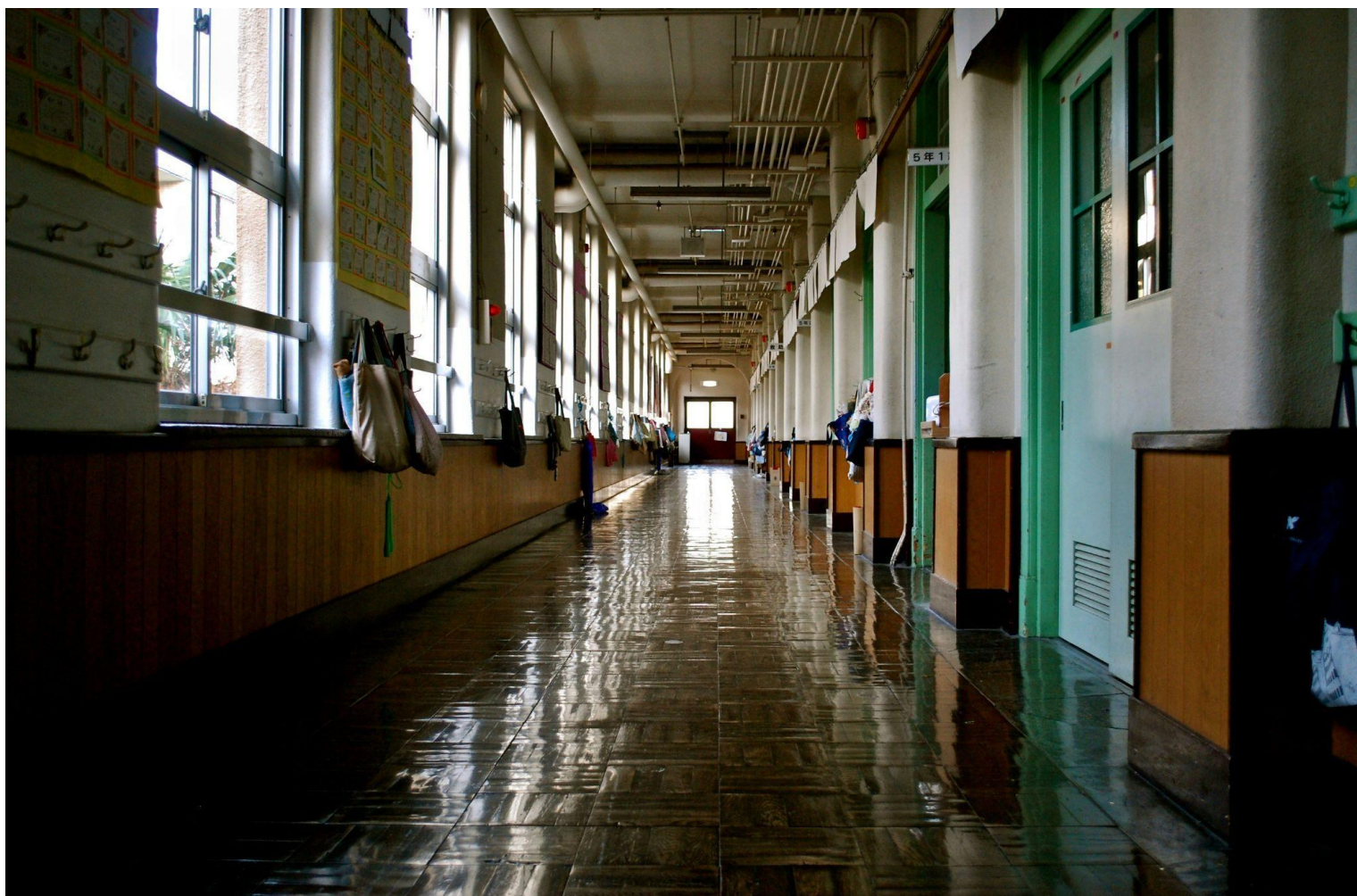


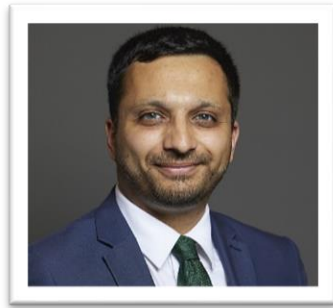
Britain's Skills Advantage

How can the education system best enable every individual to fulfil their potential?

