Education Committee

Oral evidence: The future of post-16 qualifications, HC 902

Wednesday 27 April 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Apsana Begum; Anna Firth; Ian Mearns; Angela Richardson.

Questions 41 - 77

Witnesses

I. Lord Blunkett, former Secretary of State for Education and Employment; Lord Willetts, former Minister of State (Universities and Science); Sir Charlie Mayfield, Chair, QA and Be the Business.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Blunkett, Lord Willetts and Sir Charlie Mayfield.

Q41 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for coming today. Just for the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, can I ask you to introduce yourselves and your positions?

Lord Blunkett: I am David Blunkett. I am very happy to be called David. I am a former Education and Employment Secretary and an active Member of the House of Lords.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I am Charlie Mayfield and I am chair of a business called QA, which is one of the world's largest training and solutions providers in technology and IT skills. Previously, I also chaired something called the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and, prior to that, I was also chair of the John Lewis Partnership.

Lord Willetts: I am David Willetts, president of the Resolution Foundation, Member of the House of Lords, and formerly Minister for Universities and Science.

Q42 **Chair:** Last week, the Tony Blair Institute published its report, "We Don't Need No Education? The Case for Expanding Higher Education". As you know, the report argues that this should be done by expanding the proportion of young people entering higher education from the current 53% of the cohort to 60% by the end of this decade, and 70% by 2040.

The Department for Education's own statistics suggest that graduates from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will earn significantly less than their better-off peers after graduating—a gap that widens in the five years following graduation. Nearly one in three university undergraduates work in jobs that do not require their degree, and only three fifths of first degree full-time graduates have permanent contracts six months after leaving university.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that one in five students lose money by going to university and that the financial returns for graduates are often underwhelming. The Centre for Social Justice says that a graduate earns less, on average, five years after graduation than a level 5 apprentice earns three years after completion.

Should we be setting a higher target for university admissions when our current university system is misaligned with the needs of the economy and fails to deliver a return on investment for many young people?

Lord Blunkett: First, there is an absolute load of garbage talked in this area. There should not be a stand-off between properly equipped technical and vocational education with high rewards and the future of education in terms of high-level skills, which can often be obtained during one's adult life and not just when a young person leaves school. I appreciate the IFS statistic. Some of the statistics you read out are highly dubious, to put it mildly, and we are in a moment in time when we

desperately need hands-on technical skills, partly because of 1 million people going back to their original homeland in Europe following Brexit, and partly because of the fallout of covid. We should respect that and invest heavily now in technical and vocational education, including T-levels and including maintaining high-level BTEC national diplomas and other high-quality advanced qualifications.

As for the notion that in 20 years' time, we will not have moved, through artificial intelligence robotics, into an entirely different world, we see it already. The changing world of work, where the pattern of how people contribute, whether it is online from home or not, is so rapid a change that not to think about what we will need in 20 years' time and the different approach that will be required would be ridiculous.

Secondly—and then I will let other people contribute—we preach that we need high-level, flexible, adaptable skills, with people working in teams and able to use those soft skills, and to adapt to the technology and the world of tomorrow. Then we immediately reverse that and teach the opposite. We have to stop the stand-off between vocational and academic and realise that, quite often, we need both. I am a living example because I did evening class, day release and got a national certificate in business studies while I was doing A-levels in the evening to get to university. Unless we do that in the new era, with new qualifications and new ways of teaching, we will be miles behind.

The reason that the Blair institute came up with its suggestions is that it was looking at Canada, South Korea, Australia, Japan and those parts of the world that are genuinely addressing the moment but looking to the future.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I agree with David that we should not be looking at there being a stand-off between one side of the so-called divide and the other, but my greater focus is not on how many people are going into higher education, but more on what they do when they get there. That is really the most critical issue, because the evidence that we see within QA, as an employer, is that there is a large and widening gap between the world of education and the world of work, which has very serious consequences for individuals in terms of their ability to gain good and worthwhile employment, and also for the country's competitiveness and productivity, which is held back by there being this gap.

Employers already say that about 50% of young people, whether they are coming out of school or out of university, are not ready for work and, if you like, they are just at the point where they really should be ready. What they say is missing is less about basic skills. All the evidence shows that basic skills are improving over a sustained period of time. It is also interesting that we have more people doing STEM-related degrees in this country than most others in the OECD, which people are often surprised by, but what employers are saying that people do not have enough of is

resilience, communication and problem solving. You could probably add teamwork to that, as David has already mentioned.

When you look within what goes on at universities and schools, you see some signs that are concerning. Only 14% of people at school do work experience. That is despite the fact the Government say that everybody should have two experiences of work before the age of 18. At university, that figure is only 19%, so that is a very low figure.

The other point I would make is that employers are beginning to rely less on educational outcomes and more on alternative means of assessment in making their recruitment decisions. There are just a few points that I think are interesting on that. At QA, we did a scrape of vacancies on job boards, which is a technique that is very easy to do and repeat. We did it at a particular point last year and we were focusing on tech and IT-type vacancies.

First of all, there were 100,000 of those vacancies, with an average salary of £37,000, and that number had risen by 50% on the prior year. When you then looked within the job ads at what the characteristics were that the employers were looking for, the degree that people had done was 12th in the list of priorities for those employers. They were focusing a lot more on other things further up the level. What all these things suggest is that there is a big gap and it is growing.

The other point that I would make is that 60% of recruitment professionals are relying already on alternative assessment techniques. These are online tests to assess people's verbal skills, logical ability and problem-solving, and those are very attractive to employers because, of course, what they give you is a common level on which you can assess every and any candidate, regardless of where they have come from, all at one particular point in time.

It may not be that the final decision is taken on that basis, but a lot of the sifting is happening that way and increasingly so, and that will continue. Therefore, going forward, there is a really big question about what is happening in higher education and how well it is preparing young people for that world of work and the accessibility that they seek for high-paid jobs.

Q43 **Chair:** David, before I get your answer, if I can just carry on with Blair's report, he says that the breadth of skills offered by HE is better suited to the skill demands of the emerging economy than a focus on narrow forms of technical education, but the Pearson Business School says that one in five graduates is not ready for the workplace—something you have just highlighted. Half of HR managers said that graduates lack leadership skills, while a similar number identified skills gaps in negotiation.

Do you agree with the recommendations of the Blair report that these skills can be developed only in higher education? To what extent should university degrees be prioritised relative to technical education as we

better prepare our education system for the evolving world of work?

Lord Willetts: I do not believe in targets. I believe in young people making informed choices about what they should do. There is a deep-seated economic and social trend across advanced western countries for more and more people to have higher education. If you look at the OECD data, in most countries, in most years, it goes up, so it is quite heroic to try to aim at stopping that trend.

Of course, it is very important to be clear what higher education means. Higher education means education at level 4 and above in our multi-storey car park model of education levels. If you say, "Do I think that we should have more people ending up getting education at levels 4 and above?", which includes the technical qualifications you referred to earlier and includes higher-level apprenticeships, then that is both a pretty much inevitable trend and probably a good thing.

I do think the growth is an opportunity to promote more innovation and more diversity, and the best way to achieve that is to plan for a world in which there are more and more people doing higher education. You then have the interesting questions: "Where do you locate new institutions? What type of courses are made available?" I am a believer in growth. Quite a lot, but not all of it, will happen in universities, and this Committee can really help by identifying some of the forms of level 4 and above higher education that you would most like to promote.

Lord Blunkett: Could I just reinforce what Charlie and David have said? It is what we teach and how we teach it, not necessarily the institution and certainly not necessarily whether it is technical or academic. Much of what happens in some universities is technical and vocational. I ought to declare an interest with both the University of Sheffield and the University of Law. In the second case, it is teaching professional skills and qualifications that equip people to go into particular, appropriate employment.

In the first, we have the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, which has higher-level apprenticeships built into it, with the opportunity of people doing all kinds of things on the back of that. Engineering and medicine are vocational, so we do talk a lot of nonsense.

What I would really reinforce is that every course should have modules that are related to the world of work in one form or another, and placements from universities with employers are an absolutely crucial part of achieving that. We are miles off doing it. We tried, with foundation degrees over 20 years ago, to get the world of work and the higher education institutions working together. What we now need, I would suggest, is a seamless approach, where further and higher education work together, entirely collaboratively rather than separately.

Q44 **Chair:** Following what you have said, in my view, one of the disappointing parts of the Blair report is that there is hardly any mention of degree

apprenticeships, where we know students earn while they learn, develop higher technical skills and are virtually guaranteed to get a good job. There is no loan. They also meet the needs of the wider economy in terms of skills. Do you think that the Blair report missed a trick by choosing to focus so heavily on university in a traditional sense rather than to promote alternative post-16 pathways like degree apprenticeships?

