

Learning & Skills Policy Update

August 2020

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Introduction

This newsletter is intended to keep unions and other stakeholders up to speed on recent learning and skills policy developments, including commentary by the TUC and unionlearn. It also highlights new resources developed by unionlearn to support union reps to boost learning and skills opportunities in the workplace. If you have any suggestions about either the content or design of the newsletter, please contact Iain Murray: imurray@tuc.org.uk. The newsletter and a range of other learning and skills policy briefings are available on the [unionlearn](#) and [TUC](#) websites.

A Plan for Jobs 2020

On 8 July the government published [A Plan for Jobs 2020](#) and the Chancellor of Exchequer presented the proposals to Parliament. The main thrust of the plan is to boost skills and job creation in the coming period to combat the anticipated sharp increase in unemployment. The plan prioritises a range of jobs and skills initiatives aimed at young people, who are being hit hardest by job losses and who are also at risk of long-term scarring to their job prospects resulting from unemployment. While some of the initiatives do

cover adult skills, it is anticipated that there will be further proposals on this in the Spending Review in the autumn and a forthcoming FE White Paper.

Kickstart scheme

The centrepiece of the proposals aimed at young people announced by the Chancellor was a new Kickstart scheme “to fund the direct creation of high quality jobs for young people at the highest risk of long-term unemployment.” Funding of £2 billion will be made available “to create hundreds of thousands of high quality 6-month work placements aimed at those aged 16-24 who are on Universal Credit and are deemed to be at risk of long-term unemployment.”

Government funding will cover payment of the relevant National Minimum Wage for 25 hours a week and will also cover employer National Insurance and minimum automatic enrolment contributions for workplace pensions. In effect this means that, for a 24-year-old, the total government grant will be around £6,500. The Chancellor confirmed that employers can apply to be part of the scheme from August and that young people will start taking up these new subsidised jobs from this autumn onwards.

In the run-up to the Chancellor’s announcement the TUC had been calling for a new jobs guarantee programme prioritising young people (see [previous newsletter](#)). Reacting to the Chancellor’s statement the TUC General Secretary, Frances O’Grady, [said](#): “Unions campaigned for a job guarantee scheme [and] Kickstart is a good first step”. However, the TUC reaction also called for

more extensive government action on jobs and skills to protect the UK against mass unemployment, including targeted support for the hardest-hit sectors like manufacturing and aviation.

While the *Plan for Jobs* report makes no reference to the training element of the Kickstart scheme, the Chancellor said in his speech that “they will be good quality jobs – with employers providing Kickstarters with training and support to find a permanent job”. However, the [Treasury](#) has confirmed that employers cannot use Kickstart to recruit young people as an apprentice as the aim of the programme is to support people to subsequently progress to sustainable employment, including an apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships & other training schemes

To address the fall-off in apprenticeship starts the Chancellor announced two new financial incentives for employers. From 1st August 2020 to 31st January 2021 there will be a new payment of £2,000 to employers in England for each new apprentice they hire aged under 25. There will be a £1,500 payment for each new apprentice they hire aged 25 and over during the same period. These payments will be in addition to the existing £1,000 incentive payments the government already provides for employers who are recruiting new 16-18 year-old apprentices and those aged under 25 with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

There are also plans to expand significantly the number of traineeships. Traineeships are a skills development programme that includes a work placement and they used to last from 6 weeks up to 6 months, but the maximum duration has now been increased to a year. A traineeship provides employability training and English and maths learning if the individual has not achieved a level 2 qualification in these subjects. Traineeships are unpaid and participants can retain their benefit entitlement while on the programme. Employers can also provide trainees with expenses for

transport and meals and unions engaged in the programme make this a key priority.

