The UK’s Skills Strategy

2005 has seen a major development in the Government’s plans to improve the skill base of the UK economy as a vital way of achieving the national goals of ‘prosperity and fairness’.[1] Two White Papers have been published putting flesh on the bones of the 2003 Skills Strategy White Paper. They are the brainchildren of the National Skills Alliance comprising the DfES, the DTI, the DWP, HM Treasury, the CBI, the TUC, the Small Business Council and the Learning and Skills Council. The papers address the UK’s poor performance relative to other EU countries in relation to the level of basic skills among a large section of the workforce, the relatively low proportion of workers with intermediate skills and the low levels of investment in training by employers. In addition, while the UK is recognised for the high quality of its universities, the low status accorded vocational education and training has led to complaints from employers that many graduates are not appropriately skilled for a 21st century economy. Even at this higher level, there are major skill gaps currently being filled by imported labour.

Taken together, these three White Papers: 21st Century Skills – Realising Our Potential, (July 2003), 14-19 Education and Skills (February 2005) and Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work (March 2005), set out the Government’s proposals for the reform of vocational education and skills training at all levels in the UK. (See Appendix 1 for maps of the new initiatives). These proposals build on the efforts to improve educational outcomes that have been a hallmark of the Labour Government. These have included targets for improved standards in primary schools, secondary schools and further education colleges, a target of 50% participation in higher education and a number of reviews of current practice. Universities will have a vital role to play in the delivery of the Government’s proposals.

This paper outlines the proposals in the Skills White Papers, and reviews the reactions to the two most recent by various stakeholders.

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This White Paper forms the foundation of the current skills agenda. The two subsequent White Papers, 14-19 Education and Skills and Getting on in Business, Getting on in Work build on the ideas proposed here. The central tenant of the paper is ensuring that employers have access to the right skills mix to successfully support and grow businesses and that individuals are appropriately skilled to ensure life long employability and personal fulfilment. The paper discusses four areas in which work will be undertaken to ensure that this occurs. These are: skills for employers, skills for individuals, reforms to qualifications and partnerships for delivery.

Skills for Employers

The paper identified six important strands of Strategy to ensure employers can satisfy their skills requirements:

- Enabling employers to have greater choice and control over the publicly funded training they receive and how it is delivered. This included an extension of the Employer Training Pilots.
- Providing better information to employers, particularly about the quality of training.
- Improving training and development for management and leadership with a particular emphasis on SMEs and provision centred on the Investors in People management and leadership model.
- Developing a more accessible, coherent and integrated business support network, focused on identifying and meeting employers current and future skills needs. Business Link was identified as a crucial part of this.
- Expanding and strengthening the network of Union Learning Representatives to encourage those with low skills to engage in training.
- Strengthening the role of sector organisations in ensuring skills needs are met. The key plank of this is the creation of a Skills for Business Network in the form of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). SSCs are employer-led and actively involve trade unions, professional bodies and other stakeholders in defined sectors of the UK economy. SSCs will be expected ‘to speak for employers [in each sector] in identifying the skills needed to sustain and improve productivity, and then work with partners to achieve the right supply of skills’. The SSCs will be supported by the Sector Skills Development Agency to develop and implement Sector Skills Agreements.

Skills for Individuals

The White Paper also identified a number of areas where individuals skill acquisition would be targeted. These include:

- A new learning entitlement to free tuition for all adults studying for their first level 2 qualification. (See Table 1 below for definition).
- Targeted support for higher-level skills at technician, higher craft or associate professional level to meet sectoral and regional priorities.
- Pilots of an adult learning grant, providing weekly financial support for adults studying full time for their first level 2 qualification and for young adults studying for their first level 3 qualification.
- Safeguards for ensuring that a wide range of cultural, leisure, community and personal fulfilment learning for adults is available at local level. This should encompass an increased range of opportunities to encourage adults to return to learning.
- Better provision of information, advice and guidance on skills, training and qualifications.
- Additional provision to help adults gain ICT skills as a third basic skill alongside literacy and numeracy in the Skills for Life programme.

Reforms to Qualifications and Training Provision
The White Paper argued that ‘concerted action to reform the supply and delivery of publicly-funded education and training’ was required to ensure that the system is flexible and responsive to employers and learners needs. The changes outlined included:
- Developing learning programmes that ensure all young people develop the skills, attitudes and attributes employers require.
- Developing programmes that allow learners from the age 14 through to HE to follow a strictly vocational route.
- Reforms to Modern Apprenticeships to make them more flexible and remove the upper age limit.
- The creation of an employer-led qualifications system for adults that is responsive to changing skill needs and recognises the value of units as well as whole qualifications. In addition, a credit framework for adults will be developed.
- Developing programmes which address the need for generic skills.