CPF Discussion Brief

October 2025





Foreword - Saqib Bhatti MBE
Member of Parliament for Meriden and Solihull East
Shadow Minister (Education)

Dear fellow member,

Education is key to our opportunity as a country. It is not only core to the Conservative ethos, but is one of our greatest success stories in Government. We can see that through our recent PISA scores, which also show by comparison how Labour fails children.

But our children are facing an increasingly uncertain future. Technology is changing the kind of jobs they will have and the kind of learning they will need. For every child to achieve their full potential, we need an education system that matches their talents to future jobs.

And so, as we prepare for a return to Government, we will need to keep learning.

What works, and what doesn't?

Where can we learn from past successes, or best practice elsewhere?

And within our membership, we know a lot about education: whether that's as parents, employers, school governors, or teachers ourselves.

That's why I want to hear from you and your CPF groups, and I look forward to reading the results of this policy paper as we shape our ideas.



Saqib Bhatti MBE MP

Context

Dear Colleagues,

This discussion paper on the topic of education is the first in our new series of consultations where we are working on commission from Shadow Ministers and the Conservative Leadership, as well as shaping the general Conservative thought-leadership ecosystem.

Now, more than ever, our Party needs its members and the policy expertise we can bring: the teachers, small business owners, entrepreneurs, tax experts, and others who want to use their experience – professional, personal or political – to shape policymaking and get the best for our country.

There are many ways you can be involved. Locally, make sure that your Conservative Association or Federation has a date in the diary to take part in work and be sure to invite as many members and supporters as possible. Nationally, we are calling for our “expert members” to join our new expert working groups directly supporting the Shadow team.

This briefing paper was inspired by an expert roundtable discussion on the topic of Education, led by Neil O’Brien MP, the new Shadow Minister for Policy Renewal and Development and the primary focus of this paper is to ask how our education system can best support every student to achieve their potential, from those who are at risk of disengagement from traditional schooling to those who outperform their peers and need stretching further.

Please send your responses to the questions in this paper to admin@conservativepolicyforum.com.

A summary of responses to this consultation paper will be sent to Saqib Bhatti MBE, the Shadow Minister; Neil O’Brien, Shadow Minister for Policy Renewal; and John Penrose, the CPF Chairman. The deadline for sending your response is Monday 1st December.

We look forward to reading your views!

Kind regards,

John Penrose
CPF Chairman

Frances Lasok
CPF Director

This paper was written by Melissa Hussain, former-Deputy Director for National Policy

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT SYSTEM

Academic and Technical Education Routes

Academic Pathways

The traditional academic route involves GCSEs at age 16, followed by A Levels at 18, leading to university. Around 700,000 students take GCSEs annually, with approximately 300,000 continuing to A Levels. University participation has grown from 15% in 1990 to over 40% today.

Technical Qualifications

T Levels, introduced from 2020, are 2-year courses equivalent to 3 A Levels, combining classroom learning with industry placements. Currently available in 23 subjects including digital, construction, and health. BTECs remain popular, taken by around 200,000 students annually.

Apprenticeships combine work with study, available from Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) to Level 7 (master's degree equivalent). Numbers have fluctuated: 500,000 starts in 2015/16, dropping to 320,000 by 2021/22.

Current Context in Vocational Education

The Labour Government has established Skills England, and it has proposed that this body should oversee a national strategy for post-16 education. However, that is still to be developed.

Labour is also removing the Apprenticeship Levy and replacing it with the Growth and Skills Levy. The Youth Guarantee means all children will now have statutory entitlement to two weeks of work experience.

International Context

Germany's dual education system sees 60% of young people enter apprenticeships. Switzerland achieves 70% youth employment through strong vocational education. Both countries maintain high economic productivity and low youth unemployment.

Assessment System Changes

Recent Reforms

GCSEs moved from A*-G to 9-1 grading in 2017, with 9 being the highest grade. Coursework was largely removed, with most subjects now assessed by final exams only.

For 2025-2027, students will receive formula sheets in GCSE mathematics and physics, continuing a temporary measure introduced during COVID-19. The Department for Education cited "exceptional circumstances" in education recovery.

Progress 8 scores have been suspended for the current two years of GCSE results as relevant Key Stage 2 (KS2) data is not available due to testing policy during COVID-19.

However, the Progress 8 measure remains a widely recognised value-added indicator of school effectiveness, comparing pupils' GCSE outcomes with those of nationally-matched peers based on similar KS2 attainment.

