

**GuildHE response to:**

**Future of the Skills System (Skills Commission)**

**May 2019**



## **RESPONDENT INFORMATION**

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Permission	
Have you read and understood how we handle your data?	YES
Do you give permission for the Commission to quote your submission?	YES
Can we attribute the submission to the institution?	YES
Can we attribute the submission to you personally?	YES

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# 1. What kind of skills system do we want?

- a) To you, what are the key features of a successful skills ecosystem and what role should different organisations play? What principles should be taken into consideration? How should different organisations interact?

*Consider the roles of key stakeholders such as learners and employers, ideal levels of geography for decision making, how to take into account a changing digital infrastructure etc. Where possible consider UK and international examples, including related policy fields (such as schools) where appropriate. Perhaps think broadly about points of contact for stakeholders such as colleges and employers– are the structures able to provide sufficient to deliver results and solutions?*

## About GuildHE

[GuildHE](#) is the officially recognised representative body for smaller and specialist universities and colleges in the UK. We champion a diverse higher education sector. We represent 50 members, including multi-faculty universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private (“not for profit” and “for profit”) sectors. Member institutions include some major providers in professional subject areas including art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; maritime; health and sports. Our members prepare students for success in specialist careers. They offer living and learning in small academic communities and focus on delivering practical research for real-world impact.

## Opening comment

GuildHE welcomes this inquiry into the skills system, and hopes it can provide much needed clarity on the relationship between skills and the education sector more broadly. Skills is at present seen as shorthand for technical and/or professional education within all levels of the education system, whilst at the same time is used to describe non academic learning such as how to do a presentation, how to work in a team etc. Both Higher and Further education offer opportunities for citizens to develop useful skills for future employment under both of these definitions, and many of our member institutions offer both FE and HE technical qualifications.

## Joined up policy across Whitehall

Whilst we recognise that this enquiry is looking specifically at FE, it will be important for any recommendations to be seen in light of HE technical education in order to create a coherent narrative to the public and employers.

Fundamentally, there should be a joined up structure of skills policy, from primary school to PhD which allows citizens to be equipped with the necessary tools to access and achieve in their chosen career. Too much of the policy discourse in this area is focused on HE vs FE vs schools. This seems counterproductive in creating a coherent and accessible education system. GuildHE is proud of the work our members do to deliver industry-focused qualifications which are seen as

both academic and technical: they have developed strong partnership with industries and local employers to develop their curriculum offer. We believe this is one of the key strengths of our part of the sector.

Government's role is also not very clearly defined, even when all parts of the education landscape are now housed within one Department for Education, although BEIS has some oversight of the skills agenda through the Industrial Strategy and creation of Local Industrial Strategies. There are tensions emerging between the IfA and employers on the direction of travel for some vocational qualifications including Apprenticeships and BTECs. We do not feel that the current skills policy is collaborative nor coherent to those outside of the education sector, and this will have negative impacts on individuals and the economy.

### *Better two-way employment engagement*

Of course, employers play a useful role in articulating the skills they require to operate and increase productivity, but to date their engagement and understanding of this area is patchy and sometimes incoherent. Our education system is often berated in the press for not producing qualified individuals with the 'right' skills for employer needs. Whilst there is more that we can do to support employers, we think the skills agenda is often seen as a replacement for in house employer training or CPD courses. Our member are happy to work with employers to design and deliver courses which provide the necessary skills for employment, but nationally funded education institutions cannot offer specific training within individual employers unless it is an Apprenticeship or a formal CPD qualification. We must ensure that nationally funded skills education is fit for purpose, provides broad-based skills transferable to an array of employers now and in the future, and accessible to whomever wishes to access it.

## **b) What should be an overall vision for learning and skills success and why? What role do you see yourself and your organisation playing?**

*At a high level consider participation in learning, how the system can mitigate social and regional inequalities, alignment with local and national economic priorities, as well as individual outcomes such as employment, earnings and wellbeing.*

The FE sector is not like Higher Education. Students usually attend the most local provider who delivers their qualification, and there is very little appetite (unless it is incredibly necessary) for students to travel much further than a few miles from their homes, not least because there is not as great financial support available for FE students. Therefore access to this form of skills education is often restricted to local provision which supports local/ regional skills needs but does not promote social mobility. There is the chance to view the skills and education system holistically, with national priorities aimed to support and develop local needs.

We are concerned that the new vocational and academic routes will force young people to choose a specific path early on in life, and due to the regional diversity of provision will inevitably

restrict some young people from accessing the training they require in the industries they have dreamed of working in.

