



# A short guide to FE and skills across the four countries of the UK

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**February 2024**

Making Education Relevant

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The world is changing fast and education needs to keep up. Edge is an independent, politically impartial education foundation. We want education to be relevant to the twenty-first century. We gather evidence through research and real world projects and partnerships and use this to lead the debate and influence policy and practice.

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# Introduction

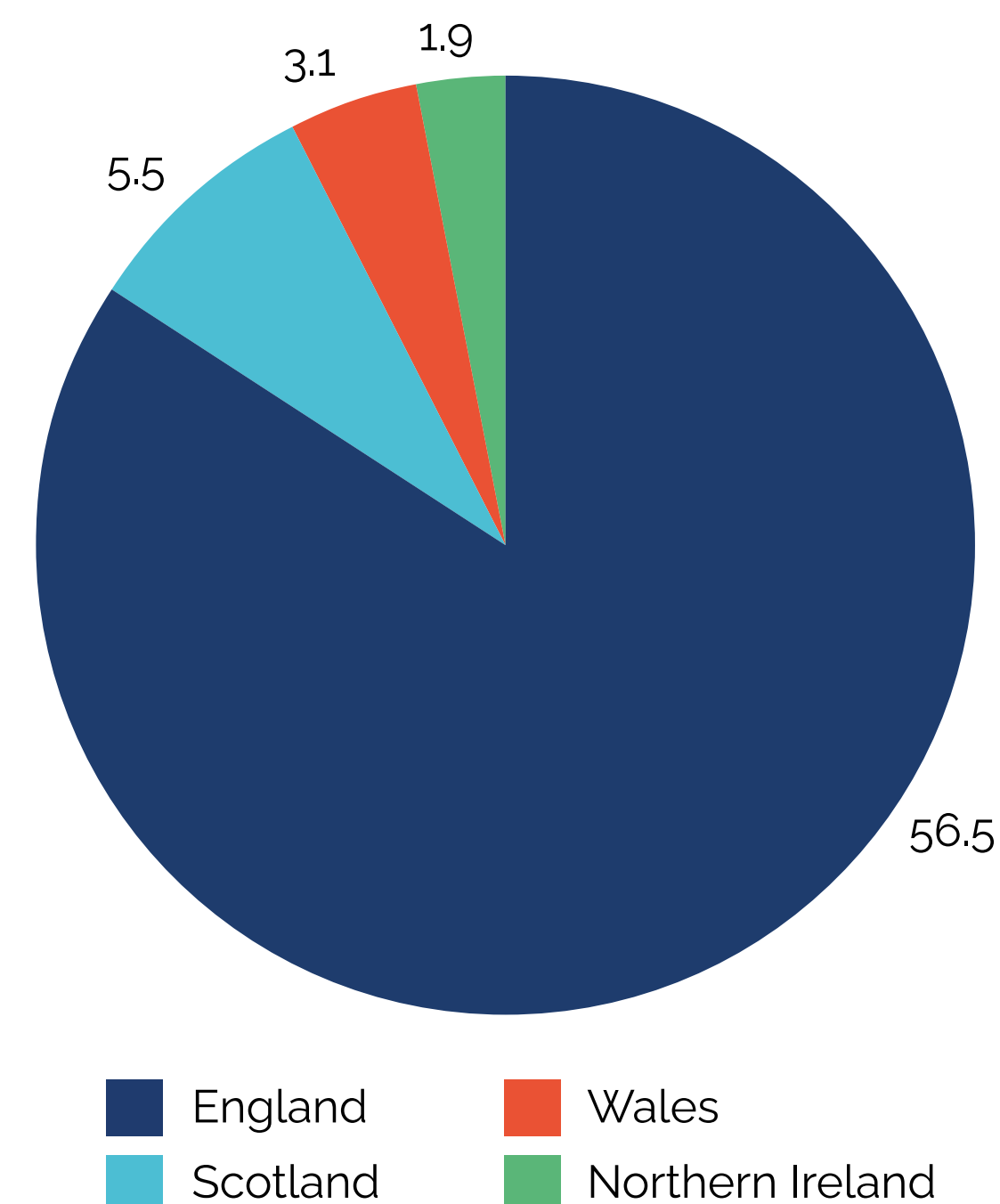
Since democratic devolution in the late 1990s, each nation in the UK has been free to develop its own approach to education and skills. This has created a patchwork of policy across the UK, with each nation choosing a path that fits the needs of its young people and economy. From school inspections, explored in Edge's 2021 report, [Inspection across the UK: how the four nations intend to contribute to school improvement](#), to apprenticeships, each nation has developed its own system. For example, Scotland is unique in offering Foundation Apprenticeships which pupils can complete while still in school, alongside their other studies.

However, the divergence of devolved policy led to some confusion about how these different systems operate. As the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development set out in a recent report, [Devolution and evolution in UK skills policy](#), 'there is a real lack of intra-UK research, compared

with a broad range of internationally focused work' when it comes to skills. Edge examined the FE and skills sector in our 2018 report, [FE and skills across the four countries of the UK](#), which made the case for policymakers to learn from the different approaches, rather than transplant whole policies from one nation to another. Policy in England, with its population of 56.5 million, will undoubtedly differ from policy in Northern Ireland, which is home to 1.9 million people (see Figure 1).

However, as we demonstrate in our 2018 report, there is also value in some form of standardisation across the UK, such as National Occupation Standards (NOS), which allow industry-specific skills and competencies to be recognised across the UK (see our 2021 report, [Perspectives on National Occupational Standards: What do users think?](#), for more on our work here). In a recent, [National Occupational Standards Strategy 2022 and beyond](#), the governments of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, reiterated their support for NOS and the value they bring, stating that 'the three governments are committed to retaining NOS as a UK-wide product'.

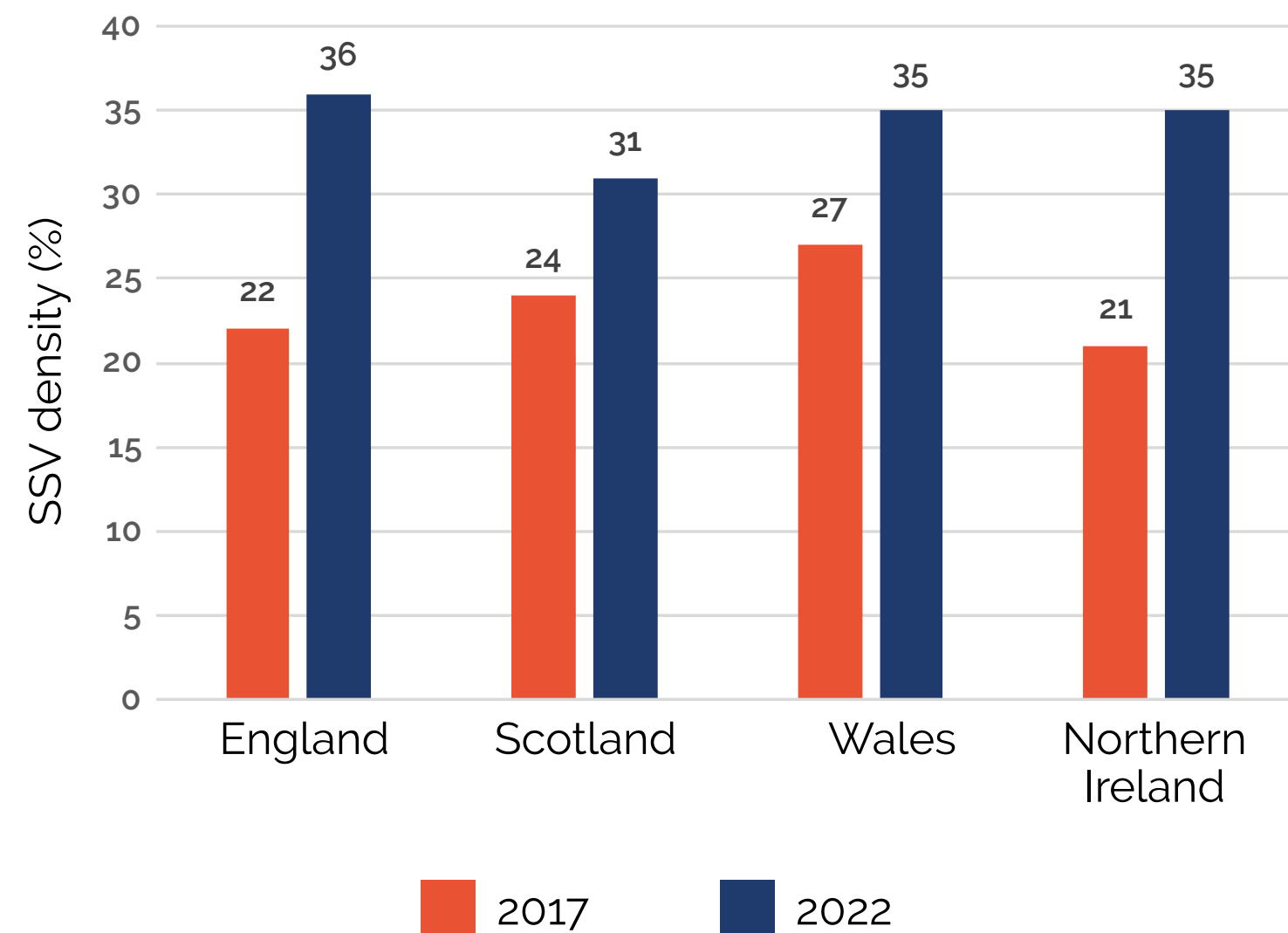
Figure 1: Population of the UK by nation (in millions)



Source: Office of National Statistics, published December 2022

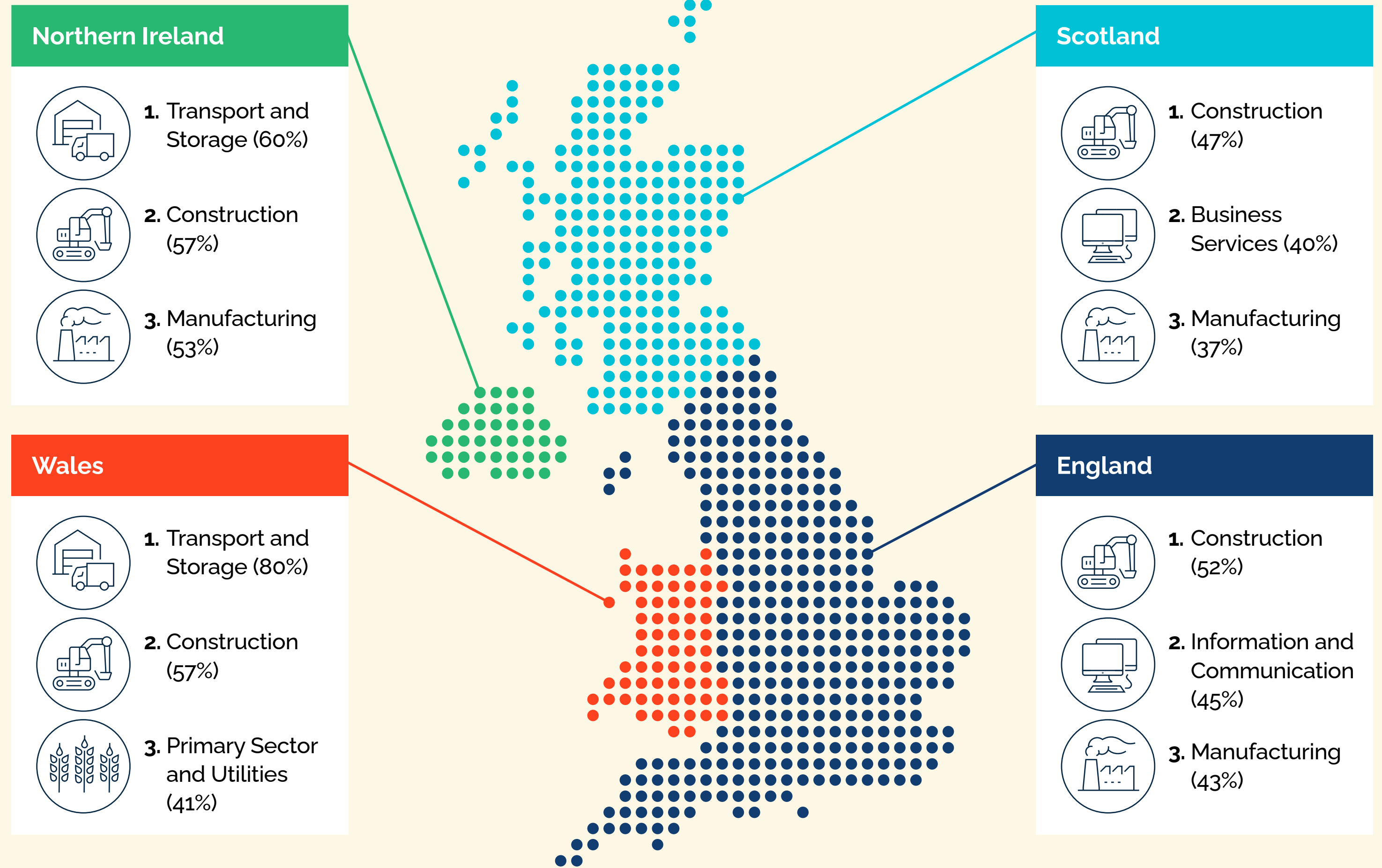
Since Edge's report was published, we have seen new challenges emerge, such as Covid-19 and advances in AI, that have laid bare the stark skills shortages crisis facing each nation (see Figures 2 and 3). These challenges have galvanised the UK administrations to take new approaches to ensure their skills systems are more adaptive and flexible. In light of these policy developments, we have published this guide to help clarify the approaches to post-16 education and skills across the four nations.