Reforms to the supply side to raise the effectiveness of further education colleges and training providers were also described. These included:
- Reforming the funding arrangements for adult learning and skills to give training providers stronger incentives to work with employers while reducing bureaucracy.
- Supporting the development of e-learning across FE.
- Supporting colleges to build their capability to deliver a wide range of business support for local employers.
- Broadening the range of training providers by offering public funding to those private providers who offer training that is distinctive and high quality.

Partnerships for Delivery
In order to achieve successful implementation of the reforms outlined in the White Paper a National Skills Alliance was established. This was described as ‘a new social partnership’ for skills. It comprises:
- The key departments: DfES, DTI, DWP and HM Treasury
- The economic partners: the CBI, the TUC and the Small Business Congress

At regional level RDAs will be asked to agree with partners (usually regional manifestations of those involved in the Skills Alliance) a structure to deliver the
regions Framework for Regional Education and Skills Action (FRESA) and ensure that the Regional Economic Strategy is supported through the development of a better skilled workforce. Sector Skills Councils are expected to work at regional and national level. Local Strategic Partnerships are tasked with addressing the issues identified at a local level.

14-19 Education and Skills White Paper
In October 2004 the Tomlinson Report, a comprehensive review of 14-19 education was released. Its key proposal was the replacement of GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications with a single overarching diploma designed to stretch the most able as well as cater for those opting for work-related learning. 14-19 Education and Skills is in large part a response to this paper. The White Paper acknowledges that the ‘system for 14-19 education – curriculum, assessment and the range of opportunities on offer – needs radical modernisation to meet contemporary and future demands’.

However, it rejects the Tomlinson overarching diploma model opting instead to retain current qualifications and introduce new vocational options.

The critical thrust of the White Paper is that it is vital to improve post-16 participation rates in education by re-engaging the disaffected and providing opportunities to stretch all students. Although much of the demand for skills is at higher levels, the report stresses the importance of ensuring that all school leavers have a grasp of functional English and maths. Vocational routes will begin at younger ages and will lead to higher-level qualifications culminating in the chance to study for a specialised diploma available in fourteen subject areas. This may include the opportunity to study HE modules in the sixth form. Employers will be heavily involved in developing the diplomas. The government also aims to address criticisms about the breadth of A-levels.

A new system of qualifications
The qualifications system will be redesigned to address the priorities outlined above. The new system will:

- introduce greater choice of what and where to study and make it easier to combine academic and vocational learning;
- retain GCSEs and A levels as cornerstones of the new system;
- introduce new specialised Diplomas, including academic and vocational material covering each occupational sector of the economy. The Diplomas will be available at levels 1, 2 and 3; [see Table 1 for current equivalents]
- require that anyone achieving a Diploma at level 2 must have functional English and maths at level 2;
- put employers in the lead through Sector Skills Councils, in designing specialised Diplomas which provide the right grounding for work and further study, supported by higher education and the QCA; and
- challenge and support schools and colleges to ensure that young people take qualifications when they are ready, not at a fixed age, encouraging acceleration to level 2 and ensuring early achievement at advanced levels is recognised in performance tables and elsewhere.

The new system of qualifications however, does not go as far as the Tomlinson Report recommended. There will be no overarching, compulsory diploma that encompasses current GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications. Instead a hybrid qualification will be developed.
Table 1: New level descriptors and their equivalents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Entry/Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GCSE grades D-G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>GCSE grades A*-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Addressing Post-16 Participation

One of the key aims of the White Paper is to ensure an improvement in the post-16 participation rate in education that compares very unfavourably internationally. The government aims to raise participation from 75% to 90% by 2015.

In order to do this, the paper argues that there is a need to offer ‘a more motivating set of options’ as the academic focus of current curriculum and qualifications at post-GCSE level is not engaging for some learners’. Instead, ‘a strong work-focussed route designed specifically to motivate those 14-16 year-old young people who are at the most risk and who … would be motivated by a different learning environment’ will be designed. This route will largely be developed as a facet of other vocational programmes outlined in the paper.

This route will be particularly important for those students who do not do well academically. Very few students who do not get 5 or more A*-C GCSEs at 16 go on to study at level 3 or above. The vocational options therefore will be combined with other strategies to encourage more learners to obtain good GCSE passes. There is also likely to be a move away from students sitting qualifications at fixed ages. Instead students will be able to sit qualifications when they are ready, either at an earlier or later age.

A number of programmes will also be developed to work with students who have specific barriers to learning. One example of this is the ‘Every Child Matters’ programme that aims to tackle the personal problems of young people through specific targeted interventions. Those with special education needs will also be eligible for additional support. The ultimate aim is to create a system that meets learners at their current level and delivers educational options that allow them to build on their current skill level.

Developing Basic Skills

Employers, and other groups, have expressed concern that school-leavers lack the basic skills necessary to function even in low-skill employment. GCSE has been particularly criticised because its ‘compensatory’ assessment system means that a good grade can be achieved by strengths in one area compensating for weaknesses in another.

