

Government consultation on the National Skills Fund

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 21,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

B. Answers to specific questions

Question 10: What do you think will be the key barriers to adults taking up the free level 3 qualifications? Please set out the barriers and, where possible, provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.

3. The key barriers to adults taking up free level 3 qualifications are:
 - Work and family commitments – reducing the time available to attend the programme and undertake the required coursework.
 - Lack of sufficient maintenance awards and bursaries – there are many other costs associated with undertaking level 3 programmes, including childcare, transport costs, resources and materials, etc. While colleges are able to access bursary funding, this may not cover the full cost of being a student.
4. Adult take-up of education is demand-led and linked to many factors to do with the availability of jobs, employer support, financial constraints, previous success in education and family commitments.

Question 11: This is a question for providers:

a. How do you currently advertise your learner support offer?

5. This varies from college to college. Most advertise learner support services on their websites and in student handbooks.

b. To what extent does the current learner support offer enable you to address the financial barriers which could stop adults participating in or continuing learning?

6. Colleges report that current learner support only partially covers the costs associated with being an adult student. Bursaries do not cover all costs and are insufficient for some learners who have housing, caring, transport and other costs to cover.

c. Which financial barriers do you find it hardest to address and what is the reason for this?

7. Living costs are the hardest to cover as these include household and family costs. These vary depending on location, housing costs and transport availability.

Question 12: How easy is it for adults to find out whether they are eligible for the current learner support offer? Please provide an explanation for your answer.

8. We are neutral on this answer.

9. Some support is relatively easy to find out about and colleges advertise this support; others, such as support for housing and household expenses is less easy as it may reside with several different agencies or be dependent on charitable trust grants, donations, scholarships or stipends.

Question 13: Are there any other ways through which it would be useful to publicise learner support? Please set out what these other ways are and explain why they might be useful.

10. It would be useful if there was an app which set out all the learner support funds available, including charitable bursaries. There are a number of apps but these tend to be specific rather than fully comprehensive and are not, generally, focussed only on adults.

Question 14: How do you think that government can support providers to deliver best practice in communicating and providing the current financial support for adults? Please explain your answer and, where possible, provide evidence for your response.

11. The government could provide information on funding for wider learner support which is reviewed and updated every year.

12. It would also be helpful if availability of learner support funding and bursaries were longer term rather than annual.

Question 15: For the non-financial flexibilities below, please select which you think are valuable:

13. The following are valuable to adult learners and many colleges aim to offer these:

- Flexible start dates
- Breaks in learning
- Flexible modes of delivery
- Weekend and evening learning
- Recognition of prior learning

14. All of the above are valuable flexibilities for adult learners but the funding methodology does not necessarily allow these flexibilities without penalties to providers.

15. Other flexibilities which are not listed include child or carer friendly hours of study, although many colleges aim to offer this to adult learners.

Question 16: Are there any barriers which make it difficult to use or deliver the existing non-financial flexibilities? Please set out what these barriers are and, where possible, suggest ways that these barriers may be overcome.

16. There are barriers in terms of the funding methodology which make it difficult for providers to deliver flexibilities for adults. For example, clawback of funding during the pandemic, when learner number targets were not met.

Question 17: This is a question for providers: What could encourage providers to deliver these non-financial flexibilities more often? Please set out which of these non-financial flexibilities your answer refers to (e.g., “all the non-financial flexibilities above” or “flexible start dates only”).

17. Providers comment that they would like more flexibility in terms of the funding methodology and longer-term funding agreements.

Question 18: Not applicable.

Question 19: Different sectors may use the offer in different ways, depending on their skills needs. How do you think different sectors might make use of the offer and why? If you are answering as an employer, you might want to talk about how your specific sector could use the offer.

18. The care sector would use the offer to attract older adults into training; the STEM sector might use the offer to attract younger adults who may progress to level 4 and 5 training. Each sector tends to operate slightly differently depending on demand and supply within the industry.

Question 20: How might we adapt the offer to better meet the needs of employers, including those from a range of different sectors, and a range of sizes? Where possible, please set out the proposed adaptation and which types of employers it would suit.

19. The offer needs to be very flexible to meet different employer demands. Employers want skills that meet their specific product and service requirements. Employers are usually willing to be flexible around types of qualifications, but many want specific courses which they know they can rely on to produce the skills they require from course graduates.

Question 21: How else can we encourage employers to use the free level 3 qualifications for adults to train or upskill their workers? Please set out your suggestion and, where possible, provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.

20. If the offer could be available to adults on apprenticeships, this would work well for small employers who do not access levy funding.

