

A photograph of a man and a woman in a professional setting. The man, with a beard and wearing a blue denim shirt, is pointing at a whiteboard covered in colorful sticky notes. The woman, wearing a red top, is looking at the whiteboard with interest. The background is slightly blurred, showing office shelves.

TRANSFORMING SKILLS: A CALL TO ACTION

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Foreword

The UK is confronted with a dual skills and labour market crisis that is stifling growth. It has a workforce in need of skills and, in parts of the economy, a scarcity of workers. Skills policy can never move people to accept low-paid, unattractive jobs in sectors of acute staffing need. But in Transforming Skills, we argue that a skills system, focused on promoting growth and prosperity, can play an important role in addressing this crisis.

To do so, it should support employers, individuals, and educators to more effectively respond to the enormous challenges our economy is experiencing. But to meet these challenges, the skills system must transform. We propose how this can be kickstarted with specific, targeted interventions:

A transformational, not incremental, approach:

Western societies are undergoing huge demographic and labour market shifts, with technology and artificial intelligence (AI) disrupting the world of work. Human interactions are evolving in a world of ubiquitous technology, presenting opportunities for increased productivity but also raising societal concerns. Tackling skills reform incrementally will not keep pace with these changes; instead, a step change in the approach to skills is imperative.

A productive and creative economy:

Skills serve as the backbone of thriving societies, yet we fall short in equipping our workforce with the skills required to flourish in the modern workplace. Skills such as creativity, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, resilience, leadership, speaking and listening are an integral set of innately human talents that enable collective success. Paradoxically, technological advancements render these skills even more crucial. Thus, we propose a fundamental change of approach to embed these skills that are essential for all jobs across our education and training system.

A responsive and agile skills system:

Alongside embedding these skills for everyone, we need a much more responsive system for delivering skills. Government should set strategic direction, but employers, colleges and training providers should be able to collaborate with awarding and assessment bodies to dynamically develop approved programmes for the new economy. The regulated skills system moves far too slowly. In a world of accelerating change, speed and responsiveness are key. The government needs to empower the system with vision and not micromanage. New approaches to help job starters, systems that support re-skilling, upskilling and

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multiskilling, along with transformative approaches to adaptive assessment, are required. This will be realised through innovation and empowerment, not centralisation.

A digitally and technology-enabled model:

Data and technology need to be at the heart of a transformed skills system. Learners and employees should be able to use data to make informed decisions about career choices, re-training and upskilling opportunities. Generative AI enables far faster development of programmes and courses. Similarly, AI opens routes to adaptive, learner-centric personalisation of content to respond to a learner's specific needs. We are at the early stages of a paradigm shift in technology and, if harnessed, its impact on skills could be profound.

To do this, *Transforming Skills sets out a vision* for a radically transformed skills system that embeds essential workplace skills, is agile and responsive, and seizes the opportunities opened by data, technology, and AI. The prize is a more productive workforce and a more prosperous economy.

The changes we recommend are directed at the post-16 skills education system in England, but where necessary, we discuss their relationship with the broader education system. And in some cases we explore their potential, by making further suggestions for how they can be realised.

In bringing these proposals together, we have often relied on the insights of others. We have conducted a series of workshops and surveys with learners and employers; consulted with a variety of stakeholders in the skills education system, including researchers and practitioners; and reviewed the extensive literature on skills and the labour market.

We believe the resulting proposals are both aspirational and achievable, and can help play a vital role in boosting productivity and equipping our workforce for the future.

JAMES KELLY
Chief Executive and
Co-Founder, Corndel

OLLY NEWTON
Executive Director,
Edge Foundation

DAVID GALLAGHER
Chief Executive,
NCFE

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Policy recommendations

Transforming Skills sets out policy recommendations which, taken together, could unleash a radically transformed skills system. We first consider the way we equip individuals for a new world of work and skills, before exploring how the system can adapt for a time of greater uncertainty and change.

Part one: Equip everyone for a new world of work and skills:

Embed uniquely human skills, so everyone can be work ready

Skills such as creativity, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking and leadership are an important set of human talents and will become even more important amid technological advancements.

The government should:

- Develop a standard framework to articulate these essential skills, and embed them across our education and training system, running like a golden thread through standards, curricula and assessment.
- Create a clear set of embedded metrics to evidence skills development over a lifetime of learning.

Modernise assessment

Our current assessment system prioritises high-stakes, written exams but misses opportunities to evidence a broader set of skills, competencies and potential. The government should:

- Ensure that methods of assessment are broad and fit for purpose. This can be achieved by introducing more course and project-work, oral presentations, extended investigations, group projects, teacher assessment and multiple-choice assessment, alongside written exams.
- Introduce more subtle and frequent formative assessment coupled with helpful feedback for learners, educators and educational institutions, so that assessment becomes a tool for transformational learning.
- Introduce personal digital learner profiles which evidence formal qualifications and broader achievements, such as the products of independent projects, work experience, and achievements outside of school, giving learners greater ownership and agency in their learning journey.

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Enable and inform choices for everyone

Learners need more support to explore careers options and develop the right skills for those careers. The government should:

- Introduce stronger support for the role of careers guidance staff in facilitating, coaching, and building career opportunities into the curriculum.
- Ensure that learners are able to reflect critically and constructively on their own skills to progress and make the best possible choices for the future.
- Introduce a work-ready guarantee, so that all learners entering work for the first time have a high-quality programme that ensures they have the right skills for work.

Part two: Promote agility by introducing more flexibility

Build responsive and agile skills delivery

If individuals are to respond to rapid and unpredictable changes in the workplace, skills training needs to become much more agile and responsive. The government should:

- Introduce flexible 'bolt-on' modules of learning that can be rapidly developed and deployed, so that technical and vocational learners can learn other technical skills that may be required for them to be highly productive and valuable in their work.
- Establish 'quick-starter' training for new employees, made up of smaller credits which are 'stackable' towards larger qualifications and/or the appropriate apprenticeship.
- Build a new social contract for continuous learning over a lifetime - so that all the increasing costs of upskilling, reskilling and multiskilling are spread fairly between employees, employers and the state.

Harness technology for learners and employers

To thrive within a rapidly changing world, the skills system should harness the potential of digital technology and learner insight. The government should:

- Embrace a technology-led approach to scan for and develop new occupations or adapt existing occupational standards.
- Use technology to harvest the latest sector information and develop up-to-date teaching materials.
- Provide avenues for digital learner feedback, so that courses, standards and assessment are continuously improved.
- Empower learners with up-to-date information on their strength areas and personalised opportunities for skill development.

