disadvantage.

Conclusion

I will separately write to Baroness Whitaker in relation to the specific questions she raised on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma communities.

I hope you find this letter informative, and I look forward to continued contributions from you as the Bill finalises its passage through the Lords. I would like to draw again to your lordships' attention the additional policy notes that were published in advance of the debate on Tuesday and which were attached to the previous all peers letter. These can be found on (www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-and-post-16-education-bill-impact-assessment-and-jchr-memorandum) and cover topics raised in the debate, including apprenticeships and careers information.

The Bill team stand ready to provide any official briefing or further detail, and can be contacted on skills.billteam@education.gov.uk.

I will place a copy of this letter in the House library.

Yours sincerely,



BARONESS BARRAN
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE