

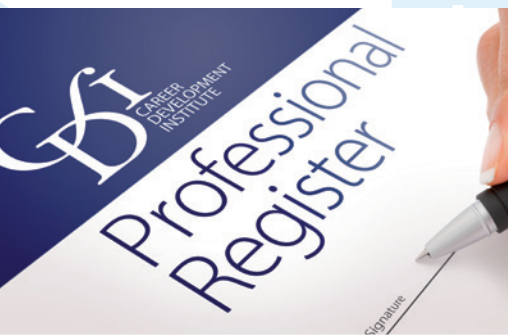


Briefing Paper

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The Skills for Jobs White Paper Implications for career development

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Briefing Paper

Summary

The Department for Education published *Skills for jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* on Thursday 21st January 2021. The white paper is wide ranging and includes discussion of compulsory and post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. There are also several specific proposals that relate to the organisation of England's careers education and guidance system.

Key proposals

The white paper aims to (1) increase the availability of skills to the economy and the alignment of education with the needs of business; (2) provide a mechanism for 'leveling up' and increasing opportunity for all citizens by improving access to learning; and (3) rebalance the education system away from universities and towards vocational and technical education. It seeks to achieve this through a range of measures including by:

- developing a lifetime skills guarantee for all citizens;
- reforming the funding of post-18 learning provision and integrating further education into the higher education loan system;
- aligning education and training provision with employers' needs and funding colleges to connect their offer more strongly to employers; and
- providing colleges with £1.3 billion in capital funding.

Many of the announcements in the white paper are not new but reiterate and extend existing policies and practices.

Careers education and guidance

The white paper includes a section entitled 'clear and trusted information, advice and guidance for careers and education choices'. This includes the following proposals.



Issues raised by the white paper

- It makes relatively few major announcements. The most substantial change relates to the reform of funding arrangements for post-18 education and training.
- It is not a lifelong careers strategy and leaves several key issues vague or unresolved.
- It fails to offer a way forward on personal career guidance within the education system and beyond it. There is no reference to the importance of qualified careers advisers nor any additional funding for personal career guidance.
- The approach to career guidance set out in the white paper is effectively a continuation of existing policy and lacks the ambition needed in the present moment.

Commitments

- Requiring schools to provide independent career guidance from year 7.
- Publishing updated statutory guidance for careers.
- Supporting and strengthening the 'Baker clause'.
- Continuing the rollout of the Careers Hubs.
- Investing in more training for careers leaders.
- Revamping the National Careers Service website.

Reviews and future plans

- Asking Ofsted to undertake a thematic review of career guidance.
- Seeking greater alignment of The Careers & Enterprise Company and the National Careers Service to create an all-age careers system.
- Increasing the focus on careers in teachers' training and professional development.

Introduction

The Department for Education published *Skills for jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* on Thursday 21st January 2021.¹ The document is a ‘white paper’ which means that it sets out the government’s intentions for the future, but does not constitute new law, binding commitments or regulations. The white paper has been expected for several months, but progress on it was disrupted by the pandemic. In this briefing paper I have distilled down the key proposals contained in the white paper with a particular focus on the changes that will impact on careers education and guidance.

The white paper is wide ranging in its focus and includes discussion of the compulsory and post-compulsory education system as well as lifelong learning. Many of the proposed changes set out in the white paper have implications for the career development of individuals and for the various careers education and guidance services that exist to support these individuals. There are also several specific proposals that relate to the organisation of England’s careers education and guidance system.

There is little in the new document that is surprising as it builds on the existing policy trajectory. The 2019 Conservative manifesto presented a very limited set of commitments relating to education and training and had nothing to say about career guidance specifically.² Commitments set out in the manifesto which are of direct relevance to the current white paper included ongoing support for apprenticeships, the promise to develop a National Skills Fund and investment in the physical infrastructure that underpins technical and vocational education and training. These proposals have all been taken forward in some form.

