

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The future of post-16 qualifications](#),
HC 55

Tuesday 13 December 2022

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 256-316

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Department for Education; and Sue Lovelock, Director of Professional and Technical Education, Department for Education.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robert Halfon and Sue Lovelock.

Q256 **Chair:** I am delighted to welcome Minister Halfon to give evidence to the Committee. Minister Halfon, would you like to introduce yourself and your team?

Robert Halfon: Yes, thank you. It is very good to be here. It feels a bit surreal giving evidence to an inquiry that I started as the previous Chair, but it is a privilege and honour to be here today. I want to say to the rest of the Committee that it was an incredible job being Committee Chair, so I am glad to be in my position as Skills Minister, and I congratulate you, Chair, on your new position. I am Robert Halfon, the Minister for skills, post-16 education, apprenticeships and higher education.

Sue Lovelock: I am Sue Lovelock. I am the director of professional and technical education in the Department for Education.

Q257 **Chair:** Thank you very much for joining us. Obviously, as Back Bencher of the year and such a successful Chair of this Committee, you need no introduction, Minister. As Chair, you frequently spoke of the need to better prepare young people with the skills they need for a changing world of work. What skills does the Department believe will be most needed? Is there sufficient data on future skills and is that rigorous enough to be used as the basis for future curriculum change?

Robert Halfon: This is a really important question. I will set out the framework. Those who know me will know that I often talk about a ladder of opportunity. That ladder has two pillars on either side. One pillar is about social justice and opportunities; the other side is strengthening further education and higher education. The first rung—Ian Mearns will be pleased to know—is careers. We need to do a lot of work on that, and I know you have a separate inquiry on it. The second rung is quality qualifications, which I know we will talk about. The third rung is championing apprenticeships and skills, and the fourth rung is lifelong learning. Finally, at the top is job security and prosperity. What does all that mean in practice? It means that you need to, first of all, invest in resources, so we are increasing resources on 16 to 19 by £1.6 billion and increasing the budget for skills in general by £3.8 billion over the Parliament. It also means increasing investment in data, and that is part of your question.

The previous Secretary of State, Nadhim Zahawi, set up the unit for future skills, which looks at skills deficits and where there are holes. It has six dashboards. It is actually run by Baroness Barran—the other education Minister—and that will help us a lot. Alongside that, you have the DFE labour market surveys and the Department set up, after the skills Bill and the skills White Paper, local skills improvement plans. There are 38 of those—38 geographical areas. They can look at microdetail, working with colleges and chambers of commerce to ensure that we get the data about



local skills. For example, in Surrey and Hertfordshire, they found out that they needed more creative skills, and that was very similar in Warrington and Cheshire.

Q258 Chair: Those obviously are localised initiatives, and they engage with LEPs and other organisations. Does that mean you get a range of quality in terms of the information they produce, or are they feeding in the quality of information that the Department would want to see?

Robert Halfon: Obviously they are just starting because they came in through the skills Bill. They are at the lowest level, and they are feeding through data and information. At the top, you have the labour market service and the new unit for future skills looking at national skills deficits. To carry on with your opening question, I mentioned about investing in data, but there is also investment in infrastructure. We have big deficits in STEM, for example. We have 21 institutes of technology all over the country, and 12 of them have already been rolled out. A number of them are involved specifically in promoting STEM and digital skills. You then have investment in quality qualifications. There are the T-levels, the new higher technical qualifications, the skills bootcamps, the free level 3 courses and much more besides. Finally, there is investment in careers, which we will discuss, and investment in employer engagement.

Q259 Chair: You have set out an enormously broad agenda with a huge range of initiatives. The IFS annual report, which was published yesterday, highlighted the fact that, although schools funding was protected and would return to its highest level ever—similar levels or just above where it was in 2010—colleges and the FE sector have seen a reduction in funding over the past decade. The extra funding that it is now receiving does not make up the real-terms gap in that space. I think that Amanda Spielman's annual report referred to the pressures on the post-16 and FE sector, and highlighted the pressures on sixth-form colleges. As the Minister, how do you respond to that, and how do you make sure that there is sufficient resource for the sector to deliver the enormous challenges that you are setting for it?

Robert Halfon: That is a very important question. I am very open about this. For a number of years, the further education sector did not receive the increases that we saw in other parts of the education system. However, with Nadim Zahawi and, previously, Gavin Williamson, and with the current Secretary of State, the balance has been redressed. A phrase that I always hated was "FE is the Cinderella sector". I always reminded people that Cinderella became a member of a royal family, and that we should banish the ugly sisters of snobbery and under-resourcing.

It is not perfect—there will always be pressure for new resources—but I mentioned £3.8 billion for further education and skills over this Parliament, with an extra £1.6 billion for 16 to 19-year-olds, and there is an extra £500 million to be spent on T-levels. We are going to spend £2.7 billion on apprenticeships; £2.5 billion on the national skills fund, with bootcamps in free level 3 courses for people who do not have level 2s in core subjects. There is capital investment of £2.8 billion to improve the college estate.



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Only a few days ago, we announced £490 million for HE and colleges, to build state-of-the-art facilities in various colleges around the country, from Northumbria all the way down to Yeovil.

Chair: And some for the University of Worcester, for which I was very grateful.

Robert Halfon: And for colleges as well, to build state-of-the-art facilities for high-tech skills.

It is not perfect, and I will always fight for more resources. I am glad that £53 million was announced a few days ago for four colleges so that they could spend that money on insulation. They can spend it on whatever they want, but it is designed to help them to cover energy bills.

FE has struggled for a number of years, but we are reversing that and are trying to invest as much as possible. I will always champion more resource, as will the Secretary of State, who is passionate about FE and skills.

Q260 Chair: You referred to money being spent on new initiatives. Not all of that is new money. You wrote to the Committee last week about traineeships and taking some of the money out of that scheme. Recent figures show that only 15,500 of the targeted 43,000 traineeship starts were recorded in the year 2021-22. Why do you think that the traineeship programme consistently failed to attract the high number of starts that were targeted, despite considerable funding?

Robert Halfon: I want to study that. Clearly, covid has had an impact. Traineeships have not been stopped. Two things are happening. First, they are being integrated into existing programmes such as the T-level transition year; bootcamps; and the free level 3 for those who, as I mentioned, do not have level 2; and other skills programmes. Secondly, traineeships can be carried on through the providers and further education colleges. Each student gets a study programme and they can be offered a traineeship through that. The crucial point is that take-up was too low for a national programme, so we made the decision that it would be better to integrate that with other skills programmes while offering it if independent providers want to carry on doing so with the study programme.

Chair: I am going to turn to T-levels and bring in Anna.

Q261 Anna Firth: Good morning, Minister. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to talk to you about T-levels now that you are in the Department. Research from the Department of which you will be aware—the employer pulse survey that was published in April—shows some concerning statistics, particularly that fewer employers were interested in providing T-level placements in 2021 than in 2019: 30% now versus 36%. Perhaps more concerningly, 63% of employers reported that they were not interested in offering T-level placements.

Given that T-levels were developed hand-in-glove with employers—to be of maximum help to them—I wonder whether you are surprised by the



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figures. I also wonder whether regional variation is at play, because those figures do not reflect the picture in Southend. T-levels have been a huge success at South Essex College, and we have seen massive growth in the T-level programme.

