



Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds

Thursday 7 September 2023

11.05 am

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Members present: Lord Johnson of Marylebone (The Chair); Lord Aberdare; Lord Baker of Dorking; Baroness Blower; Baroness Evans of Bowes Park; Baroness Garden of Frognal; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Lexden; Lord Storey; Lord Watson of Invergowrie.

Evidence Session No. 15

Heard in Public

Questions 162 - 177

Witnesses

I: Catherine Sezen, Director of Education Policy, Association of Colleges; Paul Warner, Director of Strategy and Business Development, Association of Employment and Learning Providers.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Catherine Sezen and Paul Warner.

Q162 The Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee. Thanks for making time to come and be with us. As usual, there will be a transcript after the hearing, which you will have an opportunity to correct if you need to. If any members have any interests that they need to declare following the recess, this might be a good moment to do it.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I have joined the qualifications committee at Pearson and I am also now advising Charter School Capital.

Baroness Evans of Bowes Park: I am also advising Charter School Capital.

The Chair: They are well advised.

Lord Baker of Dorking: It must be a very prosperous body.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Or we are very cheap.

The Chair: Welcome again. How effectively does the current 11 to 16 education system prepare pupils for the full range of options available in the 16 to 19 phase? Before you answer, would you be kind enough just to introduce yourself and say what you do at your organisation?

Paul Warner: Good morning. I am the director of strategy and business development at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, which is the primary representative body for post-16 vocational work-based learning providers, with about 750 organisations in membership.

In answer to the question, broadly, it does not. That is the summary answer. The fact that the pre-16 stage should, in theory, take you to level 2, but then, effectively, the vocational system starts again at level 2 tells you a lot about what you need to know. Any sort of meaningful preparation for vocational options is not really catered for within the pre-16 system as it stands at the moment. It is, primarily, academic in nature and, frankly, does not easily adapt to the notion of vocational learning. That is a fairly short and pithy answer, but it is the most accurate one I can give.

The Chair: That is a helpful starting point. Thank you very much.

Catherine Sezen: Hello, everyone. I am director for education policy at the Association of Colleges. We represent 90% of English colleges and there are around 228 colleges in England. I am going to be a little broader than Paul on this one. I would look at it in two ways, looking at curriculum and information, advice and guidance, and how effective those two things are.

In terms of curriculum, it should be broad and balanced, which opens a door to a range of post-16 opportunities. If we look at the results from

this year, for 16 year-olds there were around 380,000 entries in level 1 and level 2 vocational technical options. If you compare that with the number of entries, for example, for English or maths, which is over 600,000, that gives you an idea that, in terms of vocational technical opportunities, they are not necessarily widely taken up in schools. Some of those young people for those 380,000 may be taking more than one vocational technical qualification, so it is by no means all students who do that.

We would think that it should be the norm to have it as part of that broad and balanced curriculum that young people have the opportunity to explore something more than the academic options that are available. Those academic options obviously lead to positive outcomes. However, we are talking about being broad and that is really important.

In terms of information, advice and guidance, we have the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company and provider access legislation. Those things are definitely going in the right direction. There are many more opportunities now for young people to find out about post-16 options and particularly vocational technical options.

However, it is not enough. How do we make it come to life for a young person? That is really important. If that is not what you are seeing in your day-to-day life, how does anyone know what an engineer does? How does anyone really know what a mechanic does? How does anyone know what it means to work in AI as a new occupation that we will be looking at? We would say therefore that, in terms of being effective, there is a lot more to be done in order to make it broader and more inclusive for a variety of different options.

Q163 Baroness Garden of Frognal: You represent two very important organisations that do fantastic work. I worked for City & Guilds for 20 years and I worked with both your organisations very closely. In your view, which qualifications best prepare pupils for post-16 technical or vocational pathways, including apprenticeships? Are these qualifications sufficiently valued and supported in the current 11 to 16 system?

We note particularly that schools are very quick to celebrate their kids going on to university, but very few of them celebrate their kids going on to apprenticeships. That was something that I tried to persuade Michael Gove to do in the heady days of coalition Government, when I was in his ministry. "What a good idea, Sue", he said, and did absolutely nothing about it.

Catherine Sezen: When we are looking at apprenticeships, that is really interesting, because the number of under-19 apprenticeships has fallen dramatically over the past six years. That could be accounted for by Covid. We have all been through that. The numbers have fallen almost by half, so that is something we need to bear in mind. "Why is that?" would be the question. Is it the pull or is it the push? I am not quite sure.

