



**APPG on Apprenticeships: Hindering or Helping? The impact of T-Levels and FE Reform on apprenticeships and upskilling**

**Chair:** Jonathan Gullis MP, Vice-Chair, APPG on Apprenticeships

**Speakers:**

- David Gallagher, Board Member of FAB and CEO of NCFE
- Teresa Frith, Senior Skills Policy Manager, the Association of Colleges
- Dr Benjamin Silverstone, WMG, University of Warwick
- Ed Richardson, Principal Policy Advisor in the Education and Skills team, CBI
- Paul Ward, Director of International and Regional Partnerships, Uni of Salford

**Also in attendance:** Baroness Garden of Frognal, Lord Aberdare, Lord Puttnam, Lord Tebbit, Lord Blunkett, Steve McCabe MP, Jane Hunt MP, Esther McVey MP, Jo Gidgeon MP, Darren Henry MP, Imran Hussain MP

Jonathan Gullis MP welcomed attendees and introduced speakers and the topic of the session. He then introduced Board Member of FAB and CEO of NCFE David Gallagher.

David Gallagher, Board Member of FAB and CEO of NCFE spoke about his background, and stated that FAB and NCFE had engaged with industry experts on building the viability of work experience placements to build networks, employability and social capital. He stated that apprenticeships were more narrowly focused than T-levels, focusing more on a specific job or vocation than a qualification. He emphasised the importance of a mixed balance of provision, and stated that the increasing size of the 16-24 demographic created new challenges for the industry.

Jonathan Gullis MP thanked David Gallagher and handed over to Senior Skills Policy Manager of the Association of Colleges Teresa Frith.

Teresa Frith stated that T-Levels and apprenticeships are different by design with very different learning programs, and were both worthwhile for different reasons. She added that she believed that a T-Level does not convey the same requirements on the learner as an apprenticeship. However, she acknowledged that broad sector knowledge is incredibly helpful, and in that respect T-Levels do have an important role to play. She went on to state that under the current system, a candidate would not be able to top up a T-Level with an apprenticeship, and that this needed reform. She added that they were not currently seen as equivalent qualifications, citing the example of a Level 3 apprenticeship being seen as a better qualification than a Level 3 T-level. She concluded by asserting that we need a universal system of assessing an individual's success.

Jonathan Gullis MP thanked Teresa Frith and handed over to Dr Benjamin Silverstone of WMG, University of Warwick.

Dr Silverstone stated that the curriculum doesn't currently offer opportunities to properly react to industry needs. He cited the example of a new engineering T-level being about 5 years behind the industry development. He asked how we could deliver a curriculum that is up to date and forward-looking.

Jonathan Gullis MP thanked Dr Silverstone and handed over to the Principal Policy Advisor in the Policy and Skills team at the CBI Ed Richardson.

Ed Richardson summarised his background, and said it is important that industry leaders help employers to better understand T-levels, and that it was too early to see exactly how T-levels are playing out in terms of the viability due to the impacts of the pandemic. He asked how placements can go ahead in a blended way, and how they could keep pace with industry developments. He



said clarity was needed on how apprenticeships can support full-time roles to give employers confidence. He echoed Dr Silverstone's earlier point regarding the challenge of curriculum design, saying that it needs to keep up with sector development. He concluded by asking how this could be addressed through further education reform and the Further Education White Paper.

Jonathan Gullis MP thanked Ed Richardson and handed over to Director of International and Regional Partnerships at the University of Salford, Paul Ward.

Paul Ward explained the University's background with apprentices and stated that there was high demand in engineering sector for apprentices. He explained that he had worked closely with employers and further education colleges in co-designing an apprenticeships curriculum. He emphasised the importance of having clear pathways from Level 3, whether that be a B-Tech qualification, apprenticeship or T-level. He explained that his work was based on the need for a more technical skills portfolio as opposed to just an academic skills portfolio. He concluded by stating that apprenticeships are now very much a part of the first-class academic experience, which hasn't always been the case.

Jonathan Gullis MP stated that a vocational qualification was critical for professional and economic development, and that it shouldn't all be about academic development. He opened the discussion up to the audience, and handed over to Lord Puttnam.

Lord Puttnam stated that getting the UK's skills shortage rectified was "*life or death for the economy*". He paid tribute to Lord Tebbit's efforts to reform education and invited him to contribute.

Lord Tebbit said that we should aim to emulate the German educational model of teaching practical skills throughout the educational process. Jonathan Gullis MP echoed the need for practical skills and qualifications throughout further education and asked why UCAS has not been expanded to service apprenticeships and T-levels as well.

Dr Benjamin Silverstone mentioned that T-levels feel more like a stopgap, saying the career path for someone finishing T-levels was not as clear as for someone finishing an apprenticeship or a university degree.

Teresa Frith added that classroom and workshop-based qualifications were not as valuable as work based ones, and that work based qualifications were an effective stepping stone.

David Gallagher stated that T-levels do not "*muddy the water*", and instead constitute just one of a sensible range of options for young people. He emphasised that not every option needs to be geared to leading straight towards a job or apprenticeship, and that professional development is just as important. He noted that a major challenge pre-pandemic was offering a sufficient volume of placements, this has only grown post-pandemic. He concluded by stating that a placement can be invaluable, and that part of the solution is looking at a more flexible approach to allow young people to explore work-based approaches.

Dr Benjamin Silverstone reiterated that the evolution of the curriculum to keep pace with industry development presented an issue for current apprentices, who are effectively training for an obsolete qualification. He stated that this was an issue that needed long-term thinking to "*2030 and beyond*".

Jonathan Gullis MP asked about issues related to the geographical distribution of skills shortages.

Dr Benjamin Silverstone said apprenticeships had not achieved the social mobility they were designed to do. David Gallagher added that it was critical to have a range of options available – people chop and change their occupations throughout their career, so variety is important. Jonathan Gullis MP agreed that having a broad choice was important, and added that the



all party parliamentary group on  
apprenticeships

Government needed to lay out how the different qualifications could interact with each other. Charlotte Morris from the University of Salford noted that the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham was experimenting with a UCAS-style portal for apprenticeships.

Teresa Frith said that significant effort needed to be devoted to reskilling and upskilling workforce, and that there needed to be more inter-stakeholder dialogue to promote this.

Lord Aberdare asked about how these qualifications all fit together, and how careers advice would adapt as a result.

David Gallagher said that different qualifications offered chances for increased engagement with industry and better insight. He said the challenge is how we sustain that, and do so in an *“agile and responsive way”*, so that it doesn’t become a burden on employees.

Jonathan Gullis MP concluded by stating that there was huge potential to be unlocked, if we can work out optimally how to have all the different qualifications working together. He concluded the discussion and thanked attendees and speakers for their contributions.