

SECTOR DEVELOPMENTS...

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTO

The Conservative Party's plans for FE and skills in England include the following:

- Setting up a National Productivity Investment Fund to boost productivity, which will include an allocation of £250 million for improving skills.
- Establishing new Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in every major city in England to provide technical courses at degree level and above, specialising in areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and providing higher-level apprenticeships and bespoke courses for employers.
- Conducting a major review of skills funding and how students can access the financial support they need to access this funding. The review will also cover local skills shortages and how colleges can help deliver the skills required by local businesses through better engagement with Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).
- Delivering the commitment to create 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020.
- Allowing large firms to pass on some of their apprenticeship levy funds to the smaller firms in their supply chains, and to place some of their apprentices with them.
- Introducing a University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) style portal to help people to access technical and vocational education courses.
- Introducing discounted bus and train travel for apprentices.
- Helping workers to develop their skills in their existing jobs by introducing a new right to request leave for training.
- Helping workers to retain their jobs as the economy changes by introducing a national retraining scheme. Under the scheme, the costs of training will be met by the government, with companies being allowed able to use their apprenticeship levy funds to support wage costs during the training period.
- Developing teaching apprenticeships sponsored by major companies, especially in STEM subjects.
- Enabling teaching assistants to become qualified teachers and healthcare assistants to become nurses via degree apprenticeships.
- Creating a new national programme to attract experienced industry professionals to work in FE colleges.
- Investing in FE colleges to make sure they have world-class equipment and facilities.
- Replacing 13,000 existing technical qualifications with new qualifications, to be called 'T-Levels', across 15 main technical routes.
- Increasing the number of teaching hours on full time technical and vocational courses for 16-18 year olds by 50% to an average of 900 hours per year, and enabling all students to undertake a three-month work experience placement as part of their course.

A copy of the Conservative Party 2017 General Election Manifesto can be accessed at:

<https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto>

THE LABOUR PARTY GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTO

Labour's plans for FE and skills in England include the following:

- Abandoning the Conservative Party's plans to 'reinvent the wheel' by building new colleges, and redirecting the money saved to increase teacher numbers and improve resources in existing FE colleges.

- Improving careers advice and opening up a range of routes through, and back into education, striking a balance between classroom and on-the-job training, to ensure students gain both technical and soft skills.
- Bringing funding for 16 to 18-year-olds in line with Key Stage 4 baselines.
- Correcting the historic neglect of the FE sector by providing it with the investment in teachers and facilities it needs to become a world-leading provider of adult and vocational education.
- Restoring the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for full time students aged 16-18 from lower income backgrounds. (These were never abolished in other UK countries).
- Replacing advanced learner loans and upfront course fees with direct funding, and making all FE courses free, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.
- Abolishing HE tuition fees for English students attending English universities and bringing back student grants for English higher education students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (HE tuition fees are free in Scotland and are around one third of English fee rates in Wales and Northern Ireland. Maintenance grants for students from lower income backgrounds are also available in these countries). Since the launch of the manifesto, Labour has promised, if elected, to bring forward the abolition of fees with effect from this September (when fees are due to rise to £9,250 per year in England). This will also apply to students who are part way through their course, but will not be applied retrospectively. However, interest rates charged on their loans will be pegged to inflation rates, rather than inflation plus 3% as at present. No specific mention has been made of bringing forward the scrapping of FE 19+ tuition fees to this September, but if Labour is elected, this is thought to be likely.
- Encouraging co-operation across FE colleges, sixth form colleges and school sixth forms to improve quality, curriculum breadth and leadership.
- Setting a target, backed up by funding, for all FE teaching staff to obtain a teaching qualification within five years, and extending support for the training of teachers in the private sector.
- Increasing capital investment to equip colleges to deliver T-levels.
- Introducing a new pre-apprenticeship trainee programme.
- Setting a target to double the number of apprenticeships at Level 3 by 2022.
- Giving employers more flexibility in how the apprenticeship levy is deployed for training, including allowing the levy to be used for pre-apprenticeship programmes.
- Protecting the £440 million funding for apprenticeships for small-and medium-sized employers that are outside the scope of the levy.
- Setting targets to increase participation in apprenticeships for people with disabilities, from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, care leavers and military veterans.
- Introducing incentives for large employers to train apprentices to fill skills gaps in their supply chain and in the wider economy.
- Reversing cuts to Union Learn funding
- Setting up a Commission on Lifelong Learning tasked with integrating further and higher education.
- Abolishing zero hours contracts. Large numbers of FE staff are employed on these contracts.