The reality is, the majority of school children (and young adults) do not know the specifics of the career they may wish to pursue, nor have a real sense of their employment options until they have left school or university. Whilst we believe that more practical skills based education should be offered to young people, this should not be a choice of this vs academic qualifications as students will need to be flexible when in the workplace.

People are living longer and are more likely to have multiple careers. The skills ecosystem must therefore also support lifelong learning. The ecosystem must inspire adults to return to learning both to address national socioeconomic challenges but also to encourage individuals to have fulfilling, healthy lives and in turn reduce burden on public services (GuildHE's recent report on the [economic impact of Sport and Exercise Science](#) provides some examples of this).

Our vision for the skills ecosystem also has a strong focus on place. The education landscape should address and support local needs and challenges and enable everyone to achieve their best. This must involve looking at whole places and understanding why people should want to live in a place. This is important for talent retention and supporting the ambitions of local people. Joined up policy that looks across the whole of the skills ecosystem is one way to do this.

## 2. To what extent is the current system effective?

### a) Does England have a functioning provider base? Why or why not? How are you affected by this?

*Considering the role of colleges versus independent providers, partnerships versus competition, large providers versus small, etc., and how this balance should vary by type of provision (for example, T Levels versus apprenticeships).*

The skills system needs to be set up to address current and future challenges. Government has identified that the current technical qualifications landscape is confusing to both young and adult learners. We agree, but we must strike a balance between generic industry skills training, and more specific skills development which is sector specific. The apprenticeships schemes are one way of doing this, but only one way. Adults who wish to go back and re-train must also be able to gain access to specific skills, qualifications and funding to support them to do this in order to be competitive in the workplace.

### *Bridging technical and academic routes*

We would like to see much clearer bridging between the technical and academic routes and their qualification levels aligned. This would ensure that it is easier to transition between them, as well as encouraging the building of qualifications at different levels, rather than the current status quo of multiple qualifications at the same level. Furthermore, we are disappointed that qualification building has not been picked up by the Apprenticeship policy as yet. Trailblazers should be developing clear progression routes through the qualification levels in order to deliver appropriate apprenticeships for all parts of the business.

We are concerned that the streamlining of the FE sector and the new Technical Colleges will make it harder for the whole population to get access to the skills training required. There are yet to be any major developments in distance learning at FE level, which compounds this issue further. Whilst we can see the benefit of specialists hubs, regional outreach delivery must be undertaken to ensure that training is reaching all who need it.

That said, we are in agreement that the current landscape of qualifications is very confusing to the public, and the FE sector (both public and private) would benefit from having a central signposting service of qualifications. This is especially true for adult learners who do not have access to guidance available through the school system.

### *BTECs*

We disagree with the proposal in the recent Post 16 Qualifications Consultation to stop funding BTEC and other industry accredited qualifications. Many BTECs for example play an important role in the training of employees in specific industries for both school aged learners, and adults already in employment. This learning cannot be replicated within a T-Level framework (and we have grave doubts about the accessibility of T-Level qualifications in all parts of the country) and we would urge government to reconsider this aspect of the policy.

### *FE & HE*

FE colleges also deliver significant proportions of HE qualifications (around 10%). This widens access to higher qualifications to those who are unable to attend a university, but also offers a distinctive approach to academic and technical qualification delivery. FE colleges have developed strategies which support learners to gradually build up qualifications, and Foundation Degrees are a key part of HE in FE delivery. Colleges are also well connected to local businesses and industries, and are able to pull together 16-19 strategies, with adult education strategies, and higher learning strategies in order to be an asset to skills training at all levels in their region.

### *Apprenticeships*

Apprenticeships are a little different. They are first and foremost employment opportunities, with built in training. We would like to see many more Higher and degree level apprenticeships being

developed, but at present we find employers do not understand how the qualifications framework works, or what the different levels look like. Better training and support by DfE to Trailblazers should be provided. Access to apprenticeship opportunities could also be better communicated. At present, advertising opportunities happens predominantly through channels aimed at young people, rather than to the whole population. Once the new apprenticeships schemes have gained public support, more should be done to raise the profile of opportunities to all in society, regardless of age.

### *Regulation*

Finally, we wish to see much tougher regulation of private training providers delivering formal and informal qualifications. This is especially the case of qualifications at Level 4+ where the provider does not need to register with the OfS. Students, employers, and the taxpayer need to be better protected from badly managed provision.

We do not believe an open market in this space has improved the quality of qualification delivery, and in some cases has had the opposite effect. Only when this part of the sector is better regulated will the 'prestige' of technical education improve, and employers may see a better calibre of employee. Industry bodies can also play a greater role in monitoring the quality of private training.