Question 22: Not applicable

Question 23: This is a question for providers: What prior learning requirements (if any) do you have for someone taking a level 3 course? Please set out the prior learning requirements and how those requirements differ between different courses and sectors (if at all).

For example, you may require an adult to have gained the equivalent level 2 qualification before taking a level 3 course. Do the prior learning requirements differ depending on the sector at which the course is aimed?

21. Providers require evidence that the individual can study to level 3 standard. This might include prior testing for literacy and/or numeracy skills if the individual does not have a level 2 qualification.
22. Not all level 3 qualifications, such as business, computing and tourism require a prior level two qualification, but they may require experience in the industry. However, most STEM subjects, such as construction and engineering and hospitality and catering do need a prior level 2 before the individual has the basic industry grounding to progress to level 3 study.

Question 24: This is a question for employers: Are there any particular requirements for learners looking to achieve a level 3 qualification in an area that supports your sector? Please set out these requirements and, where possible, provide a reason and/or evidence for your response).

23. Please see our answer to Question 23 above.

Question 25: How else can providers best support adults without a level 3 to access the level 3 qualifications available through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, given that they may lack some prior learning or experience? Please provide evidence and/or examples to illustrate your response.

24. Providers often offer a study skills package to adult learners to help those without a level 2 progress to and achieve a level 3 qualification. This works well, and not only provides study skills support but also helps the adult gain the confidence needed to study.
25. Providers may also suggest the individual gains experience in the industry to which they aspire to progress, should they do not already have this.

Question 26: How else can we achieve the best impact for adults with the most to gain from the free level 3 qualifications for adults, alongside funding the courses? Please provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.

26. Maintenance grants need to be available for adults, especially for those not in work or on a low income. Those in well paid but part-time work may also need maintenance support as well as study support.
27. More funding is also needed for study programmes prior to entry on a level 3 programme.

Questions 27 & 28: Not applicable.

Q29. Which current aspects of the Skills Bootcamps do you think are most valuable? Select all that apply.

28. Those in bold below are the most valuable:
 - Short, intensive courses
 - **Industry-specific training, designed to meet the needs of employers**
 - **Focused on in-demand skills**
 - Fast-track to an interview

- **Line of sight to a job**
- Recruitment pipeline for employers
- **Flexible delivery model**
- **Emphasis on improving diversity in technical skills**
- Other, please specify

Question 30: Not applicable

Question 31: This is a question for providers: What do you think are the challenges in delivering Skills Bootcamps? Where possible, please provide evidence for your response.

29. Bootcamps have been successful, but they tend to be limited to specific types of industry. More flexibility and more availability would be helpful.

Question 32: This is a question for providers: How best do you think we might help providers to overcome the challenges to delivering a Skills Bootcamp? Please refer to the challenge you have set out in answer to the previous question. Where possible, please provide evidence for your response.

30. The term 'Bootcamp' suggests a compulsory and somewhat negative connotation and does not do justice to the types of programmes which are or could be offered. Equally, these programmes need to be available more widely, both in terms of the industries to which they link and the locations in which they are available.

Question 33: Not applicable

Question 34: Skills Bootcamps currently run for up to 16 weeks. Other than the length of the courses, do you think we could adapt Skills Bootcamps in any other way?

31. We would support those adaptations in bold below:

a. Support adults to access this training more easily?

b. Support adults who are self-employed to access this training and use what they learn to benefit their business?

c. Better meet the needs of employers, including those from a range of different sectors, and a range of sizes?

32. Bootcamps could be adapted to provide short or medium length programmes to meet the requirements of a variety of industries and in a variety of locations.

Question 35: Skills Bootcamps are designed to give adult learners the skills they need to fast-track them to an interview for a specific job. Do you think Skills Bootcamps courses should continue to be a maximum of 16 weeks long? Please explain and provide evidence for your answer.

33. No. Bootcamps could be longer and be adapted to a range of industries. If they are any less than 16 weeks, it is unlikely that they will provide the breadth and depth of skills needed. If they are up to a year, they could provide the support for adults who are returning to study and work, as well as experience in working in those industries.

Question 36: What is the minimum length of time that you think a Skills Bootcamp course should be? Please provide evidence for your response

34. See above – not less than 16 weeks and preferably more if the aim is to progress to level 3.

Question 37: N/A

Question 38: This is a question for employers: We understand that how an employer is required to make this financial contribution could have an impact on them – for example, whether employers are required to make an upfront payment before the start of the course. Are there any ways that we could make the mechanism for contributing as easy as possible?

