



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

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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

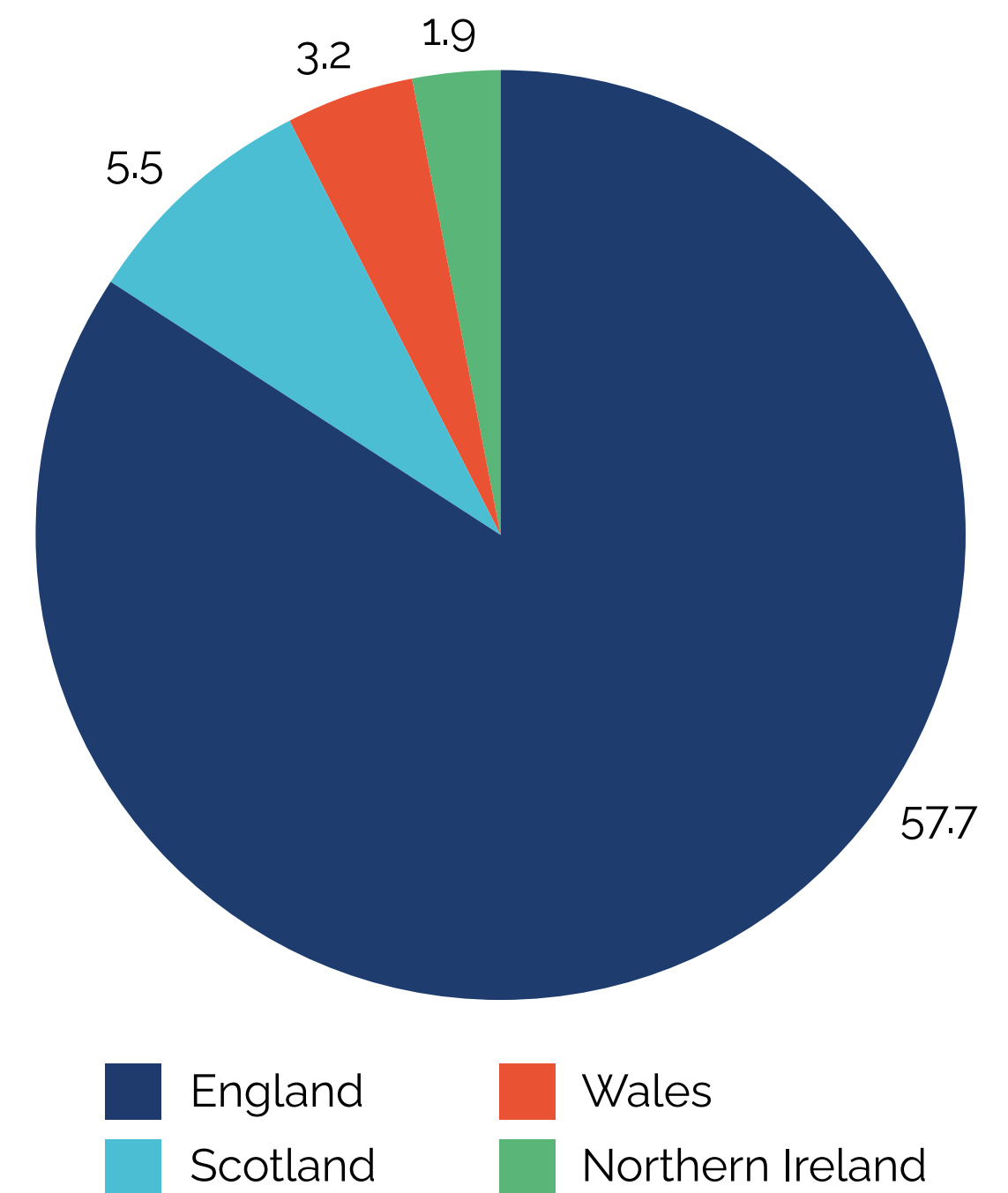
Since democratic devolution in the late 1990s, education and skills policy has diverged significantly across the four nations of the UK. This has created a patchwork of policy across the UK, with each nation choosing a path that fits the needs of its young people and economy. From school inspections, 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 (while the Prime Minister has announced plans to introduce Foundation Apprenticeships in England, early indications suggest they will not have a close resemblance to the Scottish model).

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 2023 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.<sup>1</sup> 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: Estimated population of the UK by nation (in millions)

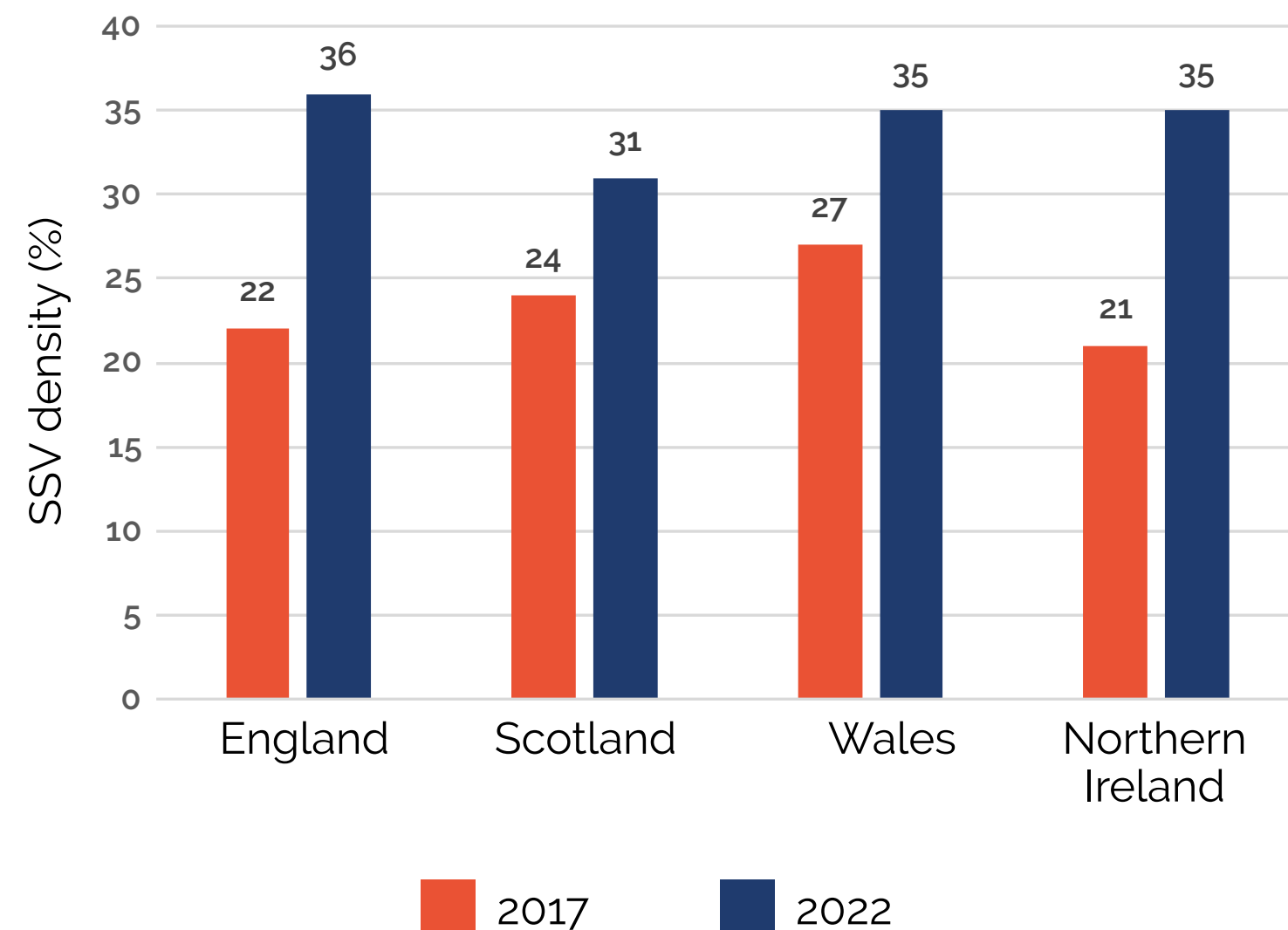


Source: Office of National Statistics, published October 2024

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/2023-devolution-evolution-skills-report-8483.pdf>

