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THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

The future of apprenticeships: Higher and often?

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ABSTRACT

Policy changes to apprenticeships in England have focused on meeting the needs of employers, including offering higher apprenticeships and being offered to adults and young people. Labor market predictions indicate a reduced need for lower-level skills and a greater need for higher level skills over the next ten years. This paper considers key aspects of labor market demand notably management skills, and skilled workers in both construction and social care, and the apprenticeship offer in those areas. Further, it identifies trends towards apprenticeship pathways and the growth in adults and higher apprenticeships. These combine to conclude that apprenticeship delivery is adapting to labor market demand by offering opportunities to obtain higher level skills and at different times during a career, contributing to our understanding of apprenticeship policy and its links to the labor market.

Key words: apprenticeships, labor market, skills, higher apprenticeships

INTRODUCTION

Policy changes in English apprenticeships since quality concerns were raised in 2012, have resulted in changes to funding, assessment and content. A levy is now raised from large employers and can only be spent on apprenticeships. Qualifications are no longer required within an apprenticeship, but an end point assessment takes place, and some professional statuses are included. The content—apprenticeship standards—are now developed by employers to describe the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed for the specific job role. This focus on employers and specific jobs has led to a growth in higher and degree apprenticeships, which is also beginning to happen in countries like New Zealand (Mackay *et al.*, 2022) and Australia (Ashman *et al.*, 2021). Apprenticeships are also offered at a range of ages, with 48% of apprenticeships in 2023–2024 started by those aged 25 or over (Department for Education, 2025).

At the same time, it is claimed that one million, mostly elementary occupations, will disappear from the UK labor market by 2035, with 12 million roles affected

(Scott *et al.*, 2024). This shift in the labor market is from jobs which require lower-level qualifications towards roles which demand higher level skills. This pattern of shifting from lower to higher level training can be seen in the changes to apprenticeships in the past 10 years (Pullen, 2024).

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper aims to answer the research question: to what extent do the changes in apprenticeship experience and implementation reflect the changes in labor market demand in England, and what relevance might this have for other countries developing higher and degree apprenticeships.

This paper draws initially on primary research from three projects. Firstly, a policy analysis of apprenticeships for adults for the University Vocational Awards Council (Pullen, 2024), from which is drawn the policy analysis and review of grey literature on apprenticeships and analysis of government figures on apprenticeships. Secondly, a report on the experiences of apprentices

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paid the apprenticeship minimum wage for the Low Pay Commission (Pullen *et al.*, 2024a), from which is drawn interviews with apprentices on their experience and apprenticeship journey. And finally, a mixed methods research project focused on widening participation and degree apprenticeships (Pullen *et al.*, 2024b) from which is drawn interviews with staff at an apprenticeship training provider in outreach and/or employer engagement, and also with apprenticeship policy stakeholders. All interviews took place online with individuals based in England and all focused on apprenticeships.

The paper then considers the findings from these interviews in the wider economic context of jobs in England, drawing on recent research and analysis both in academic and grey literature. This approach to bringing qualitative experiences and reflecting them against existing quantitative data provides triangulation that helps us better understand how wider trends manifest for individuals.

RESULTS

As employers now have greater influence on apprenticeships in England through funding, content and assessment changes (Pullen, 2025), a key driver could be labor market demand, as employers seek to use apprenticeships to fill skills shortages. The Skills Imperative 2025 (Dickerson *et al.*, 2023) reports on skills demand over the next decade highlighted a small growth in professional level skills, but a larger demand for managers and senior professionals. Considering industry sectors and current demand, in England those on the skills shortage list (Home Office, 2024) are predominantly social care and construction. Table 1 based on a review of sector-specific reports and broader indicators of current and future labor demand, highlights how apprenticeships are considered to be a way to meet that demand.

While some of these apprenticeships are at entry level, increasingly there is growth in these areas at higher levels. Interviews with employed engagement staff in universities delivering degree apprenticeships suggest that employers are keen to train staff at higher levels, both within the health sector (including social care where it sits in the public sector) and in construction and the built environment through roles like surveying and civil engineering. This is particularly the case for larger building firms and the public health service, which all pay the apprenticeship levy (HMRC, 2023).

Patterns in apprenticeships more broadly have meant that fewer apprenticeships are being completed at the lowest level, Level 2, particularly by young people, while

there are more higher and degree apprenticeships, often completed by adults over 25. Here, Level 3 in Social Care is the most popular apprenticeship in that sector, while the business programs are at higher levels, often for people already in the workforce but with limited formal business education. Construction and the built environment offer a range of apprenticeships at different levels, there are challenges at both entry level—Levels 2 and 3—and at higher levels in terms of recruitment and completion (CITB, 2025).