Robert Halfon: To the first part of your question, I would rather be straight with the Committee than try to say that everything is all wonderful. There have been problems with the work experience element of the T-levels. Again, we are studying this; again, the pandemic will have had some effect. We have invested £240 million—a lot of money—over the past four years for industry placement preparation, and £23 million to support the workforce.

What are we trying to do about it? We are allowing hybrid placement. We are saying there can be time in training facilities and simulated work environments. We are trying to offer other flexibilities. There are hundreds of T-level ambassadors working with colleges and employers to try to boost workplace take-up. I am looking at other ideas that I cannot mention at the moment, but if you call me back, perhaps next year, we will be in a better place.

Let me turn to the take-up in different areas. Given the kind of MP you are, I have no doubt that you have had a huge impact on the T-level courses in your area. They are good in some areas, but there are problems—in rural areas, for example. There are bursaries for colleges to help with that. The other point to make, which I sometimes make to colleagues, is that in rural areas you still have the NHS, for example; you have public services that need students to train and to help, and they can work with the T-level programmes. We are doing a lot of work on that.

Q262 **Anna Firth:** Fantastic. There is a lot of work going on, which is good to hear, but is part of the issue a lack of awareness about T-levels and their potential, both at the school level and the employer level? Could local chambers of commerce play a role to help bridge the gap between pupils and employers?

Robert Halfon: T-levels are new. I am passionate about them because my dream has always been to ensure that vocational education has the same prestige as academic education. I think they will be good. Sixteen T-levels have been rolled out; there will be 24 by 2025. It is a new qualification.

I mentioned the local skills improvement plans, which will be incredibly important because they involve employers and the chambers of commerce. Don't forget that not every area has a chamber of commerce, and some in some areas that do have them, they are not even real chambers of commerce; they just call themselves chambers of commerce. Business organisations, employers, colleges and providers working together and producing a plan will make a huge difference.

To me, this goes back to the most important first rung of the ladder; I am genuinely not just saying this to make Ian happy, but that rung is careers. We have to transform careers advice in schools. We are doing a lot on



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that. I don't know whether there is going to be a question on that later; if there is, I am happy to go into further detail. The first rung of that ladder is careers. What has to happen is that more students have to be encouraged to do T-levels in schools. There are programmes at the moment; again, I am working on that. That is the way in which you will get a higher take-up.

Q263 Ian Mearns: May I ask a supplementary on that particular point? One of the problems, Minister, is that we don't have the level of engagement in this whole agenda from businesses across the whole country. It seems to work well with many large businesses with many employees, but the employment base in many parts of the country is made up of small and medium-sized enterprises. Given that, how are we going to bring about the culture change to engage business in the future of training and getting them interested in training—in upskilling their own workforce, but also helping to upskill the future workforce through things like apprenticeships and work experience?

Robert Halfon: I think you came with me on the Committee trip to Germany.

Ian Mearns: Oh yes.

Robert Halfon: I don't know if you remember—we met some German companies. They were saying they were training people from 14 years old.

Ian Mearns: Yes.

Robert Halfon: It was a fascinating conversation. I said, “Why do you do this?” I don't know if you were with me when I said that.

Ian Mearns: Yes.

Robert Halfon: And they said, “What do you mean, why? This is what we do because we need to train our young people. It is part of our culture.” We do need to change that. There are issues—sometimes certain areas don't have big business, so small businesses are essential. You are absolutely right. In terms of apprenticeships, you know, of course, that we pay for the training. We pay 95% of the costs of training for small businesses; if they have fewer than 50 employees, we pay all of the costs of the training. There are other financial incentives to employ 16 to 18-year-olds. Again, the local skills improvement plans are all about small business. It is not just about big business. That comes down to working with small businesses to encourage them to—

Ian Mearns: I think it would be true to say, however, that the position in Germany was underpinned by legislation that required businesses to be part of their chamber of commerce on a regional or sub-regional basis and to have so many trainees per 10-year period. It is a very different atmosphere there. There are structural differences; over decades, those structural differences have created a cultural difference as well.

Anna Firth: Last question from me, Minister, and then I'll hand over—



Robert Halfon: Sorry, I think Sue wanted to come in on something.

Sue Lovelock: On the awareness front, I was just going to mention that we think that that is absolutely critical. We have paid for communications and marketing to highlight the role and opportunities of T-levels, both for young people and for employers, as well as other opportunities such as apprenticeships and higher-technical qualifications. It is a really key part of our implementation plan to build awareness.

Q264 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. My last question is: has the Department seen a trend in employers not offering the full placement over the full two years? It is a problem that we have found in Southend. An employer—it might be a hospital or a business—signs up to the T-level programme, which is wonderful, and the students are enrolled at the college. At the end of the first year, the employer can't offer the work placement any more, and at that point the T-level falls. Unless that work placement can be sourced elsewhere, the qualification cannot be given. It is hugely important that when employers sign up, they sign up for the full two years. Is there a piece of work to be done about the incentives being placed at the end of the two-year period, rather than at the beginning?

On the other side, employers say to me—I am sure they say this to other colleagues too—that they need more young people with the relevant skills for their particular business, whether that is engagement, engineering or whatever. If employers could also be incentivised to provide some training actually in the college, that would help with the T-level programme being more relevant. Obviously, it would publicise itself. Those employers would have the opportunity to hand-pick and see the best of the cohort ahead of any other employer. There seem to be two possibilities there—two ways in which we can try to make this programme work better.

Robert Halfon: On the first point, I am not aware of this being widespread, but I will look into it. If it is taking place, we need to deal with it. On the second part, we are trying to do an FE recruitment programme and offering places to people from business to come into FE. Once that rolls out, I think that it will help with some of the issues that you are suggesting. I think that we have to be careful: we are asking employers to do the work experience, so we have to be careful that we are not placing too much of a burden on them. At the end of the day, they have got to run their business, but I do absolutely want more people with business experience and for there to be more opportunities for teaching staff in FE colleges to come from industry.

Q265 **Miriam Cates:** Good morning, Minister. I will follow on from Anna's question. One of the suggestions of the CBI is that the barrier of the placement requirement for industry could be bridged a little bit, perhaps using hybrid placements—so, part online and part in person. Do you think that that is a good idea? Would it compromise the quality? Have you considered that?

Robert Halfon: We are looking at allowing hybrid placements, and also saying that they can go to a training facility of the company rather than



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just actually on the work floor, so to speak, of the business. I am absolutely sympathetic to what you are saying. I do think, again, that the T-level is a vocational qualification. That is part of it—a significant part of it—and that is the whole purpose of it. I am very keen, for that work experience, that people do go out and work in a company.

There may be in the future, and this is not policy—I am a huge fan of the Open University. It is an incredible institution. I remember going to see it in Milton Keynes, and it was using AI and computer technology so that people who wanted to do science would be able to work from their computer doing experiments. You felt like you were in the laboratory, almost, pouring the test tube. It was incredible. Maybe there can be some of that in the future as it comes through. I am a huge believer in work experience, from schools to colleges, and I would like work experience across all qualifications; one day I hope that that will be the case. I think that that is a very important part of the T-levels, and I do not want to lose it.

