



UVAC
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

Strategic
Priorities
2024-2027

Who we are



U VAC is one of the most authoritative voices on higher level skills programmes delivered by higher education (HE) and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy, strategy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships in England. UVAC has institutional members of all types and sizes and from across all university mission groups and a sizeable number of valued corporate supporters. In 2024 UVAC celebrated its silver jubilee; two and a half decades, since 1999, of championing higher level technical and professional learning and actively supporting progression routes into HE and the registered professions, through our advocacy, representation and research work.

“

Now apprenticeship opportunities stretch from the crafts and trades through to technical, associate professional, managerial and professional job roles and we have the foremost universities in the world involved in their delivery alongside colleges, training providers and employers.



And, what a remarkable 25 years we have experienced in apprenticeships. In fact, we have seen a seismic shift in the development and policy design of apprenticeships in England. Previously, we had apprenticeships that were the domain of traditional sectors and industries, with little to no engagement by, or appeal to, HE providers (HEPs). Now apprenticeship opportunities stretch from the crafts and trades through to technical, associate professional, managerial and professional job roles and we have the foremost universities in the world involved in their delivery alongside colleges, training providers and employers. Degree Apprenticeships have become a significant entry-route to skilled professions from architecture and engineering to nursing and social work, providing a means for young people starting out in their careers, and adults already in work, to enter traditionally graduate occupations in the private sector and contribute to modernising and diversifying our public services.

Mistakes of the past must be avoided. Too often there has been a failure to consider higher level skills and the role of universities in the development and delivery of skills policy. If skills policy is focused on supporting the UK to develop as a high productivity economy, a focus is needed on higher level skills and the UK's world-class university sector must be fully engaged.

The context in which we work

Low productivity, economic inactivity and slow business growth, the weak state of the public finances, and the transition to green skills and a net zero economy are key challenges faced by Westminster Government. Appropriate apprenticeship and skills policies will be required to deal with each of these challenges, with government needing to lead activities to tackle labour supply issues and skills shortages and gaps, in order to raise productivity and economic growth – points made in [Skills England: Driving growth and widening opportunities](#). However, when apprenticeship and skills policy is considered, the argument made, by some in further education (FE), is for the need to focus on young people and lower level skills.

Skills England

The language of its creation is very much linked to a particular view – that the skills system is broken, with the role of Skills England as an executive agency bringing together a fractured skills landscape, developing a shared ambition to boost skills and ensuring skills policy is aligned with the needs of the economy. Launched in principle in July 2024, it takes on the functions of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) (not as a statutory body but as a defined team within DfE with the [Secretary of State deciding which bits to delegate](#)), while also having an expanded remit to look at skills gaps and demand. Skills England will also identify the training that is accessible via the Growth and Skills Levy as part of its wider remit around skills strategy, planning and [rationing level 7 apprenticeships](#).

In establishing Skills England in this way, and confirmed by the [Institute of Apprenticeships And Technical Education \(Transfer of Functions etc\) Bill](#), policy makers have fallen into the trap of assuming that the apprenticeship and skills systems have nothing to celebrate and that in apprenticeships especially, the last ten years has resulted in a system of delivery at level 6 (bachelor's degree) and level 7 (post-graduate, master's degree) that is 'too expensive', diverts funding from young people who need lower-level skills programmes, are re-packaged graduate schemes, abused by employers who re-badge existing staff as apprentices, represents a 'middle class landgrab' or not in the spirit of apprenticeships at all, but 'fake' apprenticeships; that in effect they are not 'proper' apprenticeships. UVAC would rather that there is recognition for the excellence

▶ they bring in creating progression pathways into the skilled professions so it is disappointing that the narrative has returned to what apprenticeships have historically been. UVAC hopes that Government will ensure that Skills England is independent, blind to provider type and focuses on the skills the economy actually needs, regardless of level and age of employee, and will lobby to this effect.

Skills England will also advise on the type of provision which falls under 'flexible training'. Stand-alone modular courses are expected to feature modules at levels 4 and 5. So, if Skills England is involved in the funding, expanding and planning of vocational sub-degrees funded through the HE system, the new quango will be a big deal for HE and not just for apprenticeship delivery. In the name of developing a comprehensive post-18 skills system, Skills England is going to want to have a say over the development of modular courses in the regulated HE system whether Labour implements the Lifelong Learning Entitlement or not.