A copy of the Labour Party 2017 General Election Manifesto can be accessed at:

<http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017>

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PARTY GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTO

The Liberal Democrat's plans for FE and Skills in England include the following:

- Committing to maintaining 'real-terms' protection for 16-19 FE funding.
- Investing in continuous professional development for teachers.
- Introducing individual learning accounts to fund adult and part-time learning.
- Provide all adults with individual access to all necessary career information, advice and guidance.
- Doubling the number of businesses that hire apprentices, and extending apprenticeships to new sectors of the economy, such as creative and digital industries.

- Developing National Colleges as centres of expertise for key sectors (such as renewable energy), and to help deliver the high-level vocational skills that businesses need.
- Working with the Apprenticeship Advisory Group to increase the number of apprentices from BAME backgrounds, to help ensure gender balance across industry sectors, and to encourage underrepresented groups to apply for apprenticeships.
- Identifying and developing the solutions needed to solve skills gaps, (such as the lack of advanced technicians) by expanding higher vocational training such as foundation degrees, Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certificates and Higher Apprenticeships.
- Ensuring that all the receipts from the apprenticeship levy in England are spent on training.
- Aiming to meet all basic skills needs including literacy, numeracy and digital skills by 2030.
- Developing an effective and comprehensive system for credit transfer and recognition of prior learning and qualifications.

A copy of the Liberal Democrat General Election manifesto can be accessed at:

<http://www.libdems.org.uk/liberal-democrats-manifesto-2017-general-election-launch>

THE AOC AND AELP GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTOS

Presumably, neither the Association of Colleges (AoC) nor the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) are intending to field candidates in the forthcoming general election, but this has not prevented them from publishing their own election manifestos, each with their own proposals to the next government for the future of FE and skills in England.

The AoC manifesto says that:

- For the UK to succeed in a post-Brexit world, the country must be more self-sufficient in skills.
- Colleges are the only institutions that can make this a reality.
- There is a need to develop a new culture of lifelong learning, and make this the norm in all communities, and for all people.
- There is a need for increased investment in FE, after too many years of starving colleges of cash.

The AoC calls on the new government to 'sustaining economic growth' and to create 'a fair and effective education system', and makes three recommendations on how each of these could be achieved:

'Sustaining economic growth'

- Developing a skills strategy with increased investment for every part of the country.
- Allowing for a period of stability to build quality apprenticeships.
- Establishing a fair funding formula for schools and colleges.

'Creating a fair and effective education system'

- Building strong colleges and institutions.
- Introducing personal learning accounts to boost adult skills training.
- Providing the support needed for people to access education and training.

A copy of the AoC 2017 General Election Manifesto can be accessed at:

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Manifesto%202017.pdf>

The AELP manifesto calls on the new government to:

- Deliver 4 (rather than 3) million quality apprenticeship starts by 2020.
- Ensure that proceeds from the apprenticeship levy are *only* used to fund apprenticeships.
- Give a firm long-term commitment to supporting apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3 to enable social mobility. (According to the AELP, evidence is growing that many large levy-paying employers are planning to use their levy funds primarily for higher and degree level apprenticeships).

- Guarantee funding of at least £1 billion a year for non-levy paying firms to help them with their apprenticeship needs.
- Support a fully demand-led skills funding system, driven by the needs of employers and learners.
- Introduce traineeships and employment programmes that reduce the benefits bill and create opportunities for people of all ages.
- Introduce good *applied* English, mathematics and digital skills across learners of all ages, and to end the current failed GCSE resits policy.
- Embrace the expertise and experience of independent training providers (ITPs) in the implementation of the government's proposed technical and professional education reforms.
- Suspend the current Adult Education Budget (AEB) procurement process, until ready to re-procure the entire £1.5 billion budget.
- Ensure that apprenticeship funding rates make taking on 16-18-year-old apprentices attractive to employers and training providers, and reflect the additional effort required with this age group.
- Develop quality apprenticeships up to and including Level 7 backed by good assessment and a *single inspection framework*. (Degree apprenticeships in England are currently regulated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and inspected by the Quality Assurance Agency).