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Our changing world

The world of work is transforming rapidly, but our skills training system is not ready for today, let alone tomorrow.

The disruption caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Brexit, and Covid-19 are proving too much for this outdated and slow-moving skills system, with growing shortages reported across vital sectors.¹ These skills shortages occur when vacancies cannot be filled because applicants lack the skills, experience or qualifications employers require.²

These shocks are nothing compared to the disruption we can expect in the next decade, however. New technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), will redraw the boundary between humans and machines. Equally, net-zero, climate change, and global economic forces will reshape the economy, as well as demands on employees, and on learners.

With a widening skills shortage, the UK is playing catch-up before the real challenge begins.

¹You can read all of The Edge Foundation's Skills Shortage Bulletins at <https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/>

²[Employer skills survey 2019 research report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814212/employer_skills_survey_2019_research_report.pdf)

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These skills shortages and the labour market issues they help to exacerbate are accompanied by severe structural weaknesses, indicating a current skills system that cannot respond to rapid change and disruption.

Below are some of the key weaknesses that employers and research organisations continue to raise, which are reflected in the Edge Foundation's regular skills shortages bulletins.⁷

Weakness 1:

The skills that employers are seeking – essential 'human' skills such as good communication, teamwork and problem solving – are not being prioritised within the education and training system at a time when they are becoming ever more important in the workplace.

These skills are recognised by employers and employees as being key to driving forward creativity and productivity in the workplace, and they will be vital to preparing everyone for the changes in work that are forced by technologies like AI. But too often, learners are unable to acquire these skills in a way that benefits them or employers. This is because while some sections of education (in particular, the private sector) recognise these skills, most do not – and as a consequence, they are not measured.

Weakness 2:

Employers and employees are poorly served by the traditional structure of skills provision that focuses on long, rigid courses.

This means that employers and employees are often unable to develop the skills that they need. While learners and employees struggle to access education and training that fit changing patterns of lifestyle, employers find that they are unable to secure training for their workforce in a way that truly delivers all the skills they need.

Weakness 3:

The process for designing and updating qualifications is laborious and unresponsive, at a time when the labour market and economy are changing rapidly.

It is often impossible for educators to react to changes that might occur quickly in a profession or industry. It can take years for most courses to be updated and approved for delivery. Even when this is not the case, 'issues like the provision of up-to-date technology can hold back modernisation of courses.

Weakness 4:

Assessment is often concentrated too narrowly on testing knowledge and prioritises cliff-edge examinations at the expense of other, potentially more suitable, forms of assessment.

By measuring a learner's ability to retain knowledge without considering the many other qualities essential to success in the workplace, learners and employers are being let down.

Weakness 5:

Our careers advice system is not set up to provide the lifelong support that all individuals will increasingly need, as global trends necessitate a more agile workforce.

Currently, careers guidance is squeezed into curriculum time, with very little funding. It means that some schools struggle to fund dedicated advisers. Adult learners are often unaware of provision, and there is no obvious system to support them.

Increasingly, however, all individuals will need to play a much more active role in their careers – understanding their own strengths and how they can make the most of their qualities in a volatile economy.

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- We already bear the burden of historically poor skills development. There are **nine million working-aged adults** in England with low basic skills in literacy or numeracy, including **five million** who have low skills in both ([The Learning and Work Institute, Edge Bulletin 11](#)).³
- The changes we have already witnessed are leaving more people behind. For example, **11.7 million people aged 15 and over** across the UK lack the 'essential digital skills' needed for day-to-day life online. ([Lloyds Bank Group/IPSOS MORI Bulletin 8, 2020](#)).⁴
- This is holding back our economy, too. Nearly a **quarter of all vacancies could not be filled** because the employer could not find the skills they needed in 2019, up two percentage points since 2017. Nearly three-fifths of these were reported in middle and high-skilled roles ([Employers Skills Survey 2019 DfE](#)). This year (2023), **73% of UK organisations** reported that they are experiencing skills shortages ([The Business Barometer, 2023](#)).⁵
- Plus, forecasts show that the situation is likely to get worse. By 2030, **seven million additional workers** could be under-skilled for their job requirements, about 20% of the labour market ([The Industrial Strategy Council's report, Bulletin 7](#)).⁶

In short, this country's skills system is not yet prepared for the world of work ahead – one where the only constant will be continual change. While the forces we have discussed seem unprecedented, the risks of the present are not unfamiliar. In the 1970s, millions of workers were prepared for jobs in manual sectors when jobs in these sectors began disappearing from the UK economy. Skills training, therefore, must respond to a rapidly changing future to prevent harms to the workforce, and seize opportunities to grow the economy.

³<https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/skills-shortages-bulletin-11/>

⁴<https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/skills-shortage-bulletin-8/>

⁵<https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/skills-shortages-bulletin-12/>

⁶<https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/skills-shortage-bulletin-7/>

⁷<https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/>

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This requires government to leave behind notions that the 'market' or the 'state' uniquely know best how to respond to these changes. Instead, as we will go on to discuss later, government's role should be much more strategic and pragmatic: developing vision and building a coalition that reaches across our society, so that employees, employers, and the state can work together to ensure opportunities for all.

The UK's international competitors are already embracing such changes. In the US, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), alongside other large investments, sets out the federal government's vision for equipping people for high-skilled jobs.⁸ Skills are also one of the four pillars within the EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan.⁹

Transforming Skills calls for specific actions that, if successful, can kickstart a rapid transformation to the provision of vital skills in our education system.

⁸ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-inflation-reduction-act-provides-pathways-to-high-quality-jobs/>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_510

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Our vision for the future

In fixing the skills system's weaknesses, however, there is an opportunity to transform how everyone learns and develops for the better, to the benefit of individuals and employers.

The education and training sector has long talked about putting learners at the centre of learning, but the imperatives for this are now more pressing. Increasingly, individuals will need to change careers and train in new fields throughout their lives as a result of a changing economy and new technology.

But, when correctly harnessed, the same technologies that are likely to cause more disruption in our economy offer the potential to give people more control over how they develop their careers.

Rather than treat a more volatile economy as a moment where the workforce is 'done to', government should use the changes that are likely in the next decade to give all individuals more control over their futures.

Indeed, if individuals are to respond to greater volatility, then this is not just a laudable aim but a necessary exchange. The expectation is that everyone will need to take on a more assertive role in negotiating their working life. Giving individuals a greater sense of control over how they can shape their own outcomes, should, therefore, be a central ambition.