Given what you have just said, Lord Blunkett, should every degree course, whether it is classics or engineering, involve a significant part of the week working in an organisation or a company as well as the academic study? If you do classics, you might work at the British Museum or a local museum, for example. If you do English literature, you might work at a publishing company. If you do engineering, you might work at BAE at the same time. It often happens in some vocational universities that you might work at the same time, so it would not just be going off for a year, but be part of your weekly course to work at a business or organisation.

Lord Blunkett: The answer to both your questions is yes. It will take an absolute sea change to achieve this, but we should endeavour to do so. I have just come back from a visit that included the University of California, Los Angeles. I am currently at about 2 o'clock in the morning in my head, so forgive me if I am not as coherent as I might be. That is the leading public—as opposed to private—university in the States. The range of courses available to students and the experiences arising from them are much more impressive than we offer.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: On degree apprenticeships, at QA, we currently have 2,500 degree apprentices on programme, and another 1,500 expected to start over the next 12 months, so we think this is a very important opportunity area. In particular, we focus on technology areas like AI and digital and technology solutions.

One of the observations we make, though, is that, of those 2,500 people on programme, only 20% are under the age of 19 at the point of starting. I am sure you are familiar with the fact that a lot of the degree apprentices are being fulfilled by older workers who are already in the workplace.

I am very much of the view, as colleagues have said already, that it is less about how many people are going to university and what they do when they are there, and I am very strongly a supporter of having many more applied and work-related experiences as a part of that system. In order to achieve that, you have to create a much more porous relationship between the world of education and the world of work. One of the challenges we currently have with this sort of target approach is the simple notion that more people go to university, which means that more schools are in a grade race to try to get the grades that mean that people can get to that university.

As colleagues of mine, who probably know more about this than I do, have said before, universities like teaching students who have deep, specialist knowledge in the areas they are going to be teaching. We have an education supply system that is hard to penetrate for employers. There are great examples, such as the AMRC, which is part of the University of Sheffield, but there are far too few of them.

While I would love to see more degree apprenticeships, and they are a very good system—I can give you stats and information about how you compare one kind of course with another and how much more effective it is on just about every single level—in order to achieve that outcome, we have to address the bigger challenge of whether we have enough porosity between the education supply system and the world of work.

Lord Willetts: I thought you might ask about higher-level apprenticeships. Of course, it would be easy just to sit here and say that it is a fantastic idea, and many of them are excellent, but perhaps I could just make three points of caution.

First, one of the reasons why our higher education system is quite good is that our universities are autonomous. They are different from universities in some other countries where there is a high level of public control. Just as I am against targets, I am against being too prescriptive about exactly what happens in universities. I am much more of a believer in informed choices by individuals.

Of course, among our universities already, going back to David Blunkett's point about the diverse missions of universities, the old colleges of advanced technology, which had sandwich courses as a key part of their identity, carry on. Aston and Brunel provide a year in business as part of the sandwich course model and, if students choose that model because they see it works better for them, that model should expand. In other words, I still believe in a market choice rather than central planning.

Secondly, I am now going to make a really boring Treasury point. When you say that they do not have loans—it is earning and learning—we are talking here about the use of the apprenticeship levy, which is a certain amount of money. Employers are already quite wary of the apprenticeship levy and, understandably, are trying to use it mainly to meet their own training needs. If higher-level apprenticeships on this model keep on growing, we will end up with exactly the same dilemma as we had with conventional higher education, which is the Treasury saying, "Hang on—this is very expensive. How can we fund it? We are not going to put in so much public expenditure", and we shifted to a graduate repayment model.

When I look at priorities for public spending, I do not find, by and large, that any form of higher education is high on the list. Health and earlier stages of education are priorities, so there is a financial constraint somewhere in this system.

Q45 **Chair:** Just 2% or 3% of companies pay the levy, and you could have medium-sized and smaller companies doing degree apprenticeships as well as the big ones.

Lord Willetts: Yes, but at the moment there is an amount of money that is collected through the levy. Would you wish to have a bigger levy or would you like to prioritise this use of the levy against other uses of it? There is a cash constraint somewhere, especially if it is being offered as a free thing. That is my Treasury wariness. I am sorry about that.

Thirdly, I did not respond to your opening observation about disadvantaged students and access. There, the uncomfortable evidence is that degree apprentices are less socially diverse than students doing the same subjects at university not part of a degree apprenticeship. We know from OFS data that degree apprentices are more white, less disabled and more male, and it looks as if the reason for that is that we monitor university recruitment pretty closely and have made a lot of progress on broadening access to university.

Higher education is more accessible than many forms of employment, so the monitoring, scrutiny and pressure on employers taking on higher-level apprentices is much less onerous than the requirements on universities. You could even turn it the other way round. You could say that one of the reasons why there are so many students from ethnic minority and disabled backgrounds now piling into university is that they find that more accessible, sadly, than parts of the labour market.

Q46 **Chair:** Yes, but do not forget that that is because, at the moment, degree apprenticeship offerings are pretty small beer, relatively. There are not that many of them on offer and there is not much advertising about them. Most people do not even know about them. Also, in terms of disadvantaged students, there may be more going to university but they do not go to the good universities—that is the wrong way of putting it.

Lord Blunkett: You should rephrase that, Chair.

Q47 **Chair:** I should say that they do not go to Russell Group universities, and they are more likely to drop out. As the stats show, they do not have good employment outcomes.

Lord Willetts: I have two quick comments on that. First of all, you say "good", although you shifted then to Russell Group. If our agenda is promoting a more diverse range of universities and those with close links to business, every time we think that a certain sort of research-intensive university where researchers get Nobel prizes constitutes a good university, or a university with strong business links or a vocational mission does not, we make the problem worse, not better.

Q48 **Chair:** I was wrong to say that. In terms of the marketing, people believe, sadly, that only Russell Group universities are good universities. That is what I meant by my question, and we know that that is not the case, because there are many non-Russell Group.

Could I move on, because my colleagues want to come in? Just finally, for the time being, this refers to some of the things that David Blunkett said about knowledge and skills, and this false argument where you have one or the other. The schools White Paper just talked about a knowledge-rich curriculum. It barely mentioned the word "skills" in it. Do you think that that is symptomatic of what is wrong with our education system—that we are not preparing pupils for the world of work?

If I can just carry on with that, we allow students to narrow at the age of 16. Surely, given that we underperform compared with many other developed countries in terms of skills, we should offer an international baccalaureate, as 150 other countries do, which has academic education, absolutely, but also includes vocational and technical education, and maths and English all the way through, rather than just saying to students that they can narrow to three or four subjects at the age of 16.

Lord Blunkett: Yes, I am very strongly in favour of that road of direction, with one proviso. We need to adapt the way in which we teach, and Charlie would have a lot more to say about this than I would, in terms of the experience that he is having with QA. The more modern, integrated, hybrid way of teaching will enable that to happen. You will build in the technical, as well as, of course, building on a body of knowledge and what traditionally was called scholarship, which we cannot be against, but we need to have balanced by the hands-on, literally, as well as brain-on, experience of young people that turns them on, rather than turns them off.

The second proviso is whether, with maths in particular, we could adapt it so that we assess and build a set of qualifications that are appropriate to what people will need as they progress. I have not lost out because I did not do algebra, frankly, but I might have done had I gone into a different form of employment and had I been able to see. I am using it as an example of how we need to assess whether people get the skill and the qualification that they require and that they can build on through progression in life.

This is the beginning of a learning process, not the end of it. For so many young people, they are turned off the lifelong learning process by what hoops they are expected to jump through. It is not easy because the minute you talk about this, you talk about dilution and watering down, and that the qualification is not worth it and everybody must have prizes. This is just a nonsense. We need to equip people to be able to continue learning. I was brilliant at arithmetic and useless at other things, not just because I could not see but because they were taught so lousily.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: First of all, on knowledge-rich and skills-light, there is a real opportunity to do a lot more in this space. If I build off where David started around maths, I do not know if you are speaking to National Numeracy, but it is well worth talking to. It is a charity that addresses the issue of a lack of numeracy among adults and it has a lot to

say of real value about how maths is taught, as some of the root causes of this endemic problem.

Furthermore, there is not, in my mind, a dumbing-down issue with introducing skills into a knowledge-rich curriculum. If you take something like maths, is it more useful for people to learn circle theorem—which, by the way, is not "pi R squared", as I thought when I was asked by my son about circle of theorem; it is much more complicated than that—or is it better that people learn how to do data analysis and some of those skills that are highly teachable and very examinable? You can have very high standards and infuse the whole curriculum with modern tools that make the subject much more interesting and rigorous. There is a tremendous opportunity to do more of that.