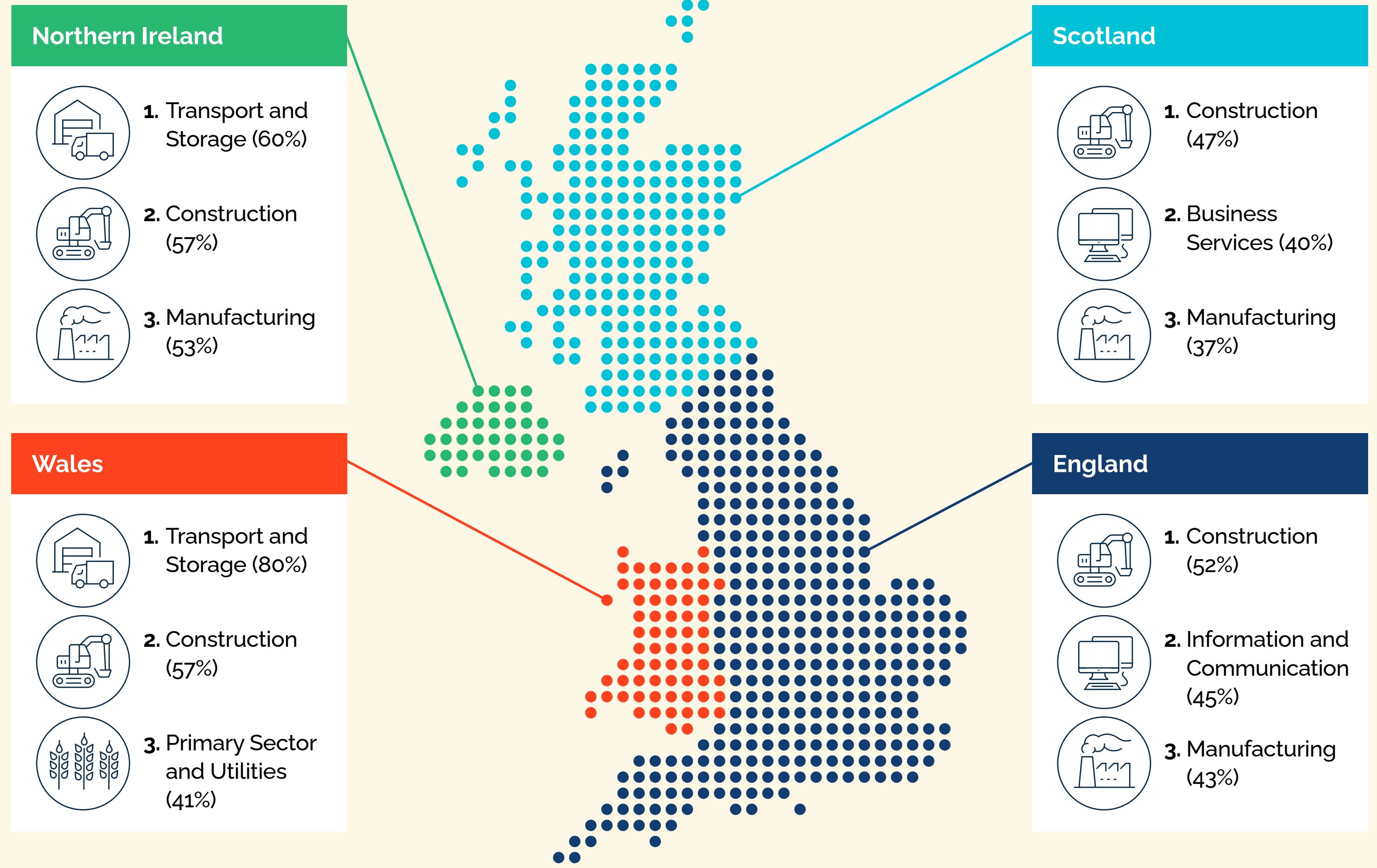
Since Edge's report was published, we have seen new challenges emerge, such as Covid-19 and advances in AI, that have laid bare the stark skills shortages crisis facing each nation (see Figures 2 and 3). These challenges have galvanised the UK administrations to take new approaches to ensure their skills 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, or Medr) 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) 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

The policy landscape in England has shifted considerably following the election of a new Labour Government in July 2024. Arguably, some of the most significant changes to the post-16 education policy landscape under the previous Conservative Government (2010-2024) 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. Legislation such as the Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022) 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. It also gave the Government powers to introduce the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, giving 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. Originally, applications were due to be open in February 2025, but this has since been delayed to September 2026 for courses commencing in January 2027.

In July 2024, a Labour Government was elected, led by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. The Government's agenda is separated into 5 distinct 'Missions':

1. **Kickstart economic growth** to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 – with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off.
2. **Make Britain a clean energy superpower** to cut bills, create jobs and deliver security with cheaper, zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero.
3. **Take back our streets** by halving serious violent crime and raising confidence in the police and criminal justice system to its highest levels.
4. **Break down barriers to opportunity** by reforming our childcare and education systems, to make sure there is no class ceiling on the ambitions of young people in Britain.
5. **Build an NHS fit for the future** that is there when people need it; with fewer lives lost to the biggest killers; in a fairer Britain, where everyone lives well for longer.

There is a designated Board for each Mission, chaired by a Cabinet Minister. For example, the Chancellor chairs the Growth Mission Board and the Education Secretary chairs the Opportunity Mission Board. This mission-led approach will be supported by reform of the civil service 'so that it is geared to Mission delivery rather than working in the traditional silos that focus on fiefdoms not outcomes.'<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/next-phase-of-mission-led-government-will-put-working-peoples-priorities-first-with-pm-set-to-unveil-plan-for-change>

To deliver a more joined-up skills system, the Government has established Skills England, a new Executive Agency based in the Department for Education, which serves to analyse and project skills needs, advise on how skills gaps can be addressed, shape technical education and training and work with devolved regions and local partners to ensure their skills plans align with national skills priorities. By name, its remit is confined to skills and training in England, which will have implications for businesses, supply chains and training providers spanning the UK. To inform its understanding of national skills needs, Skills England will work with the Migration Advisory Committee and the Industrial Strategy Council (the strategy was published in 2024 and identifies eight key growth sectors). While established in shadow form in 2024, Skills England has already absorbed the Unit for Future Skills (previously, Department for Education) and is in the process of receiving the functions transferred from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (with the [legislation](#) to achieve this currently going through Parliament). Skills England is anticipated to be fully operational with a new CEO and Board in Spring 2025.

The Get Britain Working White Paper, published in November 2024, revealed more detail on the Government's manifesto pledge to deliver a 'Youth Guarantee' in England for 18 to -21-year-olds to have access to training, an apprenticeship, or support to find work. Youth 'trailblazer'

areas will be set up in eight mayoral combined authorities to trial the development of transition plans for young people disengaged or at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), supported by £45 million funding. The White Paper also set out plans to deliver a new national jobs and careers service to support people develop their skills as well as looking for work.

The previous government embarked on a review of RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3) and below qualifications to address complexity and weed out 'low value' qualifications as suggested in the Sainsbury Report of 2016. This was also an attempt to encourage the uptake of T Levels, a new technical qualification introduced in 2020 at RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3), equivalent to 3 A Levels. The new government paused the defunding of qualifications due in August 2024 and instead embarked on a 'rapid review' which reported in December. The review concluded that 70 per cent of the courses earmarked for defunding will have funding continue up to 2027, including those that overlapped with T Levels, in a departure from the previous government's approach.

The school system has also been a point of focus for the Government, with a Curriculum and Assessment Review launched in September 2024. The review is currently looking at curriculum, assessment and qualifications pathways across all key stages, seeking to identify the 'most significant

and pressing issues' and address these through 'evolution not revolution'. The call for evidence closed in November 2024 and further stakeholder engagement is expected in 2025 with a final report in the same year. A Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill has also been introduced in the Commons by the Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, which would see academies required to teach a "revised national curriculum" after the Curriculum and Assessment Review has reported and the Government consulted on its recommendations, amongst other proposed changes.

Other manifesto pledges that we expect to see more detail and progress on in 2025 are:

- The introduction of a Growth and Skills Levy to replace the Apprenticeship Levy. Skills England has been consulting with employers on what non-apprenticeship training will be accessible through the new levy and plans to report on this in early 2025.
- Foundation Apprenticeships. Announced by the Prime Minister in September 2024, these new shorter apprenticeships give young people a route in to careers in critical sectors and could be funded through the levy. The roll-out date has not been announced.
- A post-16 strategy to break down barriers to opportunity, support the development of a skilled workforce, and drive economic growth through the industrial strategy.

### 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 final 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 pace with new approaches and was out of step with the assessment system in the senior phase. Four important reports have been published since:

1. 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. In response, the Government introduced the [Education \(Scotland\) Bill](#) in June 2024, which aims to replace SQA with a new body, Qualifications Scotland, expected to be operational in Autumn 2025. It would also establish the office of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland to lead the new education inspectorate, which is also expected to become operational in Autumn 2025. Outside the Bill, the remit of Education Scotland is also due to be revised.
2. 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 and the introduction of a baccalaureate-style system. The Government's [response](#) in September 2024 promised to rebalance assessment, including removing written assessment from some practical subjects, and to rationalise the qualifications offered in the senior phase.