Q266 Miriam Cates: So you are essentially saying that it could make up part of the work experience, but that it is really important to also have that human element of interaction.

Robert Halfon: Exactly.

Q267 Miriam Cates: That makes sense. I will move on to the drop-out rate. The first T-level cohort had a drop-out rate of about a fifth. What data might the Department have about that cohort? Were there any particular characteristics shared by those who dropped out? Are you considering changing the entry requirements or the guidance around who should do T-levels as a result?

Robert Halfon: We had about 1,100 people doing T-levels, I think, and a 92% pass rate. It is a new qualification; it is very prestigious, and it is tough. That is not a bad thing. I want it to be the gold standard—everyone goes on about A-levels being the gold standard, and I want vocational qualifications to be the gold standard. It is inevitable, in the early years, that there will be drop-outs. Again, we are looking at that.

I talked about the T-level transition year to prepare people better for T-levels, and that is really important. In essence, they are doing a level 2, and it is looking at knowledge, skills and behaviours and teaching people everything from the academic side to resilience and other areas. I think that with the T-level transition year offered to students, you will have a much higher completion rate for those students who go on. These are very early days for the T-level transition year, but 49% of those who did the T-level transition year went on to do a level 3.

Q268 Miriam Cates: I will just diverge slightly and bring in your higher education hat. You talked about how the FE sector has been seen as the Cinderella sector.

Robert Halfon: Not by me.

Miriam Cates: But it has been seen as that, and it has been chronically



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underfunded compared with schools and universities as well. Some 50% of our young people go to university, and student loans cost the taxpayer £20 billion a year, of which we get approximately half back. The cost of higher education is absolutely phenomenal compared to further education, and yet, five years after graduating, between a third and a half of graduates do not have graduate jobs. Do you think the higher education sector represents value to the taxpayer when compared to the potential value of the further education sector in bringing people up to the kind of skills they need for work?

Robert Halfon: I did a speech recently about higher education, and I said that I had three aims for it: jobs, skills and social justice. I think higher education, for the most part, provides value for money. In the top 20 universities, there are quite a few British universities. I want to see more doing skills and degree apprenticeships, and I want to see more social justice. But when I talk about social justice, I am talking about more disadvantaged students not just getting into university—because more are getting in—but competing and getting good skilled jobs at the end. I do not think it is an either/or. I want to focus resources on universities where we are promoting skills and degree apprenticeships, and those universities that are doing well to get people good skilled jobs at the end. I would not say we should take money away from there to give more money to FE. We have got to properly resource FE, which we are starting to do again, and we have got to resource our universities to promote skills, jobs and social justice.

Q269 **Miriam Cates:** A third to a half of those going to university are not getting a graduate job. They have an average debt of £45,000. They are technically worse off than if they had not gone to university and instead done a skilled vocational technical course—especially an apprenticeship, where they could have been paid alongside. It seems to me that we can't have these conversations separately. We can't say that the FE sector needs more attention, focus and funding, at the same time as having a higher education sector that, for possibly a half and certainly a third of young people, does not represent value—and certainly does not represent value for the taxpayer. Should we not be having this conversation joined up between post 16 full stop, rather than just 16 to 18, and then ignoring what happens after 18?

Robert Halfon: If you notice, when I did this job in 2016, I was just Minister for Skills and Apprenticeships. I could say I am part of the Government's net zero target, as I am being recycled. But my title is now Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education. The reason for that is because we are not looking at it in separate silos, but instead we want skills across the board. We are focusing the increase in money—I think it is over £700 million—on the key areas we need to ensure succeed, so that students have better STEM and better skills.

The other answer you would expect me to give is just two words: degree apprenticeships. They are my passion. I am working with the Department and officials to look at how we can rocket-boost degree apprenticeships. There has been some good news on that. We have had 148,800 starts on



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degree apprenticeships, at levels 6 and 7, since 2014-15. We are making an additional £8 million of funding available over the coming year to support providers with degree apprenticeships. I would like to see a lot more. As I have said many times, I think degree apprenticeships are the answer to so many problems, such as social justice, skills and bringing FE, skills and degrees together, as well as meeting the skills needs of our country.

Q270 Chair: We are going to return to apprenticeships, but before we move on from HE, I want to ask about international students. We rely on a big cross-subsidy from international students in many of our universities. There have been some headlines recently that suggest there may be a move to reduce the numbers. As the Minister now responsible for our university sector, what is your view on international students and their contribution?

Robert Halfon: I note that you listened to what the Secretary of State said last week. The target was 600,000 by 2030; we reached that target early. The target is still 600,000, which I think is good news. Our education export is worth about £25 billion, and we hope to raise it to £35 billion by 2030. That target remains, and I am very supportive of international students.

Q271 Chair: But to raise it to £35 billion, I think organisations like UCAS are talking about 1 million students, rather than 600,000. Is that something that you think is a worthy aspiration, or is it something that we need to avoid in order to keep the Home Office happy?

Robert Halfon: This is the problem with targets: you can't win. If we don't meet a target, you would have been saying to me, "Why on earth haven't you met your targets?", or, "It's not looking very good." When we do meet the target—which I think is an astonishing number and provides a huge amount of income to our country—then people say, "It's not enough," or, "You've got to have 1 million." You can't win. I am quite happy with the target as it is; I think it is realistic. I do not want pie in the sky; I want realistic. I absolutely support international students.

Q272 Chair: Do you believe international students should be welcomed at all our universities?

Robert Halfon: Providing they are universities that are recognised by the OfS as proper universities, absolutely. If we have British students at all our universities, there is no reason why we should not have international students.

Q273 Kim Johnson: Good morning, Robert, and welcome to your new position. You will know that we have had some damning statistics during this inquiry, particularly in terms of 16-year-olds who lack basic maths and English. The principal from the FE college in my Liverpool, Riverside constituency has raised some serious concerns about curriculum reform, so I would like you to say a little more about what you think T-levels offer. You have already said that you think they are "prestigious" and "tough", so can you say what cohort of students T-levels are aimed at?



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They have been described as watered-down A-levels for the slightly less academic. Would you consider a modular approach to supporting students, and do you think that T-levels actually provide value for money at this moment in time?

Robert Halfon: I think T-levels should be for all students. I think that they offer a gold-standard technical vocational qualification, but I also think we should offer students the T-level transitional year, so those students who would like some extra help in order to do those T-levels get a T-level transitional year. As I mentioned earlier, that is basically a level 2, and it looks at all parts: knowledge and skills for the workplace, positive attitudes and behaviours, strategies for resilience, confidence, self-esteem, and industry-relevant technical knowledge. I do not want to create an educational divide in which disadvantaged students do one set of qualifications and everybody else does another, or a wall between two sets of students. What I would like to have is a level playing field in which every student has a chance to climb up that ladder of opportunity to get quality qualifications.

Q274 **Kim Johnson:** Do you think that is actually possible for those students who have low educational attainment? At the moment in our FE college, the students come in and they are able to do a level 3 while doing their maths and English at the same time. The principal of my FE college does not believe that that is going to be possible with T-levels. Students will not be able to access courses, creating greater levels of NEETs in the system. How would you respond to that from my FE principal?

