

Addressing the non-university skills gap in England

The mid-level skills gap is a problem for many employers as they struggle to recruit enough employees with the right skills and/or qualifications. This can leave jobs unfilled and companies unable to expand further. While there are many routes into higher education for the over 25s, it is more difficult for established workers to undertake technical or vocational education to upskill or retrain if they are not supported by their employer or cannot self-fund.

Critical skills shortage

HM Treasury has estimated that by 2022 there will be an additional 3.6 million jobs within medium-skilled occupations, with the construction, finance and manufacturing industries most likely to report shortages of skilled trades, indicating a critical need for greater numbers of new technical and professional skilled workers in the workforce.

Furthermore, the Brexit vote and the UK's future exit from the European Union is already discouraging skilled EU workers from staying in the UK or moving here to take up the medium skilled jobs employers struggle to fill. While the future situation for EU workers in the UK is currently unknown, it is expected that hiring EU workers will become more difficult for employers, which may exacerbate the

which has supported colleagues with up to £100 million in funding will need to be replaced.

The government has taken further action to support non-university training, and in the 2017 Spring Budget announced a commitment to further education maintenance loans from 2019-2020 for students on technical programmes at levels 4-6 and to support adults retraining at National Colleges and Institutes of Technology. This included £40 million to test different approaches to retraining, including £5 million to support 'returnships' for those returning to work after a long break. However, the provision does not cover learning at Level 3, a crucial level for adults wanting to retrain and upskill before entering higher level learning.

Inequality and disadvantaged groups

Concern has been raised about access to skills training and further education for a number of disadvantaged groups. Some reports have referred to the 'missing middle', a group consisting of low earners who neither have access to funding support received by mid to high earners, or qualify for 'out of work' support. In particular, single parents, part-time workers and people with disabilities are least likely to undertake further skills training and progress to higher earning.

Within this group, mothers with children aged under the age of 12 are more likely to be in part-time than full-time employment, and are viewed as being 'content' to work in low graded jobs with managers often unaware of the talent, experience and aspirations of this workforce.

There are additional barriers for the unemployed to retrain, as the welfare system is structured so that those studying part-time need to demonstrate that they would be available for full time work if the opportunity, thus providing a disincentive to such individuals to complete their course of study.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged groups have much to gain and much to offer from further training that could lead to more skilled employment, and have a significant role to play in addressing the critical skills shortage currently being faced.

Conclusions

Renewed interest in development of technical and vocational training to address a pressing skills gap in the UK economy is welcomed, however there remain a number of barriers to access to and participation in such training, particularly for those over 25. Issues relating to access to financial support, improving participation rates for disadvantaged groups, and better promotion of existing schemes are all areas that still need to be addressed.

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