

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill: Second Reading Opening Speech

I beg to move, that the Bill be now read a Second time.

Mr Speaker,

In my previous role as the vaccines minister, I set out how we as a nation were going to work our way back to normality, by delivering on an incredible vaccination programme. This would be the product of evidence, expertise, commitment, and collaboration.

I am now here, I'm very pleased to say, as the Education Secretary. But I would like to make clear that my aims, first and foremost, remain the same.

I am determined to focus on evidence, data, and delivery. And on realising the huge potential we have in our very best asset: our people.

I know first-hand how important education is – I came to this country with my family aged 11 without a word of English – and here I am now in this chamber. With the right education, opportunity abounds.

Unfortunately, we are still feeling the aftershocks of the pandemic. And we still have many challenges ahead.

We need to recover economically.

We need to level up our country.

But I'm glad to say we're already making headway in this.

The Chancellor's Budget is putting the money where it needs to be – with £378 billion of direct support for the economy over this year and last.

Our Plan for Jobs is working – with the peak of unemployment forecast to be two million less than previously predicted.

And wages are growing.

We will build on this by having skills at the very heart of our plan.

Skills, Schools and Families – this is our mantra.

And skills are about investing in people, all across our country.

About strengthening local economies.

About productivity, stabilising the labour market, and global competitiveness.

About shoring ourselves up for a better, stronger, more prosperous future.

This is not a pipedream Mr Speaker. We are getting it done right now.

Our Skills for Jobs white paper set out in January what our plan was to reform the skills system.

I'm not going to repeat everything it said – members I'm sure would have familiarised themselves with it– but I hope I am going to show how we have acted upon it.

Firstly, we have significantly increased investment.

We are investing £3.8 billion more in further education and skills over the Parliament by 2024-25. As my right honourable friend, the Chair of the Education Select Committee, said earlier this month, this is “a remarkable amount of money for skills”.

I would note, Mr Speaker, the cross-party support for the measures in this Bill. The Noble Lord, Lord Sainsbury, who led an independent panel on skills on behalf of the Coalition Government, is a big supporter of our plans. As President Truman once said, “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.” And that is what we are trying to do, Mr Speaker – work together to level up the skills base across our great country

We are delivering an extra £1.6 billion boost by 2024-25 for 16–19-year olds' education, including maintaining funding in real terms per student and delivering more hours of teaching for T Levels. And there's an extra hour a week for all students in this age group, who have the least time to catch up from Covid.

Apprenticeships funding will increase to £2.7 billion by 2024-25 to support businesses of all sizes to build the skilled workforce they need.

We are making vital improvements to the FE college buildings and equipment across England.

We are delivering on our National Skills Fund manifesto commitment, to help to transform the lives of people who have not got onto the work ladder and lack qualifications.

Secondly, we're implementing the policies from the white paper.

For example, we've established 8 trailblazer areas across the country where the first local skills improvement plans are being developed by employer representative bodies.

They are currently engaging employers, education providers and key local stakeholders to begin the development of these plans. The trailblazers, from Kent to Cumbria, will generate valuable learning to inform the wider rollout of these plans across the country.

And finally, this Bill sets out the essential legal framework for our reforms. We're setting ourselves up for success – by giving people the skills and education they need for work.

By improving the quality of what they learn.

And by protecting our learners from the disruptive impact of provider failure – reducing the risk that they miss out on vital learning because the training provider they are studying with goes bust.

I've seen first-hand the transformative power of education. I'd like to take a moment to re tell an experience I had whilst on a visit to Barnsley College. The college was the first in South Yorkshire to roll out T Levels and while I was there, I met several of their students.

I'd like to tell you about one of them. Honestly, I have rarely met a more inspiring individual. He told me that with his T Level, and I am quoting him word for word here... "I am looking at unis now and thinking which one I am picking, not which one is going to pick me". Greg is living proof of the transformative effect our skills programme is having.

I also met students at Barnet and Southgate college in my first week in post and saw how state of the art facilities were helping those with learning difficulties or disabilities to realise their ambitions.

Barnet College is going further by strengthening its ties to local businesses. The college has worked closely with its local Chamber of Commerce to provide a range of services for local businesses.

So, Mr Speaker, our reforms are working.

They are changing people's lives now.

They are levelling up the country.

And this Bill will help to secure these reforms for the years to come.

Skills are about getting people fulfilling and productive jobs and helping them to improve their lot. That is why one of the key parts of this Bill is Local Skills Improvement Plans.

They place employers, through representative bodies, at the centre of local post-16 skills systems. Only through understanding what is needed in a local area and working in a holistic way with employers, education providers, and key local stakeholders, can we develop credible local plans to ensure that skills provision meets local needs.

Mayoral Combined Authorities, who have certain devolved responsibilities for adult education, are also critical stakeholders who will be closely engaged in this process. So, I am pleased to say we will introduce an amendment to place the role of MCAs on the face of the Bill.

Local Skills Improvement Plans will help ensure the skills system is responsive to labour market skills needs and supports local innovation and growth, with every part of the country able to succeed in its own unique way. This is levelling up in action.

And as the Prime Minister set out at COP 26 two weeks ago: when it comes to tackling climate change, words without action, and without deeds, are pointless. So, within this Bill we're taking that action, by setting out the need to consider skills that support our path to net zero as part of the Local Skills Improvement Plans.

