

Discussion paper

Technical education, knowledge, and the purposes of schooling

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Confederation
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The Government has recently announced the outlines of a new policy on 14–16 technical education. From Year 10, the Government wants young people to have the opportunity to combine core academic subjects, including English, mathematics and science, with “high-quality” technical education, work experience, and connections with employers. To understand this announcement, we must first understand the landscape of technical awards at age 16.

What are technical awards at KS4?

Technical awards are level 1 or 2 qualifications at Key Stage 4 with a more vocational focus compared to GCSEs. They are typically taken alongside GCSEs. In 2024/25, 45 percent of students in state-funded schools took at least one technical award, with 84 percent of state-funded schools and 91 percent of state-funded mainstream schools offering them. There are 48 technical awards.¹

Technical awards underwent significant reform in 2020 that aimed to respond to the criticism that they were perceived as an ‘easier’ option than GCSEs. The reformed qualifications are still being embedded in the system, with 2026 marking only the third year of awarding. As such, most evidence relates to the pre-reformed qualifications. The final report the Curriculum and Assessment Review noted that data on progression outcomes for learners who have taken the current suite of technical awards is particularly lacking, limiting the extent to which we can draw firm conclusions about their long-term impact.

Unlike GCSE, A level or the new V levels there is no national specification of the content - this can largely be chosen by different awarding organisations. That means providing a line of sight for students taking tech awards to for example V level or apprenticeships is not currently easy to do. To address this the government would have to take control of the content of technical awards as it has rightly done for V levels.

The technical awards are approved for reporting in DfE performance tables so, technical awards can count towards Progress 8. Currently, up to three GCSE qualifications or technical awards (which are included in the approved list for the year in which the student will reach the end of KS4) can count towards the three slots in the ‘open’ bucket in the Attainment 8 measure.²

Department for Education research indicates that students taking technical awards tend to have lower absence and exclusion rates compared to similar students who do not take technical

¹ Department for Education (2025), [*Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*](#).

² The DfE has recently consulted on reforms to Progress 8, so the detail of these arrangements may change in future.



awards.³ It is important to note that this is correlation evidence and that there are likely to be lots of other factors that may be contributing to attendance outcomes to a greater or lesser extent. But this matters if we are to take seriously some of the evidence of recent reports on engagement.

However, technical awards are *not* a 'pathway.' And we should strongly resist the language of a pathway from age 14.

Why we should resist the language of a 'pathway' at age 14

The language of pathways reopens long-established historic dichotomies and contradictions in education policy. We need to find a way to talk about technical education that avoids the selection of young people at age 14. We must not return to historical policies that create differentiation of the type of education and knowledge considered appropriate for different classes of young people. Indeed, we have seen serious commentary from serious people in the education sector reflecting on the dangers of selection at age 14, or indeed younger.⁴ They are quite right to alert us to these risks.

If we are going to make the case for parity, technical education should not be positioned as a lesser form of education for students who don't like formal learning, nor should be it positioned as a 'skills' curriculum for students whose behaviour is maladapted to school. It must be demanding, clear, hard work, and rewarding, but in a different type of domain to the traditional 'academic' subjects.

This brings us to a conversation about the principles of a socially just education system. And we could helpfully return to a question posed by Michael Young's work: can powerful knowledge form the basis of technical education?⁵

To answer this, it is helpful to reflect on Young's work on powerful knowledge. He argues that schools should give young people access to knowledge they are unlikely to acquire simply by living their lives. Young has subsequently emphasised that powerful knowledge is not just a collection of facts: its power lies in the forms of understanding and thinking that it makes possible. And Professor Zongyi Deng develops these ideas to make the case the education is about cultivation of human capabilities.⁶

This matters particularly for vocational and technical education.

³ Department for Education (2019), [Non-GCSE qualifications in England: key stage 4 entries and absence and exclusions outcomes](#)

⁴ Muijs, D (2026), [VET, Germany and the Netherlands – the shining beacons on the hill?](#); Freedman, S (2026), [Burnham's first mistake: The problem with his education plan](#); Simons, J (2026), [Making the Burnham 14-19 plan work: lessons from the USA](#).

⁵ Young, M (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back in*. Routledge.

⁶ Deng, Z (2022) 'Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: pushing the boundaries', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54:5, 599-617.