Robert Halfon: I would be interested to talk to your FE principal, but as I say, those students who may struggle can do the T-level transitional year, which does all the things that I just described: English, maths and digital skills, the contextualised application of those skills relating to a student's chosen T-level route, knowledge and skills for the workplace, and positive attitudes and behaviours. It is a good programme that will prepare those students for T-levels. I do not want to deny students from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to do gold-standard qualifications.

Q275 **Kim Johnson:** Do you know if there is any evidence available to determine how well that transition process is working at the moment?

Robert Halfon: It is a new programme. What I can tell you is that 49% of students who did that transition programme went on to do level 3.

Q276 **Kim Johnson:** And do we know what level and what kind of educational attainment those students had, to be able to move on to those courses?

Robert Halfon: I do not have those details, but I can write to you about it.

Kim Johnson: Okay, thank you.

Q277 **Ian Mearns:** In your previous role as Chair of this Committee, you gave a speech stating, "I urge my colleagues on the Front Bench not to remove BTEC funding until T-levels have been fully rolled out and are successful." I have spoken to people in the sector who are very concerned that there



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is an implication that BTECs could be withdrawn too quickly before T-levels are fully fledged. We could therefore have a situation where the baby is being thrown out with the bathwater. Of course, when we are judging the success of T-levels, it has to be about quality—absolutely—but it also has to be about scale, so that a large number of young people can do T-levels if it is appropriate for them. But there will be others for whom a T-level probably is not appropriate. They might not be able to manage it, but they might be able to manage another qualification, such as a BTEC. Since you are now in the role of Skills Minister and are urging Front-Bench colleagues not to do away with BTECs until T-levels are fully fledged, what is your attitude now, Minister?

Robert Halfon: The good news is that collective responsibility is not retrospective, as I understand it. I was trying to work out how long it would take for somebody to quote my old words back at me. Let me set out the framework to explain how I see qualifications, because this is really important. Of course, qualifications are about learning, experience and education, but there need to be four key things for qualifications. I promise to answer your specific question.

The first thing is that they have to be quality qualifications and employer-led—I have always believed that. The second thing is that they have to predominantly give chances for progression: if you have done a level 2, you do a level 3, a level 4 and so on. The third thing is that the whole purpose of this is to have good outcomes, so that people get good jobs at the end. Finally, and very importantly, I want a level playing field for the disadvantaged, so that they climb up the ladder.

Let me go through the issue of BTECs. The first important thing to say is that we are not getting rid of all BTECs. What we have done is prune, because it is about quality over quantity. We have pruned around 5,500 that had virtually no or low enrolment. There are going to be BTECs that will absolutely remain: for example, BTECs in applied science, engineering, IT, health, social care, design and sport. There will remain larger BTECs in subjects for which there is not a T-level, such as sport and exercise, science and performing arts. I should say that the 5,000 we have got rid of include level 2 as well because, as I say, there was virtually no or low enrolment. We did that, but we are keeping a significant number. They will carry on as before, and students will be able to mix and match.

The third argument is that, as Kim touched on, some students are not prepared for the T-level. I go back to the transition year, because I think that is a really good thing. It is a level 2, and I have gone through all the different knowledge, skills and behaviours that you need to have in the T-level transition year.

I think that we are in a good place. I have visited a number of colleges and spoken to principals since I took on this job just a few weeks ago, and I have had two college principals say that our approach is the right one, because they want to move to a T-level system so that T-levels are the gold standard. But there will still be a significant number of BTECs in the areas that I have mentioned.



Q278 Ian Mearns: You have referred on a number of occasions to T-levels as the gold standard, but you do not yet have—or, it seems, any plans to have—any T-levels for creative subjects. You mentioned retaining BTECs in creative subjects. If T-levels are the gold standard, why don't the creative industries deserve a gold-standard qualification?

Robert Halfon: T-levels are very similar to apprenticeship standards. As you know, apprenticeship qualifications are done by trailblazer groups working with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. If there is a need for a T-level in some of the subjects that you mentioned, that may happen, but there are T-levels in craft and design, and media and broadcast. There may not be a T-level for everything, but if there isn't a T-level, people will continue to do BTECs or applied general qualifications.

Q279 Ian Mearns: It seems to me that the creative industries are important for our economy. If there isn't yet any take-up from employers, possibly the Department needs to think about that to engender interest.

Robert Halfon: But I mentioned that there are T-levels in craft and design, and media and broadcast. You want BTECs to remain. When I say to you that there are some BTECs remaining, you then ask me why there is not a gold standard in T-levels.

Q280 Ian Mearns: They are not mutually exclusive. It is important that we retain BTECs for some students who might not be able to achieve a T-level standard.

Robert Halfon: Again, to be absolutely clear—this is really important—I want some BTECs to remain, but I don't want a big wall. I do not want qualifications that only disadvantaged students do and qualifications that everyone else does. That would be entirely wrong. We do not say that about A-levels. I want to ensure that some BTECs remain, but if some students find it difficult to go to T-levels straight away, then they have access to the transition year.

Chair: Following up on that point, I will bring Kim back in.

Q281 Kim Johnson: Robert, going back to the point that was made earlier about engagement with employers, we know that T-levels will falter without employers stepping up. What evidence is there that SEND, black and disadvantaged students will benefit from T-levels, which you described recently as "tough"? You have said that this particular cohort have the most to gain, but what assessment has been undertaken of the risk to the thousands of young people who might be held back from education?

Robert Halfon: Equality assessments would have been done on T-levels, and I am happy to write to you about those. You mention children with special educational needs. We have introduced flexibilities across all elements of the programme to support those students, and there will be additional tailored preparation as well. I do not want to tell students from different ethnic minorities that they have to do different qualifications or



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that they are not ready. I want to ensure that everyone has a chance to do these gold-standard qualifications.

Q282 Kim Johnson: Earlier, you mentioned ambassadors that are being engaged to try to support the take-up of T-levels. Can you say a bit more about those ambassadors? Who are they? Are they paid? How do they operate?

Sue Lovelock: We have a network of around 150 T-level ambassadors. They are a mix of employers who have been involved in the development of T-levels. Some are employers who worked with us at the outset to design the content, and some have offered industry placements and seen a real benefit to bringing in young people in that way—moving them on to their apprenticeship programmes, for example. Some are FE colleges that are passionate about T-levels and want to be part of the ambassador network. We also have some students now, which is an exciting part of the network. We have a group of T-level student ambassadors who finished their T-levels this summer; they have gone on to great things and they are really excited about championing T-levels.

Robert Halfon: I just reminded myself about something else. There is a programme called the apprenticeship support and knowledge programme—ASK—and there is the apprenticeship diversity champions network, which explores the barriers to taking on apprentices from ethnic minority backgrounds and includes best practice, hints and tips for employers to improve diversity in apprentices. So there are apprentice ambassadors as well as T-level ambassadors, and STEM ambassadors as well. I have done an apprentice ambassador network, which is full of young people. It is actually the best way to promote apprenticeships, skills and T-levels. Young people are going to listen to people who have done them and become ambassadors more than—dare I say it—people like me going on about apprenticeships, however passionate I may be about them.

Q283 Kim Johnson: The requirement for students to undertake unpaid placements can disproportionately impact on a lot of students, because it takes them away from part-time work to support themselves and their families. What is your take on that? What do think needs to happen to insure against that?

