Department for Work & Pensions

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Lord Baker of Dorking
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8th November 2022

Dear Lord Baker,

Thank you for your question of 17 October 2022 in the House during the debate on the reduction of out of work benefits. I wanted to write to you as promised on the topic of technical education.

Every state-funded school must offer an ambitious curriculum which is balanced and broadly based, which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of pupils, and prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities, and experiences of adult life. This is exemplified by the national curriculum.

Design and technology D&T can inspire young people to pursue careers in design, engineering and manufacturing and it is one of the few subjects that gives pupils the opportunity to experience the practical application of maths, science, and computing. The curriculum has a strong focus on the processes of iterative design and on technology and makes links with STEM subjects. The government recognises that high-quality D&T education makes an essential contribution to the creativity, culture, wealth, and well-being of the nation.

When the current national curriculum came into effect in September 2014, it included a comprehensively overhauled D&T curriculum. The current D&T curriculum provides greater flexibility and encourages schools to use a wider range of industrial, commercial, and domestic contexts for their teaching and to make use of local resources. When developing the current D&T curriculum, the government worked closely with key organisations in the sector, such as the James Dyson Foundation, the Design and Technology Association and the Royal Academy of Engineering. This ensured that the content of the D&T curriculum and qualifications set out the knowledge and skills sought by leading employers and are aligned with up-to-date industry practice.

The current D&T GCSE and A level qualifications was introduced in September 2017, and the first exams were taken in 2019. These qualifications have been developed to be rigorous and focus on iterative design processes which are at the core of contemporary practice. This makes the subject more challenging and moves it away from its craft-based routes to a cutting-edge qualification. Building

on the changes to the national curriculum programmes of study, the revised D&T GCSE and A level have a strong emphasis on technical knowledge, including understanding of cutting-edge technology and processes. The D&T GCSE allows both breadth and depth of knowledge, without limiting students on the materials they can work with. It enables them to make choices appropriate to their design. Both the GCSE and A level qualifications provide the opportunity to apply maths and science knowledge as well as creative skills.

Computing is also a part of the broad and balanced curriculum and is a foundation subject of the national curriculum that is taught up to Key Stage 4. The computing curriculum is deliberately broad, to mitigate against the rapidly evolving nature of the digital world and to allow for flexibility in how the content is taught. The curriculum content includes topics such as, computational thinking (solving problems using a computer), understanding how computers work and connect with each other, algorithms, and programming. Overall, the computing curriculum aims to ensure all school age pupils have the solid foundation to go on and specialise at post-16 level.

Additionally, Ofsted, in their School Inspection Framework (2019) hold schools accountable on whether their curricula are suitably broad and balanced and have set expectations of all schools, including Academies and Free Schools, regarding computing at Key Stage 4. With the above in mind, the Department for Education is satisfied that we have in place a national curriculum that teaches high value computing and digital skills. We are continuing to work towards increasing the number of students taking the CS GCSE and welcomed the 16% increase in A Level Computer Science entry in 2022, making it the second fastest growing STEM A Level after Design and Technology.

The Department for Education also realises that the Computer Science GCSE may not appeal to all students and that vocational technical qualifications are an important part of school provision. In this regard, there are currently two Level 1/2 ICT qualifications and a further five Level 2 ICT qualifications that are included in the school performance tables. In total 29,502 of all Key Stage 4 pupils took a digital related VTQ in 2020-21, meaning one fifth of all Year 11 pupils entered a digital Key Stage 4 qualification in that period.

The Department for Education is reforming technical education to ensure all post-16 students have access to technical options that support progression and meet employer needs. The government have introduced T Levels – a new, high-quality programme, designed with employers, that will give learners the knowledge and experience needed for skilled employment, further study (including higher education), or a higher apprenticeship. T Levels are at the centre of the government's plans for technical education reform. They are rigorous, stretching programmes of study at Level 3 based on recognised, employer-led standards.

We also continue to promote our high-quality apprenticeship which are supporting young people and employers to gain the skills they need, now and in the future. There are over 650 employer-designed apprenticeships available in all

sectors of the economy. Our new ‘Career Starter Apprenticeships’ campaign is raising awareness of Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships that offer great opportunities for those looking for their first role after leaving full-time education.

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

With best wishes,

BARONESS STEDMAN-SCOTT
MINISTER FOR WORK AND PENSIONS (LORDS)