

Dear Secretary of State,

Many congratulations on your appointment and we are delighted to see you back at the Department for Education. We know you will agree that the education portfolio is a unique area to lead and nothing can be more important than realising the potential of our citizens and future leaders. Given your background as an apprentice and your previous success as skills minister, we know you will particularly champion the role of further education and skills. We look forward to working with you on this agenda.

You will be aware that a number of important commissions and committees have been developing well-researched solutions for how we might transform England's education system. They have been led by highly-respected professionals across the sector and they speak with a unified voice calling for: i) A long-term education strategy ii) Prioritising skills as well as knowledge iii) Evidencing a wider portfolio of talents iv) Turning the tide on technical education and v) Developing balanced school evaluations. We have expanded on these key priorities below.

The world is changing fast and the UK faces wide-spread and growing skills shortages (summarised in our [regular bulletins](#)), causing particular concern in sectors such as healthcare, construction, and hospitality. Take our brilliant NHS as an example. We currently have 38,972 vacancies within the Registered Nursing staff group alone.

Businesses are reinforcing this message, and the Open University [Business Barometer 2022](#) report highlights 68% of SMEs and 86% of large organisations reporting skills shortages. This costs businesses [£6.1bn per year](#) in recruitment fees, temporary staff and training for workers. Education and training can be the key to restoring a sustainable upward trajectory in productivity.

You have also inherited a fantastic workforce of highly skilled and enthusiastic teachers in schools, colleges and universities. However, institutions continue to face a mounting crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. In 2020, a record [one in six](#) early career teachers left the profession after serving just one year, while an estimated [40%](#) leave after five years. Teachers are the bedrock of education, so any reforms will need long-term investment and greater support for our workforce.

Given the tight fiscal climate and the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, HM Treasury has rightly kept a cautious eye on the government purse strings. However, nothing can be more important than investing in education. It is an investment in our human capital, future talent and future generations. We trust that you will continue to champion education and skills in light of the upcoming departmental savings exercise.

So now is the time to take action on the key priorities being called for across the education sector:

- **A long-term education strategy** – A recent report from the [Foundation for Education Development](#), found that 85% of respondents believe politicians from different parties should work together to develop a shared education strategy. Over the last decade, the education sector has undergone significant churn. So, we should look to develop a long-term education strategy – one that unlocks the potential of every child and supports our teaching workforce. The strategy needs to bring together education at all levels and throughout life. This will tackle educational inequalities and support progression at all ages. This strategy would be shared across all parties, go beyond the five-year electoral cycle and be supported by a long-term funding commitment.
- **Prioritising skills as well as knowledge** - Essential skills are transferable skills like creativity, problem solving, team-work; skills that almost everyone needs to do almost anything. They support working, learning and wider life too. Research from LinkedIn's [Global Talent Trends](#) (2019) found that 92% of employers believe so-called 'soft skills' are equally or more important than hard skills. However, with

a knowledge-heavy curriculum and assessment system, the skills employers are seeking are not being prioritised within education. We should embed the learning of essential skills via interdisciplinary project-based learning, links with employers and real-world events. Organisations such as the [Skills Builder Partnership](#) continue to develop a common framework to achieving this.

- **Evidencing a wider portfolio of talents** – The current focus on high stakes written exams rewards those who are more naturally inclined towards academic, written examinations but routinely fails a third of pupils at GCSE level. It also fails to evidence the kinds of skills and experiences employers and universities want. Instead, like a growing number of countries across the world, we need to celebrate the strengths of all young people. To do this we need a variety of ways of assessing pupils, including on demand, tests with oral components and extended investigations. Influential organisations like [‘Rethinking Assessment’](#) are developing practical solutions such as a [learner profile](#) model which can be rolled out in schools across the country.
- **The year we turn the tide on technical education** – We must no longer define technical education as ‘alternative’ to academic learning. It provides its own unique educational pathway, integrating academic learning with practical skills. T Levels currently represent an exciting development in technical and vocational education. However, it is not necessary to replace other valuable Level 3 options to make T levels a success. The [Protect Student Choice](#) campaign secured over 100,000 signatures urging government to reverse the plan to defund a number of important Level 3 options, including valuable Applied General Qualifications. Learners deserve the opportunity to study a range of high-quality qualifications; defunding these valuable pathways would be a mistake.
- **Developing balanced school evaluations** – The way we currently measure schools causes unnecessary stress and anxiety among teachers and students. We should look to reform the inspection and accountability regime [including reform of the Ebacc and Progress 8] moving from an adversarial to a performance improvement role - similar to inspectorates in the [other three nations](#). The [Times Education Commission](#) has called for a reformed Ofsted that works collaboratively with schools to secure sustained improvement. As part of this, we should develop a new “school report card” reporting on a broader range of factors such as wellbeing, school culture, and inclusion; unleashing the potential of schools.

Finally, the education sector has experienced countless policy changes over the years, providing a wealth of information about what has already been tried. We want to see a real focus on making good education policy, including learning from international examples (as well as those outside the usual case studies), learning from front line practice and [learning from the past](#). It is critical that we learn from these lessons to ensure that your policies have the best chance of success.

Education has the potential to create meaningful change in every area of society and following Covid-19, England now has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restack the educational card deck in favour of all young people. The Government’s commitment to lifelong learning can only be fully realised through a developed strategy which creates opportunities at all ages. These calls offer just a glimpse of the key priorities for education and there are many others calling for important changes across the sector.

We look forward to working with you to deliver this important work.

Yours sincerely,

Alice Barnard.

Alice Barnard - Chief Executive, Edge Foundation

Also signed by:

Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney - Joint General Secretaries, National Education Union

Rachel Sylvester - Chair, Times Education Commission

David Hughes - Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Professor Bill Lucas - Co-Founder, Rethinking Assessment

Carl Ward - Chair, Foundation for Education Development

Bill Watkin - Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association

Jane Hickie - Chief Executive, The Association of Employment and Learning Providers

Tom Ravenscroft - Founder and CEO, Skills Builder Partnership

Patrick Wall - Founder, edpol.net

Rebecca Deegan - Founder and CEO, I have a voice

Dr. Diana Beech - Chief Executive Officer, London Higher

Deborah Annetts - Chief Executive Officer, Incorporated Society of Musicians

Simon Parkinson - CEO & General Secretary, WEA

Kerry-Jane Packman - Executive Director, Parentkind

Hannah Kirkbride – CEO, Career Matters

Tony Ryan - Chief Executive Officer, The Design and Technology Association

Andrew Hurst MBE - Chief Executive, One Dance UK