# UNDERSTANDING APPRENTICESHIPS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

## A note exploring the apprenticeship system and related skills shortage


### *Summary*

*Since the heyday of apprenticeships in the 1960s and 70s, the number of workers pursuing this route has fallen dramatically. This is partly due to the substantial increase in the number of young people going to university. However, the apprenticeship system also disincentives larger employers from using the system to create new roles and take on new apprentices. Instead, apprenticeships are now largely used in lieu of in-house training. The number of over-25s starting an apprenticeship is now double the number of under-19-year-olds.*

*The result is a nationwide skills shortage. The UK is now the exception in developed nations in having a higher rate of literacy among 55–64-year-olds than for 16–24-year-olds. This particularly affects STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) related occupations and is most acutely felt in industrial and former industrial areas. Whilst skill levels have improved in the last two decades, the rate of improvement has been significantly faster in areas that were higher skilled to begin with - leaving other areas behind.*

*Despite having a higher rate of university graduates than other developed nations, the UK also has a higher share of low-skilled workers meaning that two in five employees are engaged in work for which they do not have the appropriate qualifications. Cities have disproportionately benefited from the increase in graduate numbers - other areas have become trapped in a low-skill, low-productivity economic cycle. This has far reaching implications for the UK economy, the potential for Levelling Up and opportunities for industrial areas with a recent history of limited employment prospects for low and medium-skilled workers.*

*This note explores the development of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom, how the system works today (including in the devolved nations), the Apprenticeship Levy, T Levels, the impact of the skills shortage and regional disparities before reaffirming the value of apprenticeships to industrial areas and presenting some options for reform.*

## Apprenticeships: Fact Sheet

### *What are apprenticeships and T Levels?*

- Apprenticeships are open to people over 16 and not in full time education.
- Apprentices are entitled to statutory minimum wage, holiday and off-the-job study.
- By law, apprenticeships must be at least 12 months but may last up to five years.
- Since 2015, 16 to 18-year-olds in England must either stay in full-time education, undertake voluntary work alongside employment or start an apprenticeship.
- There are four levels of apprenticeships overseen by the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education – a body funded by the Department for Education:
    - Intermediate = NVQ Level 2 (5 GCSE passes)
    - Advanced = NVQ Level 3 (2 A Level passes)
    - Higher = NVQ Level 4 (Foundation or Higher Education Certificate)
    - Degree = NVQ Level 5 (Bachelor's or Master's degree)
- T Levels are technical-based qualifications aimed at 16-18-year-olds after GCSEs.
- They are two-year courses and exist alongside A Levels and apprenticeships.
- T Levels are study based with a placement of at least 315 hours (~17.5%) in industry – by contrast apprenticeships are workplace based with around 20% study time.

### *How are apprenticeships funded?*

- Apprenticeships are funded by a 0.5% levy on employers with annual wages of over £3 million – employers can withdraw their contributions to fund apprenticeships
- Employers can receive a government 10% top-up and if they spend all their levy funds receive an up to 95% subsidy for additional apprenticeships
- The Apprenticeship Levy operates on a 24-month use-it-or-lose-it basis incentivising employers to use apprenticeships as in-house training rather than to create new jobs.
- SMEs can access funds but are discouraged due to complicated processes.

### *Skills shortage: key stats*

- Around 9 million adults in England have low of basic skills – 5 million are employed.
- Half of the working age population (17 million) have low levels of numeracy skills
- Two out of five do not have the correct qualifications for their role.
- The regional skills disparity has grown since 2004 with areas that were higher skilled twenty years ago leaving other areas behind.

## How have apprenticeships developed?

Whilst the overwhelming majority of school leavers continuing in education today do so via university qualifications, historically apprenticeships have played a highly significant role. Dating back to the master craftsmen and guilds of the Middle Ages[1] and later regulated by the 1563 Statute of Artificers and Apprentices,[2] the apprenticeship system has evolved greatly over the centuries. The new technologies of the industrial revolution led to resistance to the restrictions imposed by the medieval system and the requirement for workers in a skilled trade to have served an apprenticeship was abolished in 1814.[3]

Nevertheless, apprenticeships remained and developed as a fundamental method of providing skills and knowledge to those entering a skilled occupation. By the early 1900s, the apprenticeship route was being taken by a third of male school leavers.[4]

The 20th century saw two major events in apprenticeships in the UK. The first was the Industrial Training Act 1964,[5] designed to avoid skills shortages in the new scientific revolution that was to be forged in Harold Wilson's 'white heat' of technology.[6] Central to the Act was the establishment of Industrial Training Boards (ITBs),[7] which in addition to raising a levy on employers and distributing grants to fund apprenticeships, outlined training recommendations; published manuals; and set syllabuses and standards for courses to follow. This greatly formalised a previously haphazard system of training and by the early 1970s around 15% of school leavers (including roughly 35% of males) were opting for the apprenticeship route.[8]

