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Spotlight

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The skills test

Liz Kendall recently announcing the government will fund AI training for ten million workers by 2030 was less an act of government benevolence, more a recognition of the absolute necessity of digital upskilling if Labour is to realise its modern industrial strategy.

Yet the urgency of preparing for the economy to come sits alongside a more immediate problem. Large numbers of people are struggling to access the economy as it exists today. Employers continue to report deep and persistent skills gaps. Apprenticeship availability and uptake trend in the wrong direction, while the number of young people not in education, employment or training has reached record levels, raising questions about how effectively the current system supports those at risk of exclusion.

Skills policy is expected to support productivity, underpin industry and equip workers for new technologies, while also addressing economic inactivity and participation gaps. Too often, however, the systems tasked with delivering these goals operate in silos, with limited coordination between national priorities, employer demand and individual need. The result is a landscape that can appear ambitious in rhetoric but fragile in practice.

This edition of *Spotlight* explores whether the UK's approach to skills is keeping pace with the demands now placed upon it. On page 6, Lauren Edwards MP, co-chair of the Skills, Careers and Employment APPG, examines the challenge of tackling rising NEET levels while closing longstanding digital skills gaps. On page 7, Lord Willetts sets out the case for stabilising and strengthening the apprenticeships system, arguing that sustained support matters as much as structural reform.

We also ask whether private enterprise can be better incentivised to support skills reform (page 10). Rhi Storer investigates how the new Growth and Skills Levy, coming into force in April, is intended to reshape funding and employer engagement (page 16). And contributors including MPs Helen Hayes and Ian Sollom assess whether skills policy is being treated as a core driver of social mobility, or as an adjunct to other priorities (page 22).

Together, these pieces point to a central question. As the pace of economic change accelerates, can the UK build a skills system that responds to future need without losing sight of those already being left behind? The answer will shape not only how the economy grows but who it is designed to work for.

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Technical excellence

Technicians are the missing workforce that can drive growth

In association with

What comes to mind when you hear the term "technicians"? Perhaps it's the construction workers helping deliver the next generation of affordable homes, or an apprentice starting out in the clean energy sector, or even those who work in our country's world-leading life science laboratories, turning insight into the practical breakthroughs that are reshaping the world we live in.

While they rarely splash the front pages, over 1.5 million technicians are at work every day doing the critical jobs that keep the country running, growing successful UK businesses and staffing the front line of public services.

Yet new Gatsby Foundation-funded analysis by The Burning Glass Institute shows that one in three of the technician roles most closely tied to the eight priority areas outlined in the Government's *Modern Industrial Strategy* are facing acute shortages, holding back the UK's long-term growth.

Demographics add urgency to this problem. In many technician occupations, a substantial share of the workforce is nearing retirement. In some strategically important roles, the proportion aged 55 and above is particularly high. A large cohort of experienced workers will leave over the next decade with no clear mechanism to replace them. Whether it's maintaining diagnostic equipment used in our NHS, installing the heat pumps that will help our transition to net zero, or upgrading our defence infrastructure, none of this will happen without an adequate supply of technicians, and current shortages are already beginning to bite.

All this is despite technician roles being an increasingly attractive proposition to young people who have concerns about entering a labour market being reshaped by artificial intelligence, while potentially burdened by tens of thousands of pounds in student debt. Technician roles offer well-paid, stable employment without the need for a university degree, and are often less vulnerable to being automated due to their reliance on physical dexterity, on-site problem solving and interdisciplinary judgement.

Indeed, the current above-inflation increases in pay for technicians – with salaries of £40,000 or more now common in areas such as aircraft maintenance and electrical trades –

are one symptom of the current scarcity of people ready to fill these roles.

So how can the government go about tackling this systemic challenge, and help unlock higher productivity and wage growth for decades to come? Here are three suggestions that could be implemented quickly and wouldn't break the bank, yet would make a real difference.

Raise awareness and build confidence

Because so many technician roles work behind the scenes, too many people simply do not know these careers exist, and the roles and routes to them are poorly understood. This leads to incorrect assumptions being made, that these are roles that are insecure, poorly paid, or "grimy", and so we end up preventing young people from finding out about the opportunities technician careers offer.

Yet the evidence shows that where technician careers are made visible and tangible, interest and uptake respond. Findings from national engagement and tracking work shows that young people who encounter real technician stories are more likely to recognise the roles, see them as skilled and aspirational, and consider them as viable futures. Parents, too, become more confident advocates when they understand the routes and outcomes. Platforms such as technicians.org.uk, which bring together clear information on roles, pathways and progression, show how visibility can be built at scale. With awareness still far too low among parents, teachers and employers of the routes designed to meet the needs of employers and strengthen the technician pipeline – T-levels and Higher Technical Qualifications – government should learn from existing best practice and invest in awareness as an urgent priority.

When technical routes are well defined, aligned with real labour-market demand and supported by meaningful employer engagement, confidence grows among learners, parents, employers and providers alike. Clear occupational standards, visible progression and pay pathways, and closer alignment between education and workforce demand, give learners confidence that their technical education will lead to a job.

Close the gender gap

The drastic under-representation of women across technician roles must urgently be addressed. In most of the occupations facing the sharpest shortages, female participation is below 5 per cent. In some of the highest-paid and most strategically important trades – including welding and electrical maintenance – it is below 1 per cent. By contrast, women account for around 17 per cent of graduate engineers, showing that the technician workforce is even more skewed than parts of engineering that already struggle with gender balance.

This should be a red line for any Labour government. Not just because equity matters, but because there is no credible plan to close technician shortages without widening participation for women and girls. Even modest gains would unlock tens of thousands of additional skilled workers.

Where sustained effort has been made to challenge stereotypes and broaden participation, progress is possible, even in highly male-dominated occupations. Apprenticeship data shows that in some trades, female participation among new entrants is higher than in the existing workforce, though from a very low base. However, without deliberate action, the technician gap will harden into a permanent structural weakness.

Focus apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are the key to unblocking the technician pipeline. Where apprenticeship standards are built around real technician roles, where employers are supported to deliver high-quality on-the-job training, and where apprentices can see clear progression and recognition, the model works.

When we imagine an apprentice, it's invariably a young person that comes to mind. But we are an international outlier, with around half of our apprenticeships undertaken by adults who are already in work. Apprenticeship policy needs to prioritise addressing the barriers that are preventing young people from embarking on technician careers. Government needs to work with employers to ensure that they are providing enough apprenticeships to meet future demand and that the roles and apprenticeships are promoted to young people.

