

# Spotlight

Thought leadership and policy

## Skills and Apprenticeships: Preparing for a new economy

Nadhim Zahawi MP

Miatta Fahnbulleh

Toby Perkins MP



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# Reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy are long overdue

As the Chancellor Rishi Sunak unveiled his Plan for Jobs in July 2020, he remarked that throughout the pandemic he had “never been the prisoner of ideology. For me, this has never just been a question of economics, but of values.”

Sunak’s plan included a commitment to give businesses an additional £2,000 for each young apprentice they hired. Fifteen months later, facing pressure from industry, the Treasury spent £500m extending the scheme.

The latest data vindicates that decision. Figures released at the end of January reveal that there were 130,200 apprenticeship “starts” between August and October last year, marking a 3.5 per cent rise on the same period in 2019.

The enhanced employer incentives are estimated to have created 162,000 new jobs during the course of the crisis. But despite the success of the intervention, it appears the Treasury is

unlikely to fund a further extension of the scheme, which is now closed to applications. The Association of Learning and Employment Providers’ chief executive Janine Hurt told *Spotlight* the government must reinstate the incentives “as a matter of urgency”. “Incentives could,” said Hurt, “be targeted for those hiring apprentices under 25 and funded through recycling unspent apprenticeship funding.”

While some employers say extending the scheme would only benefit smaller firms, many have called on the government to lift restrictions on how unspent funding raised by the Apprenticeship Levy is used. Under the current system, the Treasury claws back funding that isn’t spent within two years. Between May 2019 and May 2020, the government forced employers to return £2bn in unspent funds.

MakeUK, a trade body for manufacturers, believes this money should be allowed to subsidise the cost of equipment provided by colleges, many of which have been hit by a decade of austerity-era cuts and lack adequate provisions.

This is just one of the proposals put forward by industry. But while trade bodies are at odds over how to overhaul the Apprenticeship Levy, many believe it is in need of reform. Reviewing the system, it seems, is not just a question of values, but of economics too. ●

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## Jobseekers to be pushed into working in any sector

The government has announced an ambitious new target to get 500,000 unemployed benefit claimants into work in the first half of this year. The Way to Work campaign, announced at the end of January by the Work and Pensions Secretary Theresa Coffey, includes stipulations that unemployed workers on Universal Credit will face sanctions if, after four weeks looking for work in their preferred sector, they do not make “reasonable efforts” to widen their search into other areas, including social care and construction. Previously, jobseekers were allowed three months to prioritise job searches in professions that matched their skills and experience.

Office for National Statistics figures show that a record 1.2 million vacancies are currently waiting to be filled – 59 per cent higher than before the pandemic. Labour shortages in the haulage, hospitality, construction and food service sectors have led to wage hikes.

Way to Work will also focus on working with “a wider range of employers” to “harness the talent of jobseekers” and “boost this country’s jobs-led recovery”, according to the Chancellor Rishi Sunak.

The more stringent rules on benefits come amid a flurry of policy announcements known as Operation Red Meat, designed to appeal to wavering Conservative MPs in the wake of the “Partygate” scandal. ●

### Bootcamps scheme boosted by funding announcement

The government has announced that £60m of funding is available for skills training providers as part of its Skills Bootcamps programme.

Initially launched in 2020 to teach digital skills, the Skills Bootcamps now offer free courses lasting up to 16 weeks to adults aged 19 and over in areas such as construction, data science, cloud computing, heavy goods vehicle (HGV) driving, and industrial health and safety. Private training providers, employers and further and higher education organisations will be able to bid for funding to run the Bootcamps. Payments will be awarded according to the success of the courses, with 20 per cent withheld until Bootcamp trainees have been offered a new job, an apprenticeship, or a new role or responsibilities with their existing employer.

The cash comes from the National Skills Fund, a £2.5bn effort to “help adults train and gain the valuable skills they need to improve their job prospects and support the economy”, according to the government. It allows adults without level 3 (A level or equivalent) qualifications, and those earning below the full-time National Living Wage (£18,525), to access level 3 courses, in subjects ranging from accounting and finance to warehousing and distribution, for free.

In 2020, the Open University revealed that 56 per cent of companies had reported skills shortages and were spending £6.6bn a year – a cost that had tripled since 2017 – on recruitment services, employing temporary staff or inflating salaries in an attempt to plug skills gaps. Meanwhile, analysis from the New Economics Foundation has found that only 6 per cent of workers were retraining for a new job before Covid-19. ●



### Scottish colleges warn of a “real emergency” as they face a £52m funding shortfall

Further education (FE) leaders across Scotland have warned of a “looming skills emergency” if planned cuts of £51.9m are implemented in the budget currently being debated in Holyrood. If the budget is passed in its current form, FE colleges will lose £23.9m due to inflation and £28m following the removal of emergency pandemic funding.

The National Union of Students Scotland has said the budget “threatens to erode the progress made towards making education accessible to all”, while Pam Gosal, the Scottish Conservative shadow further education minister, claimed that the ruling SNP had “failed to

fund our colleges” for all of their 15 years in power. Ken Milroy, chair of Colleges Scotland, warned that the cut threatened “a skills emergency” that punished colleges that had already “delivered exceptional results in training, upskilling and reskilling people for what their local economies need”.

Last year, the UK government committed an additional £400m to sixth forms and colleges in England. But according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), because of inflation and the growth in student numbers, funding remained 11 per cent below 2010-11 levels. ●

### Apprenticeship starts return to pre-pandemic levels

Department for Education (DfE) figures have revealed that new apprenticeship starts have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, with 130,200 starts reported in the first quarter of the academic year. This was up by 43 per cent on last year’s figures, meaning 555,900 people are currently participating in apprenticeships.

The majority – 57 per cent – of these apprenticeship courses were provided by private training providers, with further education (FE) colleges providing 26 per cent. Last year, the Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi told workers in the FE sector he “would love to see more colleges involved in delivering apprenticeships”, which would see them benefitting from increased government funding.

The Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s scheme to hand employers a £3,000 bonus for taking on a new apprentice has yielded 161,860 claims, DfE figures show.

The government has made much of its desire for a “Skills Revolution”, promoting a host of new government training schemes. The former education secretary Gavin Williamson said he wanted to “counter the myth that a degree is the only way to a good job”. However, FE funding for 16-18-year-olds fell from roughly £8bn in 2010 to £6bn in 2021. ●



Amount UK firms spent on plugging skills gaps in 2020



Increase in the number of apprenticeship starts since 2020



Real-terms funding decrease in English FE institutions since 2010-11

# How the Skills Bill will revolutionise the route from learning to earning

## Reforms will help us put an end to decades of dawdling productivity

By Nadhim Zahawi MP

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It is now four months since the Prime Minister gave me the huge honour of heading up one of the most exciting departments in Whitehall, and since then I have been in a tearing hurry to get on with the job.

Although the pandemic put enormous pressure on all education settings and continues to add extra challenges to our reforming agenda, it has only made me more determined to deliver on our commitment to build back better.

For me, education has always been one of the most vital social levers we have. But without an effective and ambitious skills system, there can be no levelling up, no bounceback from the pandemic, no post-Brexit powerhouse.

So we are going full steam ahead with our skills reforms, which are revolutionising the route from learning to earning.

We are developing a system that meets the needs of learners and employers and will enable the economy to flourish in the future. And we haven't a moment to lose. We have to put an end to decades of dawdling productivity, which has seen us all too often playing catch-up with our competitors.

My mission is to ensure everyone has the chance to make the most of their potential and to get the training that is likely to lead to a satisfying job, wherever they live.

The Skills Bill is the backbone of all of this. Alongside our wider reform plans, it will promote lifelong upskilling and help transform post-16 education and training and make us an economic force to be reckoned with on the global stage. The pandemic has taught us that the world can change in the blink of an eye. To recover from this – and any other similar event in the future – we need to be far more flexible and far more agile.

The Prime Minister laid the foundation for this new, nimbler skills economy when he announced the Lifelong Loan Entitlement. This will enable people to train, retrain and upskill throughout their lives and in a way that suits them.

The pace of technological transformation continues to accelerate. There's a study that suggests by 2030 (which, after all, is only eight years away) some 20 million people in the UK alone will lack basic digital skills. That's two-thirds of the entire workforce. So



**Nadhim Zahawi says he wants everyone to have access to a rewarding working life**

digital skills figure prominently in all our plans for post-16 education.

Our commitment to a greener economy, too, means preparing people for a world that must operate in a more sustainable way. We must be ready for this. Our workforce must be ready for this.

