

Learning & Skills Policy Update

March 2017

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Introduction

This newsletter is intended to keep unions and other stakeholders abreast of policy developments in learning and skills, including providing updates on what the TUC and unionlearn are saying on specific policy issues. If you have any suggestions about either the content or the design of the newsletter, please contact Iain Murray: imurray@tuc.org.uk. The newsletter and a range of learning and skills policy briefings are available on the [unionlearn](http://unionlearn.org) and [TUC](http://TUC.org) websites.

Budget 2017 – Skills announcements

The TUC welcomed a number of skills policy announcements in the Budget, in particular the commitment to step up funding for the rollout of the new technical education qualification system (or “T Levels” as they were referred to in the Budget for the first time). The planned overhaul of technical education is drawn from the recommendations of the Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education

chaired by Lord Sainsbury, which the government endorsed in its response (Post-16 Skills Plan) albeit without making any definite promises on funding. Both reports are available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education.

Both documents were published last summer and the TUC [welcomed](#) the broad thrust of the recommendations, saying that the prospect of Brexit heightened the need for a new high status technical skills system that would complement apprenticeships. Despite numerous well intentioned initiatives in recent decades, there is a broad consensus that technical education in the UK remains the poor relation of the academic route. This is a drag on productivity and inhibits career progression for those who are not inclined to go to university for a range of valid reasons.

As the Chancellor bluntly pointed out in his speech, “while we have an academic route in this country that is undeniably one of the best in the world, the truth is that we languish near the bottom of the international league tables for technical education.” The thrust of the recommendations of the Sainsbury Panel are aimed at putting in place a new system of technical education that is provided through 15 high-quality routes with standards being set by the Institute for Apprenticeships (which is to be

renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education).

The TUC set out more detail on its view of the proposed reform of technical education in its [submission](#) to the parliamentary committee overlooking the Technical and Further Education Bill, which is taking through some of the necessary legislative reforms. In addition to welcoming the central thrust of the Sainsbury reforms, the TUC submission specifically welcomed the following features of the proposed technical education framework:

- Integration of the apprenticeships and technical education systems as is the case in many other countries
- Building in flexibility that enables students to switch between academic and technical education pathways to reflect changing preferences and circumstances
- Tailored support for disabled students and those with special educational needs taking up this educational option; and
- Enabling adults to access the new technical education system to retrain or upskill.

However, the TUC submission also highlighted two potential hurdles that might see this initiative go the way of many others in the past. First, as Lord Sainsbury himself emphasised in the foreword to his panel's report, "a reason why our system of technical education has not been of high quality or respected in the past is that it has not been properly funded." It was of concern that the government's response last summer included the following ambiguous commitment: "We accept and will implement all of the Sainsbury panel's proposals, unequivocally where that is possible within current budget constraints".

The announcement in the Budget is a major step in overcoming this hurdle with a

commitment to provide an "additional £500M of additional funding" per annum by the time all the qualifications within each of the 15 occupational routes are all available (expected from September 2022). This additional funding will increase the number of hours on these new courses by more than 50% to over 900 hours a year and also allow for a high quality industry work placement, two criteria that the Sainsbury Panel recommended as being essential.

A second hurdle to achieving a durable technical education system highlighted by the TUC is the need to ensure that employers and employees have a genuine sense of ownership of the system, which should in turn promote a high degree of political consensus about its long term stability. Other European countries tend to regulate their training systems through a "social partnership" approach involving a close collaboration between government, employers and trade unions and this leads to longevity and high quality standards that meet the needs of employers and the workforce.

This is still an outstanding challenge for the nascent technical education system and the government's ongoing apprenticeship reform programme. For example, the TUC has recently expressed concerns that despite the significant role of trade unions in the design and provision of apprenticeships, no-one with a trade union background was appointed to the board of the Institute for Apprenticeships.

There were some additional skills announcements in the Budget of note, including that the government will be spending up to £40 million by 2018-19 "to test different approaches to help people retraining and upskill throughout their working lives". While this funding level is dwarfed by the funding levels committed to apprenticeships and technical education, it does at least represent an acknowledgement by government that it

needs to give a greater focus to policies in support of lifelong learning and retraining opportunities for the existing workforce. There is much best practice unions can demonstrate on this front, especially through the innovative work of union learning reps in supporting adults to re-engage in learning and training through workplace initiatives.

The Chancellor also confirmed in the Budget that from 2019-20 maintenance loans will be available to students taking technical education courses (level 4-6) at the new National Colleges and Institutes for Technology that are currently under development. In addition, from 2018-19 part-time undergraduates will for the first time have access to maintenance loans and “doctoral student loans” of up to £25,000 will also become available then.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship Levy and unionlearn guides

In the run-up to the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in April, unionlearn has continued to promote a range of tools to support union reps, officers and ULF projects to negotiate good quality apprenticeships with employers. These unionlearn guides include the [apprenticeship toolkit](#) and [15 key apprenticeship levy negotiating tips](#).

In February unionlearn launched a new eNote - “Apprenticeships – know your rights” aimed at helping apprentices. This explains to apprentices (and prospective apprentices) why a quality apprenticeship is a great way to earn money while developing skills for a rewarding career. It explains that new apprentices will be entering the world of work but learning as they do so, studying for a qualification, and possibly a degree.

The eNote is a self-contained module that contains a mixture of text, video and quizzes. It

lasts for 10 minutes and can be returned to as many times as you like. The eNote answers lots of questions that new apprentices would need to know, including:

- What is an apprenticeship?
- Can I do one?
- What kind of apprenticeships can I do?
- How long will it take to complete?

