



Reflections on UVAC national conference 2025

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Dec 2025



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November always brings a sense of excitement at the promise of another UVAC conference, with a chance to meet up with friends and colleagues old and new. This year was no exception, and it seems that I am not alone. Everyone that I spoke to, whether they were exhibitors, speakers, sponsors, delegates or UVAC associates, noted that the “networking opportunities” were one of the most valuable aspects of the annual conference.

This was my 15th UVAC conference and many things have changed (no more 3-day events in York with a conference dinner in the splendour of St William’s College), but the essence and spirit of the meeting has not changed - sharing good practice and discussing policy issues in the field of Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Skills. This year was no exception, and our CEO Dr Mandy Crawford- Lee, reminded us that UVAC provides a unique and independent voice for the HE sector with our skills development focus, and that UVAC members have generated £650million in apprenticeships this year, translating government policy into effective programme delivery.

In recent years it has become a tradition for me to sit next to Prof Jonathan Garnett, UVAC board member, for the initial keynote speeches. Jonathan is a guru of WBL and was once referred to at a UVAC conference, alongside my mentor Prof David Young, as “the Lennon and McCartney of WBL”. This year Jonathan was anticipating a future focussed conference, given the changing political times. We were both hoping to hear about innovation in assessment and curriculum design, how teams were working with employers to effectively support skills development, with an insight into the challenges that employers face when supporting their learners. We were not disappointed.

The first three key notes addressed all of the issues and set exactly the right tone for the conference- dealing with policy, academic and operational practice issues.

We began with the Aptem sponsored keynote, which provided food for thought about High Impact Progress Reviews. Progress Reviews, when undertaken effectively are the keystone of apprenticeship delivery. Jonathan noted that the Anglia Ruskin/ Aptem approach, using AI to enhance the tripartite review process, provided a glimpse of how the rapid advances in AI technology could be used to free up tutor time and help focus on making the review sessions more focussed on creating impact for the apprentice and the employer. Whilst I agree that dynamic and interactive reviews are essential for effective co-ordination and planning of on and off the job learning, we need to be mindful of the workload for apprentices in preparation for a review, in addition to their course assessments. For me, ensuring that the WHOLE workload of the apprentices is embedded within the overall assessment strategy is a key consideration for programme design.

Kerry Boffey from FIN provided an insight into the “hot topic” on many institutions’ minds- that of the renewed (NB NOT new) Ofsted framework. She reminded us that providers must look beyond the headline changes to

Ann Minton
UVAC Associate
Dec 2025

grasp the deeper implications of each inspection judgment area, quoting Sir Martyn Oliver, His Majesty's Chief Inspector "If you get it right for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, you get it right for everyone else. No-one should be left behind."

Inclusion is now explicitly inspected within the framework, at institutional and delivery levels. Do the culture of your organisation, the policies, processes and systems support the early identification and support of disadvantaged learners to achieve and not be left behind? Do staff know how to adapt their teaching, learning and assessment approaches to meet individual needs and use the policies and procedures effectively? Do staff and leaders effectively monitor the performance of disadvantaged learners, making adjustments to support retention and achievement?

The final keynote of the morning was from Think- who discussed the role of vocational HE and apprenticeships in the English devolved areas. This was a thought-provoking session about the importance of being involved in the development of regional skills plans, working with employers to identify local priorities and the actions needed to address them. It was gratifying to note that the majority of the audience were already working with local employers to develop and address LSIPs.

Julie Stone, Phil Sanders and Nicky Westwood ran a workshop to support the development of a blueprint to assure quality in times of change. This was a very "hands on" session, reviewing and revising the work of the UVAC Quality Network.

Each table was given an aspect of the apprenticeship lifecycle to review, with key touchpoints, challenges and risks to consider. This was a great opportunity to chat to people at a busy and information packed conference, sharing ideas and views. I was lucky to sit at a table with colleagues from the University of Exeter, including Rachael Johnstone. We had a lively conversation, debating where curriculum design comes in the cycle. The value of looking at challenges from different perspectives was really evidenced in the session, and it was one of the things that Rachael most values about attending UVAC conferences- real practical sessions that encourage debate to solve mutual problems and overcome challenges.

Everyone in the room was highly engaged and it was great to see a multidisciplinary team in action, professional services staff, business development managers, academics, workplace coaches, and even some incognito Ofsted Inspectors, working together to refine a blueprint that could be very valuable in these uncertain times in HE. Feedback to the wider group was a little rushed and the sessions could have gone on for another hour!

