

Speech

# Education Secretary sets out Skills Bill opportunities

Gavin Williamson spoke at ResPublica about how the Post-16 Education and Skills Bill will help to level up the country, building back better from the pandemic.

From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP](#)  
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Thank you for those kind words Chris [Skidmore].

I know that as Universities Minister you cared passionately about making sure all our young people got the right opportunities to get on in life and how important it is for our further and higher education sectors to work together more closely.

I will be taking a keen interest in your chairmanship of the new Lifelong Education Commission which I know is going to be looking at these issues among many others.

Ever since I joined the Department for Education (DfE) I have made it a personal mission to get technical education the recognition and respect it deserves, to make it the beating heart of local communities. Today we are that much closer to achieving it thanks to the Post-16 Education and Skills Bill.

We have put skills right at the heart of our ambitious reforms to make sure our post-covid recovery has a sure and solid foundation.

This Bill is a signal that tells everyone: we will empower you to get the skills you need to build the life you want. It is a massive investment in lifelong upskilling, an investment in communities so that people can thrive and prosper – wherever they live.

So today I would like to talk in more detail about how the Bill is going to do that and how it dovetails with the other reforms to the education landscape that we have already rolled out.

I am sure by now, people are well aware that we are on a mission to level up the country, so that better-paid jobs are within reach for everybody, wherever they live.

This is not just a question of basic justice, that people everywhere deserve the same chances to build a prosperous and fulfilling life for themselves.

It is not just a question of rebuilding after the pandemic.

It is a question of once and for all, putting to rest the outdated, and frankly ridiculous notion, that the only measure of someone’s worth is whether they have a degree.

This has never made economic sense. Now, when skills shortages are so acute and the pandemic has thrown up deep challenges for many business sectors, it would be nothing short of a national calamity if we left it unaddressed.

So we are tackling it head on and putting skills first in a radical programme of change to future-proof learning for generations to come.

In too many areas of the country, people feel the only way to get on is to get out. We see this repeated over and over and it drains the lifeblood out of some towns and cities.

Perversely, shortages in key skills mean that employers in other sectors end up having to import workers because there just aren’t enough skilled people.

We want every community to offer opportunities to the people who live there.

And we are putting employers in the driving seat.

Employers will join forces with our further education (FE) colleges to make sure that young people in the area can be confident that any course they take will lead to a job.

We are introducing a duty for all further education providers and sixth form colleges to review how well the training they provide meets local needs, and look at ways of improving it if necessary.

Success will be built on partnership... partnerships between employers and further education colleges, who will work together hand in glove. It will enable colleges to respond to employers’ skills needs and reshape what they offer students. It is a virtuous circle of supply and demand.

In this way we will reset the balance so that young people not only have a high quality and viable alternative to going to university but they know that it is one that will help them get a job.

Last year the Prime Minister launched the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which will help people train and retrain at any point in their lives, to learn new skills that will keep them working and progressing.

As part of this, an estimated 11 million adults in England who do not yet have A levels or equivalent, are now eligible to take their first Level 3 qualification for free from a list of almost 400 courses.

The qualifications have been chosen because they are the most likely to boost career prospects, wages and help fill skills gaps. They cover a range of subjects that link to sectors with good job opportunities, from engineering and agriculture, to digital and health and social care.

The Prime Minister has also announced plans to introduce a Lifelong Loan Entitlement as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. From 2025 it will provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime.

I want a new era of partnership between colleges and universities. The Lifelong Loan Entitlement will have a huge impact on post-18 study, making it as simple to study in your local college as to get a loan to go to university – and making switching between the two easier than ever.

Our student finance system currently favours and pushes people towards a three-year full-time degree at the expense of lifelong and higher technical learning. But most people need more flexibility in their lives to study, to train or retrain and upskill as both their circumstances and the economy change.

The Lifelong Loan Entitlement will make it easier for students to choose how to study by creating a more streamlined funding system. People will be able to space out their studies and learn at a pace that is right for them, including opting to build up their qualifications over time, within both colleges and universities.

We will consult on the detail and scope of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement this year, and continue to work closely with the sector so that it meets the needs of learners, employers and our wider economy. From next year, we will be running trials for certain short courses to see how this will work in practice. This will help us build up the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

I have already spoken about colleges, but universities also have a critical role to play if we are to level up across our nation. I want every university leader to feel reassured about this; but, equally, we must recognise that some universities will need to adapt to truly embrace this opportunity.

I want a wholesale reversal of the collapse in Level 4 and 5 provision, which provides the technical needs in which our nation is truly lacking. Our new Higher Technical Qualifications, based on employer-led occupational standards, represent the gold standard in this area, but not all provision at this level is focused on entry to a job, and we know that there are other quality qualifications in this space.

Alongside this we need a renewed emphasis on part-time provision, on modules and on creating routes between colleges and universities, to enable people to study how, where and when best suits them, whatever their age. I want to see universities reaching out to colleges as partners and as equals, as some are already doing, to create the learning ecosystem we need.

As it stands we take one train, down one track to one destination and do a three-year degree ... the Lifelong Learning Entitlement will be a train everyone can get on and off, whenever they want, and we will lay a whole new network of track to connect people, communities and fresh routes into jobs.

All these reforms are a natural progression to what we have already been rolling out, such as our T level and apprenticeship programmes, for instance. These are also driven by employers and we are already beginning to feel the benefit of the growing number of skilled workers who will boost our economy and bring down unemployment.

Our Institutes of Technology (IoTs) will show our new partnerships in action. They are unique collaborations between further education colleges, universities and employers to offer higher technical education and training at higher skills levels in key STEM sectors such as digital, construction, advanced manufacturing and engineering, where employer demand is greatest.

They are employer-led, and reflect the needs of employers in the local areas they serve. Drawing on the assets and expertise of local colleges and universities, they are helping to break down outdated distinctions between further and higher education.

IoTs are designing and delivering a new learning offer, helping to meet demand for higher technical skills today and creating a workforce that is ready for future technological change and changing work place practices.

IoTs are already operating in areas such as Yorkshire, the West Midlands, North East, South West and London and the government is investing up to £290 million to set up a comprehensive network across all regions of England.

This is how we are going to put an end to our productivity problem. For far too long, we have not had enough engineers, technicians and construction workers.

This has held our economy back, leaving us less competitive than many other countries around the world. It has also left people unable to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.

At the same time, technology is transforming industries and businesses at dizzying speed. You have only to look at the course of the pandemic to see how our lives can change in an instant. The skills you have now, might not be the ones you need in 10 years or even five or even next month.

This is a momentous change for education in this country. It’s a revolution in the way that people will gain skills throughout their lives. It is the key to unlocking our potential both economically and socially. Thanks to these reforms, people of all ages will know that they can go as far as their talent and ambition will take them, whatever unforeseen events occur.

They will be able to make the most of opportunities as they arise and they will be able to do it from wherever they live. We are not just building a new future for our children we are building a new future for our country.

Thank you.

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