

Education Committee – Further Education and Skills

14 March 2025

Introduction

About the Skills Federation

[Skills Federation](#) brings together the shared perspective of different industries on how the UK can build a workforce able to meet our skills needs. Our members are 18 employer led sector skills bodies who work across more than 20 sectors of the economy and represent over 150,000 employers, both large and small, across the UK. They are funded by their industries to provide sectoral voices and vital support on skills issues. This includes workforce planning and intelligence, professional standards, tailor made skills solutions, qualifications, kitemarking, accreditation and quality assurance.

Our vision is for a skills system that supports industrial investment and growth by providing a pipeline of talent into each sector of the economy, giving the opportunity for everyone to get in and get on at work through pathways that turn jobs into great careers.

The Skills Federation response

We wanted to respond to the inquiry because the extensive evidence base that our members have provides a wealth of sector specific detail which is not available elsewhere. Our response provides views across sectors where there is commonality, in addition to sector specific examples to illuminate both differences between sectors, and areas of effective practice. A key concern for employers is occupational competence and our reflections and recommendations are focused on ensuring that the system delivers this for learners and industry.

Our response, which has been put together with our members, draws on our responses to the Curriculum and Assessment Review and to the Industry and Regulators Committee inquiry into “Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training”.

Summary of Skills Federation’s response

The key points from our response are:

- Skills policy needs to take into account the specific needs of sectors to improve opportunity, boost economic growth and enable government to achieve the missions. Employer led sector skills bodies work to meet industry demands by aligning the skills and training provided with the needs of specific sectors. They are funded by their industries to be the voice on skills and should be a key strategic partner for government to understand and respond to sector demand.
- For employers occupational competency is of central importance. The challenges with vocational and technical routes need to be addressed to create a system with clear and flexible progression routes to work and further study which deliver this.
- Skills are integral to achieving the ambitious targets for economic growth and sufficient funding needs to be available for further education.
- Whilst apprenticeships are valued by employers and work well in many cases, they are not always the optimum solution. The Growth and Skills Levy should be flexed to include wider provision and sector skills bodies have a key role to play in identifying where and how.

- The recently announced reforms will bring some welcome flexibility but need to be introduced carefully to ensure that quality remains high, and the apprenticeship brand is not diluted.
- Greater and deeper devolution is welcome to ensure that skills provision can be better tailored to the needs of individuals, including connecting them to employers and employment opportunities in their local area. However, the risk of greater fragmentation, particularly for national employers, needs to be mitigated.
- A new careers strategy is required to set the direction and purpose of career development for young people and adults.
- Skills England provides an opportunity to bring greater coherence to the skills system. To do this Skills England needs to work across government and co-design solutions with a range of stakeholders, including sector skills bodies.

Section 1: Curriculum and qualifications in further education

The main points made in section 1 are:

- Whilst the route from GCSEs, through A Levels and onto higher education works well, the challenges with vocational and technical routes need to be addressed.
- Assessment and grading methods should be appropriate to test vocational skills required for the workplace as well as testing knowledge.
- Maths and English curriculum and qualifications need to be reviewed and in so doing ensure that they are relevant and contextualised to develop skills needed for the workplace.
- T Levels work well for some young people in some sectors but there are challenges around work placements, employer recognition and the quality of teaching.
- Applied general qualifications that are well-used and valued routes to work should be retained alongside T Levels.

The post-16 curriculum

One of the key purposes of education is to prepare young people for work. Ensuring that curriculum and qualification pathways are focussed on helping develop the right knowledge, skills and behaviours for work is essential and there is clearly a role for employers in helping to get this right.

For the around 40% of young people who undertake A Levels following GCSEs with a view to moving into higher education, the system broadly works well. In general, study programmes are well-established and well understood, including the methods of assessment, and wider support including tutorials, enrichment and careers information advice and guidance. There are a range of options available with progression routes to higher education. Employers understand this route and will use qualification attainment alongside [other methods](#) to test specific skills and aptitudes during recruitment processes.

Vocational and technical routes are less well-understood and valued by employers which leads to a range of challenges. We propose that the following aspects need to be targeted for improvement:

- Retain applied general qualifications where they provide a valued route into work and maintain the option for learners to study vocational qualifications alongside applied generals, A Levels and technical qualifications.
- Employers value competence and assessment and grading methods should be appropriate to test vocational skills as well as testing knowledge. Sector skills bodies

should be consulted as strategic partners to ensure relevance to the skills needed for the workplace.