Your second point really was about, therefore, the merits of broadening the approach and whether we should move away from over-specialism at the age of 16. Broadly, I would be in favour of us doing that. There are many aspects of the IB that are attractive, but I am also very conscious that there are enormous barriers to making a switch of that nature. We have to accept that the education system that we have is complex. It is very hard to change. There are many vested interests and different parties who have strong points of view, most of which are highly valid, and so it is very difficult to change. Therefore, my sense is that it is perhaps dangerous to reach for a solution like the IB, simply because it is going to generate as many enemies as it will supporters, and it probably gets lost in the melee that then proceeds to take place and nothing really changes.

Alternatively, there must be opportunities to add to and enhance the experience of people when they are in education. In this respect, some of the work that we have done at QA is really instructive. In fact, covid has been an accelerator of the adoption of not just digital but blended learning. What we have done in the space of really a couple of years is to completely transform the way we deliver learning. In many respects, to be honest, I would say we are being far more rigorous about assessing what the best ways are of delivering knowledge to people who need it. Some of it is through self-paced digital learning, which, by the way, does not mean Zoom calls with endless PowerPoint. You gamify it and make it interesting and exciting. You can put in quizzes and mechanisms that allow you to measure progress. All of that is really powerful.

Secondly, you then focus on what you do best in the classroom. We have examples where we are already working with some Government Departments on developing things like cyber-explorers, which we have done in conjunction with Government Departments, and also tech bootcamps, which we are delivering through partnerships with universities. They are just examples of where you could infuse what is currently done within the existing system with new things and innovation, which would start us on a pathway towards achieving some of the things that you are describing.

Q49 **Chair:** David, given what Charlie has just said, why not have an option where you would persuade schools that you carry on with A-levels and not upset the apple cart, but say to schools, "There is this IB offering that we would encourage you to do"? There are a few schools that do it—I am going to see one in a few weeks—but not many. You would have an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach in solving this.

Lord Willetts: Yes. Interestingly, it was just after David's time, but in 2005, when Tomlinson was proposed and Labour decided not to do Tomlinson. They instead said, "Don't worry—you will have access to IB in every local area", and that promise was never delivered. This is where I do have very strong criticisms of universities. This system is shaped by university admissions rules, and universities have an interest in recruiting students who already know a lot about a particular subject that they are going to teach and in reducing the risk of students moving from one course to another.

It is completely different from the American system, where you often do not even specify the subject that you are going to do at an American university. There is then internal competition within the university between the different subjects and disciplines: who can attract the student to their subject? This English system is why the IB promise from Labour in 2005 was not delivered.

Universities set very high exchange rates for IB. They would say, "If you want to come to do physics, we really want you to have an A-level in physics, but if you have an IB we are expecting the science element of your IB to be pretty much the same as A-level physics, despite the fact that you have also been doing history, writing essays and doing a second language". The exchange rates set by universities were one of the reasons why the model you previously described has not happened.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: This is a really important point. There are a whole load of unintended consequences that flow from the fact that, in order to get into a good university, you need to get high grades in the subject—

Lord Willetts: Now you're at it.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I would also question the point that David made about, therefore, the autonomy of universities. I agree with that as a principle, but, when you had 6% of people going to university, it was probably more defensible than when you have 50% or even 60% of people going to university. If you want to see significant change in the rest of the education supply system, you have to start with where the biggest, strongest signal is coming from that is currently influencing what goes on in schools, which, effectively, ends up being a bit of a grade race. It is the acquisition of grades, as I said previously. The outcomes are increasingly not valued by employers who have better mechanisms to assess core capability than relying on whether somebody has a 2:2 or a 2:1 in X, Y or Z from X, Y or Z university.

Q50 **Anna Firth:** You made this point earlier, Charlie, and it really interests me. I have come on to this Committee because I want to promote equality of opportunity at all levels of education and into the workplace, so that is where I am coming from. We are heading for a system where, in two of the biggest sectors in employment—one, the City of London, that powers the UK economy, and one, medicine, that looks after our wellbeing—you now need significant work experience, which is not open to all. We do not have equality of opportunity in the internships and the work experience that is necessary to access both of those huge sectors.

I know this from personal experience. I started my career in investment banking in the City. I knew nothing about investment banking when I went to university and had no experience of that sector. No one in my family had ever talked about that sector, but I went through the milk round, attended interviews and got a place. That would be extremely rare today. I have two daughters who have been interested in investment banking, and it is a campaign at university to get a spring placement in order to then have the opportunity of working in that sector.

That is a disaster in the making for us as a country, because we are not enabling the huge pool of talent to access that important sector. It has become exactly the same in medicine, which, you might argue, is more important for us. How are we going to tackle that and ensure that all children get the opportunity of what you termed applied, work-related experiences? It is in all of our interests.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: There is not a simple answer to that—I wish there was—but I very much agree with what you are saying about the importance of having experiences of work in the course of your time in education. Things like the milk round largely do not exist anymore, because employers find going around universities and interviewing people a very inefficient way of recruiting them. It is much easier to get a whole load of people to apply online, do a massive sift and then end up with a smaller group. It is a totally different world today.

In terms of how we do this, there are issues on the employer side and on the education side. At the moment, if you start with schools, which is where you have to begin, it is quite difficult. Years ago, I was involved with Business in the Community, and I remember going to a school in north-west London. We were having a conversation then about how we encourage more work experience. The truth was that, because the school is being measured on Ofsted inspections and ratings, and so on, anything that might get in the way of achieving the right grades in an Ofsted inspection is not something that the headteacher is going to embrace or welcome.

Again, some of the measurement systems we have in place, for good reasons, about raising standards have the unintended consequence of creating an adverse environment with regard to work experience. It is bizarre, because most parents of the kids who are at those schools are in work and have been in that situation. They are engaged with the school.

My sense is that you start locally, work with schools, encourage them to be more open, and create mechanisms that enable parents, apart from anybody else, and local employers to be more engaged with the school and to create more experiences of work. By the way, on that, we need to move away from this slightly monolithic notion of doing a week. It could be less than that. It could be much more modular and bite-sized.

Q51 **Anna Firth:** Can I push back at you a bit on that? I did exactly that as a governor of a leading Kent grammar school, which has given evidence in this inquiry. That does work at a local level—putting on a careers fair and organising mentoring over the summer—but what then happens is that people get those opportunities who are friends, or daughters or sons, of the parents who have those careers, and that is not fair. It is better the way it is at the moment, where the City makes it an open competition, but still, in order to get through those hoops and to pass the exams and tests that they have, and then to do well in the internship, you need support around you. You need people who know how to get you through those tests and help you through that apprenticeship. That is where the unfairness is.

Chair: Can I just ask you both to answer in a nutshell, because I want to bring in Angela?

Lord Willetts: Yes. Very briefly, I have one practical point on this. It goes back to your opening remarks, Chair. When we put the student fees up to £9,000, we required that about £1,000 of that be spent on access. Our focus then was very much on ensuring that disadvantaged students got into university. Things have improved a lot. We still have more to do, but they have improved.

As Robert said at the beginning, even when, at universities, kids from disadvantaged backgrounds have outperformed—and it is the only stage of education where they do a bit better—for any given level of educational attainment, when they then go out into the labour market, disadvantaged graduates earn less than advantaged graduates.

These access funds can be used to fund the kind of initiatives needed to tackle the problem you described. If it is investment banking, predominantly in London, and if you are prosperous and living outside London, you can help fund your student to do an internship during the summer. If you are not, you cannot. Universities using their access money to help students in their last year get placements, internships and work experience when mummy and daddy cannot do it for them would be a very good use of access money, and there could be a rebalancing towards helping them out into the labour market and not just recruiting.

Q52 **Angela Richardson:** My question is fairly broad—in your substantial answers, you have already covered quite a few things—and is about knowledge and skills. Lord Blunkett, you mentioned that we need high-level, flexible skills and adaptability. Charlie, you talked about resilience, communication and teamworking—some of those softer skills. Lord

Willetts, you talked about these alternative assessment techniques that take place with employers.

We know that the world of work is rapidly changing for young people. We know that we have skills gaps and we want our young people to be able to take on a full part in society in the work that they do. What are the implications of the way that we teach those skills and knowledge? We are talking about post-16 skills and curriculum, and the world of work, but what are the implications right from the beginning in terms of how we prepare our young people, but also thinking about some of our adult learners, their return to work and how we might be able to meet some of the skills gaps that we have at the moment, as well as preparing for those future skill requirements?

Lord Blunkett: We need to start by teaching the teachers and inculcating this from as early a point in the education journey as we can. Incidentally, I ought to say that, from my wife's experience as a GP, the medical schools that are really doing well on this are those that have outreach programmes and pre-med courses that allow youngsters from more disadvantaged communities—because it is not just households—to access. I just thought I had better get that on the record; otherwise I will be shot when I get home.

We need to teach the teachers—and, in some areas, teaching the teachers means teaching people who have no teaching skills at all, which is true of quite a lot of people who are teaching in higher education, including in medicine—taking on board what is happening from the early years in terms of teaching methodology and the experience of those who are hands-on and qualified teachers.