For me, it is not just the qualification; it is actually the whole experience. It goes back to the point I was making in the first answer that we would

like to see more young people offered the opportunity to experience a wider range of options and possibly undertake funded extended tasters at college.

There are around 10,000 students, 14 to 16 year-olds, who do part or all of their education in a college, through either electively home-educated provision, alternative provision or direct entry provision. Direct entry is where young people actually spend the whole week there. It effectively becomes their school. Those young people have the opportunity to do a wide range of vocational technical options alongside core subjects, so that would be English, maths, science, et cetera.

We want to promote how that encourages better transition post 16. That transition from secondary into college is quite difficult and it is really important that we focus on that. To go back to the key point there, it is not just about the qualifications. It is about the whole experience and how we encourage more young people to consider a broader range of options and to know that it is not just about going on to do A-levels. A-levels are great—I am sure that many people in this room have A levels; I do—but they are not the only option available.

Paul Warner: I am not sure that any of the qualifications out there that are primarily used in the 11 to 16 phase particularly adequately represent anything that is likely to happen in the post-16 phase, with the exception of English and maths, for obvious reasons. That will be the big one that any provider will be looking for. I am speaking here primarily about apprenticeships. That is where most of our members are and our interest is. I am speaking primarily there, but that applies across the system as well. It is the English and maths qualifications that providers and employers will mostly be looking for.

If the other qualifications in themselves at GCSE level are anything at all, they are an indicator of engagement and behaviours. The subject itself is generally not a massive indicator of how well or otherwise anybody is actually going to perform or be suited for an apprenticeship once they come out of the pre-16 phase.

As I said before, the GCSE system is primarily academic in nature. It does not easily sit with moving into a vocational pathway. There is a whole transition that happens there and it feels like a very big jolt in the system at the moment. It is certainly not a smooth transition. English and maths are the only things that can really be said to transition across in any effective way.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: That would be academic English and maths, would it? The great concern is that GCSE English and maths is often unattainable for many people who are more vocationally oriented. What about functional English and functional maths, which are much more geared towards practical subjects? Would you accept those, or do you reckon that GCSE English and maths are the absolute essentials?

Paul Warner: GCSE English and maths is what we have, so therefore that is what needs to be recognised. There are, of course, elements in that. You are showing their basic ability, their underpinning knowledge and abilities in some of the concepts.

However, functional skills, level 2 maths for example, have always been described as another way to reach the same level of skill and attainment but by a different route, through an applied route. We are doing a lot of research work into functional skills at the moment. We are increasingly finding that we are really hard-pushed to find the difference. When you look at an exam paper, if you put a GCSE exam paper and a functional skills paper side by side and took the titles off, I would defy anybody to make an informed guess about which one was actually the GCSE and which one was the functional skills.

That makes me ask, therefore, why we have two exam streams that are doing the same thing. We say that one of them is going to be applied. It is actually not. When you look at the paper, it is not applied. It looks very much like the GCSE paper. I may be jumping ahead to answer one of the next questions, so forgive me. In terms of whether functional skills should be offered at the 11 to 16 phase, my question is, "What's the point?"

The Chair: That is great. We will come back to this in a bit more detail shortly.

Q164 **Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** Catherine, in your recent remarks you talked about the transition being very important. We would all agree with that. The AoC said, in its submission, that "All young people should have a transition plan, which is monitored and updated regularly throughout KS4", which is an excellent idea. Are you able to say a bit more about how you might envisage such a transition plan being first created and then updated as the young person goes through key stage 4?

Catherine Sezen: If a young person has an education, health and care plan, quite a lot of detail goes into that looking at their transition. We know, for example, that over 25% of 16 to 18 year-olds in colleges have a special educational need or disability. They have additional needs and then you might also have young people who have suffered a bereavement, had an illness, been absent from education for a reason or had a disrupted education.

We do not get that information at college. We do not get any information on the attendance of those students, which tells you everything that you need to know. We do not know how well that student attended in key stage 4, which would be really helpful information for us in terms of looking at where we really need to support young people. Young people do not always want to disclose that information until it is a little bit further down the line and things have started to unravel for them.

In terms of that transition, we would be looking for something that is discussed with parents, carers and the young person, for example at a

parents evening, and updated in terms of, "What are you looking at doing post 16? What are your ambitions?" It is all part of the information, advice and guidance.