Luckily, the skills reforms will lay the foundation for this changing economy, not just for next year, but five years hence – ten years and a generation, even – into the future.

The reformed apprenticeships programme goes from strength to strength. We are constantly finessing this to make sure every apprenticeship meets the skills needs of employers and gives individuals the opportunity to progress in their chosen careers. Apprenticeship funding will increase to £2.7bn by 2024-25 alongside other improvements to encourage more small businesses to hire new apprentices.

We'll continue to grow our T level offer. These top-quality technical qualifications will become as famous and trusted as A levels. They will enable as many young people as possible to get specialised training that is going to set them up for successful careers. More T levels mean more highly skilled workers and that means a more robust economic recovery and growth.

Then there's the Skills Bootcamps. These offer free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks, which mean people can

**Education is one of the most vital social levers we have**

build up specific skills that have a clear route to a job at the end. Take our HGV bootcamps, for example. These are a rapid response to the current shortage of skilled HGV drivers. They will train people to be on the road, delivering lettuces and washing machines – everything that consumers need – and they will be doing it as early as March.

We are supporting the largest-ever expansion of traineeships as part of the Plan for Jobs. As with apprenticeships and T levels, this has meant working with employers to develop traineeships that provide quality training in priority sectors like construction, digital, transport and green industries.

By enabling people to meet the challenges of a labour market that is rapidly changing, we will not only make the country more prosperous and more competitive, but also fairer for everyone, wherever they live, which will also mean a boost for communities. This is levelling up in action.

Eighteen areas across the country will be pioneering work to build stronger partnerships between local employers and colleges through the Skills Accelerator programme. What this means is the training colleges offer meets skills gaps locally and not somewhere hundreds of miles away. So more people can get the training they need to get a great job close to home.

I know the pandemic has had a huge impact on job prospects and many people will think that switching careers or retraining is too expensive. This is why we are investing more to help adults with our free courses for jobs.

This offer can help adults without a level 3 qualification to get the skills they need for a wide range of jobs. From April this offer will also be available for anyone earning less than the National Living Wage annually (£18,525) or who is unemployed, regardless of what prior qualifications they have.

This is such an exciting time to be working in education and I am extraordinarily proud to have been entrusted with its leadership. To me there is nothing more worthwhile than realising the potential of the people who live in this great country and to set them on a path to a rewarding and satisfying working life. ●

*Nadhim Zahawi MP is the Secretary of State for Education*

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# Miatta Fahnbulleh: Skill up to save the planet

The chief executive of the New Economics Foundation and former government adviser talks to *Spotlight* about the skills and wider economic challenges facing the UK

By Samir Jeraj

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When Miatta Fahnbulleh became chief executive of the green and left-leaning New Economics Foundation (NEF), she was one of the first black women to head a UK think tank. “I was like: ‘Oh gosh. OK – well, there you go, there’s an accolade!’” she says. The economist had come to the UK from Liberia with her family as a child, then progressed through Oxford University and into the civil service, before becoming an adviser to the Labour opposition and moving from there to the Institute of Public Policy Research and then on to the NEF. “I’ve been in the policy world for a long time – which is still middle class, white and male-dominated,” she says. While the situation is improving on gender, Fahnbulleh notes that “even today, you still have to fight to get an equal hearing”.

“The economy doesn’t work for people and planet and you fundamentally need to think about how you transform it in order to do that,” Fahnbulleh says, articulating the view the NEF has been pushing since its creation in 1986 during an era of Thatcherite economic policy under Nigel Lawson. Through the New Labour years, coalition government, and into the populist present, the think tank has often ploughed a lonely field of green progressivism, but with the climate crisis, unprecedented government intervention to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, and the breakdown of the global neoliberal order, the “outlier” ideas associated with the NEF have propagated and become a staple part of the debate. Fahnbulleh points to both Theresa May’s emphasis on an economy that “works for everyone” and Labour’s 2017 manifesto *For the Many, Not the Few* as examples of how the politics has shifted on the economy. “I think all parts of the [political] spectrum are having to do different things to respond to the moment that we’re in,” she says.

“If I think about the next year, it will be punctuated by a cost-of-living crisis,” Fahnbulleh explains. A decade of squeezed wages and rising prices for core goods are driving the crisis in the short term, but, she points out, these have their roots in longer-term structural issues, one of which is how the labour market is working in the UK – pre-pandemic it was defined by job creation, but few jobs paid a decent wage allowing people to live a good quality of life, she says. ▶

◀ “The system has not been very good at identifying people that could be skilled up – skilling them up and then matching them with jobs that have been created,” Fahnbulleh adds. Part of the reason for this is the UK’s underinvestment in skills, both in the public sector and the private sector, compared with other OECD and European countries, she explains. On top of this, Fahnbulleh says the market for providing skills and training is fragmented and decision-making is too concentrated in the hands of Westminster. Instead, she would like to see a skills system that is “agile” and able to respond to the “needs of the here and now”.

This is an important plank for Fahnbulleh and the NEF’s plans to create a greener economy. Some parts of the economy will contract, and others disappear, as the UK moves towards net-zero emissions, and the workers and communities connected to those parts will need a plan to transition to new jobs and sectors. “Social change and disruption, if it’s not done well, is bad for people, it’s bad for communities, it’s bad for society,” says Fahnbulleh. She points to the devastating impact of the move away from coal mining in northern England in the 1980s – something that is still vexing policy-makers as they seek to “level up” these same communities 40 years on. The move to net zero needs to ensure these patterns are not repeated and regional and social inequality is actively addressed so that the new jobs in the green economy are decent, secure and well-paid. “If we want the job markets and a low-carbon economy to look better, and to pay people better, I don’t think it happens ad hoc or by accident. I think it has to be deliberate,” she says.

The NEF’s solution to this problem of how to train and retrain workers as the economy rapidly changes and transitions to net zero is a part work/part train scheme. It takes its inspiration from countries such as Germany, which have managed their economic transformations with relatively less pain and retained an industrial base in their economies. Workers in sectors in decline or transition continue to work part-time while retraining part-time, both staying in the labour market and learning the skills for the new jobs being created in the economy. This would be backed by government support, guaranteeing pay up to 80 per cent (as with the furlough scheme) for time in training, while employers keep people on for at least 40 per cent of their usual hours and continue to meet National Insurance and pension payments.

Pre-pandemic, just 6 per cent of workers were upskilling towards a new job, and this figure was even lower in sectors such as retail and hospitality, which have been most affected by the pandemic. The NEF’s *Upskilling Britain for a High-Wage Future* report called the furlough period a “huge, missed opportunity to reinvigorate the UK’s skills base”, noting that while some workers did engage in training and upskilling during this time, this was



The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, was widely praised for the furlough scheme, but was

mostly as a result of them using their initiative.

Fahnbulleh argues that the UK could implement such a work-training scheme now to deal with the impact of the pandemic on parts of the economy. “As we transition out of this phase of the pandemic, we know there are still going to be sectors of the economy that are going to be really hammered,” she says. “What do you do with those workers? Do you just leave them and hope they can find their way in the jobs market? History tells us that’s not right.”

Government, Fahnbulleh insists, has to play a “deliberate” role in the skills market and in transitioning the economy, but from her years in the civil service she is under no illusions about the difficulties of being in government. “There are two challenges every government faces,” she says: the first is the strength of the Treasury and its resistance to investment; the second is the fragmented and siloed nature of government in the UK.

Skills policy interacts at a minimum with the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Department for Education, and on top of that it will impact on the Department for Work and Pensions, she says. These are departments that still work in silos and are not necessarily thinking about these types of skills outcomes and how to work across boundaries. Meanwhile, outside of the challenges of coordinating central government departments and getting them

**“All parts of the political spectrum are now having to do things differently”**



it a missed opportunity?

to agree is another whole set of challenges in implementing skills policy. Here is where the schools, further and higher education systems and an array of local governments all come into play. "So your ability to say this is an objective and drive it through that system is a massive challenge," Fahnbulleh says. The situation with this "weak", "reactive" and "chaotic" government is particularly acute, she adds.

When asked what she would do differently if she found herself in No 11 for a week, Fahnbulleh reels off a mini manifesto comprising "a green new deal", investment in "quick wins" such as technology and upgrading the UK's ageing housing stock, the funnelling of more money to local government through combined authorities, and a part-work/part-training scheme to transition workers into a climate-proof economy.

