EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION: A WAY FORWARD FOR APPRENTICESHIPS

A GATSBY DISCUSSION PAPER

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The Gatsby Charitable Foundation
The Peak, 5 Wilton Road, London SW1V 1AP
T +44 (0)20 7410 0330 F +44 (0)20 7410 0332
www.gatsby.org.uk

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INTRODUCTION

In England, apprenticeships have become the primary means of providing work-based training for both young people and adults and for a wide range of occupations. This approach differs to that taken in many countries that see apprenticeships as an entry point into an occupation for young people.

The government currently faces several challenges with apprenticeships and skills development, including:

- a decline in the number of apprenticeships being offered to and/or taken up by young people
- low completion rates
- pressure on the overall apprenticeship levy expenditure, primarily driven by the increased uptake of higher-level, more costly apprenticeships by levy paying employers
- calls from large employers for greater flexibility in how the apprenticeship levy can be used
- small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) not engaging with apprenticeships

This paper explores apprenticeships in depth before making recommendations that would tackle current challenges and provide a possible way forward for apprenticeships in England.

We look at:

- the coverage of the labour market by apprenticeships and whether this addresses skills shortages in key sectors, and the age demographic of apprentices
- the nature of occupational standards, including the level and specialisation of standards
- how the English apprenticeship system compares to those in countries with strong apprenticeship systems and lower youth unemployment, including Germany, Switzerland and Denmark

BACKGROUND

WHAT THE SKILLS SYSTEM NEEDS TO DO

The skills system in England needs to perform several roles: it needs to enable young people to enter and progress in work; it needs to support adult workers to change occupations or to upskill; and it needs to give employers access to the skills they need, whether through new entrants or upskilling existing workers.

To effectively achieve all these roles, there needs to be a national framework of standards that underpins all technical education and training. The last 15 years have seen progress being made towards this, particularly with the introduction of apprenticeship standards (now referred to as occupational standards) following the Richard Review of Apprenticeships.[1]

THE RICHARD REVIEW OF APPRENTICESHIPS

By 2012, when The Richard Review of Apprenticeships took place, apprenticeships had stopped being a programme aimed at young people: the age cap that had made over 25s ineligible for apprenticeships was removed in 2004 and significant numbers of working adults were taking shorter and lower-level apprenticeships in sectors that did not have a long history of apprenticeship, such as retail. For some of these apprenticeships, the reality was that training played a very limited role and most of the funding was being used to assess and accredit existing skills.

One of the main recommendations of the review was to refocus apprenticeship on developing occupational competence. To achieve this refocus, apprenticeship frameworks were replaced with apprenticeship standards that were based on single occupations.[2]

FROM FRAMEWORKS TO OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

Under the apprenticeship framework model, apprentices took qualifications, frequently National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), that were assessed on performance in the workplace against task-based occupational standards developed by sector bodies and applied qualifications that were more focused on the underpinning knowledge and understanding developed as part of the off-the-job training. The work-based qualifications were continuously assessed in the workplace by assessors employed by the training provider. The modular nature of the qualifications meant that an individual apprenticeship framework could lead to several different occupations. This lack of occupational focus and the fragmented nature and approach of continuous assessment meant employers were not confident about which occupation apprentices were competent in.

After the Richard Review, groups of employers came together to develop apprenticeship standards that described the tasks undertaken in an occupation, the knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary to complete these tasks and the assessment that would assure occupational competence. These employer-led occupational standards are a component part of apprenticeships and the majority of technical qualifications in England, such as T-levels.

However, a lack of guidance on how an occupation should be defined created several issues that are explored in this paper.

1 Richard, D. (2012) The Richard review of apprenticeships.

2 Apprenticeship frameworks specified qualifications that needed to be completed during the apprenticeship, a similar approach to that taken in Northern Ireland. NI Direct (accessed 2026) Apprenticeships: Types of apprenticeships.

SKILLS SHORTAGES

There has been broad support for the reforms made after the Richard Review, but many think the skills system is not operating as well as it should, and that current skills shortages are evidence of that. However, it is not always easy to tell if the issue is skills shortages (employers' existing workforce not having the necessary skills) or labour shortages (employers not being able to find people to fill roles). It is also rarely asked if shortages are because of a failure in the supply of skills or if they are caused by the working conditions being offered.

Too often the reaction to labour shortages has been to try to attract more young people into an occupation. Technological and economic changes mean we need to find different ways to support existing workers to change occupations or upskill and, in the process, make better use of technology and drive productivity.

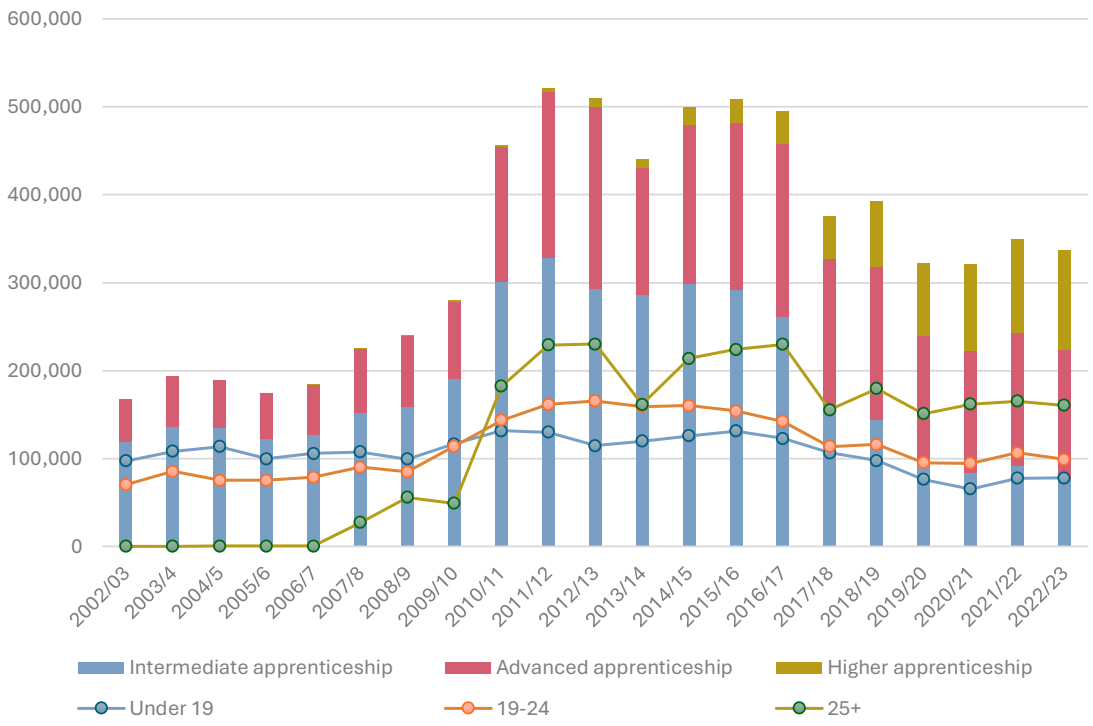
Linked to the issue of skills shortages were concerns about employers investing less in skills, which prompted the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY AND ITS IMPACT

The government introduced the apprenticeship levy in 2017 in response to falling levels of employer investment in training. The levy is paid by the largest 2% of employers. The money raised by the levy is held by the Treasury, which distributes it to the four nations. In England, this results in an apprenticeship budget of around £2.5 billion a year, which pays for all apprenticeships in levy paying and non-levy paying employers – although non-levy paying employers are required to make a financial contribution towards training.

Since the levy was introduced, the types of apprenticeships available have changed, largely because levy payers want to get back the money they pay in. Unfortunately, the easiest way to do this for many employers has been to create higher-level standards designed for existing workers, who are usually older. This has therefore meant fewer young people being able to use an apprenticeship as an entry into work. Figure 1 shows apprenticeship trends for the past 20 years.

Figure 1. Apprenticeship starts: Age and level over the last 20 years



FINDINGS

All these changes in policy have impacted on apprenticeships. A recent Gatsby report found that changes in the demographics of apprenticeship starts have been driven more by changes in government policy than changes in the labour market.[3]

Our analysis of apprenticeships found that:

- apprenticeships in England cover an unusually large number of occupations that would not traditionally have had apprenticeships
- apprenticeship standards are spread thinly and do not match demand or address skills shortages in key sectors
- there is a decrease in young people starting apprenticeships, while large numbers of existing employees who have been in a job for more than a year are taking apprenticeships
- there is a lack of granular labour market information to help government design apprenticeship policy and to enable apprenticeships to be able to respond to demand, for instance, is demand high because of a lack of skills or because of working conditions?
- the all-age model has diluted apprenticeships and created a system with competing demands: supporting young entrants into the labour market and reskilling and upskilling for experienced adults
- this one-size-fits-all approach to apprenticeships – young people's entry to employment and the upskilling or reskilling of existing employees – has created an overly complex set of standards which does not support high-quality training or ensure efficient use of public finances

3 Holliday, R. (2026) The impact of policy changes on apprenticeship starts since 2006. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

- this increasing complexity has resulted in duplicated and over-specialised standards, many of which are not suitable for new entrants
- those adults who are upskilling through apprenticeships would be better served by different types of training instead of a full apprenticeship
- employers are using apprenticeships to access funding for in-work training for their existing employees
- international systems distinguish more clearly between initial vocational education for young people and continuing vocational education for adults, with the former designed to support transition into the labour market and the latter to enable reskilling or upskilling and progression for those already in work
- in other countries, employer bodies enable intercompany or branch training and assure the quality of on-the-job training
- in other countries, options have unique codes and data is collected on them to understand how apprenticeships meet labour market needs

METHODOLOGY

STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION (SOC) 2020

Having occupational standards means direct links can be drawn between training and occupations. For this analysis, we mapped all the occupational standards on the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)[4] website[5] to the 2020 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC 2020), the UK's system for classifying jobs.[6]

The SOC index enables jobs to be linked to an occupational group. The SOC underpins most of the labour market information used for careers advice, job matching by employment agencies and the development of government labour market policies.

