

Britain's Skills Advantage - Summary of Responses Received

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines evidence submitted to the Conservative Policy Forum in response to the policy paper *"Britain's Skills Advantage: How can the Education system best enable every individual to fulfill their potential?"*. Contributions were received from constituency discussion groups and individual respondents with backgrounds spanning engineering, manufacturing, healthcare, business leadership, education governance, academia, and public service.

While there were differences in emphasis, respondents shared a clear consensus: the UK's education system has struggled to adapt to varied aptitudes and learning styles. This has weakened technical pathways, exacerbated skills shortages in major trades, and left many students disengaged and poorly equipped for adult life.

Respondents also cautioned against false binaries, such as the choice between academic and vocational education, or between economic and civic purposes in Education.

"Education is not just a job training scheme. It should develop the ability to reason, analyse evidence, and express thinking clearly—skills required in both vocational and academic study." - **BSECCA CPF Written Submission**

Headline policy ideas emerging from the consultations include:

- **Earlier identification of student strengths** and flexible progression pathways.
- **Embedding high-quality careers education** and employer engagement from early secondary school.
- **Establishing genuine parity of esteem** between academic, technical, and vocational routes.
- **Reforming assessment to recognise a wider range of abilities** and learning styles.
- **Stabilising education policy** and strengthening long-term teacher workforce planning.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. The Purpose of Education - capability before job matching

A recurring concern across submissions was that recent policy debates frame education too narrowly as a mechanism for matching individuals to jobs. From those that responded to the paper, 65% argued that this approach misunderstands both education and labour markets.

Education was seen as having three interlocking purposes:

- **Developing cognitive capability** (literacy, numeracy, reasoning, critical thinking)
- **Building personal capability** (self-organisation, resilience, responsibility)
- **Enabling later training**—whether academic, technical, or professional

“It is the purpose of education to train students for a particular job, or to produce students capable of being trained.” - BSECCA CPF written submission

2. Timing matters - why 14-19 reform starts too late

Although the consultation focused on ages 14–19, 70% of respondents argued that, by this stage, outcomes are already heavily constrained by earlier development.

Evidence and experience cited by contributors pointed to:

- **Rising numbers of children entering primary school without basic communication** or social skills
- **Escalating SEND identification** later in schooling, often at very high cost
- **Persistent attainment gaps** links to early disadvantage

“If a child reaches 14 without a good educational foundation, they are already in a very bad position to benefit from later opportunities” - Kettering CPF Branch

As a result, many proposals stressed early intervention, particularly in language, behaviour, and readiness for learning, alongside reform of secondary pathways.

3. Technical and Vocational Education: Status, Structure and Supply

The most consistently raised issue across all submissions concerned the status and credibility of technical and vocational education, with 80% of groups that responded identifying this as a significant weakness in the current system.

Respondents pointed to a long-term erosion of high-quality technical routes, linked to:

- **The expansion of universities at the expense of polytechnics** and technical colleges
- **Cultural assumptions** that academic routes are inherently superior
- **Funding and accountability systems that privilege A-levels**

“The idea that if you do not go to University you are somehow second-rate is deeply damaging, and economically irrational” - East Wiltshire CPF Branch

There was strong support for:

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- **Restoring deep, mentored apprenticeships**
- **Elevating the status of technical qualifications** through professional recognition
- **Making vocational routes clearly viable**, aspirational and financially attractive

4. Careers Education and Employer Engagement

Careers guidance was widely viewed as too abstract, too late and too disconnected from the real working environment. Concerns about the relevance of careers education offered were raised by three in five of the respondents.

Respondents across numerous groups advocated for:

- **Earlier exposure to occupations and workplaces**
- **Greater involvement of employers** and practitioners in schools
- **Incentives for businesses to engage** meaningfully with future employees

“Young people cannot aspire to roles they have never seen or understood” - **Hertsmere CPF Branch**

Several submissions argued that employers must share responsibility for skills formation, particularly for job-specific and sector-specific competencies.

5. Assessments, Standards and Differentiation

There was a broad agreement that the assessment system needs to better reflect diverse abilities while retaining national credibility. Concerns about assessment rigidity were raised by 55% of submissions.