The manifesto’s promises were fairly high level, and the government has been tightlipped on what they might mean in practice since the election. Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson gave a speech to the Social Market Foundation in July in which he re-iterated the government’s commitment to technical and vocational education and highlighted the importance of skills, retraining, the need for alignment between education and employment and hinted at a need to rebalance the number of people pursuing technical as opposed to academic pathways.³ He spoke of the need to move to a ‘German style further education system’ based on employer-led qualifications and locally embedded colleges. The speech was light on details but much of its rhetoric reappears in the current white paper.

Another element of the background story for the white paper is the expiry of the Careers Strategy. The Strategy was launched in 2017 and has shaped careers education and guidance over the last three years.⁴ All of the commitments in the Strategy had run out by the end of 2020. This meant that there was a need for the government to revisit career guidance in 2021 and set out some new policy. The white paper has provided an opportunity to do this although it does not constitute a new Careers Strategy.

Parallel to the publication of the white paper, the Department of Education has also published its response to the Augur review of post-18 education funding.⁵ While this is a separate document from the white paper, and only constitutes an interim response, it broadly echoes the proposals set out in the white paper and adds little new information.

Finally, it is worth noting that this white paper has emerged in the context of an ongoing pandemic and an emerging recession. Although the white paper does not discuss the pandemic in detail, the new system that it describes will need to connect to the wide range of pandemic-related education and employment initiatives launched by the government.⁶ Other comparable countries (such as those in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) are viewing technical and vocational training⁷

and career guidance⁸ as key to their plans for post-pandemic reconstruction, but this is implied rather than explicit in the white paper.

Key proposals

The over-arching concept in the white paper is that of the *lifetime skills guarantee*. Rhetorically this is designed to suggest that access to lifelong learning and skills development will be extended in the service of three main policy aims.

- To increase the availability of skills to the economy and the alignment of education and training with the needs of business. This is often articulated through the idea of putting employers at the heart of the system.
- To provide a mechanism for ‘leveling up’ and increasing opportunity for all citizens by improving access to learning.
- To rebalance the education system away from universities and academic pathways and towards vocational and technical education.

These aims will be achieved through many different initiatives which will be phased in over the rest of the parliament. Key proposals include:

- The development of the *lifetime skills guarantee* as an individual entitlement for all citizens. This will fund anyone who does not have a level 3 qualification (equivalent to two A levels) to access one. It will also ultimately (by 2025) create a *lifelong loan entitlement* (essentially a new and broader student loan system), which will allow all citizens to undertake the equivalent of four years post-18 education and training.
- Aligning education and training provision with employers’ needs. This will be achieved by bringing employers into the planning and management of education and training through the creation of *local skills improvement plans*. It will also give employers more opportunity to set the focus of education and training by requiring all post-16 qualifications to conform to *employer-led standards*.
- Providing *strategic development funding* for some colleges to allow them to reshape their offer to employer needs, whilst funding others to establish *college business centres* to work with employers more closely.
- Providing colleges with £1.3 billion in *capital funding* to improve the buildings and facilities available to learners in colleges.

The white paper also includes support, including new funding in some cases, for existing initiatives including the apprenticeship system, T-levels, higher technical qualifications and the Institutes of Technology⁹. Supporting these are additional measures to enhance standards, recruit teachers, reform teacher education and professional development, and improve governance in colleges. Tom Berwick of the Federation of Awarding Bodies reflected on the familiarity of much of what is in the white paper, saying.

*This white paper is perhaps not quite as comprehensive as it could have been in terms of covering the range of transformational reforms of post-compulsory tertiary education that the review panel envisaged... Overall, what has been announced today is very much a restatement of what has already been agreed — a useful ‘work in progress’.*¹⁰

There are also some short-term initiatives such as the provision of £8 million for digital skills training. Finally, it includes a lot of promises to consult stakeholders, improve and streamline systems and funding arrangements, publish more data and remove bureaucracy.