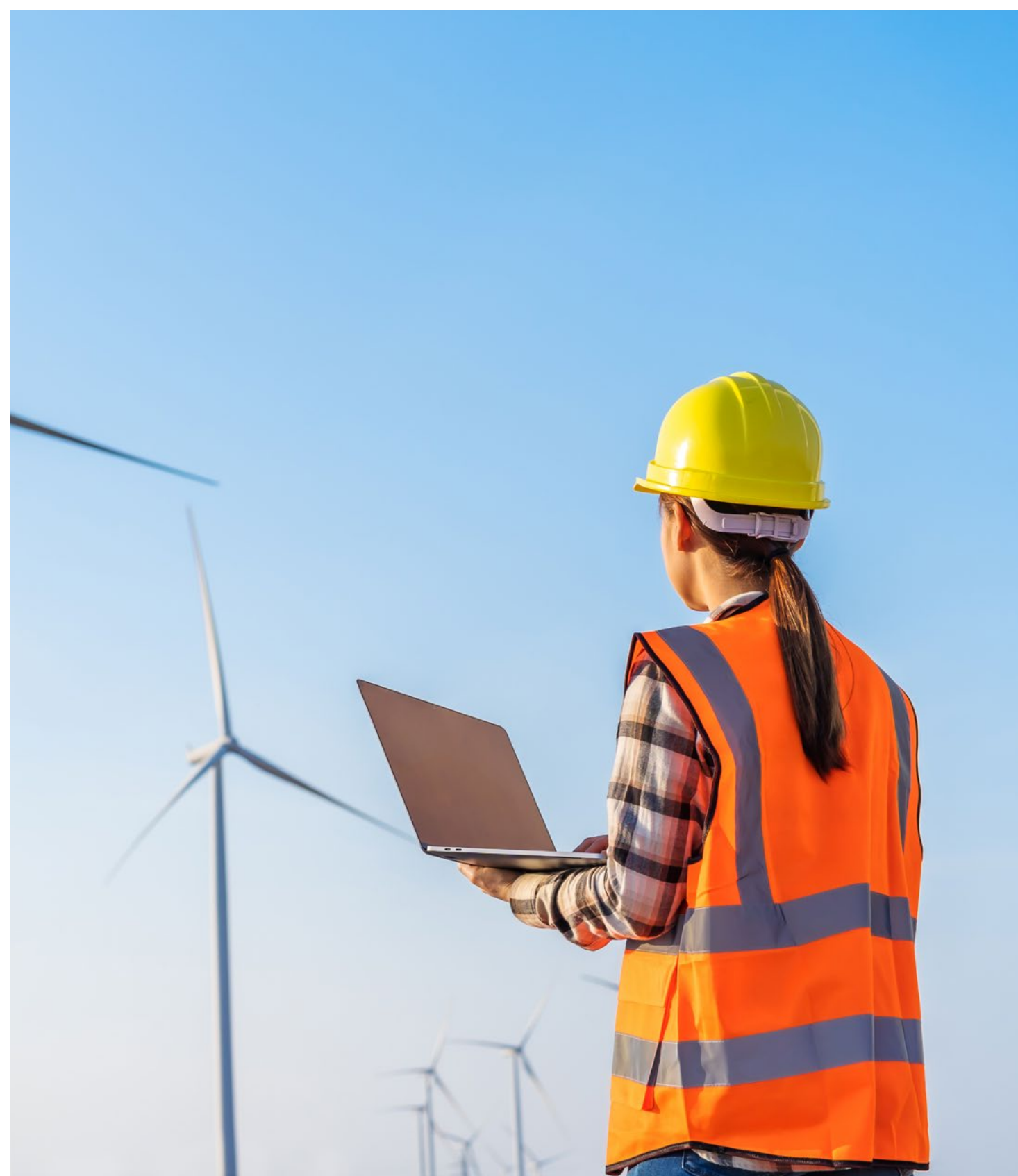




3. The final [report](#) of the National Discussion on Education, published in 2023, laid out a consensual vision for the future of Scottish education, following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. After the Discussion and the recommendations of the 2021 OECD report, the Scottish Government announced the establishment of the Curriculum Improvement Cycle in December 2023 to ensure a more systemic approach to curriculum review. The first subject area for improvement is maths and numeracy.
4. The aforementioned 2023 report by James Withers, [Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#) called for a new single funding and delivery body for post-school skills delivery. The Scottish Government has since [announced](#) plans to transfer responsibility for all national training programmes, including apprenticeships, from Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council.

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.



Despite some turbulence in 2024, Scotland's transition to Net Zero by 2045 remains a key commitment of the Scottish Government. Notably, the newly created GB Energy, a publicly owned energy company, will be headquartered in Aberdeen. A key consideration in the UK's transition to Net Zero 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. 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 a new 14-16 offer will be available from 2027. 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 became operational in August 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. These recommendations were fully accepted by the Welsh Government in its April 2024 [response](#).

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 (DfE) 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. However, a September 2024 [report](#) by the Northern Ireland Audit Office found that limited progress had been made towards achieving the strategy's strategic goals and criticised the lack of coordination between government departments in delivery.

Following the return of power-sharing government in February 2024, the new Economy Minister, Conor Murphy, set out his priorities:

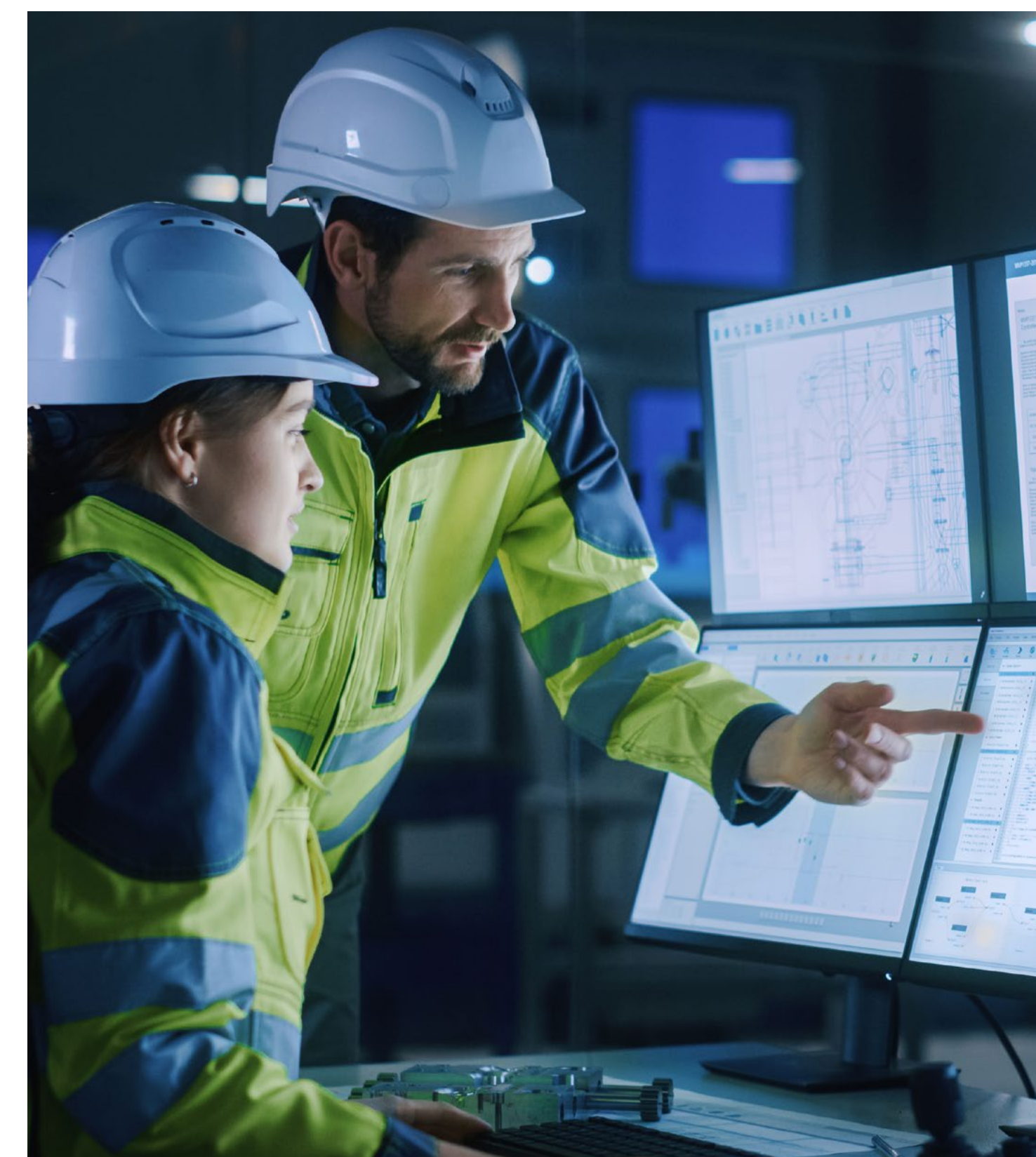
1. Create good jobs
2. Promote regional balance
3. Raise productivity
4. Reduce carbon emissions

In September 2024, the DfE published the [Delivering the Economic Vision: A three year forward look & 2024/25 Action Plan](#), including plans to expand the campus at Magee (Ulster University), 'transform' the delivery of further education, a three-year Careers Action Plan (in collaboration with the Department of Education), and a new Skills Action Plan.

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, culminating in a final report in December 2023. The Education Minister accepted a number of the review's recommendation in his October 2024 [response](#), including raising the age of participation to 18 and undertaking a curriculum review.



Date	Event	Country
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
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
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

Date	Event	Country
December 2023	● Report of Independent Review of Education published	Northern Ireland
July 2024	● New Labour Government elected in Westminster	UK-wide
July 2024	● Skills England established in shadow form	England
August 2024	● Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (Medr) operational	Wales
September 2024	● Curriculum and Assessment Review launched	England
September 2024	● Response to Hayward Review published	Scotland
September 2024	● Delivering the Economic Vision: A three year forward look & 2024/25 Action Plan published	Northern Ireland
October 2024	● Response to Independent Review of Education published and new curriculum review launched	Northern Ireland
November 2024	● Get Britain Working White Paper published	England
December 2024	● Outcomes of rapid review of Level 3 qualifications published	England



# Governance arrangements and key agencies

*This section looks at the different governance bodies overseeing the education and skills landscape across the UK. These have been subject to change recently with a new tertiary body in Wales and a new skills body recently set up in England, while Scotland is undertaking wide-ranging reforms to its arms-length bodies.*

## 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. 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) **Skills England** (currently established in shadow form) is a planned executive agency within the DfE which will seek to understand skills gaps, unify the skills landscape, and shape technical education to respond to skills needs. To this end, it has absorbed the Unit for Future Skills, which was responsible for improving the quality and accessibility of jobs and skills data.
- b) 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>3</sup> In September 2024, it was announced that the ESFA will formally close in March 2025, bringing its functions within the DfE.
- c) The **Office for Students** (OfS) regulates higher education institutions in England.
- d) 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. In October 2024, the Government introduced the IfATE (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill in Parliament which, once passed, will dissolve IfATE and transfer its functions to Skills England (via the Secretary of State for Education).
- e) The **Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation** (Ofqual) oversees qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England, including apprenticeships end point assessments.
- f) The **Office for Standards in Education** (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, including FE colleges.

<sup>3</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 the Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Skills, is responsible for skills policy and implementation.

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 funding universities and FE colleges. It also provides strategic direction for the college and university sectors, with a statutory duty to secure high quality coherent provision. Up until the academic year 2024-25, colleges and universities agreed an Outcome Agreement with SFC setting out how they will meet social and economic needs, which decided their funding allocation. Moving forward, SFC's Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model will replace the current Outcome Agreement process, shifting focus from pre-agreed outcomes to monitoring past performance and delivery against broad expectations, under headings such as high-quality learning, good governance, knowledge exchange and innovation research excellence, and skills and work-based learning, among others.

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 and proposed moving SDS's resources around the development of apprenticeships to the new qualifications body recommended by Muir. The Scottish Government has since decided to transfer responsibility for apprenticeships to the SFC.

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. The Education (Scotland) Bill, introduced in Parliament in 2024, would replace SQA with a new body, Qualifications Scotland, as recommended in the Muir Review. However, contrary to Muir's recommendations, Qualifications Scotland would be responsible for both awarding and accreditation and regulation.

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, and works with the Scottish Government to provide external reviews of Modern Apprenticeship provision. As per the recommendations of the Muir Review, the Education

(Scotland) Bill would transfer Education Scotland's inspection function to HM Inspectorate of Education. Further work is ongoing to refocus Education Scotland's functions outside of the Bill.

- e) The **Student Awards Agency Scotland** (SAAS) is an executive agency of the Scottish Government, providing funding for students in higher education at universities and colleges, including graduate apprenticeships.
- f) The **Quality Assurance Agency** is a registered charity working to improve the quality of higher education. It has been tasked with supporting the implementation of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework, supporting the delivery of a new national enhancement programme for all colleges and universities in Scotland.

