

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **New report says red tape is strangling skills development**

The Government's skills policies have created an excessively bureaucratic system that lets learners and small businesses down, according to a new report from the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development. The report warns that colleges and training providers feel they are not trusted by the present system, whose bureaucracy and target-led culture may be reducing their ability to help people to find work and employers' ability to find suitably skilled workers. The report also calls for the introduction of a purely vocational option for 14-19-year-olds who would prefer to take such a route to employment or further education.

The report, based upon the first of a series of round-table discussions with senior representatives from major training providers and colleges, says that those bodies are ideally placed to help central Government understand the needs of local employers. In particular, they could help develop policies that could better support the small- and medium-sized enterprises that employ three fifths of the UK's private sector workforce. The round table participants felt that current Government policy tended to impose a one-size-fits-all regime that risked alienating small firms, who could not contribute to policy development due to their relative lack of personnel and resources.

Kate Shoesmith, the Centre for Skills Development's senior manager for policy and practice, said that this could have a serious impact during the economic downturn. "With so many people employed by small firms," she said, "it's incredibly important for those firms' training needs to be dealt with effectively. Colleges and training providers understand those unique needs far better than Government, which necessarily has to look at the bigger picture. Without listening more



closely to these experts, the Government could be blind to some of the serious training challenges that small firms are facing, potentially leaving the UK short of the skills it needs to restore economic prosperity.”

The report cites the Government’s move to introduce ‘functional skills’ as an example of its lack of awareness of local needs. “[Training] practitioners are particularly critical of the way their options have been limited for young people whose experience of the school classroom is largely negative,” the report says, adding that the current insistence on “a heavily theoretical component” to vocational courses could “frighten off” potential new recruits.

“Given the constant trickle of news about increasing unemployment,” said Ms Shoesmith, “the Government has to realise that it’s more important to get someone into a regular job than it is to tick boxes. Most of the people we spoke to felt that the Government might be hitting the target but missing the point: literacy and numeracy are important, but the present system is frankly terrifying for young people who already feel left behind by school.”

Another concern expressed by the round table participants, drawn from the catering, construction and health and social care sectors, was that further education as a whole seemed still not to be trusted by policy-makers, with both funding and policy stacked heavily in favour of higher education. “The time may have come when policy-makers need to recognise the strengths of the training sector, and particularly the practitioners within it, and to give them substantially more discretion over the way they respond to local needs”, the report says.

The Association of Learning Practitioners (ALP) welcomed the report. Its chief executive, Graham Hoyle OBE, said: ‘This very welcome report offers an excellent starting point for the work which the



UK Commission for Employment and Skills is undertaking on the simplification of the skills system.

ALP strongly supports CSD's recommendation that although diplomas are now up and running, 14-19-year-olds skill need a purely vocational learning option. This will particularly help those not ready to start a full apprenticeship.'

ENDS

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Notes to editors.

1. 'SMEs employ 13.5 million people - 59.2 per cent of the total private sector workforce.' BERR website (<http://www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/enterprise/enterprisesmes/index.html>), retrieved 26 Jan 09.
2. The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) spoke to fifteen practitioners drawn from the construction, catering and health and social care industries in October, under Chatham House Rules. Their concerns and CSD's findings are in its report, *Practitioners' Voices: Understanding their role within a demand-led system*, available on CSD's website. CSD will continue to explore the role of further education practitioners in policy-making.
3. The report's key findings and recommendations are:
  - In other spheres of government, the principle has been established that intervention (audit or inspection) should be inverse in proportion to success. The same principle should apply to further education.
  - Vocational routes are valid options for all ages.
  - [Training] practitioners and their representatives are important and worthy contributors to policy decisions at a local, regional and national level.
  - Practitioners are a gateway to better understanding demand – an effective feedback mechanism from practitioners to those at the centre of policy needs to be established.
  - A more flexible approach which allows for discretionary time to enrich the learners' experiences and tailor the programme directly to their needs would have a greater, more beneficial impact.
  - Qualifications which are fit for purpose and well-received by employers and learners are those where an inclusive model for qualification development has been employed.
  - Clarity is needed on what policy changes to qualifications and their delivery mechanisms means in practice.
4. The Association of Learning Providers ([www.learningproviders.org.uk](http://www.learningproviders.org.uk)) is the leading trade association for vocational learning providers in Britain. The majority of its 470 members are independent private, not-for-profit and voluntary sector training organisations. Membership is open to any provider committed to quality vocational learning and it includes over 60 FE colleges involved in work based learning. ALP members train a significant majority of the Apprentices in England and are major deliverers of New Deal and Train to Gain contracts on behalf of government.
5. The [City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development](http://www.cityandguilds.org) is an independent, not-for-profit research and development body which is committed to improving the policy and practice of work related education and training internationally. It works with organisations around the world – principally with policy makers, employers, training providers and learners – to share knowledge and help to lead the debate on policy and practice, aiming to achieve its vision of a world in which all people have access to the skills they need for economic and individual prosperity. It is an independent part of the City & Guilds Group.