Careers education and guidance

The white paper includes a section entitled ‘clear and trusted information, advice and guidance for careers and education choices’ which focuses on career education and guidance provision. It begins with the unequivocal statement.

We need impartial, lifelong careers advice and guidance available to people when they need it, regardless of age, circumstance, or background.

There is a recognition of the fact that career guidance provision in England continues to be patchy and fragmented and a promise to do something to address this. There is also a commitment to continue with the existing careers policy framework including the use of the Gatsby Benchmarks¹¹ as the ultimate aim of careers policy in compulsory education. Concretely this results in the following proposals.

questions about whether it will really drive a fundamental shift in the educational and qualification choices of individuals. Which once again highlights the need for strong careers education and guidance.

With respect to careers education and guidance there are three main areas of concern: firstly, that the white paper falls short of being a genuine careers strategy; secondly the omission of serious proposals around personal guidance; and thirdly the concerns that it is not ambitious enough and that serious improvement cannot be delivered without investment.

Commitments	Reviews and future plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requiring schools to provide independent career guidance from year 7 (extended from the old duty which went down to year 8¹²). • Publishing updated statutory guidance for careers for schools and colleges. Although it is not clear what this ‘update’ will focus on or when it will be released. • Supporting and strengthening the ‘Baker clause’¹³ requirement for all young people to have the opportunity to learn about technical and vocational pathways. • Continuing the rollout of the Careers Hubs¹⁴ as local coordinating structures for careers provision. • Investing in more training¹⁵ for careers leaders. • Revamping the National Careers Service website (again) and advocating for its use in schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking Ofsted to undertake another thematic review of career guidance in schools and colleges. • Seeking to move towards an all-age careers system by improving the alignment of The Careers & Enterprise Company and the National Careers Service. Professor Sir John Holman will lead an initial review of the system and there is also a promise that there will be a longer-term review (presumably as a next phase after Sir John’s review). • Building awareness of career guidance into every stage of professional development for teachers, from initial training to education leadership.

Issues raised by the white paper

The white paper contains a range of valuable new initiatives which have the potential to improve education and training in general and careers education and guidance in particular. However, at 80 pages the document takes quite a long time to announce relatively little.

In many ways the problem with the white paper is that it falls somewhere between describing a complete education and training system, in which many of the key components are already in place, and a series of announcements of new initiatives. At times this obscures the fact that what is being announced as new, is actually very similar to things that already exist.

The most substantial announcement is the new loans system, which is designed to create a more flexible system in which there is greater parity of esteem between, and access to, technical pathways (through further education) and academic pathways (through higher education). But, there are questions as to whether the Treasury has actually signed off on this plan.¹⁶ Even if this overhaul of the student loan system can be delivered there are big

The need for a Careers Strategy

With respect to careers education and guidance, the new commitments are quite helpful and plug the gap in strategy that has existed since the 2017 Careers Strategy expired. However, it is not a full replacement for the Strategy and there is a danger that the career-specific elements get buried in the arguments around the implementation of the white paper.

A lot of the proposals for careers education and guidance remain vague including the overall level of funding, the specific funding for the various programmes announced and the timetable for implementation. There are also important details missing such as any clues as to what will be in the new statutory guidance or when it will be released. There are a variety of candidates for what should be included in the new statutory guidance such as a requirement to provide dedicated curriculum time for careers education and greater specification of the training and qualifications that careers professionals should have to work in schools.



The decision to embed discussion of careers into a broader white paper focused on further education diminishes careers as a policy area in its own right. More worryingly viewing it through the lens of vocational and technical education, means ignoring some of the wider policy links which are important to the development of England's career guidance system. There is a strong case for regarding careers education and guidance in relation to the schools' curriculum and school funding and in relation to widening participation to higher education and graduate transitions. There have, for instance, been valuable local innovations in careers work funded through the National Collaborative Outreach Programme which is coming to an end in July 2021.¹⁷ Finally, and particularly critically with unemployment levels rising, it is important to consider careers provision in relation to the support that exists for unemployed workers through the Department for Work and Pensions.