But refocusing skills policy must also allow UK firms to take the necessary steps to drive growth and success. At this moment, for example, the number of adults in formal learning is falling. Alongside this, there are countless examples of people taking up education that do not provide them with much better opportunities or help to promote greater productivity. So, any call for greater agency for individuals should come in conjunction with greater agency and support for employers as well.

We propose a new social contract between working individuals, employers, and government to address how skills are learned and supported. This new contract would ensure the engine room of the economy – people and employers – is much better placed to seize opportunities for growth as the economy changes rapidly. If adopted, this new social contract would address existing weaknesses and kick-start a transformative response to a moment of considerable, disruptive change.

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Part one: Equip everyone for a new world of work and skills

Embed uniquely human essential skills, so everyone can be work ready

This country's education system was founded on the 'three Rs' – reading, writing and arithmetic – that learners need in order to acquire knowledge and develop technical skills. But the education system is not prioritising the teaching of other, equally important skills. Sometimes known as 'essential skills' or 'human skills', these include listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, teamwork, leadership, resilience and emotional intelligence.

These skills are vital to all jobs and are the tools people use in every aspect of their lives. They give people the confidence to articulate, to listen, to work well with others, and to influence. In fact, they are the skills that enable collective success, and so are crucial to productivity and creativity. And, because these qualities differentiate humans from machines, they will become ever more important as the rate of automation speeds up.

Indeed, employers see these skills as crucial to thriving in work and in life. Research from LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends (2019) found that 92% of employers said that essential skills are equally or more important than technical skills, with creativity highlighted as being of particular value.¹⁰ Meanwhile, learners pursuing technical careers see them as crucial to progression. In Transforming Skills' sessions, learners recognised the importance of skills such as communication, time management, creativity and resilience, both in the workplace and within the education and training system.

Furthermore, there is strong evidence illuminating the vital role that essential skills play in the economy (see boxes on page 13). As a result, these are the skills that employers value for those who are joining the workforce to develop quickly.

¹⁰ <https://news.linkedin.com/2019/January/linkedin-releases-2019-global-talent-trends-report>

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Defining human skills

The terms used to describe these uniquely human skills include 'essential', 'meta', 'work readiness', 'fusion', and 'employability'. To confuse matters further, literature looking at the labour market uses two different categories, 'cognitive' and 'non-cognitive', to group skills. What there is agreement on, however, is the need to resolve this situation. Some of the sector has agreed that the best term is 'essential skills', because this asserts the essential nature of these skills to all jobs. But others feel that these are skills defined by their human quality. And, of course, the redrawing of the boundary between humans and machines adds impetus to this distinction. More importantly, there is much greater consensus for the need to embed these skills into the system. This would be best achieved by ensuring there is a consistent, defined set of skills applied by a framework, so they can be explicitly taught and tested.

¹¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions>

¹² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0014292114001433?via%3Dihub>

¹³ <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/file/essential-skills-tracker-2023>

¹⁴ <https://plc.pearson.com/en-GB/news/pearson-skills-outlook-shows-employees-are-preparing-tech-focused-world-sharpening-their-human>

¹⁵ <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/how-do-essential-skills-influence-life-outcomes>

Essential evidence

Evidence from the Educational Endowment Foundation has found that oral language interventions (also known as oracy or speaking and listening interventions) have an average impact of approximately an additional six months' progress over the course of a year.¹¹

This evidence also points to skills other than language and communications. For example, Hanushek found that problem solving had a more pronounced return to skills in the UK than in other countries.¹² The Essential Skills Tracker also sets out evidence that a higher essential skills score is associated with a wage premium of between 6.9% and 8.8%, controlling for experience, basic skills, and social advantage.¹³ This is similar to the wage premium associated with the same increase in numeracy.

It is clear that employees already recognise the importance of these skills within a changing world. Pearson's Skills Outlook showed that in the UK, workers are currently prioritising problem solving and teamwork as skills to develop and maintain throughout their careers.¹⁴ Job seekers in the UK also reported leadership and problem solving as the two skills they would be most interested in developing in the future.

There are effective ways of teaching specific essential skills, like speaking and listening. Research in 2003 carried out in the US found that taking part in communication training significantly improved third-year medical students' overall communications competence, as well as other beneficial skills such as relationship building, negotiation and shared decision making/organisation and time management.¹⁵

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While there are pockets of good provision in this country, skills such as communication, teamwork and problem solving are rarely actively taught in our education and training system. Whether learners are at school, FE colleges, university, or already entering work, there is little or no focus on identifying, developing, or assessing these skills. This leaves employees less prepared for the world of work than employers would wish, and leaves employers blind to a range of qualities that individuals might bring to the workplace.

This is only likely to be further exposed in the near future, as individuals need to call on uniquely human qualities to provide value as automation accelerates. The OECD estimates that 14% of all jobs are at high risk of automation.¹⁶ In the UK, the ONS estimates 7.4% of jobs are at risk.¹⁷

But an equally fundamental challenge will be ensuring wellbeing and resilience for everyone in the world of work. That is why some frameworks – like the **Skills Builder Partnership's Universal Framework** – include qualities like 'aiming high' and 'staying positive' among a list of skills they aim to develop.

By encouraging individuals to work on a more rounded set of skills – encompassing academic knowledge, technical skills and our more human skills – learners would get a much clearer picture of all the qualities they will need to join work and lead a productive life.

This should encourage learners to think much more about their own development, too. As we will go on to explore in our proposals, this

can be aided by the ways in which these skills can be learned and encouraged, building self-efficacy.

Learning skills like problem solving, communication and leadership should therefore be embedded into our education and training system, no matter the route followed by an individual.

To do this:

- The skills identified by Skills Builder as essential (see below) must be fundamentally **embedded** in our system, running like a golden thread through standards and curricula, then captured within our assessment structures and reinforced within careers guidance.
- We must create a **guarantee** that ensures everyone gains these skills, no matter the route they take through education – schooling, apprenticeships, FE or HE – and no matter where they live, their starting point, or background.

Embedding Essential Skills at Newcastle College

Skills Builder's work with Newcastle College provides an example of how this can be achieved in education. The college promotes the learning of essential skills throughout a student's chosen course. Students are encouraged to reflect on development using a log book and measure progress through discussions. They are also encouraged to apply their understanding of their acquired work skills through vocational projects, work experience, and engagement with employers.

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¹⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/future-of-work/reports-and-data/what-happened-to-jobs-at-high-risk-of-automation-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whichoccupationsareathighestriskofbeingautomated/2019-03-25>

Embedding uniquely human skills in our system

Standards and curriculum

We recommend adopting a framework so that teaching and learning these skills can be standardised and uniformly delivered across the curriculum, and then measured consistently through different contexts.