### **b) How appropriate is the current model of commissioning and procurement? What are the implications of this for yourself and your organisation?**

*Consider how individual procurements fit into a bigger picture, the role of procurement and new market entrants versus stability of institutions and longer-term funding, the range of funding approaches, whether this has implications for innovation, adjustment to digital transformation, competition and collaboration with other stakeholders and employers.*

In the apprenticeship space there is a huge gap in the procurement processes which heavily restrict SMEs from engagement in gaining necessary skills and in some regions there is no opportunity for SMEs to engage with Higher and Degree Apprenticeships. The current process also restricts access to skills qualification in certain regions of England, and especially those in rural/coastal locations.

### **c) To what extent do institutional and local system priorities align to national government priorities such as those described in the Industrial Strategy, the ambition 'to create a country that works for everyone' and other national policy challenges?**

*Consider the collective intentions of local stakeholders working together – relationships between providers, LEPs, local government or regional authorities. To what extent is supporting the*

*Industrial Strategy a priority and are skills a feature of local strategic discussions around issues such as housing, demographic changes etc.*

### *Creative sector*

GuildHE and ukadia are delighted that government see the creative sector as a serious part of the UK economy. However the current education and skills policies do not help this sector to flourish.

The introduction of the eBacc, the stretching of school budgets and the loss of creative subject teachers has meant that arts education is being eroded in schools. The arts are predominantly now taught in affluent schools, in affluent neighbourhoods to affluent children. This does nothing to help diversity in the arts sector and further compounds issues around cultural capital development for all parts of society. Removing the ability to access arts based skills training will create a massive black hole in the creative industries. We have already seen a sharp decline in the number of students wishing to undertake an arts based degree, yet employers say they need creative graduates.

Assumptions have been made by some in government that arts education is not a 'core' discipline, and those who are gifted are able to hone their talents outside of the curriculum. This is just not the case. We are very concerned that the levels of GCSE and A Level qualification take up will significantly drop, which will have a knock on effect for the pre-requisite requirements needed for both technical and academic further and higher education in the arts.

As Darren Henley, CEO of the Arts Council England, says in the introduction to our publication on the [economic value of creative focused universities and colleges](#):

*“Our international competitors regard our success with envy. So, any education system that focuses solely on science, technology, engineering and maths – important as they are – does so at its peril. The creative industries are a huge part of our economy, employing hundreds of thousands of people in high value jobs. Creative skills are essential in all sectors, creating leaders who can innovate. Surely, it makes sense for us to broaden out the traditional focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths of STEM, to incorporate Arts subjects, so creating STEAM?”*

*An education system that only concentrates on Numeracy and Literacy risks producing two-dimensional young people. Adding the third dimension of Creativity into that system – and seeing it as an equal measure of success – imbues the talent pipeline with the knowledge, skills and experiences that industry leaders repeatedly tell us they are crying out for in their workforce. The study of art, design and performing arts subjects ignite that spark of creativity in a student that will stay with them throughout their career.”*

We believe that employers have a responsibility to articulate their skills needs more deliberately than they do now. LEPs do help facilitate this for large local industries, but SMEs and some large

companies do not typically engage in this process, and discussions around skills are always focused on the lower levels (2 & 3).

### *Employer need and industry support*

Employers are known to complain that the current HE and FE teaching does not provide the necessary skills for employment. But this fundamentally misses the point about many of the educational qualifications offered at this level. Even the new technical routes will not make a graduate completely employment ready for a specific employer in a specific context. Employers place too much emphasis on educators to provide their employees with very specific skills.

Whatever the new education landscape looks like, the education sector and employers need to have a more developed dialogue about what the expectations are. And employers may end up needing to take more responsibility for specific training to staff. We discuss the issue of employers not articulating true 'essential' and 'desirable' characteristics in job descriptions below; but these could form the basis of a discussion between employers and educationalists about what is required and deliverable within institutions, and what can only be learned by doing the job.

Many GuildHE members (both traditional and alternative providers) are specialist institutions, and have seen niche gaps in the skills market to develop courses, and even whole institutions, with employers in partnership. This helps to bridge the divide between education and employment for graduates. Like other specialists, alternative providers are good at meeting the needs of the industries they serve, with SAE, UCFB, UCEM, BIMM, University of Law and ICMP all delivering courses which are not widely taught in traditional universities. GSM and SAE have also developed a business model around delivering more traditional courses in an innovative way (for example accelerated degrees), in order to better meet employer needs.

Our members heavily invest in preparing students for work. This is through a variety of means including: employer led curriculum development, live briefs and work placements used for assessment and developing students enterprise skills. In some of our institutions over 20% of graduates go off to be self-employed. These students benefit from support, both on their course and through alumni schemes.