Robert Halfon: That is important. Over the coming year, £176 million will help disadvantaged students to participate in some of these qualifications. That is run by the providers. We have also spent about £550 million to enable providers to support and retain the disadvantaged, and to support those with special educational needs.

Q284 Kim Johnson: What would the £550 million equate to per student?

Robert Halfon: Well, that requires a bit of mathematics. May I write to you about that?

Kim Johnson: Yes, that would be great.

Robert Halfon: That is a tough one.



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Q285 Chair: It is always good to have the former Chair pinned down on something he has to write to the Committee about. A moment ago, you mentioned 150 T-level ambassadors, who are about to start. Given the thousands of schools and however many hundreds of colleges around the country, presumably you will be looking to build that number up, will you?

Robert Halfon: Absolutely, and not just the T-levels; there are many hundreds of apprenticeship ambassadors, which I have mentioned, and thousands of STEM ambassadors, promoting with businesses and—

Q286 Chair: This links into our inquiry on careers. In that, we heard from a group of very bright teenage students that very few of them had heard about any of the vocational opportunities at school; they had at college, with some of that engagement coming through at the colleges they attended, but the visibility that they had on whether that was degree apprenticeships or T-levels was not there when they were still at school. The visibility that they had of these things was minimal, so one of the big challenges is to get more people into schools to talk about them to ensure that that information is being exchanged.

Robert Halfon: Believe me, you are talking to the converted on this subject. My maiden speech in the House of Commons was about promoting apprenticeships in schools—my first ever speech. I go around the country, previously as Committee Chair and now in my new job, and I ask apprentices if their schools teach them about apprenticeships or encourage that, but nine times out of 10 the answer is no. That is a problem.

What are we doing about that? It is important. We have strengthened the Baker clause, which means six proper encounters—not just someone coming in for five minutes—and we have this thing called ASK, the apprenticeship support and knowledge programme, which goes into schools and has about £2.8 million spent on it. Ofsted is toughening things up as well, and doing the careers review at the moment.

This has to change, because we know that when apprenticeships are promoted in schools, we get a 16% increase in the take-up of apprenticeships. It is a massive thing, and we will not solve any of the problems with T-levels or apprenticeships until we solve that problem completely. A lot of work is going in—£30 million to support secondary schools and colleges to improve career programmes—and I have made it very clear what I expect for careers from the Department for Education. Obviously, there are the Gatsby benchmarks, but I liken those to the 10 commandments: everyone believes them, but that does not necessarily mean that they happen—although more and more schools are doing them.

Q287 Chair: To make a point about the Baker clause, this is the difference between legislating for something and making sure that it actually happens. I am well aware from my time in Northern Ireland that we sometimes legislate for things and nothing happens.



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Robert Halfon: We have legislated for that—six encounters altogether during school years 8-13 which include three key years, 11, 12 and 13.

Chair: But making sure that they happen in the schools is different from writing it into legislation.

Robert Halfon: Absolutely, and that is for Ofsted and others.

Q288 **Ian Mearns:** Briefly on that, one of the main accountability measures that we hold schools against is the number of youngsters who get the appropriate number of examinations at a particular level, and that is then published in league tables. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, there is a man shouting down the chimney, I do apologise.

Years and years ago, when we had our localised careers companies, we did not get everything right in any way, shape or form, but one of the things we did have good awareness of was destination tracking: where youngsters were going, how many were becoming NEETs—not in education, employment or training—and how many were going on to FE and HE. We had really quite robust data on that. I am wondering whether we could create a new accountability measure for schools on where their youngsters go after they have left their establishment and how well prepared those youngsters are for the world that they move on to at the next stage of their training, education or employment.

Robert Halfon: Again, these are the things I am looking at, Ian. I have a lot of sympathy for what you say. I want to look at outcomes. People say, “Oh, schools are following the Gatsby benchmarks.” That’s great, but is it actually leading to good outcomes? We do have data—overall, general data—in terms of student outcomes and where they are going, but we don’t have it at micro level, in terms of schools.

Q289 **Chair:** On Ian’s point, which is a very good one, I remember that when I was Nicky Morgan’s PPS at the Department, there was a big announcement, with great fanfare, about changing the destination data to pay more attention to apprenticeships, employment and so on. Has that taken effect? And from your perspective, is the destination data that we hold on schools good enough and granular enough?

Robert Halfon: I don’t think it is good enough, and I am working with the careers team. As I mentioned earlier, I think careers advice in schools should be focused on work experience, on promoting skills and on social justice and outcomes. Those are the key things that careers advice has to be about, and that is what I am working on at the moment.

Q290 **Ian Mearns:** Probably more important than the data itself is how the data is used, Minister. The data has to be used to hold accountable the institutions that provide the data, which is the outcomes for the individual. That is what it is all about: those individuals. Unless the institutions can be held accountable, it becomes meaningless—just a collection of statistics.

Robert Halfon: Yes. Ofsted looks a bit at destination data in general, but I think that a lot more needs to be done about careers advice.

Chair: Andrew has been waiting very patiently.

Robert Halfon: Sorry, Andrew.

Q291 **Andrew Lewer:** That's all right. This is still on data, and on your themes about engagement and people in the sector advocating for what the Department intends to do. This does not start off from a good base, given that 86% of those responding to the Department's consultation disagreed about withdrawing funding for applied general qualifications that overlap with T-levels. Indeed, in this inquiry, the vast majority of witnesses have expressed those sorts of concern as well. Given that this proposal has that small level of stakeholder support, why is the Department still pressing ahead with it, particularly when there are the concerns about the adverse impact on disadvantaged students that Kim and others have mentioned already? And you have made comments about some of the BTECs carrying on, but you would have been aware of that when you were Chairman of the Committee and you were still pushing for—

Robert Halfon: Actually, I was not aware of all the BTECs that would be remaining. At the time, I thought we were getting rid of all BTECs, but that is absolutely not the case. This is why I am quite happy to say that I think it is the right policy, because I do want us to move to T-levels. As I say, we are not getting rid of all the BTECs; that is very important. I have mentioned some of the subjects already.

I do not accept that all stakeholders are against this. I met two college principals, one from the north-west of England and one from a London college, and both said, "Please continue in the way you are going, because we want the T-levels to come through." Again, I go back to the disadvantage point. Everything that I want to do in this job and that I tried to do previously as Chair of the Committee is to promote social justice and make sure that disadvantaged people have the chance to get good skills and good qualifications. I do not want to create or build a big education wall and say disadvantaged students do one set of qualifications and everybody else does another. What I do want to do is make sure people are properly prepared for T-levels. That is why—well, we're not getting rid of BTECs, but as I mentioned, we have that T-level transition year.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to turn to apprenticeships, as promised—I see you are wearing your apprenticeships badge—and I will bring in Ian.

Q292 **Ian Mearns:** Since 2015-16, there has been a 41% decline in apprenticeship starts, and we have heard that since the introduction of the levy employers have shunned 16 to 18-year olds. Should the levy be reformed? Should the policy underpinning the levy be reformed—for example by setting aside a portion of the levy for apprentices under 19? How much of the levy is not being spent, and if it is not being spent, where is it going?