A weak conception of vocational and technical education starts with the workplace and asks: what does a young person need to be able to do this job? Young's approach encourages us to ask a more demanding question: "What knowledge does a young person need to understand the field of practice in which this job exists?" That distinction is fundamental.

A construction student should certainly learn how to perform construction tasks. But they should also encounter mathematics, materials science, engineering principles, design, environmental science, and perhaps the economics and regulation of construction.

A health and social care student needs practical competence and experience of caring relationships, but also biology, psychology, sociology and an understanding of the conceptual and ethical frameworks underpinning professional practice.

An engineering student needs workshop experience, but also mathematics and physics.

The point is that vocational competence cannot be reduced to performing tasks. Powerful knowledge enables vocational learners to move from doing towards understanding; from performing a task to grasping the concepts and principles that explain why it works.

If we take seriously the argument that knowledge is powerful because of what it enables a person to understand, judge, create, and become, then we must also take seriously the different forms through which human beings come to know the world.

Knowledge is powerful when it enlarges human capability

Professor Deng's argument about powerful knowledge gives us a useful intellectual framework. Knowledge is not powerful merely because it is difficult or because it belongs to a prestigious discipline. Its power lies in its educational potential: what it enables a young person to understand, think, judge, imagine and do.

This gives us a much stronger basis for thinking about technical education. The technical curriculum should not be justified simply because employers need particular skills. That is too narrow.

Of course employers matter. A functioning economy requires skilled people. The Government's wider reforms explicitly seek to connect education and training with national and local economic needs, including priority growth sectors.

But the purpose of education cannot be reduced to supplying labour. A young person is not simply future economic capacity. They are a person. The educational question must therefore remain: What does technical knowledge enable this young person to understand and become? That takes us somewhere much more interesting.

A technical curriculum should contain genuine knowledge: principles, concepts, theories, methods, materials, systems, history, ethics, and the distinctive ways of knowing that belong to particular technical fields.



This is where the distinction between knowing *that* and knowing *how* becomes important. Education should not force young people to choose between the two. It should help them understand their relationship.

A broader conception of 'Bildung'

There is also a deeper philosophical point. The European tradition of *Bildung*, which informs Professor Deng's thinking, asks us to think about education as the formation of the whole person. This is helpful here because it prevents us from dividing young people too early into different categories: academic and vocational, thinkers and doers, university-bound and work-bound.

A flourishing society needs all these things. We should want young people who can think rigorously, do things well, communicate clearly, solve problems, work with others, exercise judgement and understand their place in a complex social world.

There is intellectual, creative and moral significance in making something that works. There is dignity in mastering a craft. There is satisfaction in solving a real problem. There is civic value in constructing the buildings, maintaining the infrastructure, caring for people, developing technologies and creating the services upon which communities depend.

Technical education can make these forms of contribution visible.



What needs to be done?

The Curriculum and Assessment Review recommended a review of Key Stage 4 Technical Awards. The review recommended that the Government should prepare to review the reformed technical awards from 2027, but this date could be brought forward to December 2026. The review recommended that attention is given to:

- Attainment and completion rates, functioning of assessments, stakeholders' views and other relevant data.
- How content supports progression to 16-19 pathways, including those which will have been reformed.
- Whether the structural requirements defined in the technical guidance, including assessment requirements, supports the broader purpose of technical awards whilst ensuring they remain rigorous and reliable.
- Encouraging awarding organisations to update Key Stage 4 technical awards to improve progression to the updated 16-19 pathways, as the 16-19 'third pathway' of V levels is developed and linked to occupational standards.
- Maintains the current moratorium on new technical awards to ensure stability and effective monitoring, except where evidence of demand for a new qualification or substantive feedback on existing qualifications is exceptionally compelling.

This seems a very sensible set of recommendations which will help to establish a new educational settlement.

In addition to the above, CST believes that that the technical awards must have underpinning standards and nationally determined outline content, which would require the development of new technical qualifications. This will bring technical awards in line with other high-value qualifications and help ensure we create progression route options, which are not there currently.



The conundrum of parity

There is a serious danger that the language of choice can conceal inequality. If technical awards becomes the route disproportionately taken by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, or by those who are perceived to be less academically successful, then we will simply reproduce an old hierarchy under a new name.