So, while the current announcements are helpful, they stop considerably short of being the kind of lifelong careers strategy that is really needed. It would be possible for the Department for Education to build on the white paper and move to launch a more comprehensive careers strategy later in the year alongside the launch of new statutory guidance.

Personal guidance

Most of what has been announced in relation to careers education and guidance can be welcomed, but the lack of any serious discussion of personal guidance within the white paper is a major oversight.

Despite the unequivocal support for 'lifelong careers advice and guidance' and the Chancellor's recent assertion that 'the evidence

says careers advice works'¹⁸ the white paper largely ignores the role that careers advice (personal guidance delivered by a qualified careers professional) can play.

The ongoing lack of dedicated funding for personal guidance is challenging for schools who are dealing with tight budgets and competing priorities. The pandemic has worsened the financial position of many schools and seen the emergence of new priorities.¹⁹ At present only 63% of schools are able to deliver personal guidance for all of their students²⁰ and there are concerns that the pressure of the current crisis may see this situation worsen.²¹

Outside of formal education the access to personal guidance is even worse with most people entitled to very limited support through the National Careers Service website and helpline. There is particularly acute need for those who are not in education but who are too young to access the National Careers Service. There are also concerning gaps for adults who are not within the priority groups that the National Careers Service is funded to address, notably those who have recently been made redundant or become unemployed.²² The white paper largely ignores all of these problems with access to personal guidance.

The failure to fund personal guidance appropriately is particularly disappointing in the light of the The Careers & Enterprise Company's recent work in piloting new approaches to personal guidance²³, clarifying the evidence base²⁴ and demonstrating that it delivers a return on investment.²⁵ There is clearly a need to develop a much clearer and more ambitious approach to personal guidance of the kind that has been advocated by those calling for a *career guidance guarantee*.²⁶ Indeed such a guarantee could be offered as a useful part of the *lifetime skills guarantee* announced in the white paper.



The need for greater ambition

Many of the problems with careers provision that are identified or implied in this document have been persistent and ongoing problems throughout the last ten years. While the Gatsby Benchmarks have provided a powerful framework for improvement in schools, there is still only a small minority of schools (c.7%) who are meeting all of them.²⁷ Meanwhile the elements of the career guidance system that are outside of compulsory education have received less attention and development. A wide variety of research, policy documents and commentators²⁸ have highlighted the need for:

- personal guidance and other aspects of careers provision to be properly funded;
- the development of a national system which successfully aligns provision in schools and the education system with that available to adults and those who are working or recently unemployed;
- a clearer approach to developing and ensuring quality across the whole careers system including making a clear commitment that only those who hold a full Level 6 or above qualification in career development should be providing personal guidance; and
- initiatives to address the gaps in the system, particularly for young people who are not in school, working adults and the recently unemployed.

The context of the pandemic highlights the need for career guidance and makes it more urgent to address these problems. Yet, the white paper proposes a steady continuation of the approach which successive governments have been developing since around

2012²⁹ and which was set out more formally in the 2017 Careers Strategy. There is a clear question as to whether a continuation of the current approach is sufficient or whether a more radical, and better funded, approach is needed.

Final thoughts

The white paper represents this government's first serious engagement with career guidance. So far what is on offer is largely positive but does neither represent any radical new thinking nor a substantial increase in funding for career guidance. For the most part the new announcements follow the trajectory set out in the 2017 Careers Strategy. The problem with this lack of new thinking is that over the last year we have entered a major crisis in both the education and employment systems. Disruption of the education system, restructuring of the economy and rising unemployment all massively increase the demand for, and necessity of, career guidance. Given this, it is hoped that the announcements in the white paper only represent the beginning of a bigger process of reform and investment in England's career guidance system.

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