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13 October 2021

The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP  
Minister of State (Minister for Higher and Further Education)  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
Westminster  
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Minister,

### **Apprenticeship, Technical Education and Skills Priorities and the Higher Education Contribution**

It was nice to see you again last week at CPC21 and once again I extend my congratulations to you on your recent appointment

As I mentioned, the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is the national not for profit HE representative organisation for Higher Education Institutions committed to the higher-level vocational agenda. We have over 80 HEIs from all university mission groups in membership and, as you know, universities have a pivotal role in the apprenticeship, technical education and skills agenda. Indeed I believe in working together we can help realise the ambitions with regard to the agenda for skills and the drive for outcomes and social mobility. I have recently taken over the Chair and in that capacity wanted to write to you and make the following requests of Government:

- 1. Enable Employers to Fully Utilise Higher and Degree Apprenticeship to Raise Productivity and Deliver Key Public Sector Services** - Apprenticeship is an all age and all level programme and should remain so. In the public sector employers are using Higher and Degree Apprenticeships to train the new Police Officers, Nursing Associates, Registered Nurses and Social Workers that society needs. In the private sector Higher and Degree Apprenticeships are being used to train the engineers, digital specialists, scientists and manufacturing and construction professionals needed by businesses to raise productivity and compete internationally. Apprenticeships are no longer perceived as the choice *for other people's children*. Of course, some changes could make the apprenticeship system work better; more effective levy transfers, greater flexibility for sectors and SMEs that have found it difficult to engage in apprenticeships and more

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ability for employers to specify mandatory degrees in apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7. Calls from some to restrict the ability of employers to use the apprenticeship levy for higher and degree apprentices, for older and/or existing employees, individuals with an existing level 6 qualification or employees earning more than an artificially defined salary cap would totally undermine the ability of employees to use apprenticeships to train individuals in key public and private sector roles. **We would ask that Government emphasises its commitment to Higher and Degree Apprenticeship and support employers to use the apprenticeships their organisations need to deliver public sector services and to support a post Pandemic recovery.**

2. **Retain Funding for Applied General Qualifications (e.g., BTEC, Cambridge Nationals) -** UVAC fully supports T Levels. The removal of funding for Applied Generals will not, however, support the successful roll out of T Levels. T Levels are an entirely different and welcome new offer requiring extensive high quality work placements and are for individuals with a clear interest and ambition in a career in a specific sector or field. Applied Generals provide an alternative quality choice for individuals not wanting to follow A levels and unsure as to the career they want to follow. Applied Generals have supported substantial numbers of learners access higher education and have a proven record in widening access and supporting underrepresented groups in HE. Applied Generals also have a key role in supporting progression to HE in what many would regard as priority occupational areas: health and social care being a good example. **In order not to damage the widening participation and the levelling-up agenda we would request that Government reconsider its proposals to remove funding for most Applied Generals for the 16 - 18 cohort.**
3. **Expand Higher Technical Education on the Basis of Skills Needs, but not at the Expense of Level 6 Provision -** Many of the key job roles in society and the economy are at level 6, 7 and 8 - in health, nursing, policing, science, artificial intelligence, digital technology, engineering. Indeed, IfATE have approved employer developed occupational standards for 182 occupations and professions at level 6 and 7. Our NHS needs doctors, clinicians, healthcare practitioners, registered nurses, nursing associates as well as a plethora of key roles at lower levels. Government should support the expansion of higher technical education and higher technical qualifications where such provision is needed in the economy, but not at the expense of level 6 and 7 programmes including bachelor's and master's degrees. **We would advise that Government base skills policy on the skills needed by the economy - skills programmes at craft level and levels 4 to 7 are needed.**
4. **Change the Concept that there are *Just Academic and Vocational Choices* -** The choice is not either an apprenticeship *or* university nor an academic *or* vocational programme. Such ideas have the potential to perpetuate the academic and vocational divide. The fastest growing type of apprenticeship is a Degree Apprenticeship where, in the integrated model a degree is used to deliver and accredit the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified by the Apprenticeship Standard. Since their introduction, Degree Apprenticeships have introduced a new highly aspirational choice: a degree and an

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apprenticeship (job) in one package. **Government should seek to expand learner and employer choice at levels 4 to 7, but recognise the need to combine theory and knowledge with practice to achieve competence.**

5. **Value the Role of All Providers, HE and FE in the Delivery of Skills Programmes -** Ensuring individuals, employers, the economy and society have the skills programmes needed will require the full engagement of all providers, colleges, independent training providers and universities. Government needs to ensure all providers, working with employers and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) can deliver the skills the country needs. Too often skills policy has been synonymous with further education and skills programmes with lower-level provision. Government needs to develop an inclusive and comprehensive approach to post 18 learning where policies and programmes are not developed in isolation but based on economic and societal priorities. **Government should emphasise the fundamental role of HE as well as FE in the delivery of nationally important skills programmes.**

I believe the above requests demonstrate that we welcome the current focus on skills and the drive for increased flexibility and diversity of provision. I hope they help and support the thinking and analysis under way.

UVAC very much looks forward to continuing to support HEIs work with employers to develop the provision needed in the economy including the rollout of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement. I, and UVAC's Chief Executive Mandy Crawford-Lee, would welcome an early opportunity to meet and outline how the higher education sector can continue to support the successful implementation of the apprenticeship and higher technical education reforms and to clarify any of the points made. I thank you in advance for considering these requests and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Yours sincerely



Professor Graham Baldwin  
Chair of UVAC  
Vice-Chancellor at the University of Central Lancashire

Copy to: Mandy Crawford-Lee, Chief Executive, UVAC

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