The SOC classifies jobs by skill level and skill specialisation:

- Skill level reflects the duration of training and/or work experience recognised by the field of employment as needed to competently and efficiently do a job.
- Skill specialisation is the specific knowledge needed to carry out the job competently, thoroughly and efficiently.[7]

The SOC is a nested classification system with nine major groups, 26 sub-major groups, 104 minor groups and 412 unit groups. The SOC 2020 includes an additional level – SOC Ex – that contains subunit groups with six digits. There are 1,370 subunit groups, although some of these are identical to the four-digit unit group. For example, the subunit group 9264/00 waiters and waitresses is identical to the unit group 9264 waiters and waitresses.

The nested nature is illustrated below:

Major group 4: Administrative and secretarial occupations

Sub-major group 41: Administrative occupations

Minor group 412: Administrative occupations: Finance

Unit group 4122: Book-keepers, payroll managers and wages clerks

Subunit group 4122/01: Accounting clerks and book-keepers

4 IfATE has since become Skills England, where appropriate references in the paper link to the Skills England website.

5 Skills England (accessed 2026) Apprenticeship finder.

6 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (updated January 2026) SOC 2020.

7 ONS (accessed 2026) SOC 2020 Volume 1: Structure and descriptions of unit groups – 2. Principles and concepts.

MAPPING OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS TO THE SOC

For our analysis we mapped each occupational standard to the SOC Ex level. The nested nature of SOC made it possible to deduce the other SOC levels.

We are grateful to IfATE who provided their preliminary mapping of occupational standards to SOC Ex. We compared the IfATE mapping to an automated mapping created with the Cascot tool, a computer program designed to make this type of mapping 'simpler, quicker and more reliable'.[8] When the two mappings did not match, we carried out a more detailed analysis to identify the most appropriate SOC code to use. Some standards have options, which are role-specific specialisations that meet an employer's needs. In line with IfATE practice, we mapped each option to a SOC code.

It is worth noting that mapping an occupational standard to a SOC code involves a degree of subjectivity, different people might classify the same occupational standard to different groups in SOC based on their interpretation of what the occupational standard entails and the skill level of the SOC group.

Using the mapping we compared those taking a particular apprenticeship to the numbers and demographics of those employed in that occupation. We also used the mapping to compare UK coverage with international labour market coverage.

Since the analyses in this paper were completed, Skills England has published the UK Standard Skills Classification, which will make it much easier to carry out these analyses in future. It is critical that the classification is kept up to date and that researchers are encouraged to use this classification going forward.[9] [10]

8 University of Warwick (July 2024) Cascot: Computer assisted structured coding tool.

9 UK Standard Skills Classification (accessed 2026) UK skills explorer.

10 We counted 717 standards that had not been retired and contained enough information to be mapped to SOC. At the end of 2025, the Skills England database had 722 apprenticeships approved for delivery or approved for delivery paused, the Standard Skills Classification lists 1019 apprenticeships because it includes the options as single items, where we had counted 1109 options.

ANALYSIS: APPRENTICESHIPS AND THE LABOUR MARKET

This section of the paper uses our mapping of occupational standards to the SOC (described in the methodology section) to look at:

- how well apprenticeships cover the English labour market
- the contribution of apprenticeships to the labour market
- whether this matches demand
- whether apprenticeships address skills shortages in key sectors
- the age demographics of apprenticeships and employment
- the apprenticeships that work well for young people

DISTRIBUTION OF APPRENTICESHIP STANDARDS BY THE SOC

Table 1 shows how apprenticeship standards, and any associated options, are distributed across the major SOC groups in England. Many of the standards have options that are viewed by Skills England as occupations in their own right, so we have also mapped these options to SOC. The column for standards and options in this table (and elsewhere in this report) counts the number of occupations, for example, a standard that has no options counts as one occupation, a standard with two options would be counted as two occupations.

To illustrate, in SOC major group 1 – managers, directors and senior officials, there are 34 standards and 49 options mapped to the major group, although the options are not necessarily from these standards. For example, the children, young people and families manager standard is mapped to 2469/02 welfare professionals 'not elsewhere classified' (N.E.C.) but the option in this standard, manager in children's residential care, is mapped to 1232/03 residential care managers and proprietors and so would be counted with the 49 options. In this case and for some other standards, it is worth noting that the options map to different levels of SOC; this is a little surprising as it suggests the options may not be that similar to each other.

Table 1. The distribution of apprenticeship standards and their associated options for the major SOC groups in England

SOC	Major group title	Standards	Standards and options
1	Managers, directors and senior officials	34	49
2	Professional occupations	190	280
3	Associate professional occupations	187	286
4	Administrative and secretarial occupations	27	33
5	Skilled trades occupations	156	249
6	Caring, leisure and other service occupations	38	68
7	Sales and customer service occupations	13	22
8	Process, plant and machine operatives	56	88
9	Elementary occupations	16	34
	Total	717	1,109

Traditionally those in SOC major group 2, professional occupations, which includes occupations such as accountant and lawyer, were trained through apprenticeships. In recent times this changed and the route into these occupations was through university. However, with the introduction of higher apprenticeships, this has changed again, and there are now 176 standards that are at bachelor's degree level (level 6) and above.

At the other end of the spectrum, it is surprising to see apprenticeships mapped to SOC group 9, elementary occupations. These occupations generally require little or no training and would probably be better served by an alternative to an apprenticeship. For example, there are a number of elementary security occupations that require a Security Industry Authority (SIA) licence. The SIA specifies licence-linked qualifications, such as the level 2 award for security officers in the private security industry,[11] but this only requires 42 hours of study compared to the professional security operative apprenticeship[12] which lasts a year.

Table 2 shows the number of standards at the Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF) levels.[13] It shows that most standards are still at levels 2 and 3, which are the levels traditionally associated with apprenticeships, although participation data suggests that numbers of apprentices at levels 6 and 7 are increasing.

Table 2. RQF level of standards and options

RQF level	Standards	Standards and options
2	140	237
3	244	392
4	113	162
5	44	59
6	111	144
7	65	115
Total	717	1,109

CONCENTRATION OF STANDARDS BY OCCUPATIONAL ROUTE

Skills England groups together occupations that have related knowledge, skills and behaviours into 15 different routes. Table 3 shows how many standards there are in each route.[14]

Table 3. Standards in each occupational route

Route	Standards	Standards and options
Agriculture, environmental and animal care	40	74
Business and administration	43	45
Care services	15	19
Catering and hospitality	11	34
Construction and the built environment	99	137
Creative and design	60	84

11 BIIAB (accessed 2026) Level 2 award for security officers in the private security industry.

12 Skills England (accessed 2026) Apprenticeship finder: Professional security operative.

13 'The RQF provides a single, simple system for cataloguing all qualifications … with qualifications indexed by their "level" and "size"'. GOV.UK (accessed 2026) Regulated Qualifications Framework. Ofqual blog. RQF level 3 is equivalent to A-levels and level 6 to a bachelor's degree.

14 Skills England (accessed 2026) Occupational maps.

Digital	34	55
Education and early years	13	17
Engineering and manufacturing	167	337
Hair and beauty	8	8
Health and science	91	113
Legal, finance and accounting	42	58
Protective services	21	25
Sales, marketing and procurement	35	42
Transport and logistics	38	61
Total	717	1,109

Some routes, engineering and manufacturing in particular, have many more occupational standards than others. Jobs in these sectors often require specialist training, but having large numbers of specialised apprenticeships may not be the best way to provide that training for existing employees and these apprenticeships would not be appropriate for new entrants to the industry.

It is also helpful to see how the occupational routes are distributed across the major SOC groups (see Table 4).

Table 4. Major SOC groups and occupational routes

	SOC major group								
Occupational route	Managers, directors and senior officials	Professional occupations	Associate professional occupations	Administrative and secretarial occupations	Skilled trades occupations	Caring, leisure and other service occupations	Sales and customer service occupations	Process, plant and machine operatives	Elementary occupations
Agriculture, environmental and animal care	3	7	6	1	32	21	–	–	4
Business and administration	9	18	12	6	–	–	–	–	–
Care services	2	5	7	–	–	5	–	–	–
Catering and hospitality	–	–	9	–	10	2	6	–	7
Construction and the built environment	5	21	28	2	53	–	3	24	1
Creative and design	4	28	21	–	30	–	–	–	1
Digital	–	38	12	–	4	1	–	–	–
Education and early years	–	7	7	–	–	3	–	–	–
Engineering and manufacturing	3	86	85	–	113	–	–	43	7
Hair and beauty	–	–	1	–	–	7	–	–	–
Health and science	4	46	41	–	–	16	4	–	2
Legal, finance and accounting	9	21	12	14	–	–	2	–	–
Protective services	–	1	16	–	1	1	1	–	5
Sales, marketing and procurement	4	2	18	3	6	4	5	–	–
Transport and logistics	6	–	11	7	–	8	1	21	7
Total (standards and options)	49	280	286	33	249	68	22	88	34

The distribution of apprenticeship standards across the SOC codes broadly reflects the nature of the sectors these occupations are most commonly found in. For instance, no professional occupations (SOC major group 2) are linked to the hair and beauty route, whereas most occupations in the health and science route come under SOC groups 2 and 3 (professional occupations and associate professional occupations).

By grouping together occupations that require similar skill sets, the routes highlight potential career progression pathways. In some cases – such as construction and the built environment – these routes align closely with specific sectors, making the connection between business activity and occupation relatively straightforward. However, in cases like digital, the relationship is more complex because there are digital roles in a wide range of sectors.

It is also important to note that relationships between sectors and occupations change. For example, the increasing use of digital technology in manufacturing has given rise to mechatronics-focused occupations, and the increase in off-site construction may result in construction occupations that look more like manufacturing ones.

SHARE OF EMPLOYMENT

Table 5 provides an overview of the labour market. It shows how many people are employed in each major SOC group, alongside the number of apprenticeship starts in each SOC group and the portion of the labour market that this represents.