The paper therefore restates the necessity for ‘every young person to achieve high standards in the basics of functional English and maths in particular’. This ‘functional core [will be] the same in the adult Skills for Life qualifications, other Key Skills qualifications and in GCSEs’. Work ‘with employers and universities, as well as teachers and lecturers and subject specialists [will be undertaken] to describe clearly what is to be understood as functional skill and make sure this definition is applied in all qualifications’. Building on this, it is proposed that functional literacy and numeracy qualifications will be developed. Functional units will be introduced in both GCSE English and maths and this may be extended to the IT curriculum. In addition to the functional units a new GCSE diploma for those students who gain 5
A*-C subject passes including English and maths is proposed. Students who do not pass the functional units will not pass the diploma regardless of their marks in other subjects. Conversely, those that pass only the functional units will receive a separate qualification indicating this achievement. Those who have not achieved level 2 by 16 will receive additional support. This may include working towards Level 1 or entry qualifications as steps along the way.

**Key Stage 3 (KS3)**
Underpinning 14-19 education is achievement at Key Stage 3 (the curriculum for those aged 11-14). In order to ensure maximum benefit from this stage the KS3 curriculum will be strengthened to ensure that all pupils have a good grounding in all the foundation subjects of the National Curriculum. Duplication will be reduced so a more coherent curriculum allows time for fully developing fundamental skills.

**GCSE**
GCSE is the first major qualification undertaken by those in the 14-19 year old range. In addition to the introduction of functional skills there will be other changes to GCSE. Competency in ICT will be an important component of all subject teaching. This will continue through all educational levels up to HE. Science education will also receive special emphasis. The study of at least 2 science subjects is compulsory at this level and programmes are underway to increase the numbers of students choosing to study a form of science post-16. Citizenship and other personal and learning skills subjects will also remain a crucial strand of pre-16 education. Finally, work-related learning is a statutory requirement at GCSE. This will be built on to develop enterprise education. This will ‘develop [learners’] employability skills and attitudes and their enterprise capability, and do so with employer input to their learning and in the environment of work’.  

**A levels**
A levels will not be significantly altered. For example, there will be no change to enlarge the breadth of current A level study. However, there will be some changes. For example, A level exams will contain optional harder questions. These will allow for stretch for more able students. These questions may also help differentiate better between A level candidates. The number of assessments will be reduced from six to four while retaining the scope and quality of the overall assessment. In addition a new ‘extended project’ will be introduced. ‘This will be a single piece of work, requiring a high degree of planning, preparation, research and autonomous working’.

Alternatively, able students may be offered the option of studying HE modules in schools. There will also be some changes to the way in which admissions information is available to universities. Universities will ‘have access to the grades achieved by young people in individual modules by 2006. HE Institutions will also be able to request marks as well as grades’. In addition, a system of post-qualification application to HE will be introduced for university entrants in 2010.

**Developing Vocational Education**
Reflecting the Tomlinson Report’s recommendations the White Paper argues that it will be necessary to develop widely available, credible vocational qualifications that offer strong progression pathways to learners. This will ensure it is ‘easier to mix academic and vocational learning’ with no clear dividing line between the two and the possibility to ‘mix and match’ study. The paper argues that ‘with the exception of Apprenticeships, nothing on offer in the vocational area has the clear appeal to young people, the public, employers and higher education of GCSEs and A levels’.

In order to under-cut the perception that vocational qualifications are a second-class attainment a new vocational qualification framework will be developed. This will
consist of specialised diplomas at levels 1, 2 and 3. These will, at least up to level 2, be completed in conjunction with the full national curriculum. The diplomas will contain a core of functional maths and English, specialised learning in the relevant discipline, suitable work-experience and relevant GCSE or A level study. Each level will build on the one before it and the design of diplomas will fit closely with the adult qualifications framework. It will be possible to follow a specialised learning line that will cover key sectors of economic importance. The modern apprenticeship scheme will also be further developed to fit within the framework of diplomas.

The diplomas will be designed in consultation with employers to ensure that they closely meet market needs. As such, the diplomas will often offer ‘opportunities to young people to learn at work and outside school’. There will be fourteen specialised lines of diploma covering all the main occupational sectors of the economy. These will be: Health and Social Care; Public Services; Land Based and Environmental; Engineering; Manufacturing; Construction and the Built Environment; Information and Communication Technology; Retail; Hospitality and Catering; Hair and Beauty; Sport and Leisure; Travel and Tourism; Creative and Media; Business Administration and Finance. There will also be options for specialisation within each line of learning, allowing students to specialise in specific occupational areas.

Employers and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) will work together ‘to devise a set of national standards, tied to international benchmarks, which will apply to all diplomas. It is envisaged that initially diplomas will be largely constructed out of ‘existing qualifications and units of qualifications’. Four ‘lines of learning’, (ICT, engineering, health and social care, and creative and media) will be available by 2008 and a further four (including construction) by 2010.