"We need to act today, in order to have any chance that, in ten years, we've started to shift the dial on [climate change]," Fahnbulleh warns, acknowledging that pushing the politics in this area is "a really hard thing". She points to "collective cognitive dissonance" around the Cop26 negotiations, and the lack of urgency and priority given to climate change and the transition to a green economy. You're either going to put it as a thing we tackle deliberately, she says, or you're going to have "a version of the pandemic times ten, when we are just throwing billions at our problem in order to dig ourselves out of the hole." ●

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# Government focus on lifelong learning must go further

## Investment in skills is key to post-pandemic growth

By Daisy Hooper

In association with



In September 2020, Boris Johnson set out his vision for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee: to give all adults the ability to access skills training throughout their lives. This was in direct response to the events of the earliest months of the pandemic, which proved pivotal in changing the world of work.

Traditional ways of working were upended, whole sectors were forced to close, and many workers began to re-evaluate whether their job was something they wanted to, or were able to, continue with.

Adult retraining is so important because skills training holds the key to solving one of the most persistent challenges to the UK economy: the productivity puzzle. The UK has had a decades-long productivity problem, characterised by a “long tail” of less-productive businesses, many of which are SMEs. This is in part due to a lack of investment in higher-level skills and a policy environment that fails to encourage private investment in training.

In the post-pandemic context, the need for retraining is stark. In order to prevent the scarring effects of Covid on workers’ employment prospects, it is imperative that workers get better access to training that provides the skills that employers need. However, the workers most in need of skills training are those least likely to seek it out.

This access to retraining is particularly important for workers trying to transition from declining industries to growth sectors such as tech and artificial intelligence (AI), as well as green industries that are crucial for the government’s ambitions to achieve net zero by 2050. To effectively transition between sectors, workers need both technical and transferable skills.

### The importance of management apprenticeships

To date, the apprenticeships system has helped to plug part of the gap for the UK’s retraining needs. The ability to study without paying the training costs, while also gaining practical work experience and a salary, is an attractive prospect to many intending to gain new skills. The Apprenticeship Levy has forced businesses to assess their skills needs and to invest – and many employers have identified the same gap: management skills. This isn’t just a private sector issue; the government has recently

acknowledged this skills gap in the public sector by way of the recently announced review into NHS management, as well as the drive to build a new civil service curriculum and campus.

Management skills cover a broad variety of skills essential for employability beyond those of merely managing a team or a project. These are transferable skills that help workers be productive at work, handle change and solve problems. In particular, recent Chartered Management Institute (CMI) research identified that the top skills critical to employability are team working, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication skills. Management apprenticeships teach all of these.

We also know that investing in management and leadership skills creates economic benefits for both individuals and organisations. In research conducted with forecasting firm Oxford Economics, the CMI found that managers who achieved Chartered Manager status boosted their organisations' business revenues by £62,000 each year on average, and by £310,000 over five years. The research also estimated an additional contribution of £22,400 to the UK economy every year from each manager becoming Chartered. As the skills gained from management apprenticeships foster greater employability and have clear economic benefits, it is demonstrably clear that management apprenticeships are a worthwhile investment for the public and private sectors.

There are, however, suggestions from a few loud voices within the skills sector that Apprenticeship Levy funds are not being spent on those that need them the most. Exaggerated claims around levy funds being used to bolster executives' CVs at the expense of younger workers are not borne out by the data, and should not be used as an argument to starve older workers of training provision. Department for Education data shows that in the 2019-20 academic year, 49 per cent of management apprentices were studying a Level 3 Team Leader apprenticeship – a qualification level that prepares the learner for their very first step on the management ladder, and a far cry from the C-suite.

If we want to see the whole workforce able to enjoy productive, satisfying careers, and the economy become more



productive as a whole, we must move away from seeing skills provision and funding as a zero-sum game between the experienced and those at the beginning of their working lives. Instead, we need to offer the opportunity for people at all stages of their working lives to take a management apprenticeship, to boost their team-working and employability skills, and to become more productive.

### Looking to the future of skills and retraining

As the UK economy moves beyond the pandemic, the government has rightly made skills and retraining a clear focus for its recovery activity – but now it needs to follow through on that commitment.

One policy innovation, the National Skills Fund, was announced as a core part of Rishi Sunak's March budget and was well-received within the further education sector. The fund has the potential to provide a pipeline of skills training for workers, preparing them to take up future apprenticeship opportunities.

Looking forward, the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) in 2025 has the potential to be a game-changer by providing access to

loans for people to take further education courses throughout their lives. While we look forward to working with the government on the LLE's design and delivery, we don't yet know how or if this will affect apprenticeship funding. I would like to see the government ensure that both businesses and employees are clear about the benefits and differences between the Apprenticeship Levy and LLE funds before the entitlement begins so that they know which system will be most appropriate to meet their needs. Apprenticeships and the LLE need to work alongside each other, meaning we must fund both systems properly to achieve maximum impact.

The shock delivered by the pandemic underlined the need for action on adult skills. Together with other interventions, management apprenticeships are crucial to employability and business productivity. If it learns from the successes of the employer-led apprenticeship model, the government has the opportunity to deliver a truly bold answer to a perennial question, while at the same time transforming the prospects of thousands across the UK. ●

*Daisy Hooper is head of policy and public affairs at the Chartered Management Institute*

# The skills shortage is stunting our economic growth

Ministers speak of the importance of a skilled workforce but operate in ways that undermine that aim

By Toby Perkins MP

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As someone who worked in the recruitment industry for eight years prior to entering parliament, I am acutely aware that there has never been a time when employers felt that their appetite for skilled, work-ready applicants was being satisfied.

However, it is clear that these pressures are growing, stunting our economy's growth, affecting our international competitiveness and failing a generation of young learners and workers. Even prior to Covid, there were almost 800,000 young people in the UK classified as Neet (Not in Education, Employment or Training). The UK must emerge from the pandemic with a focus on skills if our economy is to prosper.

The government consistently speaks of the importance of a skilled workforce but it is operating in ways that undermine that aim. It lacks an overarching strategy that recognises the power of a partnership between government, education providers and employers. Ministers' numerous new initiatives often contradict existing ones, don't deliver what is promised and create confusion among learners and providers. And ultimately, ministers don't prioritise or understand the needs of students, staff or employers when it comes to further education (FE).

The Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in 2017, illustrates these failings. This tax on larger employers accompanied the scrapping of central government funding for apprenticeships. The levy has led to a massive reduction in the number of entry-level apprenticeship opportunities for young people and a reduction in the number of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employing apprentices. Government data shows the total number of apprenticeships in England fell by almost a quarter from 2011 to 2019, with nearly 130,000 opportunities being lost even before Covid hit. Since then, this has only worsened, with opportunities for 16-18-year-olds falling by a third.

The closure of Connexions – the government-led careers service providing information, advice and guidance – was a short-sighted move, indicative of the government's short-term approach, which has left a generation of young people without careers advice. Even now, provision is inconsistent, school rather than careers-led, and without effective oversight. The government's



**The UK must emerge from the pandemic with a focus on skills, says Perkins**

reintroduction of the so-called Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which it abolished in 2013, shuts out the vast majority of adults who need to retrain, and excludes nine million jobs in England in sectors not covered by the “guarantee”. Similarly, initiatives such as Kickstart, Bootcamps and the National Careers Service have failed in their objectives, with the government’s desire for a quick headline creating a muddled landscape that is letting down learners and employers alike.

Facing widespread criticism, the government has now sought to outsource responsibility for the strategic direction of local skills policy to chambers of commerce, with FE colleges and metro mayors relegated to an advisory role.

More broadly, ministers have demonstrated they don’t understand the motivations and barriers facing learners from deprived communities, nor will they allocate the resources required to help this crucial sector thrive. While Labour

has welcomed the introduction of T levels as an expansion of technical qualifications, their operation – alongside the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance – makes it harder for learners to afford to study, with longer courses and limited potential for other paid work.

At the Labour Conference last autumn, Keir Starmer set out the party’s commitment to tackle these failures. Labour is building a vision for the future and a skills system designed around the needs of learners, employers and providers, ensuring that every young person leaves education ready for work and ready for life, equipped with the skills they and our economy need to prosper. By removing tax breaks from private schools, Labour would fund access to a specialist careers adviser for every school alongside reintroducing two-weeks’ work experience, supporting young people to make informed decisions about future study and career options.

This comes alongside a commitment

to focus on re-engaging young people who are Neet. Working with local authorities and metro mayors across the country, Labour would provide targeted funding for local programmes such as Talent Match, which delivers tailored support to young people not in education or employment, recapturing and igniting their interest in learning.

