



Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords] - Summary

House of Commons - Debate Summary - House of Commons

15/11/2021

Second Reading

The Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, moved that the Bill now be read a second time.

Marsha de Cordova (Lab, Battersea) asked if he would rethink the move to get rid of BTEC qualifications. Zahawi responded "We are not getting rid of BTECs."

Catherine West (Lab, Hornsey and Wood Green) asked if he was disappointed there had been a 41 percent drop in apprenticeship take-up. Zahawi said it was "very important for this House to focus on outcomes rather than just inputs."

The Minister continued, saying that "skills, schools and families" were this Government's mantra, and that they would be investing £3.8bn more in further education and skills over the Parliament by 2024/25. He noted the cross-party support for this, particularly from Lord Sainsbury, funder of the Gatsby Foundation, who had led an independent panel on skills during the coalition Government.

He said there would be an extra £1.6bn for 16 to 19-year-olds' education by 2024/25, including maintaining funding in real terms per student and delivering more hours of teaching for T-levels. Apprenticeships funding would also increase to £2.7bn by this time, he added.

Jim Shannon (DUP, Strangford) queried what the Government was doing to support low attainment of good GCSEs amongst disadvantaged pupils. The Minister said they were investing £5bn in education recovery, including for tutoring and teaching quality.

Zahawi continued, outlining other measures including the National Skills Fund, trailblazer areas, and local skills improvement plans (LSIPs). The Bill also specified the legal framework for reforms; particularly by "protecting our learners from the disruptive impact of provider failure" should a provider go bust.

On LSIPs, he said these would "place employers, through representative bodies, at the centre [...] of the local post-16 skills system." The plans would "help to ensure that the skills system is responsive to labour market skills needs and supports local innovation and growth," he added, and clarified that mayoral combined authorities would also be closely engaged in the process.

The Minister also outlined how the Bill helped deliver the lifelong loan entitlement (LLE), which would "help to give people a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education at levels 4 to 6, for use on modules or full courses, in colleges or universities, over their lifetimes." He added that the LLE would help to create a parity of esteem between further and higher education.

Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South), member of the Education Committee, asked what the Government would do to ensure those who didn't have a level 2 qualification could access the guarantee. The Minister said he would come to this later.

He continued, saying that the Government had also now introduced further measures in the Bill to eradicate the use of essay mills.

Paul Blomfield (Lab, Sheffield Central), chair of the APPG for Students, pressed the Education Secretary further on the earlier question on BTECs, saying "he may not intend to abolish them, but will not effectively defunding them have the same effect?" Zahawi said their changes to allow T Levels to succeed would not involve getting rid of "high-quality BTECs".

On reforms to technical education, Zahawi said they were extending the powers of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to approve a broader range of technical educational qualifications.

Zahawi announced that they would be removing the English and maths exit requirements from T Levels, so students were not inhibited by this or put off starting the course. He noted England had more than 12,000 qualifications at level 3 and below, whereas the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland each had around 500 or fewer. He affirmed that T Levels and A Levels should be at the forefront of the level 3 landscape, but stressed that other qualifications would still be needed alongside them. "It is quite likely that many BTECs and similar applied general-style qualifications will continue to play an important role in 16-to-19 education for the foreseeable future," he added.

On level 2 qualifications, the Minister said this had been neglected for too long, particularly in technical education. The Government would consult on proposals for reform later this year, he confirmed.

Kate Green, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, said they would not vote against this Bill as amended by the Lords. However, she noted the Bill lacked ambition with regard to ensuring every adult had the opportunity to "retrain and reskill where necessary, to address technological change and globalisation and tackle the climate crisis".

She welcomed the introduction of T Levels, but noted they wouldn't be right for all students and there was a danger of forcing young people to specialise too early. On BTECs, she welcomed confirmation that there would be an extension by one year before courses were defunded, but said this was still a short amount of time for providers to adjust, and called for this to be extended to four years.

She noted what the Education Secretary had said about removing the requirement in T Levels for GCSE English and maths, and asked then what support would be on offer to students who lacked these qualifications. Green asked the Minister to say a little more about how they intended T Levels to be a route to higher education.

