

# National Skills Fund

**TUC response to the government  
consultation**

## Introductory comments

The country is already facing a national skills crisis and there is a need for urgent action on a much greater scale than the policy framework set out in the skills white paper and this consultation. While employers in every sector are concerned about major skills shortages, many workers are facing unemployment in the coming weeks and months, especially if there is no continuation of the furlough scheme. Government should bring employer bodies and trade unions together to agree strategies to tackle labour and skills shortages, including getting industries and sectors to prioritise delivering decent terms and conditions, direct employment and a proper pay rise.

We also need a new national lifelong learning and skills strategy based on a vision of a high-skill economy, where workers are able to gain both transferable and specialist skills to build their job prospects. A strategic approach along these lines could be delivered at pace by a National Skills Taskforce that would bring together employers, unions and other key stakeholders along with government. This all requires a new scale of ambition well beyond the government's existing skills policy framework and there are a number of key areas in need of reform to address both short-term and longer-term challenges, including the following:

- There needs to be a significant long-term boost to investment in learning and skills by the state and employers
- People need access to an expansive set of learning and skills entitlements and workplace rights throughout their lives to support upskilling and retraining whenever necessary, including through the introduction of lifelong learning accounts
- Government should establish an equality audit of all its skills policies to ensure that policy development and delivery mechanisms are focused on tackling the significant barriers impacting on groups facing disadvantage and discrimination
- We need a new national social partnership on skills - led by employers and unions - to provide clear strategic direction, as is the case in most other countries. Trade unions will also continue to play a vital role by supporting young people and adults to upskill and retrain in the workplace and government should renew its support for union learning
- We need to make sure that our college workforce is valued and empowered and an immediate priority must be to tackle the long-term decline in pay.

While the consultation does not cover the education and skills funding systems for 16-18 year-olds or apprenticeships, urgent reforms are also necessary in these areas. The forthcoming review of the apprenticeship levy should prioritise reforms that will boost the number of high-quality apprenticeships and widen access to under-represented groups. There is also a pressing need to increase college and sixth form funding for 16-18 year-olds and to introduce a number of other reforms to ensure quality post-16 education and skills pathways for all young people.

## Free level 3 qualifications for adults

### What do you think will be the key barriers to adults taking up the free level 3 qualifications?

One of the key barriers will be that many adults lacking a level 3 qualification will not have attained the necessary qualifications at lower levels that they require to be in a viable position to complete a level 3 course successfully. The large number of adult learners in this position lack the proficiency and confidence to embark on a level 3 course even if it is free. They would have been greatly helped if the government had also restored the adult level 2 entitlement to make these courses free. Some adults, such as the unemployed and those on very low wages, can access free courses to attain their first level 2 qualification but the vast majority of adults currently need to make a significant financial contribution. This financial disincentive, combined with other barriers, will limit the numbers that can progress to the level 3 entitlement. The Augar Review and the House of Commons Education Select Committee have recommended that the level 2 entitlement should be restored. However, the government's response to the Committee's last inquiry on lifelong learning and adult skills simply highlighted the exemptions for the unemployed and very low-waged, while it is yet to respond in full to the report of the Augar Review.

Another issue is that the entitlement only covers a first level 3 qualification and this means that we are barring access to the lifetime skills guarantee for people with existing level 3 qualifications who are in desperate need of retraining. This is particularly hard hitting in the current economic environment for people who worked in sectors that felt the worst impact of the pandemic. Many of these adults are being denied the opportunity to retrain at level 3 unless they pay the tuition costs themselves in full or take out an Advanced Learner Loan. Research has shown that adults in this position are averse to taking out these loans and simply cannot afford to pay the tuition costs. Many more people are likely to find themselves in this position if the government persists with its plan to close the furlough scheme. The Education Select Committee has proposed a minor change involving flexibilities to the lifetime skills guarantee to allow unemployed people already qualified to level 3 to be able to access level 3 retraining for skills shortage jobs, but government has not responded positively to this.

People are also being denied using the entitlement in some circumstances because the current format of the lifetime skills guarantee does not cover all level 3 qualifications. The prescribed list initially excluded qualifications in hospitality & catering and other major sectors of the economy, but in the summer the government saw sense and made some adjustments to the list of eligible qualifications. There is little justification for government prescribing which level 3 qualifications should be funded based on dubious forecasts of what qualifications will prove most effective in boosting the employment prospects of adults in the future.