The provision of vocational training will require enlarged capacity in the educational system, ‘[y]oung people will continue to be based in a school until age 16, but may spend up to 2 days a week in other settings’. Schools, colleges and other training providers will be expected to work together to ensure that all learners can access all diploma routes within a reasonable distance of home.

A number of sector Skills Academies will be created as ‘national centres of excellence in skills’. The long-term aim is to have a Skills Academy in ‘each vocational area, closely linked to the relevant SSC and directly to employers’. The Academies will ‘drive quality through the system’. As part of these developments the role of Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVE) will be enlarged. The Academies will be complemented by the creation in April 2006 of a new national quality improvement body for the post-16 sector, to be known as the Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QuILL). These measures aim to ensure the credibility and quality of the new vocational qualifications.

Pathways for Progression
Developing strong progression pathways for all qualifications, including the new vocational routes, is a critical strand of the approach depicted in the White Paper. Additionally, currently, not all qualifications offer good progression to employment or higher levels and students may find themselves in a ‘dead-end’ in terms of progressing their qualifications or entering the workforce. The changes proposed would ensure that ‘[b]y the age of 19, young people will have had the opportunity to pursue academic qualifications; qualifications in a broad vocational area; or occupationally-specific qualifications in a work context. Whichever way they choose to become qualified, the qualifications they achieve will have real currency’.

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¹ For further information on employer involvement in curriculum development see below.
² For further information on Skills Academies see p. 14 below
It is evident that there must be clear progression routes between GCSEs, Diplomas and A levels. For example, it must be ‘possible to progress … from a level 2 Diploma to A levels or from GCSEs to a level 3 Diploma’. Vocational diplomas, like existing academic qualifications, will not only have clear progression routes from one level of diploma to the next but through into other forms of learning, including university study.

In addition, the paper argues that pathways for progression must remain broad at least until post-16 level and preferably to higher levels. Between 14 and 16, whatever choices … [learners make] they will not narrow down their options – and will be able to make a further choice about how to continue in learning’. However, all learners will have the opportunity to experience some vocational learning even if they are following a strictly academic route.

Better information and guidance systems will be developed to guide learners through their options to ‘enable successful progression from one stage to another and … inform the important choices that young people make between different options’. This guidance system will also be strongly integrated with the newly redesigned adult system.

**Reaction**

Many in the education community greeted the release of the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper with dismay. The Tomlinson Report’s consultation process had gone to great lengths to develop a broad consensus across the education profession in favour of a single overarching diploma. The White Paper appeared to have merely cherry-picked from its proposals. This generated anger amongst many in the sector. For example, the Independent Schools Council said the paper was a ‘missed opportunity’ to introduce a complete overhaul of the education system. NATFHE described the decision to not implement changes in the Tomlinson Report as ‘cowardly’.

The most widespread criticism was of the Government’s failure to implement a ‘fundamental overhaul of the qualifications system’. Commentators argued that without ‘the proposed absorption of GCSEs and “A” levels into a new, unified, qualifications system it will be harder to get “parity of esteem” between vocational and academic routes’. The National Union of Teachers argued that ‘the Government’s proposals to reform 14-19 education will widen the divide between academic and vocational subjects, not narrow it and represented a “failure of nerve”’. This view was echoed by the chief inspector of schools, David Bell, who said: ‘Continuing with the current GCSE and A-level structure carries the risk of continuing the historic divide between academic and vocational courses which has ill-served too many young people in the past.’

This sense of disappointment was shared by Sir Mike Tomlinson who commented: 'While I welcome a number of proposals contained in the White Paper, and believe the priorities identified are the correct ones, I remain disappointed that at this time that government has decided not to implement the proposals in full.' He argued that the decision to retain ‘gold standard’ exams and introduce a diploma only in the vocational track ‘yet again risks emphasising the distinction between the vocational and the academic’.

There was also a level of cynicism about the government’s decision making. Teachers’ trade unions accused the government of ‘playing politics’ in the run up to a general election. They argued that: ‘the limited reforms announced today will do
little for those who have hitherto been failed by the qualifications system. Electoral
tactics, it seems, have taken precedence over educational logic.42

Universities UK were more measured in their assessment of the paper. They argued
that it will be important in the absence of an overarching diploma at Level 3 to ensure
that ‘the Government makes every effort to ensure that vocational and academic
routes have parity of esteem’.43 However they praised proposed changes that will:
allow Universities to better differentiate between the most able students; incorporate
the higher education sector in the design of the new vocational routes and core
functional skills; and increase the recognition given to the role of advanced vocational
and occupational learning as viable routes into HE.44

The Trade Unions Congress (TUC) also had a mixed reaction to the paper. It
expressed disappointment that the government had not chosen to implement the
Tomlinson proposals fully but welcomed the White Paper as providing a new
opportunity to improve vocational education. The TUC general secretary, Brendan
Barber, commented: ‘While it is disappointing that the Tomlinson proposals have not
been fully adopted, the White Paper does at least lay the foundation for an improved
vocational approach, which represents a real challenge for business’.45

