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Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper

Reflections and Summarising

Overall Purpose

The Post-16 Education & Skills White Paper sets out a system-wide reform of England's skills landscape to:

- Build a skilled workforce aligned to economic needs.
- Drive growth and productivity, supporting the Industrial Strategy.
- Improve social mobility, particularly reducing NEET rates.
- Create a simplified, coherent, responsive skills system.

Working with Employers to Drive Growth

Key Issues:

- 27% of vacancies due to skills shortages (2024)
- 8.5m adults with low English/maths; 7.3m lack essential digital skills
- Nearly 1m young people (16–24) NEET

Key Reforms

- Skills England as the national authority for labour-market intelligence.
- Joined-up skills + employment system (Pathways to Work).
- Expansion of Skills Bootcamps and SWAPs.
- Growth & Skills Levy to fund short, modular training.
- Sector Skills Packages (construction, digital/AI, engineering, defence).
- Skills passports; reduced reliance on migrant labour.

A Prestigious, Specialist FE System

Key Challenges:

- FE teacher shortages (4% vacancies; ~40% 5-year retention)
- Declining adult FE participation
- Over 900 Level 3 vocational qualifications

Key Reforms

- £1.2bn annual skills investment by 2028–29
 - 6,500 new FE teachers; national CPD framework
 - Industry Exchange programmes
 - Technical Excellence Colleges in priority sectors
 - Major capital upgrades (estate maintenance + Skills Mission Fund)
 - Greater use of technology & AI
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- New V Levels as the sole Level 3 vocational option
 - Two Level 2 pathways (occupational/progression)
 - New Level 1 English/maths pre-GCSE courses

Strengthening Higher Education

Current Challenges:

- 44% of HEIs forecast deficit (2024/25)
- 25% real-terms drop in per-student funding since 2015–16
- High reliance on international fees; research cost recovery at 66%

Key Reforms

- Tuition fee caps rising with inflation (2026/27 & 2027/28)
- Greater specialisation & collaboration between universities
- Research funding reform + REF streamlining
- Crackdown on low-quality provision, esp. franchised courses
- Strengthened governance and financial oversight

Student Finance:

- Lifelong Learning Entitlement: 4 years of modular funding (from 2026/27)
- Maintenance loans uprated with inflation
- New targeted maintenance grants (via International Student Levy)

Disadvantage, SEND and System Targets

Current Challenges:

- NEET rates: 13.6% (16–24); 16.2% (18–24)
- NEET associated with £50k lifetime earnings loss
- Poor mental health top absence cause (88% of colleges)

Key Reforms

- Youth Guarantee: automatic college place at 16, job guarantee after 18 months UC, subsidised work placements.
- AI-enabled NEET risk identification; improved data sharing.
- Mental Health Support Teams expanded to 60% coverage by 2026.
- Supported internships; SEND support via the Adjustment Planner.

- Two-thirds of young people in higher-level learning (L4+) by age 25 – plus 10%+ in Level 4/5 by 2040.



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Table Discussion 1

Thinking about your role and setting, what are the most significant implications of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper?

- How might this effect curriculum, qualifications or advice offered to students?
- What does the White Paper suggest about progression routes beyond traditional A-levels?
- Are there tensions between policy ambition and current capacity in schools or colleges?

One headline implication per table.

Table Discussion 2

How could schools, colleges and universities respond collectively to this agenda?

- What should collaboration look like in practice, not just in principle?
- Where do schools need greater clarity or support from HE or FE?
- What opportunities exist for place-based partnerships (e.g. shared outreach, progression agreements, aligned messaging)?
- What is one thing we should stop doing and one thing we should do differently as a sector?

One practical action or principle for partnership working.



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Final Reflections