Skills Builder's Universal Framework comprehensively sets out eight essential skills: listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, aiming high, leadership, and teamwork.¹⁸ These are broken down into 16 teachable, measurable steps, starting from 'getting started' through to 'mastery'. The framework is completely open source and was developed by the Essential Skills Taskforce, led by the Gatsby Foundation and including sector-leading organisations.

The Universal Framework is already widely used across education institutions, the third sector and by employers. Hundreds of universities, FE colleges and schools across the country have built the framework into their curricula and measure progress across the eight skills.

Adopting the framework and incorporating it into the curriculum would lock in excellence in essential skills at the appropriate stages of education and would have other significant benefits, too. As a result, learners would be required to develop this set of skills in their pursuit of knowledge and technical ability throughout their existing curriculum, and through a variety of learning activities. For example, in group projects, classroom debates, or in other project-based activities.

Transforming Skills' discussion group with learners highlighted how variable provision is. This is borne out by small-scale surveys – our survey of the NCFE CACHE Alumni membership network showed high levels of variability, with some people saying that they had a lot of support to develop skills like communication and teamworking, while others reported having no support at all. Similarly, when asked about self-assessing their skills, pupils in a small survey of a school in Tower Hamlets reported wide ranges of comfort with different abilities, such as working in a team, meeting new people and making an argument. So, as part of embedding the skills that are now essential to any job, the education system needs a clear set of metrics against which to assess the status quo – such as how skills vary by age, geography, and socio-economic background.

This would act as a baseline from which to measure progress. Again, the Skills Builder framework could act as a basis for such measurement, developing on its Benchmark self-assessment tools.

However it is done, developing a set of standardised metrics will be a vital part of embedding this new approach. That is because, as we argue in the next section, only what is measured is managed.

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¹⁸ <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework>

Modernising assessment: "If you want it, you have to measure it"

Skills education and training is mirroring issues with the wider education system by over-relying on summative, exam-based assessment. This is largely the result of attempts by policymakers to apply the same kinds of assessment to skills as are found in academic education, seemingly to promote parity of esteem between skills and academic education.

But many voices, including Rethinking Assessment and The Times Education Commission, are calling for changes to this system. They point out that cliff-edge examinations heap stress on students, increase workload for educators, and that the system as a whole prioritises performance management, and rewards institutional performance in a very narrow range of subjects and based on a narrowing range of assessment methods.¹⁹

Assessment's failings

The assessment system dominates what is taught and how it is taught. Systems tend to only value what is assessed. Young people leave education with little more than a series of numbers and letters reflecting only one aspect of their achievements. Crucially, exam results provide future employers with no real information on the competencies they seek, including in vital areas like creative thinking, collaboration and communication. Employers, too, appear to lack confidence in the system. The Times Education Commission found that 89% believe it is important that students are assessed on more than academic attainment.²⁰

While these issues are found in schools, they are perhaps even more of a problem for post-16 technical and vocational education, where high-stakes exams that test knowledge are less useful than they are in academic learning. For example, when apprentices – a group whose learning should be based on work – tell Transforming Skills²¹ that their assessment was overly focused on retained knowledge, it is time to rethink assessment in the skills system.

If the system is to embed a greater range of skills, including those that are uniquely human and greater knowledge and technical skills, assessment should change to accommodate this.

Assessment, therefore, must change in several ways:

- Provide learners with opportunities to develop the right skills and mix of skills and knowledge.
- Make sure learners understand what skills and qualities employers are looking for, linked to performance and productivity.
- Provide evidence for learners that they are developing the right skills and can improve their skills and knowledge accordingly as they learn.
- Treat learners as individuals within a system whose styles of learning, strengths and weaknesses become part of how they learn and improve throughout their lifelong journey of learning.

These recommendations echo wider changes that the assessment system needs, which as well as encouraging a mix of skills that are more appropriate for the world of work, are also better for learners and for society.

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¹⁹ See: Rethinking Assessment: <https://rethinkingassessment.com/>, The Times Education Commission: <https://nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf>.

²⁰ Times Education Commission: <https://nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf>

²¹ Feedback from Transforming Skills workshop with apprentices

1. Broaden how we do assessment

Examinations test how learners retain knowledge. Rather than discard them entirely, Transforming Skills recommends that they are supplemented by a greater variety of ways of assessing learners. To support the development of a richer mix of skills, including the uniquely human essential skills, this would entail multimodal forms of assessment that include a more varied range of assessment activities, including course and project-work, oral presentations, extended investigations, group projects, teacher assessments, and multiple-choice assessment. Not only are these approaches as rigorous as written exams, but they can also be crucial to the development of essential skills.

AI technology has also made it easier for students to plagiarise, which exploits a weakness in coursework in particular. But, by moving to a richer, multimodal approach to learning and assessment, this can be mitigated much more effectively – particularly as many of these forms of assessment can be training environment-based or conducted in real-time.

Including a richer variety of different forms of assessment could also help educators make assessments more engaging for learners. At Livingstone Academy Bournemouth, for example, students worked in groups to produce a video game to pilot trans-disciplinary learning and assessment. Any changes to assessment approaches would need to be incorporated into teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) and initial teacher training (ITT) so that educators feel equipped to own and drive these shifts.

2. Assessing learners throughout their development

At the moment, our system is increasingly focussed on assessing learners at the end of their courses. Instead, we recommend that summative assessment should be only one part of how learners are assessed. This is because, too often, it needlessly creates a high-stakes cliff-edge for learners that is stressful, and is not always conducive to optimum performance or for understanding development.

Assessment, therefore, should be deployed more often and incrementally throughout learning, to support and guide learners during their courses. This more subtle and much more frequent formative assessment can be used to create touchpoints for students, educators and institutions. It can enable learners to reflect on learning, and provide teachers and learners with feedback on progress. In this way, assessment becomes a powerful tool for learning, allowing learners to understand what they can do already, and what they can do to learn more.