Table 5. Apprenticeship starts as a share of employment in major SOC groups

SOC major group	Title	Employed (millions)	Apprenticeship starts (thousands)	Starts as share of employment
1	Managers, directors and senior officials	3.07	33	1.1%
2	Professional occupations	6.34	48	0.8%
3	Associate professional occupations	3.89	78	2.0%
4	Administrative and secretarial occupations	3.39	37	1.1%
5	Skilled trades occupations	2.12	45	2.1%
6	Caring, leisure and other service occupations	2.22	64	2.9%
7	Sales and customer service occupations	2.21	15	0.7%
8	Process, plant and machine operatives	1.63	11	0.7%
9	Elementary occupations	3.63	6	0.2%
	Total	28.50	337	1.2%

Table 5 shows that apprentices make a significant contribution to caring, leisure and other service occupations but perhaps surprisingly little to administrative and secretarial occupations. This may reflect longer-term trends in the labour market, which have seen an increase in service occupations and a decrease in administrative and secretarial occupations. However, changes in the size of a particular occupational group usually affect demand less than the need to replace workers who retire.

Table 6 shows the top 15 occupations in the UK, based on the Skills England index of demand,[15] the size of the workforce in each of those occupations in the UK and the number of apprenticeships starts in those occupations in England. Many of the SOC unit groups where there are no apprenticeship starts have relatively small numbers employed in them. It can be more difficult for a sector or a company with a small workforce to make apprenticeships work.

Table 6. Workforce size of the top 15 in demand occupations and the number of apprenticeship starts in each occupation for 2024

SOC unit group	Title	Index of demand	Number employed	Apprenticeship starts
6136	Senior care workers	1.49	67,810	11,565
8153	Rail construction and maintenance operatives	1.21	6,916	0
6135	Care workers and home carers	1.19	676,566	6,236
2240	Veterinarians	1.15	16,304	0
8234	Rail transport operatives	1.13	12,174	0
1254	Waste disposal and environmental services managers	1.02	7,879	0
3533	Financial and accounting technicians	1.01	22,837	2,867
1140	Directors in logistics, warehousing and transport	0.95	13,058	242
9111	Farm workers	0.94	46,599	379
6134	Houseparents and residential wardens	0.87	25,490	0
2123	Electrical engineers	0.84	40,616	236
7122	Debt, rent and other cash collectors	0.83	38,145	0
4142	Office supervisors	0.81	38,867	13,758
5431	Butchers	0.75	27,030	377
3132	IT user support technicians	0.74	111,926	3,579
	Total		1,152,217	39,239

AGE AND APPRENTICESHIPS

To understand the contribution apprenticeships make to the labour market, we need to understand the level of the apprenticeships and whether they are in areas with skills shortages and in key sectors. Are the shortages at entry level and therefore open to young people? Are the shortages at higher levels that existing employees could move into with upskilling? Are there actual skills shortages or

15 Critical demand is defined using a composite index of seven indicators (including visa applications, online job adverts and wage growth) to identify which are currently seeing high levels of demand. GOV.UK (updated October 2024) Explore education statistics: Occupations in demand. Calendar year 2024.

are they labour shortages that suggest the need for recruitment rather than upskilling or are issues being caused by the working conditions, as discussed in the background section?

Table 7 shows the percentage of under 25s starting apprenticeships in the SOC sub-major groups. The assumption is made that for under 25s, apprenticeships mark the start of their career whereas apprenticeships that are dominated by older people (towards the bottom of the table) are likely to be used for upskilling.

To reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), existing employment patterns must be the starting point. Occupations with a significant proportion of employees under 25 should be examined to see if an apprenticeship would be appropriate. Where an apprenticeship makes sense, e.g. perhaps not in the elementary trades, the funding and policy changes that would be needed to better engage employers in offering apprenticeships to young people could be explored.

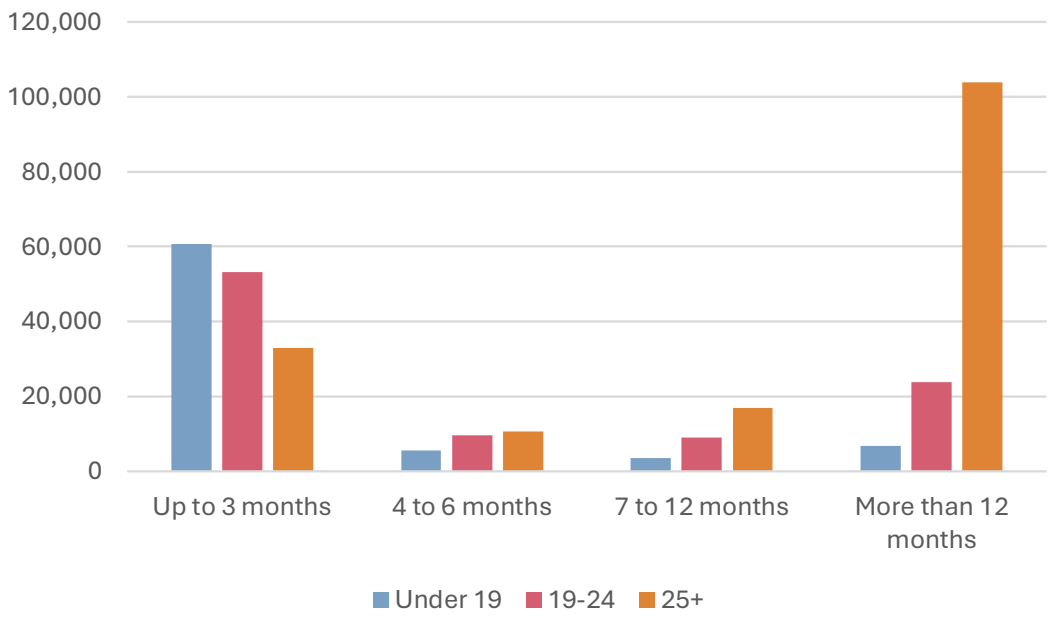
Table 7. Percentage of apprenticeship starts under 25 and percentage of employees under 25

SOC sub-major group	Title	Percentage of apprenticeship starts that are under 25	Percentage of those employed that are under 25
91	Elementary trades and related occupations	95%	24%
53	Skilled construction and building trades	92%	17%
52	Skilled metal, electrical and electronic trades	90%	15%
62	Leisure, travel and related personal service occupations	90%	18%
34	Culture, media and sports occupations	83%	18%
31	Science, engineering and technology associate professionals	77%	13%
72	Customer service occupations	70%	23%
81	Process, plant and machine operatives	67%	10%
71	Sales occupations	65%	32%
33	Protective service occupations	64%	7%
54	Textiles, printing and other skilled trades	61%	12%
51	Skilled agricultural and related trades	61%	13%
63	Community and civil enforcement occupations	58%	5%
21	Science, research, engineering and technology professionals	55%	7%
61	Caring personal service occupations	52%	13%
24	Business, media and public service professionals	50%	5%
41	Administrative occupations	47%	12%
92	Elementary administration and service occupations	46%	29%

82	Transport and mobile machine drivers and operatives	35%	5%
32	Health and social care associate professionals	32%	8%
35	Business and public service associate professionals	31%	9%
23	Teaching and other educational professionals	20%	5%
22	Health professionals	18%	5%
11	Corporate managers and directors	9%	2%
12	Other managers and proprietors	7%	5%
42	Secretarial and related occupations	-	9%

Figure 2 details apprenticeship starts in 2023/24, showing the age of the apprentices and the length they had been in that employment before starting their apprenticeship.[16] This helps us understand how many apprenticeships are being used to support young people into work and how many are being used to upskill or reskill existing employees.

Figure 2. 2023/24 apprenticeship starts by age of apprentice and length of their employment



16 GOV.UK (updated January 2026) Explore education statistics: Data set from apprenticeships – duration, starts by level, age, length of employment.

Table 8 gives the cumulative percentages, which shows the pattern more clearly. We can see that 88% of apprentices under 19 have been in post for a year or less, whereas only 37% of apprentices over 25 have, meaning that 63% of over 25s have been in post for more than a year.

Table 8. Cumulative percentages for length of employment for the age groups of apprentices

	Up to 3 months	4 to 6 months	7 to 12 months
Under 19	77%	84%	88%
19-24	55%	65%	75%
25+	20%	26%	37%

An issue with this data is that, although the length of time the apprentice has been with the employer is recorded on the Individualised Learner Record, their job title is not recorded. This omission in the data reflects a broader lack of occupational data in government statistics, which makes it difficult to understand the impact of apprenticeships on the labour market.

Data that should be recorded includes:

- the starting occupation of an apprentice (for those in work)
- the occupation they progress to on completion (ideally through better data collection by HMRC) to understand if it is what was expected based on the subject of the apprenticeship
- for those who had been in work, whether the apprenticeship led to a change in occupation

The data in Figure 2 and Table 8 suggest that a significant number of over 25s are taking an apprenticeship with their current employer. This means these apprenticeships are more likely being used to upskill for existing occupations rather than to facilitate a change of occupation, which would often be accompanied by a change of employer. However, without better data on the job titles of apprentices at the start and on completion of the apprenticeship, it is difficult to be sure.

By looking at the standards with the largest number of apprenticeship starts it is possible to identify which are used mainly by young people and which are dominated by over 25s. Table 9 shows the age distribution for the top 20 standards.

The pink rows are the standards with a majority (more than 50%) of people 25 or over taking them. The green rows are those with a majority of under 19s taking them and blue shows the standards where the majority taking them are aged 19 to 24. More than half of the top 20 apprenticeships standards have more apprentices that are 25 or over taking them, whereas less than quarter of the top 20 are mainly taken by under 19s.