Many adults face a range of barriers to improving their job prospects, whether this involves moving into work or developing their current employment and career trajectory. While this of course especially applies to all those with designated protected characteristics, there are other disadvantaged groups (e.g. people who have not fared well in formal education, economically excluded communities etc.) that will face barriers to accessing the lifetime skills guarantee and other entitlements. Our responses to other questions in the consultation cover different aspects of these barriers. There is, however, an urgent need for government to draw on responses to this consultation to develop an equality audit of all its skills policies to ensure that policy development and delivery mechanisms are focused on tackling the significant barriers impacting on all groups facing disadvantage and discrimination.

The TUC is also of the view that many of the potential barriers would be addressed if government extended skills entitlements and allocated additional funding to this end. A much more expansive upskilling and retraining strategy is required to address the scale of the skills crisis facing the nation in both the short- and long-term. This strategy should include expanded skills entitlements - including restoration of the adult level 2 entitlement - and a new "right to retrain" guaranteeing access to free college courses and training programmes for all adults. Over the longer-term this should be backed up by the development of personal lifelong learning accounts that would give people better knowledge and ownership of their entitlements to free education and training. These accounts should draw on existing models in other countries which facilitate additional workplace learning and encourage employers to invest more in learning and training. In addition the government should draw on the approaches in other countries and establish a [permanent short-time working scheme](#) providing fully funded training to any workers who are working less than less than 90 per cent of their normal working hours.

We should also follow the examples of other countries that have introduced workplace rights guaranteeing paid time off for education and training. OECD [research reports](#) have shown the benefits of combining strengthened training rights at work with lifelong learning accounts. The Green Jobs Taskforce has issued some welcome recommendations on this front, including that government should "test innovative approaches to tackle barriers to training faced by many workers, such as skills vouchers, training sabbaticals and paid-time-off-to-train arrangements". The Taskforce also emphasised that "it is imperative workers collect an appropriate wage (as close as possible to their normal income) during their training." There should also be new entitlements to skills reviews in the workplace that draw on the successful Mid-Life Skills Reviews model pioneered by trade unions and union learning reps. The government also needs to tackle the shortcomings in advice and guidance for adults and young people by establishing a universal skills/careers guidance service delivered by career guidance professionals.

**How easy is it for adults to find out whether they are eligible for the current learner support offer? a. Really easy b. Easy c. Neutral d. Difficult e. Really difficult. Please provide an explanation for your answer.**

Knowledge and awareness will depend a lot on the circumstances of the individual. A motivated adult learner with a committed attitude to looking into available financial support can access online guidance and also gain further information from contact with

colleges, training providers and career/IAG providers. However, the available research and anecdotal feedback suggest that the much bigger challenge is to improve communication of this information to potential adult learners who do not progress to detailed investigations of financial support. For the vast majority of adults, general awareness levels are very low about financial support for non-HE routes and our view is that it is really difficult for them to access advice and guidance on this unless they make a direct approach to a college or provider. Even then they may not be guaranteed getting advice on financial support.

**Are there any other ways through which it would be useful to publicise learner support? Please set out what these other ways are and explain why they might be useful.**

There are a number of options. For example, learner support could be publicised through marketing and advertising campaigns. While this may be expensive on a national basis, targeted promotion at the local level could have a major impact on raising awareness. This should be part of wider local campaigns to promote take-up of the level 3 entitlement and other skills entitlements, with strong messaging about the available options for overcoming financial barriers. A wide range of local public institutions and community/voluntary bodies that adults interact with should be encouraged to disseminate this information, including council offices, libraries, Jobcentre Plus, advice centres (e.g. Citizen Advice Bureaux), careers and IAG bodies, and others. Sector skills bodies also have a key role to play in promoting take-up in some sectors but their coverage across all sectors has weakened over the years due to a lack of coordinated support from government.

Trade unions could also help to communicate information through the role of union learning representatives (ULRs) in particular. ULRs will be supporting workers and negotiating with employers about use of the level 3 entitlement in workplaces, but will also be in a position to advise workers about the options of doing this outside of work in their own time. We cover the role of unions in more detail in our response to later questions focused on the workplace.

**How do you think that government can support providers to deliver best practice in communicating and providing the current financial support for adults? Please explain your answer and, where possible, provide evidence for your response.**

Colleges and training providers could play a crucial role in marketing and promoting the current financial support as we have recommended in our response to earlier questions. However, this will require adequate resources and funding dedicated to this. All providers should consider instigating procedures where all adults making any form of approach about taking up adult skills entitlements are fully informed of the options for financial support relevant to their circumstances.