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3. Capture learners' progress to help them articulate what they can do

By creating a broad learner profile that truly reflects young people's wider talents, we can give learners greater control of their skills development. This should be complemented by a digital learner profile, highlighting a learner's formal qualifications, but also personal interests, independent projects, work experience, evidence of creativity, collaboration, and achievements outside of school. Successful examples, such as the digital Mastery Transcript, already exist in the USA. Meanwhile, colleagues at Rethinking Assessment are piloting examples of a learner profile in the UK. In Scotland, the Independent Review of Qualifications recently recommended that a Scottish Diploma of Achievement be introduced as a graduation certificate.²²

4. Realising the potential for these changes

If a range of different forms of formative assessment run through a course, learners can be challenged in a variety of ways. If these inform a broad learner profile, this can help to build a more informed picture of how they learn – giving learners, educators and institutions a richer and more useful understanding of their learning abilities and their progress. Importantly, educators and institutions can learn much more about learners' individual abilities too, helping to develop a more inclusive model of learning over time. On an individual level, this would help to support learners – particularly those with specific learning needs. But such data would also be of huge value at cohort, institution and system levels, providing a richer set of insights on 'what works' to inform continuous improvements. In our later section, 'Keeping up with a changing world', we explore how these can be part of a digital platform that puts learners at the heart of their learning experience.



²² Rethinking Assessment learner profile: [Rethinking Assessment's Learner Profile](#)
Independent review of qualifications: [It's Our Future - Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment: report - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Enable and inform choices for everyone

Effective careers advice

Transforming Skills joins calls for improving careers guidance, echoing arguments elsewhere that learners need more support to explore careers and to develop the right skills for those careers. We therefore support the Gatsby Benchmarks that have set a course for improving guidance significantly.²³

But there is huge variation in people's experiences of careers guidance.²⁴ For some, their eyes are opened to opportunities, while others find the experience is detached from their own situation. This is especially true for those without family to support their journey into work. As a result, more focus is required to get the system right – as set out in the Holman review of the Careers Guidance System in England.²⁵ There needs to be emphasis on the role of careers guidance staff – facilitating, coaching, and building opportunities into curriculum.

Furthermore, we recommend connecting these opportunities so that they are captured within the learner profiles that we have previously outlined. More resources will be required to expand staff numbers, and ensure recruits are capable of taking on such vital, but challenging roles. But in time, and when coupled with recommendations we make to develop a more agile system, this can provide significant benefits to learners. In particular, learners will gain a much better understanding of their qualities and the gaps they might need to address. This will enable them to make better choices to suit their needs, goals, and potential.

By doing so, careers guidance would be both much more valuable for school leavers. But it should also, by giving everyone a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, provide everyone with the information they need to continue to develop throughout their careers. But with a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses, comes a further requirement to explore how those needs might be met. At this moment, careers education for adults is not effective – a gap that would need to be addressed.



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²³ <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/focus-areas/good-career-guidance>

²⁴ Evidence from Transforming Skills workshops with learners found [PLEASE FILL]

²⁵ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-system-letters-from-sir-john-holman-and-robert-halfon>

Work-ready guarantee

Changing a system will take time, but learners need the right support today. For that reason, Transforming Skills recommends that all learners entering work for the first time have a high-quality, work-ready programme embedded into their broader learning, wherever that learning is happening.

This personal work-ready programme would ensure learners develop skills essential for any job, including communications, teamwork, working relationships, personal wellbeing and care. The outcomes of this programme should be captured within their learner profile, so that they have a clear account of what they have achieved and can use this with potential employers. It will prepare them for work, equip them with the resilience required to thrive in work and to embark on a journey of continual development that leads to the mastery of a range of skills throughout their working lives. It must be accompanied by regular feedback and audit, capable of identifying where learners are not receiving the support that they need to develop the skills that make them work-ready. This should include information from learners, employers and providers, allowing them to highlight where gaps are occurring.

Where weaknesses are identified it must trigger rapid, remedial work to make sure provision is up-to-scratch and that long-term inequalities can be combatted. This can be enabled through a new 'digital engine' at the heart of the skills system, which is the subject of our later section on revolutionising qualification development by harnessing new technology.

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Part two: Promote agility by introducing more flexibility

Build responsive and agile skills delivery

If individuals are to respond to rapid, unpredictable changes in workplace practices, skill training delivery also needs to become much more agile and responsive. We suggest progress is required on three fronts to achieve this:

- Enhancing the flexibility of current courses – so that there is agility built into provision, such as within apprenticeships, to rapidly incorporate new elements.
- Developing a job-starter guarantee – so that all employees can take up a new role from their employer with high-quality training to get them rapidly up-to-speed.
- Building a new social contract for lifelong learning – so that all the increasing costs of reskilling are spread between employees, employers and the state.

This chapter sets out how this can happen.

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The changing workplace

As we have already discussed, emerging technologies are changing what happens in the workplace. They are altering existing roles – requiring car mechanics to adapt to electric vehicles; giving birth to new roles – creating a host of digital marketing jobs; and, unfortunately, in some cases, making roles redundant. To respond to this disruption, people will need to acquire skills rapidly, and in ways that can fit round their lives and lifestyles.

Falling numbers of adult learners

There has been a large drop in adult learners – those aged 19 and above – over the last decade. This includes a 50% fall in adults taking qualifications at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and below, and a 33% fall in the number of adults taking Level 3 qualifications (A Level equivalent). Such falls will partly reflect cuts in public funding for such courses under the coalition government. However, the fall in the number of learners is greater than the reduction in funding would suggest.²⁶

Courses often take too long to complete, are at the wrong times for many learners, or are provided in the wrong format (offline vs online, for example). They may also be too exhaustive, fail to take into account and recognise prior learning, or be poorly targeted for learners' needs. As moving to a new profession can carry significant risk, having insufficiently responsive adult skills provision may close off many individuals' opportunities. As a result of these mismatches, the skills system is failing to give people the opportunities they need to opt for

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new jobs and to upskill. This failure is happening at a time when the need for individuals to do so quickly and effectively is becoming ever-more important.

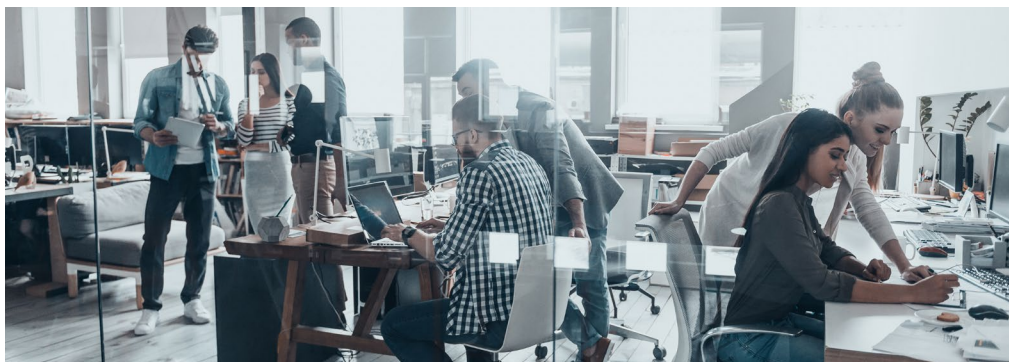
Enhancing the flexibility of current courses

To respond, we recommend adding greater flexibility to provision, while retaining consistency and standards. This should apply to training that prepares individuals for a profession, such as apprenticeships, which can fall short of on-the-job expectations. For example, an apprentice Level 3 domestic electrician will learn all of the technical skills required for electrical work, but it is very likely they will also require basic plastering and patching skills that are not provided as part of the apprenticeship. Skills requirements, in fact, may differ from region to region or by employer. And as the UK transitions to net-zero, the demands on professions such as plumbers, builders, and electricians are all likely to change.