Table 9.Age distribution of the top 20 apprenticeship standards

Standard (level)	Total starts	Under 19	19-24	25+	% employed for over 12 month
Early years educator (level 3)	15,302	30%	38%	33%	21%
Team leader (level 3)	13,758	1%	11%	89%	81%
Business administrator (level 3)	12,682	38%	36%	26%	21%
Operations manager (level 5)	10,709	0%	4%	96%	83%
Lead adult care worker (level 3)	9,490	2%	18%	80%	66%
Accountancy or taxation professional (level 7)	9,204	3%	68%	28%	24%
Installation and maintenance electrician (level 3)	7,567	59%	31%	10%	9%
Senior leader (level 7)	7,135	0%	1%	99%	89%
Data analyst (level 4)	6,746	1%	12%	87%	74%
Early years practitioner (level 2)	6,457	60%	23%	17%	7%
Adult care worker (level 2)	6,236	8%	24%	68%	50%
Data technician (level 3)	6,163	5%	16%	79%	70%
Children, young people and families practitioner (level 4)	5,895	0%	21%	78%	23%
Engineering technician (level 3)	5,486	45%	39%	16%	14%
Hairdressing professional (level 2)	5,232	85%	12%	3%	8%
Teaching assistant (level 3)	4,661	24%	25%	51%	30%
Leader in adult care (level 5)	4,239	0%	6%	94%	70%
Carpentry and joinery (level 2)	4,154	75%	19%	6%	9%
Nursing associate (NMC 2018) (level 5)	4,100	2%	25%	73%	62%
Customer service practitioner (level 2)	4,099	47%	32%	21%	13%

FINDINGS

- Apprenticeships in England cover an unusually large number of occupations that would not traditionally have had apprenticeships.
- Apprenticeship standards are spread thinly and do not match demand or address skills shortages in key sectors.
- Fewer young people are starting apprenticeships, while large numbers of existing employees who have been in a job for more than a year are taking apprenticeships.
- There is a lack of granular labour market information to help government design apprenticeship policy and to enable apprenticeships to be able to respond to demand, for instance, is demand high because of a lack of skills or because of working conditions?

ANALYSIS: THE NATURE OF OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

This section of the paper uses our mapping of occupational standards to the SOC (described in the methodology section) to look at:

- the nature of occupational standards, including the level and specialisation
- the impact of the introduction of apprenticeships at different levels in closely related occupations to upskill existing employees

Some employers complain that they cannot find the training they need for new or for existing employees. The coverage of the labour market and number of standards suggests that the issue is not so much the absence of an occupational standard, but that the way the training is delivered does not work for them. So, an employer who wants to upskill an individual to carry out a new task can probably find that task and the associated knowledge, skills and behaviours in the occupational standards, but current public funding policy means they can only use levy funding for training delivered through an apprenticeship. To get round this, some employers have developed standards that are much narrower and more specialised than would be appropriate for anyone entering the labour market.

NARROW AND SPECIALISED STANDARDS

The SOC Ex subunit group (the six-digit subunit) is the most granular available. It represents the narrowest occupational classifications that are closest to individual job titles. Table 10 shows the SOC Ex subunit groups that have significant numbers of standards and/or options.

Table 10. SOC Ex subunit groups with significant numbers of standards

SOC Ex subunit title	Standards	Standards and options
3116/00 Planning, process and production technicians	7	15
5315/00 Plumbers and heating and ventilation installers and repairers	6	12
2121/05 Transportation engineers	3	11
5223/08 Lift technicians	3	11
5111/06 Poultry farmers	2	10
5241/03 Installation and maintenance electricians	10	10
2125/03 Industrial and production engineers	4	9
3114/03 Surveying technicians	2	8
3557/04 Hospitality managers	1	8
5449/03 Goldsmiths, silversmiths, jewellers and precious stone workers	1	8
6129/07 Stable workers	1	8
8134/02 Water treatment operatives	3	8

Table 10 does not include subunit groups that are N.E.C. (not elsewhere classified). N.E.C. groups are catch-all subunit groups that include a diverse range of

occupations that are too small to code to an individual subunit group but that have a distinct identity.

In Table 10 it is surprising to see 11 options (e.g. occupations) mapped to lift technicians – this is made up of two standards that have six and four options coded to lift technician and one standard with no options. Table 11 shows some of the standards in Table 10 that contain the term 'lift' in more detail.

Table 11. Standards and options mapped to the term 'lift' with relevant SOC Ex subunit group

Standards	Overview of role	Options	2024/25 starts	SOC Ex subunit group
Lifting equipment technician	Repair, maintain, modify, inspect, test, install and assemble lifting equipment to ensure its suitability and safety for a continued period of service.	N/A	30	Engineering technicians N.E.C.
Lift truck and powered access engineering technician	Service, repair and maintain lift trucks and powered access vehicles.	N/A	150	Lift technicians
Stairlift, platform lift, service lift electro-mechanic	Carry out the installation or maintenance and repair of stairlifts, lifting platforms and service lifts.	Stairlift installation	10	Lift technicians
		Stairlift service and repair		Lift technicians
		Lifting platform installation		Lift technicians
		Lifting platform service and repair		Lift technicians
		Service lift installation		Lift technicians
		Service lift service and repair		Lift technicians
Lift and escalator engineering	Carrying out the installation or maintenance, repair and modernisation of lifts and escalators.	Lift installation	80	Lift technicians
		Escalator and moving walk installation		Lift technicians
		Lift service and repair		Lift technicians
		Escalator and moving walk service and repair		Lift technicians
Lifting technician	Preparing and operating different cranes to lift and place a variety of loads in the workplace.	Crawler crane operator	20	Crane drivers
		Mobile crane operator		Crane drivers
		Tower crane operator		Crane drivers

The descriptions show that the occupations here are in two groups: one associated with lifting equipment, such as cranes; the other associated with lifting people. The equipment needed to lift things compared to people may be different, but it is hard to see that five different standards are needed, particularly given that there are only 290 starts across all five standards. It seems particularly puzzling that the stairlift, platform lift, service lift electromechanic standard has six options: stairlift installation; stairlift service and repair; lifting platform installation; lifting platform service and repair; service lift installation; service lift service and repair.

Traditionally, a young person would do an engineering apprenticeship (for example, fitting or maintenance) and as part of their on-the-job training would specialise in the particular activity. An individual completing an engineering apprenticeship who moved to a lift installation firm would be trained to use their engineering skills on lifts (they would be upskilled). This shows that an apprenticeship suitable for young people (like a fairly broad engineering apprenticeship) may not be suitable for upskilling existing employees. But a narrow standard for a lift and escalator electromechanic is perfect for upskilling engineers who have no background of working with lifts.

A criticism of broader apprenticeships is that the employer will not always be able to provide experience of all the different duties. In the example above, a firm might specialise in the installation of stairlifts but not work with lift platforms. A common solution used in countries with strong employer bodies is to develop intercompany or branch training that allows the apprentice to gain experience they cannot get with their current employer (see Comparing the coverage of the labour market).

APPRENTICESHIPS TO UPSKILL EXISTING STAFF

Apprenticeships being used by employers to upskill existing employees is common practice. An example of when this may not be the most efficient way of delivering the training required is the level 4 hospitality manager apprenticeship.

The options in this standard are conference and events management, food and beverage service management, front office management, hospitality outlet management, housekeeping management, kitchen management, multifunctional management and revenue management. The focus is on applying management skills to a range of business functions and the entry requirements state that 'individuals starting the apprenticeship should have had supervisory responsibility in order to start this apprenticeship'.

The Skills England occupational maps suggest this standard should be taken after both the level 2 hospitality team member and the level 3 hospitality team supervisor apprenticeships have been completed. So, a school-leaver is unlikely to be able to start the hospitality manager apprenticeship, and someone who is already in work and supervising others probably does not need to take a full apprenticeship. Higher technical qualifications (HTQs) focused on management skills would be a more efficient way to train people for middle management.

Table 12 shows the results of a ChatGPT analysis of apprenticeship titles where it appears that one of the apprenticeships in the pair follows on from the other, and which might be better delivered outside of an apprenticeship. Titles in bold include an adjective that suggests they are a progression from the original occupation, rather than an entry occupation.

Table 12. ChatGPT analysis of follow-on apprenticeship titles

Title 1	Title 2
Professional economist (integrated degree)	**Senior professional economist (integrated degree)**
Financial services customer adviser	**Senior financial services customer adviser**
Early years practitioner	**Early years lead practitioner**
Housing and property manager	**Senior housing and property manager**
Civil engineering technician	**Civil engineering senior technician**
Children, young people and families practitioner	**Children, young people and families manager**
Healthcare support worker	**Senior healthcare support worker**
Adult care worker	**Lead adult care worker**
Building services engineering technician	**Building services engineering senior technician**
Insurance professional	**Senior insurance professional**
Rail engineering technician	**Rail engineering advanced technician**
Metrology technician	**Senior metrology technician**
Junior advertising creative	**Advertising creative**
Production chef	**Senior production chef**

People working in an occupation usually have a range of qualifications at different levels, unless they need a licence to practice. An occupation is made up of a set of related jobs that have a common set of tasks and associated knowledge, skills and behaviours, not a specific level of education. The rail industry has three standards covering three RQF levels (2-4). The options in the standards appear very similar, so the difference between a level 3 rail engineering technician and a level 2 rail engineering operative who both specialise in telecoms is not clear. This does not mean that training is not needed to go from being an operative to a technician to an advanced technician but the specialisations in the standards shown in Table 13 almost certainly owe more to employers only being able to access funding for apprenticeships than to the reality of working on the railways.

Table 13. Rail industry standards and options

Standard code	Standard title	Option, if applicable	Level
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Electrification	2
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Overhead lines	2
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Signalling	2
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Telecoms	2
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Track	2
ST0317	Rail engineering operative	Traction and rolling stock	2
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Electrification	3
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Overhead lines	3

ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Rail systems	3
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Signalling	3
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Telecoms	3
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Track	3
ST0318	Rail engineering technician	Traction and rolling stock	3
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Electrification advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Overhead lines advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Rail systems advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Signalling advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Telecoms advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Track advanced technician	4
ST0316	Rail engineering advanced technician	Traction and rolling stock advanced technician	4

FINDINGS

Employers want their employees to have the skills that are needed for their job. Apprenticeships have been proven to give young people occupational competence while they also develop other knowledge and skills that will support their broader career aspirations. However, for existing employees, apprenticeships are unlikely to be the most efficient way of developing or maintaining occupational competence, either for the employer or the employee.