The second significant event to affect apprenticeships was deindustrialisation. The decline of manufacturing industries in the United Kingdom coincided with the Industrial Training Act 1982, which replaced many ITBs with voluntary employer-led bodies without the powers to raise statutory levies.[9] As a result, the 1980s saw a dramatic fall in the number of apprenticeship training programmes across the economy - the few exceptions being advanced technology areas, such as aerospace, nuclear and energy. By 1990, the number of apprentices had fallen from 340,000 per year in the early years of the century to only 53,000.[10]

The Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), which had been introduced by the Callaghan government in 1978 with the aim of helping 16-18 year olds into employment, was expanded until 1983 when it was replaced by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS).[11] Whilst trainees were entitled to periods of off-the-job training, this was often low quality[12] and the scheme was widely criticised for enabling employers to exploit school leavers as a pool of cheap labour.[13]

In 1987, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were introduced (except in Scotland) as a framework to rationalise the 'jungle' of existing vocational qualifications. These competency-based qualifications consist of five levels designed to be equivalent to academic qualifications - for example NVQ level 2 was equated to GCSE (grades A*-C).[14] This framework was superseded in 2015 by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RFQs), although the term NVQ may still be used.[15]

Modern Apprenticeships were introduced in 1994 and the National Apprenticeship Service was established in 2009 to coordinate apprenticeships in England. The current structure of

apprenticeships commenced in 2013 and sees 'trailblazers' (groups of employers) working together to develop new apprenticeships, standards and assessments.[16]

The 2012 Richard Review raised concerns about the watering down of the term 'apprenticeship' that had occurred in previous years arguing that apprenticeships are most effective when they involve 'sustained and substantial training' closely integrated with a new job role. Put simply, on-the-job training does not necessarily constitute an apprenticeship, 'there must be a job and the job role must be new'.[17]

These concerns were substantiated by the Sainsbury Review, published in April 2016, which found that there were 'serious problems' with the apprenticeship system. Of primary concern was the 'over-complicated' bureaucracy and failure to 'provide the skills most needed for the 21st century'.[18]

As a result, the Apprenticeship Reform Programme, which had been established the previous year, phased out framework apprenticeships, introduced T Levels and degree apprenticeships, set a target of 2.3% of public sector staff to be employed as new apprentices, and announced the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to offer free qualifications for adults without the equivalent of A Levels. The Apprenticeship Reform Programme was concluded in July 2021.[19]

## How do apprenticeships work today (England)?

Today, as in the past, apprenticeships are intended to offer a combination of skills and knowledge, coupling on-the-job training and off-the-job study.[20] Typically, an external training provider, for example a college, delivers this study. However, depending on the nature of the apprenticeship, this may also be undertaken at the place of work or online.[21]

Apprenticeships are open to those over the age of 16, living in England and not in full-time education. By law, apprenticeships have to be at least 12 months in duration, although some may take up to five years to complete[22] and during that time apprentices are legally entitled to a salary of at least the national minimum wage[23] and holiday pay.

There are four levels of apprenticeship overseen by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, a non-departmental public body established in 2017 and funded by the Department for Education. Each apprenticeship corresponds to an NVQ level:

| **Apprenticeship** | **NVQ Level** | **Academic Equivalent** |
|---|---|---|
| Intermediate | Level 2 | 5 GCSE passes |
| Advanced | Level 3 | 2 A Level passes |
| Higher | Level 4 | Foundation or Higher Education Certificate |
| Degree | Level 5 | Bachelor's or Master's degree |

The most recent addition is the degree level apprenticeship, introduced in 2015. These are targeted at 18–19-year-olds, with theoretical study provided by a university from which graduates can achieve a bachelor's degree (e.g., BEng) or a master's (e.g., MEng).[24] As of 2022, there are 600 different apprenticeships available.[25]

## What is the school leaving age?

Since 1972, the school leaving age in the United Kingdom has been 16 years old. By 2007, 11% of 16-18-year-olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET).[26] In an attempt to reduce this, the Education and Skills Act 2008 outlined plans to raise the age at which young people in England could leave learning, referred to as the 'participation age, to 18 by 2015.[27] After finishing secondary school, 16-year-olds must either stay in full-time education, start an apprenticeship, be in training or undertake at least 20 hours of voluntary work per week whilst in part-time education or training.