²⁶ [https://ifs.org.uk/news/plans-will-leave-spending-adult-education-and-apprenticeships-25-below-2010-levels-2025#:~:text=Large%20drop%20in%20adult%20learners,qualifications%20\(A%20level%20equivalent\)](https://ifs.org.uk/news/plans-will-leave-spending-adult-education-and-apprenticeships-25-below-2010-levels-2025#:~:text=Large%20drop%20in%20adult%20learners,qualifications%20(A%20level%20equivalent))

It would therefore be useful for employers to be able to use their levy to 'bolt on' a module of learning, so that technical and vocational learners can learn other technical skills that may be required for their work, or to help them to become highly productive and more valuable. The bolt-on could take up around 20% of apprenticeship time, with employers and providers having the flexibility to decide with learners which bolt-ons are appropriate in their circumstances. In many cases, the module would still align to the relevant occupational standard, and provide a micro-credential.



Yet, while this would add much needed flexibility to the system, it does not go far enough. As workplace practices change, employees, employers and providers will need more flexible bolt-ons, allowing them to develop provision to address real-time changes to workplace practices. This will involve trusted providers working directly with employers to make sure any bolt-ons provide value for money for employees. This cannot be a free-for-all that undermines standards. Indeed, in many cases, this will mean employers picking up the training within the 80% of on-the-job time within apprenticeships, as providers may not be able to develop their training facilities rapidly enough.

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Quick-starter training and agile provision

Greater agility in existing provision will make a difference. But workers and job seekers need to know that, as the world of work changes around them, employers can provide high-quality training so they can take up new positions. As well as supporting employees in their new job, this training should represent the first step on a journey to a qualification. And, if they receive a usable certification, this should give 'stackable' credits towards any larger qualification – in particular, towards the appropriate apprenticeship.

Such 'quick-starter' training would give new-joiners reasonably assured moves into new jobs, helping to reduce the costs and risks for people looking to move into a new line of work. Learners are most likely to identify time and work, followed by cost pressures as a challenge, with 23% naming time and work, and 17% naming cost.²⁷

For employers, the advantages of short, well-targeted training are also obvious: shorter times to start work require less investment, and more bespoke provision makes the investment in individuals inherently less risky.

How industry is using quick-starter training models

This quick-starter model is present already in some industry-leading examples. Rapid software development courses, for example, can run for 10 weeks to prepare programmers for a job. They can perfect their skills on the job and return to the classroom to continue development when employees and employer identify a need. Such courses tend to run for less than three months, reducing risks to both employer and employee.

²⁷ <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/adult-participation-in-learning-survey-2021/>

Given the economic importance of supporting employees to move to new roles, job-starter courses should be funded. We recommend that government explore options to fund this model, including as part of a more flexible Apprenticeship Levy. This would make the training element free at the point of use to employer and to employee. This, again, can reduce the risks that the training entails for both parties. Plus, as only individuals who take up a new role would qualify for this provision, employers would have a strong incentive to make sure the training was effective. As ever, though, this cannot be a free-for-all. To ensure this, employers will need to work with trusted course providers and awarding organisations to ensure courses add value and that employees get the right credentials.

At present, providers have very little autonomy to work directly with employees, employers, and unions to design effective courses. This separation was a necessary part of the drive to align standards across the sector. However, it will need to be relaxed going forward, as the system cannot possibly accommodate rapid changes while retaining such centralised control.

The existing auditing systems should therefore be used to identify trusted providers and awarding organisations who have demonstrated that they are capable of co-designing provision and delivering quality. Organisations who meet a required standard could be given delegated powers to quickly design agile, contextualised learning. Once the basic model has been established, government should also look to deploy this more agile approach to a variety of areas, so it can help to address known weakness in the UK economy, such as managerial skills.

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A new social contract for lifelong learning

The job-starter guarantee would share the growing costs of retraining individuals mid-career, but we also need to consider the increased costs of continuous learning over a lifetime. There is an argument that these costs should be borne solely by individuals, through loans that they take on. For younger workers, this might be sustainable. But taking on debt may become increasingly difficult for workers as they get older.

Similarly, the alternative approach of "leave it to the market" – where employers bear all the costs of training – is unlikely to succeed. The UK economy has a poor record in investing in skills and it is unlikely that this will be resolved without intervention in the next decade. Smaller employers, for example, often do not have the resources to anticipate future changes and design appropriate training by themselves.

Instead, employees, employers and the state should share the responsibility for upskilling, reskilling and multiskilling. Many of our competitors already recognise this (see box opposite). Instead of waiting for people to be laid off – with all the human and economic costs this entails – Sweden, for example, is developing furlough-style arrangements, supporting people to upskill and retrain while in their current employment.

Such an intervention in Britain would be likely to work differently. However, its principle – that society can support people through difficult and otherwise potentially damaging changes – is just as relevant here as anywhere else. As automation hastens and more roles are lost or subsumed into other positions, the state will

inevitably have a role in supporting people through these changes. Finding ways to mitigate or share the costs of that change, while at the same time empowering people and employers to make the right choices for their futures, will be invaluable.

How competitor nations are supporting learning

New Swedish reforms provide workers with the right to financial support for continuous professional development and retraining.²⁸ This is effectively a furlough-type scheme for lifelong learning. Under an agreement between employers, unions and government, workers can take time off to train.²⁹ Study grants provide a replacement of up to 80% of net income (to €3,000 per month or 65% of net income up to €6,600 a month). A supplementary loan of up to €1,170 can be added to the grant element of the support.