It would have to be a system that everybody buys into. I used to work in a college and we tried to initiate this with our local schools, but it is quite difficult if not everybody in the area buys into it. All post-16 providers and all schools would need to buy in. It could be something electronic. You obviously have to be mindful of what information is being passed on and it needs to be secure.

Colleges always say that additional information would be really helpful. Paul was talking about English and maths results. I had students who lied to me about their English and maths results because they did not necessarily want to have to resit. They would come in and say, "I can't find my transcript, Miss. I haven't got it with me today, but I got a 4", only for us to discover two weeks later that that was not the case. They could not find that slip of paper. If we had that information coming to us centrally, it would help us support young people to progress more effectively and to support them from day one when they come into college.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: The onus would be on schools to supply that in respect of each pupil, presumably put together by the year head at each stage.

Catherine Sezen: We would not want to make it cumbersome because that was where it fell down for us. You would have to have things that could go through the SIMS in schools. We call it MIS, so the management information system. It could be done quite rapidly. Even if you had attendance, that tells you quite a lot. Then you could follow up with that individual young learner to make sure that you were supporting them in order to sustain them post 16.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: From memory, there are some complicated data consent issues around all that.

Catherine Sezen: I appreciate that, yes.

Q165 **Lord Aberdare:** My original question was exactly the one that Lord Watson asked, so I will ask a different question. I may have had a slight misunderstanding from what you were saying, Paul: that the most important element was English and maths in terms of the technical vocational side. I would very much agree with what Catherine said. Ideally, it should be the norm for everybody to be taking something in the way of vocational and technical qualifications.

Going directly to Paul, what would you expect? You are outside the formal education system in AELP. In terms of what you will be offering or looking for from young people coming out of school, what would you want or expect them to have done in the 11 to 16 phase that is not properly being covered at the moment? I was a bit surprised that you would not have focused on broad skills such as teamwork, project work or

communication skills. It seems to me that you have to start those before. You cannot just come out of school at 16 and then start a completely new set of learning.

Paul Warner: No, that is absolutely right. My previous answer was relating to what the situation is at the moment. In an ideal world, yes, absolutely, I agree with Cath. There should be at least proper vocational options within the 11 to 16 phase. Ideally we would be looking at a wider set of what used to be called soft skills, as you said, such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving.

I said earlier on about the fact that other qualifications tend to be, for vocational providers, an indicator of engagement and behaviours. That is probably what they are looking for. They are trying to use those as a proxy for, "Do we have, within here, somebody who might have an element of problem-solving about them? Do they communicate well?" At the moment, within the current structure of GCSEs and trying to transfer those into a vocational setting, a lot of vocational providers, and I dare say employers, are struggling to use that as a proxy. It needs to be much clearer. It needs to be much more evident within there.

Could I also pick up on something that Cath said that is very important as well about special educational needs in terms of transition? There is a really big problem about education, health and care plans and how that data rolls over into the post-16 phase. Education, health and care plans in the 11 to 16 phase will focus on the support that is needed at that point. That could be very different from the requirements at a post-16 point, but it is such a long-winded process to go through it and get that changed that, in many cases, the system means they are not able to access that additional support because the EHC does not identify what it is they need. They have to go through a process to get it and they can end up not getting it. This is what I mean about this cliff, this disjunct, at the 16 stage.

Q166 **Lord Baker of Dorking:** You are both very important witnesses to this committee, if I may say so, because you are on the front line professionally and you are clearly totally opposed to the policy of Mr Gibb that vocational education should start at 16. That is too late. I am not criticising FE colleges, but they have a huge task within two years to get people up to level 3 in engineering. That is a huge task. The brighter students will do it. The less bright students will struggle, quite frankly. That is why FE colleges—I am not criticising them—are only going to get about 6% up to level 4 after two years. That is about the figure.

If they started at 14, like the colleges I support, or at 11 even, by 18 many more would be able to get to level 4 because of the length of time that they have been studying. That is the greatest improvement we could make, because the shortage of technicians at level 4 and beyond is holding this country back. All that you have been saying very much confirms the evidence we have been taking from other people as well. Would you agree with my figures about level 4? I think that you would, would you not? It is a challenging thing to get to in two years.

Catherine Sezen: I would need to go back and check on that destination data. It is important to note that many students come into college and need more than two years to succeed at level 3. That is something we need to recognise. For some learners, that is going to take three or perhaps four years to reach that level.