In Wales and Scotland, the leaving age remains unchanged. Students in Wales may leave at the end of June in the academic year during which they turn 16. In Scotland, students leave school at the end of May or at Christmas depending on the date of their 16th birthday.[28]

## How does the Apprenticeship Levy work?

Unlike academic qualifications (such as A Levels), which are fully funded by the Department for Education, employers are expected to finance apprenticeships. Since 2017, this has been done via the Apprenticeship Levy. Employers with annual wages over £3 million are taxed 0.5% of their pay bill and the contributions raised are collected directly into the digital Apprenticeship Service account held by HMRC. Employers are able to withdraw their contributions to spend on apprenticeships. The basic amount which may be drawn is determined by the apprenticeship type, though the employer may choose to invest more. Employers will also receive a 10% top-up from the Government for the determined amount, though this will not increase if the employer chooses to spend more than the funding band.[29]

In order to encourage employers to utilise this funding, the pot operates on a use-it-or-lose-it basis. Any funds remaining in the Apprenticeship Service Account after 24 months is accrued to the Exchequer.

In addition to the 10% top up, businesses who have used all of their levy funds are able to receive a 'co-investment' subsidy covering up to 95% of the cost for additional apprenticeships. Previously, only 90% could be footed by the taxpayer but this was increased with the intention of offering more affordable support to smaller employers.[30]

However, the nature of the use-it-or-lose-it regime and lack of discretion on how money is spent has exacerbated the issues highlighted in the Richard Review. Rather than directing funding towards the creation of new roles or supporting new employees, it is instead chiefly directed towards professional development for existing employees.[31] As a result, the number

of over-25-year-olds starting an apprenticeship is now double the number of under-19-year-olds doing so.[32]

Meanwhile, smaller employers who do not pay the levy can access the generated funds by arranging apprenticeships with registered providers but are disincentivised by a combination of a lack of candidates and complicated process. Despite the fact that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were previously the bedrock of the system and are between two and three times more likely to use apprenticeships exclusively as a tool for recruitment, they currently account for only 10% of apprenticeships listed on the Government website.[33]

Much of the Levy currently goes unspent with 26% of businesses not using funds and viewing it as a tax.[34] While some have argued to prohibit the use of Levy funds for in-house training, others, such as the Confederation of British Industry, for the Apprenticeship Levy to be reimagined as a Flexible Skills Levy,[35] which could be used for high-quality, non-apprenticeship training to upskill the existing workforce as well as funding apprenticeships.[36]

## What are T Levels?

Launched in September 2020, T Levels are two-year technical-based qualifications that can be studied by 16–18-year-olds after finishing their GCSEs. They exist alongside A Levels (for those who wish to continue in academic education), apprenticeships and other post-16 qualifications.

While T Levels are approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and based on the same employer-designed standards as apprenticeships, they differ in that they are designed to prepare students for training or further study rather than to offer on-the-job training for those wishing to pursue a specific occupation.

Each T Level contains an industry placement of a minimum of 315 hours (approximately 45 days), which equates to around 20% of the 1,800 hours expected to be required to complete the course. By contrast, apprenticeships are designed for those who want to earn a wage while learning and are typically 80% on-the-job and 20% of the time dedicated to study.[37]

## How do apprenticeships work in Scotland and Wales?

Oversight of apprenticeships is devolved in both Scotland and Wales.

In Scotland, Modern Apprenticeship frameworks are overseen by the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG), which replaced the Modern Apprenticeship Group in April 2020. The AAG sits within Skills Development Scotland,[38] an executive non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government, and is responsible for approving all Scottish apprenticeships, ensuring that they fit with policy and overseeing quality assurance in apprenticeship development activity.[39]

Responsibility for framework approval, quality assurance and aligning apprenticeships with the needs of the Welsh economy[40] lies with the Welsh Government under its role as Issuing Authority.[41] The Welsh Government is advised by the Wales Apprenticeships Advisory Board (WAAB), an independent enterprise-led body established in 2018, which also includes representation from trade unions, further and higher education.[42]

As in England, apprenticeships in Scotland[43] and Wales are open to those aged 16 and over. The devolved nations can decide how their share of the UK-wide Apprenticeship Levy is spent. Allocation is determined based on how many employees are based in each location and consideration of the Barnett Formula.[44] The devolved Governments may also choose to dedicate additional funding to support apprenticeships.[45]

The Scottish Government has pursued a more relaxed approach allowing employers to use their levy fund on the type of training that the business feels is most appropriate and does not necessarily have to be labelled as an apprenticeship. For example, funds can be used for Modern apprenticeships, English apprenticeships, college training, workplace training, supporting skills development and employment-focused training for young people.[46]