▶

Growth and Skills Levy

Labour's pre-election pledge to let businesses spend up to 50 per cent of the apprenticeship levy on other types of training has been dropped in favour of more planned flexibilities, given the reality of how much flex there is on an already spent apprenticeship budget. UVAC argues that the apprenticeship system as a whole should be working together to increase the budget on apprenticeships rather than restricting the national programme's breadth and stretch, from training in entry-level job roles to higher level technical careers and highly skilled professional occupations. How realistic is it that there will be extra funding unless the Treasury (HMT) reduces the margin it takes from the money raised by the levy? The inevitability of the Growth and Skills Levy is that by widening the levy to fund other forms of training will mean apprenticeship numbers have to be reduced unless there is a significant uplift in the Department for Education's (DfE) budget.

An alternative to restricting spend on apprenticeships, would be to increase funds raised through the Apprenticeship or Growth and Skills Levy and thereby increase the size of the 'levy pot'. Government could consider two main ways of doing this. It could increase the amount levy paying employers pay, by increasing the levy rate from 0.5% of payroll. It could alternatively or additionally, widen the scope of the levy by reducing the threshold at which employers start paying the levy, currently set at a payroll of £3 million.

Our asks of Government: Apprenticeships and Skills

There is much to do in terms of working with Government on all aspects of skills and apprenticeship policy. UVAC hoped that apprenticeship in England would never again be seen as 'a good programme for other people's children' - a programme primarily for those not in education, employment or training (NEET) or furthest away from the labour market. If the UK is to tackle its productivity gap it must raise the skills levels and the productivity of the existing workforce i.e. individuals in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. Focusing on training young people entering the workforce will not tackle the nation's productivity problem alone.

An over focus on the young will also not help apprenticeships deliver social mobility and a high-income economy. Individuals should have the ability to progress to a higher-level occupation and fulfil their potential throughout their working life. What higher and degree apprenticeships can do is provide new opportunities for older adults to train for and secure higher technical, professional and managerial roles. Measures of social mobility that simply focus on achievements by the age of 24 undermine and undervalue the achievement and aspiration of such individuals.



UVAC has two main asks.

Apprenticeship and skills policy must encompass individuals of all ages and include all levels of skills training.

1.



Government must ensure that the country, in the form of government, employers and individuals invest more in training and development.

2.



It is encouraging to see both reflected as important in Skills England's own analysis. Investment must however have a focus. The country needs to invest in the skills and occupations needed to raise productivity, deliver key public sector services and a high-income economy. Growth is the watchword. This does not mean a rigid national plan. Employers generally know which skills their organisations need. Government does, however have a role in ensuring colleges, higher education institutions, independent training providers and universities deliver the programmes employers and individuals need *and* in spearheading the development of a culture where employers champion and celebrate their investment in training.

Before the inception of degree apprenticeships in 2015 and the introduction of the levy in 2017, apprenticeship delivery had little correlation with the skills needed in the economy. Today apprenticeships are an aspirational programme - in no small part *because* of degree apprenticeships - and the bifurcated system that, for so long, characterised HE and vocational training as alternative sides of the English education system, now consigned (or so was thought) to the past. Apprenticeship must retain a clear purpose and must remain employer-led. Apprenticeships in England have evolved to such an extent that they are no longer a programme of FE. In order to support growth at higher levels, the language of employers, the professions and higher education must be retained in the apprenticeship system. We must not lose clarity on what the purpose of apprenticeship in England is and UVAC will endeavour to reduce the risk that it is.

Our Agenda – Addressing Challenges and Making the Most of Opportunities

The UVAC agenda is of great significance to the HE sector, more so than any time in the last twenty five years. The binary and dualistic nature of the comparison between vocational and academic represented by the academic-vocational, theory-practice, head-smart – hand-smart, mental-manual, education-training that so often characterises the debate on what constitutes national priorities is so unhelpful when deciding on matters of national skills policy. While we should be cautionary with regards to new policy and its impact we will, and can, find positives including opportunities.



The following represent the headline strategic priorities for UVAC and its members in terms of apprenticeships and skills policy:

1. Higher and Degree Apprenticeships including policy, quality and regulation

Higher and degree apprenticeships are here to stay. The strong demand for higher and degree apprenticeships is coming from employers and individuals, which makes Government's moves against level 7 provision all the more extraordinary. Higher level apprenticeships are the fastest area of growth in terms of starts, accounts for an increasingly large proportion of apprenticeship spend and withstood a number of economic shocks suffered by other levels of apprenticeship provision. Higher education providers (HEP) engaged in this agenda do, however, face a multitude of challenges not least of all around quality and regulations including from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). UVAC will continue to work on behalf of members to challenge the extent of requirements to meet performance standards given that 85 per cent of members are good or outstanding following Ofsted inspection and very few register for DfE intervention based on Apprenticeship Accountability Framework (AAF) measures of quality. Funding bands have also not kept pace with growing economic costs or inflationary pressures.