I agree with your point, Lord Baker, about the importance of greater exposure for young people to this variety of options. We know that, when colleges ran increased flexibility programmes and young apprenticeship programmes in the early 2000s, those young people were able to see whether engineering, for example, was a thing they wanted to go into. Then they were able to progress more quickly when they got into college at 16 because they knew exactly what they wanted to do. They were well known and it helped as well with that transition information. That was the point that I would make.

Paul Warner: I would not demur from anything that Cath has just said. I am not sure about the particular figures, but I know that, as you quite rightly say, there is a lack of technicians and education in that sector. That is where the big gap is.

One thing I would add on is that, particularly with regard to apprenticeships, some of the work we have done has indicated that one of the reasons that there is a high drop-out rate at level 2 in some particular sectors is actually because the apprenticeships take so long. Young people go in at 16 and, if they are required to do a two and a half year apprenticeship to get to level 2 or level 3, that is like a lifetime for them. They can easily get a year down the line, see their mates are off getting better hourly pay somewhere else and bail out at that point. There is an indication about what we are packing into the levels at 16 as well in terms of content. In some areas we may be asking too much of young people and that is actually contributing to a high drop-out rate.

Q167 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** If I may, I will ask a supplementary to the last question before asking the substantive next question. Catherine, in your response previously you talked a little about A-levels, which are a perfectly valid qualification helping young people go to university. The statistics are that roughly just shy of 40% of young people go on to university when they finish school at 18. You have 60% who do not, and yet the take-up of apprenticeships at 16 to 19 has plummeted. What would you both want differently in 11 to 16 in order to fix that problem of apprenticeship take-up at 16 to 19?

Catherine Sezen: That is a really interesting question. It is quite interesting that we have had the requirement that people stay in education, employment and training. Sometimes people get the "stay in education" bit, but do not necessarily get the "stay in training" bit.

We also need to look at how we are engaging with employers. As I said earlier, I am not sure about that push/pull, in terms of whether it is employers saying, "We have seen a growth as well in higher level

apprenticeships for people who are actually employed". If we look at the levy, perhaps that has led to that.

However, we need to go back and do more research to find out whether it is the push or the pull. Is it the fact that young people do not know about apprenticeships and do not think that they want to go on to an apprenticeship, feel that they should be staying in school, college or an educational institution, rather than going out into an apprenticeship? Is it that employers are not keen to take on those younger learners? We often get the feedback that you were talking about in terms of essential skills and young people not being ready. Why are young people not ready now when perhaps five or six years ago they appeared to be ready to go into an apprenticeship under 19?

It would be really helpful to explore that in greater detail, but it needs us all working together. It is not just education. We also need to be working with the Government. We also need to be working with employers. That triangulation is really important because this is important for all of us in terms of productivity.

Paul Warner: I was very taken by Cath's analogy earlier about the provider access legislation, about the fact that vocational options need to be brought alive in the 11 to 16 phase. Provider access legislation will help. It is a great shame that we have had to resort to legislation to get schools to knuckle down and think about vocational options for their pupils properly, but, nevertheless, we are where we are. It still feels like it is rather a process. They have to tick this box that they have done two opportunities here and two opportunities in the next two years, rather than really trying to bring it alive and help make that a realistic life option for their pupils.

It is extremely important to note, however, that one of the major reasons for the fall-off of opportunities at level 2 and take-up of opportunities at that level is the structure of the levy itself in the first place. We were very clear right from the original thinking about the apprenticeship levy that it would steer employers to pick up older and higher-qualified workers. There would be a cliff fall at level 2. That is exactly what has happened.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Is there anything in the 11 to 16 key stages—3 and 4—that you would want to see changed in order to change the appetite for apprenticeships at 16 to 19? This would be on the demand side, I guess.

Paul Warner: As I said, bringing the provider access and the options alive and making them realistic is true. However, if we do that, we are in danger, given the current structure of the levy, of not fulfilling our promises. We are saying, "This could be a great option. This could be really good. Lots of employers value it". They get to 16 and find that there are hardly any opportunities there. They would quite rightly turn around and say, "I thought you said this was going to be a really good option for us".

The Chair: Can I follow up Lord Knight's question? Do you see the need for any changes to curriculum or accountability measures to facilitate greater exposure to technical and vocational options?

Paul Warner: We have always been minded, for example, that Ofsted should be seriously thinking about limiting grades for schools from a careers options point of view. Ofsted takes a lot more notice of what the quality of careers provision is like. Given that the fundamental purpose of a school is to prepare somebody for working life at the end of the tenure in the school, there is scope for considerably more accountability from schools to Ofsted in the quality of that provision.