In Wales, employers are not required to contribute directly to the cost of apprenticeship provision. This differs slightly from England where a Funding Band has been set to cap the amount of funding that can be drawn down from the levy meaning that in instances where cost of delivery is higher than the funding band, an additional contribution is required from levy paying employers or in the case of non-levy paying employers, the UK Government will fund 95% of the cost up to the maximum funding band.[47]

## What is the extent and impact of the UK's skills shortage?

The purpose of an apprenticeship system can be summarised as '*to provide high quality educational routes for people who do not go to university, and good jobs for places dependent on vocational or non-graduate employment*'.[48] However, there is a growing recognition amongst those in government and apprenticeship providers alike, that the current system is not fulfilling its potential.

One of the cornerstone education policies of the New Labour government, outlined by Tony Blair in his 1999 conference speech, was the 'target of 50 per cent of young adults going into higher education in the next century'.[49] Two decades later, that ambition was realised with 50.2% people going into higher education by 2017-18.[50]

However, the marked increase in high skills levels - something from which the UK economy has historically benefitted compared to other developed nations - masks a large share of workers lacking basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills.[51]

There are around 9 million adults in England with low levels of basic skills, of whom 5 million are in work.[52] Numeracy skills present a particular challenge as half the working age population - 17 million adults – are only estimated to have everyday maths skills equivalent to those expected at a primary school level: a driving factor behind the creation of the Multiply adult numeracy programme within the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.[53]

The skills problem is particularly pronounced with regard to younger workers. Over 12% of adults aged 25-34 have fewer than five A*-C GCSEs.[54] Perhaps most concerning of all, the United Kingdom is the only developed country where adult literacy is higher for those aged 55-64 than it is for 16–24-year-olds.[55]

The upshot of the focus on higher education coupled with the larger proportion of lower skilled workers, is that the share of workers with upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications is squeezed relative to other developed countries.[56]

For example, according to OECD figures, 49.4% of 25–64-year-olds in the United Kingdom in 2020 had attained 'tertiary' level of education, whilst 18.3% had below upper secondary educational attainment. By contrast, in Germany 31.3% of people had completed some form of higher education but the attainment of only 13.9% was lower than upper secondary.[57] This means that despite having a higher rate of tertiary education, the United Kingdom has a significantly smaller proportion of workers educated to upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level (32.3%) than Germany (54.9%) or even the average for the 22 EU countries surveyed (45.5%), leading to a 'missing middle'[58] and shortage in semi-skilled workers.[59]

The impact of this discrepancy is a mismatch between the jobs being created and the skills possessed by the workforce. The emphasis on tertiary education means that 13% of workers are employed in jobs for which they are overqualified while 28% are underqualified. A staggering two out of every five (40%) workers are engaged in an occupation for which they are not properly qualified.[60]

The most pronounced skills shortage is in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) related areas, such as building and construction, design, mechanical and the sciences, whereas there is a surplus in food production, sales, marketing and clerical work.[61]

## How does the skills shortage affect different regions?

The skills gap is not uniform across the country. As with primary and secondary education, London has leapt ahead of other regions. While agglomerated city regions[62] have disproportionately benefited from the doubling of graduates since 2001, developing as centres for high-skilled jobs, other areas have become caught in a low-skill, low-productivity cycle, which has trapped local economies and workers.[63]

The average proportion of 16-64-year-old residents across England, Scotland and Wales with degree-level qualifications is 39%. However, people with higher qualifications are more concentrated towards main regional cities and the South East with the share of residents with degree-level qualifications reaching 53% in London. Meanwhile, in former coalfields, areas with a higher number of workers are employed in manual jobs, only 30% of 16-64-year-olds are educated to degree level or above.[64]

This disparity between cities and other - often industrial - areas is representative of a trend also seen at a regional level. In 2004, the share of the working age population (16–64-year-

olds) with fewer than five A*-C grade GCSEs (or equivalent) was highest in the West Midlands (60.1%), North East (59.7%) and Yorkshire (58.4%). In London, this figure stood at 54.7%, only two points higher than the South East which had the lowest share. Fourteen years later, the capital had leapfrogged even the South East (33.7% and 38.2% respectively). Most remarkable though is the scale of the difference. While the three regions listed above reduced the low-skilled share of the working population by around 12%, London did so by 21.0%. The same is true for the share of workers with NVQ Level 4 or above. In the North East this rose by 9.2% (from 21.9% to 31.1%) yet in the same time period, London achieved more than double the rate of growth, accelerating from 31.9% to 53.1% (a difference of 21.2%).[65]

Put simply, over the last twenty years high skilled areas have become much more highly skilled and the areas with lower levels of skills in 2004 have been unable to keep pace. Wider economic challenges, such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change target and an ageing population, are making skills shortages more acute,[66] and whilst a 'skills mission' is included in the Levelling Up white paper,[67] this only partially addresses the decline in participation in skills training. Between 2010 and 2020, adult participation in government-funded skills training and further education programmes almost halved.[68] This decline was most pronounced in the disadvantaged areas already suffering from low-skills.