**For the non-financial flexibilities below, please select which you think are valuable: Flexible start dates; Breaks in learning; Flexible modes of delivery; Weekend and evening learning; Recognition of prior learning; Other which is not listed (please specify).**

All of these would be of value in motivating adult learners to take up and complete courses and in most cases people would probably benefit from a mix of flexibilities that address their personal circumstances. Flexible and modularised learning patterns would do much to address the barrier of time pressures, but a key challenge is the limited availability of the

non-financial flexibilities that are listed in the consultation document. If colleges and providers are to be empowered to deliver more courses on this basis, they will require adequate funding to deliver new modes of learning.

There will also need to be dialogue with the FE unions about the impact of any possible extension of such flexibilities on the terms and conditions of the workforce. The [Independent Commission on the College of the Future](#) has called for a national social partnership between government, the Association for Colleges and trade unions to look at long-term strategic challenges facing the whole FE workforce. However, the white paper makes no reference to this or the need for dialogue on other reforms that will depend hugely on the capacity of the workforce.

**Are there any barriers which might make it difficult to use or deliver the existing non-financial flexibilities? Please set out what these barriers are and, where possible, suggest ways that these barriers may be overcome.**

A major barrier is the finding from adult learner surveys that a large proportion of adults simply show no interest in taking up learning and training and that the disincentives are greatest among those with lower-level qualifications. The decline in lifelong learning over the last decade has been triggered by various factors, including a 50 per cent cut to adult education funding and the abolition of the previous Level 2 and Level 3 entitlements for adults. This has reinforced the disincentives for adults who failed to achieve level 2 and/or level 3 qualifications by the age of 23, to remedy this through adult learning.

Lacking the educational attainment expected of all school leavers engenders a lack of confidence among many adults. It also leads to an understandable antipathy towards education and in particular the classroom-based learning model. Many adults deterred from engagement in learning to this degree will not be encouraged back into learning through financial or non-financial flexibilities (albeit these flexibilities will be enormously helpful if they ultimately do decide to embark on a course). We therefore need to consider other measures to incentivise them to build up the confidence to even consider taking that first important step back into learning. And once learners do engage there needs to be a package of support in place to help them access financial and other flexibilities and to maintain their learning programme until they achieve the level 3 qualification. We refer to the scope for developing initiatives in these areas in our responses to the subsequent questions in this section of the consultation covering the level 3 entitlement.

**Different sectors may use the offer in different ways, depending on their skills needs. How do you think different sectors might make use of the offer and why? If you are answering as an employer, you might want to talk about how your specific sector could use the offer.**

In most sectors many employers will be wary that workers with few or no qualifications will be able to progress and achieve a level 3 qualification without extensive support in the workplace. Even larger companies with HR & development departments may find it challenging to deliver the degree of support required for adults that failed this level of attainment in school. It is also likely that a significant subset will have failed to achieve a level 2 qualification. There will also be sectoral differences, including specific sectors where a level 2 qualification will be viewed as an important stepping stone and/or holding a

valued status in its own right in the company or organisation in question. In such workplaces the attainment of a level 2 qualification may in itself be of real benefit in boosting wage and employment progression.

However, regardless of sectoral differences the common theme is that employers and potential learners – especially those with little recent education experience and no level 2 qualification – would benefit from a staged progression route. This would enable an individual to aim for achievement of a level 2 qualification in the first instance, with the opportunity to then to progress to a full level 3 qualification. The experience that trade unions have of supporting workers with lower-level qualifications in the workplace to progress to level 3 and beyond is testimony to this approach. Union learning reps have huge expertise in engaging and supporting workers without level 2 or 3 qualifications and a staged approach has proven to be highly successful for learners and employers.

There is also little acknowledgement in the consultation paper that some adults eligible for the level 3 entitlement will face even greater hurdles because they left school without foundation qualifications (level 1 and below). These groups will need a fairly long phased approach to achievement of a full level 3 qualification, with an immediate priority being to equip them with the necessary English, maths and digital foundation skills. This all serves to emphasise that supporting workers to study for, and complete a level 3 qualification, will in many cases require an extended support programme that successfully engages adults to resume learning in the first place and then empowers them to sustain an extended learning programme up to attainment of a full level 3 qualification. We believe that the scale of this challenge is underestimated by the government.