Not all responses to the paper were negative. Business generally responded more
positively. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), for example, supported the
government’s decision to reject the more radical proposals contained in the
Tomlinson report in particular the decision to retain GCSEs and A-levels because
they are ‘essential for employers who depend on recognisable standards when
employing young people’.46 It praised the Government’s focus on the basics, arguing
that nothing is ‘more important than equipping young people with the basic skills they
need to compete in the globalised economy’.47 Skills for Business also welcomed the
paper arguing that its focus on functional literacy, numeracy and IT would provide
‘young people with the necessary skills for the world of work’.48 They also argued that
the paper went a long way to bolstering the SSCs’ role in ‘developing a genuine
curriculum that meets employers needs’.49 The GMB also argued that the paper is an
‘undeniable boost for vocational education’ and considered that ‘the plans would
constructively address the “growing skills gap” faced by many areas of industry’.50

Skills: Getting on in Business. Getting on in Work White Paper

The second recent White Paper addresses adult education. Developing adult skills
will be increasingly important because demographic change means that there will be
fewer 14-19 year olds entering the labour market over the next ten years. In addition
people are living longer and will therefore need to continue working for an extended
period. Hence, it will not be possible to ‘rely solely on a flow of better skilled young
people entering the labour market’ as the number of these is likely to dwindle.51
Instead it will be necessary to better skill those currently in the work force and those
who are presently economically inactive.52 It is important to note that East London
diverges from this trend with a significantly younger population than the rest of the
UK.

The key focus of this paper is ensuring that ‘employers have the right skills to support
the success of their businesses, and individuals have the skills they need to be both
employable and personally fulfilled’.53 It will do this by developing a ‘demand-led
approach to training, driven directly by customer needs’.54 This will involve much
closer employer involvement in the education system. However, the paper aims to
balance this employer focus with the notion of system ‘geared to the needs and
aspirations of the individual’.55
**Addressing barriers to participation**
The paper argues that the opportunities offered in the new programmes will be available to all, however certain groups are targeted for assistance including:

- Low skilled adults on welfare benefits
- Prisoners and other offenders
- Older people

In addition more limited measures will be developed for:

- Women
- Ethnic minorities
- Disabled learners

In addition, the legal framework to prevent discrimination in training and employment will be bolstered.

**Developing Basic Skills**
Around 5 million adults have literacy skills below level 1 and around 15 million adults have numeracy skills below that level. The government will fund all adults to achieve their first full level 2 qualification. The Skills for Life programme will be strengthened to achieve this aim. The programme offers learners graduated steps in basic skills that represent attainable goals. These are often in the form of short courses that begin at a very basic level and follow through to a level 2 qualification. In addition, it is argued that developing ‘functional competence in using ICT needs to be counted as an essential skill for the modern world’.\(^{56}\) ICT qualifications will therefore be made more widely available.

**Level 3**
The paper argues that it is necessary to ‘substantially raise our ambition for the number of people who gain Level 3 skills and qualifications’.\(^{57}\) Building on increased provision at basic skills and level 2, opportunities to progress to Level 3 will be strengthened.\(^{58}\) Those learners participating in both the National Employer Training Programme and the free Level 2 entitlement will be able, if they wish to do so, to move directly to their first full Level 3 qualification.\(^{59}\) Funding will be deployed for this through Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs)\(^{iii}\) who will ‘assess how best to use existing public funding to meet Level 3 priorities in colleges and training

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\(^{iii}\) There are currently 9 RSPs nationwide, one for each Regional Development Agency (RDA). The key aim of these bodies is to maximise regional productivity and economic development through supplying the skills, training and business support which best meets the current and future needs of employers in the region. This will in turn promote social inclusion. Crucially the RSPs are tasked with ensuring effective employer involvement in skills decisions. This includes:

- Identifying obstacles and barriers to successful engagement with employers in raising productivity, innovation and skills
- Putting employers’ needs centre stage
- Raising ambition in the demand for skills
- Motivating and supporting more learners to re-engage in learning
- Making colleges and training providers more responsive to employers’ and learners’ needs and
- Achieving better working across different agencies engaged in business support and skills development.

Regional Development Agencies have been asked to take the lead in developing these organisations working closely with key partners the Skills for Business Network, the Learning and Skills Council, the Small Business Service and Jobcentre Plus. In addition a number of other partners are involved including Connexions, Local Authorities, Ufi/learndirect, Local Strategic Partnerships, employers, trade unions and other education institutions.
Higher Education Qualifications
Projections indicate that there is likely to be an increased demand for HE level qualifications. The White Paper argues that it will be necessary to ensure that HE programmes are designed and delivered in a way that best helps students to gain the skills employers need. As such, there is an emphasis on expanding foundation degree provision. Consequently, there will need to be strengthened links between Sector Skills Councils, universities and colleges so that ‘SSCs can help design degree programmes, identify those HE programmes which best meet sector needs, and invest in university facilities which provide the best-sector based programmes’. This will extend to high-level continuing professional development and may increasingly focus on work-based HE programmes, with universities providing a framework within which HE-level skills gained through work can be assessed and recognised.