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](#) and has introduced an Education Bill to deliver on them. 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. The Government has since [announced](#) plans to streamline funding for colleges, universities and apprenticeships by transferring responsibility for providing national training programmes, including apprenticeships, from SDS to the SFC and responsibilities for funding further education student support from the SFC to SAAB.

### Wales

In Wales, the Department for Education and Skills hold overall responsibility for the skills agenda. Other key agencies and organisations include:

- a) The **Commission for Tertiary Education and Research** (also called Medr) is an arms-length body, operational since August 2024, responsible for funding and regulating tertiary education and research.
- b) **Qualifications Wales** is a Welsh Government-sponsored body, responsible for the recognition of awarding bodies and the review and approval of non-degree qualifications in Wales.
- 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.

- e) **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, however the Education Minister deferred to the Executive for a decision on this in his [response](#) to the Review.

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 greater investment across the nations in more higher-level apprenticeships, as seen by the expansion and popularity in England of Degree Apprenticeships.*



# Apprenticeships across UK

	Levels	Funding organisation	Regulator/Responsible Body
England	<b>Intermediate</b> – RQF Level 2 (SCQF Level 5/CQFW Level 2)	Education and Skills Funding Agency (soon to be moved to Department for Education)	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. SDS has also piloted these at SCQF Levels 4 and 5	Skills Development Scotland and Scottish Funding Council (soon to be moved fully to the SFC)	Scottish Qualifications Authority (FAs/MAs) and Universities (GAs)
	<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)	Commission for Tertiary Education and Research	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)		

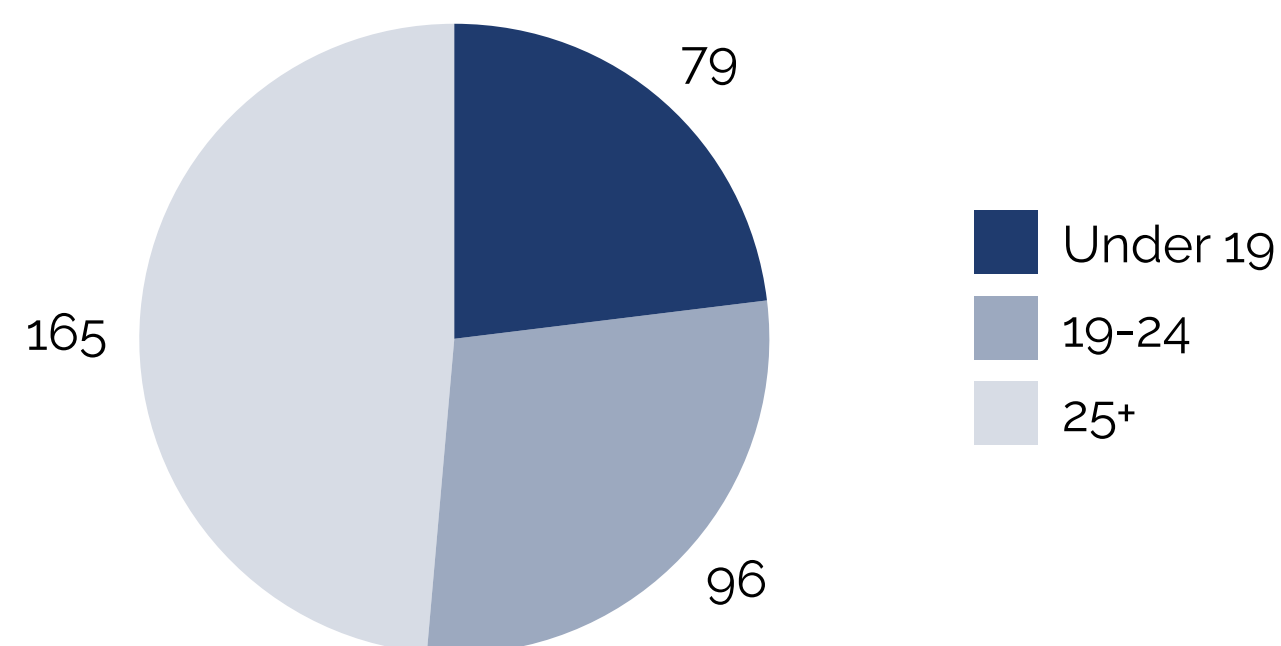
## England

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 339,580 apprenticeships starts in the 2023/24 academic year, over half (52%) of which were under 25 years old and 23% were under 19 (see Figure 4). The vast majority (79%) of apprenticeships starts were at RQF Level 3 (SCQF Level 6/CQFW Level 3) and above (see Figure 5) and the most popular subject areas were Business, Administration and Law and Health, Public Services and Care.

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

**Figure 4: Apprenticeships starts in England by age 2023/24 (thousands)**

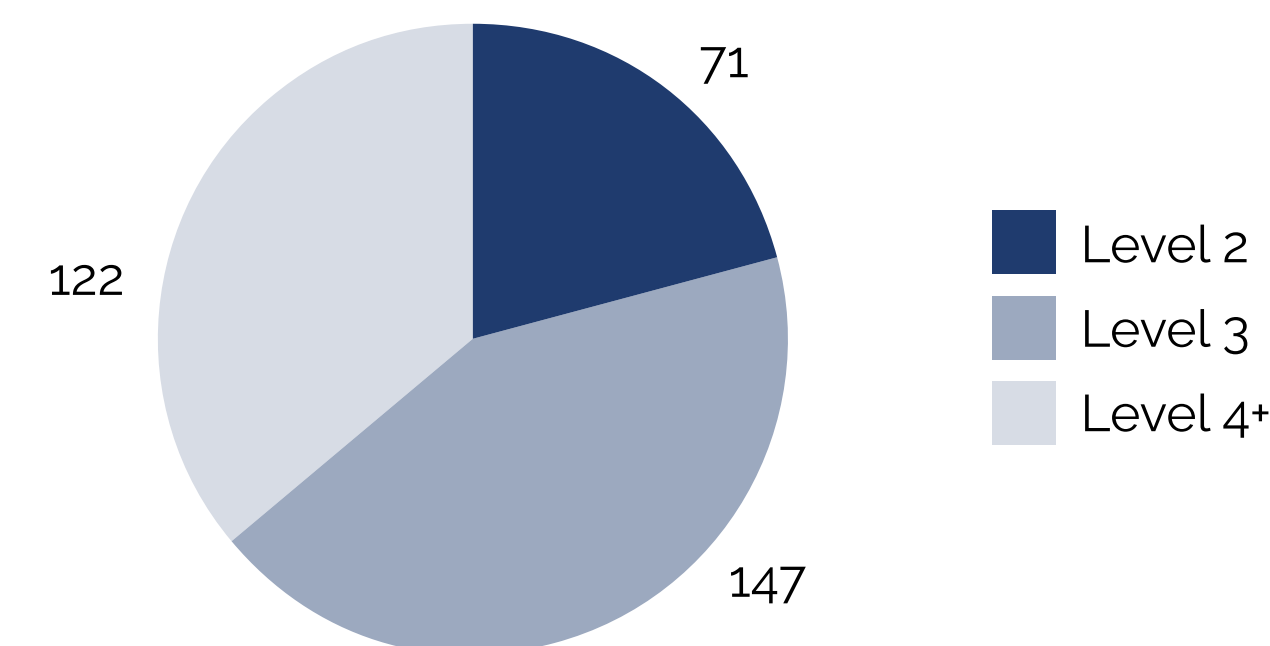


Source: Department for Education

can also transfer up to 50% of their levy to other businesses, 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 and the age of the apprentice.

The Government has committed to replacing the Apprenticeship Levy with a Growth and Skills Levy to allow employers to use levy funds on non-apprenticeship training. Skills England has been consulting with employers to decide which courses and types of training would be covered by the levy, prioritising the eight key growth sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy, as well as construction and healthcare.

**Figure 5: Apprenticeships starts in England by level 2023/24 (thousands)**



Source: Department for Education

In September 2024, the Prime Minister announced plans to introduce Foundation Apprenticeships and shorter apprenticeships that will be covered by the new levy, as part of an effort to 'give young people a route in to careers in critical sectors', with further detail expected in 2025. He also announced that apprenticeships at RQF Level 7 (SCQF Level 11/CQFW Level 7) will no longer be funded through the levy to 'rebalance' funding and encourage investment in younger people.<sup>4</sup> This comes in the context of falling starts amongst young people and at RQF Level 2 (SCQF Level 5/CQFW Level 2).

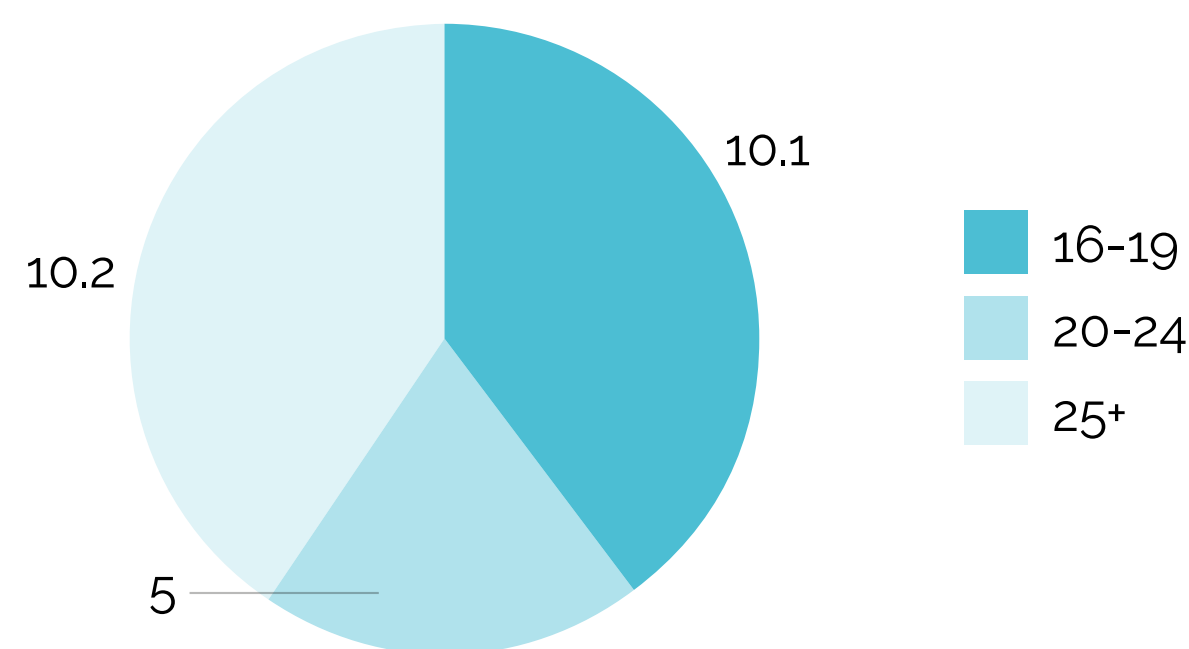
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-overhauls-apprenticeships-to-support-opportunity>