I should declare an interest—I have a PGCE from a very long time ago, but I would not risk any students outside the higher education system being taught by me now. We need to address the gap. I am quite interested in something that we toyed with but were not able to do because of workforce planning and numbers, which is that we should give our teachers at every level a sabbatical in which they immerse themselves in new experiences, including the technological developments that Charlie has talked about.

Q53 **Angela Richardson:** Charlie, talking about resilience—that is one of the key things that young people need; we need it as Members of Parliament as well—how can we meet that lack of resilience in our teaching of skills?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: You have to expose young people to difficult situations, but in a supportive environment where there is the help to get them through that, so that they swim and do not sink. That is fundamentally it. In terms of putting people into areas of work, one of the things about school is that you spend your time within a cohort of people who are all roughly the same age as you, and then you go into the workplace and suddenly find yourself, for the first time in your life, in a place that is very often far more diverse in age and every other dimension. Yet you have young people who are often slightly insecure and

want to fit in, and they are suddenly having to try to do that in a different environment. Giving people earlier experiences of that environment is one of the ways you can support people's resilience and help them to develop that.

I also want to touch on some of the questions you put to Lord Blunkett. In terms of what we teach and how we teach, I have probably said enough already about what we teach. There is a real opportunity to enrich the curriculum. We could put together a panel of employers, very selectively, with people who are setting the curriculum, and explore together how we could enrich that in academically rigorous ways. That would be a great opportunity.

Secondly, on how we teach, again there are tremendous opportunities to do more here. I have already touched on the notion of blended learning. There has been a revolution in the way people learn during covid. The notion that it is a return to the classroom or it is online is a gross oversimplification of the opportunity. The blended opportunity is enormous and powerful, and it helps on almost every level. It helps with how people learn, but it also helps to address some of the constraints on change within the education system, such as overworked teachers. If you ask teachers to deliver more and more without increasing the resource, do not be surprised when that does not work. It is a big opportunity.

Another thing we have done at QA is bootcamps, which are programmes that last between nine and 14 weeks. They are very effective. They are very focused on developing skills with a view to people going into a particular line of work, and the employment outcomes are fantastic. Well over 80% of people then go into employment.

There is an equality point here—on Anna's earlier question about how you create more access. One thing we have found with our bootcamp model is that employers have come to us saying, "We are concerned that we are not getting the right diversity in our intake. Can you please go and use the bootcamp methodology and assessment tools to recruit people who have the aptitude but not necessarily the formal qualifications that they would normally have to get into some of these things?" They do a nine to 14-week programme, and then they come in and are pretty much work-ready. We have done some very successful pilots for the DfE and for many employers.

Finally—and then I will just be quiet—there is also a huge opportunity within degrees. We partner with a number of universities in the UK, and what we are doing, effectively, is taking some of the tools that we have developed in the commercial world and infusing them into the delivery of degree programmes with advanced practice modules, some of the bootcamp methodologies and, increasingly, our blended learning, which, again, enriches it and makes it all more work-ready.

Q54 **Angela Richardson:** Lord Willetts, we are talking about knowledge being very important and the skills, as the ability to apply that knowledge. In

answering that question, have we focused too much on the knowledge side of things and not enough on the skills? Are we getting the balance right in what we teach and how we teach it?

Lord Willetts: That is a very big question. The biggest gap, created partly by early specialisation, is maths and digital skills. I do not know if that is even defined as a subject matter or a skill. I certainly do not mean classic academic maths. I mean maths and digital skills to operate effectively in the modern world, and that is a real weakness, exacerbated by the fact that a lot of people at the age of 16, even if they are on a route to a relatively academic course, can have stopped doing maths, which is a big problem.

As well as the IB agenda, which is one way of tackling this problem, the other way is to have critical maths available as a really useful course for students at school who may not be doing A-level maths—that is the vast majority of them—and probably also the extended project qualification, which is another really useful way of people at the other end of the scale, maybe doing lots of science, just organising their thoughts in a sustained way.

We are going in the wrong direction. We have gone down to three A-levels. The range of subjects within the three A-level choices, if anything, is reducing. These fundamental skills—extended writing and doing maths—should be pervasive across schools and colleges, and you would probably need a pot of money to fund schools and colleges to deliver them.

Lord Blunkett: It was sad for me that there was only a handful of universities that fought to stop the demolition and abolition of AS-levels—Cambridge was one of them—when we were moving in exactly the opposite direction to what everybody was preaching.

Lord Willetts: There is a contrast, where there is the agenda at higher education for modular learning now, with the lifelong learning entitlement, but at 16 to 18 we are heading in exactly the opposite direction. The AS was a kind of module, and many people did AS maths, so we are heading for extremely traditional A-levels and only three of them, done in a sustained way for two years, with no opting in and out. It is a very different model, and that is why this Committee's inquiry is so relevant, because 16 to 18 is heading in the wrong direction.

Q55 **Caroline Ansell:** On that note—16 to 18s heading in the wrong direction—that is quite a dramatic springboard for me. You will be interested to note that responses to our inquiry on the post-16 marketplace, if you will, have ranged from those whose contribution cites choice, that the current range of courses offers support for people from a range of backgrounds, that the A-level is good preparation for higher education and that BTEC gives breadth and contributes to social mobility, to other contributions—same inquiry, same landscape—that describe our system as too complicated and confusing, and incentivised courses that

are cheaper to teach and easier to pass.

Noting Charles' earlier comment around change being incredibly difficult to land and the need, perhaps, for more innovation in the current landscape, how do you see the curriculum as preparing students for the world of work? I am particularly interested in the point that Anna raised on work experience. What you described earlier, when we talked about widening gaps, seems to be a widening gap between employers and the qualifications and learning that students have. If it is the case that only 14% experience anything of the world of work during that pre-16 phase, and not much higher thereafter, and yet employers are not valuing or recognising the qualifications that they achieve at school, is there a critical gap here between the two?

Lord Blunkett: That is a very broad question. We did start to reach a consensus in the House of Lords between Ken Baker, David Willetts, Andrew Adonis, Jo Johnson, me and others, which ended up with a score draw in terms of what we were doing with the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. Just talking with Charlie and David outside, given the experience we had in debating that legislation in the House of Lords, if we could just sit down quietly, as we are doing this morning, and work it through, we could come to a genuine consensus, which would allow some stability in going forward. You will never take politics out of this, but it would take rather meaningless, conflicting party politics out of it.

Do we want high-quality qualifications, whether they are technical or academic? Yes, of course we do. Do we want them to be accessible by as many young people as possible? Yes, of course. Do we understand that many A-levels do not end up as the predictor of where people are going to be, but vocational qualifications, by their nature, will do? In particular, T-levels, which I am in favour of, are more focused and narrower. Do we get business involved enough? No, we do not. Will the local skills improvement plans work? They will only if chambers of commerce have the capacity and the resource to do it. Most of them do not. How do you get employers engaged when they are desperate for labour? They know what they want but they do not connect with the system to deliver it.

Unless we have some consensus about how we build that, and, by the way, what relevance LEPs have any more in this landscape, we are going to talk about it and get annoyed and aggravated that it does not happen, but we will not change it.

Q56 **Caroline Ansell:** When you say capacity and resource at chambers of commerce, what would that resource look like?

Lord Blunkett: Some chambers are very well resourced, because they have very good structures that engage their local businesses. In some areas, they have the capacity because the business community is wealthier by the nature of the tasks that are being fulfilled. That is partly structural within our economy. Going back to Anna's point about the City of London, we have demolished parts of our financial deliveries outside

the City of London and Edinburgh over the last 30 years, and we do not have regional banks in the way that the Germans do.

The capacity exists where the chambers have been able to build up the resource from the locality. Some chambers have collapsed and are now rebuilding; others have virtually disappeared. Unless we are honest about it, we will not get this right. It is no good saying that an LSIP will be driven by a chamber that has no way of doing it with a LEP that is utterly useless.

Chair: I might make the observation that some chambers that call themselves chambers are not even chambers.

Q57 **Caroline Ansell:** No, indeed. I would be most interested in your thoughts on how Government might incentivise business to be greater contributors. Arguably, it is in their interest to see the skills promoted that they are looking to recruit later down the line. To Charlie's point around Ofsted—I should declare that I was an inspector as well as a teacher in former years and absolutely understand the drive in schools to marry up to those areas that are going to come under judgment—how can we sharpen that part of the school system so that it is better reflected?

An important part of schools' mission is to prepare their student body for the world of work. In curriculum terms, what is happening on careers guidance allied to that work experience? Also, how can Ofsted have a greater role in ensuring that that is recognised, celebrated and invested in in schools?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I would go back to "Preparing people for what?", because most schools are trying to prepare their students to get into university, and increasingly so, with more than 50% of people going to universities. There is a belief that going to a good university then leads you into a good job, which means you have a good experience of lifelong learning and progression. What I am saying is that that chain is broken, or is certainly creaking, and, therefore, you have to have that in mind.