**How might we adapt the offer to better meet the needs of employers, including those from a range of different sectors, and a range of sizes? Where possible, please set out the proposed adaptation and which types of employers it would suit.**

An immediate priority should be to restore an entitlement for all adults to free courses for their first level 2 qualification. This would be of especial benefit to industries and sectors where achievement of a level 2 qualification has productivity benefits and improves the employment and pay prospects of individuals. In such sectors the learning journey for many workers may entail lengthy progression from foundation level and relatively rapid attainment of a level 3 qualification will not be feasible. However, this principle will apply in all workplaces with workers who have not achieved a level 2 and/or foundation qualifications. The strong case for this phased approach is self-evident if one looks at our school and college system, e.g., it would be bizarre if the government argued the case for pupils missing out their GCSEs (level 2) and instead progressing direct to their A levels (level 3).

A second priority is what more government can do to help employers give workers the necessary support to begin and continue on what may be a long and arduous journey to attain a level 3 qualification. Government should consider how best to ensure that the relevant careers/IAG and learning/skills bodies can be proactive in supporting employers and adult learners. This will be especially important for smaller employers without HR & development departments. In our response to the next question we identify what government should be doing to boost the capacity of union learning reps who have a long-standing reputation for supporting adult learners in the workplace.

**How else can we encourage employers to use the free level 3 qualifications for adults to train or upskill their workers? Please set out your suggestion and, where possible, provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.**

Trade unions - through the collective bargaining process and the role of their union learning reps - are a major resource for encouraging employers to maximise use of the new entitlement and for supporting workers to progress to attainment of level 3 qualifications. Through regular direct negotiations, employers and unions can come to agreement on workplace strategies to enable as many workers as possible to use the entitlement to upskill or retrain. In some cases this will be embedded in workplace learning agreements that set out entitlements and reciprocal responsibilities that employers, recognised unions, union learning reps and workers are signed up to in order to boost upskilling and retraining opportunities. Union learning reps have a long-standing reputation for supporting adults in the workplace to re-engage in learning, many of whom left school with few or no qualifications and have an ingrained aversion to learning or training.

Union learning reps work with employers, with their own union and with unionlearn to broker access to relevant learning opportunities for workers in their workplaces. And the model works: 37 per cent of union members regularly access workplace training compared to 22 per cent of non-members, and total training volumes are on average 19 per cent higher in unionised workplaces. It is notable that the latest annual skills analysis by the OECD refers to the work of unionlearn and union learning representatives as an outstanding example of "proactive initiatives undertaken in OECD countries to engage low-skilled adults to participate in adult learning" (OECD Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for Life, page 138). The Green Jobs Taskforce appointed by the government has recognised this in its new report, calling on more employers to recognise "union learning representatives, in order to increase access to training for hard-to-reach employees" needing upskilling and retraining. The TUC has produced a [briefing](#) setting out the range of evidence from independent evaluations about the unique impact of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and in particular how it supports adults most in need of opportunities to upskill and retrain.

A separate TUC [research report](#) shows that take-up of the level 3 entitlement will be diminished by the puzzling and counter-productive decision by government to cut the grant for the ULF. The OECD and a massive range of leading employers and many other stakeholders have hailed the ULF as one of the most effective initiatives at helping workers with few or no qualifications to progress up the skills ladder. The TUC research sets out how the ULF would make a significant contribution to promoting take-up of the level 3 entitlement among the hardest-to-reach groups. We know from the experience of other free entitlements to learning (e.g. English and maths level 2 qualifications) that there are significant barriers to learning beyond cost, which the ULF and union learning reps have successfully addressed in order to boost take-up. There would be a similar approach for the new entitlement, with union learning reps helping adults to overcome initial barriers to engagement, supporting them to achieve the necessary skills required before embarking on a level 3 qualification, and sustaining adult learners throughout to ensure they complete and attain the qualification. To boost take-up of the entitlement, the government should review its decision to remove all support for the vital work by trade unions and their union learning reps to support upskilling and retraining.



**How else can providers best support adults without a level 3 to access the level 3 qualifications available through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, given that they may lack some prior learning or experience? Please provide evidence and/or examples to illustrate your response.**

Our responses to earlier questions have indicated the importance of support mechanisms that will be required for adults to access learning pathways leading to successful attainment of a level 3 qualification. In particular we have highlighted the importance of: union support in the workplace; the need for a proactive approach by a wide range of local public institutions and community/voluntary bodies that adults interact with regularly; and, the full engagement of the relevant careers/IAG and learning/skills bodies to this end. All these actors will have an important role to play in supporting progression for adult learners who have little or no experience of the sector/industry they are pursuing a level 3 qualification in (e.g. because they are wanting to use the entitlement to get a job in a completely new sector).