Employer Involvement in Curriculum Development
This strategy aims to address employers’ long-standing concern ‘that they cannot recruit enough people with the skills and attributes they are looking for’ but also to require UK employers to invest more in training than they have historically. In order to develop a demand-led approach to training employers are asked to work with the state to develop appropriate qualifications to meet their skills requirements. The Government pledged a wider range of public funding to develop skills in the workplace. ‘In return, … employers [are asked] to invest more [funds] in training, where there is a clear return to the employer and the learner’. Employers will be expected ‘to engage more actively in developing and deploying skills to meet business priorities, and to articulate their needs in a way that schools, colleges, universities and training providers can understand and act on’.

National Employer Training Programme
The key vehicle for delivering skills in the workplace will be the National Employer Training Programme. The programme will be built up from employers’ business needs and then delivered in the workplace in a way that meets operational requirements.

The core of the programme is fully state funded training for employees ‘undertaking basic skills and first full Level 2 qualifications’. Funding will be delivered through Learning Skills Councils. For their part ‘employers will offer some paid time off work for participating employees’. The paper argues that the programme ‘puts the purchasing power in the hands of the employer, so that it can determine how public funds are best spent to meet their priorities, rather than funds being routed direct to providers’. The programme will build on current pilots and will be rolled out nationally from 2006-07.

Access to training supply will be brokered by an independent, impartial service fully funded by the government that will work on behalf of the employer to identify the best provider for the identified needs. The brokerage service will ‘start by identifying, through a training needs assessment, the employers skills needs at all levels, both those leading to qualifications and more informal development. It will then source [various forms of] training to meet those needs … for delivery as part of a single, integrated training package’. Employers will then be able to ‘choose which one of a range of quality-assured local providers they wish to work with’. As an aid to employers a document will be developed to provide a ‘framework of national outcomes and service standards for brokerage to make clear what customers can expect’. This will allow national comparability of the service.
A number of other features will round out the service. Firstly, Brokers ‘will work with the Business Link [the national business support, guidance and information service] services … to give a better integrated “front end” of business support’.74 Employers have complained that complicated business support systems make accessing any support difficult. Secondly, in addition to vocational skills training Small and Medium Enterprises will be able to access leadership and management development training.75 Thirdly, a National Employer Service for large, multi-site employers will be established for those companies that wish to deliver programmes to their workforce nationally rather than developing numerous programmes with local LSCs.76

Brokers will be able to work with employers to address all their skills needs not only the basic and Level 2 needs that are eligible for government funding. Such training would carry learners through to level 3 qualifications, endowing a higher proportion of the workforce with the intermediate skills much sought after by employers. Employers would, in the first instance, fund this provision. However, there will be pilots of free Level 3 provision in areas of acute shortage. It is the government’s intention to partially distribute the cost of qualifications according to benefit received. So there will be some obligation, at various levels on the individual, employer and the state. For example the individual might be asked to pay HE tuition fees, the employer to fund workplace learning at level 3 and the State will provide free basic skills training.

**Sector Skills Councils**
In addition to the National Employer Training Programme employers will be given a strong voice in the design of vocational qualifications through SSCs.77 There are currently 24 Sector Skills Councils with 1 more in development. In all are established the 25 will cover 85 per cent of the UK’s workforce. Employer input into qualifications will be operationalised through Sector Skills Agreements between employers that ‘will set out training needs, commit employers to collaborative action, and ensure public funds respond directly to employer priorities’.78 ‘Agreements will set out both the funding contributions that employers are prepared to make themselves and the priorities for shaping the allocation of public funds’.79 Regional Skills Partnerships, Learning Skills Councils, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and other public agencies are expected to respond to these priorities.80

**Skills Academies**
Skills Academies will be created at the top of the vocational skills system and will aim to improve the quality and status of vocational education. They will be ‘employer-led and form a strong network in each sector linking college Centres of Vocational Excellence with universities, training providers and specialist schools’.81 The academies will be tasked with raising standards across the system by fostering innovation, spreading best practice, shaping the curriculum and improving the professional development of teachers, lecturers and trainers. The government aims to establish 12 Skills Academies by 2007-08, developing, over time, at least one for each major sector of the economy.82

Skills Academies will have their own students but they will also be expected to ‘form a hub of specialist expertise and resources in training for their sector which can be drawn on by schools, colleges, universities and other training providers’.83 In this way Academies ‘will enrich the training for students across the whole national network and support progression routes from school to higher education’.84 Employers will be given a voice in sector Academy development through ‘governance arrangements’ that will allow them to help set the standards for good skills training throughout the sector.85

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x See Appendix 1 for more information on specific SSCs
**Delivery**

The paper argues that increasing the quality of current provision will require greater contestability, that is, providers competing to develop programmes that best meet the needs of learners and employers. Those that succeed should benefit through ‘greater [funding] rewards’. The National Employer Training Programme is prefaced on this concept of contestability.