In Germany, the Qualification Opportunities Act (2019) and Tomorrow's Work Act (2020) are providing improved funding and increased support, particularly where social partnership agreements are in place.³⁰ Small and medium-sized companies receive up to 100% of the course costs and a 90% subsidy of the employee's wage, tapering off to lower levels of support for companies with between 250 and 2500+ employees.³¹ This is part of the federal government's 'qualifications offensive', which is particularly focused on areas affected by digital structural change or structural change in general or work in an occupation with a shortage of skilled workers ("bottleneck occupation").³²

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²⁸ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/sweden-funding-retraining-and-lifelong-learning>

²⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/79f66e17-8268-437f-bb90-67494148ae49>

³⁰ <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Gesetze-und-Gesetzesvorhaben/arbeit-von-morgen-gesetz.html>

³¹ <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Gesetze-und-Gesetzesvorhaben/arbeit-von-morgen-gesetz.html>

³² <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Gesetze-und-Gesetzesvorhaben/qualifizierungschancengesetz.html>

Keeping up with a changing world

Our proposals to equip individuals for a changing world and make skills training agile can only be successful if qualifications can adapt as well.

Starting with the Sainsbury Report of 2016, T Levels, Higher Technical Qualifications, and now, all funded qualifications below Level 3, will be based on the skills outlined in a set of employer-designed occupational standards. This will give these learners the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need for work. It is a major advance that should be preserved. But repeated reforms have resulted in the skills qualification system becoming overly centralised. While this has removed poor performance and set basic standards, it is stifling the creativity and innovation needed for improvement. The skills system must therefore decentralise while retaining a framework of clear occupational standards.

Course providers should be given more freedom to work with employers to develop provision that will help to support this, but we would also recommend:

- Using digital technology and 'big data' to shorten the time that it takes to revise a standard and make new provision available, drawing on what employers ask for when advertising job roles.
- Expanding the input from learners, so that their voice sits alongside that of employers in making the system fit for purpose.
- Streamlining the institutional environment, so that there are fewer actors, and focused on achieving great provision for learners.
- Creating space within existing programmes (e.g. Apprenticeships, T Levels) for rapidly developed and deployed 'modules' to be delivered alongside a more stable core that is based on the standard. For example, this could be 10% to 20% of an apprenticeship's time, flexed to meet emerging, employer-specific, or local skills needs.

We believe these proposals would help to support agility and decentralise the system. But, as we will describe, they also harness – and respond to – an increasing role for digital technology in education. These changes, we believe, can be the start of developing a digital and technology-enabled model for skills education.

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Harness technology for learners and employers

So far, technology has mostly been used to scale up the dissemination of learning. For example, online courses reach millions of people, but teach the same content to all learners, even when their needs may be starkly different. In a skills training context, where employers rely on unique applications of skill sets, such a one-size-fits-all approach is just as much of a drawback to employer as it is to employee.

AI – in particular, generative AI that applies learning from vast data sets to generate content – is already being used to incorporate learners' and employers' needs to produce bespoke learning materials and assessment. But there is no reason why this technology should not also be harnessed to revise qualifications against the needs of the labour market as a whole. This has the potential to transform its value to the wider economy, to employers and individuals. Such a system would take time and considerable expertise to develop, but it is nonetheless within reach. It is therefore vital to begin to set out how such a system could effectively support a transformation of qualifications – and to the benefit of individuals, employers and educators.

Updating qualifications

To update any qualification, awarding organisations need to wait for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's (IfATE) employer panels to update the relevant standard. This can take up to two years before the awarding organisation can start its own process to update and renew the qualification. This means there is a significant risk that qualifications will not impart the skills that employers need. With sensible use of AI and information technology, this time lag could in many cases be reduced significantly.

Although the IfATE employer panels offer one method of including employer voice, the model is slow to respond to rapidly changing demands. The panels typically involve 10 to 15 employers, who may not necessarily be reflective of their wider sector – particularly SMEs, who often do not reflect the 'hyper-specialisation' of occupations and skills that are seen in larger employers. Technology exists now to support engagement with a far wider pool of employers, democratising the process of skills development.

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Currently, revising qualifications is a long, drawn-out process that can take months, or even years (see box on page 27). We would recommend exploring how new technology, including AI, can generate insights to support qualification design in a number of ways. They include:

- Scanning data from the labour market to see if entirely new occupations are emerging, to support the development of occupational standards around them.
- Monitoring existing standards, so that they can rapidly be updated as new technologies change role requirements.
- Developing micro-credentials, where part of a standard needs to be drawn out into a free-standing qualification.
- Improving provision, so that teaching keeps pace with both workplace practice and learners' expectations.

To realise these improvements, the skills system would need to develop an integrated "digital engine" that brings AI together with a wide range of data from employers, educators and from the wider labour market. It would support research and monitoring of the labour market and help to translate this into skills needs. Besides gathering and providing performance information for courses and learner outcomes, it could:

- Interrogate online information about the labour market, including real-time labour market information and detailed skills requirements in live job adverts.

- Provide insight into the ever-changing labour market, setting out key trends in skills demands and changes to existing requirements for job roles.
- Increase efficiency of decision making by providing recommendations for updating standards and qualifications, which would be validated by trusted professionals.
- Provide quicker reviews of standards, triggered in response to shifts in demand from employers or learners for particular skills exceeding predetermined thresholds.

As well as pulling in information and presenting it to aid decisions, technology should also be harnessed to help to refine that material by facilitating engagement with employers and learners. For example, it is now possible to:

- Automatically generate targeted questionnaires that elicit views on key aspects of any draft specification.
- Run the engagement process with employers and learners, tailoring the methodology to allow for the time they have available (from targeted questions taking seconds to answer, to chat-bot interactions allowing more detailed input and the opportunity to dig into the results).
- Maintain communities of practice, automatically generating and linking to content that provides a flow of insights to members; synthesising and presenting the results of all this engagement in formats that feed directly into decision-making.

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The application of Generative AI could then also be deployed to support the development of new course material by automatically producing first drafts of key teaching materials, of assessment strategies and reporting frameworks for audit purposes. These would also need to be validated by course designers, but would be reflective of current employer needs.

For those designing courses, having all the material together in a usable format would be invaluable. They would have at their fingertips everything required to quickly finalise teaching materials, assessment strategies and reporting frameworks for audit purposes.

All these changes would revolutionise the pace at which qualifications can change, however, they also need to be accompanied by changes in real-world practice.



Updating qualifications for net-zero

In 2021, Shrewsbury College opened a new £1m Motor Vehicle Training Centre funded by the college, the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and four regional and national employers. The facilities allow the college to teach hybrid and electric vehicle technology. However, as it stands, the qualification learners are studying for focuses on petrol and diesel engines, because most colleges do not have the facilities to teach learners about hybrid and electric engines.