What David said earlier about different practices in other countries is quite interesting. In the Netherlands, for example, to get into top universities, you do not need three A*s. You have threshold levels of requirements, which might be three Bs or three Cs, but when you get to the university, if you do not then achieve the required level over the first year, you have to leave. They calibrate it so that people do leave, which puts the onus on the student.

To your point about Ofsted, it is doing what the Government are asking it to do. It is, effectively, raising standards; that has happened, but what is happening, because everybody thinks that they need to go to university, is that the process of education becomes a grade race rather than a focus on education and how you can improve things.

The other point that I would make here is that I am a businessman, not a politician, so I tend to deal in practicalities, not in ideology.

Lord Blunkett: Ooh.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: That is no criticism of either my colleagues on my left or my right.

Ian Mearns: Honest, guv.

Chair: Or members of this Committee.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: Or this Committee. From a business perspective, looking at the education system and what you are taking on, it is a formidable challenge to change it, so it is very sensible to adopt a mindset of seeking accelerated evolution that is sustained over time. By the way, the point about cross-party support here is so important, because of the need for things to happen and be sustained over a period of time, rather than seeking revolution in any one moment.

When you take that sort of philosophy and apply it to some of the challenges that we have—

Chair: In a nutshell, because we have loads to do.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: In a nutshell: focus on key requirements and look at what the best ways of delivering those are, how that can fit within the existing system, and then how you can pilot and innovate within it. If you take something like maths, work experience, apprenticeships or even degrees, one thing that we are all vigorously agreeing on is that there is scope for improvement on all of those. Taking that practical approach could be a good way of uncovering it.

Q58 **Caroline Ansell:** David W, what are your thoughts on the curriculum and how it prepares students?

Lord Willetts: Can I just say something about employers? First of all, thinking back to my experiences as a constituency MP, employers are a very diverse group. You will get some employers who absolutely love the idea of serving on a school governing body and having some students at their workplace. Others just say, "I am quite busy enough trying to keep my company going. The last thing I need is being told that I have a responsibility for education. That is the educationist's job".

There is also a tendency for us in politics and in Government to expect more of employers than they are willing to do. For example, I am quite worried about whether T-levels are really going to be viable, if all T-levels require 45 days of work experience. The amount of money that is having to be spent as an incentive to employers to get them to offer the 45 days is a very interesting market measure of what employers require in order to engage in this way. In my experience, employers are most focused on how they can improve the skills of the people they already employ, which is part of the value of apprenticeships. Apprentices are employees of an organisation.

I would focus on ways in which we can work with employers to make upskilling of their workforce easier, and have more flexible access to education institutions. Trying to get employers to take a responsibility in a local school as well is quite a big ask.

Caroline Ansell: That is very helpful.

Q59 **Ian Mearns:** I have wanted to ask this question for quite some time. Lord Blunkett—it has been mentioned this morning already—do you ever regret that we did not implement the recommendations of the Tomlinson review?

Lord Blunkett: Yes, I do. In many senses, it was realpolitik. We did not prepare the ground sufficiently. If the emphasis of the whole education system is on the gold standard being A-levels, and then you come forward with a report that talks about a diploma, it is not surprising that you are pushing water uphill.

One of the tasks from this Committee's report later in the year and onwards is to widen this debate, so we have a consensus that, when we change things, we are not necessarily reducing the quality of what we have on offer. I tried to explain this earlier. I am not in favour of "all should have prizes". People will have different outcomes, and those outcomes can be just as valuable but not necessarily at the same level. They can be assessed and build a portfolio of achievement, not at a specific age. People mature at different ages.

There is a big debate going on outside this room and outside the DfE about this process. You could build up a portfolio that could be a passport of education, which you build on during your life. We have talked about this. Some of us are getting to the point where it will not happen, because we are too old. People are going to have to continue learning and readapting throughout their lives. We should start that at a very early stage. We should understand it then, rather than capping it off. Having a whole new way of providing people with that portfolio and that passport that they will build on, so it would be a floor rather than an escalator, could be really important.

We cannot go back on what happened in 2005. It also depends on the Ministers who were there, of course, as well as the Prime Minister, but it is crucially affected by how the debate outside confines what we do. I hope that is a reasonable summation of why we did not progress.

Q60 **Ian Mearns:** I have been a member of this Committee now, I am afraid to say, for 12 years. I cannot remember the number of times I have said to people that we could go back, look at the Tomlinson review and use it as a starting point for looking at where we need to go in the future. It is only 18 years ago, but it is still relevant.

Lord Blunkett: I commend you on your tenacity in being on the Committee for 12 years. Chair, I am going to have to go to the meeting I described before we started. I just want to say this. Part of what all of us

should be doing is learning from the past, adapting to the changed circumstances of the moment and reflecting on what we will need for the future. Most of the time, we do not do any of those things. We just bat hell out of each other.

We need to learn from what went wrong as well as what went right, stop reinventing the wheel and not ditch everything that previous Governments have done. I tried not to in 1997. There was a synergy between what came before and what I tried to do. I worked with Gillian Shephard both in the lead-up to the election and afterwards. I even went to open her husband's school when I was the Education and Employment Secretary. We can decide where we disagree fundamentally and then try to concentrate on where we agree and try to build on that.

The questions we have had this morning from the panel and the experience that David and I had in the House of Lords over the 12 months indicate that we can get a lot further than we ever thought we could on a consensus.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming, Lord Blunkett. I wish you well.

Lord Blunkett: Thank you.

Lord Willetts: I just want to follow up on a point that Lord Blunkett made. There is a lot of wisdom and experience there. This is a really crude political point. A-levels are a very popular brand. Tomlinson's first mistake was creating this new thing called diplomas. What he should have said is, "We love A-levels. We love A-levels so much we are going to update them and make them even more relevant for the future. These are new A-levels".

Ian Mearns: New Labour, new A-levels.

Lord Willetts: Yes. I would also say, "We love A-levels so much that we do not think people should be restricted to only three A-levels". Would it not be marvellous if we could redesign A-levels so that you could aim to do four, five or six A-levels? I would not go for a headlong battle about something called A-levels, which is one of the few features of the education system that most voters actually know about.

Q61 **Ian Mearns:** Members of the Committee will be sick of hearing me say this stuff, but, on the whole skills agenda, is part of the problem not the ever-changing nature of our employment base? I come from the north-east of England, as you can probably tell. The north-east of England has a population of 2.6 million, but it is a very large geographical area. There are only 1,000 companies with more than 50 employees in the north-east of England. The question is how we get that employment base, those companies, to engage with the world of education, learning and training. There are an awful lot of them that are not engaged in that at all, including with their own future workforce.

How do we bring about that culture change among businesses to get

them actively engaged in thinking about how they engage with, for instance, the 45 days of work experience that are going to be required for T-levels? There are an awful lot of companies that have not got their heads around that at all.

Lord Willetts: I know. There was a very interesting common cause made in the Lords between Conservative and Labour Members on BTECs. I was working in No. 10 when Margaret Thatcher and Ken Baker proposed and introduced BTECs. BTECs are a previous attempt to solve exactly the problems that this Committee is worried about. They have not been perfect, and there have been issues about quality, but they are now well recognised. The applied general qualification, which many BTECs are, is understood by employers and does have an employer focus.

Just as with A-levels, BTECs are a well-known brand. You can try to improve them and you can make sure there is a bit more independent assessment to make sure the quality is high, but to say, after 40 years, "We are going to close them down and shift to this new thing called T-levels" is a high-risk strategy. That is why I am pleased that the Secretary of State has announced that they are going to go slowly on the closing of BTECs. There are still risks. BTECs were designed to tackled some of the problems you are concerned about. It would be a real pity if we were to lose them from the landscape.

Q62 **Ian Mearns:** I had a meeting yesterday evening that had guests down from the Construction Alliance North East and a range of employment groups that are in the construction industry. They are saying to us that the average age of a bricklayer in the construction industry is 55. How many young people are being guided towards construction industry apprenticeships? It is very few. We have a real problem. It has been mentioned by yourself this morning as well. Careers information, advice and guidance delivered in an impartial and independent way within schools is just not happening in the way in which it should.

Lord Willetts: I was on the wrong side of some of these arguments, but, looking back, the training boards did quite a good job. You could argue that the apprenticeship levy is a more generic and less understood version of the days when there were training boards.

Ian Mearns: It has been a disaster.

Lord Willetts: Some of them survive. A training board should make you feel like your industry is contributing to the training of people who work in it. We then had the sector skills councils, which were another attempt at all of this. We probably need programmes that employers can understand as being relevant for their sector and their industry rather than generic ones.