Q168 **Lord Storey:** I want to follow up the point that Paul has made. Unspent apprenticeship levy has to be returned to the Treasury. I come from Liverpool. Over the last few years, Liverpool City Council has returned £2.8 million of unspent levy. This is a local authority that struggles to get money. One of the ways that they are trying to stop having to return that money, as you have intimated, is by financing the levy on more expensive training courses. You can get more for your bucks by training older people, even up to 30-plus, than you can 16 to 19 year-olds. Could you comment on that? Am I talking a load of nonsense here?

Paul Warner: That is absolutely correct. That is exactly what happens.

Lord Storey: Is it true of employers as well?

Paul Warner: Yes.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Can I very quickly come back to the question that the Chair posed to you? You seemed rather hesitant in replying to it. He asked whether you think there should be any change in the curriculum for 11 to 16. I would put it to you that what you want will not happen unless you agree that there should be a change in 11 to 16. If people are not taught vocational and technical subjects below 16, you will be sitting there saying the same in five years' time.

Q169 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I will move on. I will just comment in passing. I was interested that Catherine in particular did not offer the option of colleges providing education from 14 as part of the solution, and yet that is a legal possibility.

Catherine Sezen: It is, yes.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: In their evidence to us, the department has said that GCSEs "equip students to move directly into employment or apprenticeships at age 16 with a qualification in hand" and that roughly half of 16 year-olds change institution at that point. To what extent do the organisations you represent use qualification results at 16 as a measure of pupils' suitability to pursue the particular 16 to 19 routes that you offer? Clearly, GCSEs are an exam-based assessment. We are also interested in whether reducing the amount of exam-based assessment, through either reconfiguring GCSEs or just taking fewer of them, would be helpful.

Catherine Sezen: I just want to address the point you made. Around 1,500 students do full-time key stage 4 in colleges. However, those students are funded at the 16 to 18 rate, which is lower than the 14 to 16 rate in a school. It takes a brave provider to decide that they want to deliver 25 hours on a 16 to 18 rate.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Why does the ESFA not fund it as a key stage 4 child?

Catherine Sezen: We could be here a long time discussing that. It is something that we have asked on more than one occasion. For those young people who have that experience, there are opportunities. We are doing some Nuffield-funded research on that at the moment. I spoke to a group of young people at a college. For a variety of reasons, they had had mixed experiences at school. By doing this direct entry programme, they were well prepared to go into post-16 education.

It is an interesting question. There are broader things we would need to consider in terms of funding and staffing. Notwithstanding that, it would be a great opportunity for more young people to experience college, because I think that it would ease transition.

Going back to your substantive question, colleges provide a range of post-16 opportunities from entry level to level 3 at 16, because obviously young people come from school with a variety of GCSE grades. Qualifications are one of the tools that support the information, advice and guidance on entry. In order, for example, to go on to a level 3 course, most colleges would require students to have five GCSEs at grade 4 and above, including English and maths, to go straight to that level 3 course.

However, when we are looking at vocational technical, which is very important, we need to bear in mind that around 40% of young people do not achieve those five GCSEs including English and maths at grade 4 or above at 16. Some 60% of young people start a vocational technical level 3 at either 17 or 18, so they have already done a level 1 or a level 2. Colleges offer opportunities to every young person within their community and will do their level best to make sure that they can go on and achieve.

Your question about the amount of exam-based assessment for colleges goes back to the point Paul has already made about the importance of English and maths. That comes back to the condition of fundings. Perhaps we will address that in a later question when we start talking about English and maths, because obviously students need to continue studying English and maths post 16. Those are really important skills. We would question whether the vehicle, the actual qualification, is the most appropriate.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: We will probably come on to this, but I would question whether it is the qualification or the content of the programme of study.

Catherine Sezen: Yes, I would agree with that. I do not think that we necessarily require young people coming into college, particularly to do a vocational technical option, to have 10 GCSEs at grade 7 or 8. There are a variety of opportunities and perhaps we should be focusing on other things. There is quite a lot of assessment, is there not? If you look at the average exam timetable of a 16 year-old over four or five weeks, it is really intensive. Does that provide the opportunity for every young person to show what they do best?

Lord Baker of Dorking: What do you think about that? What is your view on that? You posed the question.