A copy of the AELP 2017 General Election manifesto can be accessed at:

<https://www.aelp.org.uk/file/?id=3039&type=item>

PROVIDERS OF APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING FOR NON-LEVY PAYING EMPLOYERS ARE 'LEFT FACING BANKRUPTCY'

A statement published by the Department for Education (DfE) early last month (April) said 'In order to maintain stability in the system through the start of the next academic year, in the interim period we will extend existing contracts held by all current providers until the end of December 2017. To maintain our quality standards, current providers with extended contracts will be able to undertake new starts on those contracts provided they are on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP). The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) will notify providers of specific arrangements shortly so that amended contracts are in place ahead of 1 May'. The statement went on to say 'This will not affect training provision for existing learners. Extending existing providers contracts means employers can be confident in taking on new apprentices without disruption over the months ahead'.

However, later in the month, the ESFA announced that it was 'pausing' the procurement process for the 98% of employers that were not subject to the apprenticeship levy (those with an annual payroll of less than £3 million), after it was discovered that the £440 million of funding available was 'massively oversubscribed'. Following this 'pause', employers have now been notified of their allocations for the next 8 months. However, they and their training providers say that the funds allocated amount to only 'a fraction of their current delivery' and amount to a cut in funding 'of typically between 50% and 80%, with some having to deal with cuts of more than 85%. Some training providers say that they will be 'running out of money within weeks' and are facing 'bankruptcy and failure'.

The nearest to an explanation for the reduction in funding came in the form of a letter sent by the ESFA to apprenticeship providers earlier this month (May). The letter gave details of the methodology used in determining funding allocations and said that the ESFA had 'worked out your allocation by calculating your share of provider earnings to non-levy paying employers'. It went on to say, 'Within the available budget, we have cushioned your allocation in recognition of the fact that we have had to approximate your delivery to non-levy paying employers', and confirmed that 'the current approach to subcontracting will be maintained for new starts to non-levy paying employers until the end of December (2017)'. However, the letter also said that a 'non-levy proxy' had been used in calculating funding allocations and admitted that this was based on 'an approximation using the best available data'. The letter went on to explain that because of this, there were 'uncertainties in the data'.

The allocations situation has recently become more perplexing, after it was found that the ESFA has wrongly categorised some very large firms (e.g. Santander, Mencap and the Berkeley Group PLC) as non-levy payers, and some small employers as being large employers that were required to pay the levy. The errors appear to have originated from the way in which information on employer size has been interpreted. Information on employer size is provided to the ESFA by a specialist data company called 'Blue Sheep', which charges the ESFA around £370,000 per year for the services it provides. A DfE spokesperson declined to comment on this apparently chaotic situation, saying 'We cannot make any commitment to what will happen until after the election'.

ESFA PUBLISHES UPDATED REGISTER OF APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING PROVIDERS (ROATP)

The ESFA has now published an updated version of its RoATP. The new and updated register now includes a further 507 providers from those that were not accepted in the first round of applications in March, which have been added to the 1,708 providers that have already been approved to deliver apprenticeship training. New providers on the register include 33 FE colleges, 18 councils, 13 hospitals and NHS trusts, and various employers such as McDonald's, Balfour Beatty and Eddie Stobart. Amongst the FE colleges that have been added to the register are Hartlepool College, that was rated 'outstanding' for apprenticeships in April, and a number of other colleges that were rated by Ofsted as 'good'.

However, concerns are still being expressed about the way in which providers are being vetted for inclusion on the RoATP. For example, Norfolk Training Ltd, and G4S Care and Justice Services UK Ltd, have now been included on the RoATP despite both having received an 'inadequate' overall Ofsted grade. Another new company included on the RoATP is Learn for Free Ltd, which according to Companies House, was established less than three months ago, has no apparent experience of running government-funded apprenticeships, has only one employee, no website, no landline (only a mobile number listed), and no office address other than that of a semi-detached house in Birmingham. Meanwhile, many of the training providers included on the updated RoATP have been left uncertain as to when they can actually commence their apprenticeship programmes because the ESFA has as yet failed to provide them with any details of the mandatory training programme they must undertake before they are allowed to do so.