Q63 **Ian Mearns:** Given the ground we are on, which is quite difficult—we have a significant skills gap—how can the Government best ensure that young people gain the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in

this rapidly changing modern economy? What is the magic bullet?

Lord Willetts: Charlie can comment on this, because he has been involved. The old UK CES used to have a very interesting agenda, and I hope the same will happen with the new skills unit that the Secretary of State is proposing. Again, this is very relevant for the Committee. How do you get most value out of the skills unit? There is data.

One of my frustrations when I was Minister was that the Migration Advisory Committee was identifying shortage occupations for which migration was needed, but this was not being properly fed into the funding of vocational training, although it was quite an important piece of evidence about where you should prioritise your training programmes and where you could fund apprenticeships at a higher rate. We have the sad story of heavy goods vehicle drivers. There was an apprenticeship, but it is clear that the apprenticeship was too clunky and too cumbersome. The industry was not using it. They would rather have had a more flexible and accessible qualification. It was only the shortage that revealed the problem. You can work through it by identifying particular initiatives that help in particular areas.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: A lot of points have been made just now, but I will just touch on a couple. When I first joined the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, one of my first jobs was to review sector skills councils. We found that the Government were effectively giving, from memory, £2.1 million each to about 27 or 28 different sector skills councils. It became very clear through the review we did that some were good, some were not so good and some were average.

Q64 **Ian Mearns:** Some of them were very good at self-promotion, and that is about all they did.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: What we did was to change the funding system. We said, "You are not going to just get £2.1 million whether you are good, bad or indifferent. You have to demonstrate that you are effective in identifying the skills needs of the sector. If you are, you will get money. In fact, you will get more money if you are really good at that".

Lo and behold, some of the usual suspects were quite good at it. Some of the IT and technology areas, and some of the engineering sectors, were better at it. Construction was middle ranking but had issues to do with the history of different bodies in that area. In principle, the approach was beginning to yield some interesting results. It basically gave encouragement to the ones who were not performing to get themselves sorted out. Retail was one of those. I was at JLP at the time, and it was not good enough, frankly. It fell away, and it was then reincarnated in a different form. Then UK CES was abolished, and with it went that cross-party business-provider oversight of a really critical area. I am not honestly sure what has happened to that whole landscape since.

I have another point that is very relevant to your question about how to get employers to engage. We ran something called the UK employer skills survey, which in its time was the largest and most comprehensive quantitative survey of skills requirements by employers worldwide. It was a leading piece of work. We interviewed something like 80,000 businesses every year. That allowed us to segment the data by sector, region or town. You could use it to say, "This is what employers are reporting as their key skills needs". It was taken forward; it went into BEIS. I am not sure what has happened to it since, to be honest, but I have not heard much about it.

The point I am making is that we need to think about how to get better signalling from the world of work into the world of education. We have very good signalling from universities. If you want to get into university, you know you need to get these grades. That has some adverse consequences. We have very poor signalling, generally, from the world of work. We need better institutions or better groups of employers that are appropriately incentivised to do a better job, and better sources of data and insight, which can then fuel all of that. We could recreate that relatively easily. When you talk to employers, they are finding it desperately hard to recruit people at the moment. It is very, very expensive. They have a real incentive to engage in that.

Q65 **Ian Mearns:** You are talking about signalling. With regards to universities, we have a situation where our schools are geared up to sending youngsters to those universities. There are youngsters who are not destined to go to university. The schools do not have the right curriculum to deliver for those kids.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: We have not talked that much about apprenticeships today.

Chair: Don't worry—we are coming on to that.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: They are incredibly important. The fact is that there is still a huge perception gap. They are not seen as something that is desirable. They are not promoted, and they are harder to access for a lot of people.

You said that the apprenticeship levy has been a disaster. I would disagree with that, or at least urge caution. I go back to the point about Tomlinson. Why did Tomlinson fail? It failed because it tried to suggest an alternative to A-levels. One of the worst things we could do is continue with the chop and the change and the chop and the change, which has so hampered the development of an alternative route into work.

Ian Mearns: I would venture to say that Tomlinson did not fail. It was never tried. There we go.

Q66 **Chair:** On the BTEC issue, when I talk to the Skills Minister or the Department about it, they say, "BTECs produce poor outcomes for

students". The Education Datalab stats suggest that pupils who take BTECs are more likely to be in employment by age 22 compared with those who take A-levels, and they earn £800 more a year on average. Is this your view? Are there too many BTECs? Is it quantity over quality?

Lord Willetts: I am not familiar with that specific statistic. At any one time, there are about 250,000 people aged 16 to 18 doing some BTEC or other. It is a big part of our 16-to-18 system. Getting rid of them would be a really big change. They are understood by employers. They are of mixed quality. Some of them are very general, and other vocational qualifications are very specific. The DfE says, "There are too many of them, and it is very confusing".

In opposition to David, in the shadow Cabinet before 2010, I remember that we said, "There are too many vocational qualifications. We should just have a few broad general ones; we should have general vocational BTECs". Then the stonemasons came to see me and said, "We have an established stonemasonry vocational qualification. Maybe 10 or 20 people a year do it, but they know that is their route to becoming a stonemason, carving funeral monuments and other things. We have been doing it for a long time. It is the recognised route into stonemasonry. What do you have against a stonemasonry vocational qualification, Mr Willetts, other than saying that not many people do it? Of course not many people do it; there are not that many stonemasons, but it is bloody useful for those who do it".

We have to be careful when we say, "There are too many qualifications". Some of these are niche, but they are a recognised and valuable niche. The fact that not many people are doing it is not of itself a bad thing. It may be a niche for which there is a particular precise and well understood need.

Q67 **Chair:** Charlie, are the outcomes of BTECs good, as the Education Datalab suggests, or not?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I would not profess to be particularly well informed on BTECs specifically, so I would be cautious about giving a very strong view on that, frankly. I am sure that there are improvements that could be made to BTECs. Rather than regarding them as good or bad, I am sure that there are improvements that could be made within the range. In a lot of these areas we are talking about, my sense is that it is better to accelerate evolution towards improvement than to abolish or revolutionise things.

One of the interesting points is, "How do you drive improvement?" One of the things we should recognise is that it is quite difficult to get employers to say what they really want. The usual suspects will trot up to Ministers and say, "We must have this, this, this and this", but you will not hear from the vast majority of the people in Ian's constituency, who do not really engage in that at all.

I go back to the importance, therefore, of creating the mechanisms that do surface what employers really need. We need to make sure they are robust and objective. We do that in QA all the time. It is our business. It is in our business interest to do it. There are lots of tools you can use to assess what people are looking for in employment vacancy advertisements, for example. We feed that in directly to how we develop courses and curricula.

Chair: The Government would say the local skills partnerships will help do that. Whether they do or not, who knows?

Q68 **Apsana Begum:** Good morning, panel. I have a couple of questions around the proposals to remove applied general qualifications and disadvantaged students in particular. The DfE's own impact statement last year mentioned that students with special educational needs and disabilities, those from Asian ethnic groups, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and males could be particularly impacted. I just want to understand your views on that. How could that impact be mitigated?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: Again, I am probably not the best person to comment on the details of the policy. What I can say is that we can take approaches that can be focused very effectively on disadvantaged groups that perhaps have not succeeded as much as they should have done or have not been given the opportunities that they should have been given in the education system.

The bootcamp example, which I referred to earlier, is one that we have actively used very effectively to target disadvantaged people and people from more diverse backgrounds who, for whatever reason, have not ended up with the qualifications that the system tends to prioritise. They absolutely do have the aptitude. It is just a question of being more focused and delivering better on how you engage them to get employment outcomes.

Lord Willetts: You are absolutely right about those concerns. I have two quick points. First of all, there is this question about how you measure quality. Is it absolute or is it relative to the background of the people you are talking about?

As soon as you start saying that it is relative to the background that people are coming from, Ministers say—and I understand this—"You are being patronising. You are not allowing people to show themselves". In fact, if you are from a very disadvantaged background, it is a longer journey to take. An institution might move you up quite a long way, even if you do not end up doing as well as someone who went to public school or earn as much as if you had gone into one of the classic professions. BTECs partly appear to be "low quality", because they often service more disadvantaged groups. It is reasonable to allow for that in the assessment of the performance of BTECs. That is my first point.

My second point is this. The Secretary of State has moved quite a lot already, but there is this doctrine of overlap. The overlap doctrine does not fully recognise that BTECs are a different type of qualifications from T-levels. The fact that there is a T-level in some occupational category does not of itself mean that there is no remaining role for BTECs that appear to be in a broadly similar occupation. BTECs are a different type of qualification. There is now going to be a more carefully considered and slower process. I welcome what Ministers have said, but we really do need to monitor very carefully what happens.