Robert Halfon: On the first point, the good news is that apprenticeship starts increased by 8.6% over the past year; we have 350,000 apprentices. I should say that, despite some drops over the past few years, partly because of covid—

Q293 **Ian Mearns:** Well, I think they were dropping before covid, Rob, actually.

Robert Halfon: Well, it has gone up and down, and it is hopefully going up again. We have had more than 5 million apprentices since 2010. It is also worth noting—I think this is important—that over 90% of apprentices who complete go on to get good, skilled jobs or to sustained proper education. It is not all doom and gloom, but there is a lot of work to do; I accept that. We are not planning to reform the levy, but I am looking at how it ensures that disadvantaged students are doing apprenticeships, and how it is meeting our skills needs.

We are also doing everything possible to increase apprenticeship quality. What I mean by that is that we asked all of the providers to register with the register of training providers. Ofsted will have inspected every single apprenticeship provider by 2025. There is now much more early intervention from DFE officials if they think that something is going wrong. There is better feedback between apprentices and the providers, and businesses as well. We are publishing the average overall ratings given by apprentices on providers, and investing in professional development for apprentices' teachers and trainers. We are doing a lot to improve quality.

There are incentives for small businesses to hire young apprentices, as you know. We pay 95% of the cost of training, and there is financial help for businesses that hire apprentices between the ages of 16 to 18. It is also worth noting that more than half of apprenticeships are done by people aged 16 to 24, as you probably know.

On the underspend, it is very tiny. I cannot remember the exact figure, but it is well over 96% or 97%.

Sue Lovelock: It is 99.6%.

Robert Halfon: Ah, I said 96% or 97%; it is 99.6%, so the apprentice budget has been spent.

Q294 **Ian Mearns:** Has the Department therefore quantified how much of the apprenticeship levy is actually being spent on apprenticeships—it is called the apprenticeship levy, let us not forget that—as opposed to other forms of in-house training by companies?

Robert Halfon: Well, the whole purpose of the apprenticeship levy is not that it just funds the apprenticeships in the big companies; the money that they do not spend is then used to fund small business training and apprenticeships.

Q295 **Ian Mearns:** But what has tended to happen, particularly in some of the big companies, is that rather than hand the money back for it to then be spent by other people doing other things, they spend the levy on training or educating their own employees to a much higher level.

Robert Halfon: Okay, there are two things there that are important. I will bring in Sue in a second, but, first, they have to use it for training apprentices; they cannot just use it for other things. I think the deeper part of your question is: are they using it just to retrain people to do



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apprenticeships and management courses, or whatever it may be? Am I correct? Is that what you are saying?

Ian Mearns: It is that, but also other technical skills and qualifications.

Robert Halfon: It has to be in apprenticeships. Sue, do you want to add to that?

Sue Lovelock: I would just say it would have to be as part of an apprenticeship, so some employers do choose to put their current employees on to apprenticeships to upskill them and enable them to progress in their careers and go through the different jobs that are available to them. That is part of the apprenticeship programme.

Q296 **Chair:** I want to come back to that point about the 16 to 18-year-olds because I very much recall you speaking passionately, Minister, about the benefits of apprenticeships as a vocational route and as an opportunity for people at the age of 16, if they did not want to go down an academic route.

I absolutely recognise that there are benefits from companies training people to a higher level for apprenticeship schemes, and I have no issue with that, but are you really comfortable with the reduction in the number of 16-to-19 apprenticeships that we have seen over the last few years? Do you not think there is a level that we ought to be aiming for that is higher than where we are now, in terms of the total numbers?

Robert Halfon: To be absolutely clear, I have never said I was comfortable with that; I am far from comfortable. My dream is for as many young people as possible to do apprenticeships. As I say, the way to change that is by doing some of the careers things that we have talked about—genuinely, so much of this points back to the careers—and some of the other meta things we are doing, such as giving incentives to employers to hire young apprentices or giving bursaries to care leaver apprentices. Again, that is something I am looking at very closely because it is something I really want to change.

There are not enough people doing apprenticeships. Some 79% of students who completed their 16-to-18 study in 2019 went on to stay in education or into employment, and 6% went into apprenticeships. Okay, so that was 2019-20, during the covid years, which brought figures down, but the Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, did a lot to kickstart the scheme and provide incentives to employers, and I am looking at all those areas to try to ensure that we get more young people doing apprenticeships.

Q297 **Ian Mearns:** The number that I think is more important than the number of young people starting apprenticeships is the number completing apprenticeships—that is the important rate. Is there another role for employers in information, education, advice and guidance, helping to get our young people through the course and also, rather than just getting youngsters on to an apprenticeship—any apprenticeship—making sure they are going on to the right apprenticeship in the first place?



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It seems to me that the scant regard that we pay to careers information, advice and guidance means that young people are making decisions about where they go next, but there really has to be an elongated process of involvement with young people, preparing them and making sure they are making the right decision and that they are going into something that is correct for their aims and ambitions, but also their aptitudes.

Robert Halfon: All I can say is that you are talking to the converted. I completely agree and I will do my best to work on this in my job, to try to ensure that careers advice, as I say, supports skills and work experience, especially for disadvantaged people. If we can do more to help in terms of careers and supporting apprentices, that will be quite important.

I mentioned the ASK programme, which is a good programme. The Apprenticeship Skills and Knowledge programme—that is why it is called ASK—has worked with 5,000 schools and over 47,500 teachers. It reached over 1.7 million students and 230,000 parents. It engaged over 685,000 students to talk about apprenticeships. It delivered 361 activities in 36 specially selected development schools supporting disadvantaged young people. We need more programmes and to make sure that programmes like that are working and carrying on doing the work that they do.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much indeed.

Chair: We now move on to some of the discussions being had about baccalaureates of various varieties, but first I want to bring in Kim with a couple of follow-up questions.

Q298 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, you mentioned BTECs and the fact that you are thinking of doing away with some of them, but I am interested in the process and in who is involved in identifying those BTECs that stay. Are the principles of FE colleges involved? Are young people engaged in that process? I would be very interested in who is making those decisions and how, and in what criteria are being used to decide which BTECs will remain.

Robert Halfon: I will bring in Sue in a second. We work with providers and the awarding bodies. However, the crucial point is that, thus far, we have removed around 5,500 at level 3 and below. I think over 3,000 of those may be level 2 and below, if I not mistaken. They were removed because they had very low or no enrolment; that was the fundamental deciding factor. As we go forward, we need to make sure that we look at where the BTECs overlap with T-levels. I want to make sure that all qualifications have good progression and good outcome rates as well.

Sue Lovelock: In terms of the principles and the policy overall, we have consulted extensively with colleges, schools, employers and special educational needs experts as we have been shaping the policy throughout. In terms of implementing the decisions flowing from that policy, the Minister has outlined the approach that we have taken, looking at low and no-enrolment qualifications. We have then been implementing a process to look at the qualifications that overlap directly with T-levels. That has been



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undertaken by specialist education advisers who have looked, qualification by qualification, in order to make that assessment and inform that judgment.

The next phase of the reforms will be undertaken by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and Ofqual. They will use their specialist expertise in using input from employers, in particular on whether a qualification meets the needs of employers in those areas. Also, there is Ofqual's regulation of qualifications specialism in order to make that qualification-by-qualification judgment on whether something is good quality, necessary and leading on to good progression opportunities for young people.