The updated register can be accessed at:

<https://roatp.apprenticeships.sfa.bis.gov.uk/download>

74% OF ALL APPRENTICESHIPS IN 2015/16 WERE DELIVERED BY INDEPENDENT TRAINING PROVIDERS (ITPS)

Despite government calls for FE colleges to increase their market share of apprenticeship provision, recent data published by the DfE has revealed that 376,940 of 510,070 (74%) of apprenticeship starts in 2015/16, were delivered on by independent training providers (ITPs), either through a direct contract with the ESFA or through subcontracting arrangements with an FE college or other provider. There were 104,690 starts (21%) delivered directly by FE colleges, an increase of just 1% from the previous year. The remaining 28,440 stars were delivered by local authorities, universities, sixth form and specialist colleges.

Commenting on this, AELP chief executive Mark Dawe said that the proportion of apprenticeships delivered by ITPs was no surprise, since ITPs were able to demonstrate 'strong employer engagement with levy and non-levy payers', and provided 'good quality provision and a flexible response to customer's needs'. And AOC chief executive David Hughes said that there were 'a lot of discussions to be had around apprenticeships' and went on to say, 'The last thing I want to spend time debating is market share'.

MIXED VIEWS OF DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS

Speaking at the recent independent schools' *The Third Way* conference in London, Julian Thomas, Master of Wellington College, argued that 'degree apprenticeships' should be rebranded as 'career degrees'. This, he said, was because 'the word *apprenticeship* did not resonate in the same way as the word *degree* with pupils, and more importantly with their parents'. He went on to say that although he wanted degree apprenticeships to be successful, 'in many of our schools, degree apprenticeships have barely registered' and added, 'personally, I would drop the word *apprenticeship* altogether'. Former education secretary Lord

Baker, the architect of the University Technical College (UTC) and Studio School initiatives, who was also speaking at the conference, agreed with him and said that he 'rather liked the term *career degrees*'. On the other hand, some might question whether the parents of pupils attending exclusive public schools would even remotely consider allowing their child to undertake an apprenticeship, no matter what it was called.

Meanwhile, speaking at a recent conference on apprenticeships held at the private Pearson College in London, Baroness Alison Wolf of Dulwich, the author of the 2011 report on technical and vocational qualifications that formed the starting point for the government review of such qualifications chaired by Lord Sainsbury, said that 'people should not attempt to equate an apprenticeship with university study'. She said that although she supported degree apprenticeships, she had 'mixed feelings' about them, arguing that apprenticeships 'should be celebrated as being different to university degrees'. Baroness Wolf went on to say that 'One of the things that I suspect that almost everybody in this room knows, or thinks they know, is

that in Germany there is no difference in status between an academic or technical route. You would be wrong. I do not know of any country in the world where there is the same status associated with an apprenticeship route as going to one of the top universities to do a degree. Now, that doesn't mean that an apprenticeship may not lead to some extremely attractive and successful careers, but it would do so because it is different'. All of which would seem to suggest that, in the UK, there is still some way to go in achieving the parity of esteem and worth between academic and vocational provision.



Left: Peers discussing degree apprenticeships in the House of Lords

UTC NUMBERS CONTINUE TO FALL AS THE NUMBER OF CLOSURES INCREASES

Overall learner numbers have dropped dramatically in each of the 'established' UTCs that were opened in 2014 or earlier. Of these, 55% are now operating at less than half capacity, with one 'established' UTC having just 148 students enrolled, despite having a capacity of 600. Thus far, seven UTCs have closed, citing dwindling pupil numbers as the main reason for this. Around £10 million was spent on establishing each of them. A spokesperson for the Baker Dearing Educational Trust, which oversees UTCs, admitted that it was 'taking longer to fill UTCs than we would like'. To add to their woes, 60% of UTCs inspected by Ofsted have been given 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' ratings. Earlier this year Michael Gove, the former Education Secretary for England, said that 'evidence has accumulated' showing that the UTC experiment had failed, and in contrast to the Conservative Party's 2015 General Election Manifesto (or any other political party's manifesto, for that matter) no commitment has been made to continuing to expand the number of UTCs.