Q69 **Apsana Begum:** There is a point around T-levels and A-levels, and that binary. The BTECs were a middle road for a lot of people. In March 2022, Lord Baker told us about the fact that T-levels would not work for all learners and the concerns around potential drop-out rates. He talked about UTCs, and he said that T-levels do "not suit children who get 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 in GCSE", meaning they might just drop out. That is probably what needs to be considered in terms of the wider consultation as well.

Lord Willetts: I agree. There is a real danger about the pursuit of "quality". There is certainly a nightmare scenario in which you have A-levels and T-levels, but you then have a group of 16 to 18-year-olds who are not served and do not end up with any useful training qualification because any such qualification would be "poor quality". That is one of the reasons why the loss of BTECs would be a real problem.

Ministers are now more cautious. They have responded to these concerns. Again, for this Committee, we have to track exactly how they interpret quality. There is this big role for IfATE to take decisions about BTECs in the future. IfATE needs to be held to account for how it reaches those judgments and what criteria it uses. These types of issues should be part of their decision-taking process.

Q70 **Anna Firth:** Can we move on to the issue of apprenticeships and, in particular, degree apprenticeships, which we have already touched on throughout this conversation? This Committee is in furious agreement that apprenticeships are one of the best engines of social mobility ever created.

I wonder whether you would agree with me that the financial sector and the business sector have known that for years and years, long before politicians ever got hold of this notion. Indeed, since politicians have really focused on this, it is a disappointing fact that the number of apprenticeships has declined every year for the last five years. At the same time, we see undergraduate courses rising to an all-time record high. There is a big problem here that needs to be unpicked.

In anticipation of this hearing, the Essex Chambers of Commerce arranged a roundtable for me last week with local businesses in Southend West. That is a chamber doing a very good job. I am happy to give them a shout-out. The point I took away from that evening was that no system of apprenticeships—this may apply to degree apprenticeships as well; I do

not know—will ever work unless it is employer-led and has employer engagement at the very heart and centre of the system. Against that backdrop, how can we reverse this trend and improve the uptake of these apprenticeships, particularly degree apprenticeships?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: The first thing to say is that I vigorously agree about your point about employer leadership on this agenda.

Anna Firth: That is a good start.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: One of the challenges or unintended consequences of the apprenticeship levy is that it has the effect of turning what should be an employer-led programme into a Government scheme. It is then very easy for employers to criticise it. They can say, "The Government have done this, and it is not working. Therefore, it is not my responsibility to do more to make this work better".

Having said that, in the absence of any incentives, the risk is that, equally, you do not get many apprentices, employers do not do enough to create these pathways into work for young people, whether they are degree or ordinary apprentices, and the system just does not work. I absolutely understand why the Government at the time arrived at the apprenticeship levy as a way of addressing that problem. It is wrong to say that it has been a disaster, because there have been some good things.

On the face of it, your point about the decline in the numbers of apprentices is concerning, but you also have to look at what has been happening. Certainly, in our experience within QA, we have pretty much stopped doing lower-level apprentices. The reason is that the standards that people were achieving were not so very different to the levels that people could be recruited at in the market by employers. The value of going through the rigmarole was not really there for employers; nor was it there for us as a commercial business providing into this world.

Instead, we have switched massively into doing higher-level apprenticeships. They are of higher quality, really rigorous and deliver great outcomes. We have also, by the way, innovated a lot in terms of the delivery of those apprentices, again taking on board what I said about digital and blended learning, all of which is achieving much better outcomes. Yes, we are five years in; yes, it is concerning that the numbers have been declining.

This is a perfect example. If the solution is to scrap it and start again, I suspect that all that will happen is we will be back in the same position in five years' time. We need to say, "What do we have? What is good? What is not good enough? How do we improve from here?" In terms of those improvements, there are a few things. One is that there is friction for employers. It is hard for employers to engage with the system. Big employers can do it more easily than small employers, and therefore you

see a preponderance of larger employers within the apprenticeship world. Anything that can be done to reduce that level of friction would be helpful.

One of the contentions there is that the Government are clearly concerned about deadweight. There is history, by the way, of people using apprentices poorly, to which none of us would want to go back. The Government have tended to focus on looking for due diligence within the process of the delivery of the apprenticeship, which is what creates a lot of the friction. Things like the 20% off-the-job training have to be delivered through an approved supplier. All of those things are part of the desire to ensure that quality is delivered in the process.

My argument would be to put more emphasis on the outcome. Can you see a measurable improvement in the skills that have been attained? If you can, and you can be confident that is better than what would have happened in the normal course of events for that individual, the Government should be less concerned about the method through which those skills were acquired. That kind of philosophy could unlock more apprentices who are focused on the right things, which might be helpful.

Perception, by the way, is also a big issue. There is still a huge issue with awareness and how parents and young people view the alternative of apprenticeships versus HE.

Lord Willetts: Let me start by saying that I understand the value of apprenticeships. The Chair, Robert, has done a fantastic amount to get them up the political agenda. My father ran an apprenticeship programme for a midland manufacturing firm. The trends are pretty clear. Apprenticeships are going up the age scale and up the educational levels. Apprentices are becoming older, and they are more and more at levels 3, 4 and above.

I personally think it is very hard to see that trend being reversed. This is a change in the quality and type of apprenticeships based on the big fact that, to be an apprentice, you already have to have an employer who has decided to take you on as an employee, with all the rights and costs that go with that.

This goes back a bit to the BTEC exchange that we had. As well as apprenticeships, we need some kind of traineeship or vocational qualification that falls short of an apprenticeship, that is not a full-blown apprenticeship and that does not require the employer to have taken the big decision to have taken you on as an employee, with all the labour protections that go with that. I would start with that to plug the gap rather than try to push apprenticeships back down to 16-year-olds and back down to level 2. They are heading in a different direction.

Q71 **Anna Firth:** Can I just ask a follow-up? I am very interested in your last point there, Lord Willetts. In the area that I represent—I am sure it is the same with many others—over 95% of the businesses are micro-businesses with zero to nine employees. In this country, over 99%

of businesses in the entire country are small or medium-sized. We heard evidence at this Committee a few weeks ago about the possibility of these very small employers offering hybrid apprentices with another employer. That would be some sort of blended apprenticeship or possibly more of a training scheme. Does that sound like something we could explore?

Lord Willetts: Absolutely, yes. Take a caricature, but a real case example, of an individual plumber. Someone who is working as a plumber will often say to you that they do not feel able to take on an apprentice solely as their personal responsibility given, as he or she might see it, all the hassle that goes with that, but you can have a group training association. That starts by training people in the basics of plumbing, and then allows local plumbers to recruit from that and do a bit more as an add-on.

Your point is exactly right. But, because the word "apprenticeship" has achieved so much value and prestige, everything is pushed to apprenticeships. We need pre-apprenticeship training programmes that will help the employers you are describing then take a decision to take someone on.

Q72 **Anna Firth:** My final point is about messaging. I always ask quite a few friends, family and young people before I come to the Committee to see what the level of knowledge is out there about the things we are discussing here. I have been very struck by the fact that there a number of young people who do not even know what a T-level actually is. That is a massive messaging problem.

These are not being publicised by schools. For many young people, you have the tyranny of the status quo. They can only be told about the opportunities that the institution that they are in knows about or wants to promote. Therefore, is there a big piece of work to be done to ensure that all young people get to know of all the different opportunities that are out there?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: There is definitely an issue with messaging. Some 60% of young people believe that to get a job in IT you need a degree, yet the data I have just given you suggests that that is not what employers are saying. It is a specific, but interesting, example. As I said earlier, there are 100,000 jobs out there, 50% more, with an average starting salary of £37,000. There is a gulf between the world of education and the world of work. Some of it needs to be filled by messaging and better communication, undoubtedly.

I would just make two other points, which relate to your previous questions and to what David has said. I would also caution against thinking that the fact that apprentices have gravitated towards older age groups is a bad thing. Nine out of 10 of the people who are going to be in the workplace in 10 years' time are already working; 25 million people in this country need some kind of significant reskilling in order to for them to retain their relevance and their productivity within the workplace. Apprenticeships within the workplace may very well be a very good way

of doing that. They are just beginning to get going and get some traction. There is certainly scope for improvement, but they are something to build on; we should not think they have somehow failed, because that is not the case.

In terms of what has to be added to that, I like the notion of traineeships, but I would be cautious about suggesting that we launch yet another thing into this very crowded landscape. That simply adds to the challenge of messaging; it adds to the challenge of delivery. You have to think about the channels through which you are going to deliver it. Are they already pretty congested? The answer to that is probably yes.

My preference would be that we focus more on how you improve the work-readiness of the existing education system through what you do, as we have discussed, on A-levels, how you make them more applied and how you include more experiences of work within them and within the curriculum. We should also focus on what you do at university around the same kind of area, as well as doing all we can to try to publicise the availability of apprenticeships and evening that up in schools.