There also needs to be further discussions with employers, trade unions and sector skills bodies about extending existing programmes that help adults to acquire the necessary foundation skills and experience needed to be in a position to retrain at level 3. It is significant that this part of the consultation paper highlights that some employers “may require an adult to have gained the equivalent level 2 qualification before taking a level 3 course”, which supports the case for restoring the level 2 entitlement to support people to upskill/retrain in new sectors.

**How else can we achieve the best impact for adults with the most to gain from the free level 3 qualifications for adults, alongside funding the courses? Please provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.**

As we highlighted in earlier responses, trade unions and union learning representatives play a vital role in supporting adult learners in the workplace to progress to the attainment of qualifications, especially those lacking confidence and without prior learning. This role is even more telling in the case of workers who are taking up employment in new sectors and who lack any experience of the industries in question. Union learning reps have the expertise to engage with workers in this position and to ensure they are supported to gain the necessary sector experience as well as engaging in the necessary learning and training needed to progress to a level 3 qualification.

This question appears to us to be sending mixed messages about possible options for extending the level 3 entitlement to develop a new right to retrain. On one level the consultation paper continues to emphasise the priority of focusing on adults without a level 3 qualification. Yet in the same paragraph it points to the increasing demand on adults to retrain due to the impact of Covid-19 and significant economic trends such as the “emergence of new technologies”. The TUC is calling for the new entitlement to be extended to a right to retrain for all adults even if they already have existing qualifications at level 3. The demand for retraining will escalate rapidly if the furlough scheme is closed as planned. If nothing else, the government should at least consider piloting a retraining entitlement for adults who are currently unemployed or who are at high risk of losing their employment due to the impact of Covid-19 on their sector – with a view to extending this once it has been evaluated.

## Skills Bootcamps

**Which current aspects of the Skills Bootcamps do you think are most valuable? Select all that apply • Short, intensive courses • Industry-specific training, designed to meet the needs of employers • Focused on in-demand skills • Fast-track to an interview • Line of sight to a job • Recruitment pipeline for employers • Flexible delivery model • Emphasis on improving diversity in technical skills. • Other – please specify. Please explain the reason for your response.**

All these aspects of the programme are valuable. However, there is a case for rating the value of different aspects of the programme on the basis of the scale of the various challenges facing individuals and employers and workers when it comes to upskilling and retraining. Our view is that an overriding priority must be an emphasis on improving diversity in technical skills in order to empower groups that are too often excluded or barred from accessing the high-quality technical upskilling and retraining that they need to improve their job prospects. While this will include all those with protected characteristics, the reach of the programme must be wider and reach out to other disadvantaged groups (e.g. people who have not fared well in formal education, economically excluded communities etc). While there is currently no statistical or qualitative feedback about the impact of the pilots to date, there is anecdotal evidence that some have done better than others in improving diversity, in particular through recruitment of women and BME groups. If this proves to be the case, then this is certainly to be welcomed and a priority must be to spread this best practice to the whole programme as soon as possible.

Empowering access by these groups will require a sharp focus on tackling the barriers that adult learners often cite, including the need for flexibility of provision to meet caring responsibilities and other demands on their time. In some cases this could mean that short intensive courses are not applicable to potential participants whose greater priority may be flexibility rather than duration. There are challenges to tailoring courses to people with wide-ranging needs for flexibilities, but a central principle should be to make this a priority for the programme to maximise diversity in training and help employers recruit from a wider pool. The research conducted for the development of the National Retraining Scheme highlighted the importance of making job outcomes a direct element of training provision and this will be a crucial factor in engaging take-up and will help employers to tackle both short- and longer-term skills shortages. However, there must be rigorous systems in place to ensure that all participants are treated fairly when it comes to progression to a genuine job opportunity and that employers are genuinely using the programme to widen diversity in recruitment.

Building a recruitment pipeline for employers and ensuring the training meets their needs will also be hugely important factors in helping a wide range of participants to progress to real jobs through the programme. And this will of course be crucial to ensuring the full and active engagement of employers in the programme and helping to tackle skills shortages. However, there will need to be safeguards in place to monitor whether any employers are

using the heavily subsidised training to deliver job-related training which they previously would have delivered and funded from their own resources. Attracting such employers to engage could be viewed as “low-hanging fruit” by some providers, but over-recruitment in this area could be mis-directing a large amount of subsidised training and depriving others of access, including disadvantaged groups.

