The term 'lifelong learning' is sometimes used in England as an umbrella term for forms of learning that fall outside the school system. However, there is no universally accepted definition of the expression and other terms are more commonly used. The legal framework refers to ‘further education’, which is education taking place in a non-school context for people over the age of full-time compulsory education (16 years). Details of this provision are given in the chapter on ‘Adult Education and Training’ and associated articles on funding, quality assurance, teachers and management staff working in adult and further education.

The Secretary of State for Education is responsible for the work of the Department for Education (DfE), including further education and skills.

The Government has set out its funding priorities for the further education and skills sector in the 2019-20 funding letter. This details funding for the 2019-20 financial year, alongside indicative budgets up to 2020-21, and confirms the Government’s strategic direction for the sector for 2016-2020 as that of ensuring high quality provision that gives good value for money and focuses on young adults, the low-skilled and those who are unemployed. It highlights the Government’s commitment to: increasing participation in post-16 mathematics education; the new Institutes of Technology, the first of which are expected to open from September 2019; and supporting providers as they prepare for the introduction of T Level qualifications in September 2020. It also provides details on the devolution of the adult education budget from 2019/20 (see the article on ‘Adult Education and Training Funding’).

The main policy documents and legislation relating to lifelong learning include:

- the 2016 Post-16 Skills Plan
- the Enterprise Act 2016
- the November 2017 Industrial Strategy White Paper
- the 2018 Budget.

The Post-16 Skills Plan outlined the Government’s approach to reforming technical education, with the aim of ‘[supporting] young people and adults to secure a lifetime of sustained skilled employment and [meeting] the needs of [the] growing and rapidly changing economy’ (p. 7). Central to the Plan is reducing and streamlining the possible routes into employment which will be available to 16- to 18-year-olds and adults from 2020 onwards, and which will aim to offer learners a high-quality educational option to prepare them for skilled employment. In an action plan published in October 2018, which provided an update on progress made in developing policy and implementing the reforms set out in the Skills Plan, the Government stated that the initial focus of the technical education reforms would be on 16- to 19-year-olds, but that over time, it also intended to review technical education for adults and technical provision at Level 4 and Level 5. In December 2018, the Secretary of State announced the launch of Higher Technical Qualifications at Levels 4 and 5, which the Government launched a consultation about in 2019 and which are due to be
introduced in 2022. Similarly, a consultation [15] focusing on post-16 qualifications at Level 3 [16] and below (excluding A Levels [17], GCSEs [18] and the new T Levels) was launched in March 2019. It included proposals for the removal of funding approval for unreformed qualifications, so streamlining possible routes into employment.

The Enterprise Act 2016 [19] introduced measures intended to aid the Government with meeting its goal of creating 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020, including setting apprenticeship targets for the public sector, creating the apprenticeship levy to help fund them, and establishing the Institute for Apprenticeships (now the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education) [20], with the primary function of setting quality criteria for the development of apprenticeship standards and assessment plans and reviewing, approving or rejecting them. The apprenticeship levy has been payable since 6 April 2017 by employers with an annual paybill of over £3m (€3.389 million*) and is used to invest in apprenticeships. Further information on the levy is available on the Department for Education (DfE) website [21]. The remit of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education was extended by the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 [22] to include technical education qualifications.

The Industrial Strategy White Paper [23] was issued in November 2017. The strategy includes:

- an adult digital skills entitlement alongside new digital qualifications from 2021 onwards, in addition to the entitlements which already exist for English and maths
- a National Retraining Scheme to help people reskill and up-skill as the economy changes, which will be targeted at adults without a degree who are in work and are aged 24 or older
- a high-level advisory group, the National Retraining Partnership, bringing together representatives from government, businesses and workers, to set the strategic direction for the retraining scheme
- continued endorsement for new Institutes of Technology [24], which, from September 2019, will specialise in delivering higher technical education (at Levels 4 and 5) with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

In its 2018 Budget [25], the Government announced a reduction in the fee that small businesses must pay to train and assess the apprentices they take on (called ‘co-investment’), in order to support apprenticeships. The reduction was confirmed in the Spring Statement 2019 [26], and has been in place since 1 April 2019.

*Exchange rate used: €1 = £0.88, ECB [27], 16 September 2019.

Article last reviewed September 2019.

DID YOU FIND WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?

YES

NO

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Message *

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