Secondly, a Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QuILL) ‘will lead work to raise performance and build the capacity of colleges and training providers to assess themselves, develop their own self-improvement programmes and ensure they better meet the needs of employers and individuals’. Strong programmes of staff development throughout the system will complement this.

In addition, the QCA are currently developing a new Framework for Achievement to simplify the current range of vocational qualifications, which are unnecessarily complex and insufficiently flexible. The framework will provide a coherent system that will encompass the full range of vocational qualifications. It will outline the level of each qualification, the necessary components of that qualification and the possible progression pathways. Increased flexibility will be added through the introduction of ‘a credit-based approach’. This will allow learners to build up achievement over time through combinations of units, not necessarily whole qualifications. These units can be combined in a variety of ways to allow learners to progress ‘as far as they wish to go from basic skills through to higher education’.

There will also be some changes to the way LSCs will fund course provision to more directly align it with the needs of employers. Changes will be phased in gradually to allow for adjustments.

Additionally, a number of other key players will be involved in the delivery of the programme. For example, there are plans to develop a Union Academy to draw the strands of trade union learning activity together as unions ‘have developed a powerful role in promoting training in the workplace’. The Academy would strengthen the Union Learning Representatives programme, establish high-quality regional centres for Union Learning and extend the network of local Union Learning Centres. Unions are expected to be actively involved in SSCs and developing SSAs. Regional Skills Partnerships are also expected to be heavily involved in delivering the paper ensuring that regional priorities are adequately addressed.

Finally, the paper clearly argues that although better skills are crucial for a competitive economy, study is ‘for millions of people … a source of pleasure, interest and personal fulfilment outside of work’. In response to this there is a clear pledge to ‘safeguard the availability of these types of learning opportunities’. This will mean that there will continue to be funding available through existing funding bodies for study outside of work-focussed routes. However, there is concern among adult education providers at all levels about how the status and funding of such study will be maintained.

**Progression Pathways**

The necessity of building strong, clear pathways for progression through the various levels of qualifications is a further key aim identified in the White Paper. The paper argues that ‘it must be easier for people to climb up the skills ladder, in steps that suit their talents and motivation, from the basics of literacy, language and numeracy..."
through to higher education’. Routes that allow progression from vocational studies into Higher Education are particularly stressed. This will necessitate close working between schools, FE and HE providers.

In order to facilitate learner access to progression pathways coordinated advice that covers all areas of employment will be required. Ufi lerndirect will be asked to extend its services to offer centres that ‘offer personal, high-quality support to individuals to help them make the right choices on job options, skills, training, qualifications and related support such as childcare’.

**Reaction**

*Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work* has generally been more favourably received than the White Paper covering 14-19 Skills. Reaction from business, education and other stakeholders has, in large part, been positive. There were however, minor criticisms.

The increased emphasis on employer involvement in the skills and training system has been broadly supported by business. For example EEF, the manufacturers organisation, gave ‘a warm welcome to the strong focus on employer needs and the key role of business in the design of training’ in the White Paper. The EEF ‘has in particular welcomed plans to pilot the extension of subsidised support for training towards higher end technical qualifications, building the technician, craft and associate professional level skills that are essential to the needs of engineering and manufacturing’. They did sound one note of caution however, noting that ‘funding … will only be matched by employers where the training is directly relevant to their business needs’.

Additionally, two of the major SSCs reactions reflected the general tone of business response. Skills for Logistics reported that they were ‘very supportive of this White Paper. It is vital that policy regarding skills supply is responsive to the future needs of employers and that industry is in the driving seat when it comes to skills development’. Skills for Business also ‘welcomed the employer-led approach in the government’s Skills White Paper, which represents a major shift towards delivering a demand-led education and skills system’. They argued that the White Paper ‘makes clear the urgent need for education to get more closely involved in the productivity agenda, by prioritising work-related skills development at all levels’.

The CBI also ‘welcomed the White Paper’s general tone of raising skills to improve business performance and individual employability’. However, they went on to argue that: ‘Radical reform of the Further Education Sector is needed if training provision is able to meet employers and individuals needs’. To this end the CBI has proposed an end to ring-fenced funding of workforce training for FE colleges. This would open up the market to all training providers, whether public or private, and add a real element of ‘contestability’ to funding. The CBI is also broadly supportive of SSCs and SSAs. However it cautions that they ‘must not be a one-size-fits-all approach and employers in each sector must be free to decide the best approach to tackling skills needs’. It also argues that SSAs must not ‘distract from ensuring that every local college is able to deliver a high quality, responsive service to businesses’. Nor must the drive to have an academy servicing every major sector in the economy lead to duplication of resources, because of overlap between sectors in terms of skills needs.