Catherine Sezen: No, I do not think that it does. It provides opportunity. We are all different, are we not? Some people thrive on assessment. Others do not. It looks at one type of assessment as well, assessing your academic ability, whereas we know that we have a range of abilities. Each one of us in this room has a range of abilities. I am not necessarily sure that assessment captures all of that.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: If most young people are taking eight or nine GCSEs and of them the technical award, which would largely be D&T but can be other technical awards, might be, at a stretch, one, is that the right balance, given that the majority are not going to university?

Catherine Sezen: It comes back to information, advice and guidance. If you have a young person whose aspiration is to go into medicine or law, clearly they need to be on a certain pathway, because that is their aspiration, notwithstanding that young people change their minds. It is really important that we bear that in mind.

It is that opportunity to explore something that allows people, particularly those who are creative and have those great problem-solving skills, to actually show how great they are at something. I have worked with so many young people who come to college and you say, "Oh my goodness. What you are doing there is incredible". They respond to that because they have never had that sort of praise previously because they have been judged on their academic ability.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Is it fair to say that we are so preoccupied by wanting to keep open the option of law and medicine, so therefore getting everyone to do 10, 11 or 12 GCSEs if we possibly can, so we do not close off those options to young people, that we are closing off other options by not allowing them the space to take more technical and vocational qualifications at key stage 4?

Catherine Sezen: I think so. For example, where can you go wrong with catering? Everybody needs those sorts of skills. Design technology and digital skills are all things we are going to need as we are moving through the 21st century. I agree. Art, design and all of those qualifications and experiences—I go back to my point about experiences—help enhance people's understanding of what opportunities there are post 16.

Paul Warner: There are two things I would say. I will pick up on something you said earlier. Qualifications themselves are not really that important. The content of them—what they might tell you about the attitude to learning or the behaviours of that individual—is important, but it is not the qualification itself. You could say that for whatever qualification. If you invented a new one and put it in at 16, we would have to look at it in that way. GCSEs themselves, with the exception of English and maths, are not particularly important, generally speaking, for post 16.

The Education Secretary said recently, about A-level results, that young people should not get too despondent because in 10 years' time nobody would ask about them. I would put forward that, with GCSEs on vocational pathways, almost immediately most of them are ignored, to be honest. It is only English and maths that anyone is looking at. The current system of GCSEs does not really cater for vocational aptitude. If you have a GCSE in statistics or economics, that is great if you want to be a statistician or an economist, but if you want to be a nurse or a landscape gardener, it is not so much so. You are virtually having to start again.

Q170 **Lord Watson of Invergowrie:** I have a general question, probably to both of you but it may be more specifically to Paul and AELP. It is within this question of the value of qualifications. You may be aware that the Times Education Commission's report last year showed that many businesses have lost faith in exams and resort to their own assessment systems before taking young people on. Paul, representing independent training providers, do you find that that is an issue as far as they are concerned? Does that follow through to the sorts of jobs that they go on to?

The other thing is that I know you are involved, as an organisation, with the Save our Skills campaign at the moment. I have seen your letter to the Secretary of State, which I dare say she has not had time to answer, given other events. I realise that that is about funding. To what extent is it about, when you question the current position of apprenticeships, whether young people have the skills to take up the apprenticeships, rather as Cath was outlining in terms of the lower take-up later on?

Paul Warner: There is a real issue about what are termed spikey profiles of attainment when young people move from the pre-16 phase to the post-16 phase. It is not uncommon by any means for a provider to have a young person come to enrol with them who has achieved level 2 maths and can present evidence of having done so. It is not uncommon for the provider to then figure out that actually they do not really have that level of skills. They have been taught to pass an exam. In terms of the level of maths skills they have, they really have to start again. They have to bring them up or do it again.

The funding is not very good to do that anyway. That is one point. Secondly, if they already have that qualification, they will not really be given any funding to do it again to bring them up to level, because they

apparently already have it. There is a real issue about the content of the GCSE system. It is what we have, but does it actually prepare young people and really demonstrate what they can do and are ready to do at vocational level? No, I do not think that it does.

- Q171 **The Chair:** Can I quickly ask whether you think that the fact that DfE has a performance indicator that measures the proportion of school leavers going to Russell Group universities is inadvertently driving schools to disincentivise people from taking technical or vocational options?

Paul Warner: Absolutely, yes. This was at the heart of why we were so active in backing provider access legislation. It is not necessarily for now, but we could give so many stories of where colleges and independent apprenticeship providers have been to schools' careers days, when they can get in at all, and are given a stand at the back or even in a corridor, or the pupils are actively told, "You need to talk to the universities over here. That is the route you need to go down. For the rest of you, there is an apprenticeship provider over there. You can talk to them". There is a very big attitudinal thing. The DfE, advertently or inadvertently, reinforces that.

