

## **Apprenticeships aren't designed for young people any more**

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# Apprenticeships aren't designed for young people any more

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The number of people in England choosing to enrol in an apprenticeship has declined markedly over the past decade. Apprenticeship participation has fallen overall from 908,700 in 2016-17 to 736,500 in 2023-24.

Particularly notable has been a shift away from apprenticeships providing introductory skills for young people towards them becoming higher level qualifications for older adults.

In 2023-24, 55,660 under-19s were taking part in an intermediate apprenticeship, down from 75,500 in 2019-20. On the other hand, 185,810 over-25s were participating in a higher level apprenticeship in 2023-24 – up from 109,770 in 2019-20.

“Apprenticeship starts for the under-25s fell by 38% in the period 2015-16 to 2022-23,” education secretary Bridget Phillipson told the House of Commons in September 2024. “It will fall to this Labour government to turn that around.”

Continued messaging from successive governments has emphasised that apprenticeships are for young people. “To every young person I meet my message is that no matter who you are, or where you’re from, or whatever career you want to do, an apprenticeship will open doors for you,” Robert Halfon, skills minister in the previous Conservative government, said in 2023.

Politicians present a decline in young people taking apprenticeships as a problem. But it is government policy that has turned these qualifications into something much more suitable for adults already in the workforce.

## Employers first

A large reason for this is changes to how apprenticeships work that make them more centred on the role and needs of employers.

The changes to apprenticeships since 2012 include a levy on large employers. Companies with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million pay 0.5% of this into a time-limited pot that they can use for apprenticeships within the company or transfer a proportion to smaller companies.

Apprenticeships have also shifted from a focus on achieving qualifications towards meeting standards that focus on the knowledge, skills and behaviours of a job and often include a status or recognition from a professional body.

The employer recruits, employs and pays the apprentice. Employers appoint the training provider, and they set the standards.

Faced with using or losing money for apprenticeships and the choice between an unknown new recruit and an established member of staff, large employers might rationally opt to use apprenticeships to support their existing workforce to improve their skills.

Many adults enrol on apprenticeships to improve their skills. fizkes/Shutterstock

Adult apprentices typically have experience in relevant roles but want to improve their skills and progress in their careers.

The NHS, for example, sees apprenticeships as a key part of its workforce strategy. Emerging evidence from my research with colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University and charity the Edge Foundation suggests many people on health apprenticeships are adults and existing staff.

## Reduced requirements

Policy announcements from the current government have cemented this shift. They include the removal of the need for English and maths qualifications for adult apprentices, and the reduced minimum time period for an apprenticeship from 12 months to eight.

In announcing the recent changes to English and maths, Bridget Phillipson said: “Businesses have been calling out for change to the apprenticeship system and these reforms show that we are listening. Our new offer of shorter apprenticeships and less red tape strikes the right balance between speed and quality, helping achieve our number one mission to grow the economy.”

These changes are designed to increase the number of adult apprentices who complete their apprenticeship. Shorter apprenticeships should allow adults’ substantial relevant experience to be recognised within their apprenticeship so they can complete it more quickly.

English and maths requirements had been a barrier for some adults to completing their apprenticeship. Some employers had made having English and maths qualifications a requirement for getting onto an apprenticeship. Without the requirements, more adults should be able to access and complete apprenticeships – but this change is only for those aged over 19.

Increased funding for small and medium enterprises to take on apprentices, which was introduced under the previous government, also prioritised employers, although it did come with an additional incentive for them to take on 16-to-18 year olds. Other employer-focused policy changes from the previous government include reducing the requirements for time spent training off-the-job.

The current government’s planned change to a growth and skills levy does include the creation of foundation apprenticeships. More detail on what they will entail in England is yet to come. But these do currently operate in Scotland, allowing younger people to gain substantial work experience whilst studying for qualifications at college.

This kind of programme could create a smoother transition into an apprenticeship for a young person, and may increase the number of young people participating in apprenticeships. But for now, employers and the skills needed for economic growth still seem to be the priority.