Respondents strongly supported:

- **Retaining GCSEs and A-Levels at national benchmarks** for performance
- **Broadening assessment** to include practical work, portfolios, projects and interviews
- **Using setting rather than rigid streaming**, with flexibility to move

“Every pupil is currently put through the same mincing machine, which too often produces a sense of failure rather than confidence” - **Thirsk and Malton CPF Branch**

AI was frequently mentioned both as a challenge, due to damage to coursework integrity, and an opportunity for personalised learning.

6. Excellence, SEND and Equity

Contributors repeatedly emphasised that equity and excellence were not mutually exclusive.

Two in five groups raised concerns in relation to:

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- **Highly academically gifted students being underchallenged**
- **Late identification of SEND** within both primary and secondary education
- **Over-reliance on parental advocacy** rather than objective assessment

“A child with SEND may be a genius trapped in their shell. The system often finds them too late, or not at all” - Kettering CPF Branch

There was strong support for earlier identification, better differentiation, and sustained challenge across the ability range.

CRITIQUE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY

Key areas of criticism included:

- **Over-emphasis on degrees**, leading to graduate underemployment and devaluation of vocational routes.
- **Ineffective work-experience models**, particularly short mandatory placements with limited value.
- **Centralisation and policy churn**, undermining school autonomy and teacher morale.
- **Teacher workforce pressures**, including workload, shortages, ageing staff, and barriers for career-changers.
- **Reducing the availability of private education** in favour of state education.
- **Student finance arrangements, encouraging unrealistic expectations** and long-term debt.
- **Weak alignment between education and industrial strategy**, contributing to persistent skills shortages.

The perceived impact of these failures included lower student engagement, as well as a decline in teacher retention, especially in state education. Moreover, respondents stated that current government policies have created a distortion between education output and the UK's economic needs.

POLICY PROPOSALS

Problem 1: Weak early foundations and late intervention

Solutions:

- **Expand and strengthen early-years provision** focused on language, communication, and social development
- **Reintroduce Sure Start-style family support** in disadvantaged areas
- **Raise expectations for school readiness** before primary entry
- **Improve early SEND screening** and intervention
- **Reduce class sizes in early years** where cost-benefit analysis supports it

Problem 2: Poorly informed and inflexible pathway choice

Solutions:

- **Begin structured careers education by Year 7**, not post-GCSE
- **Provide transparent comparisons of post-16 options** using LEO data
- **Allow movement between pathways at 16–19** without penalty
- **Ensure post-16 funding follows the student**, not the institution

Problem 3: Low Status and Fragmented Technical Education

Solutions:

- **Restore high-status technical colleges** and strengthen FE–school alliances
- **Modernise apprenticeships** to emphasise depth, mentoring, and duration
- **Introduce meaningful professional recognition** for technical qualifications
- **Ensure funding parity** between A-levels, T-levels, and BTECs
- **Review and defund low-value degree courses** with weak labour market outcomes

Problem 4: Weak Employer Engagement with Skills formation

Solutions:

- **Incentivise employers to provide structured placements** and mentoring
- **Reform the Growth and Skills Levy** to encourage genuine training
- **Create formal industry–school teaching partnerships**
- **Support second-career pathways into teaching** for industry professionals

Problem 5: Narrow Assessment and Limited Recognition of Ability

Solutions:

- **Retain GCSEs and A-levels** as national benchmarks
- **Expand project-based and practical assessment** where appropriate
- **Introduce digital learner portfolios** alongside exam results
- **Use oral and applied assessments** for learners with specific needs
- **Ensure external moderation of non-exam assessment**

Problem 6: Under-Challenge of High Ability Students and SEND misalignment

Solutions:

- **Identify high academic potential earlier**, including among disadvantaged pupils
- **Permit acceleration, early exams, and subject-based setting**
- **Improve SEND assessment** to ensure support is proportionate and evidence-based



- **Allow flexible movement in and out of mainstream provision**

Problem 7: Policy Instability and Workforce Pressures

Solutions:

- **Commit to a 10–15 year national education strategy**
- **Reduce policy churn** and preserve institutional autonomy
- **Improve teacher pay**, status, and workload sustainability
- **Enable teachers to teach**, not act as substitute social services
- **Strengthen governance** rather than central micromanagement