**Figure 2: Skills shortages vacancy (SSV) density by nation, 2017 and 2022 (%)**



Source: Department for Education, Employer Skills Survey 2022

**Figure 3: Sectors with largest SSV density by nation**



Source: Employer Skills Survey 2022

# Policy framework

*Each nation has seen shifts in its policy context owing to the changing needs of their skills system, facilitated by a wide range of reviews and legislation. Some changes have been quite large-scale, such as the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act, which established a new body (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, 'CTER') to oversee the entire tertiary education landscape in Wales.*

Shared challenges have also paved the way for similar policy responses across the nations. For example, all nations will have to grapple with the issue of an ageing workforce (the Industrial Strategy Council's 2019 research paper, [UK Skills Mismatch in 2030](#), estimates that 80% of the UK's 2030 workforce are already in the workforce). In response to this challenge, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have all made a commitment to deliver lifelong learning in their recent skills strategies, while England pledged to introduce a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (later renamed to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement) from 2025 in its 2022 Skills and Post-16 Education Act. A full list of the policy changes can be found in the timeline at the end of this chapter.



### England

Arguably, some of the most significant changes to the post-16 education policy landscape in recent years can be characterised by a drive to improve employer engagement in the skills system, reform of technical education – particularly at Level 3, increased regional devolution, and a commitment to expand access to lifelong learning.



'Skills' is considered an integral part of the Government's flagship Levelling Up agenda. As then Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, set out in his October 2021 Autumn Statement, *'Higher skills lead to higher regional productivity and higher productivity leads to higher wages.'*<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the 2022 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper set out a target of 200,000 additional people completing high-quality skills training by 2030. The Skills for Jobs White Paper, published in 2021, presented a comprehensive reform agenda to ensure that the skills system is flexible, employer-driven, and responsive to changing labour market demands. It set an ambition to advance technical education and promote lifelong learning. This vision was later supported by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act. Passed in 2022, the Act placed local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) on a statutory footing, created a legal requirement that colleges ensure work to meet local skills needs, and placed a duty on schools to offer all pupils encounters with providers of technical education.

The Act also gave the Government powers to introduce the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) from 2025 as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. The LLE will give all new learners access to tuition fee loans equivalent in value to four years

of post-18 education, that can be drawn from up to the age of 60. When the LLE was first announced, the Minister for Higher Education stated the Government's ambition to *'turn education from a narrow, set destination, into an accessible, long-term and flexible journey.'*<sup>3</sup> In support of this, the Government introduced the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Act, which passed in September 2023, to set fee limits for HE modules, short courses, and full courses to ensure that flexible learning doesn't come at a disproportionate cost.

The Baker Clause, introduced in 2017, mandates schools to allow learners access to a range of employers and education providers, including FE colleges, during the school day. In 2022, the clause was strengthened to make it legally enforceable. The Government is also pursuing reform of qualifications at RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3) and below to address complexity and weed out 'low value' qualifications.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/autumn-budget-and-spending-review-2021-speech>

<sup>3</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-02-24/debates/22022455000010/HigherEducationReform#contribution-05BF96BA-1BF6-4AEB-8642-E1F2C2D6AEB1>

### Scotland

There has been a drive for a holistic rethinking of education and skills in Scotland, with numerous reviews in recent years looking at school education, the skills system and tertiary education.

The Scottish skills system can be seen to be more carefully planned and managed than the more marketised approach of England. Scotland's [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#) (NSET), published in 2022, sets out the principles and actions needed to achieve a 'wellbeing economy' by 2032. Key proposals in its plan to develop a skilled workforce include a national digital academy to allow wider access to courses at SCQF Level 6 (RQF/CQFW Level 3), more shorter industry-facing courses, and a Talent Attraction programme to attract key skills and talent from the rest of the UK. The subsequent [report](#) in 2023 of the Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, led by James Withers, brought forward recommendations on how the public body landscape should be adapted to deliver the NSET.

The Scottish Government has also been focused on reform of its school system, stemming from the recommendations of the OECD's 2021 [report](#) on Scotland's Curriculum for

Excellence (CfE), which found that while CfE was largely the right approach for Scotland, it had failed to keep up to pace with new approaches and was out of step with the assessment system in the senior phase.

Professor Kenneth Muir's 2022 report, [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#), looked at structural and functional change of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Scotland, calling for them to be replaced with new bodies. Professor Louise Hayward's 2023 report, [It's Our Future – Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#), looked at reform of qualifications and assessment in the senior phase, recommending a reduction of exams in the senior phase and the introduction of a baccalaureate-style system. Alongside this, the final [report](#) on the National Discussion on Education, published in 2023, laid out a consensual vision for the future of Scottish education, following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

Scotland's approach to education and training for young people is based on the three policy pillars of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). GIRFEC is a framework for organisations working with young people to use as a guide to ensure that all children are given the right support at the right time. CfE is the curriculum for

Scottish schools for learners to follow from the age of 3-18, designed to be competency-based and holistic. The CfE was evaluated by the OECD in 2021, which criticised its inconsistent approach in the senior phase. DYW is a youth employment strategy to better prepare young people for the world of work, by linking businesses to education providers. It is an essential mechanism to provide the Young Person's Guarantee – a commitment by the Scottish Government to connect every 16- to 24-year-old in Scotland to the opportunity of a job, placement, training or volunteering with employers.

Scotland's transition to Net Zero is a forceful commitment by the current SNP government and underpins its agreement with the Scottish Green Party. A key consideration in this is the need to upskill and reskill to prepare for a just transition to a low carbon economy.

### Wales

In March 2022, the Welsh Government published [Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills](#), setting out how it plans to deliver a fair and equitable labour market in Wales that is flexible enough to adapt to the changes in policy and funding. The plan centres around five areas of action:

1. Strengthening the system to deliver the Young Person's Guarantee, giving everyone under the age of 25 access to an offer of work, education, training, or self-employment;
2. Tackling economic inequality to ensure no group is left behind;
3. Championing Fair Work for all;
4. Supporting people with a long-term health condition to work;
5. Nurturing a learning for life culture.

Similarly, delivering 'a platform for young people, fair work, skills and success' was listed as a key priority in Wales's [new economic model](#) published in November 2023.

There is also a strong focus on identifying and supporting young people who are at risk of becoming NEET (Not in

Education, Employment or Training). The Welsh Government has employed a two-pronged approach to this through the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework and the Young Person's Guarantee. The Framework provides guidance on how to identify those at risk of becoming NEET, broker appropriate support, ensure provision, monitor progress, and employment opportunities.

Like Scotland, Wales is committed to a Just Transition and has published a [Net Zero Skills Action Plan](#) in support of this. A key action in the short-term is delivering the Green Personal Learner Accounts (PLAs) pilot. PLAs allow those over 19 and earning under £30,596 access to fully funded, flexible part-time courses. The Green PLAs pilot includes a list of approved courses in applicable sectors, such as energy, construction, engineering and manufacturing, and is not subject to an earning cap.

Wales has been moving towards a more 'Made-for-Wales' education system in recent years, including a commitment to increase study through the medium of Welsh. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 created a new Curriculum for Wales in schools, which became mandatory for all Year 7 and 8 learners from September 2023. It has also developed a suite of Made-for-Wales GCSEs that will be introduced from 2025 and has recently completed a review of the 14-16 offer. This Wales-centric approach has been

reflected in the post-16 education sector. In its [Co-Operation Agreement](#) with Plaid Cymru in 2021, the Welsh Government committed to a number of wide-ranging policies, including taking forward reform of tertiary education, informed by the new national curriculum, an expansion of lifelong learning and workforce professional development and reform of vocational qualifications. Since then, the Government has passed The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act in 2022 which established the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), a new arms-length body to oversee and fund the entire post-16 education landscape, which is due to become operational in April 2024. The report on the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, commissioned by the Welsh Government, recommended a national strategy for vocational education and training, as well as a better understanding of labour market needs and how the education system is delivering on these.

Policy in Wales is underpinned by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which gives a legally binding common purpose for national Government, local government, local health boards and other specified public bodies. It presents a critical agenda which reflects a sustainable and prosperous vision for the future of Wales, including concerted action on education and skills.



## Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has embarked on an ambitious programme to transform itself into a ['10X economy'](#) by 2030 through increasing innovation tenfold over the 2020s. To deliver the skills aspect of the programme, the Department for the Economy published [Skills for a 10X economy – Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland](#) in 2022, setting out a whole Government strategic framework for the development of Northern Ireland's skills system to 2030. A key priority is the development of specific specialist skills to give Northern Ireland's relatively small economy a place to compete on the global stage. The strategy sets out how this should be achieved through increased take up of lower-level qualifications, including through remote delivery; a new lifelong learning project and action plan, and the introduction of a Better Jobs Pledge for businesses to sign up to.

Due to the collapse of power-sharing institutions in Stormont in February 2022, Northern Ireland currently lacks a functioning executive. To ensure transparency and accountability, the Department for the Economy published the [10X Delivery Plan 2023/24](#) in July 2023, setting out the actions to be taken by the Department and its partner organisations to move towards achievement of the 10X objectives by 2030. The Delivery Plan takes the place of the annual departmental Business Plan for 2023/24.

Northern Ireland's skills policy is informed by the [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer](#), which is sponsored by the Department for the Economy and Invest NI, and undertaken by Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) to provide a better understanding of the future skills needs across the NI economy.

As part of the commitments in the New Decade New Approach deal, the Department of Education appointed a panel, chaired by Dr Keir Bloomer, to undertake an Independent Review of Education. The final report, [Investing in a Better Future](#), was published in December 2023 and makes a number of wide-ranging recommendations, including establishing a new Government department to cover the entire education journey, raising the age of compulsory education to 18 and undertaking major curriculum reform. Following a consultation, it will be up to an incoming Minister to decide the Department's response to the report.

Like Wales and Scotland, preparation for a Just Transition is a key consideration in Northern Ireland's skills strategy. The Department for the Economy is in the process of developing a Circular Economy Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland. [Responses](#) to its public consultation on this indicate that the public consider design, innovation and technology skills as most critical to supporting the Circular Economy. The final strategy will be published in due course.



Date	Event	Country
April 2017	Baker Clause introduced as part of the Technical and Further Education Act	England
April 2017	Apprenticeship Levy introduced	UK-wide
May 2019	Report on Review of Post-18 Education and Funding (Augar Review) published	England
March 2020	One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative, Inclusive (the Cumberford-Little report) published	Scotland
January 2021	Skills for Jobs White Paper published	England
April 2021	Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act passed	Wales
June 2021	OECD report on Curriculum for Excellence published	Scotland
June 2021	Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research published	Scotland
January 2022	Baker clause strengthened	England
February 2022	Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper published	England
March 2022	Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education (Muir report) published	Scotland
March 2022	Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills published	Wales
March 2022	Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy published	Northern Ireland
March 2022	National Strategy for Economic Transformation published	Scotland
April 2022	Skills and Post-16 Education Act passed	England
September 2022	The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act passed	Wales
February 2023	Net Zero Skills Action Plan published	Wales
May 2023	Report on national discussion on education published	Scotland
June 2023	Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape (Withers report) published	Scotland
June 2023	Report of Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (Hayward report) published	Scotland
July 2023	Report of review of vocational qualifications published	Wales
September 2023	Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Act passed	England
December 2023	Report of Independent Review of Education published	Northern Ireland



# Governance arrangements and key agencies

*This section looks at the different governance bodies overseeing the education and skills landscape across the UK. These are likely to change in the near future as a new tertiary governance body for Wales is due to become operational in 2024 and a new legislation is due to be introduced in Scotland to establish a new qualifications body.*

## England

The governance of the skills system in England involves multiple stakeholders, including governmental departments, agencies, and sector bodies. The Department for Education (DfE) is primarily responsible for delivering education and skills policy, the brief for which is held by the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education. Within the DfE, the recently established Unit for Future Skills

seeks to improve the quality and accessibility of jobs and skills data to better understand skills mismatches and future demand. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) also plays a role in supporting employment and skills initiatives.

In addition to governmental departments, several key agencies and sector bodies play crucial roles in implementing and overseeing the skills system. These include:

- a) The **Education and Skills Funding Agency** (ESFA) is responsible for funding education and training for learners of all ages. It oversees the distribution of funding to education providers, including FE colleges and training providers. In recent years, around 60 per cent of the adult education budget has been devolved from the ESFA towards mayoral combined authorities.<sup>4</sup>
- b) The **Office for Students** (OfS) regulates higher education institutions in England. An independent review looking at the efficacy, governance, accountability and efficiency of the OfS is due to conclude in summer 2024.
- c) The **Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education** (IfATE) is responsible for developing and maintaining apprenticeship standards, ensuring they meet the needs of employers and provide relevant and high-quality training. It is also responsible for the classroom-based element of T Levels.
- d) The **Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation** (Ofqual) oversees qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England, including apprenticeships end point assessments.
- e) The **Office for Standards in Education** (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, including FE colleges.