Our analysis of the nature of apprenticeship standards should be cause for concern.

- The all-age model has diluted apprenticeships and created a system with competing demands: supporting young entrants into the labour market and reskilling and upskilling for experienced adults.
- This one-size-fits-all approach to apprenticeships – young people's entry to employment and the upskilling or reskilling of existing employees – has created an overly complex set of standards which does not support high-quality training or ensure efficient use of public finances.
- This increasing complexity has resulted in duplicated and over-specialised standards, many of which are not suitable for new entrants.
- Those adults who are upskilling through apprenticeships would be better served by different types of training instead of a full apprenticeship.
- Employers are using apprenticeships to access funding for in-work training for their existing employees.

ANALYSIS: INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

In this section we look at:

- how the English apprenticeship system compares to those in countries with strong apprenticeship systems and lower youth unemployment, including Germany, Switzerland and Denmark

BACKGROUND OF APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEMS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

In many countries apprenticeships are seen as just one form of work-based learning, but one that is particularly suitable for young people starting their careers. Apprenticeships are part of the education system and as such are more than a 'job with training'.

The delivery of apprenticeships in these countries is also very different to that in England. Most apprenticeships take at least three years to complete and include more general education, such as the national language, maths and citizenship, as well as broader subjects relevant to the type of apprenticeship, such as physics for engineers, and in some cases the study of a foreign language.

Unlike in England, all apprenticeships have a common start date, and all apprentices begin their off-the-job training in September at a vocational college. There is also greater emphasis on the on-the-job training delivered by employers, which is assured by employer bodies, such as chambers. Previous Gatsby research provides more detail on the delivery and assessment of apprenticeships in other countries.[17] [18] [19] [20]

Apprenticeships are seen as perhaps the most effective way to train young people for skilled occupations, and countries with strong apprenticeship systems generally have lower youth unemployment than those without. Productivity in these countries has also been strong, driven in part by a highly skilled non-graduate workforce.

Apprenticeships are generally developed to provide entry to an occupation (called Initial Vocational Education and Training) not progression in or from it. These countries provide work-based training specifically for adults (called Continuing Vocational Education and Training), which is more flexible than that available in England. It is still focused on applying learning in the workplace but there are fewer rules about how, where and when the training must be delivered.

COMPARING THE NUMBER OF STANDARDS

Being able to link apprenticeships to single occupations instead of broad sectors makes it possible to compare apprenticeship coverage of the labour market in England with apprenticeship coverage of the labour markets of other countries that also use apprenticeships to develop occupational competence. This approach was also used in a 2022 report for Gatsby that examined which occupations had apprenticeships in England, Switzerland, Denmark and Germany.[21]

17 Field, S. (2023) Great expectations: Three steps to a world class apprenticeship system. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

18 Norman, A. (2022) What is an apprenticeship? Comparing the occupational coverage of apprenticeships in England, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

19 Field, S. (2018) Taking training seriously: Lessons from an international comparison of off-the-job training for apprenticeships in England.

20 Field, S. (2021) A world without maps? Assessment in technical education. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

21 Norman, A. (2022) What is an apprenticeship? Comparing the occupational coverage of apprenticeships in England, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

For this report, lists of apprenticeship standards for Switzerland[22] and Denmark[23] were translated using a combination of Google Translate and ChatGPT. The translations were then mapped to SOC Ex level using Cascot. Where Cascot provided a low confidence score or there was an obvious error in the matching we carried out a manual check of the coding. A similar process was completed for Germany,[24] but we also used a mapping to the German equivalent of SOC as part of the checking process.

Table 14 shows the number of standards and options in different countries in 2022 and in 2024 (the current mapping). Where possible we have used the options in other countries to enable a comparison with England, this means the numbers for other countries are larger than those normally quoted.

Table 14. Standards and options in England, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark

Country	2022	2024
England	740	1,109
Germany	482	473
Switzerland	403	413
Denmark	234	235

It is important to note that the significant increase for England between 2022 and 2024 is mainly due to the number of options. The number of standards has increased from 701 to 717. Whether one counts standards or options, England has significantly more than the other countries. This is partly because apprenticeships in England have been designed as all-age and so cover different parts of the labour market to apprenticeships in the other countries where they are designed for young people entering the labour market not for upskilling existing workers.

Another key difference is that in other countries, social partners – employer representative bodies, unions and providers – are more involved. In England, the standards have been developed by only a small number of employers, so it is not surprising that the standards are narrower and more specialised than those developed by consensus across a broader range of stakeholders.

COMPARING THE COVERAGE OF THE LABOUR MARKET

Table 15 compares the percentage of SOC unit groups (the four-digit group) in England, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark that have an associated apprenticeship standard or an option. It shows that apprenticeships in England cover a far greater proportion of the labour market than the other countries.

Table 15. Percentage of SOC unit groups with an associated standard or option in 2024

England	70%
Germany	34%
Switzerland	29%
Denmark	28%

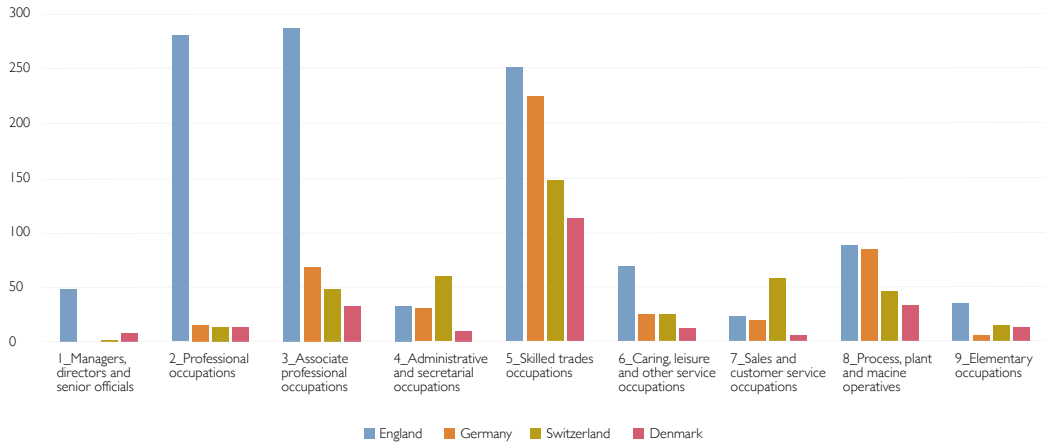
22 The Federal Council (Switzerland) (accessed 2026) SBFI professional directory: Basic vocational training.

23 Danish Ministry of Children and Education (accessed 2026) The Education Guide: Education for young people search.

24 Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) (accessed 2026) List of recognized training occupations 2023.

Figure 3 compares the number of apprenticeships for each major SOC group for each country. Again, the proportion of apprenticeships in many of the major SOC groups are completely different to those in the other countries, particularly for SOC major groups 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 3. Number of apprenticeships by SOC major group (2024)



Focusing on the major groups that traditionally used apprenticeships for training, it is clear the English system has changed more than the other countries. Table 16 shows that in England, standards in these SOC groups now only represent 67% of all the standards. In other countries it is close to or above 90%.

Table 16. Percentage of standards in the major SOC groups apprenticeships traditionally focused on

SOC	SOC group title	England (incl. options)	Germany	Switzerland	Denmark
3	Associate professional occupations	26%	15%	12%	14%
4	Administrative and secretarial occupations	3%	6%	15%	4%
5	Skilled trades occupations	22%	47%	36%	47%
6	Caring, leisure and other service occupations	6%	5%	6%	5%
7	Sales and customer service occupations	2%	4%	14%	2%
8	Process, plant and machine operatives	8%	18%	11%	14%
	Total	67%	95%	94%	86%

We were surprised to see that Switzerland has many more standards in SOC 4 administrative and secretarial occupations (60 compared to 33 in England) and in SOC 7 sales and customer service occupations (57 compared to 22 in England).

Switzerland has three standards that have significant numbers of options:

- The commercial employee standard takes three years to complete and has 52 options. It provides entry to a wide range of clerical roles, including bank clerk, hotel clerk, hospital clerk and insurance clerk.
- The retail professional standard, which also takes three years to complete, has 33 options. It provides entry to a range of management roles in different retail areas, for example, retail professional – sporting goods and retail professional – management – consumer electronics.
- The retail assistant standard takes two years to complete and has 22 options. It is essentially a sales role in different retail areas, for instance, retail assistant – perfumery and retail assistant – pet shop.

We learnt more about these standards on a visit to Switzerland. The off-the-job training for the options in these standards is identical; the option describes where the apprentice is employed and the branch courses they can take. This is deliberate. The manager of commercial employee apprentices at a government agency explained that after finishing the apprenticeship, his apprentices might go on to work as travel agents or in banking. So, although the options in the Swiss system seem narrow at first, in reality they provide broad training that enables young people to progress into a wide variety of occupations.

Branch courses are normally run by employer bodies to provide opportunities for training that might not be available in a particular workplace. They can also be used to provide training in new technologies or approaches. This is not common practice in England.