The interviews with apprentices who were paid the minimum wage showed that individuals who progressed from entry level apprenticeships in subjects like business administration and customer service, were aiming to ultimately obtain professional status, through apprenticeships. One individual had completed four apprenticeships in total and achieved a Masters-level professional status in accountancy. Another was on his third apprenticeship in human resources. In describing his motivation for starting the first apprenticeship, he said: "It got me into a large organisation ... I was mainly applying for a foot in the door in a career ... And then obviously, the plan was to develop to further apprenticeships".

These apprentices, by moving through the appropriate levels, were aiming to achieve these managerial positions in future, thus helping to plug future gaps in the labor market. This pathway approach to apprenticeships, whereby the first apprenticeship is in a way into a career, with a plan to develop further through apprenticeships at higher levels into a professional role, is a new development for apprenticeships in England.

Lastly, there has been a growth in adults and existing staff engaging in apprenticeship, particularly at higher levels. Although this is partly perception (Pullen, 2024), it is the case that apprenticeships are now better designed for individuals with prior relevant work experience, as they are focused specifically on training individuals for a job. This allows for the possibility of individuals not just completing multiple apprenticeships as referenced above, but also for adults to upskill and potentially even reskill later in life. As recent evidence (OECD, 2024) has highlighted that the UK has an issue with skills utilization, training individuals for a specific job while they are working, would seem to be a helpful solution at least for some, particularly when employers are covering the cost of training.

CONCLUSION

These findings highlight the aspirations for apprenticeships to help the economy in England tackle skills shortages and respond to labor market demand. In three

Table 1: Skills shortages and apprenticeships

Skills shortage or sector	Evidence	Main apprenticeship program	Participation
Management skills	Previously 8 in 10 managers became managers with no formal training (CMI, 2023) Management skills are predicted to be the fastest growing of all levels of job role (Dickerson <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	Level 7 Senior Leader Apprenticeship (IfATE, 2024) Level 5 Chartered Manager Apprenticeship	12,000 in 2023-2024 on Level 7 Senior Leader Apprenticeship (Oxford Economics, 2025) which saw an initial dip in 2021-2022 when the apprenticeship standard was amended but has rebounded. Government plans may remove public funding from the Level 7 which would likely have an impact
Construction skills	Range of construction trades are eligible for UK skilled worker visas (Home Office, 2024) Around 3 times the current number of apprentices needed to meet industry demand (CITB, 2025)	Level 2 and Level 3 programs key for construction trades, while roles like surveying and project management require higher level skills	Growth in starts Construction and the Built Environment from 21,920 in 2019-2020 to 24,230 in 2023-2024 (Department for Education, 2025) Around 82,000 participated in construction apprenticeships in 2023-2024 but completion rates have been falling (CITB, 2025)
Social care	Social Care roles on UK skills worker visa (Home Office, 2024) 131,000 vacant posts as of 2023-2024 with demand being met mostly by international recruitment and 54% of current staff have no relevant qualification (Skills for Care, 2024)	Level 2 Adult Care Worker and Level 3 Adult Care Worker are key with Level 4 Lead Practitioner in Adult Care, Level 5 Leader of Adult Care, and Level 6 Social Worker Degree Apprenticeship increasingly important (Skills for Care, 2024)	Although apprenticeships in health and care have been going up with nearly 100,000 starts in 2023-2024 (Department for Education, 2025), social care apprenticeship starts fell by 14% between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 (Skills for Care, 2024).

key sectors, apprenticeships have been developed and are being promoted by sector bodies and employers, and while this has been successful in terms of management skills, there still challenges for construction and the built environment and social care. However, despite the problems, apprenticeships are part of the solution.

The shift towards apprenticeships that can be worked through in a pathway, starting at an appropriate level and taken by both young people starting their careers and adults in the workplace, at appropriate points rather than all at the beginning of a career, makes them better able to help tackle skills shortages. It is also a reflection that skills shortages do not only exist in entry level roles, where people might once have expected to start at the bottom of a ladder and move upwards. Addressing skills utilization and shortages at a range of levels and in a range of roles, means helping adults upskill and reskill throughout their careers as jobs change and evolve in response to exogeneous challenges and opportunities. This does mean apprenticeships that are at higher levels and taken more often are more appropriate in the modern world. This is made easier in England, where apprenticeships are shorter, but this kind of flexibility of approach may be worth considering in countries where apprenticeships are more fixed in terms of level and age.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions

Pullen C: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by Sheffield Hallam University.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for research purposes and publication. The participants were informed that the interview data were only to be used for research purposes, and their information would be pseudonymized or anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they could stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they could refuse to respond to any question asked during the interview. Participants could withdraw from the study at any point up to 2 weeks after they were interviewed.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. The article was subject to the journal's standard procedures, with peer review handled independently of the author and research group.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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