

# A new design and regulatory framework for technical education in England

Gareth Parry

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**From April 2018, a new central body – the *Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education* (hereafter ‘the Institute’) – will be responsible for a reformed sector of technical education in England. It will oversee the development of the sector and the regulation of its programmes, providers and qualifications.**

Technical education will comprise:

- employment-based apprenticeships, including those incorporating degrees and other higher-level qualifications;
- dedicated college-based courses, offered by public and private providers; and
- approved technical qualifications, including those at the sub-bachelor levels of higher education.

If implemented in full, the changes will be far-reaching. The reform proposals and their guiding assumptions have received a mixed reception. However, rather less attention has been devoted to this enterprise than to the new regulatory arrangements in higher education.

Central to the reform is a distinction between ‘technical’ and ‘academic’ education, the former drawing its purpose ‘from the workplace rather than an academic discipline’. The two-type structure based on this conception will move upper secondary and tertiary education in the direction of a more tracked system of programmes and qualifications, albeit with opportunities for individuals to transfer between the two tracks.

Although a long-standing division between higher and further (now technical) education will be maintained, the scope of the reform measures will potentially multiply the interfaces, overlaps and collaborations between the two sectors.

## ▪ Sector reform and design

The reform is the latest in a long line of policy interventions aimed at increasing the standing, value

and attractiveness of vocational education and training in England. The rationale for the new undertaking and its design features were set out in the Sainsbury report in 2016. The Sainsbury blueprint was immediately accepted by the government in its Skills Plan published in the same year.

The technical education sector will be distinctive in at least five respects:

1. all provision will meet national standards set by employers;
2. integration will be sought between work-based and college-based programmes;
3. technical education routes and qualifications will span both the secondary and post-secondary levels;
4. a focus on progression to skilled occupations (described as those requiring a substantial body of technical knowledge and a set of practical skills valued by industry);
5. a single body (the Institute) will oversee the development, operation and regulation of technical education.

The overall aim is to establish technical education as a credible, coherent and high-quality alternative to the academic pathway leading to A-level qualifications and the bachelor degree.

## ▪ Policy, legislation and timetable

Unlike in higher education, the present reform of technical and further education has involved separate pieces of legislation and the remaking of one new body into another.

## Institute for Apprenticeships

To meet a government commitment to have three million people commencing apprenticeships by 2020, and secure their relevance and rigour, the Institute of Apprenticeships (IfA) was established by the 2016 Enterprise Act. To fund this expansion, the Finance Act of 2016 sanctioned a levy payable by large employers. The same legislation gave legal protection to the term apprenticeship.

## Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

The IfA and the levy were launched in April 2016. Five months into its existence, the government announced the extension of the remit of the IfA to include the whole of technical education (a key recommendation in the Sainsbury report). The renamed Institute was established by the Technical and Further Education Act in April 2016, with just one year to fulfil its core apprenticeship functions and prepare for its expanded role.

Unsurprisingly, the magnitude and complexity of the reform has meant adjustments to the implementation timetable. Technical qualifications at the upper secondary levels (T levels) are likely to take priority, especially since higher-level education is subject to multiple regulatory regimes. The first T levels will be taught from 2020.

Of the 15 occupational routes which will apply across technical education (another Sainsbury recommendation), four are expected to be apprenticeship-only. T levels in all the remaining 11 routes are planned to be introduced by 2022.

### ▪ Governance, remit and responsibilities

As in its first incarnation, the Institute is intended to be an employer-led body, with leadership and developmental roles as well as regulatory and administrative functions. Like the Office for Students and UK Research and Innovation, the Institute will be an executive non-departmental public body. It will receive strategic guidance from the Department for Education and report to the Secretary of State.

At present, the IfA has a 10-member board with an employer majority, chaired by a senior business leader (Antony Jenkins) and including the Chief Executive. In the new organisation, membership of the board and the structure of committees will need to reflect its extended remit and additional duties.

These will include:

1. implementing a redesigned sector of technical education;
2. ensuring the relevant education and training is of good value and high quality;
3. determining which occupations are appropriate for people to undertake apprenticeships or obtain technical qualifications;
4. setting, approving and monitoring standards for apprenticeships and technical qualifications; and
5. granting licences for the development of new technical qualifications and maintaining a register of higher technical qualifications.

### ▪ The implications for higher education

If successful, the reform will:

- anchor responsibility for higher-level technical education – college-based and through apprenticeships – in a single sector;
- rely on functions carried out by the sector bodies for quality, funding and data collection, and their coordination by government and the Institute;
- expand the number of higher and degree apprenticeships (where no tuition fees are payable by the apprentice);
- recognise only higher technical qualifications that meet national standards for eligibility for government-backed loans;
- establish a number of ‘institutes of technology’ focusing on higher-level technical skills, including at the bachelor level and above; and
- change the supply and stimulate demand for sub-bachelor education and training (where undergraduate qualifications at these levels are in decline).

Higher and degree apprenticeships will bring universities into technical education and its regulatory requirements. These programmes have already highlighted ambiguities and issues of autonomy in how quality and standards are conceived, assessed and assured, and by whom.

**Professor Gareth Parry** helped establish the ESRC/HEFCE-funded Centre for Global Higher Education.

**Email:** [g.w.parry@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:g.w.parry@sheffield.ac.uk)

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