Apprenticeships must once again become a national engine of opportunity, focused on priority technician roles and playing a key role in building the workforce of the future. ●

SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP

Practising welding at Technicians: the David Sainsbury Gallery at the Science Museum

Gatsby Education champions and supports the delivery of a world-class education and skills system – one that drives opportunity, boosts productivity, and supports a stronger, future-facing economy. www.gatsby.org.uk

A view from parliament

Lauren Edwards
Labour MP for Rochester and Strood, and co-chair, Skills APPG

"The challenge of skills reform is investment – even when the benefits are clear"

Getting the skills system right is essential if we are to deliver on key national commitments – from building millions of homes to seizing the opportunities of the green economy and giving people genuine hope for a better future through work. The system we inherited is deeply flawed and will take time to repair, which creates a significant political challenge.

Unemployment has risen, long-term sickness remains stubbornly high at 2.8 million, and nearly one million young people are "NEET" – not in education, employment or training. Labour must confront these deep structural problems through welfare and skills reforms that help people move into secure, well-paid jobs and offer a better life than relying on benefits.

Major investment is already being directed into programmes designed to tackle these issues, including the Youth Guarantee and the WorkWell scheme. These initiatives address long-term barriers and reflect Labour values, but we must also respond to concerns that the cost of employing staff – particularly young people – has become a barrier to hiring.

The Milburn review on tackling the NEET challenge will report in the summer. Ahead of that, the Skills Commission's *Earning or Learning* report, which I've been involved with as co-chair of the APPG for Skills, has already set out interim recommendations. Our findings show that place-based approaches, early intervention and targeted support for the most marginalised young people deliver the strongest outcomes. The challenge, as always, is securing the upfront investment required, even when the long-term economic and social benefits are clear.

There are steps the government can take that do not require significant new spending. Simplifying systems, improving engagement with employers, and giving businesses more flexibility would make a meaningful difference. The new Growth and Skills Levy, alongside free apprenticeship training for SMEs, could be transformative in constituencies like mine where over 90 per cent of businesses are small or medium-sized. But we urgently need clarity on how the levy will operate in practice, which should be done with industry. Another priority is ensuring that vital education reforms retain momentum despite skills policy now being split between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education. Careers advice must reach children earlier in schools and promote technical pathways, as well as being delivered through job centres. Apprenticeship reforms must balance the need to reduce NEET numbers with ensuring frameworks enable progression to higher-level qualifications, too. The new Lifelong Learning Entitlement has the potential to boost productivity but needs to be more ambitious to deliver the culture shift that will encourage more investment in the workforce.

Finally, no overview of the skills landscape would be complete without touching on artificial intelligence. AI is neither a cure-all nor an apocalyptic threat. I have seen the benefits of AI first hand in local businesses and public services in reducing administrative workloads and allowing workers to focus on the human-centred aspects of their roles. All relevant parties must stay alive to both the opportunities and risks of this new and evolving technology, as legitimate concerns remain about its impact on jobs, particularly graduate entry routes alongside the wider pressures facing universities. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

A view from the Lords

David Willetts
President of the Resolution Foundation

"Fixing our performance on skills needs a set of interventions across the learning journey"

The biggest economic challenge facing Britain is getting growth going, and one of the biggest obstacles to that is our poor performance on skills. It is not all bad news. We are doing better on the education basics at school. And our flexible labour market is relatively good at using the skills we have got. But our adult workers do not have the level of skills of many of our competitors.

There is no one single policy solution to this deep-seated problem. Instead we can think of it as a check-list of sensible interventions at successive stages of the journey through schools and college or university and then out into the labour market. And the first good news is that there can be a more coherent overall view now that there is one minister – and a highly experienced and competent one – bridging the two key departments of the DfE and DWP. This could resolve one of Whitehall's oldest border disputes. The DfE is frustrated that the DWP does not allow unemployed benefit recipients to get training without losing their benefits. The DWP thinks that the DfE is trying to use the welfare budget to fund education programmes. If anyone can resolve this, it will be Jacqui Smith.

But that is only the start. There is still a lot to do. Here is a short checklist.

The most shocking waste in our whole education system is how we write off the 30 per cent or more of 16-year-olds who do not pass GCSEs in maths or English. Resits only rescue at best 30 per cent of them. For the rest, their long-term job and employment options are badly damaged. We need to be bolder in finding different types of routes to get them to Level 3. This is rightly a priority in the government's wider education and skills strategy.

BTECs can play a big role here. It is a pity that their future is once more under threat. First there was a mistaken belief that, somehow, T-levels could replace them when T-levels were designed as a specific technical qualification, not an all-purpose alternative to A-levels. Now the government is planning to design a new qualification to replace them. This is going to waste years.

I was one of the people encouraging George Osborne to create the Apprenticeship Levy. I saw it as a boost to funding for apprenticeships; to match the fees and loans boosting funding for higher education. But employers have understandably been spending it on their own current employees rather than taking on what they see as the greater risk of a new apprentice. This means that there has been a shift in the age and education level of apprenticeships upwards. It is the younger people at levels 2 and 3 who have lost out. The government should rebalance the system back towards them.

Degree apprenticeships are the most extreme form of this. Students get qualification at higher education level and many go on to well-paid jobs. These courses costs up to £30,000. It is an indefensible diversion of rationed apprenticeship funding to pay for such courses when the levy should be for younger and less-qualified people. Degree apprenticeships should be funded by fees and loans to liberate resources for this. This also reflects the reality that many degree courses are vocational. The only trouble is we don't know how many. It would be great if the government did more to collect the data that would show how many university students are getting onto a clear route to certain occupations, and indeed often with an explicit licence to practice. Universities are where much of our vocational education is delivered. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

Advertorial

AI and energy security: A double-edged sword

Only by getting the right skills in place can the UK reap the benefits, and manage the risks, that new technologies bring

By Ed Almond

In association with

The Institution of Engineering and Technology

Artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies have a potentially huge role to play in successfully meeting the UK's various energy challenges. Indeed, such platforms will be vital in upgrading and decarbonising the UK's energy system, meeting growing energy demand, ensuring security of supply and keeping prices down for consumers.

However, as these technologies are introduced across the energy system, it is crucial that the government works closely with the industry to reap the benefits while mitigating the risks.

Energy infrastructure outages can have widespread and serious consequences for both individuals and society. As well as the impact of physical damage to infrastructure, such as the recent substation fire that saw the closure of Heathrow airport, energy infrastructure vulnerability to AI misinformation and cyber attacks is rapidly becoming one of the biggest threats to the UK – one that the government must take steps to minimise.