## Scotland

Apprenticeships in Scotland are approved by the Apprenticeship Approvals Group, regulated by SQA, and funded by SDS (although this is due to change following proposed legislation expected to be introduced in Parliament in 2025). Currently the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB), an independent, industry-led body, ensures that apprenticeships meet the needs of businesses. The Minister for Higher and Further Education is minded to take forward James Withers' recommendation to wind down the SAAB with the Scottish Government's longer-term approach to employer engagement still at an early stage of development. Key functions of SAAB will still be maintained, such as the development and approval of new apprenticeship frameworks and the redevelopment of existing frameworks. 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), taken by learners in the senior phase of school; Modern Apprenticeships that lead to the award of Scottish Vocational Qualifications

**Figure 6: Modern Apprenticeships starts by age in Scotland 2023/24 (thousands)**

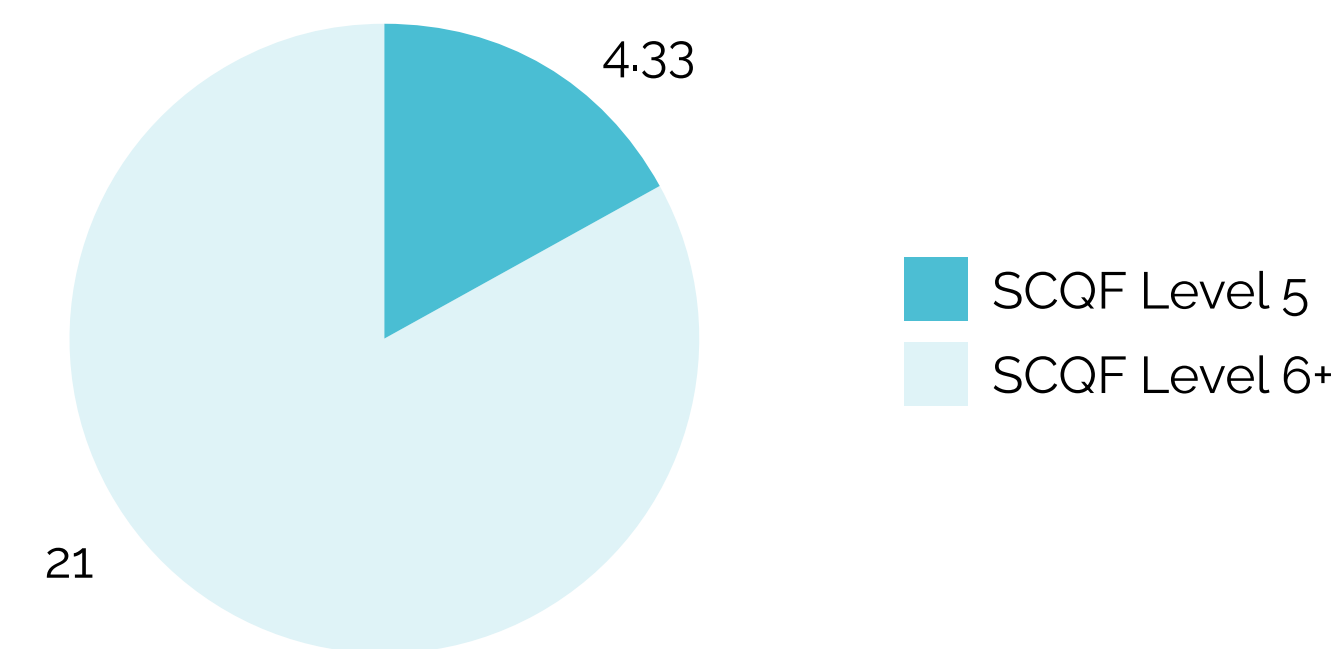


Source: Skills Development Scotland

(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 tend to make up the bulk of apprenticeships in Scotland with 25,365 starts in the 2023/24 financial year.<sup>5</sup> By comparison there were just 1,166 Graduate Apprenticeship starts<sup>6</sup> and 4,122 Foundation Apprenticeship starts<sup>7</sup> in the 2021/22 academic year (the latest available data). Under-20s made up almost half of apprenticeship starts (see Figure 6), while most apprentices opted for an

**Figure 7: Modern Apprenticeships starts by level in Scotland 2023/24 (thousands)**



Source: Skills Development Scotland

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. SDS and SFC split the costs of funding Foundation Apprenticeships, SDS funds Modern Apprenticeships (with the level of funding depending on age, level, and sector), and SFC funds new graduate apprenticeships (though SAAS provides the tuition fee funding to universities). Given the complexity of apprenticeship funding, the Government has committed to consolidating all apprenticeship funding in the SFC.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/1hiip1pm/modern-apprenticeship-statistics-quarter-4-2023-24.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/xe2nuwx5/graduate-apprenticeship-annual-report-2022.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/j4nfmwyz/foundation-apprenticeship-report-2022.pdf>

## Wales

The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (Medr) is responsible for all apprenticeship funding in Wales, while the Welsh Government is responsible for setting out the policy direction and strategic priorities of apprenticeships<sup>8</sup>. Medr covers the cost of registration, delivery and certification of all qualifications within the apprenticeship framework.

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). Junior Apprenticeships are also available to Year 10 and 11 pupils. These are vocationally-focused full-time learning programmes based in further education colleges, funded by schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government, combining work experience with a Level 2 course.

There were 22,880 apprenticeships starts in the academic year 2022/23 (the latest full-year data available), almost half of whom were under 25 years old, and 23% of whom were

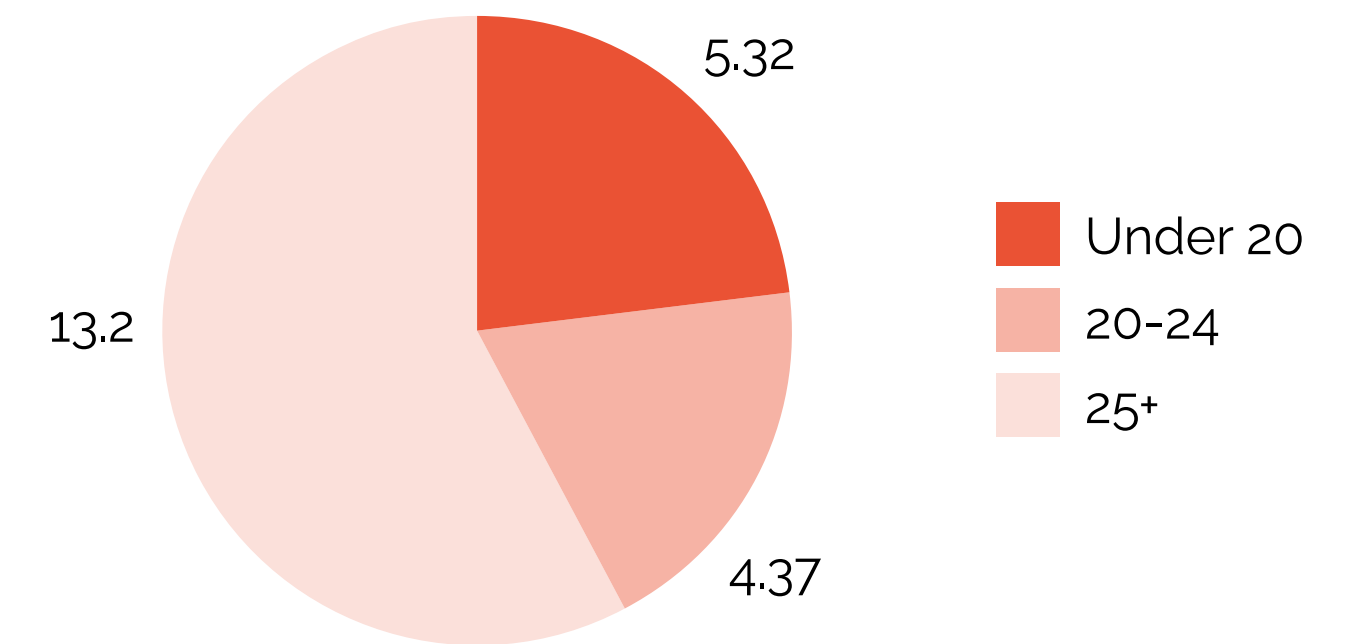
under 20 (see Figure 8).<sup>9</sup> Almost half of apprenticeship starts (43%) were at CQFW Level 3 (RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6). The most popular industry by far was Healthcare and Public Services, which made up 45% of all starts. The Welsh Government has committed to a target of creating 125,000 apprenticeships over the 2021-26 Senedd term.