2. Protecting level 7 higher and degree apprenticeships

UVAC is disappointed that the Labour government has failed, very early on, to recognise how the current apprenticeships system enables individuals who did not have, or who missed the opportunity at a younger age, to train for a higher-paid career or follow a route to a registered profession. It is highly likely that the announcement affecting the scale of level 7 investment by employers is in part reflective of the rhetoric that has been critical of management apprenticeships. The caricature of the investment banker, or well-paid FTSE executive using levy funds to pay for an MBA has, even very recently, featured in the debate on apprenticeships despite the master's degree removal from funding in 2020. The reality has, however, always been different. Around 60% of senior leader apprenticeships are undertaken in the public sector, with the NHS being the biggest recruiter. In reality, too little attention is paid in skills policy to the fundamental importance of developing management skills and raising management performance or, indeed, how improvements in management skills would have the most impact on raising productivity and public sector efficiency. UVAC will work with DfE and Skills England to ensure proper consideration is given to what is and isn't fundable by the levy and support members to respond to shifts in policy.

3. Social Mobility, Diversity and the Delivery of Public Sector Services

Government expects, and HEIs will need to develop and deliver, provision that enhances social mobility, tackles underrepresentation and encourages diversity. UVAC stresses the importance of support for the delivery of high-quality public sector services. Degree apprenticeship already deliver well for the public sector, particularly in addressing the long-term workforce challenges in the NHS. These arguments need to be amplified and maintained. Investing more in training in the public sector increases productivity and results in better public service delivery for monies invested by Government. From a social mobility perspective, Government should want a focus on opening up progression routes to the professions and to higher paid occupations. Supporting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-served communities into entry-level roles can help with social mobility but it is a first step. Government should be far more ambitious and will need a focus on social mobility and progression into technical level roles, the professions and higher paid occupations.

In terms of wider apprenticeship and skills policy the following priorities are apparent:

The Industrial Strategy, Green Jobs and Net Zero agendas

A major focus is needed on green jobs if the country is to deliver the net zero economy. Key occupations here will frequently be at level 4 and above. A focus is needed on higher-level occupations if the country is to develop as a high skill, high productivity and high income economy. Similarly, if the focus is on improving productivity, Government must have a major focus on the adult workforce, those aged over 24, who comprise the vast majority of the working population. For the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the funding solution to proposals is to increase productivity. Average output per worker for G7 nations (excluding the UK and Japan) was 16% above the UK level in 2021. Various causes for low UK productivity can be identified and an analysis of such causes and potential solutions should be at the top of the Chancellor's in tray if Labour's Green Prosperity Plan is to guarantee any success.

SMEs and Young People

Government is very concerned about the decline in the use of apprenticeships by SMEs and the decline in starts of 16-24 year olds. It is seeking to increase use and the number of starts by promoting more flexible delivery approaches, including shorter duration apprenticeships, Foundation Apprenticeships, and by rebalancing funding in favour of school and college leavers. UVAC will work with Skills England and the inter-departmental brief it has, particularly the connection to the industrial strategy, to solve what is a major ideological problem; that some parts of the apprenticeship system are not comfortable with the inevitable outcome of market choices which for some time now has seen employers recruit larger volumes of higher level apprenticeships and migrated upwards the demand for skills. Through our members' support we will help navigate the challenge for providers to respond to an ever changing playing field. Nothing is more disruptive than ever-moving goalposts.

Flexibilities and Progression

'Accelerated' and 'front loaded' models of apprenticeships have been promoted, with too little effect on sectors such as the creative industries. UVAC will work with UUK and Guild HE on models focused on sectors where project-based employment is common e.g., the creative and digital sectors, and where an apprentice may have several different employers during their apprenticeship. One of the major complaints from employers concerning the Apprenticeship Levy, is its perceived inflexibility. Employers complain that they typically cannot spend and therefore lose a significant proportion of their levy payments. Introducing flexibility on what employers could spend levy payments on would increase the opportunity for employers to recover and use their levy payments. UVAC has argued and continues to argue that productivity should be the starting point for any Government approach to apprenticeship and skills. The consultation on the now defunct Advanced British Standard (ABS) noted that: "A third of our national productivity growth over the last two decades is explained by improvements in skills levels across the workforce". These are important statistics when adaptability and flexibility is considered.