The economic impact of an electricity blackout depends on factors such as duration, geographic impact and affected sectors. Estimates suggest that a nationwide blackout lasting 24 hours could cost billions of pounds. These are not just hypothetical scenarios; a Vorboss report published in April 2024 found that the UK economy suffered a loss of £17.6bn in economic output due to connectivity outages in the preceding 12 months, with the average UK business losing out on over £11,000 in economic output.

These were relatively short power outages. But if a system blackout lasts more than a few days, the economic damage could reach tens of billions of pounds, leading to supply chain failures, impacting hospitals and emergency services, seeing mass business closures and causing potential social unrest. Government investment in cyber security and network resilience today can save billions in lost revenue tomorrow.

The increasing number of devices connected by digital networks, including in energy infrastructure, also exposes these areas to new risks. If systems are fed with incorrect or misleading information, they might fail to identify potential issues such as impending equipment failures or capacity shortages.

Misinformation is often a tool used by cyber attackers who want to disrupt grid operations. AI-driven malicious misinformation campaigns can mislead operators or automated systems, causing disruptions and outages. An AI system manipulated by false data could also expose vulnerabilities for hackers to exploit, resulting in a third-party taking control of critical infrastructure, disrupting operations, or gathering confidential information.

To mitigate these risks, effective cybersecurity measures and training for all staff are essential to protect systems from manipulation. Workers will need differing levels of understanding of, and training on, AI depending on their organisational roles.

It is crucial to ensure that any AI systems deployed are robust, transparent, and subject to comprehensive validation and verification processes. There should be tools and techniques that are available to AI developers that can help them prove they are safe and fit for purpose to regulators, with competency frameworks and lists of recognised qualifications to help provide organisational reassurance over developer competence in particular areas.

There is a challenge finding people with the required skills at competitive salary rates. The Growth and Skills Levy should ensure flexible funding, particularly for SMEs, to upskill existing workers with bespoke short courses (microcredentials). This would help ensure a basic standard of safety and competency for those at "working" and "practitioner" level. At the higher "expert" level, key cyber security roles should have protected status (in the same way as "medical doctor") to help drive up and guarantee standards.

While the integration of new technologies such as AI into our energy infrastructure systems poses threats, there are also significant security benefits to be gained from harnessing them safely.

For example, by integrating AI alongside the adoption of cyber-physical systems like "digital twins" – virtual models connected to a real-world counterpart by a two-way flow of real-time data – we can monitor and rapidly address faults, boosting security and resilience. This is already being adopted on a case-by-case basis, but the potential benefits from a whole systems approach is game-changing.

If the government coordinates the energy industry to bring together the different digital twins of critical energy infrastructure into one holistic model, this could then be used to monitor and address issues across the whole system. By joining up monitoring and intervention of generation, transmission and consumption, government can ensure a secure supply of energy across the country.

But we cannot realise the potential of these technologies without the skilled workforce to utilise and adopt them. UK engineering and technology firms are the least likely to recognise digital twins as a priority for reaching net zero (5 per cent), and fewer than a quarter of employers think that we have the skills in this area, which include data collection and analysis.

The introduction of AI into the systems that control our energy infrastructure is already underway. This brings both the potential to strengthen security and resilience through innovation and the risk of a system failure – either through unintentional failures or from the ongoing efforts of malicious actors to access and weaken our systems.

The best way to reap the benefits of new technologies and mitigate the risks is to ensure that all workers are given appropriate training on the safe and effective use of AI and digital systems, along with investment in cyber security expertise and robust regulation.

Ed Almond is chief executive at IET

FAHRONI / SHUTTERSTOCK

An electricity blackout lasting a few days could cost the UK economy tens of billions

How do we get employers to better engage with skills reform?

Policy experts on the need to demonstrate trust, consistency, support and value

Few areas of economic policy depend more heavily on the engagement of private enterprise than skills.

Governments can set frameworks, allocate funding and reform institutions, but without sustained and meaningful involvement from employers, training systems struggle to deliver at scale. That has been a persistent lesson of UK skills policy over the past two decades, and one that remains unresolved.

The case for engaging private enterprise is straightforward. Employers are closest to shifting labour-market demand, understand how roles are changing, and ultimately control access to jobs, progression and in-work training. Where businesses invest consistently in skills, productivity tends to be higher, job matching improves and workers are better able to adapt as technologies and sectors evolve. Where they do not, shortages deepen, recruitment costs rise and opportunity narrows.

Yet the UK has long struggled to secure that level of engagement. Employer investment in training has declined in real terms since the early 2010s, even as skill requirements have increased. Department for Education data shows spending at its lowest level in over a decade, alongside a fall in the average number of training days per employee to the lowest level since records began. Apprenticeship participation remains limited, with a minority of employers ever taking on an apprentice, despite repeated reforms designed to widen uptake.

Beyond apprenticeships, engagement with lifelong learning is uneven. UK participation in adult education is low by international standards, particularly among those with lower qualifications or insecure employment. Employers frequently report that training budgets are among the first to be cut during periods of uncertainty, while workers in part-time or temporary roles are least likely to receive support. The result is a system that risks reinforcing existing divides rather than correcting them.

There are structural reasons for this pattern. The UK labour market is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, many of which lack the capacity to design and manage training provision. Short business cycles and tight margins discourage long-term investment, particularly where returns are uncertain or shared across the labour

Keir Starmer speaks to young Rolls-Royce employees during a 2025 visit to its Filton factory

PETER NICHOLLS/GETTY IMAGES

market. Skills systems themselves are often fragmented, requiring employers to navigate multiple providers, funding streams and regulatory requirements. For many firms, especially outside large urban centres, the transaction costs outweigh the perceived benefits.

There is also a question of confidence. Employers have experienced frequent reform and shifting institutional arrangements, from sector skills councils to local enterprise partnerships to mayoral combined authorities. While devolution has promised closer alignment with local labour markets, it has also introduced variation and complexity. For businesses operating across regions, the skills landscape can appear inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

These challenges are becoming harder to ignore. Labour shortages persist across construction, health, logistics and digital roles, while automation and AI are reshaping tasks within jobs as much as jobs themselves. The government's commitment to large-scale AI training reflects an acknowledgement that workforce adaptation cannot be left to chance. But it also revives a familiar question: how far can public ambition go without deeper, more durable employer engagement?

In the search for responses, we posed a straightforward question on this most complex of subjects: "Is there a specific policy, innovation or shift in approach that you see best persuading more employers to engage meaningfully with skills reform?"

Imran Tahir

Senior research economist, IFS

As the UK enters a new phase of skills reform, the challenge is no longer just about policy ambition or institutional design but whether employers see the system as relevant, workable and worth sustained engagement. With repeated reforms having struggled to shift behaviour at scale, what would genuinely change how employers interact with the skills system?