The reform outlined by the current government will succeed only if technical education has rigour, quality and genuine progression. The government should focus on the supporting quality and fitness for purpose of vocational and technical qualifications, as measured by successful destinations.

technical awards must be intellectually ambitious. They must be taught by expert professionals. They must provide access to meaningful qualifications. They must lead somewhere. They must not close doors.

And they must be funded properly.

The Government's wider reforms already point towards clearer progression routes at 16, including A levels, V levels and T levels, alongside reformed level 2 pathways. The principle should be simple: no dead ends.

A young person should be able to move from technical education into higher-level technical study, an apprenticeship, higher education, skilled employment or further learning. Choice is only real when this remains open. and that is all about content, and about proper standard setting.

The goal should not be to create two educational systems: one for the thinkers and one for the doers.



The school, college and the civic economy – and the strategic significance of trusts

There is another opportunity here which matters particularly for education leaders.

The Government intends schools, colleges, mayors, local leaders, and employers to work together to create routes connected to good jobs in their area. This could be understood as much more than a careers initiative. It could become an expression of the 'civic economy'.

This is education as preparation not merely for employment, but for participation in society. It should not lock a young person into a place, but it should enable them to remain a part of their community and contribute to the flourishing of that community if that is what they want.

Schools and colleges should not become training centres for today's vacancies. They should educate young people in way that builds human capabilities and the civic economy.

This means that the strategic capacity and capability of school trusts and college groups are essential to the reforms. It is very unlikely that schools on their own will have the capacity and capability to engage strategically at the local level to do this work. It will require the type of system and curriculum leadership typically found in trusts.

The role of employers: reopening the civic economy

Technical education can bring employers into educational life without allowing employers to determine the whole purpose of education or nature of the curriculum. One of the less visible changes in our labour market is the closure of points of entry. Many young people do not simply lack skills. They lack routes into work.

The traditional entry-level job – the first rung on the occupational ladder through which a young person could acquire experience, confidence, relationships and practical knowledge – has become less available in many sectors. Organisations have become leaner. Technology, including artificial intelligence, has changed the composition of work. Recruitment practices increasingly privilege prior experience and formal qualifications. In some sectors, the very jobs through which people once learned how to work have disappeared.

This creates a paradox.

Employers ask young people to become "work ready", while simultaneously reducing the opportunities through which they can become ready for work.

The civic economy therefore needs employers to think differently about their role. An employer is not simply a consumer of the education system. Employers should not simply ask schools, "Can *you* produce the people we need?" They should also ask: "What can *we* do to create the conditions in which young people can enter, learn and progress within our sector?"

That is a different kind of relationship. It moves beyond sponsorship, careers talks, and occasional work experience towards institutional and civic partnerships.



Employers can help reopen points of entry by creating meaningful placements, structured work experience, entry-level roles, apprenticeships, mentoring and progression routes. They can work with schools and colleges to understand the curriculum and help young people see the relationship between what they are learning and the world of work. They can also examine their own recruitment practices: whether unnecessary experience requirements, overly narrow qualification criteria, or inflexible processes are inadvertently closing the door to young people.

This is not philanthropy. It is an investment in the civic economy. And there is a reciprocal dividend.

Young people bring into organisations not simply labour, but new perspectives, energy, questions and potential. Employers gain the opportunity to shape their future workforce while contributing to the vitality of the communities in which they are located.

The school knows the young person. The employer knows the workplace. The college knows technical progression. The local authority or strategic authority understands the place. And the young person knows something that all the institutions can sometimes forget: what it feels like to stand at the threshold of adulthood and wonder whether there is a place for you in the world of work.

A genuinely civic economy brings these forms of knowledge together. It creates what we might call a partnership of entry – a deliberate effort by institutions to ensure that the transition from education into working life is not a cliff edge but a bridge.

This is particularly important for young people who do not have inherited networks of professional knowledge and social capital. If access to work increasingly depends upon already knowing how the labour market works – who to ask, where to look, how to present yourself, how to gain experience before you have experience – then the market can reproduce advantage rather than create opportunity.

Technical education, connected intelligently to employers, can interrupt that cycle. But only if employers are willing to reopen the doors.

The ambition should therefore be greater than simply producing a technically skilled workforce. It should be to create access to labour markets so that young people can see a route from learning to belonging, from first opportunity to mastery, and from entry to contribution.

That is a civic purpose.

It gives employers a role in education that is neither instrumental nor peripheral. They become partners in the stewardship of the next generation.





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