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Library, Estimates: Spending of the Department for Education on adult education, post-16 education, further education and colleges, June 2023, p.37 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2023-0147/CDP-2023-0147.pdf>

### Scotland

The governance of the skills system in Scotland involves multiple stakeholders, including government departments and agencies. The Scottish Government, particularly the Directorate for Fair Work, Employability, and Skills, is responsible for skills policy and implementation.

Recent reviews, such as Kenneth Muir's review of education and James Withers' review of the skills delivery landscape, have called for changes to the functions of Scotland's governance agencies. Muir recommended the creation of three new national education bodies: a qualifications and assessment body, a national agency for Scottish education and an independent inspectorate body. The Scottish Government broadly accepted these recommendations in its [response](#). Withers recommended clarifying the remits and expectations of national agencies operating in the post-school skills space and the creation of a new national funding body to have responsibility for administering and overseeing the delivery of all publicly funded post-school learning and training provision. A response to the Withers review has not yet been published.

Key agencies and sector bodies also contribute to shaping and delivering the skills system in Scotland. These include:

- a) The **Scottish Funding Council** (SFC) is an arms-length body of the Scottish Government responsible for both funding and regulating universities and FE colleges. It also provides strategic direction for the college and university sectors. Colleges and universities agree the Outcome Agreement with SFC setting out how they will meet social and economic needs, which decides their funding allocation.
- b) **Skills Development Scotland** (SDS) is the national skills agency responsible for supporting individuals in their career journeys, providing career guidance, supporting workforce development and administering apprenticeships. Withers recommended that SDS be substantially reformed to focus singularly on career guidance. The review also proposed moving SDS's resources around the development of apprenticeships to the new qualifications body recommended by Muir.
- c) The **Scottish Qualifications Authority** (SQA) is responsible for accrediting, regulating and awarding qualifications in Scotland, ensuring they align with national standards and industry requirements. Muir recommended that a new body, Qualifications Scotland, take on SQA's awarding powers, while a new national

agency for Scottish education takes on its accrediting and regulating functions. While the Scottish Government has accepted his recommendations, Ministers confirmed in November 2022 that one body would be responsible for both awarding and regulating qualifications, against the recommendations of the OECD and Muir, but stressed that these functions would be completely independent of each other.<sup>5</sup> Withers also recommended that this body be responsible for overseeing the post-school qualifications landscape and for the development of all publicly funded post-school qualifications and awards. [The Programme for Government](#), released September 2023, confirmed that legislation will be introduced in 2023-24 to replace SQA and in December 2023, a [consultation](#) closed on the content of this Education Bill.

- d) **Education Scotland** is a Scottish Government executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education, including responsibility over the curriculum and inspection. The Muir Report recommended that the new role of school inspection be taken out of Education Scotland and into a new independent inspectorate body. The Scottish Government [broadly accepted](#) this, but has [consulted](#) on whether this should be a new separate executive agency or a new independent office-holder should be created for the role of HM Chief Inspector of Education for Scotland.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/questions-and-answers/question?ref=S6W-12733>

## Wales

Wales is currently on track to consolidate its various governance bodies in the post-16 education and skills space into one body responsible for the entire tertiary sector. The Department for Education and Skills hold overall responsibility for the skills agenda in Wales. Other key agencies and organisations include:

- a) **Qualifications Wales** – a Welsh Government-sponsored body, responsible for the recognition of awarding bodies and the review and approval of non-degree qualifications in Wales.
- b) **Higher Education Funding Council for Wales** – a public body responsible for funding and regulating higher education. This will be dissolved once the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research becomes operational in April 2024.
- c) **Estyn** – responsible for inspection education and training from early years all the way up to adult education, but not including universities. Estyn is independent from the Welsh Parliament but funded by the Welsh Government.
- d) **Careers Wales** – a wholly owned subsidiary of the Welsh Government, providing all-age, independent, impartial and bilingual Careers Information, Advice and Guidance.

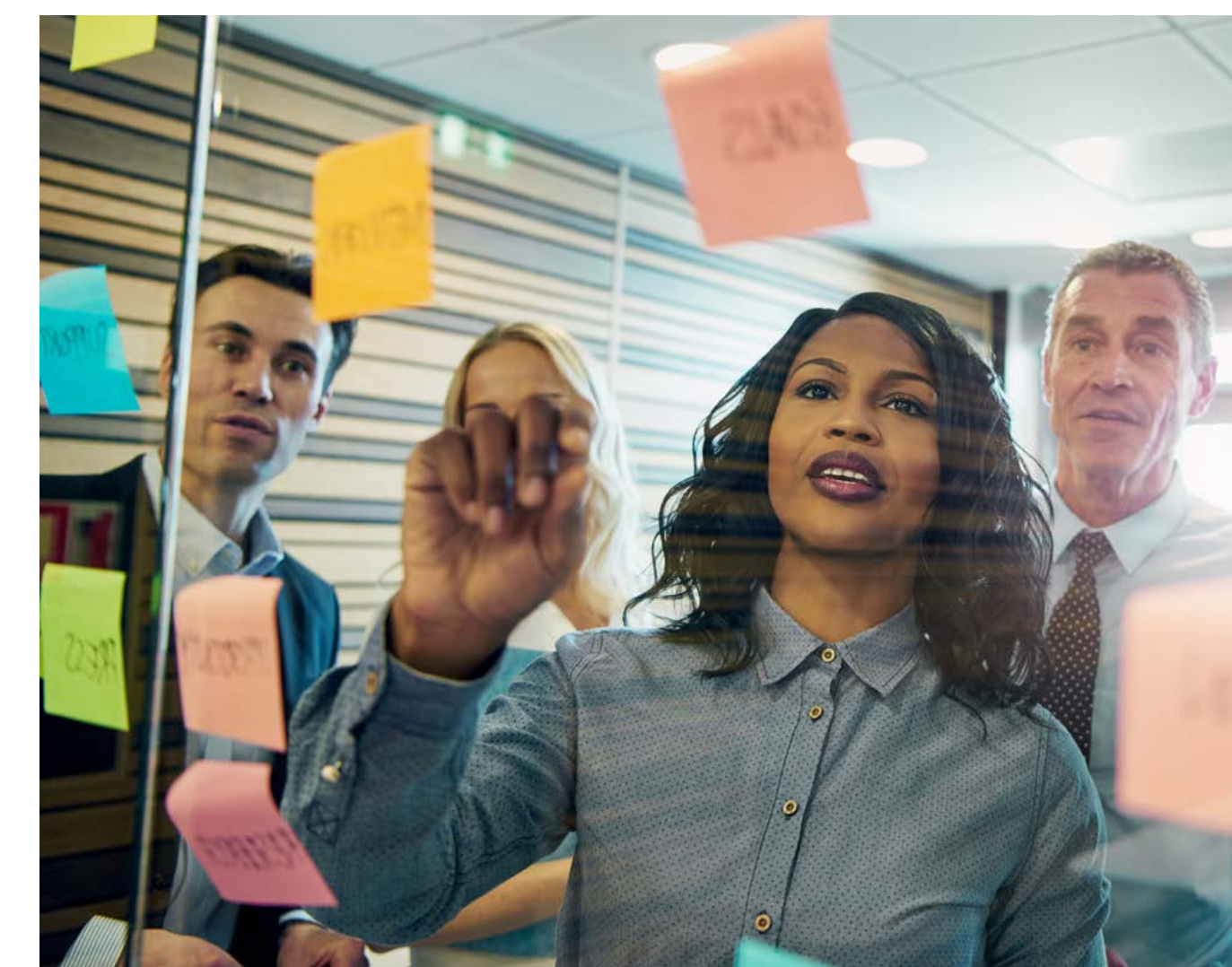
## Northern Ireland

Responsibility for skills and post 16 education, including post-16 careers advice, is primarily held in the Department for the Economy, while the Department for Education is responsible for pre-16 education. The report of the Independent Review of Education recommended that a unified department be established with responsibility for the entire education journey to allow a more holistic approach (subject to consideration by an incoming Minister).

Other key players include:

- a) **The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)** is a non-departmental public body, funded by the Department of Education, responsible for advising the Government on curriculum in schools and colleges, monitoring standards in qualifications and examinations, and awarding, accrediting, and regulating qualifications. The report of the Independent Review of Education recommended that the CCEA be split into two organisations with one responsible for curriculum and the other for assessment and qualifications.

- b) The **Education Authority** is a non-departmental body sponsored by the Department of Education, responsible for ensuring that efficient and effective primary and secondary education services are available to meet the needs of children and young people, and support for the provision of efficient and effective youth services.
- c) The **Education and Training Inspectorate** is part of the Department of Education, providing it with independent inspection services and policy advice, as well as other Government departments.



# Apprenticeships

*Apprenticeships are an integral part of any skills system, but these are designed and managed differently in each nation of the UK. Part of this involves ensuring that apprenticeships are aimed at the right ages and at the right levels. While policymakers in England have been grappling with how to address the decline in under-19s starting an apprenticeship (see Figure 4) the desire to get more adults involved in learning has led Northern Ireland to expand its apprenticeship programme to over 25s. We have also seen a desire across the nations to invest in more higher-level apprenticeships, as seen by the popularity in England of Degree Apprenticeships and of Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland.*



# Apprenticeships across UK

	Levels	Funding organisation	Regulator
England	<b>Intermediate</b> – RQF Level 2 (SCQF Level 5/CQFW Level 2)	Education and Skills Funding Agency	Ofqual
	<b>Advanced</b> – RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3)		
	<b>Higher</b> – RQF Levels 4-7 (SCQF Levels 7-10/CQFW Levels 4-7)		
	<b>Degree</b> – RQF Levels 6 and 7 (SCQF Level 10 and 11/CQFW Level 6 and 7)		
Scotland	<b>Foundation Apprenticeships</b> – SCQF Level 6 (RQF/CQFW Level 3) usually taken by learners in the senior phase of school	Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Funding Council and Student Awards Agency Scotland	Scottish Qualifications Authority
	<b>Modern Apprenticeships</b> that lead to the award of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) between SCQF Levels 5 and 11 (RQF/CQFW Levels 2-7)		
	<b>Graduate Apprenticeships</b> available from Diploma up to Master's degree level at SCQF Levels 9 to 11 (RQF/CQFW Levels 6 to 7)		
Wales	<b>Foundation Apprenticeships</b> at CQFW Level 2 (RQF Level 2/SCQF Level 5)	Welsh Government (due to move to Commission for Tertiary Education and Research)	Qualification Wales (due to move to Commission for Tertiary Education and Research)
	<b>Apprenticeships</b> at CQFW Level 3 (RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6)		
	<b>Higher Apprenticeships</b> at CQFW Levels 4 and 5 (RQF Levels 4 and 5/SCQF Levels 7 and 8)		
	<b>Degree Apprenticeships</b> at CQFW Level 6 (RQF Level 6/SCQF Level 9)		
Northern Ireland	<b>ApprenticeshipsNI</b> at RQF Levels 2 and 3 (CQFW Levels 2 and 3/ SCQF Levels 5 and 6)	Department for the Economy	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
	<b>Higher Level Apprenticeships</b> from RQF Levels 4-7 (CQFW Levels 4-7/ SCQF Levels 7-11)		

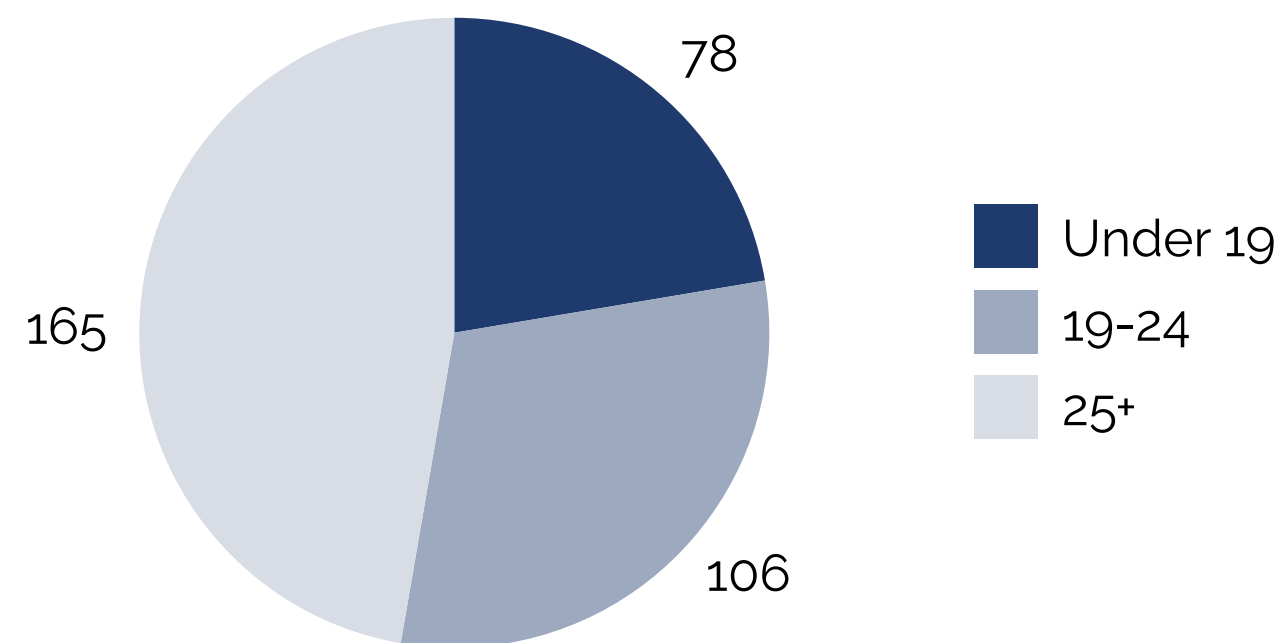
## England

Apprenticeship programmes in England are developed and approved by IfATE, with standards developed by employer groups known as 'trailblazers'. They are regulated by Ofqual. Apprentices must spend at least 20% of the programme on off-the-job training at an approved provider. At the end of their apprenticeship, they must complete an end-point assessment (EPA), developed by employers in the sector.