When employers decide whether to invest in training, they are making a judgement about whether it is worth the time, money and effort involved. As the UK enters another phase of skills reform, what matters is whether the skills system supports those decisions or makes them harder than they need to be.

Training is a costly investment, and the government already intervenes to lower those costs, most notably through the Apprenticeship Levy. Yet levy funding is tightly constrained. It can only be used for apprenticeships, regardless of whether that is the most appropriate form of training for a given role or business.

For some employers, this simplifies decisions. For others, it means adapting training plans to fit the funding, rather than the other way round. Allowing public support to cover a wider range of high-quality training would better reflect how employers actually invest in skills.

But cost is only part of the picture. What employers get back from training is often uncertain. Some of this risk is inherent, such as the possibility that trained workers move on. Other sources of uncertainty are created by the ▸

◂ system itself, particularly the lack of clear information about which forms of training deliver value.

Employers are often confronted with hundreds of courses and providers, with little evidence to guide choice or compare returns. For many firms, especially those without in-house training expertise, these information gaps deter engagement even when public funding is available.

After decades of reform, the biggest difference would come from making the existing system easier to navigate and less uncertain. That starts with giving employers greater flexibility over how funding is used, alongside clearer, more usable information about which training delivers value.

Investment in training per employee has dropped 36 per cent in the last 20 years

Stephen Evans

Chief executive, Learning and Work Institute

Skills are vital for productivity and also help employers make the most of new markets, innovation and capital investment. Yet Learning and Work Institute analysis shows the UK has a higher proportion of people with low skills than other countries and is on track to remain stuck in the middle of the pack internationally.

This is not helped by employers investing 36 per cent less in training for each employee than they were in 2005, graduates being three times more likely to get training at work than non-graduates, and the government spending £1bn less on skills in England than in 2010.

How to change this? First, we need a growing economy and stable policy. Easier said than done, but employers train their staff based on business need.

Second, we need more ways for employers to work together on training, given the risk that a rival might poach an employee I've spent time and money training. That will vary by sector; construction with lots of small employers already has its own levy scheme and minimum training requirements to work on site, for example.

Third, we need the public sector to lead the way, both in training its employees and requiring training and apprenticeships as part of public contracts. Lots of this already happens, but mayors across England can use their roles to advance this further.

Fourth, we need better incentives for employers. We've argued for a Skills Tax Credit that rewards employers investing in their staff, and our Get the Nation Learning campaign aims to showcase employers that do this and mobilise others to do the same.

Our future prosperity and business success is underpinned by skills. Time for us all to up our game.

Phil Smith

Chair, Skills England

Skills training isn't just for big business, it's for everyone. And it has to work for smaller employers too.

Too often, the current system is overly complex and overwhelming for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially those without HR teams or specialist support to navigate the bureaucracy. That isn't acceptable. Small businesses employ around 60 per cent of the nation's workforce – so we're taking action.

Since joining Skills England last year, I've listened closely to small businesses who told me that apprenticeships didn't always work for them. They raised concerns about long training periods, sometimes lasting several years – time away from the business, and the challenges of funding. Above all, they asked for more flexibility. We are evolving the growth and skills offer accordingly.

Soon, smaller businesses, and others, will be able to access new short courses. The first wave, known as apprenticeship units, will launch from April in critical areas such as digital, AI and engineering.

We have also introduced shorter-duration apprenticeships. Where appropriate, training can now be completed in eight months rather than the previous 12-month minimum. A good example is the production assistant apprenticeship for the creative industries, where many workers are employed by SMEs and often trained through commissions lasting less than a year.

Local solutions matter too. Ensuring colleges and training providers offer courses that reflect the needs of local SMEs and help young people progress into permanent jobs with them depends on strong, place-based planning and collaboration.

New Local Skills Improvement Plans, supported by Skills England and due for publication this summer, will help drive this work.

This all matters because SMEs matter. They drive growth and are more likely to recruit younger apprentices. Skills England will continue listening and developing new, practical ways to help small businesses get the maximum benefit from a simpler, better system.

Advertorial

Back Britain's builders

Only by focusing on developing its next gen of tradespeople can the UK realise its growth ambitions

Jambu Palaniappan

In association with Checkatrade

There has been a lot of noise about the government's business rates U-turn for struggling pubs. It's easy to see why. Off the back of the announcement, sector after sector has been lining up to ask the Chancellor for help, as businesses across the country face an ever-increasing tax burden.

But there's one industry that is too often overlooked – despite being central to almost everything the government wants to achieve. Fixing the housing crisis, or becoming a clean energy superpower cannot happen without Britain's 900,000 tradespeople.

"Build, baby, build" may be the mantra of the Housing Secretary, Steve Reed, but those 1.5 million homes won't build themselves; this is going to be a tough target to meet.

Why? Because standing between ministers and their housing ambitions is a growing skills crisis right across the trade industry. Research from the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning shows the construction industry is facing a severe shortage, with more than 140,000 vacancies holding up vital housing and infrastructure projects.

Checkatrade's own research, Trade Nation, found that seven in ten tradespeople see the skills shortage as one of the biggest barriers to growing their business. Nearly half have never hired an apprentice – and don't plan to. Apprenticeships have traditionally been the lifeblood of the trades. Now much of the industry is turning its back on them.

So why are apprenticeships falling out of favour? It's not because tradespeople don't care about the next generation; cost is a major factor. So is the time commitment. And many tradespeople tell us they simply struggle to find the right candidate. When you're running a small business, those hurdles can feel overwhelming.

It's true the government has made progress in breaking down these barriers. Reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy, and the Budget commitment to make apprenticeships free for SMEs hiring young people, should make a real difference.

But skills policy is only half the battle. Tradespeople face a whole host of other pressures – from soaring material costs and late payments to the epidemic of tool theft. These challenges stack up quickly, and for many businesses, they can make taking on an apprentice feel like a risk they simply can't afford.If we don't tackle these issues head-on, it's hard to see how the sector can flourish.

Tradespeople are ready to play their part in the government's growth agenda. As ministers rethink how they support British businesses – whether through rates relief, tax reform or targeted investment – they must not overlook the very people who turn ambition into reality. Without Britain's tradespeople, there is no housing boom, no clean energy transition and no growth. ●

Jambu Palaniappan is CEO at Checkatrade

Advertorial

Lifelong learning for growth and prosperity

Our educational institutions need to ensure the UK has a job-ready workforce

By James Kennedy

In association with

Global Banking School
Breaking Career Barriers

Fixing the UK's public services and growing the economy is going to require people who are already in work and those looking to re-enter the workforce to upskill and reskill.