The Chancellor announced that the government will provide an additional £111 million this year for traineeships in England, which is enough to triple current participation levels. For the first time a financial incentive will be provided to employers involving a £1,000 payment for each trainee taken on, up to a maximum of 10 trainees per company. The government also said that it will improve provision and expand eligibility for traineeships to those with level 3 qualifications and below (it was level 2 and below previously). Traineeships will now also be an option for 25-year-olds with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

Trade unions can play a key role in helping young people to benefit from a high-quality traineeship. Unionlearn’s publication - [Helping young people into work and training](#) – includes a number of case studies highlighting unions working in partnership with employers to support young people to benefit from a high-quality traineeship.

There is a further commitment in the *Plan for Jobs* to boost funding for sector-based work academies. This programme is aimed at people aged 18+ who are not in employment. It can last up to 6 weeks and provides pre-employment training, a work experience placement, and a guaranteed job interview. The government is to provide an additional £17 million this year to triple the number of places that will be made available.

The new proposals also include an option for school and college leavers to stay on studying for an additional year if they cannot find employment. The government will provide £101 million for the 2020-21 academic year to give all 18-19 year olds in England the opportunity to “study targeted high value Level 2 and 3 courses when there are not employment opportunities available to them.” In effect this allows school and college leavers at risk of becoming unemployed to do a fully funded

optional extra year of study (see [further guidance](#) on DfE website).

The government is also increasing investment in a range of career advice and jobsearch support services aimed at unemployed young people. More detail is available in the full report.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship statistics

The government's latest monthly [apprenticeships statistics](#) show a sharp decline since lockdown. Useful summaries of the latest trends are also available on the [TES](#) and [FE Week](#) websites. The government is providing comparative statistics for the period since lockdown (March 23) with the equivalent period last year. The latest available data show that there have been 34,690 apprenticeship starts reported to date between March 23 and June 30 this year. This marks a decline of 52% on the 72,800 reported for the equivalent period last year. The government is giving a health warning about these statistics, saying that the final apprenticeships data for the period will not become available until later in the year and therefore "at this point it is unclear what the true number of starts in the affected period was or if the level of reporting at this point in the year has been affected by the lockdown".

However, evidence from a range of sources suggest that the current estimate of the rate of decline may not be too far off. This is backed up by the latest apprenticeships vacancy data. According to [FE Week](#) the data from the government's *Find An Apprenticeship* website shows that vacancies for April, May and June 2020 were respectively 2,120, 1,850 and 4,030. This compares to 10,900, 13,030 and 12,100 respectively in April, May and June 2019. The government also published the latest monthly data (for May 2020) and this revealed a total of 9,000 apprenticeship starts compared with 22,300 in May 2019. This signifies a 60% drop

and there was an even greater rate of decline for 16- to 18-year-olds (a drop of 79%).

Redundancy Support Service for Apprentices

The government has [announced](#) a new support service to help apprentices who have lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 outbreak to find new opportunities. The launch of the [Redundancy Support Service for Apprentices](#) coincides with the rollout of new cash incentives for employers to recruit apprentices, as set out in the *Plan for Jobs* report (see page 2). Announcing the new service, the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills said: "Covid-19 has had a big impact on business and the jobs market, and we know that some apprentices have lost their jobs or are facing redundancy as a result. Our new Redundancy Support Service for Apprentices will make sure apprentices who have lost their jobs can get the help and support they need to get back on track and on the path to a new career."

According to the government the new service will ensure apprentices can access local and national services that can provide financial, legal, health and wellbeing support, and help them to find a new job should they need it. Apprentices can also use the service to search and apply for other available apprenticeship opportunities across the country. There is also an [employer facing](#) part of the redundancy support website. Employers who have apprenticeship opportunities up for grabs and who are willing to take on a redundant apprentice are being urged to sign up to the new service to advertise their vacancies. The government has set an aim of helping apprentices to find alternative employment within 12 weeks of being made redundant if at all possible.