- Review maths and English curriculum and qualifications and in so doing ensure that they are relevant and contextualised to develop skills needed for the workplace.
- Technical skills and academic knowledge are only part of the definition of a 'broad curriculum', learners should also be supported to develop essential employability skills, digital skills and study skills within a supportive and inclusive environment.
- Embed digital skills within the curriculum and support educators to incorporate technology, including responsible use of AI, into their teaching and learning.
- The curriculum should promote the effective teaching of climate change and the knowledge and skills (in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and other key subjects) required for green jobs.
- The creation of a binary system of academic and technical pathways is not helpful and specialising at 16 will work for some but not all young people. There should be opportunities for learners to move between different options, both academic and technical.
- Learn the lessons from the past in introducing change, and once a new system is implemented allow sufficient time to embed before making further modifications.
- In developing policy, review the impact on the whole education system, not just specific elements of it.
- Provide more effective careers guidance in schools which provides information about the value of vocational and technical routes to all young people, not just those who are not expected to achieve well at GCSE.

The assessment system

Employers value competence in a role and are looking for the knowledge, skills and behaviours which demonstrate this. Programmes focused on preparation or progression in the workplace should reflect this in their assessment methods as well as in the curriculum content.

Qualifications reform has brought a shift to written exams which test knowledge as the primary assessment method. In line with what employers are looking for, assessment methods should test the skills of learners, as well as knowledge retention, including wider skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. They should be integrated within teaching and learning, and the outputs of on programme assessment used to inform learning. These points also apply to GCSEs where assessment methods need to test practical skills, not just knowledge. Sector skills bodies can co-develop solutions which ensure relevance to the skills needed for the workplace. They are resourced by their industries to provide a sector wide view in the way that individual employers can't.

Driving better standards in further education; the quality and consistency of provision and outcomes.

For vocational and technical qualifications, it is essential that the curriculum content reflects the up-to-date requirements of work, whether specific occupations or of the wider sector. To achieve the required consistency, qualifications should be underpinned by occupational standards which detail the knowledge, skills and behaviours required and which are reviewed and refined regularly to ensure relevance to the evolving needs of the workplace.

Sector skills bodies, alongside employers, have played a key role in developing Occupational Standards in England and the National Occupational Standards which are used elsewhere in the UK. They have a detailed understanding of what's needed for their sectors, including carrying out detailed occupational mapping exercises. For example, CITB

have identified occupations where there is not an associated standard and are developing competence frameworks for the built environment sector. This work is a key outcome of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and is aligned to the new Building Safety Act.

Post-16 numeracy and literacy, including GCSE resits

English and maths are essential skills for work and learners need to be able to apply the concepts in real-world settings. We recommend that government:

- Reviews maths and English GCSEs and functional skills qualifications to create options which focus more on supporting young people to understand how concepts apply to real-world situations and which employ different assessment methods, not just knowledge-based exams.
- Reviews qualifications to make them more accessible for learners whose first language isn't English.
- Monitors the implementation of the change in policy about English and maths qualifications for adult apprentices to ensure that quality remains high and that apprentices have opportunities to develop the literacy and numeracy skills needed to be competent in their roles.
- Considers piloting incentives for employers to support development of maths and English in the workplace. This could include financial incentives and/or recognition schemes.

The strengths and weaknesses of T Levels as the main qualification option for students wishing to pursue a technical route into further education

T Levels provide a good option for some students wishing to pursue a technical route into further education. The work placement enables students to have an extended period in the workplace which provides a competitive edge in applying for jobs. Work carried out by [Edge](#) finds this is a key reason why young people choose T Levels. When T Levels work well the balance between practical experiences on the work placement, coupled with the development of theoretical knowledge, provides an effective route to work or further study.

However, the following challenges have been identified by Skills Federation members and their employers:

- T Levels are still relatively new qualifications and a [survey](#) of the first cohort of young people who undertook T Levels found that only one third (34%) of T Level learners currently working reported that their employer was 'very' (10%) or 'quite knowledgeable' (25%) about T Levels. This is in comparison with a different survey which found [64% of employers](#) feel A Levels are well understood.
- The occupational standards on which T Levels are based are both too broad in some cases (for example in high hazard industries to define competence with sufficient precision) and too narrow in others (that is, not occupations but jobs). This indicates the content may not be optimal in all cases.
- There are challenges around securing work placements including about the appropriateness for safety critical environments, where remote working is prevalent, and where employers require additional insurance for people aged under 18. Increased flexibilities to deliver work placements are welcome but won't solve all the challenges.
- Some T Levels aren't considered to provide the skills and on-site experience required to progress to an Apprenticeship or to work.