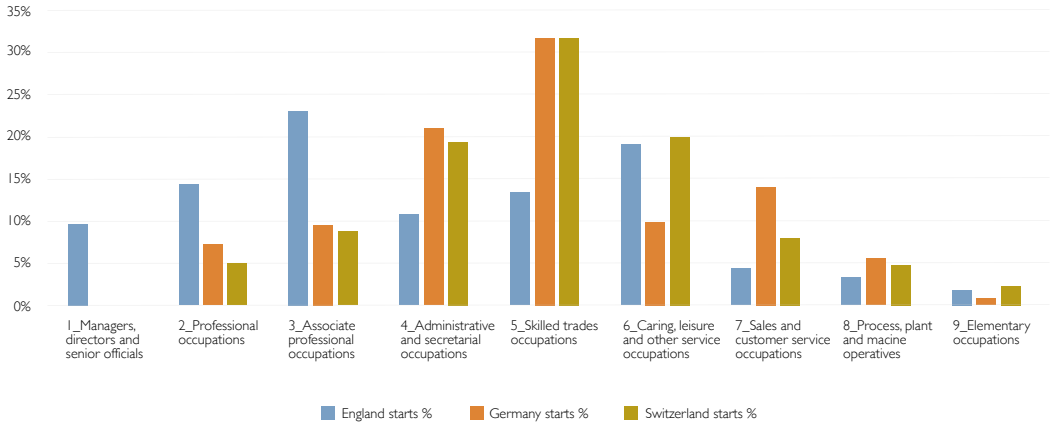
The options in these standards have their own unique codes, and data is collected on the options. This enables better evaluation of how apprenticeships meet labour market needs. This is not the case in England, but we hope that Skills England will rectify this issue and ensure that apprenticeship data is collected at option level rather than standard level.

In England, the increase in the number of options raises an important question: are the options recognised occupational outcomes in their own right or simply variations of jobs within a single occupation? The lack of clarity risks further blurring the boundary between job roles and occupations and creates uncertainty in how standards should be interpreted, developed and funded.

COMPARING THE NUMBER OF APPRENTICESHIP STARTS

Figure 4 compares the percentage of apprenticeship starts for each major SOC code in England with those in Germany and Switzerland.

Figure 4. Percentage of apprenticeship starts in each major SOC group



It is important to note that in Germany, training for the health and care sector is not done through apprenticeships. Instead, trainees go to full-time vocational schools and spend a significant amount of time on industry placements. This explains the surprisingly low figure for apprenticeship starts in the SOC major group 6 in Germany.

Many of the technician roles in engineering and construction that are difficult for employers to recruit to are in the skilled trades (SOC group 5) where the proportion of starts in England is particularly low, especially when compared to those in Germany and Switzerland.

FINDINGS

The number of apprenticeship standards and the occupations they lead to in England are very different to those in other countries that have long and successful traditions of apprenticeship. In England, the greater and increasing use of options risks blurring the boundary between job role and occupation.

In other countries, apprenticeships are focused on young people and the occupations they can move into from full-time education, while in England, apprenticeships are not focused on young people, even given concerns about young people and employment.

- International systems distinguish more clearly between initial vocational education for young people and continuing vocational education for adults, with the former designed to support transition into the labour market and the latter to enable reskilling or upskilling and progression for those already in work.
- In other countries, employer bodies enable intercompany or branch training and assure the quality of on-the-job training.
- In other countries, options have unique codes and data is collected on them to understand how apprenticeships meet labour market needs.

APPRENTICESHIPS: EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

THE CASE FOR REFORM

The evolving landscape of apprenticeships in England reveals a system under pressure from competing demands. On the one hand, there are a growing number of occupational standards – some overlapping or closely aligned – which risks confusing employers and learners alike. On the other, the apprenticeship model is increasingly being stretched to accommodate young people who are NEET (through foundation apprenticeships),[25] and the upskilling and reskilling needs of existing employees.

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

The government's skills policy is increasingly being shaped by industrial strategy priorities, such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy and defence. Skills England should work closely on these priorities because they will help anticipate future demand and coordinate investment. However, this must not come at the cost of maintaining a clear focus on occupations.

Employers recruit for occupations, not sectors, and many core skills – especially in digital, engineering and management – are shared across multiple sectors. An approach driven by sectors risks duplication, fragmented provision and missed opportunities to build transferable skills. For example, green energy, construction and manufacturing all draw on similar electrical, mechanical and data analysis capabilities. Treating them as separate skills needs can lead to parallel and short-lived initiatives that are not an effective use of public funding. An approach based on occupations, aligned to industrial strategy but not subordinate to it, would better recognise the shared technical foundations and also support the mobility of workers across sectors.

Employer-set occupational standards that underpin all apprenticeships and technical qualifications, are a cornerstone of England's skills infrastructure and could become a major strength for the UK economy. When occupational standards describe actual occupations, they align education and work and become shared reference points for employers and educators. However, some standards have been weakened by overly narrow definitions that describe specific job roles instead of occupations. A lack of guidance about what occupational competence looks like, and inconsistent descriptions of knowledge and skills make it difficult to identify overlap between standards. The increasing number of occupational standards – especially the multiple options within them – has made the system complex, inefficient and costly.

Occupational standards should provide a simple framework under which eligibility for funding from the newly named Growth and Skills Levy can be assessed.[26] Ensuring that levy funds can only be used on training that meets national standards guarantees that every penny of the levy is spent on quality-assured provision that, by definition, meets the needs of industry.

Occupational standards sit between two systems: the labour market and the education system. They are used differently in each: employers use them to define work and educators to design learning. As boundary objects, they must be clear so that everyone can use them as a common point of reference, but they also have to be flexible to work in different settings.

25 See Annex 2 for further discussion.

26 Department for Education (accessed 2026) The Growth and Skills Levy.

When standards are developed without close reference to real work, they lose their credibility. When they are overly detailed or focus only on immediate job tasks, standards can limit rather than support education and progression. Having a narrow definition of an occupation is unhelpful for several reasons, including:

- when there are large numbers of standards it becomes more difficult to ensure rigour and quality are maintained
- education and training also become narrow – reflecting specific job roles rather than broader occupations – and do not provide the transferability that justifies public funding
- if there are lots of narrowly defined standards, class sizes are small and apprentices no longer benefit as much from meeting to share experiences with other apprentices

A real occupation is one that is recognised and valued in the labour market, is understood by employers, and can support meaningful education and training. It should combine technical competence with professional judgement and contribute to wider economic and social goals. Annex 1 suggests a set of criteria for assessing whether an occupational standard describes a real occupation and functions effectively as a boundary object.

In other countries, the involvement of social partners in developing occupational standards means employers, unions, providers, and central and local governments make compromises. In England, a relatively small number of employers have been involved in developing standards. Any challenges to the appropriateness of a standard have typically come from civil servants, who may lack a detailed understanding of the sector. And no one in the system is exerting pressure on behalf of apprentices or providers, who both have an interest in apprenticeship standards with greater breadth.

A CLEAR PURPOSE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS

Apprenticeships have gone from being an entry route for young people to now often being used for retraining and higher-level qualifications for existing employees. As a result, apprenticeship participation among 16-24 year olds has decreased: around half of all apprenticeship starts are now aged 25 or over. England's all-age apprenticeship system suffers from the drawbacks inherent in any one-size-fits-all approach.

The government should divide the apprenticeship system into youth apprenticeships for those up to age 25 and adult apprenticeships for those 25 and over. The technical knowledge and skills required to reach occupational competence would be identical for both types of apprenticeship. But the distinction would enable broader educational content and requirements to be included in youth apprenticeships (for instance, standalone level 2 qualifications in English and maths). Adult apprenticeships should be modular and flexible, enabling experienced workers to complete tailored top-up training and assessment. This approach would also allow for two funding bands for each apprenticeship standard – a higher one for under 25s and a lower one for 25s and over. This would make it easier to direct a higher proportion of public funding to younger apprentices and it would incentivise employers to recruit younger entrants.

It is worth noting that countries with dual apprenticeship systems[27] tend to prioritise the learning that takes place in the workplace and will have a range of measures in place to ensure that it is high quality.[28] Although there are still concerns about ensuring that apprenticeships reflect the changing nature of work, the primary role of the employer in the training makes it less of an issue. Where employers struggle to deliver all aspects of a training plan, employer-led training centres can deliver the specialist training that colleges would also struggle with.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO OCCUPATIONAL COMPETENCE

Apprenticeships should not be seen by policymakers or employers as the only way to deliver training needs, instead they should be understood as part of a clear framework of different types of training, including taught qualifications like T-levels and HTQs as well as targeted short courses for upskilling and reskilling.

A key reform in the past 15 years was verifying that apprenticeships lead to occupational competence through a robust end-point assessment (EPA), instead of the fragmented and continuous assessment methods used before. Occupational competence is the defining feature of technical education – it is what distinguishes it from academic routes. It is based on criteria-based judgement, like a driving test. The criteria for competence must be set by employers to ensure validity, relevance and rigour, especially for future employers.

At the time of writing, Skills England is reviewing the EPA model because it is too expensive and some assessment plans are too burdensome. There are good grounds for reviewing EPAs: the current model involves every statement in a standard being assessed and reflects how NVQs were assessed. This is not in line with how the rest of Europe assesses occupational competence. But the temptation to water down the independence of the assessment must be avoided if confidence in apprenticeships is to be retained.[29] It is also worth remembering that one of the reasons for introducing the EPA was that training providers were increasing their use of assessors; in some cases this led to more time and effort being spent on assessing, particularly adults, than on teaching and learning.

In countries with strong skills systems, existing employees who have the appropriate level of knowledge and experience can take the same end-point examination as an apprentice without doing the apprenticeship and earn the same qualification to prove their occupational competence. This approach could also work in England. It would mean making the EPA standalone so that young people and adults with little experience of an occupation would achieve a diploma signifying competence by completing a full apprenticeship, but those with significant experience would only complete the training they needed to pass the EPA and gain the same diploma. Growth and Skills Levy funding could be used for the necessary top-up training and assessment for those already experienced, both of which could be delivered at lower cost and with more flexibility for both the learner and their employer.

The recent announcement about the development of short courses based on statements taken from one or more occupational standard suggests one way the levy could be used to support targeted training. To meet the growing need

27 Often characterised by having two places of learning – the workplace and the vocational college – as well as two sets of linked requirements, a training plan for the workplace and a curriculum for the college.