All-Party Parliamentary Group report

In June the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Apprenticeships put out a call for evidence seeking submissions on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on apprenticeships. Our response highlighted two of the TUC's key jobs and skills

policy asks to government aimed at helping young people facing the growing jobs crisis:

- A job guarantee programme with a flexible training element targeted initially on young people, including the option for starting an apprenticeship anytime; and
- An “education and training guarantee” for school leavers and people aged 25 and under, including an apprenticeship, a place at college or university, or another education and training option.

The TUC response to the APPG also highlighted that there are still too many poor-quality and low-paid apprenticeships and that there has been little progress in widening access to the best apprenticeships for under-represented groups. Our submission referred to a number of longstanding apprenticeship reforms that the TUC has been calling for, including measures to:

- strengthen enforcement of the right to off-the-job training
- boost wage levels by reforming and enforcing apprentices’ entitlement to the National Minimum Wage
- give apprentices an entitlement to student travel discounts
- improve equality of access through a much more robust national policy approach
- guarantee a minimum progression to a level 3 apprenticeship
- flex the levy and extend use of procurement and contracting for infrastructure projects to boost apprenticeship numbers
- embed a social partnership approach.

The APPG’s [2019-20 report](#) draws on its call for evidence relating to the impact of the pandemic and sets out a number of policy reforms that reflect many aspects of what the TUC has been campaigning for. For example, it says that the

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) and Ofsted should “undertake stronger enforcement of the rules and regulations surrounding apprenticeships to prevent exploitation, unfair pay, and poor-quality training.” It also includes a proposal to provide apprentices with free travel by 2021, echoing the findings in the TUC’s [Get a Move On!](#) report. Launching our report, the TUC General Secretary said: “Apprenticeships should be affordable for all. But many apprentices face the double whammy of low pay and high travel costs. There’s no good reason why apprentices should be left worse off than other students.”

The TUC also welcomes the APPG’s recommendation to the government to “set up an apprenticeship working group with employers, training providers, professional bodies and associations as well as unions to develop innovative ways to retain apprentices and ensure the continuing talent pipeline.” If taken forward this would reflect the stronger social partnership arrangements underpinning the apprenticeship system in many other countries with a reputation for high-quality training.

Social Mobility Commission report

The Social Mobility Commission has issued a new report raising an alert that disadvantaged young people are being left behind by the apprenticeship system. The report - [Apprenticeships and social mobility: fulfilling potential](#) – finds that apprenticeship starts have declined by 36% for people from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to 23% for other groups. It also highlights that young people from deprived backgrounds are less likely to be even selected for an apprenticeship in the first place. When they are recruited, it’s likely to be at entry level and in lower-paid industries such as hospitality, administration or health. The apprenticeships in these areas also tend to be shorter in duration than in better paid occupations such as

engineering or ICT. Only 13% of degree-level apprenticeships were accounted for by people from disadvantaged groups.

However, the report highlights the benefits for those who do manage to complete their apprenticeship despite the wide-ranging barriers. For example, the Commission reports a 16% uplift to wages for women from disadvantaged backgrounds who complete their apprenticeship compared to 10% for other groups.

The report also highlights that “disadvantaged learners often struggle to cover travel costs, and that levels of apprenticeship pay are often insufficient” and it recommends that “the Low Pay Commission and the DfE targets both those financial and non-financial aspects of apprenticeship training known to depress completion rates; particularly among disadvantaged learners.”

[Commenting](#) on the report, Kevin Rowan, unionlearn Director, said: “Apprenticeships should be accessible and affordable to all. We’d like to see government to take action in improving the apprenticeship levy system by allowing employers to use their levy funds on innovative pre-apprenticeships programmes to engage people from disadvantaged groups”. He also highlighted that the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on apprenticeships was disproportionately hitting people from disadvantaged groups.

Drawing on the research the Commission has published [guidance](#) for employers on how they can improve their apprenticeship recruitment strategies to provide more opportunities to disadvantaged groups.