HE Admissions, Access and Participation

The development and prioritisation of T Levels and the reduction in and removal of funding for Applied Generals (BTEC Nationals/Cambridge Technicals) means challenges for HE admissions, access, participation and HE programme design. Office for Student (OfS) mandated Access and Participation Plans are critical in describing how apprenticeships and technical education can deliver those aims. UVAC fully supports the notion that the visibility of pathways from level 3 apprenticeships to HE should be improved and that apprenticeships should be more widely understood to be excellent preparation for advancement through both the workplace and education. However, UCAS plans to allocated tariff points to level 3 apprenticeships based on duration, in a recognisably wider admissions process, “to position UK apprenticeships on an equal footing with A levels, T levels and other level 3...programmes of study” actually does the opposite. Duration is not a comparable measure of size for apprenticeship provision, capping the allocation of tariff points at a pass grade does not provide a comparable measure of standard and, apprentices will be disadvantaged on an intra-UK basis in terms of recognising levels of performance and when compared to students undertaking other qualifications at this level. UVAC will continue to advise on the merits of using credit to provide a measure of the ‘size’ of an apprenticeship that is consistent with level 3 qualifications on the UCAS tariff.

Higher Technical Qualifications

The Government, we presume, intends to increase the take-up and use of Higher Technical Qualifications (levels 4 and 5) through the quality mark process and, more significantly, through potential funding incentives and disincentives for other types of level 4 and level 5 provision, to address the need for technical level workers. However, the economy and society need individuals trained at all levels – level 2 (GCSE equivalent) to level 7 (master’s degree equivalent). 172, or 25% of the apprenticeship standards developed by employers are for professional levels of skill (level 6 and level 7 occupations). Government is wanting to emphasise the important of higher technical skills at level 4 and level 5 (equivalent to the first and second years of a undergraduate degree). To deliver the technical skills agenda government will certainly need the full engagement of colleges, but also the full engagement of universities.

“

To deliver the technical skills agenda government will certainly need the full engagement of colleges, but also the full engagement of universities.

Workforce Development and CPD

DfE investment ongoing in supporting an extended apprenticeship workforce development programme means UVAC is looking for continual assurance that support is contextualised for and relevant to HE, by designing, developing and delivering appropriate modules as part of an Education and Training Foundation led consortium of delivery partners. UVAC has a proven record of reflecting on practitioner innovation and creation and its official, peer reviewed, journal has published five special issues on policy and practice in apprenticeships delivered by universities. UVAC is prioritising support for practitioners’ digital competencies as central to ensuring high quality provision in work-based and apprenticeship learning. There is progress towards pedagogically consistent measures for the adoption of online and digital methods but progress is uneven and there is still a need for improved digital pedagogy and better integration of theoretical and practical learning.

Greater Use of Credit Transfer between Institutions

We need to think about credit differently as presently there is piecemeal recognition of credit by HE and there is increasingly a demand for a national framework setting out common standards that support and enables individuals to access higher education programmes including those that lead to registered professional status. Should HE fail to establish a common understanding of the value of programmes and prior experience as preparation for HE through the process of translating and ascribing credit, this manifests as a barrier to career progression for individuals and inhibits meeting workforce needs. UVAC looks to raise the debate as, when admitting students to a course of study, providers want to be assured that learners are adequately prepared for higher level learning, which is normally viewed through the value of the prior qualification in terms of the level and volume of learning undertaken.

Member Support

UVAC provides an extensive programme of sector support including an annual, national conference, symposiums, webinars, knowledge networks, briefings, templates, toolkits and one-to-one advice and support. Our activities going forward will include a specialist focus on:

Apprenticeship Compliance and Audit – All HEIs delivering apprenticeships still need to comply with DfE funding, are subject to financial audit as well as OfS external quality assurance of end point assessment for integrated degree apprenticeships and, potentially, Ofqual oversight. Through webinars, briefings and templates UVAC will ensure HEPs are up to date with requirements and benefit from shared insights and practice. The launch of UVAC's 'Black Box' of resources and tools, provides a new and varied approach to learning about new practice, giving guidance and exploring important themes.

Apprenticeship Developments – UVAC will provide opportunities for its members to consult with and work with DfE and Skills England as they roll-out new plans and ideas, including flexible programmes, short modular provision, and the introduction of the Growth and Skills Levy. New models of delivery, as solutions to engaging a different cohort of apprentice and size of employer will form part of UVAC's 'Black Box' of support, created in response to time poor practitioners and leaders, intent on expansion and growth, with a need for resources that aid practice rather than just knowledge or the giving of information.