- The dropout rate improved between 2022/23 and 2023/24 but is still high at 29%. This could indicate a problem with content, initial assessment, career guidance and/or teaching.
- The work carried out by Edge also finds challenges with teaching on T Levels including limited resources, high tutor turnover, and a lack of established teaching practices leading to a diversity of teaching styles.

The reform of level 3 qualifications

T Levels provide a good solution for some students but there are risks in viewing them as the main qualification option for post 16 students wanting to pursue a technical route. We welcome government's decision to retain 157 applied general qualifications. However, we would urge that decisions are made now for the long term, rather than just moving the problem back for two years, and that other qualifications are retained alongside T Levels.

The evidence from employers about the need to retain applied general qualifications alongside T Levels includes:

- In some sectors applied general qualifications are a well-understood and valued route to employment. For example, the Level 3 BTEC National in Applied Science undertaken by 30,000 learners in 2021 and the Level 3 applied general qualification in Games, Animation and VFX Skills was developed in partnership with employers. Turning off funding for such routes would risk employers becoming disengaged.
- Relatedly, there will always be subjects which are more niche, where there are fewer jobs, and therefore fewer qualifications offered. This causes a challenge for T Levels because of the placement and risks creating a 'postcode lottery'.
- T Levels won't fully replace the applied general qualification offer which may mean gaps in the skills that students develop.
- Due to the assessment methods T Levels are more academic than applied general qualifications. This means that a smaller cohort of learners will successfully undertake them, and other options need to be available.
- T Levels don't cover all areas. For example, there is no T Level which covers the Energy and Utility sector - a key sector for government to achieve its sustainability and clean energy targets. This also underlines the importance of ensuring there are other technical routes available.
- Learners value the opportunity to study applied general qualifications alongside other qualifications, including A Levels, and this option needs to be retained.

Section 2: Delivering further education

The main points made in section 2 are:

- Current funding for further education for both young people and adults isn't sufficient to meet the targets for growth.
- A change in culture within employers is needed to reverse the trend of declining employer investment in skills.
- Aggregating employer demand and getting the right parties, including sector skills bodies, employers and government, round the table to develop jointly owned solution would create a better environment to crowd in employer investment.

As the Skills England [report](#) indicates, around one third of average annual UK productivity growth between 2001 and 2019 is attributable to an expansion of skills available in the

workforce. As skills are integral to achieving the ambitious targets for economic growth sufficient funding needs to be available for further education.

Whilst the additional £300m announced in the budget for 16-18 provision is welcome (particularly if consolidated), the [latest annual report](#) on education spending in England by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) calculates that this is only sufficient to deliver a real-terms freeze in funding per student and college funding per student is c. 11% lower in real terms than in 2010. With 37% of colleges reporting operating deficits in 2022–23 and challenges with recruitment and retention due to relatively low salaries, it is clear that funding isn't sufficient to meet the scale of the challenge.

The recently announced decrease in the Adult Skills Fund is disappointing, particularly given that government spend on adult skills declined by a third in real terms between 2003-04 and 2023-24 (IFS report cited above). Whilst it's right to recognise the current demographic bulge of 16-18 year olds, 80 per cent of our 2035 workforce have already left compulsory education. The need for reskilling and upskilling is compounded by the pace of change of work and reductions in the budget for adult training is concerning.

Despite many employers investing heavily, employer investment in skills overall has also declined over time and is less than the EU average. This may point to a cultural issue where employers see upskilling as a cost rather than an investment, and moreover, a cost which may lead to their newly trained staff leaving for jobs elsewhere.

Being clearer about what the state should pay for, and what the expectations are for employers, and for individuals, would help create a better environment to crowd in employer investment. This should involve aggregating employer demand and getting the right parties, including sector skills bodies, employers and government, round the table to develop jointly owned solutions. Sector skills bodies working in this way can add significant value to the work of individual employers.