**Skills Bootcamps currently run for up to 16 weeks. Other than the length of the courses, do you think we could adapt Skills Bootcamps in any other way to: a. Support adults to access this training more easily? B. Support adults who are self-employed to access this training and use what they learn to benefit their business? C. Better meet the needs of employers, including those from a range of different sectors, and a range of sizes? Where possible, please detail the proposed adaptation and which types of employers it would suit. Please provide a reason and/or evidence for your responses.**

Attracting adults who would not normally consider this form of training programme will require outreach activities and partnership working with local community groups in order to support under-represented groups to access high-quality technical training. There will of course be lessons to be learned from pilots that have successfully adopted these kind of approaches. In local workplaces trade union reps will be able to make a real difference on this front by negotiating with employers to recruit from the widest pool possible for inclusion in any retraining opportunities, including prioritising workers who all too often miss out. The TUC has produced a number of guides on how employers and unions can collaborate to widen access to apprenticeships through the above approaches (available at: [www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications)) and much of this will be relevant to skills bootcamps recruitment strategies.

We support the approaches already piloted where there has been a focus on supporting specific groups that may be less likely to take up this type of training, including women and BME groups. The wider roll-out of the programme should extend innovative approaches along these lines and widening access to disadvantaged groups must be a central priority of the bidding and contracting processes. People with protected characteristics are of course a priority, but as we highlighted in earlier responses, there are other groups facing disadvantage in accessing employment and skills whose needs should be taken into account.

As highlighted earlier, flexibility of attendance is likely to be as, or more important than, the duration of the course for many individuals with caring commitments and other demands on their time. For example, it will be important to deliver the courses on a part-time basis and to offer a range of other time flexibilities to meet a wide range of needs.

**For all stakeholders, it may be valuable if employers could also make non-financial contributions to training. These non-financial contributions could be made by both those employers who are using a Skills Bootcamps to retrain their current workforce, in addition to the 30% contribution where they are using Skills Bootcamps to train existing employees, and by those who are not. Please select the non-financial contributions below that you think it would be most valuable for employers to make, and add any other contributions not listed that you think would also be valuable. • Providing space for training. • Providing technical equipment for learning. • Helping delivery of the training – e.g., providing some learning materials or teaching part of the course content.**

**• Giving their workers time to learn. • Any other additional non-financial contributions not already listed that you think would be valuable. Please specify.**

If employers are using the programme to retrain existing members of their workforce, the intensive nature of the course will be demanding and likely to require additional studying and assignments to be completed in participants' own time over a relatively short period of time. If this is the case employers should be coming to an arrangement with the workforce about providing paid time off to complete this additional course-related work, including time off-the-job during working hours. In workplaces with collective bargaining in place, employers and union(s) should negotiate arrangements that apply to all workers undergoing retraining to ensure that there is a clear specification of this entitlement to time off.

As employers are receiving heavily subsidised workforce retraining through the programme and not contributing at all to the training of potential new recruits, there should be an expectation that they reciprocate by providing "in-kind" services to support delivery of the programme. We agree with the proposals that this could include providing: space for training; technical equipment for learning; and, learning materials. We believe that some employers would be willing to consider making a contribution to support the day-to-day expenses of potential new recruits who may find it difficult to pay for travel to attend the course and any other expenses that are not fully compensated by the programme provider.

**How do you think that we can encourage more employers to make non-financial contributions? Where possible, please give examples and explain your answer.**

These discussions with employers about non-financial contributions should commence at the earliest stage of their engagement with the programme. In the case of workforce retraining it should be emphasised to them that the offer of heavily subsidised training raises an expectation of employers that they should reciprocate with "in-kind" services. In unionised workplaces there will be an opportunity for trade unions to influence employers to be proactive in making non-financial contributions.

**What further learning do you think a Skills Bootcamp should enable adults to progress onto? • No further learning. • Job-based training in the workplace. • A higher technical qualification. • An apprenticeship. • Other further training and/or learning opportunities not already listed which you think a Skills Bootcamp should enable adults to progress onto. Please specify.**

The principle should be what is in the best interests of each individual and their personal circumstances should inform this process rather than drawing up any list of eligible further learning outcomes. The consultation focuses on supporting progression to work-based training, including apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications. This is understandable and progression via these pathways would be very positive outcomes for individuals and also meet wider economic needs to boost the numbers of people attaining higher technical skills. However, participation may also result in people becoming aware of other FE/HE and training pathways that would better suit their aspirations and circumstances and these should all be recognised as positive learning outcomes.