Apprenticeships range from intermediate at RQF Level 2 (SCQF Level 5/CQFW Level 2) to Degree Apprenticeships at RQF Levels 6 and 7 (SCQF Level 10 and 11/CQFW Level 6 and 7). There were 349,190 apprenticeships starts in 2021/22, over half (52.6%) of which were under 25 years old and 22.2% were under 19 (see Figure 4). The vast majority (73%) of apprenticeships starts were at RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3) and above (see Figure 5) and the most popular sectors were Health, Public Services and Care and Business, Administration and Law.

Funding-wise, employers with an annual wage bill of over £3 million pay the Apprenticeship Levy (charged at 0.5% of their annual wage bill) which they can then use to fund apprenticeships in their organisation. Levy-paying employers can also transfer up to 25% of their levy to other businesses,

**Figure 4: Apprenticeships starts by age in England 2021/22 (thousands)**



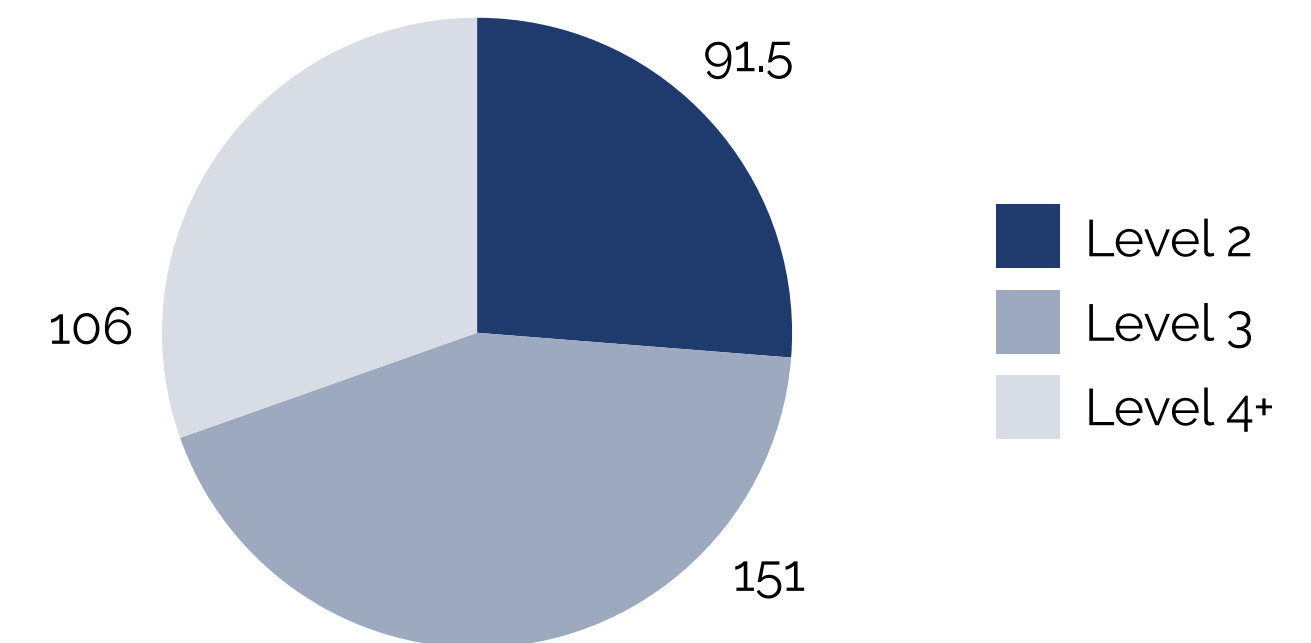
Source: Department for Education

allowing SMEs access to levy funds. For those with a wage bill below £3 million, the ESFA pay 95-100% of their apprenticeship training costs depending on the size of the business.

Traineeships are courses to prepare for apprenticeships, lasting from 6 weeks up to 1 year. As of August 2023, these are no longer a standalone national programme but are instead funded through the 16-19 study programme and the non-devolved adult education budget.

A concern that policymakers have been grappling with is the decline in both the number of young people starting an apprenticeship and the number of people starting

**Figure 5: Apprenticeships starts by level in England 2021/22 (thousands)**



Source: Department for Education

intermediate apprenticeships at RQF Level 2 (SCQF Level 5/CQFW Level 2). Starts were particularly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, but had been declining since the introduction of the levy in 2017. The levy was introduced to encourage large employers to invest more in high-quality training, but many fail to spend their full allocation. In a response to a written Parliamentary Question in November 2023, the Minister for Skills, Further and Higher Education confirmed that employers are not expected to spend their full levy funds as unused funds are funnelled back in apprenticeships for smaller businesses. The data provided in his response shows that 63.7% of levy-paying employers failed to spend their full levy funds in 2021/22.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-11-27/3788>



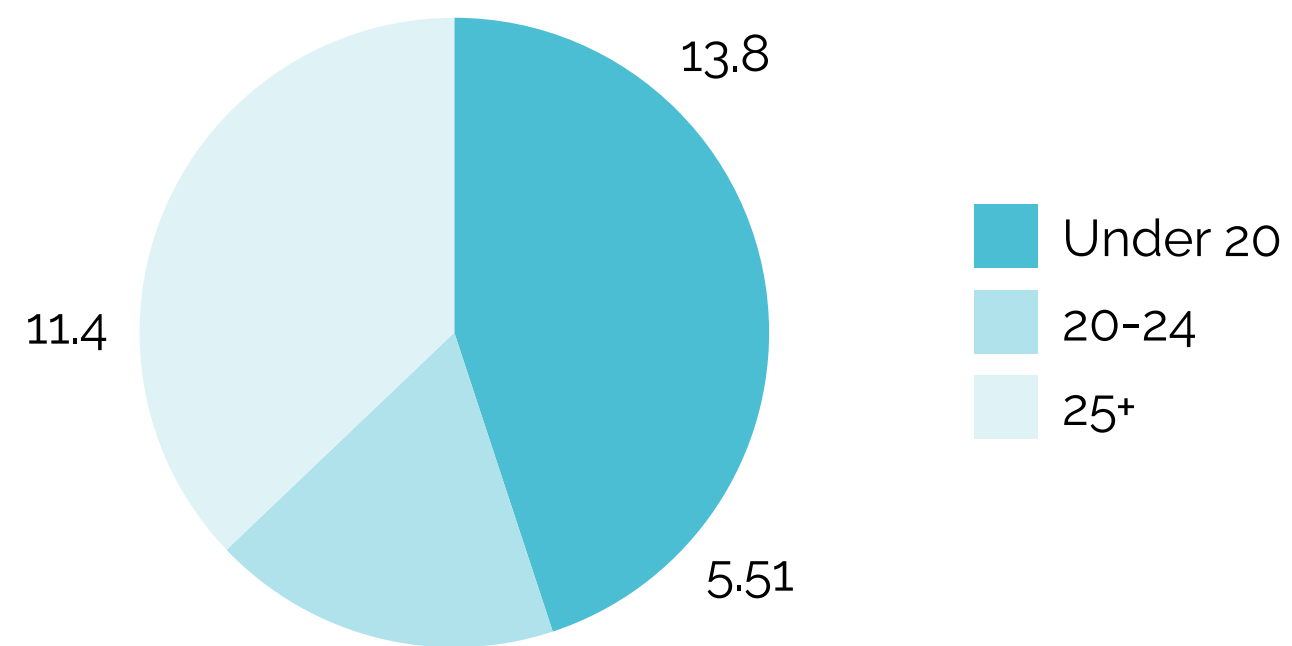
Scotland

Apprenticeships in Scotland are approved by the Apprenticeship Approvals Group, regulated by SQA, and funded by SDS. The Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB), an independent, industry-led body, ensures that apprenticeships meet the needs of businesses. Like Wales and Northern Ireland, apprenticeships in Scotland are assessed via frameworks rather than standards, with no mandatory end-point assessment.

Apprenticeships range from Foundation Apprenticeships at SCQF Level 6 (RQF/CQFW Level 3), usually taken by learners in the senior phase of school; Modern Apprenticeships that lead to the award of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) between SCQF Levels 5 and 11 (RQF/CQFW Levels 2-7), and Graduate Apprenticeships that are degree-level qualifications, available from Diploma up to Master's degree level at SCQF Levels 9 to 11 (RQF/CQFW Levels 6 to 7).

Modern Apprenticeships make up the bulk of apprenticeships in Scotland with 25,401 starts in 2021/22<sup>7</sup>,

**Figure 6: Apprenticeships starts by age in Scotland 2021/22 (thousands)**

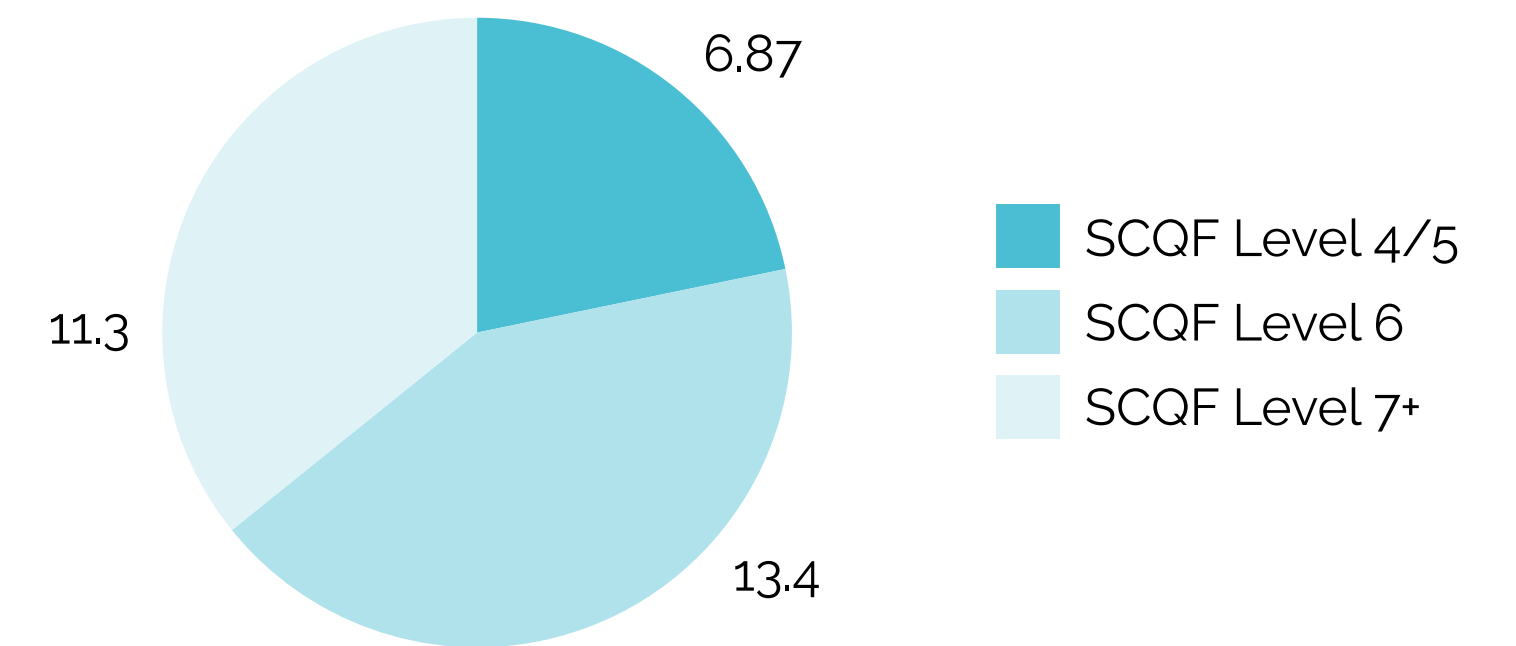


Source: Skills Development Scotland

compared to 4,122 Foundation Apprenticeships<sup>8</sup> and 1,166 Graduate Apprenticeships<sup>9</sup>. Under 20s made up almost half of apprenticeship starts (see Figure 6), while most apprentices opted for an apprenticeship at SCQF Level 6 (RQF/CQFW Level 3) as shown in Figure 7. The top two most popular industries for Modern Apprentices were Construction & Related and Sport, Health & Social Care.

Apprenticeship funding depends on the type of apprenticeship. Foundation Apprenticeships are fully funded by SDS, at no cost to the employer. The level of SDS

**Figure 7: Apprenticeships starts by level in Scotland 2021/22 (thousands)**



Source: Skills Development Scotland

contribution to Modern Apprenticeships differs according to the age of the apprentice, the qualification level, and the sector the apprenticeship is in.<sup>10</sup> Graduate Apprenticeships are funded by the SFC and Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). The apprentice applies to SAAS for tuition fees which are then paid directly to the college or university.