Q299 Kim Johnson: Do you have a timescale for the completion of the process?

Sue Lovelock: Absolutely. At level 3, the process for quality will all be completed by 2025 and for level 2, by 2027. It is quite a thorough process, so we are doing it in phases to make sure that awarding bodies, providers and employers have time to properly input into it and prepare for the outcomes of those changes.

Q300 Kim Johnson: I have one other supplementary question about adult learning. I am a firm believer and supporter of lifelong learning. Since the Government defunded Unionlearn, I would just be interested in pick-up. Have you seen a drop-off of adults taking up learning?

Robert Halfon: We are investing £1.3 billion in the adult education budget. Do not forget that 60% of adult learning now is devolved to the mayoral authorities. However, there is also the £2.5 billion skills fund, which is used for adults for boot camps, which have so far been quite successful. We have the free level 3 courses as well.

I can send you the participation in those kinds of projects. From memory, nearly 2,000 participated in boot camps. I will send you the full details about our programmes, but some of it, as I say, has been devolved. A lot of adult learning is devolved as well to local authorities in terms of community learning, so it is quite a complex picture. I will be able to try and send you what I can.

Q301 Chair: Out of interest, on that point about devolution to the combined authorities, does that reflect the share of population that they have? Or does the fact that 60% is devolved to combined authorities suggest that they are getting more per head of population than those areas that are not in combined authorities? You do not have to know the answer.

Robert Halfon: I will write to you on that.

Ian Mearns: I am interested in one of your answers that came out regarding Unionlearn. I think it is probably three or four Secretaries of State ago that that decision was made to do away with Unionlearn.

Chair: It was about a year ago.

Q302 Ian Mearns: Yes, it was about a year ago, with about four Secretaries of



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State—possibly five; I am not sure—since then. That decision was made then and I think you are very interested in not being tarred with the brush of action taken by previous incumbents of roles.

Is there no chance that the Department could reinstate Unionlearn, Minister? It was a very good programme and well thought of by educationalists, as well as by unions themselves. It was a method of getting young people in the workforce into training and education, which they possibly would not have done any other way.

Robert Halfon: That decision was made by Gavin Williamson when he was Secretary of State. I do not know whether that was when you were in the Department, Chair.

Chair: Before my time, but—

Robert Halfon: Your hands are clean, Chair. There are no plans that I'm aware of to reinstate that funding.

Q303 **Ian Mearns:** Okay—moving on. You have previously mentioned that withdrawing funding for the international baccalaureate careers programme seemed to be at odds with the Government's skills agenda. As the Minister for Skills, will you now reverse the decision to defund the careers programme for the international baccalaureate?

Robert Halfon: That is a much wider subject; I noticed that you questioned the Secretary of State about it last week. As I have said, we are not bound by collective responsibility—that can go on the record. I have seen two remarkable schools in Kent. I went with Anna to a Kent grammar school and also to the King Ethelbert School. One is doing the careers baccalaureate and one is doing the more academic version that has vocational qualifications. I think there are about 91 schools around the country that do this. Most of them are done by private schools.

You are aware, because you mentioned it to the Secretary of State, that the Prime Minister talked about widening the baccalaureate. We need to have a debate on this. I am very happy that Members agreed about skills. I am very happy that you have carried this on, Chair. You have to have the debate on this, look at where it is working and look at the outcomes for students. There were discussions about these issues in the Department, but we also have to be careful post covid not to upset the apple cart too much at this stage. The Secretary of State said that.

The Prime Minister has challenged us to see how we can build on the gold standard of A-levels and ensure that every young person receives the benefits of a broad, ambitious education. He has also talked about the widening of the teaching of maths, so that you do not just focus on A-levels but have more maths to 18. That is all I can say to you at the moment about this.

Chair: I will ask Flick to expand on this a little bit because she thinks this is an important area.

Q304 **Mrs Drummond:** We have talked about this a lot. I was really pleased



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that you were on the Times Education Commission and also that the Prime Minister has talked about it. Unfortunately, we are talking about a British baccalaureate, which is not quite right because it is devolved education, so it should be called an English baccalaureate. I would like to hear your views on that.

Robert Halfon: I always regard myself as British rather than English, but everyone has their own preference.

Q305 **Mrs Drummond:** Yes, but we have devolved education. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales might not want a British baccalaureate. We will go into that in more detail in a minute. You said that you were going to include maths and English. Are we talking about the baccalaureate or a wider remit more along the lines of an international baccalaureate with possibly five or six different subjects? If you are talking about maths, we have a shortage of maths teachers, so how are we going to achieve that?

Robert Halfon: I did not say we are going to do this; I said these things are being discussed. That is important. As I say, the Committee could have a really important role in this, depending on what you decide and whatever your recommendations are going to be. I think it is important to have that debate.

In terms of maths, we have a mastery programme. A lot of money is being invested to promote maths teaching. There are maths hubs around the country. We have the level 3 courses, and hundreds of millions being invested in Multiply as well. So there is quite a lot. The Prime Minister is very keen on ensuring that we do something on mathematics, as is the Schools Minister.

Q306 **Mrs Drummond:** But what about the lack of maths teachers?

Robert Halfon: There are bursaries for teachers in STEM subjects. They are also in FE in the area that we are focusing on today. There are bursaries for teachers in STEM subjects to try and encourage more of them. And there is the maths mastery programme to improve best practice in the teaching of maths.

Q307 **Mrs Drummond:** You have only got to 90% of your target for maths teachers in the last year. Do you think that because of that mastery programme and so on, you will start getting more young people involved in maths?

Robert Halfon: I hope so, and I hope the bursaries and the FE recruitment programme—we are doing a lot of advertising as well. I hope there will be some Christmas adverts on FE recruitment. I hope all those things together will improve things, absolutely.

Q308 **Mrs Drummond:** You mentioned that you have been to a few schools that do the IB. Is it worth looking into that, rather than reinventing the wheel and having our own baccalaureate?

Robert Halfon: There are many different proposals for the baccalaureate. There is the existing IB. As you know, there are two IBs—the careers



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version and the academic version. Interestingly, the academic version, as I think Anna found when we went there, has a lot of skills in it and creative thinking. The crucial thing to me is, does it improve—I am open-minded as to which bacculaureate it is.

Different think-tanks have proposed bacculaureates. *The Times* has proposed one. The debate to be had is how much you widen the curriculum from 16, and do you have a bacculaureate or do you make sure that everybody has to do maths and English alongside their A-levels? One thing we need to be careful of—I accept this argument—is that A-levels are still seen as the gold standard by employers and by the public. It is very important that you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, but that doesn't mean you don't necessarily look at expanding it and making sure there is more maths and English or whatever it may be throughout the system

Q309 **Mrs Drummond:** Brilliant. What sort of timescales are you looking at? Is your Department actively looking at this now?

Robert Halfon: Discussions are going on in the Department about these issues, but I can't give you a timescale at this time.

Q310 **Mrs Drummond:** Okay. The IB is used, but a lot of schools are disincentivised to take it up because of the funding—you are teaching six subjects rather than three. Are there any plans to offer more funding, and perhaps more trials as well, of a bacculaureate?