**We welcome any further comments on how we can best enable progression from Skills Bootcamps onto further training and/or learning, such as apprenticeships or higher technical education.**

To some extent, this will depend on the starting point and circumstances of individuals attending the programme. In the case of employee referrals from local employers, there should be dialogue before and during the training about how subsequent learning and training in the workplace will build on participation in the programme. For example, the post-training opportunities the employer may offer, including apprenticeships, other workplace training, and time off to progress to a higher level technical qualification. Dialogue between the employer and workplace trade unions before and during engagement in the programme will be helpful in clarifying these matters for the workforce in unionised workplaces. This should also involve discussions about arrangements to provide time off for workers to continue with study and training, including attaining a full higher-level technical qualification or other accreditation.

For all participants, engagement between the programme provider and local FE/HE and training providers will be essential to facilitate progression to further learning and training. The same will apply with regard to local career and skills guidance services and other local bodies that could help them to consider their options for further learning and training. All participants should receive comprehensive support throughout the training to give careful consideration to future options, including continuing learning and training.

The consultation document is clear that the programme does not at this stage need to provide any formal accreditation, but it should be a clear requirement that all attendees leave with some form of certification about the skills attained on the course. This will be essential for boosting their job prospects with potential employers and any further learning or training that they are considering. The proposal in the consultation paper to give further consideration about how attendance could be accredited in line with evolving technical standards is welcome. Research evidence shows that some form of certification and/or accreditation is a powerful motivating factor for adult learners, especially those who have not previously progressed to achieve any post-school education or training qualifications.

## Meeting critical skills needs

Are there any current critical skills gaps below degree level and in particular sectors, occupations, or locations that you think the skills system will not meet, either now or in the next five years? For example, some sectors might have specific skills needs which have emerged since exiting the European Union, whereas other sectors might encounter skill needs in the future – for instance, because of new technologies linked to transitioning industries or our ambition to reach net zero by 2050. a. What are these skills gaps? Please set out what these skills gaps are and specify whether they apply to a particular sector, occupation, or location. b. What level are these skills gaps at? c. Is this a current skill gap, or something that you see emerging in the future? If in the future, please detail when you think this skill need is likely to arise. d. Why do you think the skills system does not meet this skills gap?

Skills gaps and shortages need to be analysed from a range of perspectives, including more immediate priorities and longer-term challenges. Current highly publicised labour and skills shortages are more often than not being wholly attributed to the impact of Brexit and Covid in the media and it is of course true that these are highly significant factors. But in reality there is a much more complex and nuanced picture than this. For example, we know that the current shortage of HGV drivers is also being driven by longer-term trends such as a “race to the bottom” forcing companies to compete for contracts on costs alone, leading to poorer terms and conditions and forcing many drivers to pay for initial and continuing training as well as other employment essentials. The nature of some of these jobs and occupations (e.g. excessive working time away from home) are other key factors. Many of these employment-related trends are important factors in a number of other high profile labour and skills shortages in a range of sectors at the present time.

This needs to be taken into account by government when considering new measures to identify critical skills needs and shortages over the short- and long-term. Otherwise we may simply be setting up people to fail by making progress in both identifying and meeting these priority skills, but without tackling inherent aspects of specific jobs and occupations that will continue to trigger shortages. As the General Secretary of the TUC highlighted in her [speech](#) at TUC Congress 2021, the government should address current labour and skills shortages by getting employers and unions round the table with government to agree strategies to tackle this urgently, including getting industries and sectors to prioritise delivering decent terms and conditions, direct employment and a proper pay rise. The fact that a collective approach along these lines is not happening is but one more example of the deficiency of a social partnership approach on skills that is urgently needed to identify critical skills needs and discuss the best solutions to tackling such challenges.

This is very different to most other countries where employers, unions and other stakeholders come together through skills social partnership arrangements at geographical, sector and national levels. The Learning & Work Institute has produced a comprehensive [review](#) highlighting consistent findings from the OECD and others that we lack the institutional partnership of employers and unions that effectively govern quality skills

systems in other countries. This finding was also emphasised by the Industrial Strategy Council in one of its last [reports](#), which concluded that many other countries instil “a greater role for employer representative and employee representative organisations (i.e. social partners) than exists in the UK” and that this is of great benefit to the stability and quality of their skills system. Despite these findings there is not one mention of trade unions in the skills white paper and employers are being given the sole remit for influencing learning and skills provision by colleges and training providers.