Labour has also proposed using unspent Apprenticeship Levy funds to create a wage subsidy, delivering 100,000 new apprenticeship opportunities for 16-24-year-olds this year. This would support the ambition to deliver more level 2 and 3 apprenticeships, giving young people a foot on the ladder. In expanding apprenticeship opportunities, especially through SMEs, Labour would also ensure apprenticeships are available in towns and cities across England.

Contrary to their rhetoric, the Conservatives have failed to make skills or FE a priority, and core FE funding has faced bigger cuts than almost any arm of government. Successive Tory-led governments have slashed FE budgets by a third and adult education by 50 per cent in real terms. Britain now has the lowest levels of participation in adult and workplace education in 30 years, with employers unable to get the skilled workforce they need to secure our economy post-pandemic.

This has led to widespread redundancies and pay freezes across the FE sector, which has seen a whole generation of teaching talent lost. We have also seen other damaging developments, like the move to claw back adult education funding from colleges that delivered fewer courses during the pandemic. The likes of Derby College saw £1.8m clawed back, leading to dozens of redundancies.

The time for urgent action is now. Labour’s plans would deliver the skills that businesses across England need to prosper after the pandemic and as we look to the challenges of the future. Instead, the Tories are wasting individual talents and failing to deliver a secure economy. Working with businesses, Labour would see our economy firing on all cylinders, in every part of the country and every sector of the economy. ●

*Toby Perkins MP is the shadow minister for skills and further education.*

# How Covid-19 reshaped employment in the UK

## Exclusive analysis reveals Boris Johnson’s plan to transform Britain into a high-wage economy is falling short

By Katharine Swindells

In October, Boris Johnson pledged a shift towards a “high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity economy” amid falling real wages and a rising cost of living. And it is true that, in theory, the post-pandemic economy could be an opportunity for a skills revolution, with workers upgrading to fill the high-skilled occupations of the “levelled-up” green economy.

But labour market economists say the data reveals a different picture. Early figures suggest that those in low-skill, low-pay work are struggling to move into higher-paid roles, and the current infrastructure for adult education and retraining is falling far short of what is needed.

Nevertheless, despite the pandemic, unemployment rates have remained low. “It almost goes without saying, the furlough scheme was a massive success

in terms of keeping people in jobs and protecting living standards,” Hannah Slaughter, a labour market economist at the think tank the Resolution Foundation, tells *Spotlight*. “The unemployment rate has barely budged since the [job retention] scheme ended, [with] a very small rise compared to what we saw earlier in the crisis, and definitely very, very tiny when we think about previous crises.”

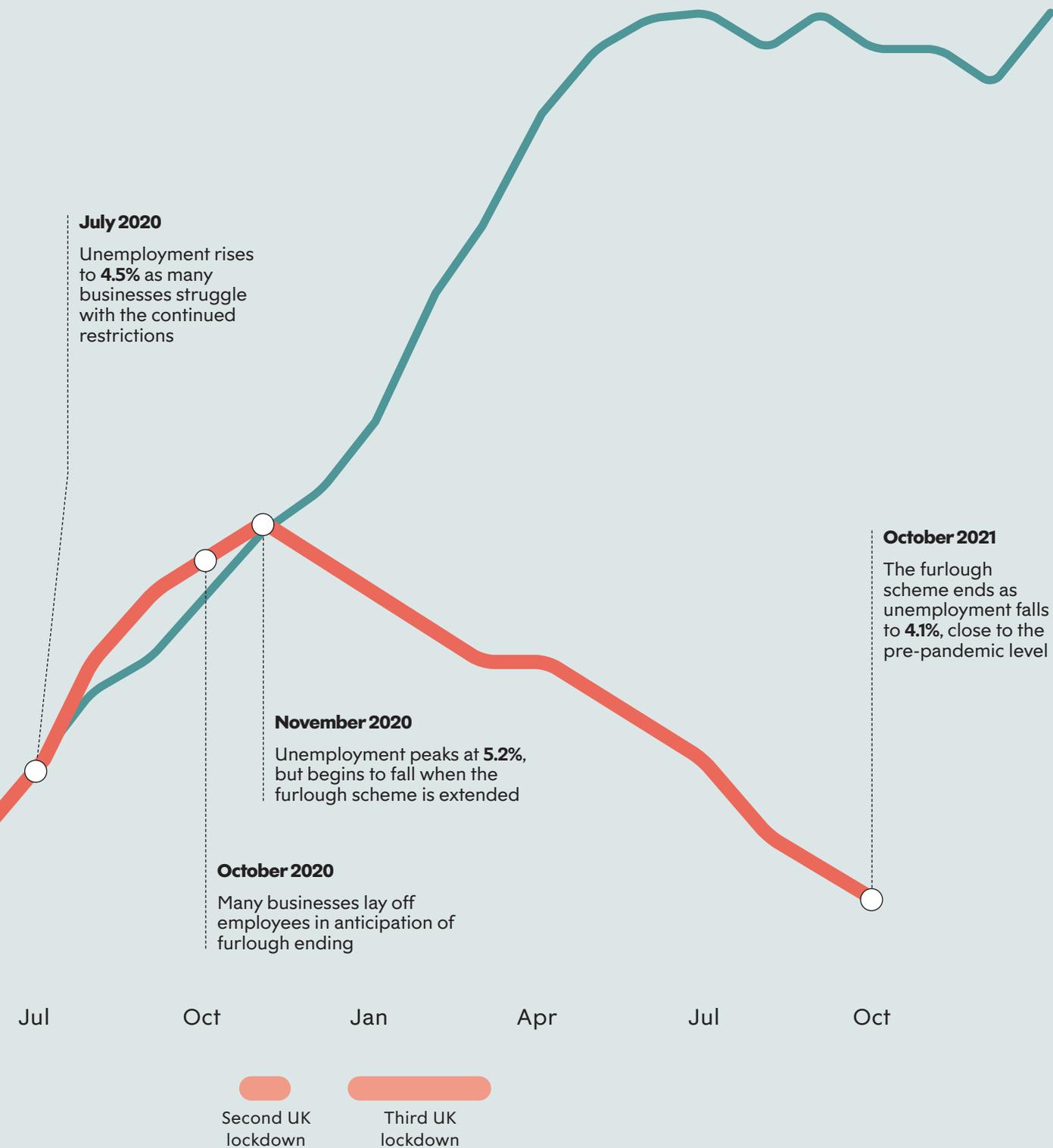
In January 2020, the UK unemployment rate was 4 per cent. The job retention scheme and other financial support offered to businesses meant that at its pandemic peak, in November 2020, unemployment hit 5.2 per cent. In comparison, through 2008 and 2009 the rate rose by almost three percentage points, up to 8 per cent of the aged 16-plus population, and it would not begin to significantly decline until summer 2013. ▶



**The pandemic has not seen the same rise in unemployment as the 2008 financial crisis**

Change in unemployment rate from:

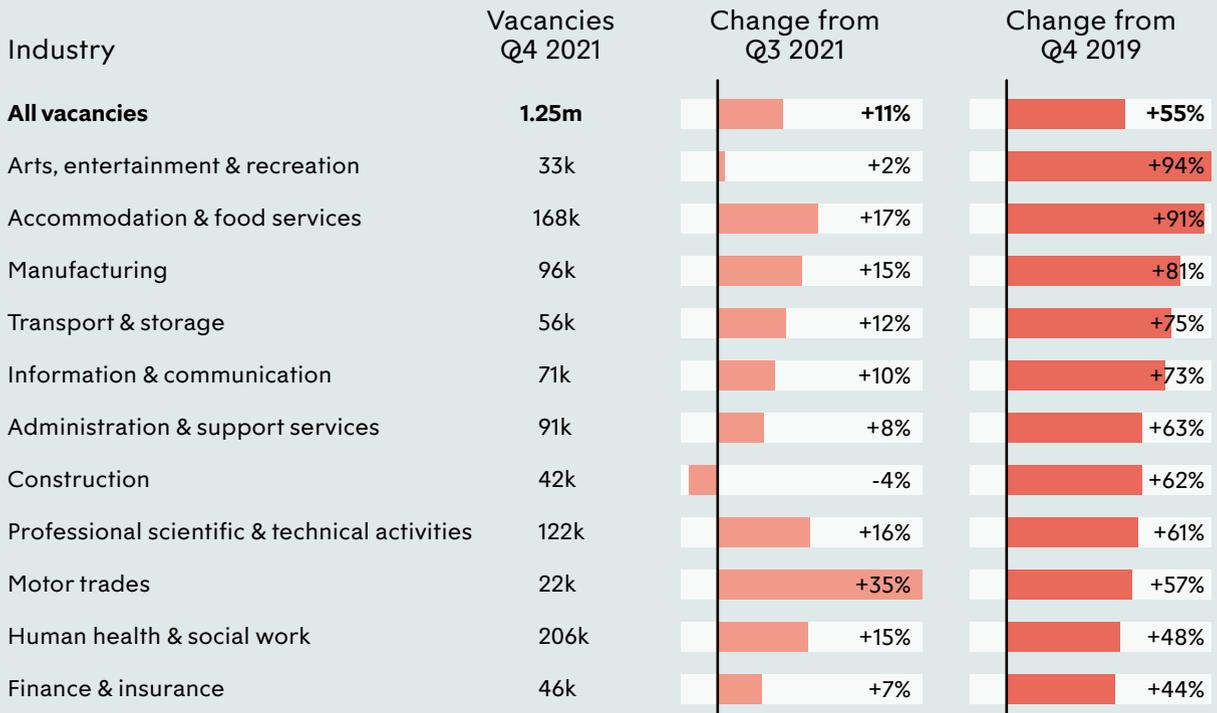
- January 2008
- January 2020



SOURCE: ONS: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

## Every sector of the economy is seeing jobs growth

No. of vacancies by industry Oct-Dec 2021, compared to previous quarters



SOURCE: ONS VACANCIES

◀ The employment picture isn't all rosy, though. The number of economically inactive people has risen by 3 per cent since the same period in 2019 and the number of people inactive due to long-term sickness is up by 12 per cent. Overall, the number of people in employment has yet to recover to where it was before the pandemic, largely because of older people dropping out of the workforce.

This is despite the fact that the jobs market has never been hotter. Between October and December 2021 there were a record 1.25 million vacancies, up 11 per cent on the previous quarter, and more than 50 per cent higher than the same period in 2019.

Vacancies have grown the most in lower-paid industries such as food and accommodation services, and transport. But there are significant vacancies across every sector of the economy, including skilled trades and knowledge-based work.

"Every single industry has got vacancies above pre-pandemic levels, which is pretty unusual by historic

standards," says Tony Wilson, director of the Institute for Employment Studies. "It's pretty remarkable."

In most cases, the pandemic has accelerated pre-existing trends. There was already demand for highly skilled information and technology professionals, and for a higher level of digital skills across the workforce; the rapid digitalisation caused by the pandemic only strengthened this trend.

Analysis by Global Data found that the number of job adverts referencing key digital skills has soared since the pandemic began. In January 2020, 2 per cent of newly listed job ads in the UK mentioned "data and content management", and by December 2021 that had climbed to 3.4 per cent. Similarly, skill in "human resource and payroll applications" rose from 1.7 per cent of job ads to 3 per cent.

"Most of the jobs growth in the last ten years has been relatively high-skilled and better-paid work," Wilson says. "But the problem is how you then distribute those jobs more fairly, how you support people to get the skills they need and

also to understand the opportunities that might be available."

In an ideal world, this would be the perfect conditions for people looking to move into higher-skilled work – the booming post-pandemic economy would be an opportunity for businesses to invest in high-skilled green jobs, while remote and flexible working makes many jobs accessible to applicants outside of London, or with children or other caring responsibilities.

But so far the data doesn't suggest signs of a more stable, upskilled economy. The number of young people working on a zero-hours contract has jumped back to over 10 per cent – back to where it was before the pandemic began. A Resolution Foundation analysis found that in Q2 2021, fewer than 12 per cent of adults were in a higher-skilled job than the year before, the lowest proportion since 2012.

More recent detailed data on exactly how people are moving jobs isn't yet available, but as the *New Statesman* reported in November, in aggregate the majority of job moves seem to be driven

by “low-skill” workers moving to similar jobs, likely for slightly better pay and conditions.

Data from the Office for National Statistics’ Labour Force Survey shows that between July and September 2021 there were 1.25 million job-to-job moves, 37 per cent higher than the number seen in the same period in 2019. The number of job-to-job moves into high-skill occupations was 18 per cent higher than in 2019, while the number of moves into low-skill occupations was 88 per cent higher.

Of course, not all jobs are equally easy to get into, with some industries used to high turnover rates and on-the-job training, while others expect applicants to have previous experience or training.

While the job retention scheme proved effective in preserving businesses and living standards, it also had the effect of freezing the labour market as it was in March 2020. No one knew how long the lockdown would last, and what state the economy would be in when it reopened, but in a time of incredible uncertainty furlough offered some stability. So it’s no surprise that many people opted not to make big career changes: in the third quarter of 2020, job-to-job moves because of a resignation fell to their lowest point since 2009.

“People might have had an income shock if they were furloughed and only getting 80 per cent of their pay, or

## “Levelling up focuses on place rather than people”

having to spend more on energy bills because they’ve had the heating on all day while they were working from home,” Slaughter says. “I don’t know how much appetite there is to make big career changes when things are still so uncertain.”

While the media has been full of stories of people using lockdown to study and upskill, the reality is that the financial hardship and ongoing uncertainty of the past two years are hardly ideal circumstances for people to invest in their own human capital. A survey by the Learning and Work Institute found that adults in higher socio-economic groups were twice as likely to take part in lockdown learning compared with adults in lower socio-economic groups, and adults who stayed in education until 21 were three times as likely compared to adults who left school at the first opportunity.

So while the post-pandemic economy could provide an opportunity for reskilling and upskilling workers, significant investment is needed to

support them in filling the vacancies the country needs, and our current systems for training people fall woefully short, Wilson says.

“We rely a lot on academic routeways to prepare primarily young people with the kind of broad range of knowledge economy skills they might need in future, and after that we just rely on employers to do the right thing and invest in their employees,” he says. “And we’re massively overly reliant on apprenticeships as the route to higher-skill training in particular.”

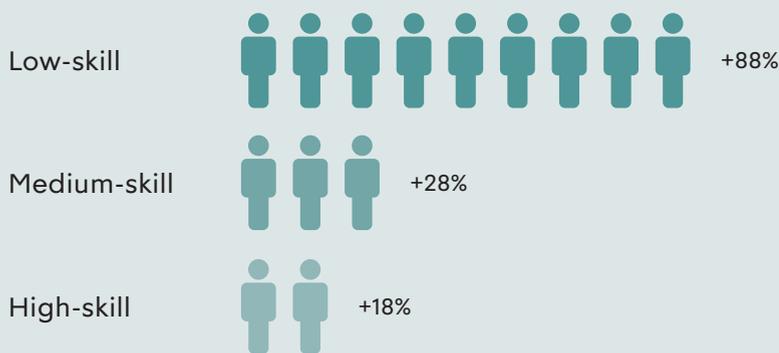
The answer, Wilson argues, is two-fold. Firstly, he calls for a local employment service that is available and accessible to all – not just those claiming unemployment benefits – and that is linked up with local businesses and other support services.

But even if the UK perfects this infrastructure, there still needs to be a culture shift on life-long learning, Wilson says. Whether it’s because they had bad experiences in formal education, or because of childcare and other caring responsibilities, a national jobs and skills strategy needs to go directly to those who are hardest to reach.

“I think there’s a real risk that the levelling-up agenda overly focuses on place rather than the people in the places that actually are levelling up,” Wilson says. “Place, ultimately, is just where people live. It’s the people that matter, and we’ve got to be much better at supporting people.” ●

### The no. of workers moving to low-skill jobs is almost double its pre-pandemic level

Change in job-to-job moves by skill moved into, Q3 2021 vs. Q3 2019



57%

57% of middle- and upper-middle class adults took part in adult learning in the first lockdown, compared with 29% of working-class and non-working adults

29%

SOURCES: ONS: LABOUR FORCE SURVEY FLOWS ESTIMATES, LEARNING & WORK INSTITUTE: 2020 ADULT PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING SURVEY





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## Retraining

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# A different sort of prison education

Is the government doing enough to support prisoner rehabilitation?

By Zoë Grünewald

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While some may know Fred Sirieix as the charismatic *maitre d'* from the hit Channel 4 show *First Dates*, there is one specific community that know him as the man who gave them a second chance. In December 2015, he launched The Right Course, a charity that turns staff canteens in prisons into high-street-like restaurants run by prisoners. By using the existing space and equipment, the initiative allows prisoners to gain industry-recognised qualifications and work in the hospitality sector upon release.