None of this has deterred Leigh UTC (with fewer than a third of its places filled, and a 17% drop in pupil numbers this year) from opening a 11-14 feeder school on land adjacent to the UTC. The new school will be called 'The Inspiration Academy @ Leigh UTC' and will open in September. It will be run by the Leigh Academies Trust, which sponsors another 15 schools in Kent. Commenting on this, a spokesperson for the National Union of Teachers (NUT) said, 'There is a danger here that decisions that will affect children's education are being taken to support structures, rather than to support learning'.

Meanwhile, another Studio School, the 'Future Tech Studio School' has announced it will close in August following dwindling student numbers and an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating. This will be the 16th Studio School to close, and one of the 34 that are still open says that it will cease recruiting at the end of this academic year.

DISAPPOINTING RESULTS FROM SCHEME DESIGNED TO RECRUIT MORE SPECIALIST MATHEMATICS TEACHERS IN FE

In 2014, the government announced a scheme that was intended to achieve the recruitment of 500 additional specialist mathematics teachers to work in FE colleges. The scheme, which is still in operation,

was allocated a budget of 'up to £20 million' to encourage the 'brightest and the best' to teach mathematics in FE. The scheme provides two main financial incentives, which are:

- A 'golden hello' of up to £7,500 for mathematics graduates, paid to them after teaching the subject at an FE college for two years. This is increased to £10,000 if the teacher works with learners with special educational needs. At the start of the 2016/17 academic year, just 13 teachers had been recruited under this part of the scheme, with new teachers receiving payments totalling £97,500.
- A recruitment incentive scheme open both to colleges and independent training providers (ITPs), whereby participating organisations receive a bonus payment of £20,000 for every specialist mathematics teacher they recruit, rising to £30,000 if the those recruited are prepared to 'share their teaching expertise' with other providers. The recruitment incentive scheme is now run by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), and has proved to be more effective than the 'golden hello' scheme. Over the period from February 2014 to February 2016, a total of 280 teachers were recruited under the recruitment incentive scheme, and 220 financial awards were made to colleges and ITPs.

Even when the 280 teachers recruited via the financial incentive route are added to the 13 teachers recruited via the 'golden hello' route, the total of 293 is still 207 below the government's target of 500. Given the continuing shortage of mathematics teachers in FE, critics of the scheme have urged the government to abandon the use of 'short-term monetary fixes' and to focus instead on 'long-term quality strategies to permanently boost teacher recruitment numbers'.

COLLEGE VAT VICTORY IN THE EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE (ECJ)

Brockenhurst College has won a long-running dispute with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), that has gone all the way to the ECJ. The case centred on whether supplies for the college's training restaurant were exempt from VAT. The ECJ agreed with the arguments made on behalf of the college, that VAT was not due on the income generated from areas such as the training restaurants or hair and beauty salons, where members of the public pay for services supplied by students as part of their course, because supplies could be regarded as being 'closely related' to the principal objective of providing education and training. Accordingly, the ECJ ruled that the services provided by training restaurant should be exempt from value added tax (VAT), provided that the services 'are essential to the students' education and that their basic purpose is *not* to obtain additional income for that establishment, by carrying out transactions that are in direct competition with those of commercial enterprises liable for VAT'. It is believed that the verdict will set a precedent for other colleges that operate similar facilities, which could potentially save the FE sector millions of pounds. When asked for a comment, a spokesperson for HMRC would only say only that 'the ECJ judgement was being considered'.

CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED TO PREVENT POTENTIAL CUTS TO FE FUNDING FOLLOWING BREXIT

A campaign has been launched to lobby the government to replace any FE funding that may be lost as a result of Brexit. Over the period from 2014-2020 the UK has been allocated £2.4 billion from the European Social Fund (ESF) to increase job opportunities and help people to improve their skill levels, particularly those who find it difficult to get work. This allocation has to be 'co-funded', in that cash must be found to cover at least 50% of the cost of projects funded through the ESF. ESF funding for England is administered through the ESFA, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Big Lottery Fund, which also provide the match funding for projects.

Many of the projects co-funded by the ESFA are now being delivered through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The projects focus on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), improving adult skills and helping those out of work to find jobs. The latest available national figures (from 2014/15) show that 107 providers, made up of a mix of colleges and ITPs, have received around £305 million. Of this amount, FE colleges have received around £100 million, plus a further £18 million in direct European grants. This represented almost 2% of total college income.