While Scottish employers with an annual wage bill over £3 million must pay the Apprenticeship Levy, they can use levy funds to pay for a range of vocational training programmes, not just apprenticeships.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/weujcv03/modern-apprenticeship-statistics-quarter-4-2021-22.pdf> (published May 2022)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/j4nfmwyz/foundation-apprenticeship-report-2022.pdf> (published March 2023)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/xe2nuwx5/graduate-apprenticeship-annual-report-2022.pdf> (published December 2022)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.apprenticeships.scot/for-employers/funding/>

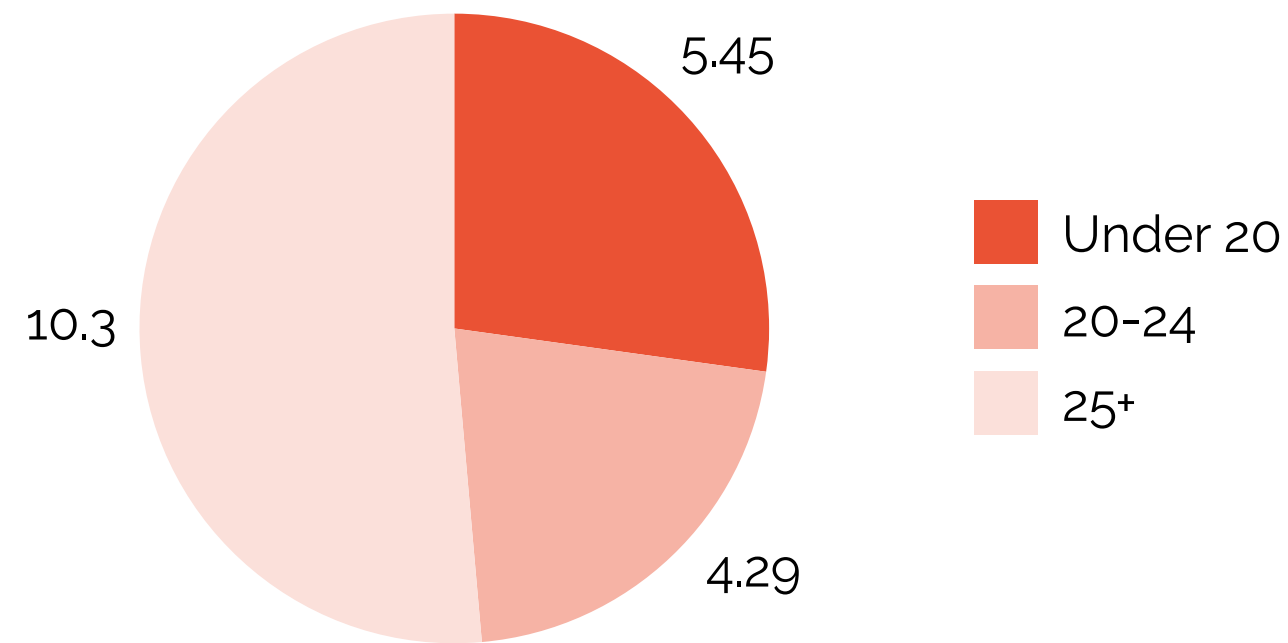
Wales

Apprenticeships below degree level in Wales are developed and funded by the Welsh Government and regulated by Qualifications Wales, while Degree Apprenticeships are funded by the Higher Funding Council for Wales (HFCW), although this will be soon be moved over to the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research. The Welsh Government covers the cost of registration, delivery and certification of all qualifications within the apprenticeship framework. The Wales Apprenticeship Advisory Board (WAAB) is an employer-led group, responsible for scoping and prioritising the future demand and content of apprenticeship frameworks in Wales.

Apprenticeships range from Foundation Apprenticeships at CQFW Level 2 (RQF Level 2/SCQF Level 5), Apprenticeships at CQFW Level 3 (RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6), Higher Apprenticeships at CQFW Levels 4 and 5 (RQF Levels 4 and 6/SCQF Levels 7 and 8) and Degree Apprenticeships at CQFW Level 6 (RQF Level 6/SCQF Level 9).

There were 20,040 apprenticeships starts in 2021/22, almost half of whom were under 25 years old, and 27% of whom were under 20 (see Figure 8).<sup>11</sup> Almost half of apprenticeship

Figure 8: Apprenticeships starts by age in Wales 2021/22 (thousands)

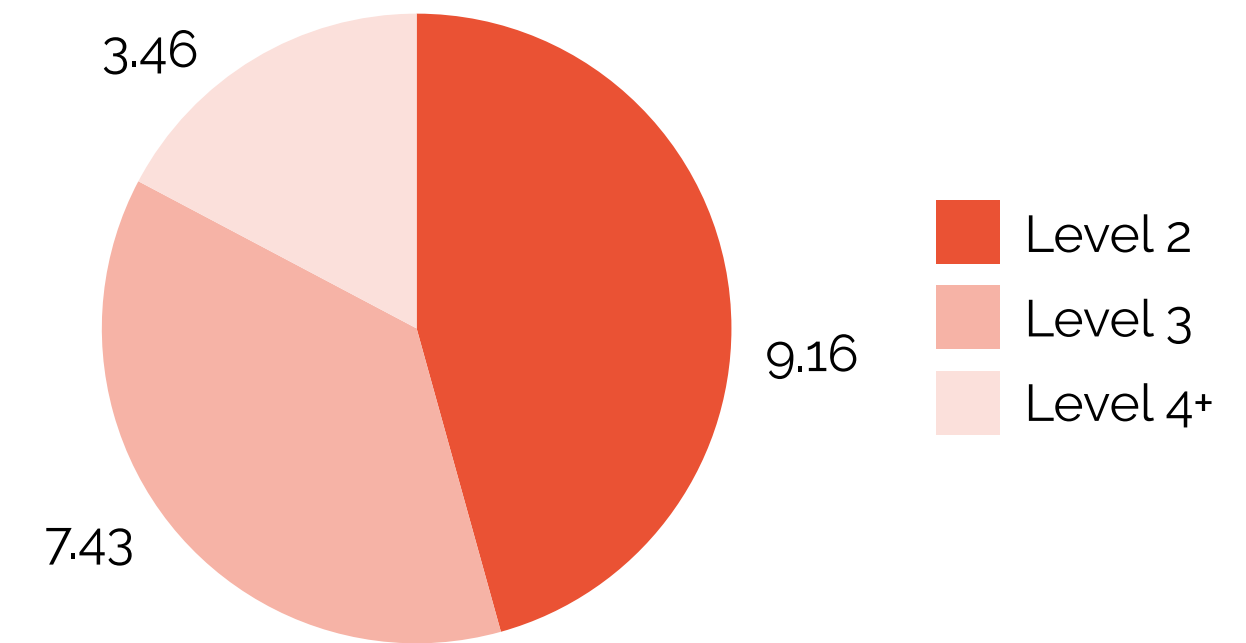


Source: Welsh Government

starts (46%) were at CQFW Level 2 (RQF Level 2/SCQF Level 5). The most popular industry by far was Healthcare and Public Services, which made up 40% of all starts. The Welsh Government has committed to a target of creating 125,000 apprenticeships over the 2021-26 Senedd term.

Responsibility for apprenticeships will transfer to the CTER from April 2024. The Commission aims to establish a new Wales-specific apprenticeship system that is flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers and supports the development of a robust and innovative Welsh economy.

Figure 9: Apprenticeships starts by level in Wales 2021/22 (thousands)



Source: Welsh Government

Like Scotland and Northern Ireland, apprenticeships in Wales are based on National Occupational Standards, with no mandatory end point assessment.

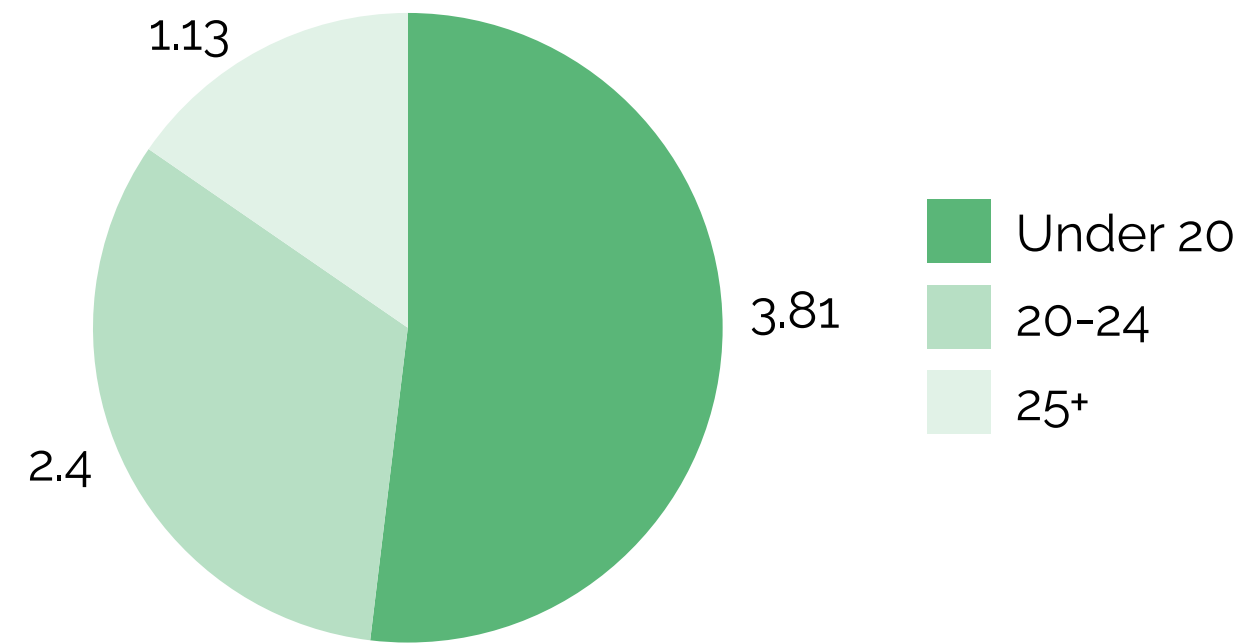
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/apprenticeship-learning-programmes-started-interactive-dashboard>

Northern Ireland

The Department for the Economy is responsible for funding and delivering apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. There were 7,608 apprenticeships starts in Northern Ireland in 2021/22, the overwhelming majority of whom (84.1%) were under 25 years old.<sup>12</sup> The most popular apprenticeships were Level 2 apprenticeships, which made up 50.6% of starts. Nearly a quarter of starts (23.7%) were in Electrotechnical apprenticeships, making it the most popular subject area, followed by Engineering and Construction.<sup>13</sup>

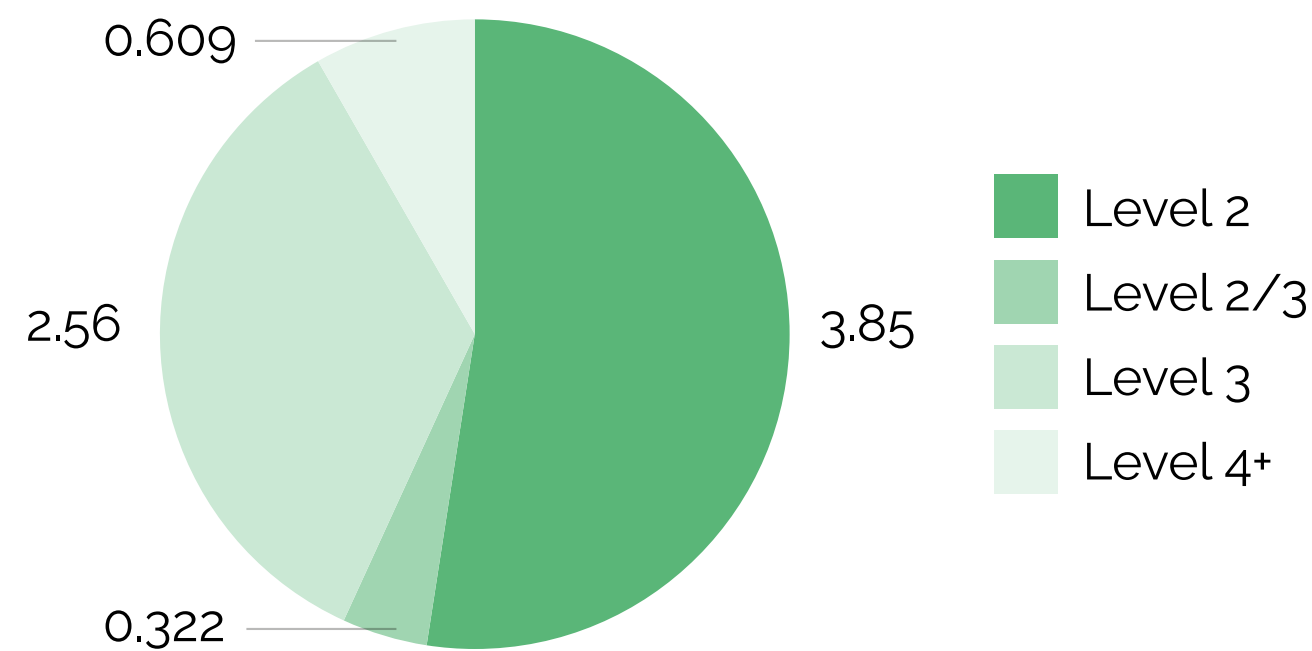
There are two apprenticeships programmes available in Northern Ireland - ApprenticeshipsNI at Level 2 and 3, which is available to individuals 16 and over, and Higher Level Apprenticeships from Levels 4-7. In September 2023, the Department for the Economy introduced All Age Apprenticeships, fully funding the off-the-job training element of an apprenticeship under the ApprenticeshipsNI programme in an effort to promote lifelong learning. Previously, funding for apprenticeships was restricted to priority sectors for those aged 25 and over.