Rightly, the government aims to kickstart economic growth, while building an NHS fit for the future and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

If it has any chance of succeeding, our education institutions need to enable life-long learning and ensure the nation has a job-ready workforce to meet the needs of employers in priority sectors.

For instance, the construction industry needs an additional 239,000 workers by 2029, otherwise the government's housebuilding targets and wider infrastructure projects will be at risk.

Our country's health and social care system is already under real pressure. The NHS has over 133,000 vacancies, including 47,000 nursing posts. Projections suggest the NHS will need up to 488,000 more staff by 2030.

Social care faces similarly acute challenges: turnover is high, vacancies are rising and workforce capacity isn't keeping up with demand from an ageing population.

Due to changes to migration and recruitment policy in recent years, the supply of the necessary talent from overseas has tightened. These positions, therefore, need to be filled by the existing population.

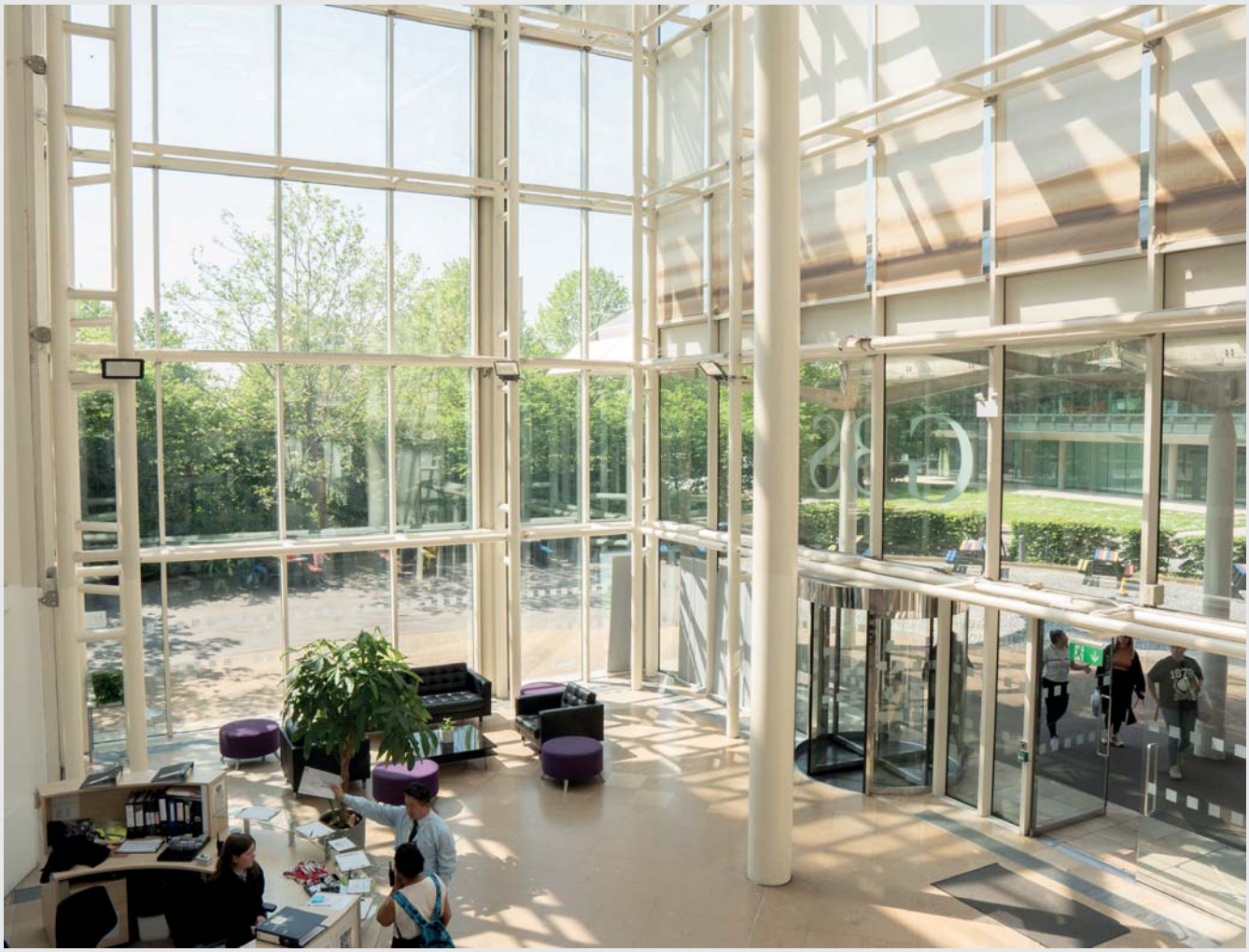
Meeting this challenge means rethinking how the country supports people to reskill, retrain and requalify, not just once, but throughout their lives.

It means designing education systems not only for young people starting out but also for adults looking for a way back in or a route to progress.

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement creates a once-in-a-generation chance to make adult reskilling routine – but only if provision is genuinely modular, supported and aligned to the needs of business.

With the right routes, and the right structures of support, adults can and do succeed in education and go on to fill critical roles in the sectors where Britain needs them most.

There are examples of higher education providers taking this into account and operating in ways that



If the government is serious about growth and public services, adult learners must be treated as core infrastructure

enable lifelong learning, with a keen focus on addressing the priority sectors outlined by the government and employers.

One of these is Global Banking School (GBS), which has more than 35,000 students across London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

Working in partnership with UK universities, GBS delivers programmes including health and social care and construction management, as well as other highly sought-after skills in IT, finance and business management. It also has a proven programme that supports student entrepreneurs to launch and grow their own businesses.

Strikingly, the average age of a GBS student is 37. Most already have jobs and want to acquire skills to get better-paid work. Around 15 per cent of them own their own small business and want to develop expertise so they can expand. And others have family or caring responsibilities and are preparing to re-enter the workforce with stronger qualifications.

GBS's success in widening participation in education to those that would otherwise miss out is also striking.

It does this by designing its approach to teaching to fit the needs of students, rather than asking students to organise their busy and complex lives around their studies.

For instance, it offers classes seven days a week and until 9pm. And it delivers only face to face – there is no online learning, which is important for adults who need a classroom environment to fully focus on their learning.

Right now, the government's focus is on broader economic growth, and more specifically building a skilled workforce for the NHS and addressing the demand across the construction sector.

These sectors will struggle to meet demand at pace without the work of institutions like GBS, tapping into communities of mature-age individuals who want to upskill but haven't had the chance.