Because the UK makes a contribution to the EU budget which is more than twice that which it receives back in grants, rebates and other funding, and has to match fund that which is received, it should easily be

possible for any ESF funds lost to be replaced with government funding. In 2015/16 the *gross* contribution made by the UK to the EU budget was £17.6 billion (or around £340 million per week) which, after rebates, grants and other funding received (most of which has to be match funded), is reduced to a *net* contribution of £10.8 billion (or around £208 million per week). However, concerns have been expressed that future UK governments may have other priorities for any savings made in payments to the EU central budget when the UK leaves the EU (e.g. providing more funding for the NHS?), and that therefore funding could be lost to the FE sector.

In an attempt to lobby for the retention of this funding post Brexit, a campaign has been launched led by the Learning and Work Institute, with backing from the AoC, the AELP, HoLEX, the Employment Related Services Association, the National Enterprise Network, Careers England, the Campaign for Learning, and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. The signatories to the campaign call on future governments to ensure that 'successor programmes to ESF are of at least the same value', and that these should be 'locally-driven, reduce bureaucracy, integrate services, and better support people and employers to meet their skills and employment needs'.

When asked to respond to this call, a Conservative party spokesperson said the government had already 'moved swiftly' to guarantee that all ESF projects signed before the UK leaves the EU would continue to be funded at current rates, but added that any future spending decisions would be 'taken by our parliament and our government' rather than the EU. A Labour spokesperson said, 'We recognise the vital role the ESF plays in Britain, and we will ensure there will be no funding shortfall as a result of Brexit'. The current government has also guaranteed that students from elsewhere in the EU who joined FE and HE courses in 2016/17 (or earlier) will either continue to be able to access courses free of charge, or continue to access UK loans to pay for their courses, depending on their age and the UK country they are studying in.

Further details on the campaign can be accessed at:

<http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/futureesf/>

ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD) PUBLISHES 'SKILLS OUTLOOK 2017'

The OECD has published its 'Skills Outlook' report for 2017. The report says that 'helped by the rise of information technology and transportation innovations, production has become more globalised and fragmented, alongside so-called global value chains, which means workers across different countries now contribute to the design, production, marketing and sales of the same product'. The report also says that 'in OECD countries, on average, a third of jobs in the business sector depend on demand in foreign countries'.

With reference to the UK, the OECD report says that:

- The UK was ranked 9th out of 28 countries for the proportion of those aged 25-64 participating in education and training. Finland, Denmark and New Zealand were 1st, 2nd and 3rd respectively, with the UK also behind the US (7th) and Canada (8th). However, the UK was ranked above Germany (15th), Spain (20th) and France (25th).
- The UK was ranked 18th out of 29 OECD countries in terms of the proportion of adults and workers who are low performers in literacy, numeracy or both.
- The UK's adult skills characteristics do not support its areas of industrial specialisation. In particular, the UK is among those countries whose 'skills characteristics struggle to meet the requirements of the technologically advanced sectors'.
- Areas where the UK's comparative advantage has decreased include the manufacturing of chemicals and chemical products, computer and electronic products and machinery, as well as motor vehicles.

The report recommends that:

- To maintain their comparative advantages, countries such as the UK should improve the skills mixes of their populations to better align them with the skills requirements of technologically advanced industries.

- To improve this alignment, UK education and training systems need to co-operate with the private sector, for example through vocational education and training with a strong, work-based learning component, local initiatives to link education institutions to the private sector, and policies to foster interaction between the private sector, universities and research institutions.
- Countries such as the UK can, 'improve their competitiveness in global value chains by teaching all students strong cognitive and soft skills at the same time, and by developing multi-disciplinary approaches. This requires innovative teaching strategies and flexibility in the curriculum choice in tertiary education while maintaining a strong focus on developing cognitive skills'.