Figure 10: Apprenticeships starts by age in Northern Ireland 2021/22 (thousands)



Source: Department for the Economy

Figure 11: Apprenticeships starts by level in Northern Ireland 2021/22 (thousands)



Source: Department for the Economy



<sup>12</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/apprenticeshipsni-statistical-bulletin-aug-2013-july-2022.pdf> ; <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Higher-Level-Apprenticeships-at-NI-FE-colleges-and-CAFRE-academic-years-2017-18-to-2021-22.pdf> ; <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/HLA-Higher-Education-Institutions-Northern-Ireland-Academic-year-2021-22.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Apprentices-Fact-Sheet-2021-22.pdf>

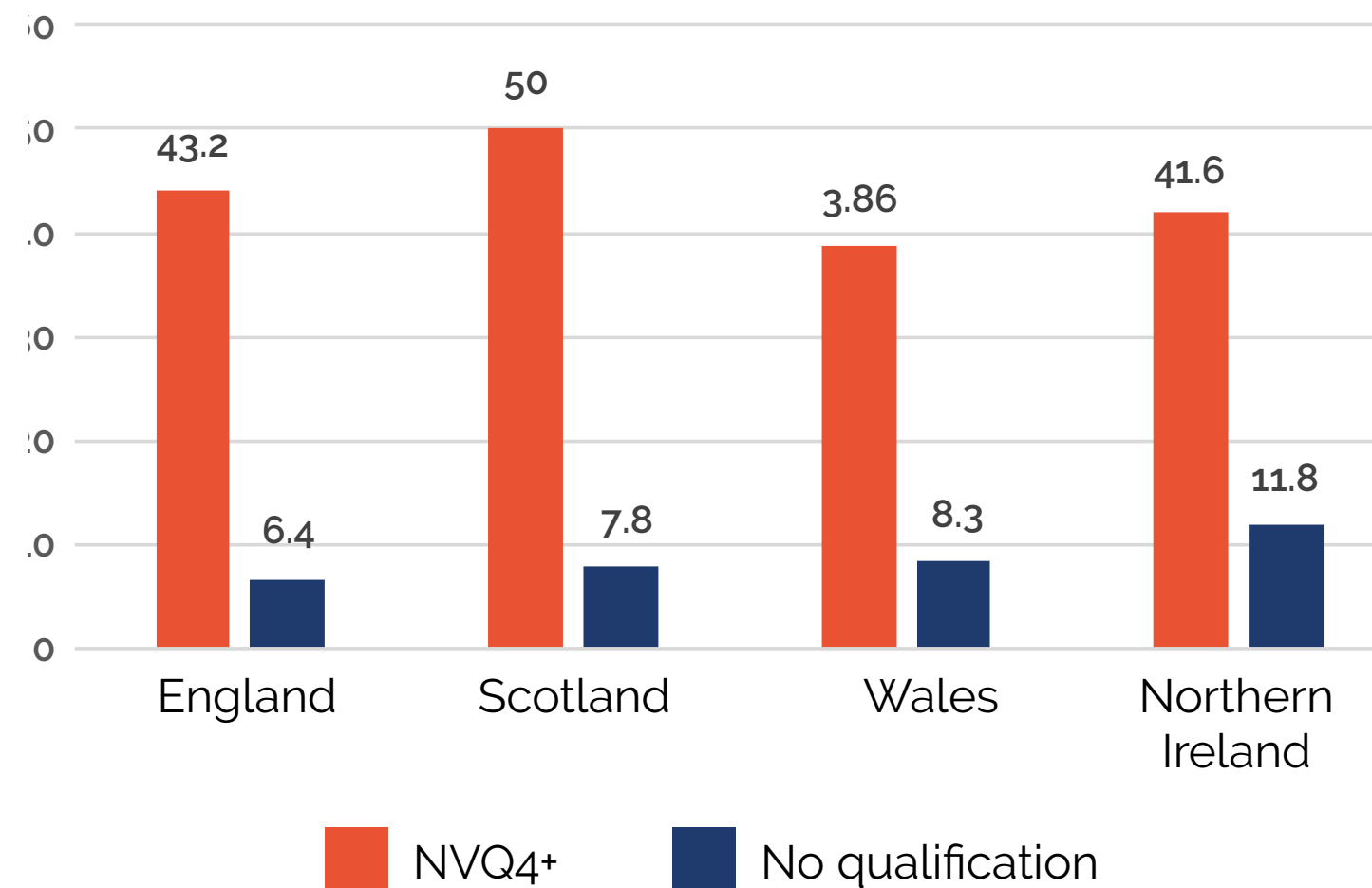
# Technical and vocational qualifications

*Alongside apprenticeships, technical and vocational qualifications are vital in delivering skills in key growth sectors, such as Net Zero and digital. However, throughout the UK, there has been a long-standing struggle to deliver parity of esteem between general and technical education, and many regard the latter as overly complex. This was a key criticism in the Sainsbury Review in England, which led to the English Government's introduction of T Levels and its review of qualifications at Level 3 and below.*

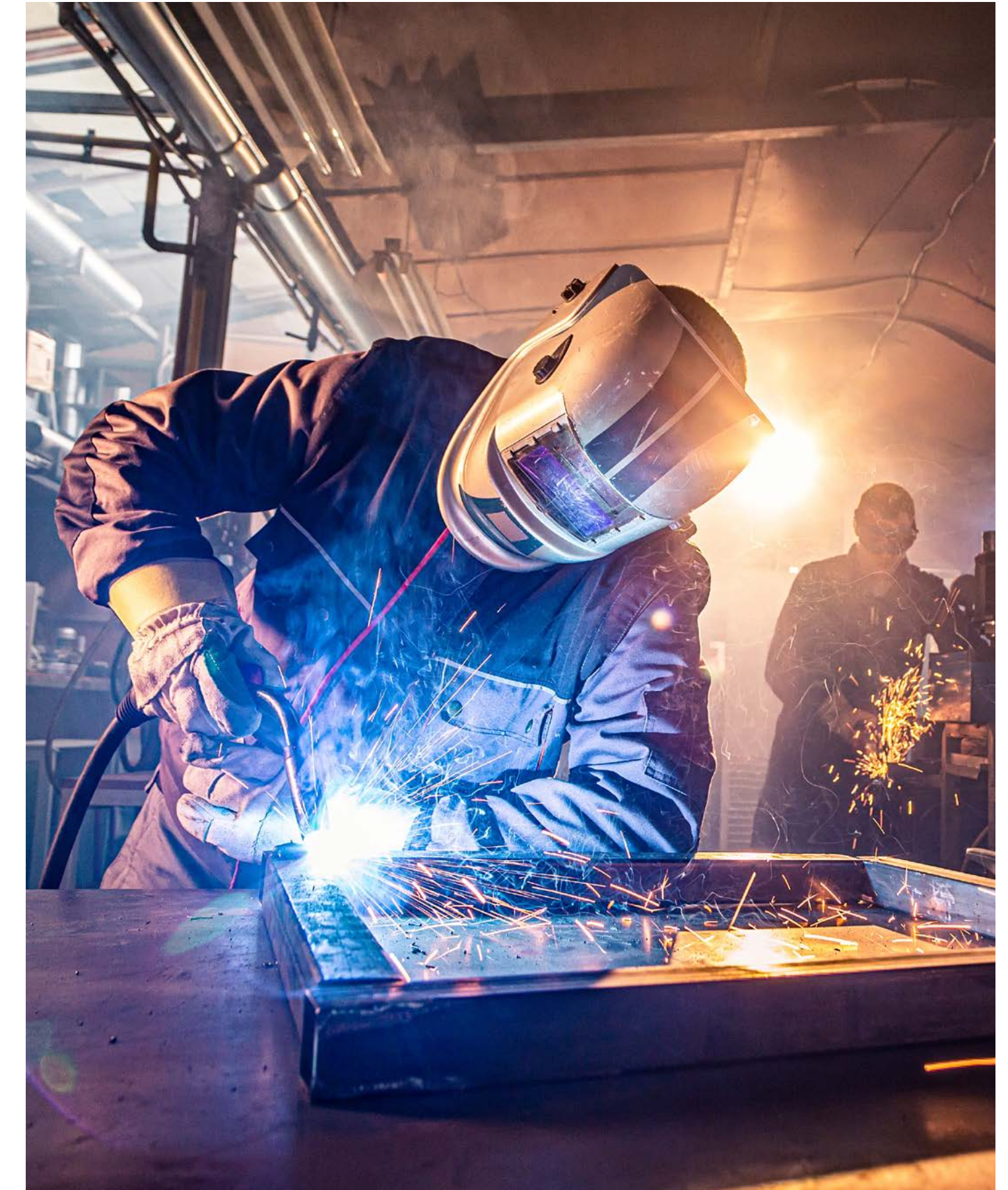
However, there are different challenges across the four nations in delivering these qualifications. For example, Northern Ireland has a relatively high proportion of its working age population with no qualifications, while Scotland has the highest proportion of those with an NVQ 4 and above, as seen in Figure 12, reflecting the need for a tailored approach. Northern Ireland has introduced AdvancedTechs, which are broadly similar to T Levels but, as work placements are more limited, they have made

this component of the offer more flexible than in England. AdvancedTechs also include a Project Based Learning element, which matches the teaching style that many FE colleges in NI have adopted. Similarly, Wales has also been exploring a more 'Made-for-Wales' approach to its qualifications.

**Figure 12: Percentage of working age population with NVQ4+ and no qualification**



Source: Annual Population Survey, 2021



## England

Learners in England can currently choose from a range of vocational and technical qualifications, such as BTECs and other applied general qualifications, and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

The landscape of technical and vocational qualifications has been a point of concern for policymakers in recent years. As the [Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education](#) (the Sainsbury Report) of 2016 pointed out, the number of technical qualifications available that offer similar but different outcomes creates a confusing and competitive landscape for those wishing to pursue technical pathways (something Edge explored in our 2020 report, [Our plan for further education: Defined, career and skills focused, collaborative](#)). In addition, technical qualifications are often seen by parents and teachers as inferior to academic qualifications.

In response to this, the Government introduced T Levels - two-year technical courses, equivalent to three A Levels, usually taken after GCSEs, designed to the 'gold-standard' technical alternative to A Levels. As of September 2023, T Levels are available in 18 subjects, due to rise to

22 in September 2024 and 23 in September 2025. The qualifications are specific to an industry and include a 45-day industry placement component. Ofsted has raised concerns in its 2023 [thematic report](#) about the early roll-out of T Levels, especially issues around regional disparities in access to work placements.

In turn, the Government has conducted a review of Level 3 post-16 qualifications in England and announced plans to defund a number of RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3) applied general qualifications that are deemed to overlap with T Levels from 2024. The decision has been met with some criticism, with sector organisations citing concerns about the impact on student choice.<sup>14</sup>

IfATE has also developed Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) at RQF Level 4 and 5 (SCQF Level 7 and 8/ CQFW Level 4 and 5) approved against occupational standards. Pearson also offers specialised vocational qualifications, BTEC Higher Nationals, at the same levels as HTQs in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

By contrast to changes made to technical qualifications, A Levels have remained relatively stable. In 2015, A Levels were reformed so that they were decoupled from AS Levels and were assessed primarily through exams. The content

was also changed to be more aligned with the needs of HE institutions.

However, at Conservative Party Conference 2023, the Prime Minister also announced plans to introduce the [Advanced British Standard](#) (ABS) - a baccalaureate-style programme for 16 to 18-year-olds, which seeks to '*ensure technical and academic education are placed on an equal footing, with every student also studying some form of maths and English to age 18.*' Under the proposals, elements of A Levels and T Levels would be combined into a single qualification, with students taking the ABS typically studying a minimum of five subjects. The reform is anticipated to take a decade to implement, with an initial £600 million investment over the next two years pledged to lay the groundwork, and will be accompanied by some form of GCSE assessment reform. A DfE consultation is currently open and seeking views on the early proposals, with a White Paper due to follow, building on the findings.