## Assessment

The decline in apprenticeships and the associated skills shortage disproportionately affects non-city, deprived areas. Many of these are older industrial communities. Lack of skills has been cited as a key factor in locking localities into low-skill, low-productivity economic cycles – effectively meaning that because those living there lack relevant skills and training, employers are less willing to invest in the creation of new skilled jobs meaning higher skilled individuals are compelled to move elsewhere for work or engage in low-skilled employment perpetuating the cycle.

Overuse of the term 'apprenticeship' has led to the word being watered down causing the route to be viewed as less valuable than other academic and career paths available. The current apprenticeship system and functioning of the Apprenticeship Levy disincentivises larger employers from using apprenticeships to create new roles for 16–18-year-olds. Subsidies targeted at big businesses, complex bureaucracy and lack of support makes SMEs less likely to engage in apprenticeships.

Some options for reform to address these issues are outlined below:

### *Redefine the term 'apprenticeship' as a mark of quality*

Call on the Department for Education to introduce a definition benchmarked against other globally respected apprenticeships systems and clearly outlining what can (and therefore cannot) be called an apprenticeship. Restricting the term apprenticeships to programmes that create new roles and offer 'sustained and substantial training'[69] would exclude low-skill generic roles and prevent apprenticeships being used as a method of professional

development for existing employees. Ensuring quality is vital to re-establishing the standing of apprenticeships as a route to a skilled occupation. [70]

### *Redirect Funding to 16–18-year-olds*

A Levels and other post-16 qualifications are fully funded by the Department for Education. Fully funding intermediate and advanced level apprenticeships for 16-18-year-olds from the DfE budget would free up Levy funds to be spent on over-19s and ensure employers – in particular non-Levy paying SMEs – will not be prevented from hiring young apprentices due to financial constraints.[71] This could be financed in part by withdrawing the 10% Government top-up and the 95% 'co-investment' subsidy for additional apprenticeships, which currently incentivises employers to use apprenticeships for internal professional development.

Additionally, as young people outside London and the South East are more likely undertake apprenticeships, redirecting funding to under-19-year-olds has potential to disproportionately direct funding towards poorer regions and industrial communities.[72] While grants are available for employers hiring under 18-year-olds and under 25-year-olds in certain circumstances, these are only £1,000 per eligible apprentice.[73]

While the Apprenticeship Levy is UK-wide, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have responsibility for how their allocation is spent and already differ from England with regard to top-up and 'co-investment' financing.

### *Enable local authorities to support SME apprenticeships*

Brokering services piloted in Greater Manchester and West Midlands combined authorities, in which levy-paying firms allocated up to 25% of their contributions to smaller firms instead of allowing unspent money to return to the treasury, have yielded positive results.[74] However, significant engagement is required to promote the opportunities of levy transfer, rather than co-investment model currently utilised by many SMEs.

Measures such as allowing local authorities to combine pots of money into local skills development funds, which could include providing greater support for SMEs wishing to take on apprentices; or power to target grant funding to address specific local skills gaps could also be explored.[75] The devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales may wish to adopt a slightly different approach depending on the priorities in each nation.

### *Reimagine the Apprenticeship Levy as a Flexible Skills Levy*

An alternative option for the Apprenticeship Levy is to broaden its scope to become a Flexible Skills Levy.[76] A key advocate for this is the Confederation of British Industry, who have argued it is a fairer way to support higher levels of investment in training across a broader range of vocational training activities, including modular courses.[77] While this acknowledges a need to invest in upskilling the existing workforce – a fact demonstrated by the way the Apprenticeship Levy is already being used in practice for in-house training and

calls from businesses for the government to do more to help them skill and reskill their workforce[78] - such a move may conflict with aims to encourage apprenticeships as a means of providing skills in conjunction with new roles or positions for new employees.

This approach is closer to the one already being pursued by the Scottish Government, which allows employers to spend their levy on training that is most appropriate for them regardless of whether it is labelled an apprenticeship or not.[79]

***Industrial Communities Alliance***
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*The Industrial Communities Alliance is the all-party association of local authorities in the industrial areas of England, Scotland and Wales.*

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