Around 15 years ago, after seeing a wave of crime in his local area of south-east London, Sirieix started working with people who found themselves in trouble with the law. "I just thought to myself, if I want things to change then I need to take action myself," he says. "And if I want to make the world a better place, I need to change myself." When he visited the young offenders unit at Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Isis in Thameside, London, he realised the staff mess could easily become a training restaurant like the ones in a catering college. "It's very simple – it's basically transforming staff messes in prison into training restaurants run by the prisoners, so they run the front of house as well as the kitchen," he says. Since then, The Right Course has set up two restaurants: at Isis and at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, which was formally opened in October 2021 by London Mayor Sadiq Khan, whose office helped to fund the refurbishment.

The Right Course is just one of several initiatives providing prisoners with work so that they have the skills to help them find employment in the outside world. Another is Redemption Roasters, "the world's first behind bars coffee company". Through roasting its coffee at HMP The Mount in Hemel Hempstead the company offers on-the-job experience and academy training in the roastery trade. The initiative also provides employment upon release, with the website claiming the firm is the "single-largest employer" of its own graduates.

Education and training in prisons is desperately needed because there is a considerable and concerning skills gap between prisoners and the general population. The chief executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, Jon Collins, says that more than half of the prisoners that are assessed on entry have English literacy and maths levels "below those expected of someone leaving primary schools"; one in three have a learning disability or difficulty; and "we know that over 40 per cent of prisoners have been permanently excluded from school at some point". Without this education, people are leaving prison in a worse place than when they started – still subject to a gap, but now with the added disadvantage of a spent conviction.

Collins adds that there is value in education beyond preparing prisoners for work after they are released; while it may not be directly beneficial for securing employment or bestowing qualifications



**The Right Course charity turns staff canteens in prisons into restaurants run by the prisoners**

after release, it is important in terms of prisoner self-confidence and well-being while in custody. "That broader range of opportunities, which enables people who haven't always had a positive experience of education in the past to do something that they enjoy and that engages them, can be immediately helpful for their well-being, but also can help them move into other forms of education once they are engaged," he explains.

Sirieix speaks of the dual purpose of The Right Course – giving prisoners a job, but also "self-respect and a sense of pride". "You should see, they are beaming with joy and pride and the self-confidence that gives them because suddenly they shine and are able to show how good they are," he says. A 2021 joint commentary by Amanda Spielman, chief inspector of Ofsted, and Charlie Taylor, Her Majesty's (HM) chief inspector of prisons, meanwhile, stated that the purpose of prisoners' education should be "to build confidence and a sense of achievement".

Katy Emck is the founding director of the social enterprise Fine Cell Work, which was set up 25 years ago by prison campaigner Anne Tree to teach prisoners needlework. Emck says the idea behind the enterprise was that prisoners should be able to practise a skill in their cells, "specifically a craft skill, something artistic where they're using their hands". Emck says some of the prisoners' works have been sold in "museums, in Fortnum and Masons, and they do commissions for amazing people". Inmates receive one-third of the proceeds of the pieces they make, sometimes up to £2,000 a year, which Emck says can contribute to a nest egg for their release, or enable them to send money home to their families.

Fine Cell also provides volunteer work for prisoners after their release, setting them up with a mentor and looking after them "for a couple of years as they try and get their lives together". Fine Cell, too, offers prisoners more than just labour.

**The pandemic worsened an already insufficient prison education system**



**Prisoners with Fine Cell hand stitch a variety of products, including this cushion designed by the late writer AA Gill**

“The money is important, [but] the rewarding, meaningful work is very important [in itself], and many of them have never experienced that at all,” Emck explains. “We tried to create an almost ideal world within prison, where they can feel proud, they can feel belonging.”

Despite such schemes, the prison education system is floundering. Some 60 per cent of prisons in England have received either a “Requires Improvement” or “Inadequate” grading from Ofsted for the quality of education and skills provision over the past five years, and according to the Prisoners’ Education Trust, only 7 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women have a job six weeks after leaving prison. The Prisoners’ Education Trust’s Collins says there are a number of reasons for the inconsistency in education provision, though the primary reason is funding. “The providers who deliver presentations can only make the money available to them go so far,” he explains. “Without more funding, it’s difficult to see how prison education will improve.” The situation has been

exacerbated by Covid, meaning that even those prisons that could provide training were unable to. Shortly after the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, prisons moved to an Exceptional Regime Management Plan, which, according to the Prison Reform Trust, meant that “almost all purposeful activity was suspended, including work, training and education”. Though many schemes are back up and running now, the Ofsted/HM Inspectorate of Prisons joint commentary concluded that the pandemic had, ultimately, worsened an already insufficient system.

So, what more can be done? Emck wants to see an overhaul of prison governance and fewer changes at the top, meaning ministers really follow through with their proposals. “The prison system is so unstable – in the last ten years there have been nine prison ministers... there’s no stability to the policies,” she explains. Emck also wants to see a change in prison ideology, so its primary purpose is truly rehabilitation. “They say it’s for rehabilitation, but they do not believe it,” she says. Sirieix echoes that sentiment, and wants policy to be focused on the reality, and the humanity, of prisoners today. “The reason why people are in prison and the reason why I’m not is because of my loving family,” he says. “We have to start by giving people chances, even if it’s second, third or fourth chances. We’re going to give people opportunities, we’ve got to educate and we’ve got to believe that we can make a difference.”

In the recently published *Prisons Strategy* white paper, Justice Secretary Dominic Raab set out his intention to “keep the public safer in the longer term” by placing an emphasis on reforming and rehabilitating offenders. As part of this, the government has unveiled the construction of a new prison, in Glen Parva, Leicestershire, which puts “purpose at the core of rehabilitation”. In Raab’s accompanying statement, he said the prison would focus on the provision of education and training. The white paper also set out an intention to create a new Prisoner Education Service, which will improve basic literacy and numeracy skills and allow prisoners to acquire further vocational qualifications.

Only time will tell if the white paper can make real changes to the prison education system. Collins is sceptical, saying that “while [the government’s] ambition to improve prison education is absolutely the right one, we don’t really know yet what that will look like in practice or what steps will actually be taken to drive forward those improvements”. In the meantime, there are many excellent initiatives that are working to rehabilitate offenders and offer them another chance. One can only hope that the government is truly willing to commit to a long-term strategy that supports offenders to learn, acquire both work and academic skills, and reintegrate back into society. ●

**Only 4 per cent of women have a job six weeks after leaving prison**

# An agenda to boost employment and protect the UK

Through apprenticeships and workplace programmes, BAE Systems is training people in the skills of the future

By Richard Hamer

In association with

**BAE SYSTEMS**

I often describe BAE Systems as a “skills enterprise” because core parts of the business – defence, aerospace and security – are absolutely reliant on the knowledge and expertise of people with specialist science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) skills.

Thanks to the brainpower of our 35,000 highly skilled UK employees, we have developed long-term defence programmes like the Astute and Dreadnought classes of submarines – which are currently in build at our shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria – and the Tempest Future Combat Air System project, which is underway at our military aircraft business in Lancashire.

We also describe these skills as “sovereign” due to the power and authority they hold over the UK’s security – the equipment and services we provide support our armed forces in defending the UK’s interests at home and abroad.

Alongside being a crucial piece of the UK defence sector, high-value

engineering and manufacturing skills are vital for the economy. In 2020, a year of economic turmoil due to the pandemic, they helped deliver exports of £3.9bn and generate £10.1bn for the UK’s GDP.

BAE Systems wants to make engineering and manufacturing an attractive career choice for young people. That’s why we invest nearly £100m per year in skills and training, working with schools, colleges and universities to promote STEM and provide hands-on experience. The challenge of encouraging more women and those from ethnic minorities into the sector is of particular importance – improving the diversity of our workforce is a real focus for us.

Unfortunately, some technical skills are in very short supply, including nuclear engineering skills, systems engineering, naval architecture and combat systems skills. Some of the skills our business needs, such as welding and pipe fitting, also require expertise and take many years to develop. This is why we run apprenticeship programmes: they have consistently proved to be very successful in helping us develop these specialist and sought-after skills while also supporting social mobility.

We continue to recruit hundreds of apprentices and in this coming year will be taking on 939, of which 580 are from the north of England and 131 from Scotland. In 2021, 26 per cent of our England intake also came from disadvantaged communities. We are a founder member of Movement to Work, a programme run by youth charity The Prince’s Trust, and provide around 100 work placements for young, unemployed people every year. We also continue to support the government’s Kickstart programme, which funds employers to create jobs for 16-24-year-olds on Universal Credit, and have a second cohort of young people due to complete the programme in 2022.