In an effort to improve awareness of all the different work and study choices, the Government have also launched the [Get the Jump](#) and [Skills for Life](#) campaigns. As of 2023, UCAS has also added the option to apply for apprenticeships to its website, so that students can consider them alongside university.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.protectstudentchoice.org/>

## Scotland

There are a range of technical and vocational qualifications that are specific to Scotland. Scottish Vocational Qualifications are work-based qualifications, developed by experts from industry, sector bodies, commerce and education, based on National Occupational Standards (NOSs), and available in a wide range of sectors from SCQF Levels 4 to 11 (RQF/CQFW Levels 1 to 7). SVQs are broadly similar to NVQs but specific to Scotland and make up the majority of accredited vocational qualifications in Scotland. The majority of other vocational qualifications are awarded by SQA and include:

a) **National Certificates** (NCs) – these are courses specific to an occupational area or subject, usually aimed 16-18 year olds and adults in full-time education, available at SCQF Levels 2 to 6 (RQF/CQFW Entry Level 2 to Level 3). They are designed to prepare learners for progression to advanced study, employment, or career development. They are made up of National Units, modules that also form the building blocks of NPAs and PDAs.

b) **National Progression Awards** (NPAs) – these courses develop specific skills and knowledge in specialist vocational areas, linked to NOSs and available at SCQF Levels 2 to 6 (RQF/CQFW Entry Level 1-2 to Level 3). They are taught in partnership between schools, colleges, employers and training providers and are often offered by colleges as part of short courses.

c) **Professional Development Awards** (PDAs) – smaller courses that are developed in partnership with industry, linked to NOS and available at SCQF Levels 6 to 12 (RQF/CQFW Levels 3 to 8). PDAs are designed to upskills those already in employment to upskill or change their career direction.

d) **Higher National Certificates and Diplomas** (HNCs/Ds) – vocationally-oriented programmes, designed by SQA in partnership with colleges, universities and industry to meet the needs of employers. HNCs are at SCQF Level 7 (RQF/CQFW Level 4) and HNDs are at SCQF Level 8 (RQF/CQFW Level 5). HNCs and HNDs can prepare a learner for employment or progression to years 1, 2, or 3 of a university course.

e) **Skills for Work Courses** – these are available for learners in schools and colleges, allowing them to develop generic employability skills needed for the workplace, offered at SCQF Levels 3 to 6 (RQF/CQFW Entry Level 3 to Level 3). Often with a workplace experience element, these are designed to prepare learners for further education or employment.

In addition, learners of all stages can take SQA Awards. These are flexible qualifications aimed at recognising wider achievements beyond academic and vocational subjects, such as the Employability Award and Scottish Studies Award. They are available at SCQF Levels 1 to 6 (RQF/CQFW Entry Level 1 to Level 3).

One message echoed across the Muir Report, Withers Report and Hayward Report was the need to address the perception that vocational qualifications are of lesser value than general qualifications. Professor Hayward recommended that qualifications are renamed in the senior phase so that the SCQF level is placed before the title of the qualification to reiterate that those on the same level are equal in value, regardless of whether they are academic or vocational.

### Wales

Most vocational qualifications in Wales, such as NVQs and BTECs, are also offered in England and Northern Ireland, and are referred to as 'designated' qualifications. However, Wales has also developed its own Made-for-Wales qualifications, referred to as 'approved' qualifications.

By March 2023, Qualifications Wales had completed five sector reviews in Health and Social Care and Childcare; Construction and the Built Environment; Information and Communication Technology; Engineering, Advanced Manufacturing and Energy; and Travel, Tourism, Hospitality and Catering. The reviews of Health and Social Care and Childcare, and Construction and the Built Environment led to the commission of new Made-for-Wales qualifications specifically designed to meet the needs of learners, learning providers, employers and sector bodies in Wales. The independent [report](#) on vocational qualifications, published in September 2023, recommended that these sector reviews be renewed, and where necessary revisited, in the context of a new national strategy for vocational education and training to ensure that vocational qualifications align with national skills needs. The report also recommended a more incremental approach to Made-for-Wales qualifications,

and new qualifications should only be commissioned after fully considering the options of adapting or revising existing qualifications.

Wales also offers the Essential Skills Wales qualifications, available from CQFW Entry Level 1 to Level 3 (RQF Entry Level 1 to Level 3/SCQF Levels 1 to 6), which cover key skills for life, learning and employment. Students aged 14-19 in Wales can also take the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, which combines GCSEs and vocational qualifications with a skills challenge certificate. The Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate has been replaced by the Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales, a new standalone qualification at CQFW Level 3 (RQF Level 3/ SCQF Level 6) which began being taught in September 2023 with first certification due in summer 2025.

Following its [review of the 14-16 offer](#), Qualifications Wales has decided to introduce a series of pre-vocational qualifications in September 2027 that would provide a broad basis for progression to post-16 study and apprenticeships.

### Northern Ireland

Like Wales, most vocational qualifications offered in Northern Ireland are also offered in England. However, Northern Ireland also offers CCEA vocational qualifications at RQF Levels 1-3 (CQFW Levels 1-3/SCQF Levels 4-6) to students at Key Stage 4 and post-16. These qualifications are practical in nature and relate to a specific job or career area and can be taken alongside GCSEs.

Since 2021, students in regional colleges can also take an Advanced Technical Award at RQF Level 3 (CQFW Level 3/ SCQF Level 6). These qualifications are designed by the Department for the Economy together with FE colleges and is equivalent to three A Levels. They combine industry-specific knowledge and skills with project-based learning and essential skills, as well as a work-placement element.

In December 2022, the Department for the Economy launched a consultation on the principles of vocational qualifications to ensure that they're working for learners, employers, and towards the national 10X skills strategy. The responses indicated broad support for the suggested purposes, principles, and categories of vocational qualifications, and generated some areas of further discussion, such as assessment requirements and progression routes.

# Tertiary education

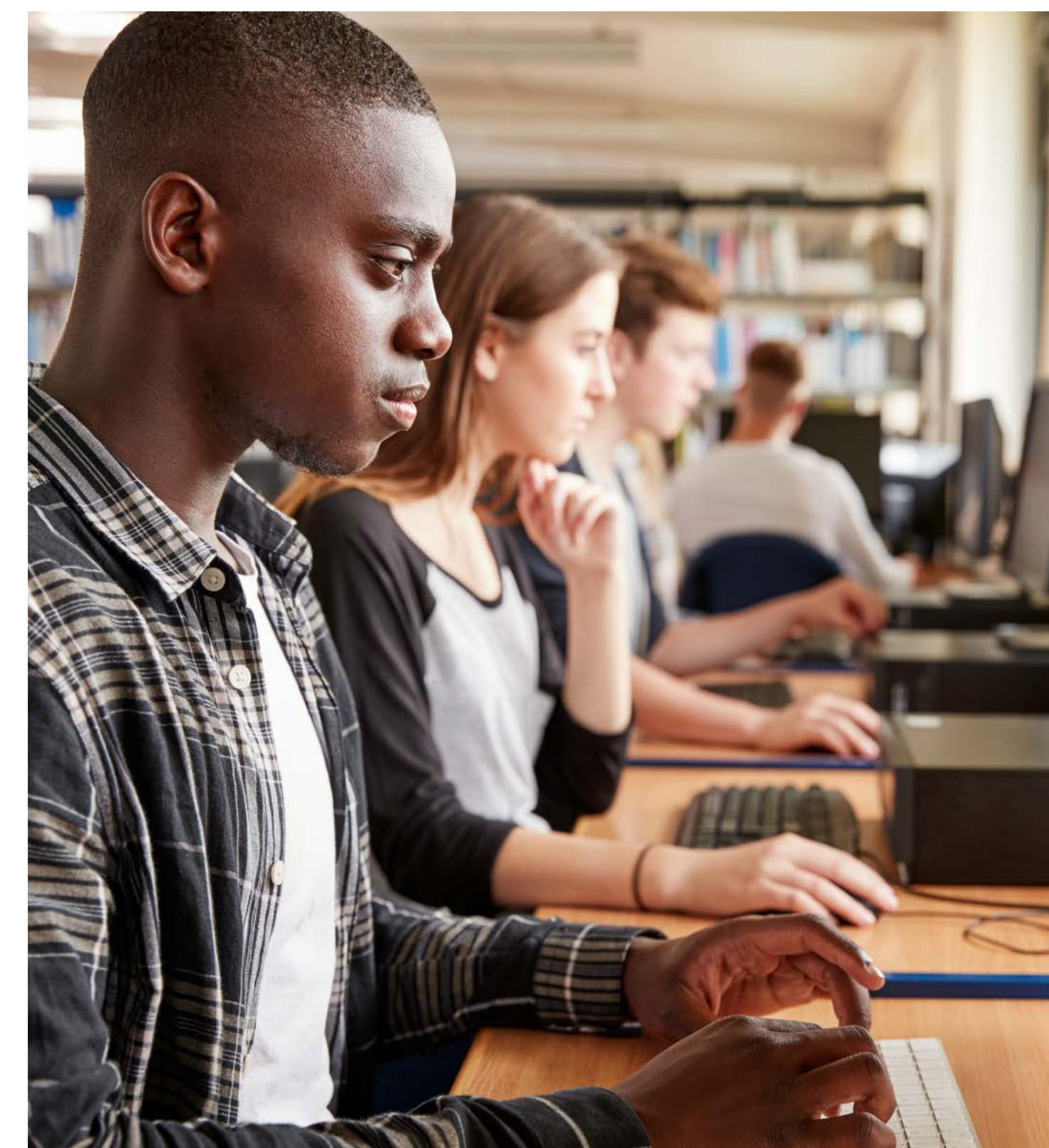
*A growing area of interest in all four nations is how to align FE and HE to broader skills needs. This has been a key recommendation of a number of recent reports in Scotland, such as the Cumberford-Little Report. However, Wales has gone further than any other nation on this in setting up a body responsible for the entire tertiary sector, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research.*

## England

In recent years, the delineation between FE and HE in England has become increasingly blurred. Many colleges now offer undergraduate programmes in partnership with a university, but some colleges hold degree-awarding powers. In the academic year 2020/21, there were 110,000 students studying undergraduate and postgraduate courses

at degree-awarding colleges.<sup>15</sup> Institutes of Technology are new collaborations, introduced in 2019 between FE colleges, universities, and employers that specialise in delivering higher technical education, such as degree-level apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, and T Levels. Many universities also offer vocational qualifications as well as degree apprenticeships, which allow apprentices to achieve a full undergraduate or master's degree. The Higher Education Policy Institute published a report in November 2023, [Connecting the Dots: The Need for an Effective Skills System in England](#), that explores these approaches in more detail.

The [Review of Post-18 Education and Funding](#) (the Augar Review) in 2019 recommended bearing down on HE courses that are deemed poor value for money. In response, the Government launched a consultation on HE reform and in July 2023 announced plans to cap the number of students applying to courses that do not deliver positive student outcomes.



<sup>15</sup> <https://d4hfzltwt4wv7.cloudfront.net/uploads/files/AoC-College-Key-Facts-2022-Web.pdf>



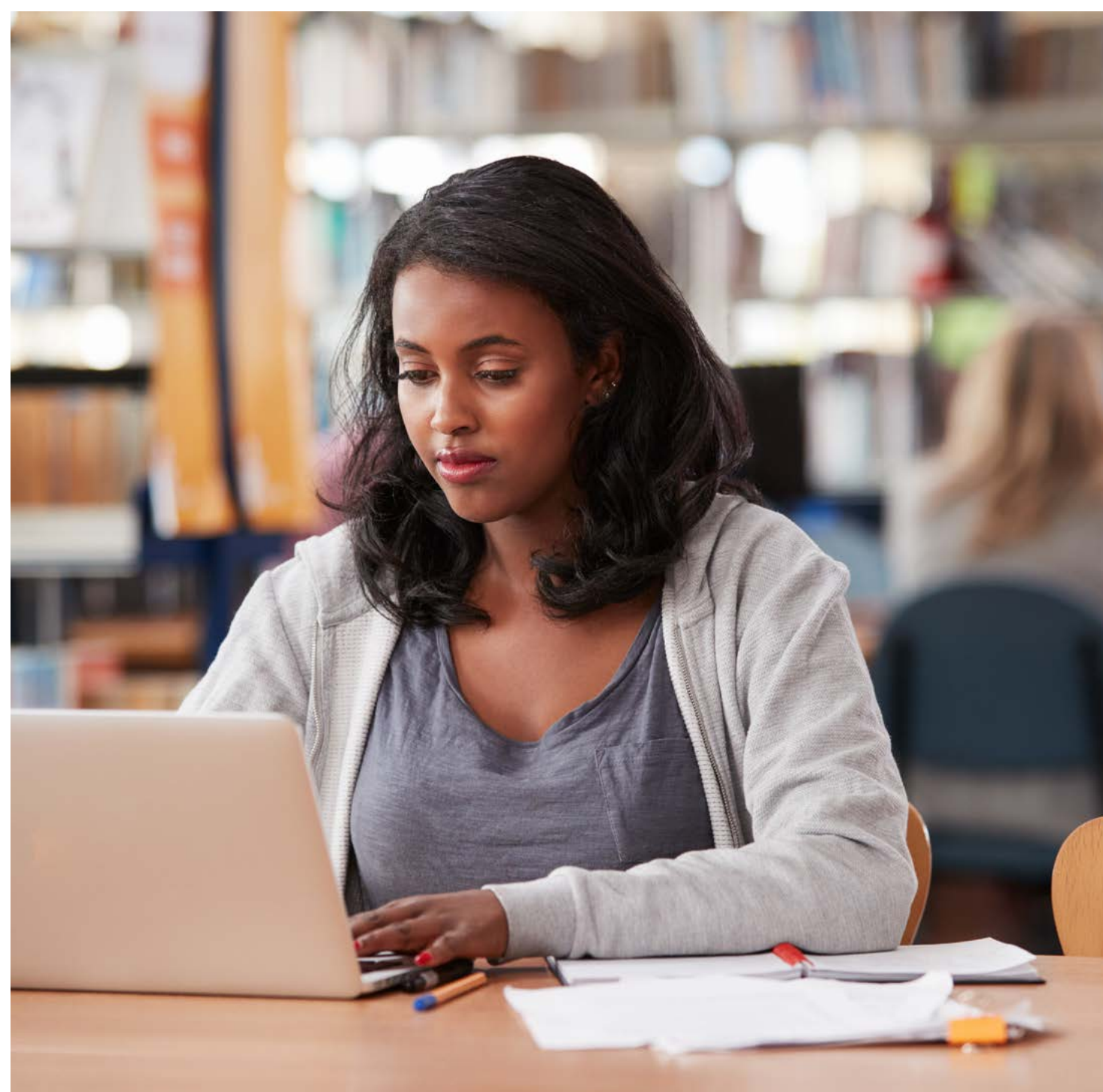
## Scotland

A number of recent reports, including Audrey Cumberford and Paul Little's 2020 [report](#) and SFC's 2021 [report](#) on its Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, recommended a coherent and strategic tertiary system, with greater collaboration between universities and colleges to address skills needs.