Robert Halfon: Again, I can't give you a pledge today, but of course all these things are looked at in the spending round.

Q311 **Mrs Drummond:** Okay. Does it have to be called a bacculaureate? Can you call it something else?

Robert Halfon: Well, this is the whole thing. The subject is not easy. My views are on the record. Some people don't want to call it a bacculaureate. Some people want it to be a British bacculaureate. Some people want it to be an English bacculaureate. Some people think we should just keep with the IB, and then it is, should it be the careers one or should it be the academic one, or whatever it may be?

What I would like to do, and I am sure the Committee is doing this—I think you had two of the schools coming along giving evidence just after I left. What I think we should do is look at where they are doing the IB, in all these 91 schools—obviously, the state schools are important—and then, look at the outcomes. The most important thing in terms of the exam system to me is progression and outcomes. Are they working? What I saw in those two schools in Kent was, yes, it seemed to be very impressive and it was working. But in terms of the name, I am pretty open-minded about what you decide to call it.

Q312 **Mrs Drummond:** You could just widen the education, include A-levels, T-levels, BTECs and whatever, and call it something like a school leaving certificate or whatever—so you are not throwing everything out, but you are actually widening the educational experience post 16. As you know, I



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would rather have it from 14 to 18, but that's another discussion altogether.

Robert Halfon: The crucial thing is that too many people in our country have numeracy and literacy problems. I think it is about 9 million people. Something is going wrong. We are doing a lot. I mentioned some of the things at the start—all the different qualifications we are doing. Whether some kind of bacculaureate or expanding post-16 education to include maths and key subjects should be added to that is part of that discussion.

Q313 **Chair:** I think you have hit the nail on the head about this challenge around literacy and numeracy. We have an English bacculaureate at the moment, which is GCSE-based. We are doing quite well in terms of the targets for participation when it comes to science, maths and English. We are not doing so well when it comes to languages. Even with those levels of participation, we are not hitting the levels we would like to when it comes to literacy and numeracy and people who are able to get good grades in maths and English.

How do you ensure, if there is going to be some form of British bacculaureate with maths and English continuing to 18, that that is accessible and that you have a suite of exams that do not automatically shut out that 30% of people who are not getting a good pass at GCSE at the moment?

Robert Halfon: The answer is to look at the schools that are doing it. I saw those kids, and I am sure that Anna would agree that no one was shut out, whatever background they came from. In fact, they benefited from it at the schools that I saw.

Q314 **Chair:** Isn't the very nature of post-16 education in academic subjects selective to a certain degree? In order to carry on, you have been selected to take A-levels or a bacculaureate in those subjects.

Ian Mearns: Streamed.

Chair: Streamed, yes.

Robert Halfon: I'm sorry, what is the point that you are making?

Chair: The point I am making is that if we want this to be a bacculaureate that every student can access, do we not need to have some kind of certificate in literacy or numeracy, perhaps, rather than an A-level or a grade at a GCSE?

Robert Halfon: I think A-levels are very important. Going back to this gold standard, they are recognised and understood by people and are respected by employers. All the different options that you are talking about need to be debated and discussed. We need a debate about it. We need the Committee's recommendations when they come out. I will look at all the options; the Schools Minister will look at it; my boss, the Secretary of State, will look at it. The crucial point is that we need more people who are doing A-levels—maths particularly and those other subjects.

Chair: I don't think many people around the Committee table would



disagree with you on that.

Q315 Ian Mearns: I was musing earlier that some youngsters might do well in English but struggle in maths. You could have the appropriate examination certificate in English, but then have a numeracy certificate that says that they can function numerically. Conversely, you could have someone doing really well at maths but who struggles with English. You could have a literacy certificate as well as your exam.

Robert Halfon: We do have functional skills, as you know. Sue wants to mention something.

Sue Lovelock: I just wanted to say that having a range of maths qualifications available post 16 is really important. We have the A-level and GCSE maths, which are very well known and well established, but we have core maths as well, which is available at level 3 for those who do not want to study a full maths A-level but have to continue to study maths in a more functional way. Also, the level 2 functional skills qualifications in English, maths and digital were an important part of the menu of options for young people who have not achieved their level 2 maths and English by the time they finish at school.

Chair: Anna, did you want to come back in?

Q316 Anna Firth: Very swiftly, Minister, on the issue of the bacculaureate, putting aside the name, isn't one of the joys of this programme that it is so flexible? Students have to study the six subjects but only three of them at higher level. They would still have to study maths and English at lower level, and there are different types even of lower levels. Don't the examples show that you can keep maths and literacy going, but within the bacculaureate is the flexibility to make sure it is at a level that the student will be able to cope with?

On what we call it, isn't this a case of a rose by any other name? Is it not far more important that we promote something that works and that we have seen working to a high level in part of the country? Given we are trading on an international level and are developing our own trade policy now that we have are outside the EU, isn't an international bacculaureate quite a good idea, given the future direction of the UK economy in particular? I just wanted your reflections on those points.

Robert Halfon: On the first point, as I mentioned, I was impressed with what I saw as a model for post-16 education. That is all I will say on that.

On the second point, I am genuinely open-minded about the name—if it happens. The English bacculaureate, the British bacculaureate, the *Times* bacculaureate, the EDSK bacculaureate, the Anna Firth bacculaureate, the Flick Drummond bacculaureate, I do not really mind. I just want to ensure that people post 16 have a wide variety of options to study, and to be proficient in maths and English particularly. However, I do think that we have a good, rare qualification that we are now offering our young people, the T-level transition, and a higher technical qualification.



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It is worth saying—if you don't mind, Chair—that just 4% of the country under 25 have level 4 or 5. Just 4%. We need to be looking at that as well, and that is why we have introduced the higher technical qualification, with 106 to be rolled out next year. We have 70 institutions doing it at the moment and £70 million of investment. Those are the things that really matter. Not enough people know about them—my job is to change that.

I think that the higher technical qualification could be very important. We need lots of STEM and digital subjects. Once you have done the T-level or even A-levels, you can then go on to do a higher technical qualification at level 4 or 5. They are also linked to the institutes of technology. As I mentioned, there will be 21 altogether—12 already—and they will teach state-of-the-art vocational and technical qualifications, helping us to meet our skills needs for the future.

I am really excited about those things. If I may say so, Chair, that is one of the reasons why not only was I lucky to be given the job, but I wanted to do it. Being the Chair of a Committee is an incredible job, and of the Education Committee, as you have probably found out already in your few weeks. Now, however, the Government are doing the right things, with a whole pipeline of extraordinary qualifications coming through and billions of pounds of investment. For everyone, from low levels of attainment being able to do the free courses right through to higher technical qualifications, there is a pipeline of exciting vocational qualifications. With the infrastructure we are investing in, that should be encouraged and welcomed. I hope that the Committee looks at those areas of improvement as well.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, it has been a pleasure to have you. We have had quite a lot to get through but, in a nutshell, I think you have answered the questions quite effectively. We look forward to having you back on the careers inquiry in the new year.

Robert Halfon: I was waiting for "in a nutshell" from you guys. I thought it would come a bit earlier. Thank you very much, and I genuinely look forward to your recommendations, whenever they come out.