An example of where this approach is working well is the [National Nuclear Strategic Plan for Skills](#). The work started with analysis of labour market intelligence which identified the significant challenges. The next stage was to identify what government would pay for and where employers would contribute. [The Nuclear Skills Delivery Board](#) which includes a range of partners from industry and government will oversee the delivery of the plan. This approach is working because it started with articulating the demand and solutions were developed in partnership, recognising that employers working individually wouldn't have sufficient impact. The involvement of [Cogent Skills](#), the sector skills body for science and technology, has been integral because they are able to provide the view of the whole sector, and to convene employers. There is a potential to roll this type of approach out more widely to other sectors.

Section 3: Skills and apprenticeships

The main points made in section 3 are:

- Sector skills bodies can play an important role in closing skills gaps through setting standards, providing intelligence and piloting initiatives. The latter would enable government to pilot sector-based flexibilities in industries in a credible way where fast action is needed, and to learn from these before rolling out more widely.
- Skills England provides an opportunity to bring greater coherence to the skills system. To do this Skills England needs to work across government and co-design solutions with a range of stakeholders, including sector skills bodies.

- Apprenticeships are valued by employers and work well in many cases. However, there are some sectors where they work less well because of the nature of employment and multiple examples of where the optimum skills solution is not an apprenticeship. The Growth and Skills Levy should be flexed to include wider provision and sector skills bodies have a key role to play in identifying where and how.
- Greater and deeper devolution is welcome to ensure that skills provision can be better tailored to the needs of individuals, including connecting them to employers and employment opportunities in their local area.
- Coordination is required to mitigate risks of duplication and challenges for employers who work across larger areas.
- We welcome the introduction of the Youth Guarantee to help support young people into work. The engagement and input of employers will be essential however to ensure a positive impact.
- Opportunities to experience work are valuable for young people. The asks of employers need to be coordinated, and solutions found in sectors where placements are more challenging to provide.

How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have.

This will always be a challenge. The skills requirements within occupations change faster than the pace of standards development, qualification design, and processes to agree funding. With emerging occupations such as those required to meet the net zero objectives and associated with new technologies including AI, there are particular challenges.

However, whilst accepting that this is the case, the following would help to narrow the gap:

- Create a strategic and systemic way of engaging with sector skills bodies who are the organisations closest to the skills needs of the sectors they represent. They have rich intelligence which can be used by government and the capacity and capability to co-create solutions.
- It is essential that the curriculum content reflects the up-to-date requirements of competency for work, whether specific occupations or of the wider sector. To be consistent qualifications should be underpinned by occupational standards which detail the knowledge, skills and behaviours required and which are reviewed and refined regularly to ensure relevance to the evolving needs of the workplace.
- Develop and fund more flexible solutions including micro-credentials and modules which provide more targeted and cost-effective solutions to upskilling the workforce.
- Not everything has to be rolled out at once. Piloting initiatives which respond to emerging skills needs in individual sectors can help to gain faster outcomes and learn lessons prior to wider rollout. There is a role for sector skills bodies to identify the areas where fast action is needed and to lead activity.
- Ensure that sufficient attention is paid to skills development for educators. Arrangements for staff to spend time in industry can help to ensure that their understanding of workplaces is up to date. Opportunities for staff working in similar areas in different providers to get together to share challenges and effective practice can also support skills development.

More broadly, to help individuals develop relevant and current skills required for the workplace greater flexibility should be considered about what government funds. There are many well-established industry approved schemes which can provide young people with the skills they need for the workplace. For example, there is a training scheme which provides a licence to operate on-site in the energy and utility sector, and a suite of 22 industry approved

qualifications in fashion and textiles. These are not offered by colleges and providers because they aren't regulated and don't attract government funding but could provide young people with the skills they need for work. To better support young people into careers, government could helpfully work with sector skills bodies about what skills are needed for competency, how best to develop these, and where the balance of funding should be between government and employers.

The role of Skills England in meeting the Government's industrial strategy and boosting economic growth.

We support the Government's proposal to establish Skills England which provides an important opportunity to bring some much-needed coherence to the skills system aligned to the Industrial Strategy, and employment and migration policy.

We advocated for Skills England to be a strategic social partnership body which worked across government to enable England to develop the skills needed to achieve government missions on growth, productivity, green energy transition and opportunities for all over the next decade. A different approach has been taken to the set-up and it will be important that Skills England retains a focus on the wider aims to unify the skills landscape, shape technical education to respond to skills needs, and advise on the workforce needed to create growth, in addition to more administration functions inherited from IFATE.