On the development of LSIPs, she asked what role was to be had for authorities outside metropolitan combined areas, and what role there would be for local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). She asked the Education Secretary if he could explain why a third of all jobs across the country were in sectors that were excluded from the lifetime skills guarantee, and why it excluded so many who already held a level 3 qualification.

Green asked Zahawi to comment on rumours regarding the outcome of the Augar review, particularly those around course quality, loan repayments and fees.

Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow), chair of the Education Committee, asked the Government to consider the amendment by Lord Clarke, which would mean that "as with universities and schools, money would follow the pupil for FE colleges that set up approved courses."

He asked the Government to consider funding for those without even a level 2 qualification, with a mechanism for progression to level 3.

He implored the Government to take this opportunity to strengthen and improve careers education and guidance, so he welcomed clause 4 on careers. He asked the Minister to "rocket-boost" community

learning by providing an adult community learning centre in every town, as his Committee had recommended.

Halfon suggested the Government should consider a "long-term plan to introduce a skills tax credit to revitalise employer-led training." He asked the Government to look favourably on Lord Clarke's Amendment 25, which sought to incentivise companies to hire young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

He also asked the Government to use the Bill to look at the £800m diversity and inclusion fund spent by universities "and re-boot it to ensure that access and participation is prioritised towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds doing apprenticeships."

Gill Furniss (Lab, Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) conveyed concerns expressed by local school and college leaders in her constituency, surrounding the T Level curriculum and who would be able to access the qualification. She added that the Bill attempted "to solve a problem that many local colleges have already addressed" in terms of employer partnerships and said it was concerning that, under the Bill, the Education Secretary would choose the employer representative bodies (ERB). She also expressed concern of the potential impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds if T Level take-up was low.

On the lifetime learning guarantee, Furniss said she agreed with the Association of Colleges that the scheme should be broadened to include a wider range of courses and the ability to undertake a second level 3 qualification.

Gavin Williamson (Con, South Staffordshire), former education secretary, spoke in support of the Bill. He asked the Minister to clarify that students taking a level 6 course, which was done in a modular way, would not pay more than £9,250.

Chris Skidmore (Con, Kingswood), former universities minister, echoed some of the comments made by Kate Green, particularly around the restrictions of the lifetime skills guarantee. He implored the Government to make sure the lifelong loan entitlement was available to those who had a level 3 qualification or above. He also said they must look to abolish the ELQ rule.

Skidmore advocated for a "truly place-based approach" and suggested the involvement of local communities, and in particular, universities.

Munira Wilson, Liberal Democrat spokesperson, said her party had long promoted the policy of personal education and skills accounts, known as "skills wallets". She urged the Government to phase out BTEC funding over four years, rather than over one year.

She expressed disappointment that the Government didn't retain the amendment in the Lords which would remove the penalty for benefit claimants to continue training. On LSIPs, she urged the cover to keep in full the amendment made in the Lords on the involvement of local authorities in their development.

Member of the Education Committee, Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich), welcomed a focus on adult education in the Bill, but agreed that there should not be an arbitrary distinction between an area that happened to have a Mayor and combined authority, and an area that did not. He added that although the Bill included multiple pathways to enable people to get on, flexibility was a must.

Chair of the APPG on social mobility, Karin Smyth (Lab, Bristol South), said she was a strong supporter of further education and alternative routes to higher education or skills, and added that she thought they were the route to better social mobility. She said that the UK needed to match up the opportunities that existed in wealthy cities with the lack of opportunity that too many constituents faced.

She said that with the amendments from the Lords, this was a better Bill for her constituency, but questioned what the Secretary of State's real involvement was, and how local ecosystems could be supported.

Chair of the APPG on T-levels, Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South) said that the need to adapt to meet net zero by 2050 and the opportunity to flourish as an independent trading nation meant that the need to support skills across the UK was clearer than ever. He said that although there was more work to be done, such as ensuring there were no gaps in T-level provision across the country, he was delighted that Government had introduced the new qualification, "effectively adapting to the needs of a modernised 21st-century British workforce".