A copy of the OECD report can be accessed at:

http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-2017_9789264273351-en

ATL SAYS SCHOOL AND COLLEGE STAFF NEED BETTER TRAINING TO DEAL WITH FAITH OR 'HONOUR' BASED ABUSE

Schools and colleges (and the staff working in them) are under a statutory obligation to have appropriate measures in place to safeguard under-18s. They are required to have procedures in place to prevent young people from extremist radicalisation and have a mandatory obligation to formally notify the police and other authorities of cases of sexual abuse, which since 2015, has been extended to include female genital mutilation (FGM). However, some forms of abuse, such as 'breast ironing' can go undetected because staff are often unaware that they exist. ('Breast ironing' involves the pounding of a pubescent girl's breasts with hard or heated objects in an attempt to stop them developing. The practice is mainly found in the countries of central Africa and is performed to try to prevent girls from becoming sexually attractive to men in a bid to protect them from early pregnancy, and sometimes to 'improve' their marriageability prospects by retaining a pre-pubescent appearance. In the UK, girls in London, Leicester and Birmingham are thought to be most at risk from the practice.) The NSPCC says that calls to the charity's helplines show that the numbers of young people in the UK are affected by faith-based and 'honour-based' abuse such as FGM, breast ironing, forced marriages and child marriages are more widespread than was originally thought and are increasing.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) says that it acknowledges how crucial it is for school and college staff to be well informed, and to be able to recognise when and how to intervene, but say that staff often lack confidence in their own judgment, are concerned about being seen as prejudiced, or are worried that their intervention could damage their relationship with the child, or with the child's family, or even with the local community. The ATL is now calling for better training to be provided for school and college staff in how to recognise indicators of, deal with, and report cases of 'honour' or faith-based abuse.

SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF WEAPONS CONFISCATED IN SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

In the two years to March 2017 a total of 2,579 weapons had been found in the possession of young people in schools in England and Wales. Around a fifth of these were knives or swords. Police said there had been a 'worrying increase in young people carrying knives'. In 2016/17 alone 1,369 knives and swords were confiscated on school premises, a rise of almost 20% on the previous year, leading to calls for knife wound first aid to be taught in schools and colleges. Other weapons confiscated included at least 26 real or imitation guns. Although when compared to the school age population in England and Wales, the numbers of young people apprehended for carrying weapons is extremely small, the police have nevertheless advised school and college staff to exercise caution when dealing with incidents involving violence or potential violence on, or adjacent to school and college premises.

AND FINALLY, ...

A lecturer was discussing an interesting news item he had heard on local radio with his students, who were on a BTEC Forensic Science course. The news item said that the police had found large numbers of dead crows on busy trunk road. All of the crows appeared to have been in the middle of eating roadkill when they died, but strangely their beaks were found to have turned a range of different colours. Because of fears that

they may have died of a new, and as yet undocumented strain of Avian Flu, the relevant government agencies had been informed and a team of pathologists who were specialists in contagious diseases had been sent to examine the crows' remains. Much to everyone's relief, after a detailed forensic analysis, the pathologists confirmed that the crows had not died of Avian Flu. They had been killed following an impact with a vehicle. It was also established the colour on the birds' beaks was from paint most commonly used in the motor industry, which was thought to have been deposited there during the collision. After further analysis of the paint type, the pathologists discovered that, curiously, 98% of the crows had been killed following an impact with a motorcycle, while only 2% of the crows had been killed by an impact with a car. The pathologists were unable to offer any explanation for this. This statistical anomaly had attracted the interest of the local university that had sent a specialist ornithological behaviourist to try to discover the reason for the disproportionate ratio of deaths caused by cars to deaths caused by motorcycles. In the subsequent report, the ornithological behaviourist confirmed that when crows eat road kill, they normally have a lookout to warn them of danger, but beyond this could offer no explanation why so many crows had been killed by motorcycles compared to the numbers killed by cars.

The lecturer said that it was a most intriguing case and invited his students to use the analytical and investigatory skills they had acquired on their course to try to form a hypothesis to provide a possible explanation for the anomaly. There was much intense concentration, deep thought and general furrowing of brows, but after a while, one of the students became agitated and said, 'I think I've got it! You said that there were lookout crows tasked with warning the other crows of approaching danger as they ate their roadkill...'.
 'Yes, I did' said the lecturer, 'But what does this tell us?'

'Well...' said the student, '...if a car was approaching, the lookout crows would be able to warn the other crows by shouting *Car! Car! Car!* - but if it was a motorcycle, they wouldn't be able to shout *Bike! Bike! Bike!*'

(Thanks for this one goes to John Callaghan, Principal of Solihull College)

Alan Birks – May 2017

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