Education Select Committee

The Chair of the Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon MP, [wrote](#) to the Apprenticeships and Skills Minister (Gillian Keegan MP) in July raising a number of policy issues relating to apprenticeships. The letter drew on the discussion

at a meeting the committee held in early July with students and apprentices to hear about their experience of lockdown and hopes for the future. While welcoming the emphasis on FE and skills in the Chancellor’s summer statement, the Chair called for additional action by government to boost apprenticeships, including the following points:

- Additional incentives to employers to recruit young apprentices are available until 31 January 2021. What long-term plans are there to reform the apprenticeship system so recruiting younger or disadvantaged apprentices is always the best choice for businesses?
- What actions is Government taking now to protect current apprentices, who are vulnerable to losing their positions?
- A ‘Kickstart’ trainee on a 6-month placement will have their wages fully funded by the Government but cannot be an apprentice. What assessment has been made of the risk this could pose in the short-term to apprenticeships starts for young people, and what measures are you considering to mitigate this risk?
- What priority is the government placing on degree-level apprenticeships?
- How will the £2.5billion National Skills Fund be used? Could it, for example, be used to support wage subsidies for young or disadvantaged apprentices?
- In the first two years of the public sector apprenticeship target (April 2017-March 2019) an average of 1.6% of employees started an apprenticeship in public sector organisations, against the four-year target of 2.3%. Has the Government considered increasing this target, and introducing greater accountability to ensure it is met?

- What will you do to remove the barriers that smaller businesses face to recruiting apprentices, particularly in terms of administration and cost?
- How will the Government ensure that schools meet their obligations under the Baker Clause, and raise awareness of apprenticeships as a destination for school leavers?

We will report back on the Minister's response to these questions from the Select Committee Chair in the next issue of this newsletter.

Union support for engineering apprentices

In May the TUC and the Confederation of Shipbuilding & Engineering Unions gave their support to a call by engineering and manufacturing employers for wider take-up of newly developed techniques to ensure that thousands of young apprentices can qualify during the pandemic crisis. The joint statement was coordinated by Enguinity, a sector body supporting employers, training providers and individuals in UK Engineering by developing skills for the future. Enguinity was previously known as Semta, the sector skills council for engineering and manufacturing.

The [statement](#) highlighted how the country's leading awarding organisation for engineering and manufacturing - [EAL](#) - has developed new protocols for carrying out End-Point Assessments (EPAs) remotely. This allows many apprentices to achieve required benchmarks in the learning process, become qualified and be ready to help the nation's economic recovery. These remote EPAs are also available to apprentices on furlough.

Kevin Rowan, Head of Organisation, Services & Skills at TUC and Director of unionlearn said: "The new ways of working mark a significant breakthrough for business and apprentices ensuring quality standards are not compromised - whilst allowing companies and personnel to continue building skills and productivity in

these challenging times. Engineering and manufacturing will be in the front-line of recovery – and we need to ensure that every single apprentice in the pipeline is given a fair chance to do their bit – crisis or no crisis."

Ian Waddell, General Secretary of the Confederation of Shipbuilding & Engineering Unions, said: "Tens of thousands of apprentices are in danger of being side-lined - when in fact they should be raring to help us on the road to recovery. We wholeheartedly support this pioneering development, championed by Enguinity and its Awarding Organisation, EAL - and urge industry to make the best use of it in the weeks and months to come. This crisis must not be allowed to blight thousands of young lives as they set out to help Britain prosper."

Enguinity has also developed an extensive new self-directed online learning platform - [Engage](#) - since lockdown. There are two sides to the platform, with a Research hub and an Academy side hosting a wealth of learning content for engineers. More information about *Engage* is available in a unionlearn [blog](#) by Lucy Thompson, Chief People Officer at Enguinity.