Chair of the International Development Committee, Sarah Champion (Lab, Rotherham), welcomed the reforms in the Bill that attempted to improve the quality of post-16 education, but said that the sector had been underfunded and indeed under-appreciated for too long and that had to change. She added that she was relieved that peers had succeeded in amending the Bill to specify that DfE must not withdraw funding for BTEC qualifications until there was strong evidence that they no longer met employer and students' demands.

Vice-chair of the APPG on sixth-form education, Rachel Hopkins (Lab, Luton South), told the House that under the Conservative Government, further education and training had been treated as an afterthought for over a decade. She said that BTEC qualifications were a key option available to students. She said that fundamentally, this was a class issue because working-class students who were more likely to study BTECs and did not have the personal networks to support a future career would lose access to a route to higher education and employment.

Flick Drummond (Con, Meon Valley), said she supported the Bill but the Government were missing a big opportunity by waiting until post-16. She said that the Bill should be looking at a 14 to 18 curriculum across the board in the Bill.

Mick Whitley (Lab, Birkenhead) said that the Government could talk as much as they liked about the importance of lifelong learning, but their promises would always ring hollow while spending levels remained so woefully inadequate. He called on the Minister to come before the House to explain what steps the Government would be taking to undo the catastrophic legacy of 10 long years of austerity on this critically important sector.

Siobhan Baillie (Con, Stroud) congratulated DfE on their work to get the Bill over the line. She asked the Minister to provide more details about putting the lifetime skills guarantee on a statutory footing and extending it to include level 3 courses. She also sought confirmation on whether the Government were looking at the creation of maintenance support systems and whether they would create a duty for schools and universities to collaborate with colleges and employers in the development of skills plans.

Labour Shadow Minister for Apprenticeships and Lifelong Learning, Toby Perkins, said that the Government had set out to trash the reputation of BTECs and that the damage was being done already. He noted that 230,000 students who were doing level 3 BTECs were being told that those were poor-quality qualifications. He called on the Minister to say which of those courses would be carrying on, which ones would not and what the plan was for those students who would not be doing T-levels. He added that the real worry was that this would result in fewer students from more deprived communities achieving vocational qualifications at level 3.

On local skills improvement plans, he said that special needs students were missing from LSIPs, which was an important point. He welcomed the Secretary of State's "climbdown" on the subject of metro Mayors and their responsibility in terms of LSIPs, but if the responsibility of those elected to local government in metro Mayor areas was accepted, "what of areas that did not have metro Mayors?", he questioned.

He stressed that Labour absolutely supported the Government's intention to introduce a lifetime skills guarantee, as it was a return to what students would have been able to enjoy under a previous Labour Government. The fact that it is not on a statutory footing, however, meant that it was only an aspiration.

He concluded by saying that the Bill was limited in scope, lacked strategic vision, and was undermined by its lack of scale and urgency. There were some aspects that would make small improvements but it lacked the scale of reform and investment required to deliver the promised skills revolution. He called on the Government to recognise that the amendments introduced by the Lords to strengthen the Bill; recognise that apprenticeships were central to skills in this country and do more to increase the numbers studying and offering them; encourage a collaborative approach that recognised a role for all communities, whether they happen to have a metro Mayor or not; and address the chronic underfunding that had characterised the last 11 years in further education.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education, Alex Burghart, opened his remarks by telling the House that the Bill formed a cornerstone of some historic reforms that Government were bringing to the skills agenda in the UK to align skills training with the needs of employers, help Government to help all students, find more reliable routes to employment, and level up the country and build back better.

He said he was pleased to hear the Opposition support changes on level 2 English and maths as an exit requirement for T-levels, because Government want these new gold-standard qualifications to be open to as many people as possible. For students at level 3, there would be world-class qualifications designed with employers leading to degree-level apprenticeships, work and higher education, because more than 50 universities already accepted T-levels. For students who were at level 2 at 16-19, there would be world-class qualifications designed with employers leading to traineeships, apprenticeships or work or the opportunity to take up the lifetime skills guarantee at level 3.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords] (Programme)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 7 December 2021.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords] (Money)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Nadhim Zahawi.)

Question agreed to.

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords] (Ways and Means)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under the Act.—(Nadhim Zahawi.)

Question agreed to.

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