28 Including the training plan, qualified trainers and oversight by employer representative bodies.

29 Morris, A. (2025) End-point assessment reform. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

for short upskilling and reskilling training, Skills England should use the Skills Compass tool, initially developed by IfATE, and now owned by Skills England, to enable awarding organisations and providers to develop high-quality, short-form qualifications that are focused on addressing skills shortages in sectors included in the industrial strategy. The delivery of this training could be funded through the levy and focused on specific transitions, for instance, enabling mechanics to shift from servicing combustion engines to working on electric vehicles.

We should ensure that short upskilling and reskilling courses take the best aspects of the apprenticeship model of training – the combination of on and off-the-job education and training with the support of an engaged employer – without everything having to be called an apprenticeship.

Shorter qualifications should also be developed for standards where the apprenticeship model is not appropriate, for example, where prior workplace experience is essential. In areas like management at levels 4 and 5, adults could take relevant HTQs instead of following a full apprenticeship.

Figure 5 shows how the different routes to occupational competence could work in practice.

Figure 5. Potential routes to occupational competence

Chloe (17) – School-leaver interested in engineering

Pathway:
Chloe has just finished her GCSEs and wants to pursue a career in mechanical engineering. She applies for a broad level 3 engineering apprenticeship with a local firm. The apprenticeship provides structured, comprehensive training over three years, with off-the-job learning, fully funded by the state.

Outcome:
She gains a nationally recognised qualification and occupational competence verified through an EPA. Her training is fully aligned with a high-value, government prioritised occupational standard.

Abdul (32) – Career changer moving into green energy

Pathway:
Abdul currently works in retail but wants to transition into solar panel installation. He completes a Skills Bootcamp to build essential knowledge and practical skills.

Outcome:
Once employed in the sector, Abdul completes additional targeted training and, after 18 months, sits the standalone EPA to demonstrate his occupational competence without needing to complete a full apprenticeship.

Helen (41) – Upskilling in her existing job

Pathway:
Helen is a team leader at a logistics firm. She takes a short HTQ-aligned management qualification instead of a full apprenticeship because she already has workplace experience and sector-specific knowledge.

Outcome:
The qualification increases her competence and confidence, enabling her to apply for a more senior role. Her employer supports the training using levy funds.

Priya (46) – Experienced professional seeking accreditation

Pathway:
Priya has worked in cybersecurity for over 10 years but lacks formal recognition. She only needs to complete a brief refresher training module and then uses the standalone EPA pathway to gain an official credential for her role.

Outcome:
This provides validation for her skills, boosting her prospects for promotion or consulting opportunities.

GETTING MORE FROM THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY

The introduction of the apprenticeship levy has had a profound impact on the nature of the apprenticeship system in England.

The levy was an attempt to reverse falling employer investment in skills. However, the levy is the only public funding for skills that employers can easily access, and the levy can only be used to fund apprenticeships. As a result apprenticeships have been used for all training needs, even when apprenticeships are not the most appropriate form of training. Many large employers have changed the types of apprenticeship they offer so that they could spend as much of their own levy contribution as possible.

Because of this, there have been calls for more flexibility in how the levy can be spent. The response to these calls should have been to allow a broader range of training to be funded by the levy, not just apprenticeships. What happened instead was that the minimum duration of apprenticeships was decreased and foundation apprenticeships were introduced.

The issue with broadening the eligibility for levy funding is that, although in the early days of the levy there was a considerable underspend, there is now little or no slack in the system. For the levy to be used for training other than apprenticeships, the amount of levy funding spent on apprenticeships will need to be reduced unless the levy contribution is increased or other sources of funding are identified. The recent removal of funding for level 7 apprenticeships is a step in this direction.

We have suggested an approach to technical education which keeps occupational standards at the heart of the system but which offers different pathways to achieving occupational competence. Part of the rationale for this approach is to allocate limited funds more efficiently.

For example, if we look at the early years educator apprenticeship in Table 9,[30] there were 15,302 starts, of which 30% were under 19, 38% were 19-24 and 33% were 25 and over.

With the current approach, all apprentices receive the same funding:[31]

15,302 (starts) * £7,000 (maximum funding)

Total funding = £107,114,000 over 18 months

Future approach is for those under 25 to take an apprenticeship:

Under 25: 10,297 * £7,000

Total under 25 funding = £72,079,000 over 18 months

The standalone EPA will also be used by and aimed predominantly at over 25s. If we assume that EPA costs are 20% of the total cost (20% of £7,000 = £1,400), and that the apprentice needs no more than half of the apprenticeship training (nine months for this 18-month standard), then the provider funding should be 50% of the total funding minus the cost of the EPA (so £7,000 minus the £1,400 EPA cost = £5,600 and 50% of £5,600 is £2,800):

30 Skills England (updated June 2025) Qualification finder: Early years educator.

31 There are some incentives for employers taking on young apprentices, including cash payments and zero national insurance, but for the sake of simplicity we have not included these incentives in this analysis.

Over 25: 5,005 * £4,200 (provider funding of £2,800 plus EPA cost of £1,400)

Total over 25 funding = £21,021,000

Therefore, the total funding (for under 25s and over 25s) would be £93,100,000, a saving of £14,014,000. This saving of around 13% is just an example and will not be the same for all apprenticeship standards because the costs depend on the duration of the programme and the savings on the mix of ages taking the standard. However, if this figure is used to estimate all apprenticeships, this approach could potentially save approximately £325 million.

In practice, the savings may not be this high because some students drop out, which means that the full funding is not paid to the provider. However, it is also possible that some adults would need less than half of the training to be ready for the EPA.

Another approach to making levy funding more flexible is to stop funding the 78,850 apprentices aged 16-18 who started an apprenticeship in 2023/24. Instead of receiving levy funding, these apprenticeships should be funded through the same rules as other 16-19 funding, as part of an annual funding allocation.[32] Apprenticeships for this age group could then be treated as study programmes, as for other 16-19 qualifications, and this would make it more straightforward to fund and provide additional education and training that would broaden the apprenticeship. For employers, particularly SMEs, it should also make it more straightforward as it may be possible to take on an apprenticeship without using the digital apprenticeship service. Each apprenticeship will cost less to the Exchequer than the equivalent classroom-based qualification and the apprentice will also be paying tax so this approach might lead to some savings in government finances. And of course, the apprentice's path into employment is more straightforward than for classroom-based qualifications.

COST–BENEFIT BALANCE OF EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN SKILLS

The cost of an apprenticeship to an employer is probably more important than the amount the government pays towards their off-the-job training. Unlike other countries,[33] we do not routinely carry out surveys on the real costs of apprenticeship – such as salaries and existing staff spending time training and mentoring the apprentice – and the benefits to the employer. In countries with strong apprenticeship systems, during an apprenticeship, employers tend to break even. In England, employers are likely to lose money if the apprentice does not stay after completing their apprenticeship.

If the Department for Work and Pensions and Skills England want employers to invest more in skills, they need to better understand the costs and benefits of their investment. To date, most of the focus has been on how much an employer pays a provider for training, but this is a relatively small part of the cost.

Comparative evidence from England, Germany and Austria shows that employers in England have higher net costs when delivering apprenticeships.[34] In 2024, in England, for employers training a heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) apprentice, there was a net cost of around £35,500 over the course of the apprenticeship. This

32 Education and Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education (March 2023) 16 to 19 education: funding guidance.

33 For example, Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (2025) Is training apprentices worthwhile? Company perspectives on costs, benefits and training quality 2025.

34 Erickson, E., Grollmann, P., Hefler, G., Hogarth, T., Lennartz, C. and Markowitsch, J. (2025) Apprenticeship costs in Germany, Austria and England: A matched plant study. A report to the Gatsby Foundation.

compares with a cost of approximately £14,200 in Germany, and a net benefit of just over £9,000 in Austria. The main reason for the differences is wage costs, including taxes, social contributions and other labour costs. In England, the average wage cost for an apprentice HVAC engineer was £27,000 a year over the three years of the apprenticeship. This compares with £10,182 in Germany and £18,026 in Austria.

If Skills England wants to substantially increase the number of apprentices beyond 50,000 in the next three years, it will need to find ways to improve the cost–benefit balance for employers. Germany and Austria are also examples of the value of routinely collecting reliable data on employer costs. In both countries, research-based surveys provide solid estimates on the full costs and benefits of employer participation in apprenticeship training, supporting a more holistic understanding of how the skills system functions.

In Annex 3 we suggest the data the government needs to collect to understand the full costs and benefits of apprenticeships to employers.[35] This data needs to be collected in such a way that it is possible to compare the costs and benefits of apprenticeships based on different standards, the size and location of employers and also on the demographics of the apprentice. If apprenticeship employer data and HMRC tax data were better linked, much of this could be done by analysing administrative datasets.

35 We based this analysis on Muehlemann, S. and Wolter, S.C. (2014) Return on investment of apprenticeship systems for enterprises: Evidence from cost–benefit analyses. IZA Journal of Labour Policy, Vol 3(25).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the evolution and current state of the English apprenticeship system by analysing available data on labour market coverage, the contribution of apprenticeships to the labour market, apprentice age demographics and the nature of occupational standards. We have also compared the apprenticeship system in England to international systems. The evidence presented reveals a system under growing strain – both from the increasing complexity and specialisation of standards, and from the competing demands placed on apprenticeships to serve young entrants and experienced adults alike.

A key theme throughout the analysis is that the all-age model of apprenticeship, though introduced with the aim of widening participation, has diluted the ability of apprenticeships to act as a structured route into skilled employment for young people. Apprenticeships in England now span an unusually large number of occupations, many of which do not fall under the apprenticeship umbrella in other countries. In contrast, international systems tend to distinguish more clearly between initial vocational education for young people and continuing vocational education for adults, with the former designed to support transition into the labour market and the latter to enable reskilling or upskilling and progression for those already in work.