It delivers graduates who are job-ready from day one and also bring a wealth of lived experience that younger graduates from traditional providers of higher education may not have.

If the government is serious about sustained economic growth and public service recovery, adult learners must be treated as core infrastructure – central to workforce planning, widening opportunity and building a more resilient future. ●

James Kennedy is the CEO of GBS

GLOBAL BANKING SCHOOL

Will levy reform solve the apprenticeship slump?

Critics fear the imminent Growth and Skills Levy favours training existing staff at the cost of young people

By Rhi Storer

Continued messaging from successive governments has emphasised that apprenticeships are for young people. The statistics tell a different story. Since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017, the number of apprenticeships for young people has declined 34 per cent. Over the same period, the proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds in England not in education, employment or training (NEET) has risen to 13.6 per cent (an 11-year high of 837,000, according to the latest government figures).

Separately, wider reforms aim for two-thirds of young people to reach higher-level education or training by age 25, with at least 10 per cent achieving Level 4 or 5 qualifications by 2040. The government has also introduced foundation apprenticeships for entry-level roles while restricting advanced training to under-21s. SMEs

Since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017, the number of apprenticeships for young people has declined by 34 per cent

LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

will get fully funded apprenticeships for under-25s, and minimum durations have been reduced from 12 to eight months. These changes represent a significant tightening of the link between state funding and age-specific outcomes. The Growth and Skills Levy, however, cannot operate in a vacuum. The success of this new framework will be measured by how effectively it integrates with broader industrial strategy and local employment support.

The intent is clear: reverse the trend of apprenticeships being used for existing staff rather than new entrants to the workforce. But will it succeed where others have failed?

Dame Alison Wolf, professor of public sector management at King's College London, argues that the rise in flexibility risks exacerbating existing inequalities rather than resolving them.

Under the current system, levy funds that large companies fail to spend are recycled centrally. But the increased flexibility may mean far fewer crumbs are left on the table, Wolf warns, "leaving even less for small and medium-sized companies", which are most likely to employ young apprentices.

Wolf describes the current system as "completely unique to this country and totally bizarre, in which a small proportion of large companies pay a levy and everybody else doesn't". Companies that pay the levy often "tie themselves up in knots finding ways to use the levy for things they would rather do as continuing professional development in a different way".

In Wolf's view, this creates a convoluted funding loop that distorts incentives and disadvantages smaller employers. "It's a completely bizarre way to organise things," she says, arguing that the system encourages large employers to reshape existing training to fit apprenticeship rules, while leaving SMEs dependent on residual funding over which they have little control.

Wolf advocates, like in other countries, everybody paying the levy on a sliding scale. "You don't have this bizarre situation where large companies pay, then the Treasury works out what's unused, then gives some of it to the [Department for Education]." While central funds are needed because some regions have large companies and others don't, "the whole design needs redoing", she says. "Until you do that, you won't get SMEs involved and you won't address access for young people."

In a YouGov and CIPD survey, commissioned by the Fabian Society, 57 per cent of employers support levy funds being used to tackle regional skills shortages. Wolf is "hugely in favour of devolving to combined authorities. ▸

◂ "Instead of searching a website, they'd go to a clearly labelled office in their local authority or combined authority, with a team managing apprenticeships locally, some funding for hard cases and, if needed, limited wage subsidies." Central government, she insists, "needs to stop trying to run everything and instead do two things: redistribute to low-income areas and support skills that are important but have small numbers."

Tom Richmond, an education policy analyst who previously directed the EDSK think tank, believes the Growth and Skills Levy has fallen a long way short of the reform originally promised. "From what we know so far, it's going to be an enormous disappointment to employers," he says.

When the policy was first announced by Labour in 2022, he continues, it was presented as a dramatic shift that would give employers far greater freedom over how they spent levy funds. But Richmond says the version now emerging is far narrower – capped at 50 per cent and limited to specific skills areas – falling well short of the "very dramatic change" employers were promised.

In his view, the retreat from that ambition reflects Labour's political misjudgment rather than a genuine policy rethink. "From the very moment it was announced, it felt like a very clumsy intervention," he says, arguing that it showed "a fundamental misunderstanding of how the levy moves around the apprenticeship system". The original promise of full flexibility was never deliverable – a failure of competence that has left employers with a watered-down compromise that satisfies no one.

He notes the government has settled on a limited form of flexibility. The redesigned levy will fund apprenticeship 'units' – short and modular courses – in critical skills areas such as engineering, digital and artificial intelligence, with durations ranging from one week to a few months.

But Ben Rowland, chief executive at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), believes the shorter courses and apprenticeship units will be beneficial. He sees these as creating useful options without abandoning the rigorous structure that distinguishes apprenticeships from standard corporate training. "I think there should be a nice balance," he argues. Short courses could include "plumbers learning how to put in air-source heat pumps, digital marketers getting their head around the ethics of AI, or cyber-security professionals learning about the latest threats from Russia and China".

For Rowland, the levy's problems stem less from design flaws than incentives that were never switched off. The government, worried employers wouldn't participate, introduced "sweeteners and incentives" to encourage uptake. Corporate giants such as Google and UBS duly embraced apprenticeship programmes. "Once it was in place, all the companies really leaned into it," Rowland explains. "They never turned [the incentives] off, even when it had become successful. So you could basically never run out of levy spend."

The result was large employers directing levy funds towards existing staff, rather than taking on young apprentices. Rowland argues the Growth and Skills Levy has done nothing to correct this, meaning that large employers can continue using funds on existing workers with even more flexibility.

Yet even if shorter courses and apprenticeship units offer employers more choice in how they spend levy funds, questions remain about whether flexibility can redirect investment toward young people rather than simply offering large employers new ways to train their existing workforce.

For Claire Green, post-16 and skills specialist at the Association of Schools and College Leaders (ASCL), the risk is that reforms continue to prioritise policy design over practical delivery, particularly in schools, colleges and SMEs – which make up the majority of employers in many local economies. "There are real question marks around how the flexibility will actually work," she says.

Green also points to persistent policy churn as a fundamental barrier to effective delivery, arguing this reform undermines confidence in the system before learners ever reach an employer. "We can't keep having this constant change," she says. "Young people need to know what their options are, and it needs to stay that way and not keep changing."

In areas dominated by very small businesses – those with under ten employees – apprenticeships are structurally impossible without additional support. Green argues the Growth and Skills Levy fails to provide the increased infrastructure and funding required to make apprenticeships viable for micro-businesses – which constitute the majority of the UK economy. "If there's only one or two people who work in the business, how feasible actually is that?" she asks, adding that higher apprentice wage costs have made participation "quite unmanageable" for many employers.