Not applicable

Question 39: It may be valuable if employers could also make non-financial contributions to training. These non-financial contributions could be made by both those employers who are using a Skills Bootcamp to retrain their current workforce, in addition to the 30% contribution where they are using Skills Bootcamps to train existing employees, and by those who are not.

Please select the non-financial contributions below that you think it would be most valuable for employers to make, and add any other contributions not listed that you think would also be valuable. Please select all that apply.

35. Those in bold below are the most valuable:

- Providing space for training
- **Providing technical equipment for learning**
- Helping delivery of the training – e.g., providing some learning materials or teaching part of the course content
- **Giving their workers time to learn**
- Any other additional non-financial contributions not already listed that you think would be valuable. Please specify.

36. Employers are often very willing to provide equipment to providers to ensure they are up to date and working at industry standards.

37. Giving time to their workers to study at level 3 would be really helpful to adults for whom off the job study time is often scarce.

Question 40: This is a question for employers: Would you be willing to make a non-financial contribution to training? Please explain your response.

Not applicable.

Question 41: How do you think we can encourage more employers to make non-financial contributions? Where possible, please give examples and explain your answer.

38. As mentioned above, employers are often willing to donate specialist equipment to potential employees and providers. They are also often willing to provide speakers and work experience placements.

Question 42: Not applicable

Question 43: What further learning do you think a Skills Bootcamp should enable adults to progress onto?

39. Those in bold below:

- No further learning
- **Job-based training in the workplace**
- **A higher technical qualification**
- **An apprenticeship**
- Other further training and/or learning opportunities not already listed which you think a Skills Bootcamp should enable adults to progress onto. Please specify.

Question 44: We welcome any further comments on how we can best enable progression from Skills Bootcamps onto further training and/or learning, such as apprenticeships or higher technical education.

40. Provide learners with details about further learning opportunities and funding support before the start of the Bootcamp. This will help the individual to plan their subsequent progress.

Questions 45 & 46: Not applicable

Question 47: Are there any current critical skills gaps below degree level and in particular sectors, occupations, or locations that you think the skills system will not meet, either now or in the next five years?

For example, some sectors might have specific skills needs which have emerged since exiting the European Union, whereas other sectors might encounter skill needs in the future – for instance, because of new technologies linked to transitioning industries or our ambition to reach net zero by 2050.

a) What are these skills gaps? Please set out what these skills gaps are and specify whether they apply to a particular sector, occupation, or location.

41. There are gaps in the green industries. These are new industries and skills programmes are not yet fully established at levels 1-4.

b) At what level are these skills gaps?

42. Levels 1-4.

Question 48: Not applicable

Question 49: Are there any particular sectors or occupations which would benefit from improved access to shorter courses? Please set out which sector or occupation and, where possible, provide a reason and/or evidence for your response.

43. The IT sector would gain from access to a range of bespoke short courses. Digital technologies are growing fast, requiring new skills. This is also a strong area of potential employment.

Question 50: Could more options for shorter courses or more modular learning opportunities help adults to overcome barriers to learning? Please explain your answer and, where possible, provide evidence for your response.

44. Yes. This would provide some of the flexibility that adult learners need. The government is promoting modular programmes at levels 4 and 5. The same could be made available for adults at levels 1 to 3.

Question 51: This is a question for providers: Are you currently delivering short courses (under 12 months) or modules outside of full qualifications?

If you answered yes, please specify:

- a. What short courses/modules you are delivering.**
- b. What level these short courses/modules are.**
- c. Why you chose to deliver these short courses or modules.**
- d. How you designed these short courses or modules. For example, did you work with employers to do so?**

45. Colleges deliver a wide range of short courses. Many of these are designed to help skills development for work. If funding permitted, the range of short courses could be wider to meet both learner and employer need.

Question 52: This is a question for employers: Have you funded short courses (under 12 months) or modules outside of full qualifications?

If you answered yes, please specify:

- a. What short courses/modules you have funded, and why.**
- b. Whether you worked with the provider on the design of any of these courses.**

Not applicable.

Question 53: This is a question for employers: Do you have any skills needs that you think might be met by a short course or module outside of a full qualification? If you answered yes, please set out what these are.

Not applicable.

Question 54: Considering the provision we have already made available through National Skills Fund investment, do you think there are any further gaps below degree level in adult skills provision which would benefit from targeted support?

If you answered yes, please:

- a. Specify what these gaps are.**
- b. Provide evidence for your answer, including evidence on the impact of this gap.**
- c. Suggest ways that these gaps in provision might best be met.**

46. There are gaps in some industries, such as green industries and carbon zero. These gaps could be met through funding of a range of programmes for a variety of industries.

C. Conclusion

47. We hope that this response is of value to your consultation. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that we can.

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