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24 December 2024

The Rt. Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern

Minister of State (Minister for Skills)  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3BT

CC: Richard Pennycook CBE, Interim Chair, Skills England

Dear Minister

### **Funding of fit for purpose training including Level 7 apprenticeships**

We welcome Skills England's role in bringing together central and local government, businesses, training providers, assessment organisations and unions to meet the skills needs of the next decade, across all regions.

More employers than ever before rely on digital apprenticeships to develop the skills they need to be competitive, to help them embrace emerging technologies and to develop digital capabilities up to leadership level.

The government's own analysis has highlighted that the digital skills gap needs to be bridged if the UK economy is to grow in line with its ambitions. Since the pandemic, starts on digital apprenticeships from 20/21 to 23/24 have increased by 47%.

While digital apprenticeships have been popular at Levels 3 and 4 for the past seven years, there has been increasing demand for higher level apprenticeships, for example the Level 7 AI Data Specialist. Over 248 apprentices have completed the programme, and circa 753 are currently in training. Other higher level digital apprenticeships only recently developed and approved for delivery include the Level 7 Advanced Digital Forensic Professional and Spatial Data Specialist. Crucially, these standards have been developed by employers to address their future skills needs.

BCS, as a leading end point assessment organisation, has seen digital apprenticeships being undertaken by a diverse population. Winners of the BCS IT and Digital awards for 2024 in AI, Cyber and DevOps were all women. This engagement is significant in a profession that struggles to attract female talent.

Our work across this sector tells us that Skills England will be wary of implementing broad brush changes that can have unintended consequences. It is vital to ensure funding is appropriate to the economic priorities and helps to drive inclusion and social mobility.

As such, we have considerable concerns about removing the funding of Level 7 digital skills and would ask that this is not enacted without consultation with the relevant stakeholders, including

employers, training providers and assessment organisations to establish a clear understanding of the likely outcomes.

We do not believe that the removal of funding of Level 7 digital skills is aligned with the government's Invest 2030 – Modern Industrial Strategy: *“With its world-leading research, strong culture of innovation, and thriving start-up ecosystem, backed by a deep talent pool and the investment required to grow and scale sustainable businesses globally, the UK is well positioned to build on its success and develop the next wave of groundbreaking digital and technology companies”*.

Our work with SMEs strongly indicates that de-funding of such programmes relevant to their organisations is only likely to disengage them further.

There are ample examples of people who have progressed onto higher level digital apprenticeships that would not have had the confidence without the apprenticeship route and would not have achieved what they have through traditional higher education.

We have every confidence that DfE and Skills England understand that funding specialist technical and leadership skills are essential for the economy and our society, and will look to nurture higher level digital apprenticeships as part of that strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Lucy Ireland, Managing Director, BCS Learning and Development; BCS, The Chartered institute for IT

Huw Davies, Chair for the Data Engineer, Machine Learning Engineer and AI Apprenticeship Standard Trailblazer Groups

Jo Bishenden, Managing Director, QA Apprenticeships

Nichola Hay, MBE, Director of Apprenticeship Strategy and Policy, BPP Education Group

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Dan Sofer, Founding Director, Founders and Coders

Matthew Tudge, Head of Skills Planning, Business West