The Withers Report recommended structural transformation through the establishment of a single funding agency covering all post-16 learning. In a statement to the Scottish Parliament in December 2023, the Minister for Higher and Further Education confirmed that this has not been ruled out by the Scottish Government and, as a first step, committed to bringing funding for learner support together in one place and to do the same for apprenticeships funding.<sup>16</sup>

The SFC report saw post-16 collaboration stemming from Tertiary Provision Pathfinders that would examine how existing partnerships could be used practically to secure more coherent provision that meets the current and future needs of learners and employers, both regionally and nationally. SFC has since set up two Regional Tertiary Pathfinders pilots in the North-east and South of Scotland.

Other areas of collaboration already exist between colleges and universities in Scotland. For example, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland work together to develop Articulation Agreements which allow students with prior further education qualifications to enter degree studies at later stages.



## Wales

Wales has gone further than any other nation in the UK towards rationalising the post-secondary education landscape. The CTER will be responsible for further education, higher education, adult education, and apprenticeships and training, making Wales the first UK nation to have a single body responsible for the entire tertiary sector. The Commission will be responsible for planning, delivering and funding a strategy for the post-compulsory education and training space that addresses social, economic and environmental priorities, in partnership with providers and learners. The Commission will also have responsibility for planning and forming the 16-19 curriculum offer.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/meeting-of-parliament-05-12-2023?meeting=15589&iob=133014#orscontributions\\_M5107E442P778C2540594](https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/meeting-of-parliament-05-12-2023?meeting=15589&iob=133014#orscontributions_M5107E442P778C2540594)

## Northern Ireland

There is a strong culture of collaboration in Northern Ireland's tertiary sector, both within FE and between FE and HE. The Curriculum Hubs model allows each of Northern Ireland's six regional colleges to take the lead in a selected priority and growth occupational area and work with the other colleges to ensure that their approach to delivery in this area is consistent across the sector. A review of the Hubs by the Education and Training Inspectorate in 2021, commissioned by the Department for the Economy, found that they are aligned with the NI Skills Strategy, are well received by learners, and foster good collaboration between colleges. The final report on the Independent Review of Education, published in December 2023, recommended that the regional colleges be replaced with a single college governance model to facilitate a national-level strategy, but with increased freedom for colleges to intervene at a local level according to local needs.

In addition, FE colleges are responsible for a significant amount of HE provision in Northern Ireland. There were 10,034 HE enrolments at FE colleges in the 2020/21 academic year compared to 66,245 HE enrolments in HEIs.

A decline in the numbers of enrolments in full time RQF Level 4 and 5 (CQFW Level 4 and 5/SCQF Level 7 and 8) courses in FE prompted the Department for the Economy to launch a consultation, which closed in March 2023. The final report on the Independent Review of Education recommended closer collaboration between colleges and universities, with universities involved in the design of higher-level vocational courses (many of which should articulate into degree courses) which will then be delivered locally in colleges.

The Tertiary Education Reform Division has also been set up as part of the Skills and Education Group within the Department for the Economy, with a focus on ensuring an effective supply of qualifications to meet the needs of employers, the economy, and students. FE colleges also meet regularly with universities and other HE institutions at the Tertiary Education Sector Leaders Forum, convened by the Department for the Economy.

Both further and higher education face funding challenges. As highlighted in the final report on the Independent Review of Education, real-term spending in FE fell by 6% since 2011/12 while spending in HE fell by 28% since 2010/11.



<sup>16</sup> [https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/FE-Sector-Activity-Statistical-Bulletin-16-17-to-2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/FE-Sector-Activity-Statistical-Bulletin-16-17-to-2021_0.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/HEI-enrolments-bulletin-2020-21.pdf>

# Employer engagement

*As potential consumers as well as beneficiaries of the skills system, a key priority in all four nations is better employer engagement in the skills offer to help meet skills needs and boost employer investment in training (which has fallen considerably in recent years across the UK, according to the [2022 Employer Skills Survey](#)).*

However, employer engagement has been tricky, with criticism in all four nations that governments have not gone far enough in delivering the skills and types of training needed. In particular, a persistent criticism is the underrepresentation of SMEs in government engagement with businesses. Businesses have the opportunity to shape apprenticeships, for example, through IfATE in England and through the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board in Scotland. Employers can also engage with education providers to deliver skills needs at a local level (such

as LSIPs in England), regionally (such as Regional Skills Partnerships in Wales), and nationally (such as the Northern Ireland Skills Council).

## England

As the Skills for Jobs 2021 White Paper set out, a 'key objective' of the Government's plan for jobs is putting employers at the heart of the skills system by 'giving employers a central role in identifying local and national skills needs; aligning the majority of qualifications and training to employer-led standards; supporting smaller businesses to access apprenticeships; and supporting the participation in English, maths, and digital skills that employers need'.<sup>19</sup>

Employers play an active role in helping to shape HTQs, T Levels, and apprenticeships, particularly working with IfATE to set the standards for different occupations. The Government has also rolled out Local Skills Improvement

Plans (LSIPs) in England. These are developed by employer representative bodies (ERBs), in partnership with employers, providers, and other stakeholders, setting out the key changes needed in a local area to make technical skills training more responsive to employers' needs. The project is expected to continue until 2025, with the research from all 38 LSIPs collated into a report and specific roadmaps for stakeholders.



<sup>19</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/601980f2e90e07128a353aa3/Skills\\_for\\_jobs\\_lifelong\\_learning\\_for\\_opportunity\\_and\\_growth\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/601980f2e90e07128a353aa3/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth_web_version.pdf)

## Scotland

As part of the NSET, the Scottish Government has committed to a Skills Pact with employers and unions to better match investment in skills and training to their needs. While there are spaces for employers to engage with the skills system, employers have reported difficulties in accessing and influencing the system, as laid out in the Withers Report.

Employers engage in the skills system, primarily through the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) strategy and the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB). DYW, introduced in 2014, focuses on strengthening employer engagement, particularly with young people, to create more work-based learning opportunities and seamless transitions from education to employment. Employers engage locally through twenty employer-led Regional DYW Groups and nationally through the DYW National Employers Forum. An independent [evaluation](#) of the strategy, published in 2023, was largely positive and found that the aims of the programme are being met. The Withers Report recommended that the DYW National Employers Forum could become a platform for employer engagement across all aspects of skills and workforce development by expanding its remit.

The SAAB is made up of leading employers and representatives from industry bodies across a range of sectors and works with SDS to ensure that apprenticeships fit the needs of industry. SDS also gives employers a voice in agreeing new standards to underpin apprenticeship frameworks through Technical Expert Groups, short-life employer-led working groups that help refine and shape the apprenticeship.

The Enterprise and Skill Strategic Board was created in 2017 to align and co-ordinate the activities of Scotland's enterprise and skills agencies. In 2022, it was replaced by the National Strategy for Economic Transformation Delivery Board.

## Wales

Wales has four Regional Skills Partnerships, representing North, South East, South West, and Mid Wales. These are voluntary, non-statutory boards made up of employers, education providers, and others, tasked with producing Regional Employment and Skills Plans to analyse and influence the provision of skills based on regional economic need.

There are also incentives in place to support businesses taking on a young person, such as the Jobs Growth Wales+ programme. When a business employs a young person between 16- and 19-years-old through the programme, the Welsh Government covers up to 50% of the young person's employment costs at the National Minimum Wage for the first six months, as well as free recruitment advice for the employer and ongoing training support for the employee. The programme is considered an essential mechanism in delivering the Young Person's Guarantee.

At a school level, Careers Wales works to bring employers and schools together with the aim of informing, inspiring and motivating young people about their career opportunities. In his 2023 [report](#) to the Welsh Government, Dr Hefin David MS raised concerns that schools primarily rely on teaching staff to make connections with employers, leading to patchy provision.

## Northern Ireland

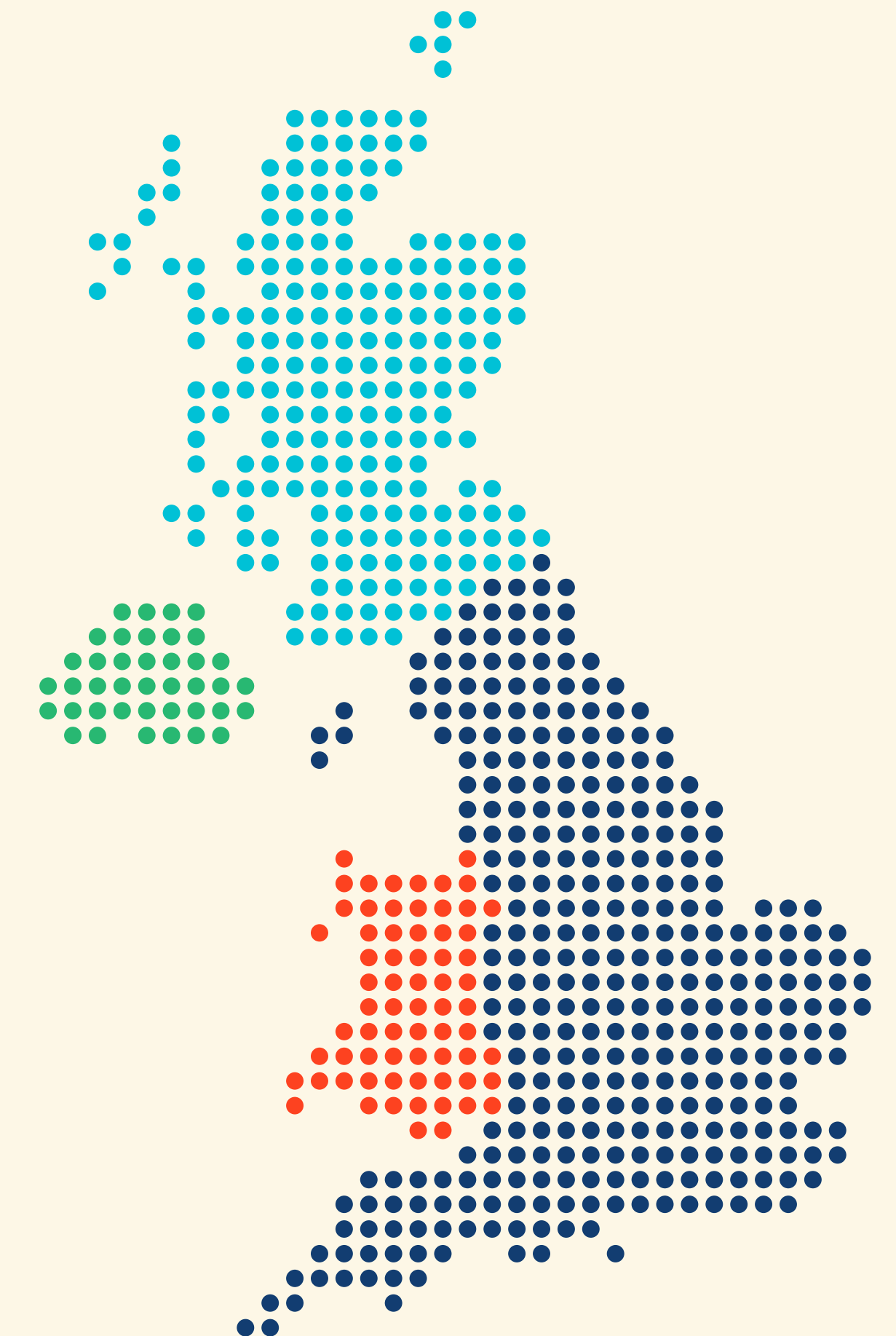
Like the other nations in the UK, there is a recognised need for better strategic coordination between employers and education providers in Northern Ireland's skills system. The Skills Strategy report highlighted that stakeholders were frustrated at the lack of coordination within government in its approach to engaging with businesses and wider civic society, especially SMEs. In response to this, the Government has set up the Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) to drive strategic co-ordination across the skills system. NISC is made up of representatives from national and local government, education bodies, students, and businesses. To ensure coherence in the system, NISC has overall say on any new stakeholder groups, advising on skills issues, and has strategic oversight of the skills agenda.

Curriculum Hubs also play a key role in engaging with employers to ensure that the FE curriculum is aligned with the skills needs of each sector. The [evaluation report](#) by ETI found that effective partnerships with industry have been established across the Hubs to identify skills gaps and develop provision.

## Find out more about work across the Four Nations

Edge works with partners across the four nations to share best practice on how to shape policy in each of our local contexts. We do this through our research reports, our Four Nations Policy Network, and our work with the College Alliance. We also work individually with each of the devolved governments through our popular workshop series bringing together policymakers, researchers, learners, employers and providers in each nation.

Click [here](#) or scan the QR code to find out more.



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