The government should begin to address these shortcomings in our skills system by establishing a National Skills Taskforce that would bring together employers, unions and other key stakeholders along with government. A social partnership approach along these lines would facilitate further discussions about the adoption of institutional arrangements that other countries use to empower employers and unions to identify and plan for skills priorities in sectors and geographically. There are existing models of best practice that could be drawn on, including the early work of the National Manufacturing Skills Taskforce. There are also previous institutional arrangements involving employers and unions that could be revitalised, including the role of sector skills councils. In some sectors, e.g. parts of manufacturing, there are still viable sector skills bodies that have a great deal of expertise on the identification of critical skills priorities.

A new social partnership framework along these lines would be vital in supporting, and drawing on, the work of the Skills & Productivity Board in identifying some of the critical skills priorities below degree level and in particular sectors. This would build on the data and evidence that is available from existing resources. For example, the last edition of the national Employer Skills Survey highlighted that employers were facing the greatest challenges in finding suitably skilled candidates for “Skilled Trades” positions, with nearly half of vacancies in these roles classed as skill-shortage vacancies (48%). Since the last edition of this survey was published, the labour market has been hit hard by the impact of the pandemic and this has transformed the scale of skills gaps and shortages that currently need addressing. And there remain a range of significant skills challenges arising out of the impacts of Brexit, automation/AI and the transition to a greener economy. For example, the Green Jobs Taskforce highlights that one in five jobs in the UK (approximately 6.3 million workers) will require skills for new green occupations and to upskill and retrain those in high-carbon jobs.

The shortfall in skilled trades and other key skills gaps and shortages are partly attributable to our poor record in supporting more young people and adults to progress to intermediate and higher-level technical skills. There is broad support for developing quality post-school pathways to apprenticeships, T levels and higher-level technical qualifications that have the same esteem as the HE route. However, we have a long way to go to achieving this. For example, while many of our apprenticeships are world-class, too many young people are not enjoying the quality employment and training experience that is the norm in apprenticeship systems in other countries. We also compare poorly when it comes to offering both school leavers and adults the opportunity to progress to higher-level technical qualifications that have an equal status to university degrees.

**Could more options for shorter courses or more modular learning opportunities help adults to overcome barriers to learning? Please explain your answer and, where possible, provide evidence for your response.**

As we have highlighted in previous responses there is great scope for encouraging adults to overcome barriers by expanding learning and training provision with a high degree of "time flexibilities" and a modularised approach. This is a central component of the union learning model and union learning reps have shown how a highly flexible learning offer - jointly backed by employers and unions - can transform the lives of adults. Adult learner surveys (e.g. the annual survey conducted by the Learning & Work Institute) consistently highlight that limited flexibilities in this area are significant barriers.

However, further consideration needs to be given to the balance between the duration of a course and equipping adults with the time and space to complete a course leading to an accredited qualification. In earlier responses to the questions on Skills Bootcamps we welcomed the proposal in the consultation paper for further consideration to be given to how attendance could be accredited in line with evolving technical standards for higher-level qualifications. We also emphasised that research evidence shows that some form of certification and/or accreditation is a powerful motivating factor for adult learners, especially those who have not previously progressed to achieve any post-school education or training qualifications. We are reiterating these two points here because there is a clear tension between the benefits of introducing shorter courses for justifiable reasons of flexibility for adult learners and potential longer-term drawbacks for their job prospects if they do not achieve an accredited qualification. In some cases employers may benefit hugely from shorter courses centred on highly specialised aspects of processes in their workplace but an exclusive focus of this kind will be of less benefit for the long-term career prospects of participants.

**Considering the provision we have already made available through National Skills Fund investment, do you think there are any further gaps below degree level in adult skills provision which would benefit from targeted support? If you answered yes, please: a. Specify what these gaps are. b. Provide evidence for your answer, including evidence on the impact of this gap. c. Suggest ways that these gaps in provision might best be met.**

We repeat our concerns that progression to attainment of level 3 qualifications will be inhibited for many adults until an entitlement to free courses at level 2 is also restored. Secondly, large numbers of adults will be prevented from attaining the necessary skills to take up employment opportunities in labour shortage areas because they will be barred from using the new level 3 entitlement for retraining due to being already accredited at this level.