The STEM skills we so urgently need are lucrative, desirable and fit for the future of work. This coupled with our wide geographic footprint means that our skills enterprise can make a valuable contribution to “levelling up” across the UK, helping to support employment in the communities that need it most. ●

*Richard Hamer is the education and skills director at BAE Systems*



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## Helping to defend our nation

Our 24,000 world-class engineers and scientists across the UK work hard to help keep the country safe. Solving complex technology challenges means we can deliver the very best for our armed forces and security services, as well as contributing £10.1bn to the UK's GDP. It's why we invest nearly £100m in training, education and skills.\*

\*BAE Systems' contribution to the UK economy (published 2022)

# Has remote working stopped us learning?

Working from home has made our lives easier but the art of absorbing knowledge much harder

By Sarah Dawood

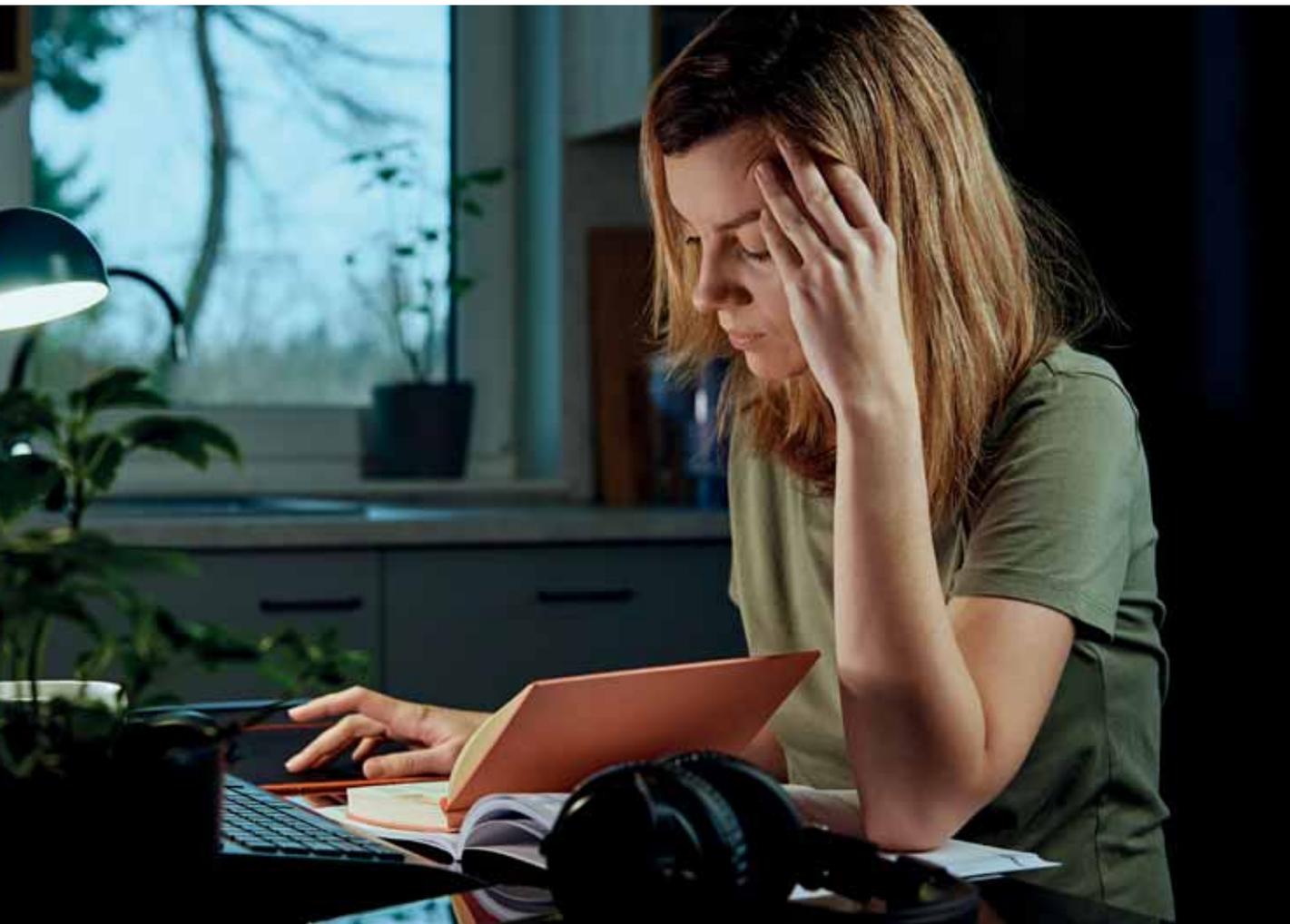
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Remote working has been liberating, releasing us from the shackles of the office and helping us hone our own perfect environment and schedule. But while it can be freeing, it can also be incredibly isolating.

Young workers and early career professionals have particularly felt the impact of working from home, which while providing more autonomy has also typically meant less hands-on support, fewer opportunities to network and a limited capacity to learn from others.

According to LinkedIn research, more than two-thirds of those aged 16-34 believe the pandemic has impacted their professional learning, and four out of five say they are out of practice with tasks such as speaking to clients or delivering presentations. Four in ten business leaders also say that young people have struggled to build meaningful relationships with colleagues.



Four out of five 16-34-year-olds say their public speaking and communication skills are rusty

A combination of the pandemic and advancements in technology has shifted the world of work permanently. So, how can less experienced individuals continue to learn new skills as we move to a hybrid model?

#### Which skills have we lost?

Unsurprisingly, social and communication skills are high on the list of those negatively impacted by the pandemic. Business leaders and CEOs say learning by “osmosis” from being around more experienced colleagues, developing soft skills and networking are the key experiences that young workers have missed out on. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that Covid-19 decreased workers’ participation in such “informal” learning by 25 per cent.

Lee Chambers, business psychologist and founder at workplace

well-being company Essentialise, says many soft skills – such as telephone manner, managing conflicts, collaborating and even office etiquette – are learnt through observation. “You can’t read a book to learn these things,” he says. “It’s very much something that you just pick up. Remote working can be challenging because you don’t have the chance to observe people in more senior positions and how they handle things.”

The autonomy surrounding working from home has its downsides. While nobody likes a micromanager, the lack of “watercooler moments” and informal dialogue can often leave inexperienced employees feeling isolated, with no one to turn to when they have questions, says Chambers; feedback is reserved for formal meetings, with fewer opportunities to learn from mistakes.

People’s confidence and public speaking skills have also suffered;

putting a hand up on Zoom lacks the immediacy of interjecting in real life, while delivering a virtual presentation lacks the audience interaction and pressure that comes from having a physical audience. “It’s the implicit, non-tangible interactions with other people that are missing,” says occupational psychologist Emma Russell. “They affect how we absorb, consolidate and practice new skills and information.”

#### The rise of online learning

While organic or “informal” learning has been hindered, research suggests there has been a significant increase in enthusiasm for and availability of formal digital learning courses. The OECD found that Google searches for online learning increased fourfold between March and April 2020, while research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) ▶

◀ found over half of employers surveyed were using online learning in 2020 compared to less than a third in 2015.

Online courses have the beauty of ease – they don't require travel and can be done from anywhere. This accessibility has empowered more individuals to invest in their own personal development. "Some education has become more liberated," says Chambers. "People are able to source it themselves now, which is a powerful mechanism for taking ownership of your own learning."

Virtual learning does have its drawbacks, especially for payroll employees – a lack of physical separation means employers often expect staff to carry on their daily activities while doing training, and it can be difficult to switch off from digital "pinging". "Younger employees are less likely to have trained their attention over the years, simply because of the dynamic nature of the world they've grown up in," says Chambers. "It's not the best learning environment."

### The accessibility of homeworking

The upside is that remote working has inevitably improved people's proficiency around technology, says Russell, and has encouraged people to be more independent and proactive, whether through seeking their own learning or networking.

Virtual learning is also much more accessible for those who have previously been locked out of education, such as single parents, people with disabilities and those from rural areas. Anecdotal evidence suggests that working from home could be preferable for neurodiverse individuals, who may struggle with non-verbal or subtle communication. For instance, the "explicit rules and structures" around using Zoom, such as "raising a hand" when you want to talk, can be easier for someone with autism to understand, says Russell.