The college has made the decision to teach hybrid and electric skills on top of the qualification's study programme. However, this comes at a cost, as the college does not receive funding for skills not included in the qualifications, and the learners are not assessed on them either.

Following the opening of the facilities, BMW placed apprentices with the college, demonstrating employer confidence in the offer.

This example shows how a college is supporting the transition to net zero through skills provision, in spite of a backward-looking qualification offer.

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Conversely, while the apprenticeship standard for car mechanic includes the requirement to service electric and hybrid vehicles, many providers will not yet have the facilities to train apprentices in these relatively new technologies but those who do can't assess apprentices in their use of that technology.

It is vital that issues like this are not simply ignored. Obviously, there is a need for investment in training facilities. But even if the cash is available, improvements in training infrastructure are likely to take time. So it would be sensible to encourage employers to provide on-the-job experience, particularly in businesses where emergent technology is playing a significant role.

Enabling individuals to make more informed choices

While the new digital engine is essential for those designing the skills system, the information it generates will be just as invaluable to learners. Providing individuals with up-to-date information on the skills employers are demanding and the new roles that are emerging, can enable everyone who is considering taking a course to make more informed choices. Even more excitingly, by putting these insights together with learner profiles, learners and potential learners can learn more about how their own strengths fit with opportunities in the world of work. This, in turn, should become a feedback system for learners to manage their skills education in concert with their developing interest in the world of work.

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Using learners' insights to improve the skills system

But, just as the system can provide more insight for learners, so learners' insights should become an integrated part of how skills education improves. In fact, there is no better example than this paper, which has benefitted hugely from insights, gathered in a series of workshops, from individuals who have recently undertaken skills education (see box). Naturally, those involved in learning have helpful insights that can improve the courses they are on. And all the best providers regularly seek feedback to help them improve their courses. This should become universal.

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Learners' insights and feedback

Our discussion groups with learners highlighted a number of themes which run through this paper:

- Greater flexibility. There was demand for greater flexibility to fit with learners' lives, including breaking courses down into smaller chunks.
- Importance of essential human skills. All our discussion groups recognised the importance of skills such as communication, time management, creativity, and resilience.
- More practical elements. All groups wanted more practical opportunities because they found this aided learning. There was a particular emphasis on work experience.
- Improving assessment. Learners were dissatisfied with the kinds of assessment used, which they felt placed an inappropriately high emphasis on knowledge over skills.
- Learner support. There was a desire to see greater support for learners, including peer support.
- Difficult transitions. All groups highlighted problems with transitions within the education system and from education to work, and felt essential human skills aided such transitions.
- Accessibility of provision. Learners repeatedly highlighted the lack of access to courses and opportunities, including geographical barriers.
- Language matters. The discussions highlighted repeated issues around language, which reinforced problematic biases within the system.

However, when it comes to designing the skills system, learners' voices are noticeably absent. That is despite many of the issues they highlight – including how assessment works, and the need for greater flexibility – resulting from problems with how the system as a whole operates.

It therefore makes sense to include learners' voices at all levels of the skills system. So, as part of the rapid development and review of qualifications that this paper envisages, we recommend testing standards with learners at the same time as they are tested with employers. This can be facilitated by using digital engagement. While employers would remain the key voice on what skills are needed, learners' input would help to decide how those skills are taught.

The views of potential learners are equally important, particularly those who could benefit from enhancing their skills, but are currently reluctant or unable to undertake learning. Engagement should therefore be structured around the needs and desires of communities, especially those suffering the greatest disadvantage. Instead of externally prescribing skills solutions, which often have low take-up, communities themselves should be engaged in designing provision that works for them. For this to be successful, it calls for specialised providers and awarding organisations. These can work as the bridge between communities and employers, making sure courses are accessible while also drawing people into learning the skills that employers demand.

More effective organisational structure

Historically, there has been a huge amount of change to the organisational structure of the institutions overseeing the skills system. While evidence suggest that countries with a settled institutional framework are better able to drive improvements, it remains very likely that this will continue. There are currently moves to devolve adult skills funding to Mayoral Combined Authorities and suggestions of further restructuring of the machinery of English government.

Nonetheless, if there is to be institutional reform it should follow two clear principles. First, it should reduce the number of departments and agencies involved in the development and oversight of provision. Currently, a host of different government bodies are involved in a single course's lifecycle.

Second, any new structure has to promote trust between all the players in the system. While oversight and regulation are necessary, the current skills system is too rigid and resistant to change. Therefore, a relationship between the regulators, providers and employers must be based on genuine trust – working together to ensure learners get the skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing jobs market.

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Conclusions

In our introduction, we said that no skills policy on its own can ever solve the skills and labour market crisis that the UK is experiencing.

But if this country is to meet this challenge, employers and individuals must be able to easily acquire the skills they need to grow and become more productive.

Right now, our skills system's weaknesses are profound and will only worsen as new technologies and other economic changes advance. The skills system simply is not ready for the job it must do.

We have set out a transformational response that we believe will address these weaknesses and put our skills system in the right place to meet the coming challenges.

This includes:

- Embedding a new mix of skills – in particular, uniquely human essential skills – so that everyone can be prepared for a new world of work.
- Establishing a work-ready guarantee to ensure these new skills are taught throughout the system, and to give individuals confidence they will be prepared for a rapidly changing world of work.
- Moving to more multimodal forms of assessment and more formative assessment that, when coupled with learner profiles, can help learners and educators to drive better outcomes.

- Empowering the stakeholders in skills delivery, so that a more dynamic and agile system of provision responds to changing demand.
- Employing much greater use of digital technology, so that individuals, employers and course providers can play a more informed and more productive role in this new system.

Only government, of course, can lead these changes and make sure that we are all ready for work in the future. But to do so, it must perform a different role from the one it has often taken. Instead of choosing between 'statist intervention' or 'principled disinterest', it must recognise and respond to the value and insights that come from the system's many stakeholders. They include not just employers, but course providers, awarding organisations and, of course, individuals in education, employment, and outside the system. This would simply recognise a reality. All these stakeholders have a crucial role to play in how skills are developed, how they contribute to productivity, and how, together with government, they shape the future of skills in England.

It is government's role, therefore, to empower, rather than micromanage this system, by setting its expectations and by working with stakeholders – championing the principle that individuals and employers should be supported to make the most of their futures. Only by doing this, can skills provision make its full contribution towards the drive for a more productive economy.

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All responsibility for the content of the report, including all opinions, interpretations and errors, lies with Corndel, the Edge Foundation and NCFE.

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