Sector skills bodies can support Skills England by:

- Providing insights and intelligence from their sectors to help form the coherent national picture of where skills gaps exist and how they can be addressed.
- Being involved in co design and co production to deliver coherent and fast responses.
- Informing a sectoral approach to understanding skills needs and how they can be delivered, which can sit alongside a devolved approach.

Developing a strategic relationship with sector skills bodies and a systematic way of engaging with them would help Skills England to maximise the significant potential of these bodies to co-design solutions to skills challenges.

Skills England will be an arm's length body of DfE but will need to work across government because skills underpin all five missions. It will be important to take a holistic view and focus on making the interfaces work between the different elements including the Industrial Strategy Council, DfE, the Migration Advisory Commission, and lead departments for each sector.

Current challenges for apprenticeships, including employer engagement, funding issues, and apprentice pay.

The first point to make is that there is a lack of clarity over the purpose of apprenticeships, and this makes it hard to evaluate impact and success. Clarity about the purpose would help steer policy decisions. This is increasingly important with the introduction of shorter and foundation apprenticeships. The apprenticeship brand is strong, and it is essential that quality is maintained to ensure that the brand isn't diluted or tarnished.

Skills Federation members represent a wide range of industries and have different views about how well apprenticeships are working in their sectors. They report the following:

- Level 2 is the entry point for some occupations, for example construction, and this isn't always reflected in skills policy which focusses more on increasing higher level skills.
- It is difficult to use apprenticeships for reskilling as an individual can't become an apprentice until they are in the role. Relatedly, there are challenges where there aren't enough supervised roles for apprentices to take up.
- There are some sectors where shorter apprenticeships could work well including the occupations covered by [ScreenSkills](#) where the current apprenticeship model doesn't work due to the high proportion of free-lance work across the sector.
- Standards for apprenticeships need to support the development of the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to be competent in a role.

Apprenticeships are not the answer for every skills shortage. Often the most appropriate solution is a shorter course which allowed workers to 'top-up' their skills. The Growth and Skills Levy should be flexed to include a wider range of provision that meets the needs of employers. Making decisions about flexibilities needs to be done on a sector-by-sector basis, a one-size fits all approach won't be effective. Skills England should consider licensing sector skills bodies to act as the gatekeeper and guarantor for the flexibilities in their sector.

We agree in principle with reducing the minimum term for apprenticeships. However, the period of the apprenticeship should only be shortened where there is evidence that it will still support apprentices to achieve competence. Developing competency takes time and reducing the minimum duration to eight months will be the right approach for apprenticeships that can deliver occupational competency over this period but poses real concerns in other areas. Two examples are advanced manufacturing and science where apprenticeships of less than a year would not provide sufficient experience to embed the fundamental skills and behaviours required for competence. Drawing on the expertise of sector skills bodies will be crucial as government identifies and pilots this change.

Skills Federation members and their employers have raised concerns about the concept of Foundation Apprenticeships and they won't be appropriate for all sectors. In some sectors, for example financial services and science, Foundation Apprenticeship won't be appropriate because there are limited numbers of roles at lower levels. In other sectors, for example, manufacturing, employers have raised concerns that a Foundation Apprenticeship won't lead to occupational competency and have questioned why they wouldn't just use the existing level 2 apprenticeships.

We agree that the reduction in lower-level apprenticeships for young people is a concern. However, a sector-based approach should be taken towards restricting funding, and the consequences and any potential perverse incentives reviewed carefully. A strong case will need to be developed as many employers would not be in favour of changes which restricted their levy spend where this runs counter to their understanding of the skills needs of their industry.

The role of devolution in addressing regional skills needs and apprenticeships.

We welcome wider and deeper devolution as an opportunity to ensure that local skills provision can be better tailored to the needs of individuals, including connecting them to employers and employment opportunities in their local area. A maturing system of devolution should also provide the opportunity to test and learn 'what works' in supporting people to succeed and should ensure that the education opportunities available are not narrowly focussed solely on the jobs in that area but are broad enough to support people who may want to work elsewhere.

However, devolution of skills within England, whilst better meeting the skills needs of places, causes challenges for employers, particularly those that work across the country. Government should consider how to coordinate meeting sector needs across an increasingly devolved landscape.

Relatedly, devolution of skills across the UK nations causes challenges for employers, particularly those that work across borders. Government should consider how to get parity and greater coordination across the UK within a devolved skills landscape. Agreeing the same competency standards to be used across the UK would be a starting point to achieving this.