Industrial Strategy Council skills report

A new skills policy report issued by the Industrial Strategy has praised the contribution that unions make to promoting learning and skills. The government has given the [Council](#) a remit for providing "impartial and expert evaluation of the government's progress in delivering the aims of the Industrial Strategy – to boost productivity by backing businesses to create good jobs and increase the earning power of people throughout the UK with investment in skills, industries and infrastructure." The Council is an independent advisory group led by Andy Haldane (Chief Economist at the Bank of England) and its membership includes Roy Rickhuss (General Secretary of Community).

The new report by the Council - [Rising to the UK's Skills Challenges](#) – refers directly to the role played by unionlearn, as follows:

“In the UK, unionlearn supports trade unions to help workers acquire skills and qualifications to improve their employability. One of the ways it does this is through the training of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs). Unionlearn has been particularly successful in recruiting low-skilled workers into training.”

The report also calls on government to consider strengthening social partnership arrangements on skills and to follow the example of other countries where there is “a greater role for employer representative and employee representative organisations (i.e. social partners) than exists in the UK.” The authors refer to a proposal by the TUC that the government should widen the remit of the National Retraining Partnership as a way of developing the UK’s social partnership approach.

The low levels of employer investment in skills is also emphasised in the analysis in the report. The authors conclude that “employer investment in training in the UK is low relative to many international competitors” and they also refer to recent [unionlearn research](#) commissioned from Professor Francis Green showing a “reduction in job-related employer-funded training volumes over the last two decades.”

Commenting on the launch of the report, Andy Haldane said: “Deficiencies in the UK skills system are long-standing and deep-seated. The recovery from the Covid crisis will be faster and more sustainable if this system can be improved through partnership between workers, employers, training providers and Government.”

Roy Rickhuss commented: “The context in which we are now operating increases the urgency with which partners in the skills system need to adapt and respond. It amplifies the need for a clear overarching vision which can guide skills partners to work together and adapt to rapidly changing

skill demands. Increased engagement of trade unions and employers in the design and implementation of skills provision will be key in driving up participation in job-related training and cultivating a lifelong learning culture. Social partners played a greater, and important role in education and training systems in all of the international case studies that informed this paper.”

Further Education

Higher-level technical qualifications

In July the government set out [plans](#) for a major reform of higher-level technical qualifications to address the low numbers pursuing this route. The announcement followed an earlier [speech](#) by the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson MP, where he “pledged to publish a White Paper that will set out our plans to build a world-class, German-style further education system in Britain, which will strive toward high quality qualifications based on employer-led standards.”

In this speech he highlighted the low proportion - 10% - of adults holding a Higher Technical Qualification as their highest qualification. This compares to around 20% of adults in Germany and as much as 34% in Canada. In addition, he highlighted some other skills trends of major concern:

- The number of adult learners in Further Education has plummeted, from 3.1 million to 2.1 million
- There has been a systemic decline in higher technical qualifications. Well over 100,000 people were doing Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in the year 2000; that has reduced to fewer than 35,000 now
- Within Higher Education Institutes, foundation degrees have declined from a high of 81,000, to approximately 30,000

- Undergraduate part-time study in higher education has also fallen significantly, from nearly 250,000 in 2010 to under 100,000
- The UK currently has very high levels of graduates employed in non-graduate jobs compared to other countries and this is partly attributed to the limited post-school technical education pathways that are available.

The government has also published a [policy paper](#) with more details on the plans that drew on a consultation issued last year. An overwhelming proportion of consultation respondents supported proposals to introduce a national scheme to approve new level 4 and 5 courses and agreed that there was a need for more people to participate in higher technical education. The newly approved higher technical qualifications will be introduced from September 2022 and Ofsted and the Office for Students will both play a key role in making sure the quality of courses is consistently high across HE and FE institutions. The government will also be launching a new public awareness campaign to “showcase the benefits and the wide range of opportunities that studying a higher technical qualification can open up and making sure students get the right information, advice and guidance to make informed choices.”