The Chair: Catherine, do you agree with that?

Catherine Sezen: Yes, I do. I have personally had that experience, admittedly a little while ago, so hopefully things have moved on. It is about educating the educators as well. By definition, people who work in schools are people like me, who went to school and university and then went back into teaching. We should look at those people as well as the careers advisers. It should be very much a whole-school process. Everybody should engage and find out much more about vocational technical options and what they offer. In short, yes.

- Q172 **Lord Baker of Dorking:** My question is very simple. Students have to get grade 4s in English and maths in order to pursue technical qualifications and apprenticeships. Do you think that level should be changed? Just say yes or no at this stage, please.

Paul Warner: The level does not need to be changed, but I have some qualifications around that.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Is it yes or no, because I want to know how you would do it? If you changed that qualification, should there be a lower qualification or not?

Paul Warner: I would say no to changing the level of the qualification.

Catherine Sezen: It is an interesting question. I would probably go with Paul and say no, based on the fact that you need a level of English and maths, or perhaps literacy and numeracy, in order to go on and be successful not just in work but in life. We see numbers of young people who do not succeed coming back into education as adults, still requiring the need to get a level 2 in English and maths. However, for me it is about the vehicle and the content of the qualification and the fact that

people are taking it again and again and again. Perhaps that is where we need to focus.

Lord Baker of Dorking: You say “again and again and again” and only 20% pass. Only 20% pass taking it again and again and again. I do not see why you are sticking with that. You will not get very much of an increase in apprentices at 16 by following your policies.

Can I revert now to a very short supplementary relating to what Lord Knight was talking about, the number of GCSEs? He said eight or nine, broadly. Should there be fewer? Should there just be two GCSEs, English and maths? Should there be three, English, maths and science? Bedales has only five GCSEs. Do you think that the GCSEs should be reduced, or should we just go on as we are doing? How would your colleges react to that?

Catherine Sezen: Colleges are looking at each individual and what their aspirations are. I go back to my point that, for some young people, doing English, maths, science and perhaps history and geography may be appropriate. However, it would be great if all young people had the option or there was an expectation of a vocational technical option. We also should not just see vocational technical as being something that “those people” do. That is really important. I will perhaps leave it there.

Paul Warner: If you reduced the number of GCSEs, you would end up seeing massive disengagement from pupils in the pre-16 phase. Although I have been fairly critical about the use of GCSEs in the vocational sector, they have a use, because you can make judgments about engagement, attitudes to learning and behaviours. They have been doing something that they chose, primarily, and something that they are interested in. It is not really about content but about what it tells you. If you reduce that to, say, English, maths and science, you would have a load of kids in the pre-16 phase saying, “This is not for me”.

Lord Baker of Dorking: Do you happen to know that we are the only country in the world that has demanding exams at 16? We are the only country in the world. You seem to go along with it.

Paul Warner: No, I am not necessarily agreeing that doing exams at 16 is a great way to proceed at all.

Q173 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Can I go back to the question about English and maths at grade 4? I was interested in your answers around, “Keep it at a level 2”, but that content might be an issue. Can you say a little more about the content of English and maths GCSE, the consequential pedagogy that then goes with teaching that content and whether a change could be of any significance in helping open up the pathways at 16 to 19?

Catherine Sezen: I will speak about English because I am an English teacher by trade. I have taught GCSE resits. The thing that astonished me more than anything was that we were straight in at analysis of language and yet many of the young people I was working with were

struggling for the basics. For whatever reason, they had quite large gaps and everybody in the group had different gaps. We focused quite a lot on improving vocabulary and looking at grammar.

The English language GCSE is quite literature focused. The functional skills, for example, is more functional in English. I think that we have some concerns about maths.

Your point about content is that, again, we are getting students to do the same thing. Imagine you have not done particularly well at school and you go back into college and then first thing you are back in an English and maths class and doing the same thing again. I would like to see building on success. In maths, for example, students may well be able to do fractions. They may be able to do ratios but they have struggled with algebra. I question the need to do so much of things like trigonometry, for example. Personally, I have never had to delve into trigonometry post 16, but I understand that in some occupations you may need to do that.

We also need to make it a little bit more occupationally focused to engage young people. However, I appreciate then that you would need a range of different qualifications for people doing different options, which may get tricky. The key point I would make is that we need a review and that we should be building students up. If you have achieved, you should be able to bank something and then work to the thing that you have struggled a little more with.