Alex McNally, a 24-year-old who runs his own podcast production company, has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and says the flexibility of homeworking has allowed him to work in the evenings when he is most productive, while virtual client pitches feel less overwhelming. The ability to open a browser tab to research during a call also helps him, as he struggles prepping prior to meetings. "Being in control of my own time and being able to network from home where I'm most comfortable has just improved my skills base incredibly," he says.

### How have employers tackled remote learning?

Many companies have rethought learning and development to enrich people's experience from home. A prolific employer of young people, Deloitte hired 1,600 graduates and school-leavers last year. It spent nearly £30m on learning and development, including a virtual induction



Deloitte created collaboration spaces in its offices purely for teamwork

**"It's the implicit, non-tangible interactions with other people that are missing online"**

programme to help new starters with soft skills such as delivering presentations and facilitating meetings, and gamified "networking quests" about the art of building contacts. Learning materials on topics such as receiving feedback were made available and line managers were trained on how to lead in a virtual environment.

To accompany the digital learning portfolio, the company created bespoke collaboration spaces within its physical offices purely for teamwork, fitted with large screens for hybrid meetings. The idea was to encourage "formal" learning at home and "informal" team-learning in the office when government guidance allowed it. "We transformed the workplace into a workspace," says Sharron Pamplin, UK partner for HR at Deloitte. "We ran different types of learning in those different environments to suit employees' needs."

Consumer goods giant Unilever also invested in virtual learning, including workshops where employees participated in groups to ascertain their personal strengths. Patrick Hull, vice president for the future of work, says that "small cohorts" are crucial to online learning: "When it gets big, you lose that intimacy and ability to interact, especially around soft skills."

To tackle feelings of isolation, Unilever also increased interaction between senior leadership and employees, holding a monthly live stream with



the CEO where employees could ask and upvote anonymous questions. Employee trust in senior leadership is currently at its highest levels ever, he says, and nearly nine in ten new joiners feel satisfied with their onboarding process.

### The future of workplace learning

As we move to hybrid working, managers should build younger colleagues' confidence by giving them a voice at the table and creating "intergenerational connections", says Chambers – finding commonalities, supporting them to lead projects, and celebrating small victories. "I've heard people say things like 'Generation Z are entitled, they lack a work ethic,'" he says. "That kind of rhetoric doesn't acknowledge that this has been a challenging situation for young people."

Salvatore Nigro, chief executive at global education non-profit JA Europe, adds that companies should invest in proper onboarding programmes so that young people can understand how the business works and who decision-makers are. "If young people do not fully understand the dynamics of an office, that first step in their career is hampered," he says.

Frequent communication is also vital to help employees feel heard, through line manager check-ins and staff surveys. "Where leaders are investing their time and attention in their direct

reports, we will see a more satisfied and hopefully better-equipped workforce," says Russell.

The siloed nature of remote working means that teamwork has suffered – so collaborative work should be reserved for the office while personal work should be done at home, says Unilever's Hull. "Creativity and collaboration are contact sports," he says. "Virtual brainstorming sessions are not the same as being around the table, riffing off one another's ideas."

Giving new starters the opportunity to practice their skills in cohorts will also mean they can learn from each other. "It's not just knowledge transfer, it's how you apply that knowledge," he adds. "We wouldn't trust a pilot to fly a plane if they had just read the manual or done the online course. They need to do the simulator and do their training runs with a more experienced pilot."

Small businesses that can't afford to develop their own virtual learning materials can seek out resources online – the government offers a Skills Toolkit of free courses, while public body Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) provides employee training. "I'd encourage people who don't have the collateral themselves to look at what other organisations have made widely available," says Deloitte's Pamplin.

The education sector also has a role to play; entrepreneurial skills should be integrated into school curriculums, says Hull, to better prepare young people for the world of work while boosting the economy by creating future entrepreneurs. "Making money seems to be a dirty word in education," he says. "But those skills of curiosity, collaboration and creative problem-solving are so critical to succeed in the workplace. Individuals who come into our organisation equipped with that kind of mindset are more adaptable and resilient." Free national employability programmes would teach young people from all backgrounds essential workplace skills, adds Nigro, such as how to conduct interviews or write a CV.

Most importantly, the next generation of workers will need to be proactive and inquisitive, expanding their knowledge and contacts through LinkedIn, podcasts, articles and talks. "It can be easy to get limited by your little screen," says Hull. "But there's a wealth of experience and insight out there. Finding interesting people outside of your normal realm to get inspiration from is going to be key."

Remote working is here to stay, at least in some capacity. The past two years have been a period of adjustment that have made it harder for all of us, particularly those new to the world of work, to form relationships and practice crucial interpersonal skills. As we move into a hybrid model, our proficiency in soft skills will not depend on chance encounters but on making a conscious effort to learn them. ●

**"You wouldn't trust a pilot to fly a plane if they had just done the online course"**

# A healthy conversation, a healthy career

The pandemic has shown us the value of well-communicated science, and it is creating career opportunities

By Charlie Buckwell

In association with **IPG HEALTH**

When we put our health into the hands of healthcare professionals we want to be confident in their skills, knowledge and training being right up-to-date. The new research and scientific discoveries of today will soon find their way into clinical use. But how effectively that happens is dependent on getting the right information to the right people at the right time, in ways that are highly personal and culturally relevant. This is where expertise in health communications comes in.

Home to the McCann Health and FCB Health agencies, IPG Health is a collective of the world's best healthcare communication agencies. The network is comprised of 5,000-plus health communication professionals across six continents and expert disciplines.

One such discipline within IPG Health is the important field of medical communications, which includes over 750 experts in our team. The role of medical communications is to help translate complex scientific information, data and evidence into communication programmes. These need to be deeply founded in the science, meaningful to the audience, and must facilitate scientific exchange across healthcare professionals. These programmes clearly need to be engaging, interesting, and support development of medical understanding. We do this important work for a diverse client base that includes the world's best and most innovative pharmaceutical and biotech companies, all at the forefront of science and health.

Medical practice though is a complex system of human interaction, healthcare infrastructure, belief systems and rapidly evolving evidence, all of which affect how the science translates to everyday clinical practice. Part of our mission is to close the gap between science and practice, and support healthcare professionals in clinical and research settings by ensuring they have the most up-to-date and accurate information, to help healthcare professionals be ready to fight disease with the best medicines and tools available. This in turn improves life for people, making medical communications a fascinating and highly rewarding sector to work in.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on clinical development, how clinical trials work, and how scientific evidence is derived, analysed,



**Close partnership between healthcare professionals and patients is key to understanding the science**

communicated and how it then influences decision-making and clinical practice. It has elevated the importance and profile of medical science. There is an appetite for better health communication, and the volume and speed of information is accelerating, as is the expectation of when information will be available.

In this context, the discipline of medical communications is rapidly evolving and adapting, and is becoming increasingly important. The switch to virtual events and, going forward, hybrid events, including scientific congresses, is opening up more possibilities for patient and public involvement, so people have the chance to better understand the science, be included in the process, and put forward their voice in the development of new treatments. We believe that people have a right to understand their disease, and democratisation of health knowledge is an inclusive force for good.

This will continue to evolve into hyper-personalised engagement that adapts in real time to how individuals want to take on board new scientific and medical information. The shift from

simply providing information to creating experiential personalised learning is an exciting innovation that will also help cut through information overload and help support more learning in less time.

People in medical communications are passionate about making a positive difference in health. Not everybody can be a doctor, or another healthcare professional. Nor does everyone want to be. But in this field people can utilise their diverse backgrounds, knowledge and skills to make a difference.

These skills include scientific knowledge and expertise, and we have a large world-class team of highly qualified scientific experts. But in addition, medical communications provides opportunities for account managers, project managers, digital experts, creatives and designers, and HR, finance and IT professionals and many others. While many people are unfamiliar with medical communications as a career, it is a rapidly evolving and growing sector with diverse career options.

Medical communications is currently in such demand that we have a shortage of people at all levels, making this a very attractive choice for new people coming

into the sector from scientific and non-scientific backgrounds.

We provide well-structured, extensive onboarding and ongoing learning and development for people coming into medical communications. Our career management programme enables people to develop their expertise and leadership skills. Medical communications is a rewarding, innovative and dynamic team environment where people can really have an impact.

Our clients are engaging us in increasingly strategic, long-term planning requiring insight into future developments in medicine. Our people are increasingly involved in considering what kind of new treatments need to be developed in the coming years to meet future medical need and ensure a compelling clinical proposition.

Medical communications is a rewarding career, which helps to ensure new scientific information gets to the people who need it most, and provides the opportunity to make a real impact to the health of our community. ●

*Charlie Buckwell is chief medical communications officer at IPG Health*



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