The quality and availability of work placements within vocational courses

Enabling young people to experience work directly as part of their course is important to contextualise theory, develop an understanding of the workplace, and to understand the behaviours required for work. Alongside effective careers guidance, this can support young people to make good decisions about their future.

There are two levels of challenge:

- Engagement with employers across all sectors and coordinating the long list of asks.
- Specific challenges in providing work placements in some sectors.

There is a long and well-documented list of asks of employers. Some of these asks, for example, providing T Level or work experience placements, need to be fulfilled by individual employers. Better coordination of this extensive and complicated list would help employers to be clear about what is expected of them and what support is available to help them engage. This coordination is a place-based activity and should form part of the role of Strategic Authorities.

There are challenges around securing work placements, particularly the longer placements that are part of T Levels, including about the appropriateness for safety critical environments, where remote working is prevalent, and where employers require additional insurance for people aged under 18. Increased flexibilities to deliver work placements are welcome but won't solve all the challenges.

Section 4: Supporting young people, widening access, and narrowing the attainment gap

The main points made in section 4 are:

- A new careers strategy is required to set the direction and purpose of career development for young people and adults.
- Sector skills bodies can play an important role both in providing intelligence about their sectors and supporting employers to offer opportunities to young people.
- The aim should be a system with both academic, and technical/vocational routes, which are equally valued, and providing clear and flexible progression routes to further study and work, and which are therefore attractive to a wider subset of learners.

Access to higher education, other qualification levels, and employment; career and course guidance.

There are currently barriers built into the system to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage which need to be addressed.

The Skills Federation have called for a new careers strategy to set the direction and purpose of career development for young people and adults. A strategy exploring career development's potential to help address broader economic and social issues and connect individuals and industry which would:

- Widen perspectives, ensuring the skills for the future and supporting levelling-up.
- Remove fragmentation in the English system and promote an “all-age” approach to Careers Information Advice and Guidance.
- Engage with sector skills bodies and use the very rich information already available including existing industry careers sites/materials.
- Utilise the tools and training already available through organisations including the Careers Development Institute and the Careers and Enterprise Company.

In addition to the key role for sector skills bodies, inputs are also needed from individual employers including work experience placements, talks and workshops, hosting site visits and contributing to developing curriculum. A high percentage of young people benefit already from these. It can be challenging, however, for employers to find the time and there are specific challenges in some industries where there are safety concerns for young people on site. Better promotion of the support available including guidance on offering work placements and networks that link business and education would help encourage more employers to engage.

Better coordination would also bring benefits. There is effective practice that can be learned from in different parts of the UK, most notably in Wales where Careers Wales coordinates opportunities for schools and colleges to engage with employers. There is a role for Strategic Authorities in England and thought needs to be given to what happens in areas where devolution is currently further away. Sector skills bodies also play an important role in coordinating careers information and recruitment for their sectors. Two examples are '[not just lab coats](#)' which [Cogent Skills](#) is involved in and [Tasty Careers](#) set up by the [NSA Food and Drink](#).

Disparity in attainment, including by gender, area of the country in which a student lives, ethnicity, and between disadvantaged students and their peers.

Learners who don't achieve well at GCSE are encouraged to take vocational and technical options which are often seen as a 'remedial', less attractive option. A higher percentage of disadvantaged learners achieve less well at GSCE which means that a class divide is also built into the system. The aim should be a system with both academic, and technical/vocational routes, which are equally valued, providing clear and flexible progression routes to further study and work, and which are therefore attractive to a wider subset of learners.

The system needs to enable more young people to access pathways into careers. This means that pathways need to be clear, and without missing options at lower levels. It also means that both young people and employers need to both understand and value these routes. For young people this means better career guidance which is focussed on vocational and technical routes as well academic options. For employers this means clear and accessible information about qualification pathways and stability within the system to allow time to embed.

The introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) has led to a decline in numbers of learners taking design and technology, drama and music GCSEs. This is a risk because if young people who want to pursue careers in the creative industries need to do this outside of school, it will be easier for students from better off families to do this, which could have a negative impact on social mobility. The Sutton Trust has already identified this as a trend with [recent research](#) finding that younger adults from working-class backgrounds are four times less likely to work in the creative industries compared to their middle-class peers.

There is effective practice to learn from. For example, [Engineered Learning](#) is an alternative education provider which supports and empowers young people aged 11 to 30 from some of our most deprived areas to succeed and achieve through engineering.