T Levels

The government updated its [guidance on T levels](#) in July. These new qualifications are described as follows in the guidance: “T Levels are new courses coming in September 2020, which will follow GCSEs and will be equivalent to 3 A levels. These 2-year courses have been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses so that the content meets the needs of industry and prepares students for work. T Levels will offer students a mixture of classroom learning and ‘on-the-job’ experience during an industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days). They will provide the knowledge and experience

needed to open the door into skilled employment, further study or a higher apprenticeship.”

The government’s aspiration is that T Levels will, over time, become one of the main post-GCSE pathways for students alongside apprenticeships and A levels. T Levels will be phased in over the next four academic years, but only three are to be launched this autumn by selected colleges, schools and other providers. There are concerns that competing demand for placements (e.g. Kickstart, expanded traineeships etc.) will impact on the availability of T level placements in the coming months. The TUC has supported the broad policy thrust of the T Level programme and the Director of unionlearn has previously commented as follows:

“T levels provide an opportunity to bridge the gap between vocational education and high-quality apprenticeships and strengthen the skills on offer for young people. High quality industry placements will be essential to the success of T levels. This means employers need to engage strongly and commit to helping overcome future skills challenges. Trade unions have a key role to play in agreeing and monitoring quality criteria and ensuring work placements are safe, supported and effective.”

Further [guidance](#) is available on the unionlearn website.

Independent Commission on the College of the Future

The [Independent Commission on the College of the Future](#) was established last year by the Association of Colleges to develop a strategic response to a central question: What do we want and need from our colleges in ten years’ time? The Commission brings together leading figures from business and the trade unions as well as national and international experts and key stakeholders from across the four nations of the UK. Paul Nowak, TUC Deputy General Secretary, is a Commissioner and to date the TUC has facilitated

two round-table sessions of the education unions to feed into the work of commission. The commission has also called for written evidence and the TUC and a number of the education unions submitted responses at the beginning of this year.

The final report was originally due to be published in the Spring but due to the coronavirus pandemic the timeline for the work of the commission has been revised. In advance of its final report - now due this autumn - the commission has recently published an interim report - [People, productivity and place: a new vision for colleges](#) - that sets out its vision for the college of the future. This vision says that “the college of the future will be central to driving a fairer, more sustainable and more prosperous society” and will deliver on the following fronts:

- For **people**, colleges will be a touchpoint for everyone throughout their lives as the world changes. Flexible and blended learning and guidance will empower each person to get a job, progress in their career and be an active citizen.
- For **productivity**, colleges will provide strategic advice and support for employers to drive business change, innovation and future workforce planning.
- For **place**, colleges will have the resources and funding to play an even greater role in fostering healthy and connected communities.

The report also highlights that no college can achieve these objectives without a new strategic and collaborative approach that is underpinned by the following:

- To achieve this vision colleges of the future will have a clear and recognised position in the education and skills system.
- Colleges will work collaboratively with each other and across the wider education and skills system in new ways. This will enable

them to together lead the way in stimulating and responding to the needs of people, employers and communities.

- Governments across the UK will be there to support, with relationships built on trust and a shared destiny.
- It is only then that colleges will be empowered to deliver for people, productivity and place.

In addition, the “vision report” includes a collection of short essays from leading voices from across the education and skills system and case studies about the civic role of colleges during Covid-19. One of the essays - *How an embedded civic ethos will make the sector resilient to future crises* - is by Dr Norman Crowther, a national official at the National Education Union leading on post 16 section strategy and member support.

FE White Paper

Paul Nowak, TUC Deputy General Secretary, recently contributed to a new [report](#) by the Campaign for Learning setting out a range of viewpoints about priorities for the impending FE White Paper. His article - *The Covid-19 Inheritance: Building a Fairer and Greener Economy* – highlights the need for skills reforms to be taken forward in the context of a national plan to stimulate demand, achieve net zero carbon emissions and a just transition for workers across the economy.