It also highlights what constitutes a high quality apprenticeship, what commitment an apprentice would have to sign up to, and includes a number of case studies from apprentices. The eNote is available at: www.unionlearn.org.uk/apprenticeship/knownyourrights

The [spring edition](#) of unionlearn’s Learning Rep e-magazine included an interview with Skills Minister, Robert Halfon MP, about apprenticeships policy and the important role of trade unions on this front. It also includes an interview with Mike Brown, who has recently taken over as Commissioner of Transport for London, who talks about tackling the skills gap in the transport sector and the important role of apprenticeships in this respect.

Institute for Apprenticeships

In January the government issued a [consultation](#) on the strategic approach of the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA), the new body that will come into place in April 2017. Launching the consultation, the government statement said that “independent, and with employers at its heart, the Institute for Apprenticeships will be responsible for approving new apprenticeship standards and how apprentices will be assessed to ensure they respond to the needs of business and give learners the skills and experience they need to succeed.”

The IfA is also charged with advising government on the maximum level of state funding available for different standards, which are being formulated by Apprenticeship Trailblazers. Trailblazers are dominated by groups of employer though there are some examples of the involvement of other stakeholders, including trade unions. Under the measures set out in the Technical and Further Education Bill, the Institute will also be expanded to cover the new technical education qualifications (T Levels). According to the government this “will deliver reforms across both apprenticeships-based and college-based routes, ensuring a more consistent approach to high-quality technical and skills-based education.”

The [TUC response](#) to the consultation reiterated its welcome for the establishment of a national body with a direct remit for quality and standards and the subsequent decision to extend this remit to cover the reformed technical education system. However, the TUC has also consistently argued that the development of the reformed apprenticeship and technical education system presented a real opportunity to adopt the principles of social partnership that govern similar skills systems in other European countries, comprising a close collaboration between government, employers and trade unions. The TUC response says that “the lack of employee voice and unions on the Institute’s Board is of major regret and there are concerns that this will undermine its role as a national guardian of quality and standards.”

The TUC response also raised concerns about the limited remit of the Institute as regards quality and standards. The response highlighted that the draft Strategic Guidance that was being consulted on, appeared to suggest that the Institute will have a much more limited role than was originally anticipated. According to this guidance the body will focus

on looking at the quality of apprenticeship standards and also advising on the funding bands for these standards. Whilst putting in place a national quality assurance process for standards is welcome, this is not an adequate response to tackling systemic issues and risks failing to deliver a meaningful, positive impact on the wide range of quality issues affecting individual apprentices.

English and maths

It has been confirmed that there is to be a delay to the ongoing reform of functional skills qualifications. The changes to the subject content will now be introduced in 2019 instead of 2018 as had been originally planned. DfE still considers reform of functional skills to be a policy priority and the work in this area commissioned from the [Education and Training Foundation \(ETF\)](#) will continue. However, the relevant ministers want to take time to consider the recommendations so far and how they fit into the wider post-16 skills policy framework. Further public consultations are in the pipeline from DfE and Ofqual will also be launching technical and policy consultations. ETF is also going to commission an awareness raising campaign aiming at strengthening the profile of functional skills as a brand, including employer recognition of it.

CITB and ECITB reviews

Last year the government appointed Paul Morrell, the former government construction advisor, to undertake a [review](#) of the two remaining industrial training boards with an operational training levy in place. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB) are funded by the industries they serve by way of a statutory training levy. The levy proceeds are redistributed by the industrial

training boards chiefly in the form of grants to subsidise training costs in the sector.

Setting out the case for the review, the government said the following: “The introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017 will impact on larger companies currently in scope of the levies operated by the industrial training boards. A key question for the review, and any subsequent levy order will be whether market failures in construction still require a separate levy and grant system and if so, how this can operate alongside the apprenticeship levy.” The government also said that the review would take into account the findings of a recent report by Mark Farmer for the Construction Leadership Council – [Modernise or Die](#) - which posed a number of questions about the ability of the UK construction sector to maintain and expand capacity, and the effectiveness and future role for the CITB.

Subsequently a government consultation was launched in February of this year and this posed a number of questions about the role of the CITB and the ECITB. The [TUC submission](#) to the consultation concludes that the scale of the skills challenge facing the sector and widespread market failure mean that a levy and grant system is still needed, but that in the coming years it will need to take account of the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. In addition, the TUC response called on the government to address some of the labour market issues (e.g. bogus self-employment and inadequate health and safety) that inhibits progress when it comes to supporting more individuals to achieve sustainable, highly-skilled and safe employment in the construction sector.

The TUC submission agrees that the CITB and ECITB should continue to have a clear leadership role for their sectors but argues that this will require governance arrangements that

reflect both sides of industry. The TUC response highlighted that there are now serious concerns about this, including that the CITB no longer has a dedicated Board seat for unions and that the ECITB is engaged in a restructuring of governance that may also weaken union voice.

Other policy and research news

The IPPR think-tank has recommended that government should double the apprenticeship levy to generate £5B per annum by extending it to a wider number of employers. Secondly, it has recommended widening the remit of the levy so that it would cover other forms of training in addition to apprenticeships. Thirdly, the IPPR report - [Skills 2030](#) - proposes that each year £1.1B of this additional income should be allocated to a regional skills fund, to be devolved to regions with lower skills levels. The report also includes an analysis of the key skills challenges facing the UK, including that employers invest less in training compared to the EU average and that UK citizens with low-level or no qualifications face major barriers to accessing workplace training.

The Gatsby Foundation has published [a Key Indicators in STEM Education](#) report which highlights the continuing challenges in achieving a better gender balance in the take-up of STEM subjects. For example, the report points out that women only accounted for 4% of advanced apprenticeship starts in engineering in 2014/15. The report also refers to other worrying aspects of the English apprenticeship system, including the high proportion of level 2 apprenticeships compared to the other European countries where apprenticeships tend to be at level 3 or higher.