The sheer number and granularity of occupational standards in England – far higher than in comparator countries – is indicative of a system that has allowed employer preferences to define standards without sufficient challenge, moderation or consensus. This has led to duplication, over-specialisation and, in some cases, the creation of apprenticeships that are not appropriate for new entrants. Analysis confirms that the current standards are spread thinly across the labour market, are often not matched to real demand and do not address skills shortages in key sectors. Moreover, apprenticeship take-up by young people is declining, while large numbers of existing employees with more than a year in the job are taking apprenticeships primarily to upskill while they are in work. While existing employees need training, a full apprenticeship may not be the best way for them to get that training.

The system needs rebalancing. Apprenticeships should be retained as a high-quality route into employment for young people, aligned with broad occupational entry points rather than niche job roles. For adults, technical education should offer more flexible, modular and cost-effective training solutions, including the possibility of taking standalone EPAs supported by tailored provision. This would preserve the integrity and public recognition of the apprenticeship brand while enabling the system to meet a wider range of skills needs without unnecessary duplication or cost.

Given that current apprenticeship provision accounts for around 99% of the £2.5 billion levy spend, making the levy more flexible will require structural and financial changes. The government should fully fund apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds from general taxation instead of using the levy. The long-term benefits to the Exchequer of young people taking apprentices should justify this investment.

For existing employees, the apprenticeship levy should be reformed to support a broader suite of training options, including taught qualifications, short courses and preparation for EPAs.

At the heart of this approach lies a renewed commitment to using public funds efficiently and fairly. Cost–benefit data for apprenticeships should be systematically collected to understand the real costs to employers and to inform any future incentives or subsidies. The system must also develop a more sophisticated understanding of occupational progression: who starts an apprenticeship, the occupation they hold during and after training, and how their careers unfold. This kind of insight is essential if apprenticeships are to remain relevant and responsive in a rapidly evolving labour market.

If Skills England and policymakers are to develop the value of apprenticeships they must act decisively. This means anchoring apprenticeships in a smaller set of broad, high-value occupational standards; ensuring funding mechanisms distinguish more clearly between the needs of young people and adults; maintaining the integrity and rigour of independent assessment; and building the data infrastructure needed to support long-term planning and evaluation.

The future of technical education in England does not depend on expansion alone, but on having a clear purpose, on differentiating different types of training and on having an unwavering focus on delivering occupational competence in ways that are meaningful to learners, employers and the wider economy.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

APPRENTICESHIPS AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Findings:

- Apprenticeships in England cover an unusually large number of occupations that would not traditionally have had apprenticeships.
- Apprenticeship standards are spread thinly and do not match demand or address skills shortages in key sectors.
- There is a decrease in young people starting apprenticeships, while large numbers of existing employees who have been in a job for more than a year are taking apprenticeships.
- There is a lack of granular labour market information to help government design apprenticeship policy and to enable apprenticeships to be able to respond to demand, for instance, is demand high because of a lack of skills or because of working conditions?

Recommendations:

- Rebalance the system and prioritise apprenticeships as a high-quality route into employment for young people with broad occupational entry points.
- Create a system with sufficient challenge, moderation and consensus to define appropriate occupational standards.
- Develop more flexible approaches to enable adults to achieve and maintain occupational competence.
- Improve the quality of data to support decision-making by government, employers and learners. This should include:
  - cost-benefit analysis to understand the real costs of apprenticeships for employers to inform future incentives or subsidies

– progression data to understand who enters an apprenticeship, their occupation when they start and when they complete and how their careers unfold

THE NATURE OF OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

Findings:

- The all-age model has diluted apprenticeships and created a system with competing demands: supporting young entrants into the labour market and reskilling and upskilling for experienced adults.
- This one-size-fits-all approach to apprenticeships – young people's entry to employment and the upskilling or reskilling of existing employees – has created an overly complex set of standards which does not support high-quality training or ensure efficient use of public finances.
- The increasing complexity has resulted in duplicated and over-specialised standards, many of which are not suitable for new entrants.
- Those adults who are upskilling through apprenticeships would be better served by different types of training instead of a full apprenticeship.
- Employers are using apprenticeships to access funding for in-work training for their existing employees.

Recommendations:

- Retain apprenticeships as an entry route into employment for young people and develop a reskilling and upskilling system for adults to avoid unnecessary duplication and costs.
- Rationalise occupational standards to reduce duplication and over-specialisation.
- Develop flexible, modular and cost-effective training to enable existing employees to achieve and maintain occupational competence, include the possibility of EPAs being taken as a standalone assessment of competency.
- Introduce flexibility in how the levy can be spent to support changes. Government should fully fund apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds from general taxation not from the levy fund, and the levy should support a broader suite of training options for learners over 25.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Findings:

- International systems distinguish more clearly between initial vocational education for young people and continuing vocational education for adults, with the former designed to support transition into the labour market and the latter to enable reskilling or upskilling and progression for those already in work.
- In other countries, employer bodies enable intercompany or branch training and assure the quality of on-the-job training.
- In other countries, options have unique codes and data is collected on them to understand how apprenticeships meet labour market needs.

Recommendations:

- Retain apprenticeships as an entry route into employment for young people and develop a reskilling and upskilling system for adults to avoid unnecessary duplication and costs.
- Explore intercompany training to encourage SMEs in particular to take on apprentices even when they cannot offer all the experience the apprentice needs.
- Skills England should ensure apprenticeship data is collected at option level rather than standard level.

ANNEX 1: FOUNDATION APPRENTICESHIPS

The introduction of foundation apprenticeships appears confusing and potentially counterproductive (for further analyses see Hayes and Searle[36]). Foundation apprenticeships have been promoted as eight-month level 2 programmes intended as a work-based option for those not ready for a full apprenticeship. But it is not clear what aspects of the foundation apprenticeship make them more likely to enable a young person to move from being NEET to a sustained destination compared to a traditional level 2 apprenticeship.

Skills England describe foundation apprenticeships[37] as full apprenticeships,[38] which means they are subject to the same off-the-job training and minimum wage rules. The foundation apprenticeship involves:

- paid employment with holiday leave
- hands-on-experience in a sector/role of interest
- at least 20% off-the-job training
- formal assessment which leads to a nationally recognised qualification

Foundation apprenticeships are available in growth sectors – construction, digital, social care, engineering and manufacturing – which also raises questions. These sectors require strong technical foundations and are unlikely to benefit from providing short, introductory placements. A more appropriate use of foundation apprenticeships might be in sectors like hospitality or retail, where the focus is on essential skills and work readiness. No matter how they are targeted, calling them apprenticeships risks confusing employers and young people, and devaluing the apprenticeship brand.

36 Hayes, R. and Searle, E. (2025) The ghost of provisions past: How can the government make a success of foundation apprenticeships? Report to the Gatsby Foundation.

37 Skills England (accessed 2026) Apprenticeship finder: Search the apprenticeships.

38 Mitchell, J. (2025) An introduction to foundation apprenticeships. Skills England blog.

ANNEX 2: CRITERIA FOR OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

A. Social recognition and codification:

- The occupation reflects a shared understanding of expertise and responsibility.
- It exists independently of its educational description and is widely recognised by employers and workers.
- The occupation has recognised job frameworks, professional standards or collective agreements that define the work and the level of competence expected.

B. Labour market validity:

- The occupation appears in recognised classification systems and labour market data.
- It serves a clear economic or service function that can be found across multiple sectors or employer types.
- Demand for the occupation is stable and measurable.

C. Occupational coherence and autonomy:

- The work involves a broad, related set of activities requiring judgement and problem-solving.
- The occupation allows for progression and professional development.
- Standards should avoid breaking work down into excessively narrow or procedural tasks.

D. Educational and developmental value:

- The standard should support learning, progression and identity formation – not just task performance.
- It should connect to underpinning knowledge and allow learners to develop adaptability and confidence.
- The structure of the standard should translate clearly into curriculum and assessment design.

E. Social purpose and inclusiveness:

- The occupation contributes to wider social and civic purposes such as well-being, safety or sustainability.
- Entry routes are open and transparent, supporting equality of opportunity.
- The standard should make clear the professional responsibilities that accompany occupational competence.

F. Governance and balance of influence:

- Standards should be developed through genuine collaboration among employers, educators, workers and regulators.
- Decision-making should be transparent and evidence based.

G. Conceptual discipline:

- Terms such as 'skill' and 'competence' should be used consistently and clearly.
- Every knowledge, skill and behaviour should relate directly to at least one occupational duty, but duties must represent coherent practice rather than isolated actions.

ANNEX 3: COST–BENEFIT DATA

To understand the costs to employers, government needs the following information.

COSTS TO THE EMPLOYER

Apprentice pay: This includes regular wages, taxes, any additional payments and support, such as help with travel, food or living costs.

Time spent training apprentices: Apprentices need instruction and supervision. This has a cost because experienced staff and external trainers spend time training apprentices instead of doing their usual productive work.

Recruitment and administration: It costs employers to recruit apprentices and manage apprenticeship paperwork. This includes the staff time needed to carry out these tasks.

Equipment and facilities: Apprentices may require dedicated machinery, tools or workspace. Costs can include the use of company training centres.

Learning materials and equipment: This includes books, learning software, videos, protective clothing, tools and materials used during training, particularly where these are used for learning rather than productive work.

Other related costs: This includes fees for external courses, payments to third parties, and any taxes or compulsory charges linked to apprenticeship training.

BENEFITS TO THE EMPLOYER

Employers also benefit from the work apprentices do while they are training. These benefits fall into two main areas:

Contribution to skilled work: Apprentices spend part of their time doing skilled tasks. The value of this work is estimated by asking what it would have cost the employer to employ a fully skilled worker to do the same tasks, adjusted to reflect that apprentices are usually less productive than experienced staff.

Contribution to unskilled or routine work: Apprentices also carry out routine or unskilled tasks. The value of this work is estimated by the cost the employer would otherwise have faced in hiring an unskilled worker. In most cases, apprentices are assumed to be fully productive in these tasks.

The Gatsby Charitable Foundation
The Peak, 5 Wilton Road, London SW1V 1AP
T +44 (0)20 7410 0330 www.gatsby.org.uk
Registered Charity number 251988

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