Another priority for our skills agenda is for lifelong learning and delivering on our commitment to the Lifelong Loan Entitlement – LLE for short.

This will help provide people with a loan entitlement, to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education at levels 4 to 6, for use on modules or full courses, in colleges or universities, over their lifetime.

I cannot emphasise how much this is a step-change in our system and will revolutionise how we see education, retraining, and upskilling.

80% of 2030's workforce are already in work, so we need to be able to adapt to the future economy and those skills needs.

The LLE will give us the flexibility to be responsive and agile and enable people to succeed at any stage in their lives. It will also give people the option to build up their qualifications over time, within both further education and higher education providers. They will have a real choice in how and when they study to acquire new life-changing skills. The LLE will help to create that parity of esteem between further education and higher education that we so desperately need.

And I am pleased to inform you, Mr Speaker, that since this Bill's introduction, the government has introduced further measures to help eradicate that scourge of honest and faithful academia: essay mills.

I'd like to thank my right honourable friend, the member for Kingswood, for his work on this topic and I know he'll appreciate it is high time we stamp out this dishonest practice, that both undermines our further and higher education systems and puts students at risk of exploitation.

Any reform of our system must also reform our set of technical education qualifications. To close the gap between the skills gained through a qualification and the skills employers tell us they need.

That is why we're extending the powers of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to approve a broader range of technical education qualifications. The Institute will ensure the independent voice of employers is embedded through this process, while working in harmony with Ofqual to ensure quality.

Now, I want to be perfectly clear here. This Bill focuses on the approval and regulation of technical qualifications, rather than the funding of technical or academic qualifications.

But when it comes to both academic and technical qualifications, what we are looking for most is quality. There is no point in a student taking a low-

quality level 3 qualification that doesn't equip them with skills for a job, or help them progress into higher education. And this is even more important when it comes to disadvantaged students.

We have over 12,000 qualifications at level 3 and below. By comparison, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland, widely regarded as having high performing technical education systems, have around 500 or fewer. Our qualifications review is vital in ensuring what's on the market is the best it can be.

I am clear that T Levels and A levels should be front and centre of the level 3 landscape.

But I am also convinced that we need other qualifications alongside them – many of which currently exist – that play a valuable role in supporting good outcomes for students. It is quite likely we will see many BTECs and other similar applied general style qualifications continuing to play an important role in 16-19 education, for the foreseeable future.

Our reforms to the qualifications landscape are rightly ambitious, but we know that we would be wrong to push too hard and risk compromising quality. That is why I am announcing today that we have decided to allow an extra year before our reform timetable is implemented.

This extra year will allow us to continue to work hard to support the growth of T Levels and gives more notice to providers, awarding organisations, employers, students and parents so that they can prepare for the changes. I am a firm believer in T Levels – as I have said before, I want them to become as famous as A levels – and I want to make sure we get them right.

As many young people as possible should have the advantage of studying and successfully completing a T Level. We hear consistently that some students are being put off taking a T Level because they are worried that they will fail it if they do not reach level 2 in English and maths. We want to change this and bring T Levels in line with other qualifications, including A levels.

We are absolutely clear that English and maths should remain central to T Level programmes, but we do not want to unnecessarily inhibit talented students from accessing T Levels simply because of the additional hurdle that reaching level 2 in English and maths represents.

That is why I can also announce today that we will remove the English and maths exit requirement from T Levels. This will bring them in line with other qualifications, including A-Levels, and ensure talented young people with more diverse strengths are not arbitrarily shut out from rewarding careers in sectors such as construction, catering and health-care. The Institute is taking immediate steps towards this.

I also want to make sure that all students from the first two cohorts are not unfairly disadvantaged by the ongoing challenges presented by Covid-19 on T Level delivery. We have therefore recently announced a small number of

temporary flexibilities to how Industry placements can be delivered for these groups, including allowing some virtual working.

We're working to improve technical education at all levels, including level 2, which has been neglected for too long. Getting level 2 and below right is key to making sure that students have clear lines of sight to level 3, apprenticeships, traineeships, and for some, directly into employment. We will consult on proposals for reform later this year, but will work at speed.

It is in the interest of learners that we take a fresh look at the system and make it easier to navigate, with better outcomes for learners, employers and the economy. When I was the apprenticeship tsar, I saw how people in other countries understood their systems so clearly – it made a world of difference. Everyone understood it, the student, their family and their employer.

Since this Bill's introduction in May, it has been subject to a thorough and significant scrutiny through the Other Place. I would like to set out my thanks to all those who contributed, and especially to the Minister for the School System, who took this Bill on just before its Report Stage and did so brilliantly.

The minister brought forward some government amendments during Report Stage, including those clauses on Essay Mills. Another amendment was to allow 16-19 colleges to become academies with a religious designation – something I know the member for Blackpool South will be very happy about.

And important sets of issues were raised in the Other Place. I can be clear that the government is listening and taking careful consideration of the proposals made there.

Not all changes are right for legislation, but I whole-heartedly agree with the spirit of many of those proposals.

Mr Speaker, it is a privilege to be able to take this Bill through the House.

I know there are many exciting and thought-provoking debates ahead of us.

But most importantly we must remember why we are doing this. It is to deliver high quality qualifications, designed with employers to give students the skills they need.

With the support of members across all benches of this House, this Bill will signify a major milestone in our Plan for Jobs and our economic recovery.

This Bill will set us up for both the future we want and, crucially, the future we need.

I commend this Bill to the House.