

Skills and Metro Mayors

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The Labour government is creating a national skills strategy. This article will discuss some of the implications of this for the future work of the Metro Mayors. A national skills strategy will also be influenced by the crisis in higher education, which has been triggered by failed marketisation as seen in a demand for higher fees from universities, accelerated by a decline in international students and the move towards apprenticeship degrees. How universities work with local and regional institutions, including Metro Mayors, will be key to their joint futures.

Skills England

The King's Speech announced the creation of a new national agency known as *Skills England*, to oversee the post-16 skills system, aligning national and regional skills systems in England as well as working with skills agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The functions of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) will be transferred from the Department of Education to the new agency to provide strategic oversight to the skills system, aligned closely with the Government's industrial strategy and its migration policy. It will also decide what other training can be funded using the apprenticeship levy after it is reformed. *Skills England* will thus not be the only agency working on skills, and how it maintains an integrated national skills strategy will depend on how it works with industry, trade unions, the Migration Advisory Committee, the Industrial Strategy Council, and local and regional government. The review of the National Curriculum, chaired by Becky Francis, Chair of the Education Endowment Foundation, will also impact the work of *Skills England*.

Rethinking DWP - Labour Market Advisory Board

Another significant influence in a national skills strategy as mediated and adapted by the Metro Mayors will be the Labour Market Advisory Board. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is being reformed, moving from a 'Department of

Welfare' characterised by insensitive punitive sanctions to a 'Department of Work'. The Government is aiming for an 80 per cent employment rate, as well as helping more people out of low paid and poor-quality work into better paid employment with more prospects.

Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service will be merged to form a new national jobs and careers service which will focus on supporting people into work and to progress within work instead of monitoring and managing benefit claims. Localities will be encouraged to give responsibility and resources to local employers to design joined-up work, health and skills opportunities as part of Local Growth Plans. The Labour Market Advisory Board will provide 'insight, ideas, and challenge as the government designs a fundamentally new approach to work'. This is a highly ambitious reform which will require extensive re-training of existing Job Centre Plus staff as well as the creation of new jobs, which can support people with long-term disabilities into work.

The legislation outlined in the King's Speech shows that there is a potential for new skills initiatives at local and regional levels in Local Growth Plans, accompanied by the effective collaboration of agencies involved in skills and employment. It will also depend on the provision of new jobs which can use new skills.

Higher Education in crisis

The crisis facing higher education has to be considered in any future regional skills development strategy. For at least ten years, most higher education institutions have been dependent on an expansion of international students, who pay higher fees than domestic students. The income from international fees has informed the business model of many universities, subsidising less well-funded activities.

The expansion of international and domestic students also affected local economies by bringing in large numbers of students who needed places to

live and study, creating local jobs and services. The decline of this income raises fundamental questions about the future of local economies as well as higher education.

Degree level Apprenticeships

The Office for Students has already started to provide funding for universities to develop degree level apprenticeships for under-represented groups, which encourage universities to develop partnerships with local employers, for example in the health, construction and engineering sectors. These initiatives will help universities to diversify their degrees and meet the needs of local employers. Apprentices will be employed by a company / organisation and will earn a wage with accompanying employment rights. They will work with experienced staff and gain specific skills and have protected time for studying and training during their normal working week.

The success of university apprenticeships will depend on universities gaining recognition as essential partners in local growth plans as well as additional funding. Universities that focus on economic and social development at local and regional levels will be working with local FE colleges to expand the routes into apprenticeships.

Metro Mayors

Over the last few years, Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, Sadiq Khan in Greater London and Steve Rotherham in Liverpool had already started to link education and employment services. The new government has recognised the potential of the growing number of Metro Mayors to play an important part in future local skills development and a national industrial strategy.

A new devolution framework will be enacted through the English Devolution Bill. This will provide transparency and consistency so that locally and regionally elected leaders can bring employment and strategic planning powers together with devolved functions such as transport and skills.

Metro Mayors will be in a strong position to bring Further and Higher Education together at regional level and to create a new Tertiary Education sector which focuses on skills needs assessment, provision of training and education as well as research to support regional and national industrial strategies.