Grade Inflation Debate

A-grade (or higher, including A* since 2010) proportions in A Levels rose from 10% in 1988 to 25.2% in 2019. During COVID-19, when teacher assessments replaced exams, the proportion of A and A* grades reached 44.3% in 2021 before falling back to 26.5% in 2023 as full exams resumed. There was another minor increase in As and A*s this year to 28.2%.

Assessment Methods Globally

Finland uses minimal standardised testing until age 16. Singapore combines continuous assessment with high-stakes exams. France maintains the baccalaureate system with both continuous assessment and final exams.

School System Structure

School Types in England

- **Academies:** 80% of secondary schools, funded directly by government with curriculum freedom
- **Maintained schools:** Run by local authorities following national curriculum
- **Grammar schools:** 164 selective schools, mainly in specific regions
- **Free schools:** New schools set up by parents, teachers, or organisations
- **Independent schools:** Fee-paying, educate 7% of pupils, now subject to tax

In 2024, when Progress 8 was last measured, thirteen of the top fifteen schools in the country for progress were academies, with the other two being voluntary aided (faith schools). Free schools and grammar schools are also disproportionately represented in the list of the 100 highest-performing schools for Progress 8, with the highest performing school in the country being a free school.

In recent years, England's PISA scores have increased significantly, having been ranked the 'best in the West' for reading and mathematics in 2024, moving from 25th in the world to 13th for reading and 27th to 11th for mathematics between 2009 and 2024.

Regional Variations

London schools significantly outperform other regions. The North-South education gap persists, with southern areas generally achieving better GCSE and A Level results.

Skills and Employment Landscape

Current Skills Shortages The Migration Advisory Committee identifies shortages in:

- Health professionals (nurses, care workers)
- Construction (electricians, plumbers, carpenters)
- Engineering and manufacturing
- Digital and tech roles
- Teaching, particularly in STEM subjects

Graduate Employment

29% of graduates work in non-graduate roles, according to ONS data. This includes 34% of arts graduates but only 8% of medical graduates. Average graduate debt now exceeds £35,000.

Economic Alignment Issues

The UK has high youth unemployment (11.2% for 16-24 year olds) alongside skills shortages. Employers frequently report difficulty finding workers with appropriate technical skills, whilst many graduates cannot find suitable employment.

Vocational Education Participation

Only 18% of 16-18 year olds follow technical routes, compared to 59% in Germany and 70% in Switzerland. Cultural attitudes often view vocational education as lower status than academic routes.

International Education Comparisons

Education Spending

The UK spends 4.9% of its GDP on education, slightly below the OECD average of 5.1%. Funding follows the pupil, and children who meet certain criteria related to disadvantage attract additional funding through the Pupil Premium. This government funding, available to schools in England, is intended to support disadvantaged pupils and raise their educational outcomes. It is allocated based on the number of eligible children in each school, and schools are responsible for deciding how to spend it, typically by selecting evidence-based strategies most likely to improve attainment for their specific disadvantaged cohort.

Teacher Status and Training

Teaching is a graduate profession in most developed countries. Finland requires master's degrees for all teachers. Singapore provides high status and competitive salaries. The UK faces teacher recruitment challenges, particularly in mathematics, physics, and modern languages.

Key Statistics Summary

- **Student numbers:** 8.7 million in state schools, 615,000 in independent schools
- **Qualification outcomes:** 67% achieve Grade 4+ in English and mathematics GCSE
- **Post-16 participation:** 82% of 17-year-olds in education or training
- **University entrance:** 38% of 18-year-olds enter higher education
- **Skills gaps:** 1.3 million job vacancies, with 36% of employers reporting skills shortages

Conclusion

The UK education system faces complex challenges requiring informed discussion. The key areas for discussion include the balance between academic and technical education, the effectiveness of different school structures, assessment methods that maintain standards whilst serving diverse learners, and better alignment between education outcomes and economic requirements.

How can the education system best enable every individual to fulfil their potential?

Questions for discussion:

1. What systemic innovations in British education are needed to improve opportunities available to students, especially those between the ages of 14 and 19?
2. How can we encourage students who may be more enthused by technical and employment focused education rather than traditional education?
3. After the introduction of T-Levels and the Apprenticeship Levy, what additional steps can be made to elevate the status of the vocational track?
4. What assessment methods would best measure the full range of student abilities, assessing all different types of learner?
5. How can we encourage students with very high academic abilities to fulfil their potential?
6. Which specific practices from high-performing international education systems should we adopt (applicable) within the British context?
7. Which aspect of the current Labour Government's education policy is poor and can be improved? Are there any approaches that should be preserved?

Groups can choose to answer all the above questions, or a selection