Responsibility for apprenticeships has now transferred to Medr, which 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. In February 2024, the Welsh Government **published** its objectives for apprenticeships under Medr:

1. Building resilience and sustainability - adjusting to the changing economic environment
2. Addressing skill shortages and promoting growth – reskilling, upskilling and vertical progression
3. Inclusive apprenticeships improving people's life chances

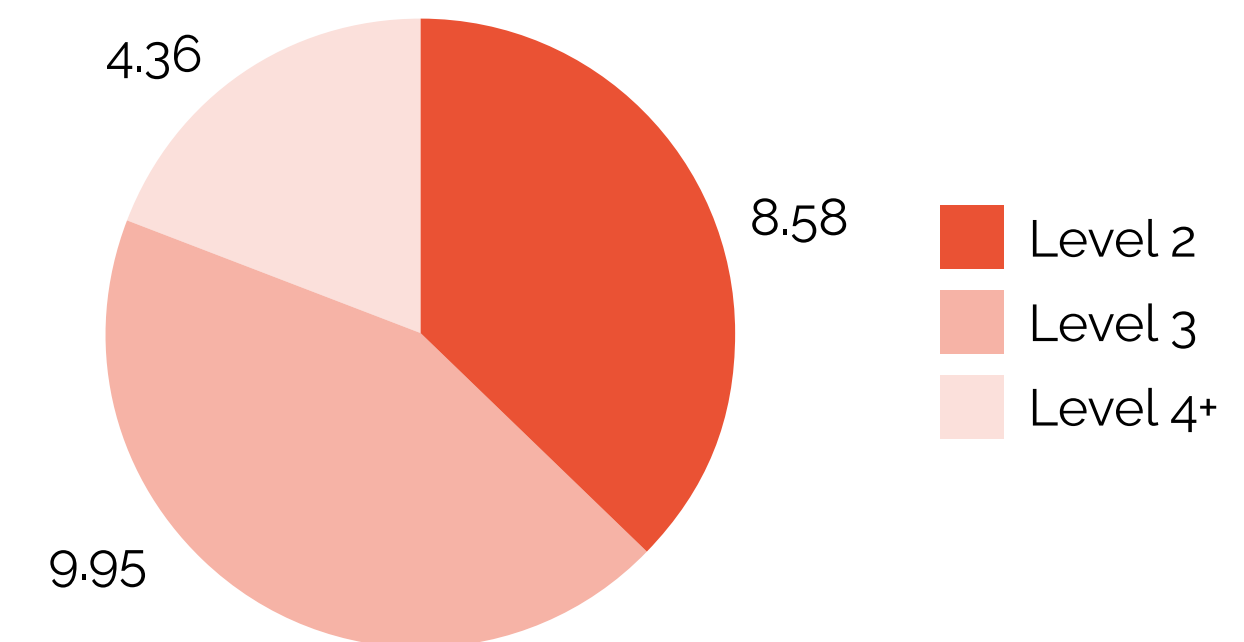
Like Scotland and Northern Ireland, apprenticeships in Wales are based on National Occupational Standards, with no mandatory end point assessment.

**Figure 8: Apprenticeships starts by age in Wales 2022/23 (thousands)**



Source: Welsh Government

**Figure 9: Apprenticeships starts by level in Wales 2022/23 (thousands)**



Source: Welsh Government

<sup>8</sup> <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/14786#C644222>

<sup>9</sup> <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Work-Based-Learning/apprenticeshiplearningprogrammesstarted-by-quarter-sector-programmetype>

## Northern Ireland

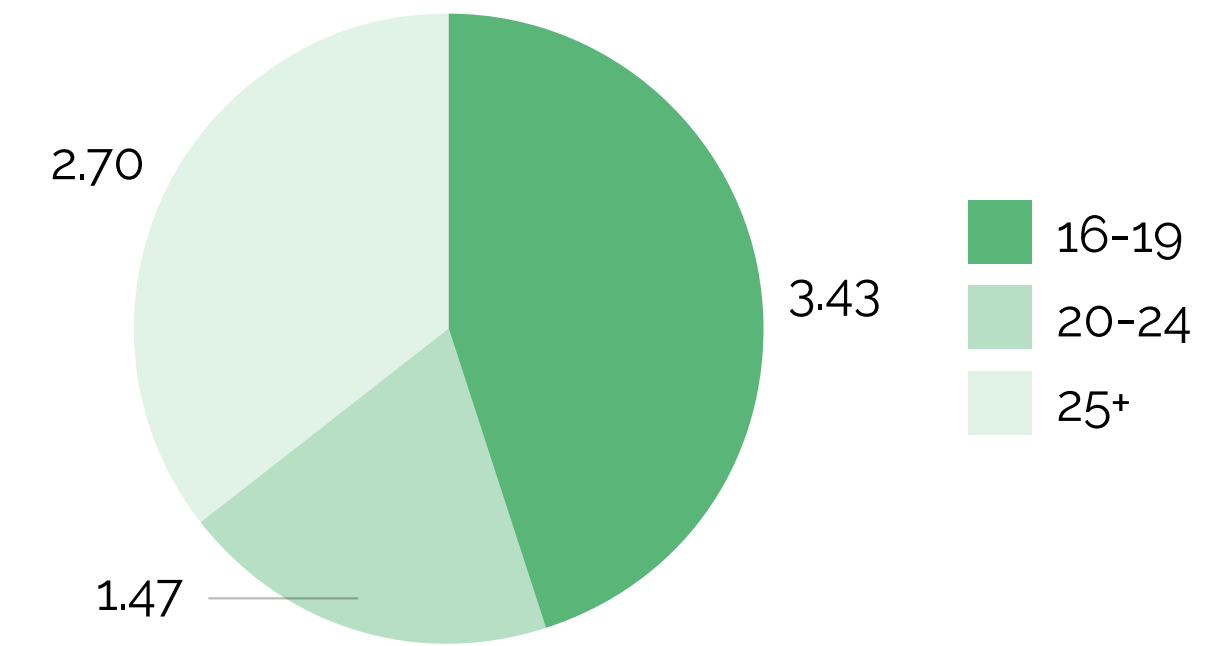
The Department for the Economy is responsible for funding and delivering apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

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. ApprenticeshipsNI account for the majority of apprenticeships with 7,608 starts in the 2023/24 academic year. By contrast, there were 879 Higher Level Apprenticeship starts in 2021/22 (latest data to include starts in HEIs available).<sup>10</sup> The majority (64%) of those starting ApprenticeshipsNI programmes were under 25 years old but this share dramatically reduced from the previous year (where it stood at 94%) following the introduction of All Age Apprenticeships.<sup>11</sup> The most popular apprenticeships were at Level 2, making up 50% of starts. The three most popular frameworks were Electrotechnical, Engineering and Health and Social Care.

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 regardless of age or sector. Previously, funding for apprenticeships was restricted to priority sectors for those aged 25 and over.

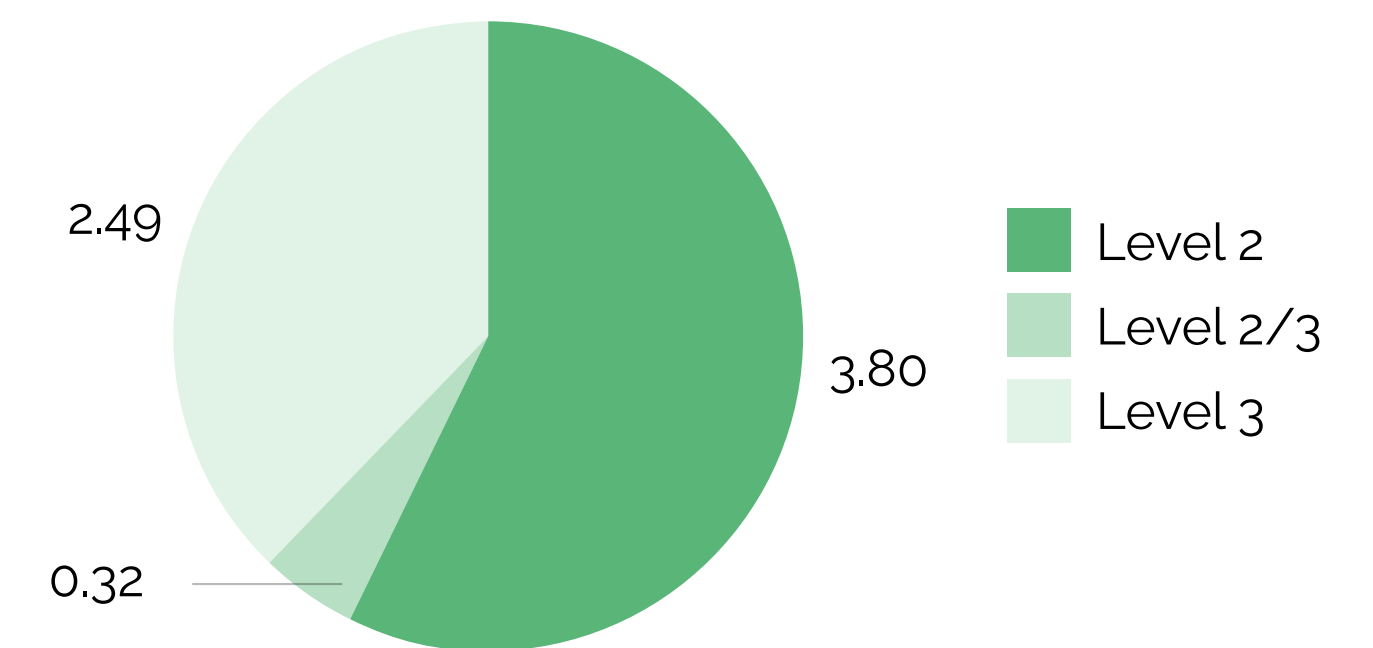


**Figure 10: ApprenticeshipsNI starts by age in NI 2023/24 (thousands)**



Source: Department for the Economy

**Figure 11: ApprenticeshipsNI starts by level in NI 2023/24 (thousands)**



Source: Department for the Economy

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/HLA-Higher-Education-Institutions-Northern-Ireland-Academic-year-2021-22.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>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/apprenticeshipsni-statistics-august-2018-october-2024>