Knowledge Networks – Extending out of UVAC's early Degree Apprenticeship Knowledge Networks (DAKN's), UVAC will continue to grow opportunities for live and online networking opportunities to give academics support in the delivery of key apprenticeships including the academic professional, nursing associate, HTQs, registered nurse, police constable, senior leader, chartered surveyor, social worker, teacher and for the successful delivery of on-and-off-the-job learning and the integrated type and model of end point assessment.

Ofsted Inspection of HE Delivered Apprenticeship Provision – All apprenticeship training, including degree apprenticeships are subject to Ofsted inspection. UVAC will keep lobbying Ofsted, to advise on contextualisation of inspection and will continue to provide an extensive programme of support focused on preparing for monitoring visits and inspection, self-assessment reports (SAR), quality improvement plans (QIP) and challenging the framework for inspection given the context of HE delivery

Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) – UVAC hosts a regular series of networking meetings focused on the development of and application of HTQs. There is a strong desire by Government to focus on the 'missing middle' of level 4 and 5 technical skills, potentially at the expense of level 6 provision. For some, skills provision still represents the option for the 50% of the population who do not go to university. As such, skills programmes are portrayed as an alternative to university. The biggest problem still is that HE is not always seen as part of the skills system and skills policy can focus on the young and low-level skills. Meeting the needs of the young and lower skilled is fundamental, but if England is to develop as a high skill, high productivity and high wage economy a focus on higher-level skills is vital. Universities do play a pivotal role in the development and delivery of technical education. In the expansion of higher technical education and level 4 and 5, universities have a critical and proven role to play, working with colleges and other training providers and employers to design new qualifications, new programmes and new flexible modes of delivery.

Demonstrating the Contribution of Apprenticeships – To combat the mantra that apprenticeships 'never make any money' for HEPs, UVAC will roll-out a modelling tool for member institutions and chief financial officers for the more effective pricing and costing of apprenticeships and to allow for confident recording of the cash benefit and percentage contribution to an institution by their apprenticeship delivery. In part, this supports the HE sector's forward look to a future model of 'non-standard' HE given the levy reform and planned flexibilities. Getting consistency is key, to ensure institutions stop applying 'traditional' undergraduate costing models to apprenticeship and skills programmes.

Research – UVAC will extend its series of published concept papers introduced in 2024 to celebrate its 25th anniversary year to sit alongside and compliment the success of UVAC's official academic peer review journal, *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning* (HESWBL) which has an international editorial board, advisory group, authorship and readership. UVAC will provide opportunities for publication by doctoral candidates and researchers as a way of adding to the body of knowledge on apprenticeships as HE practice and to keep members up to date with the latest views and opinions of a changing skills system.

HERA and the Use of Data – UVAC recognises members have a need for a support tool for using the data that exists in the apprenticeship space to strengthen understanding of performance and increase growth and development opportunities. We launched the Higher Education Reporting in Apprenticeships (HERA) data platform to provide summary dashboards with filters to refine Individualised Learner Records (ILR) content to compare performance over time with national benchmarks and expectations, and with other providers of apprenticeship delivery at level 4 to level 7. Work will continue to make improvements to usability and adaptability of data sources, including guidance, to support growth plans and institutional strategies, and to inform UVAC's own research.

Continuing to champion higher technical, vocational and professional level skills

UVAC recognises that there is no clear consensus on the aim and objectives of the England 'skills system' or its coverage. Too often the 'skills system' is seen as synonymous with FE, yet some of the most prominent skills gaps and skills shortages exist at higher education level (level 4 equivalent to the first year of a bachelor's degree to level 7 master's degree). Arguably, the most prominent occupational skills shortage apparent in the economy is the registered nurse (a level 6 degree/professional occupation). It is UVAC's role to ensure that the UK's world-class university sector is recognised as having, and plays, a fundamental role in the 'skills sector', a role so often underplayed in policies, in the press and by key agencies. It is UVAC's privilege to champion, promote and support how HEPs provide a cutting-edge approach to combining world class research and world-class skills provision which in turn informs the development of cutting edge higher and degree apprenticeships, training programmes, continuous professional development, lifelong learning provision as well as existing degree programmes.

“

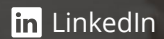
It is UVAC's role to ensure that the UK's world-class university sector is recognised as having, and plays, a fundamental role in the 'skills sector', a role so often underplayed in policies, in the press and by key agencies.





University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC)

University of Bolton
Z3-32 Eagle House
Bolton, BL3 5AB
www.uvac.ac.uk



www.linkedin.com/company/university-vocational-awards-council-uvac