Green remains sceptical that levy reform will bring the required change. "The idea of supporting younger people into long-term pathways into skills sectors where we've got gaps is a very sensible thing, but without that increased infrastructure around it, which can only come from funding, then it's always going to fall short."

With youth participation in apprenticeships declining and nearly a million young people disconnected from education or work, the need for transformational working solutions is critical.

If the Growth and Skills Levy is to succeed where its predecessor fell short, it will need to be more than a technical adjustment to funding rules. ●

68.8%

starts were supported by the Apprenticeship Service Account (ASA) levy funds account in 2024/25.

21.2%

of under-19s accounted for apprenticeship starts (74,990) in 2024/25.

353,500

apprenticeships were recorded in 2024/25 compared with 339,580 the previous year.

Comment

Dani Payne
Head of education and social mobility, Social Market Foundation

"Reform of the skills system cannot be stuck in nostalgia for Britain's past"

When Keir Starmer ditched Labour's 50 per cent university participation target in favour of an ambition for two thirds of young people to enter higher-level learning, he framed it as an attempt to end further education's status as a "Cinderella service". For decades, FE has been overlooked. Why? As Starmer put it bluntly, "politicians' kids don't go there".

The new target reflects a growing recognition that Britain's skills system is not working for many. The expansion of university places has delivered clear benefits (graduates still enjoy higher salaries) but has not delivered broad-based social mobility. Instead, this system offers roughly half of young people a credible route to progression, while leaving the rest far behind.

This imbalance sits at the heart of Britain's broken social contract. Education was meant to be the great leveller, yet it has become a dividing line. Labour's support among low-income voters has plummeted, and it is now more popular with the privately educated than the state educated. Education is now a stronger predictor of voting behaviour than class, with support for Reform closely tied to whether someone went to university.

Starmer is right to stop ignoring further education: Britons view vocational education positively, often more so than universities. Yet FE has barely featured in the national conversation. Higher education receives twice as many mentions in major newspapers, and MPs speak far more often about universities.

Fixing the skills system matters not just for skills shortages but to create credible pathways for those who don't want to follow an academic track. These are voters more likely to feel disenfranchised, increasingly sceptical that hard work pays off and drawn to populist politics, and who the centre ground needs to win back over.

But delivering this will be hard. Years of neglect left deep scars: FE has experienced deeper real-terms funding cuts than any other part of the education system. Lecturers earn £10,000 less than schoolteachers, despite teaching the same subjects. Colleges struggle to recruit industry experts, unable to compete with private-sector salaries, particularly in areas facing skills shortages. Even the successes reveal these constraints: degree apprenticeships offer a powerful social mobility pathway, but they are expensive, difficult to scale and often highly socially exclusive, with some now more competitive than Oxbridge.

And even if these barriers were overcome, skills alone cannot fix Britain's economic malaise. We can't copy the German or Swiss vocational models. Both offer lessons on issues including funding and training quality but also rest on large manufacturing bases and strong employer institutions. Britain's economy is skewed towards service industries, with many working-class people employed in retail, hospitality and social care. Creating credible higher-level pathways for the economy we actually have, in the jobs people actually do – not the jobs we nostalgically imagine – is critical.

There is also a cautionary lesson from universities. The growing debate over whether a degree is "worth it" isn't because they failed, but because we promised too much from it. Every country that expanded higher education saw graduate returns decline. That was predictable: employers pay more for what is scarce, and less for what is common. The mistake wasn't expansion but presenting university as a passport for social mobility without aligning the wider economy to absorb a more educated workforce.

We shouldn't set up further education to repeat that mistake. Fixing our skills system is necessary to renew social mobility – but it cannot bear the full weight of economic renewal on its own. Over-promising what FE can deliver would only push today's problems down the road, leaving a new group of young people feeling misled.

MARTA SIGNORI

Advertorial

Defunding apprenticeships is contrary to the growth agenda

Cutting funding will close the door on aspiring architects

By Chris Williamson

In association with RIBA

Skills are central to the government's Plan for Change. Whether to deliver economic growth, create high-quality jobs across the country or accelerate housing delivery, the skills of built-environment sector professionals are integral – and maintaining the skills pipeline is critical.

The government's decision to defund Level 7 apprenticeships for those over 21 undermines its own growth ambitions. RIBA, along with more than 70 organisations, businesses and academic institutions across the built environment sector, is calling for the eligibility for Level 7 apprenticeship funding for built-environment professions to be raised to 25.

From 1 January 2026, the Growth and Skills Levy – formerly the Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in 2017 to support employers to invest in high-quality apprentice training and ensure sustainable funding for employers of all sizes – no longer funds Level 7 apprenticeships for apprentices over 21.

Removing funding will see organisations across the built-environment sector, including architecture practices, no longer able to access funding to train the new talent we need from diverse backgrounds. Skills England has highlighted just how important this is. In its initial assessment of skills-related barriers to growth, it noted that the government's growth ambitions will increase the demand for architects, engineers, planners and surveyors.

Construction is one of the largest sectors in the UK economy, with a turnover of £370bn and contributing £138bn in value to the UK economy. While the impact will be felt sector-wide, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are particularly exposed to these changes. The sector is dominated by SMEs, including the majority of architecture practices, and many have relied on levy funding to employ and train apprentices. Without this funding, their ability to take on apprentices and invest in new talent will be severely restricted.

We know that young people are central to building a resilient and productive labour market, and the government is clearly committed to promoting apprenticeships for young people. Given its pledge that two thirds of young people will participate in

Apprenticeships allow students to train while earning, opening the architectural profession to talent from all backgrounds

JACKIE KING, COURTESY OF RIBA

higher-level learning – whether academic, technical or apprenticeships – by age 25, restricting funding for Level 7 apprenticeships feels fundamentally contradictory when many won't reach this level until after that age.

The ambition to invest in people at the start of their careers is welcome – however, it does not work with the reality of architectural education. Given the length of training, many aspiring architects will be ineligible by the time they reach Level 7, whether they progress through four-year Level 6 apprenticeships or follow the traditional three-year undergraduate degree route – many will be over the age limit, leaving them ineligible for support from the Growth and Skills Levy.

For me, the architecture profession will only be as strong as the new architects joining it. One of the highlights of my first four months as president was presenting the RIBA President's Medals, our student awards, meeting talented, energetic students from RIBA-accredited courses. What struck me most was the diversity of those aspiring architects, and if we are to widen access, and avoid a narrowing of the talent pipeline, our profession must be open to people from all walks of life.