# Technical and vocational qualifications

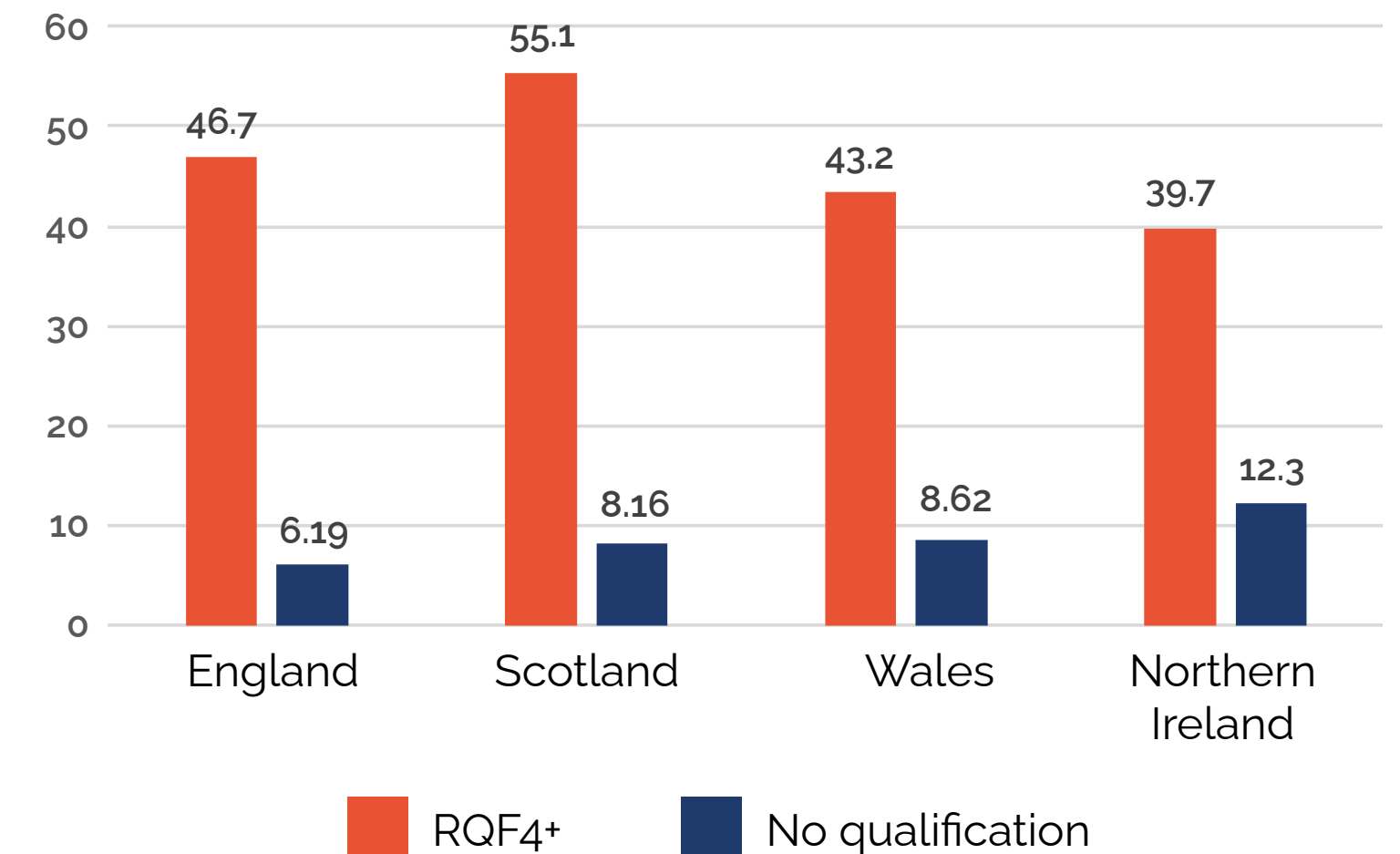
*Alongside apprenticeships, technical and vocational qualifications are vital in delivering skills in key growth sectors, such as Net Zero and digital. However, throughout the UK, there has been a long-standing struggle to deliver parity of esteem between general and technical education, and many regard 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 RQF 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 and has committed to expand the number of qualifications available in Welsh.



**Figure 12: Percentage of working age population with RQF4+ and no qualification**



Source: Office for National Statistics, 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 – Edge’s 2024 [polling](#) shows that, although 81% of the population believe that technical and vocational qualifications should be as respected as ‘academic’ ones, only 32% believe they are in practice.

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 2024,

T Levels are available in 21 subjects, due to rise to 22 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. Edge’s own [report](#) in December 2024, highlighted a number of issues with the delivery of T Levels from the student perspective, although the work placement element was a big draw.

In turn, the previous Government launched 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 deemed to overlap with T Levels. Early in the lifetime of the current Government, the Skills Minister conducted a rapid review of these qualifications, subsequently deciding to retain funding for some of these qualifications until 2027.

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 the changes made to Level 3 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.

In an effort to improve awareness of all the different work and study choices, the Government has 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, while UCAS tariff points will be collected from apprenticeships across the UK from 2025.





## Scotland

There is 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. In response to the Hayward Review's recommendations, the Government has **committed** to asking the current qualifications body and qualification providers in Scotland to ensure consistent use of SCQF levels in their titles to support a clear description of all qualifications.



### 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.

Since 2015, Qualifications Wales has been carrying out a programme of sector reviews covering qualifications across FE and apprenticeships. 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. In its November 2024 [response](#), Qualifications Wales committed to working with the Welsh Government and Medr to align with any long-term strategic approach developed by them.

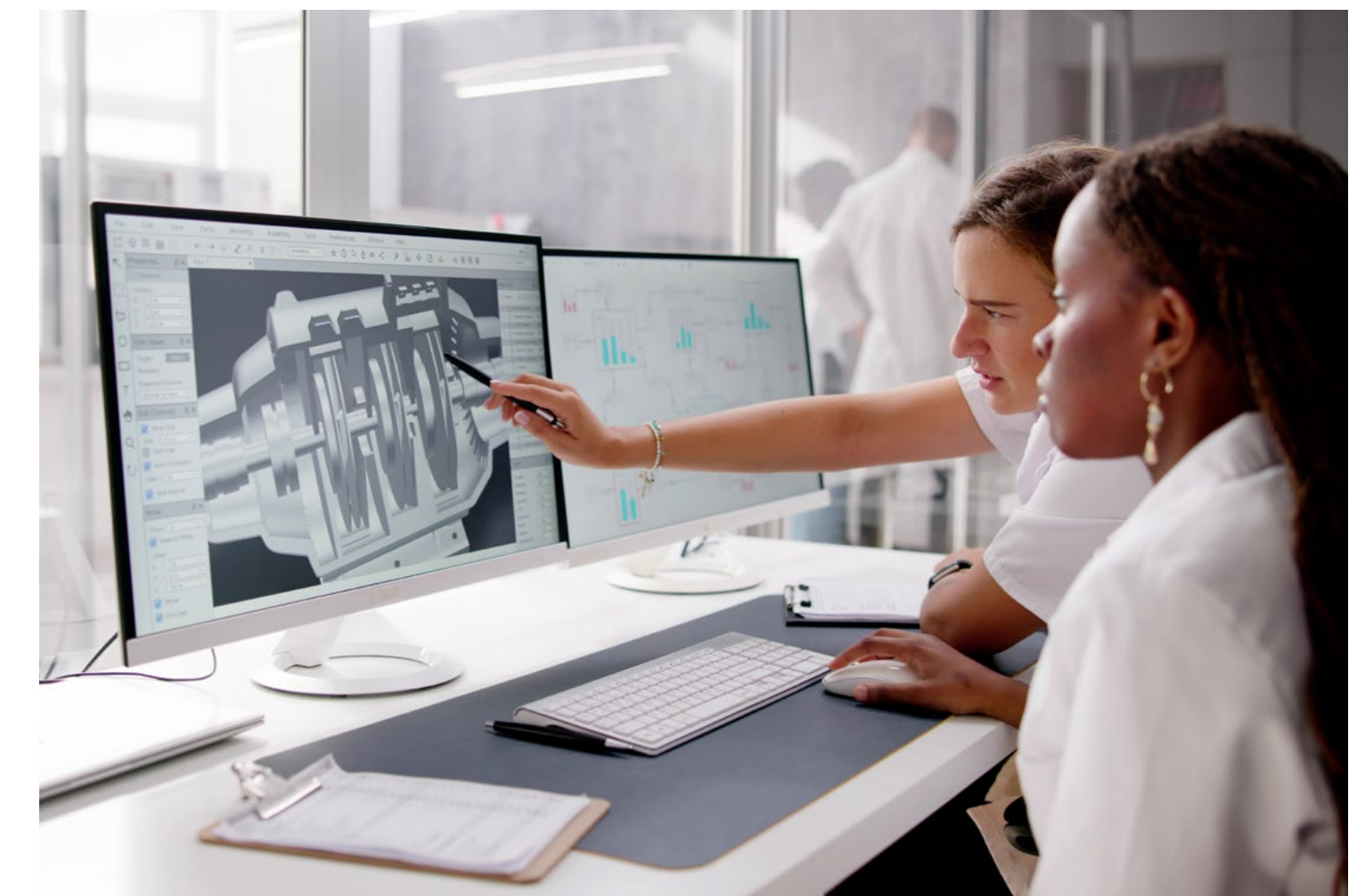
From September 2027, a new Skills Suite will be available to all 14 to 16-year-old learners in Wales, combining Skills for Work and Skills for Life topics from CQFW Entry Level 1 to Level 2 (RQF Entry Level 1 to Level 2/SCQF Levels 1 to 5). Also from September 2027, 14 to 16-year-olds will be able to take a new suite of Made-for-Wales GCSEs and VCSEs, new vocational alternatives to GCSEs intended to build awareness of, and interest in, the vocational progression routes post-16. 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.