### *Place*

Place already plays an important role for many small and specialist HE providers, as our response has already suggested. Universities and colleges have roles in shaping their places (as the recent [Civic University Commission report](#) highlights). Smaller providers tend to serve higher numbers of local people who go on to remain in the local area and lead to developing local socioeconomic strengths (for example, local graduate spinouts in Dundee and Cornwall are encouraged and supported by Abertay and Falmouth Universities respectively). They can support local industrial strategy goals through working with FE providers and help with reskilling local



people. However, policy and funding would need to encourage such collaboration rather than competition.

**d) Is the current system adjusting and adapting to future needs? Why or why not? What does this mean for you now? What will it mean for you in the future? How does it affect your long and short term planning?**

*Consider whether the current system allows opportunities for innovation, adaptation to digital transformation and a changing labour market, connections to employers and decision-makers at different levels of government, and the ability to mitigate geographical and socioeconomic disadvantage.*

*In work lifelong learning*

As economies grow and fall and sectors expand and contract, it is clear that many careers are no longer for life. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is likely to cause further employment displacement, with educators trying to predict the jobs of the future. This makes effective and efficient lifelong learning essential if the UK is to support its entire workforce, let alone address the Grand Challenges and government targets (such as achieving 2.4% investment in R&D).

Employers must change their attitudes towards recruitment, and accept workers based on their generic skill sets and potential abilities; with ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ criteria being thought through on the basis of the actual requirements of the job. Government can help support employers and the public in re-training (through access to loans, the apprenticeship levy, more pressure on employers to have training budgets etc.). At present in most occupations it is currently up to the employee to seek skills training in order to up-skill, change jobs or change careers. We need to strike a balance between the cost for the individual and the cost for the company. At present many adult learners undertake qualifications and pay for them themselves as a ‘leap of faith’.

*Declining training budgets*

Whilst the apprentice levy is too new to assess its impact on skills opportunities, we now have a system whereby employers are made to have a very narrowly defined training budget. Government must assess the impact the levy has on a company's wider training budget to ensure that other qualifications and learning opportunities are not being sidelined.

Unfortunately for many adults, there is little time or money to spend on going back to college and so it seems sensible that employers could take on more responsibility in supporting their employees to access education later in life.

There are very many non accredited training providers. We think there should be better regulation for non accredited learning to ensure employers and employees are getting good value for money.

The apprentice policy is still very focused around 16-24 year olds. Whilst there is nothing stopping older applicants to apply for apprenticeships, nor employers signing up current staff on apprenticeship schemes, more awareness of this is needed.

### 3. What do we need to do?

#### a) What needs to change to achieve an effective skills system? What steps can we take to achieve a better system and a vision you agree with?

*Consider recommendations for policy makers, different levels of government, commissioners, providers and stakeholders*

*Develop a Strategy: national framework; locally led*

DfE needs to coordinate all parts of education landscape to support the development of a coherent skills strategy. The strategy should sit across government departments and . must tie into the Industrial Strategy and allow both people and places to thrive.

This strategy needs to find solutions to local needs, which should involve local providers and organisations working together to access and develop talent from all parts of a community. At the same time, it should enable strengths located elsewhere in the ecosystem to be channelled to areas that are experiencing a deficit - not every provider should be seeking to fulfill every challenge in isolation by itself.

*Embrace diversity across FE & HE*

Examples of good practice can be found in all parts of the education system. HE, including small and specialist providers, should be included in conversations at national and local levels. HE providers both deliver a lot of industry-focussed training already, or will act as a next step for many with technical qualifications. They can act as convenors for addressing place-based skills needs directly and through drawing on existing national networks.

*Support high quality apprenticeships*

Apprenticeship trailblazer processes need to be more flexible to allow employers and education providers to work together to create high quality and meaningful qualifications. Trailblazers also need to be more transparent so that other employers are able to find out who is developing standards and in what areas. The burden of trailblazers on employers is presently very large. IfA can do much more to support employers through the process.

An apprenticeship in and of itself is not a qualification, but an operating framework in which employees can study whilst working. The IfA decision to remove formal qualifications from apprenticeships does nothing to protect the student employee and makes it much harder for that employee to reference their knowledge and skills to future employers. it also removed an element of quality assurance from the process that many industry bodies respect.

*Invest in 'whole-place'*

Places- whether towns, cities or rural areas, are where people and spend their time. They need to be attractive as places to live as well as to work *in order to* address economic and social challenges. The skills system should play a crucial role in delivering a 'whole-place' ethos.