Q174 Baroness Evans of Bowes Park: This builds on what you have both said already. Going specifically to the functional skills qualifications, Paul, you effectively said that there is not really much difference in maths. Would you say the same in terms of English and digital? Catherine, would you agree? If you think that the concept of those qualifications is worth while but they are not doing what they should be doing, how would you like to see them develop?

Paul Warner: As Cath indicated, the issue is much more marked with maths than with English. There is an issue about English, but it is much more marked about maths. Maths also has the issue that you need to be able to read, understand and comprehend English in order to be able to do a maths exam. If you do not understand the question that is being asked, you are obviously impeded in being able to answer the question correctly.

There needs to be more blue water between GCSEs and functional skills and there is not at the moment. When you look at the guidelines for functional skills, the DfE says that they do not have to be assessed in an occupational or real-life context. However, they can be taught in that way. What happens is, increasingly, over the years, providers have looked at it and said, "Mostly, these are not being presented in an occupational context. There is therefore not much point teaching it in an occupational context because the young person will not recognise it when they get to the exam", so they teach it in a non-occupational context. I will not name them but there is one awarding organisation that we have

noted that basically still completely contextualises all its functional skills assessments. Notably, it has a better success rate.

Catherine Sezen: I agree. If you look at the achievement rates for 16 to 18 year-olds in colleges, the numbers are quite small doing level 2 maths, in fairness, at functional skills. In 2017-18, 45% were achieving. In 2021-22, it was 26%, so colleges are moving away from it.

- Q175 **Lord Lexden:** Catherine, could I bring you back to the statement in your written evidence that Lord Watson mentioned, namely that all young people should have a transition plan that is monitored and updated regularly throughout key stage 4? What response are you getting from teachers, schools and, dare one say it, the Department for Education itself to this very sensible idea?

Catherine Sezen: As part of the SEND and alternative provision work that is going on through the action plan, there is a move for greater transition information for young people with special educational needs, which, as I have already said, is around 25% of students. However, we would like to see that for all students because a young person could have had disrupted education but that does not necessarily mean that they have a special educational need.

I go back to Lord Knight's point about GDPR. If the student owned the information and had agreed to that information being passed on, that would mean that you have that approval and so therefore that would not be an issue. I would be looking for all young people to have some amount of information, because it would really help support that transition process into college, although obviously there is much more that we could also do in terms of greater opportunities for tasters and opportunities to get an idea of what you want to do. Lots of young people, for example, think that they want to do hair and then realise that there is a lot more in beauty, but they have already gone down that pathway. Having more taster opportunities would allow them to get greater experience.

- Q176 **Lord Storey:** You have used the term "engage" quite a bit. I am neutral on the content issue at the moment, but is it not true that it is actually the quality of the teacher who can relate to and engage with those young people to get a successful result? If I was to drill down into your colleges and look at, for example, maths with the same cohort of children, you would find a huge difference between the pass rates, naturally. That is to do with, again, the quality, expertise and professionalism of the teacher.

Catherine Sezen: I consider myself to be quite a good teacher and quite engaging. I had a group of 12 students and three of them passed their resit. I did everything, literally standing on my hands and trying to engage these young people, but with the gaps that I inherited it is a tall order to ask for a student who has already done 11 years of compulsory education to achieve in a year.

That is notwithstanding that we need to look at engagement. I do not disagree with you and you need to make it engaging. I am always saying,

when I interview staff to work for me, that it is not about, "I want to teach maths". It is, "I want to teach young people". A lot of it is actually building confidence and dealing with failure.

Q177 The Chair: Can I ask you, please, to give us a clear answer to whether you would support functional skills qualifications for English, maths and digital being taken more widely by pupils at key stage 4, instead of or alongside GCSEs?

Paul Warner: In principle, yes. There should be an option to do functional skills in the pre-16 phase as opposed to GCSEs. However, my reservation on that is that, in their current format, there is not enough differentiation between them, so therefore there does not seem much point in making that change.

The Chair: Do you need a different functional skills qualification?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you need them to be more functional?

Paul Warner: You need them to be more functional.

Catherine Sezen: I would agree. Based on college experience, 16-to-18 colleges are dropping functional skills in favour of GCSE. That is because they have found that the functional skill, as Paul has said, particularly at level 2 maths, is as complex as the GCSE. It is not a proper alternative.

The Chair: Unless others want to jump in with a final question, we will bring this to a close. We thank our witnesses very much for their time.