### 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.

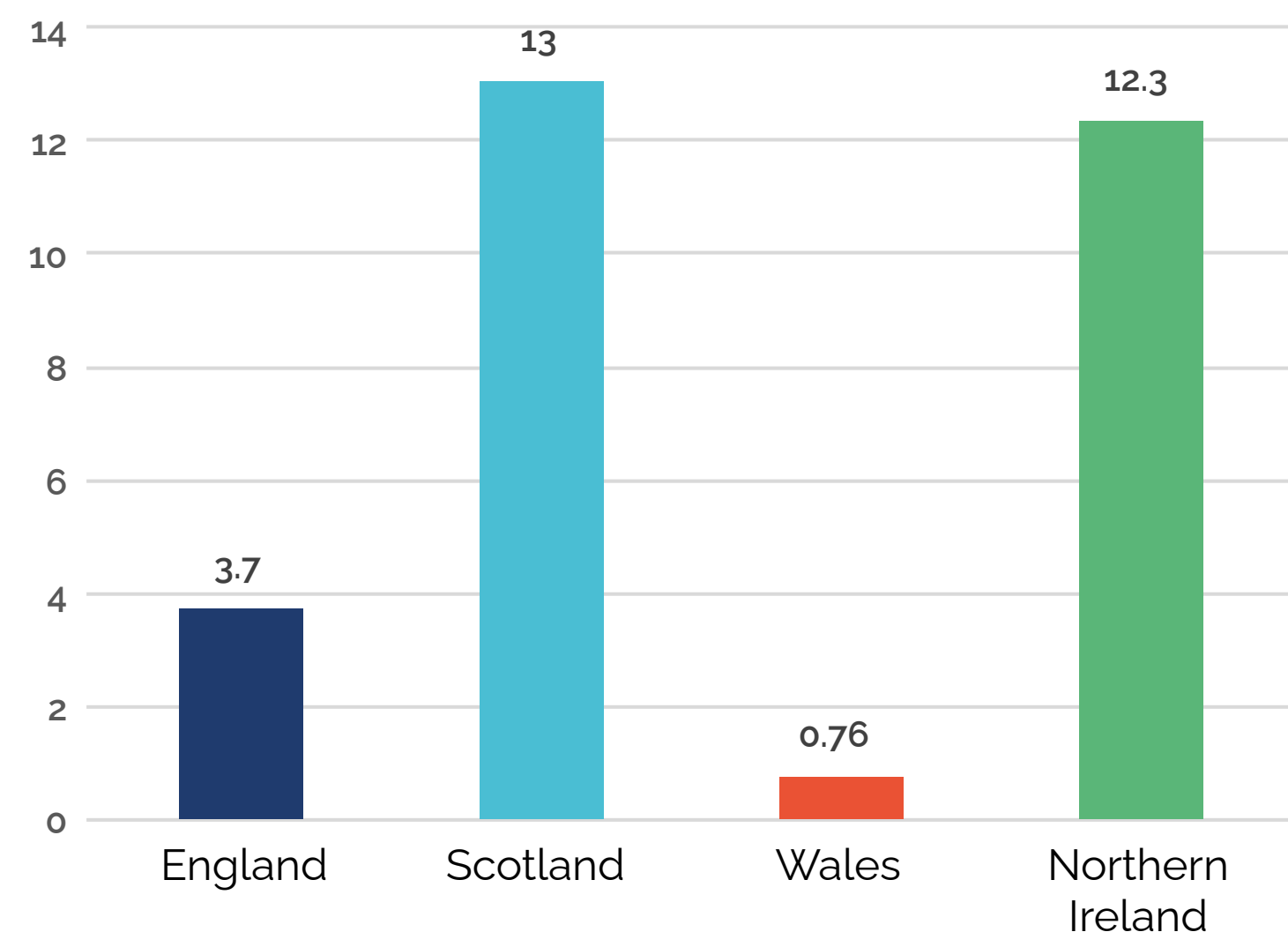
Under the Entitlement Framework, all students at Key Stage 4 and post-16 are guaranteed access to a minimum number of courses, one third of which must be applied. The Education Minister [confirmed](#) his intention to review qualifications at Key Stage 4 and post 16, including Occupational Studies, during the current Mandate.



# 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. While the relationship between FE and HE tends to be more competitive in market-based approaches such as in England, coordination between FE and HE is more centralised in Scotland and Wales's more system-based approach.

Figure 13: Percentage of HE students enrolled in FE colleges by country, 2021/22



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

## England

The relationship between FE and HE in England is marked by competition, but the line between the two sectors has been blurred somewhat by some colleges offering HE provision. College-based HE provision takes many different forms, offering a variety of provision, either outright with their own awarding powers, or in partnership with universities. In the academic year 2021/22, there were 90,120 students studying higher education courses at FE colleges.<sup>13</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.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/sb265-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>

### Scotland

Scotland has a more system-based approach to tertiary education than in England with one body, the SFC, responsible for funding colleges and universities. 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, have urged the Government to go further, establishing 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 January 2025, the Scottish government announced plans to transfer responsibility for national training programmes from SDS to the SFC.

The SFC report saw post-16 collaboration stemming from Tertiary Provision Pathfinders that would examine how collaboration could be used practically to secure more coherent provision that meets the current and future needs of learners and employers, both regionally and nationally. The SFC has since set up two Regional Tertiary Pathfinders regions with seven pilots in the North-East and South of Scotland, which began delivery of new courses in August 2023. The SFC is expected to report on the findings

of these pilots in Spring 2025. Other areas of collaboration already exist between colleges and universities in Scotland. For example, colleges and universities in 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. Medr is now 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. Medr will also 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, and will also have responsibility for planning and forming the 16-19 curriculum offer.



## 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. As this is a matter for the Department for the Economy, the Education Minister promised to consult with them in his [response](#) to the review.

In addition, FE colleges are responsible for a significant amount (12.3%) of HE provision in Northern Ireland (see Figure 13). 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.



# 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 (and soon Skills England) 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

The Skills for Jobs 2021 White Paper set out a 'key objective' of the previous 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>14</sup>

Employers play an active role in helping to shape HTQs, T Levels, and apprenticeships, particularly working with IfATE (and soon Skills England) to set the standards for

different occupations. Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) have also been rolled out 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.

Following the publication of the industrial strategy, the Government has set up the [Industrial Strategy Advisory Council](#), bringing together business leaders and the Chair of Skills England, to determine how to 'grow the economy and bring good jobs to every part of the UK'.

<sup>14</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/601980f2eg0e07128a353aa3/Skills\\_for\\_jobs\\_lifelong\\_learning\\_for\\_opportunity\\_and\\_growth\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/601980f2eg0e07128a353aa3/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth_web_version.pdf)

### Scotland

Employers are seen as vital partners in delivering skills in 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.

Employers also engage through Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs). These are collaborations between local government, the private sector, education and skills providers, enterprise and skills agencies, and the third sector, working together to identify new plans to accelerate inclusive economic growth at a local, regional, and national level. There are currently 8 REPs across Scotland.

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

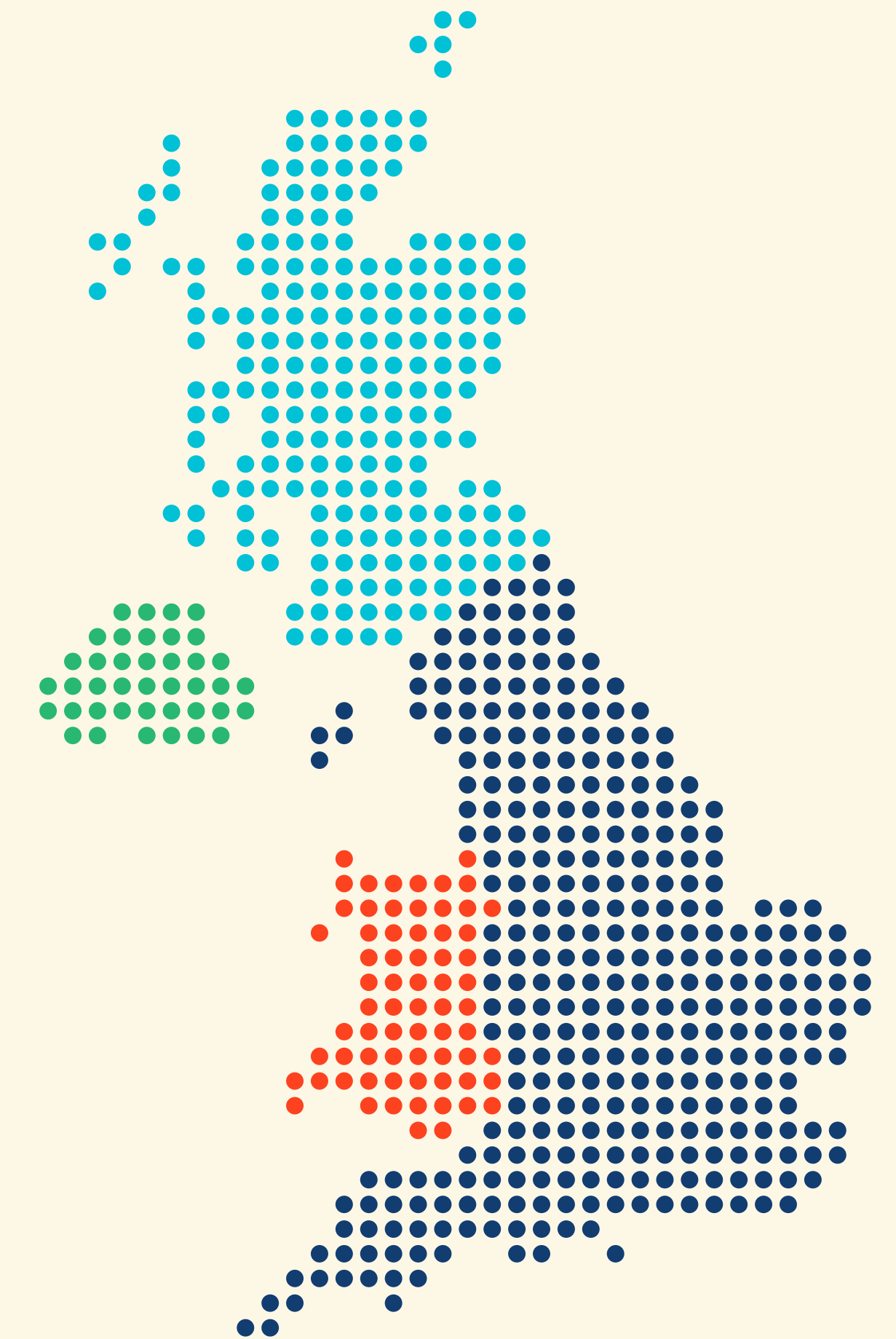
Like the other nations in the UK, there is a recognised need for better strategic coordination between employers and education providers in Northern Ireland's skills system. The Skills Strategy report highlighted that stakeholders were frustrated at the lack of coordination within government in its approach 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. However, despite this, the Institute of Directors NI expressed dissatisfaction with 'the weak and disjointed skills and education system' in its June 2024 [Skills & Workplace Forum Action Plan](#).

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 2022 [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](#) to find out more.





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