Q73 **Anna Firth:** Degree apprenticeships seem to be an absolutely brilliant idea, and they are certainly very popular with young people. Would you agree that there are nowhere near enough of them? You cannot find a degree apprenticeship if you want to study psychology. They are quite limited in the civil service. We need to extend this programme far more broadly. Would you agree?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I agree that they are excellent as routes into work. QA is the single biggest UK provider of degree apprentices. As I said before, we are in technology, so I am not surprised that there are not many degree apprentices in psychology. There probably should be, but it is a consequence of the fact that the employers, the people who might employ people as psychologists, probably are not yet sufficiently engaged in this debate, and they do not see enough relevance in it. They are probably finding that they can recruit people who have psychology degrees anyway; therefore, why do they need to do that? People in technology, however, are finding that there is a huge skills gap.

In the current HE system, people who do computer science at university are often among the least employable. In fact, one of the reasons why we exist and why we have quite a thriving business in bootcamps is that a lot of the people who do computer science at university come on one of our bootcamps. I have talked to some of these people, and they say, "I have learned more in the last 12 or 14 weeks than I did in my three years doing computer science at university".

Degree apprentices are great, but, as David said, the whole point about apprentices is that it is a job with training, rather than just a degree. You have to get the employers engaged. Realistically, given the amount of effort required to do that, it is most likely that degree apprentices will

grow but will continue to be the preserve of the sectors and the employers that lend themselves more easily to that kind of field.

Q74 **Chair:** I want to ask two final questions. I am a great believer in the apprenticeship levy. First, should it be expanded, given that 2% of companies pay it? It has changed the culture. When I meet businesses that pay it, they now have apprentice directors on their board, which would never have happened in the past. They talk about apprentices in a way that may not have happened previously.

Secondly, yes, it is great that older people are doing apprenticeships, but we want to encourage younger people to do them as well. Why not reform the levy so that businesses could use more of their levy if they have younger apprentices, employ apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds or employ degree apprentices, all of which are areas where we need to improve? What do you think of that?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I think 2% is bold, but I quite like the challenge of the 2% figure. With the apprenticeship levy, this is much more part of the discourse than it was previously. Companies are paying it. The companies that use it may, over time, having gone through the learning curve, become quite strong proponents of it. Where they do not use it, they are going to resent it as an additional tax. If you put it to 2%, you are just going to ratchet up that whole pressure.

Chair: No, what I am saying is that 2% of companies are paying it.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: You do not mean moving it from 1.5% of payroll to 2% of payroll. I misunderstood you.

Chair: Yes, I do not mean the payroll. They may change the payroll bit, but why not just expand the number of companies that pay it? At the moment, it is just big business.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: There is merit in that. In order for that to be effective, one has to simultaneously improve the mechanisms through which the apprenticeships are delivered. It would put a greater onus, positively, on making sure that standards are quickly agreed, dynamic, which they are not at the moment, and relevant to the wider pool of employers that are then paying that levy. It would put more pressure on the need to improve the system. The system needs improvement; it needs accelerated evolution, not revolution.

Q75 **Chair:** We could do the kind of tuning you are suggesting to incentivise more companies to get more younger and disadvantaged people doing apprenticeships and get more people doing degree apprenticeships by allowing them to use more of their levy if they employed those kinds of apprentices. Would that work?

Sir Charlie Mayfield: It would certainly work, yes. You will still have a lot of businesses complaining to Ministers about—

Chair: They always complain to Ministers.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: They do.

Chair: You would use less of your levy if you just retrained people as management apprentices or whatever.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: Another hat I wear is as chair of Be the Business, which is a not-for-profit set up five or six years ago, which focuses on small and mid-sized enterprises. It helps them to become more competitive and grow more quickly. We spend our whole time with the kinds of businesses that some of you have spoken about.

If one were to take that approach, and therefore by definition start moving more into that population of businesses, my suggestion would be for Be the Business or another organisation to go and spend time with that group of people in order to understand, from the ground up, how you could make this a worthwhile and welcomed thing. What changes would you need to make to the current approach to apprentices that would improve it?

By the way, the work we have done has shown that two key things matter more than anything else: the quality of leadership and management, and the level of tech adoption. One of the constraints on tech adoption among those small and mid-sized businesses is skills. If we create a mechanism whereby those businesses are more easily able to see apprentices, including possibly through group training arrangements or some such arrangement, as a way of addressing that skills gap, you might find that they welcomed paying the levy, because they would see that it was helping them to address a problem.

Q76 **Chair:** Before I ask you to comment, Lord Willetts, I am going to bring in a final question, because we want to finish at 11.30. I know you want an evolutionary approach—I get it—and not to upset every apple cart. Given that students stay to 18 now, which did not happen in the past, and given that we are talking about students doing apprenticeships at 16, are GCSEs necessary? We could have exams at that age, if necessary, to assess progress that were not necessarily employer-led in the way that GCSEs are. We could move to a wider educational system from 15 to 18 instead. David, could you comment, first, on both parts, please?

Lord Willetts: The fact that most people are doing some education and training to 18 does raise a question about the amount of effort that goes into having one round of exams at 16 and then another round of exams at 18. You are right to put that on the agenda. GCSEs themselves can narrow choices. If you have not done three science GCSEs, trying to do science afterwards is harder. For a lot of kids at 14—I have to say particularly girls—the science route is closed off due to the way we design our system. That is terrible. It should not happen like that.

If I can make one comment on apprenticeships, there is a trade-off here. Apprenticeships have quite a precise meaning. If anything, the direction of policy in the last few years has been to add more regulatory

requirements and more quality tests to give apprenticeships a very specific meaning. If apprenticeships are to have such a specific meaning, we are going to need other forms of training that do not count as apprenticeships. Perhaps the apprenticeship levy should become the training levy so that other forms of programmes can be introduced, which might be a route on to an apprenticeship.

Q77 **Chair:** My worry about that is that no one will do apprenticeships anymore; they will all call them training. I remember going to a hotel and asking them about this. They said, "I have an apprentice". I said, "What do they do?" "They have stayed for the summer for a few weeks. It was really an internship". What will happen is people will move away from the hardcore focus on building up apprenticeships.

Lord Willetts: In that case, the expansion of apprenticeships in the way that you want is going to be quite tough. I agree with what Charlie has said. The apprenticeships we have enable employers to invest in people who they have already taken the big decision to recruit and who they want to upskill. The pressure to regulate apprenticeships in quite a significant way is pushing them in that direction.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: It is a very good question. One of the consequences of GCSEs is that they have the effect of putting people off subjects. The fact that a third of people have to fail maths every year is a travesty, frankly. It tells people, "You are really bad at this. The last thing you should think about doing is something to do with maths or science at a higher level", which is very unfortunate. Again, it is a consequence of this funnel that leads you towards getting the grades at A-level to get into university. That is the mantra, which is damaging.

I believe very strongly in continuous assessment, in people knowing where they stand and how good they are at certain things, but I would tend to agree that some modification of the GCSE curriculum to make it less of a gate and more part of that process of education that leads up to an 18-level exam would be very healthy and very positive.

Lord Willetts: There is shocking research by Stephen Machin at the LSE on people who just miss their GCSEs in English and maths. This is 25% of young people. Just missing it is a disaster for their future lives compared with just getting over them. That is an appalling part of the GCSE system; you are right to raise it.

Sir Charlie Mayfield: I credit the National Numeracy council for this, but if you ask a cross-section of British adults, "What is 5% of 18?", and you give them a piece of paper, a pen, a calculator and 20 minutes, 44% of British adults cannot answer that question. That has such significant consequences. The truth is that probably maybe 5% cannot answer the question. The reason that so many fail to do so is because they panic. The fact they have been told that this is such a complex and difficult thing means that they do not take a step-by-step methodical approach that makes it easy to do it.

If you have that mindset, that will be in your head as an adult when someone turns up at your workplace and says, "We have some new training going on for a new job over here. It requires a little bit of this and a little bit of that". Particularly in a world that is more and more digital, how likely are you to put your hand up and say you want that training? You are worried that you are going to be exposed as being stupid, when you are not stupid at all. You have just been taught that you are bad at something when probably you are very able at it.

This is happening in the education system, and it has big consequences throughout a lifetime at work. It is of increasing importance, given that the world of work is changing at a faster pace than ever before. Therefore, reskilling and lifetime learning is more important than it ever has been.

Chair: Thank you very much. It has been a genuinely invaluable session. We probably could have talked to you for another couple of hours. David, congratulations on your new post with the UK Space Agency. I expect to see you in some Elon Musk spaceship.

Ian Mearns: Or on Twitter.

Chair: That is a wonderful job to have. Thank you, Charlie. That was brilliant. It is really appreciated.