This means attracting students from diverse backgrounds, supporting those with family or caring responsibilities, and encouraging alternative routes into the profession. Level 7 apprenticeships provide a genuinely accessible pathway into the built environment at a time when demand for skills is growing. I cannot help but feel that if those responsible for removing Level 7 funding had seen these students and their work, they would have made a different decision.

Architecture apprentices have told us directly about the value this route brings by making it possible to train without taking on debt, while gaining essential professional skills. The ability of apprentices to access financial independence, high-quality on-the-job learning, and the support of mentors and colleagues alongside formal study, illustrate why protecting this pathway is so crucial for the future of the profession.

The built environment sector is ready to work with the government to turn its ambitions into reality. But as we've seen, achieving these goals depends on a strong, diverse and highly skilled workforce. Raising the age of eligibility for apprenticeship funding for built-environment professionals is one key mechanism to ensure the sector can meet demand for homes, infrastructure and well-designed places. ●

Chris Williamson is the president of RIBA

Who benefits from the UK skills system?

Sitting at the intersection of labour markets, education, inequality and productivity, is skills policy serving those most in need?

By Phin Foster

A successful skills system should do two things at once: supply the workforce required for economic growth, and widen access to opportunity for those shut out of it. The UK has consistently struggled to do either.

Employers report acute shortages across industries central to the government's agenda – construction, health, digital and clean energy – while productivity continues to lag. At the same time, routes into stable, well-paid work remain shaped by background, geography and education history. Skills reform is repeatedly presented as the bridge between these problems. In practice, it has become the point at which competing priorities collide.

Labour has committed to putting employers "at the heart" of the skills system, reforming apprenticeships, expanding lifelong learning and breaking down barriers to opportunity. These ambitions are tied directly to delivery: building 1.5 million homes, accelerating the green transition, raising productivity and reducing economic inactivity. The question is whether the system now being assembled can meet demand without reproducing the inequalities, failures and oversights that created it.

For Helen Hayes, chair of the Education Select Committee, the answer begins with further education. FE, she argues, is critical to every one of the government's missions, yet has long been treated as peripheral. Speaking at the *New Statesman*'s Politics Live event in late 2025, she said governments "pay lip service" to further education while treating it in policy and budget terms "as if it's anything but" important.

The committee's inquiry into further education and skills found a system underinvested for more than a decade and lacking parity of esteem with academic routes. Schools continue to signal that success means university, even though around half of young people will never attend.

One recommendation was structural rather than rhetorical: expanding UCAS beyond higher education, aligning vocational, technical and academic applications on the same timeline. At present, Hayes noted, students submit university applications months before they hear about apprenticeships. The imbalance is baked in early.

Access, however, is only part of the problem. Capacity is another. FE

colleges struggle to recruit and retain staff, particularly in technical subjects, because pay lags behind schools, and colleges cannot reclaim VAT. "I don't know how colleges are expected to recruit and retain the best teachers when they're paid around 15 per cent less to teach the same subjects," Hayes said.

Financial disparities are even more visible where responsibility for skills delivery shifts onto employers. Ian Sollom, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for universities and skills, argued that employer-led reform underestimates the constraints businesses face. "When I talk to SMEs, they really want to take on apprentices," he said. "They're worried about skills shortages. But it's a big burden, and when it doesn't work out, it can be disastrous."

Large firms can absorb failed placements as a cost of doing business. Small employers cannot. Yet SMEs employ around two thirds of the workforce. If skills reform depends on employer engagement, supporting smaller firms is structural, not marginal. That same dynamic shapes apprenticeships themselves, often presented as a solution to both skills shortages and social mobility. In theory, they offer paid routes into skilled work without the debt associated with higher education. In practice, access is uneven.

Sarah Atkinson, chief executive of the Social Mobility Foundation, insisted that skills, growth and opportunity cannot be treated as separate agendas.

"If we're going to build the skills we need for future growth, and create opportunity for people and communities who've been shut out of prosperity, then we have to be intentional about unlocking the potential of everyone," she said.

Without that intention, inequalities persist. Skills England does not collect socioeconomic background data on apprenticeships, making it difficult to assess who benefits. Around 5 per cent of students starting university degrees were eligible for free school meals.

The proportion entering degree-level apprenticeships from the same background is also around that level, according to research from the Sutton Trust.

WPA POOL / GETTY IMAGES

A rapidly changing economy requires new skillsets across all age groups

"We're replicating the same barriers in degree apprenticeships that those routes were meant to overcome," Atkinson said. "If we don't measure social mobility outcomes, we can't know whether interventions are working."

The issue extends beyond technical training. Employers increasingly report that new entrants lack communication, confidence and teamwork. Atkinson prefers a different framing: these are core employability skills, and employers are already investing heavily in them because the education system often does not. "If we focus only on technical skills," she warned, "we miss what young people actually need to succeed and progress at work."

Longer-term labour-market change sharpens the challenge. Jude Hillary, co-head of UK policy and practice at the National Foundation for Educational Research and principal investigator for the Skills Imperative 2035, has spent five years examining how jobs are likely to evolve.

While overall employment is expected to grow, most of that growth is focused in higher-skilled professional and technical roles. Mid- and lower-skilled occupations are in long-term decline. Hillary estimates that between one and three million such jobs could disappear by 2035.

At the same time, many workers already in higher-skilled roles report gaps in what Hillary calls essential employment skills. "If nothing is done," he said, "the number of workers with substantial skills deficiencies could rise to seven million by 2035."

The risk is a labour market with fewer entry-level jobs and higher thresholds for progression. Without sustained investment in lifelong learning, displacement becomes structural rather than temporary.

Governance matters too. Hayes raised concerns about the independence and capacity of Skills England, particularly its ability to speak candidly about funding needs. Without clear national coordination alongside devolved delivery, she argued, regions risk falling through gaps. Devolution is often presented as the answer, aligning skills systems with local labour markets. But devolving funding without building local capacity can simply relocate dysfunction.

Across these debates runs a common thread: skills reform is being asked to reconcile competing demands within tight constraints. It must be responsive to employers while correcting market failures; support growth without entrenching inequality; and prepare people for jobs that do not yet exist while fixing pathways that already do.

The danger is not a lack of ideas but a lack of coherence. What emerges instead is a system that struggles to answer a basic question: who is it for?

The answer, uncomfortably, is all three: employers, individuals and the state. That is why skills reform remains politically attractive and practically difficult. It sits where trade-offs cannot be avoided.

Success requires confronting those trade-offs directly: investing in FE as infrastructure rather than afterthought, supporting employers where the market fails, and measuring success not only in starts and completions but in who benefits and how.

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