The British Chambers of Commerce were also supportive of the paper particularly praising the greater role for employers in the design of vocational qualifications. However, they expressed concern about ‘the complexity of the skills delivery system’,
arguing that the system needed overhauling to provide greater clarity to businesses who often struggle negotiating the myriad of departments and organisations involved in delivering the skills agenda.\textsuperscript{112}

Independent analyses of the White Paper has noted positively the increased funding for individuals to train for a full level 2 qualification, the increased role of Trade Unions in training and the growing strength of Sector Skills Councils.\textsuperscript{113} For example the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) commented that: ‘It is encouraging to note that Sector Skills Councils appear to be making a real difference in the training practices of the firms that fall within their scope. To some extent, they are overcoming a chronic under-investment in training among British employers through collaborative arrangements for certification and funding’.\textsuperscript{114} Even this however has been subject to criticism, commentators arguing that, as the system ‘is still voluntary, there must remains doubts as to whether voluntary arrangements are sufficient to bring forth the investment required.’\textsuperscript{115}

There has also been some criticism of the National Employer Training Programme. One analyst commented that:

One might question, … the extent to which the NETP fits the picture of genuinely “demand-led” or “employer-led” system, given its reliance upon state subsidy. Neither is the case for market failure well established, let alone proven. It may be, for example, that many employees do not get trained to Level 2 because they occupy jobs that do not require a qualification at this level and employers see no reason therefore to provide such training …. Another danger is that the more the government intervenes to subsidise employer training, the more employers have an incentive to cut back on their own investments by putting training in the area where the state will pay. If so then the state could simply end up paying for training that would have happened anyway …. The real challenges, however, are about getting employers themselves to invest more in training and creating a genuinely demand-led system that seeks to encourage more firms to adopt high-skill, high-value added production approaches.\textsuperscript{116}

Education commentators have generally been supportive of the paper welcoming the general tone and content. Those commenting have often referred back to the missed opportunities of the 14-19 Skills Paper. There have also been some minor criticisms expressed. For example although the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is broadly supportive of the White Paper it argues that ‘the strategy should be employment-led rather than employer-led and that it must engage with individual men and women as they use learning to transform their lives’.\textsuperscript{117} NIACE also expressed concern about how the changes would be resourced and if announced funding was adequate to meet the requirements.\textsuperscript{118} Further, concern that the dominance of employment in the strategy will lead to under funding of traditional liberal arts adult education has been expressed.

**Conclusion**

This trilogy of White Papers has set the approach to, the direction, and the architecture of, the delivery mechanisms and the funding regime for post-14 education for at least the next decade. There is little doubt, that, whatever the reassurances about liberal education, the agenda is one dominated by economic imperatives reflecting not only UK ambitions but also those of the EU. The UK’s Skills Strategy captured in these White Papers represents the national action plan intended to deliver the ‘new partnership for growth and jobs’ declared in the Lisbon Strategy by which the EU intends to become the most dynamic knowledge economy in the world.
This transnational and national strategy for skills development will be delivered, however, primarily at the regional level in response to the needs of regional and local economies. Educational and training providers, therefore, must become fully engaged with the new regional stakeholder organisations with much greater powers to determine the product and process.

The changes detailed in the three White Papers will have implications for universities. These will be in terms of the presenting qualifications of undergraduate recruits in the future, the determination of qualification levels in a university’s portfolio of provision, in the place of employability in mainstream programmes and in terms of relationships with local FE colleges, other learning providers and brokers and with employers’ associations.
NOTES

1 *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work Part 1*, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by Command of Her Majesty, March 2005, p. 5
3 *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work Part 1*, p. 13
4 *21st Century Skills*, p.11
5 *14-19 Education and Skills*, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills by Command of Her Majesty, February 2005, p. 10
6 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 4
7 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 6
8 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 25
9 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 70
10 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 25
11 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 24
12 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 36
13 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 38
14 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 28
15 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 41
16 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 63
17 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 7
18 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 45
19 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 20
20 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 50
21 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 6
22 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 46
23 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 53
24 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 50
25 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 79
26 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 8
27 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 80
28 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 80
29 *14-19 Education and Skills*, pp 19-20
30 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 24
31 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 48
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33 *14-19 Education and Skills*, p. 42
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36 NATFHE press release, “Failing to implement Tomlinson “cowardly””, 24/02/05
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44 ibid
45 European Industrial Relations Observatory Online, ‘Government sets out education and skills reform’, as found at [http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2005/04/feature/uk0504107f.html](http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2005/04/feature/uk0504107f.html), accessed 15/06/05
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