Next the Open University ran a World Café discussing supporting learners in the workplace. This was my first experience of a World Café -a participatory technique discussing socially constructed themes to encourage cross pollination of ideas, akin to a focus group, but allowing for a larger group of participants.

There were some common challenges arising from each table, which caused me to reflect on a co-authored paper following a UVAC workshop (Minton & Lowe, 2017) where the same challenges arose. I noted this in the group and the feeling was that there will always be ebb and flow about workplace mentors, but we need to work collectively with employers to ensure that apprentices are effectively supported, and that the nature and support for mentors may change over time.

This session, together with the previous session really emphasised the value of UVAC itself, and in particular the knowledge networks, which provide a safe space to share ideas to overcome the challenges that we all face, in the provision of High quality and impactful Higher-level apprenticeships.

Jonathan was intrigued by the Exeter University presentation on their experience of introducing a World Skill UK endorsed competition for their apprentices. He notes that "the potential of making an endorsed world skills competition an intrinsic part of higher and degree apprenticeships is certainly worth exploring."

I then caught up with Sam Moorwood, Sheffield Hallam University, another old friend and UVAC stalwart. He had just presented a session about End Point Assessment in light of the changes to the regulations. The session had been well attended, and I understand from those who attended it was a useful and informative session, delivered in Sam's usual pragmatic style. Sam himself said that he had learned much from the audience participation, and it had given him food for thought, particularly about the areas of uncertainty in the assessment reforms. He noted that this is why the UVAC conference is valuable, to share thoughts and ideas, debating the challenges that we all face, outside your usual network. We noted that over the years we have used elements from each other's presentations from conference to inform and enhance our own practice, so that we iteratively enhance each other's work. Collaboration between competitors can be done effectively.

At lunch time I took the chance to wander around the exhibition and chat to some of the exhibitors (and restock my pen collection). We had some new exhibitors – Century, Drake and Orbital who relished the opportunity to share their products with the HE market. The teams valued the interest shown by the delegates in their products, often influenced by the topics in the morning's keynote lectures and breakout workshops, such as the discussions about monitoring progress and performance.

Zoe from SDN-MESMA is another conference regular and often works with UVAC and the HE sector to provide support for providers with key aspects for quality provision through courses and other learning opportunities. She noted that the conference always has a good mix of speakers, practitioners who have developed areas of expertise that they want to share with others. She was keen to tell me about the Quality and Compliance Professional Awards- for the unsung (and often maligned!) colleagues in registry and quality assurance departments. Get your nominations in for your colleagues in January 2026. (qualityprofessionalsawards.org)

Sean from Aptem, this year's headline sponsor, was very pleased with delegates' response to their keynote speech about holding effective reviews, and subsequent enquiries about the system. He noted that this is one of the reasons that Aptem sponsors the conference, as there is a synergy between their products and the customer requirements. The conference is an opportunity to engage with their existing customers and prospective customers as well as listen to emerging best practice, and the challenges that are faced within the sector. Sean had had discussions about the renewed Ofsted Framework, and was looking forwards to hearing about the outcomes of the recent pilots, to see how the system can be further enhanced to provide effective support during the new inspection schedule.

The afternoon key notes continued to be thought provoking. UCAS provided a useful context and insight into Promoting Diversity and Inclusion, again this links to the renewed Ofsted framework. We heard that there are a number of key factors that limit diversity in HE apprenticeships. The presentation focussed on 3 key areas:

Neurodiversity – 12-15% of the population have a diagnosis, but there are a significant number who are undiagnosed. Research from UCAS shows that neurodiverse learners face additional challenges in school and so are less likely to feel optimistic about higher level learning and often experienced worries about their mental health and loneliness.

Social Mobility Challenges – learners from socially deprived backgrounds are less optimistic about their expectations and have less support from key influencers, such as parents, siblings and friends. It is no surprise, therefore, that this group are one of the disadvantaged groups in the renewed framework.

Women in STEM – this relates to the influence of education and family support. Females are less likely to consider apprenticeships or talk to a family member about jobs/ courses in STEM subjects.

Ethnic Diversity – UCAS engage with families to “bust myths” and show role models, highlighting that the sector needs to improve cultural awareness and work more effectively in partnership with communities.

We then had a panel discussion with contributions from BCU and a recently graduated apprentice, Hannah Rashidi (1st class honours degree and distinction in EPA). Hannah explained that she had experienced most of the challenges outlined by UCAS in her learning journey and had a powerful message for us all “embrace

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Dec 2025

learners for who they are, and the many facets of their life, rather than a label that they carry". She stressed the importance of using appropriate language to clarify expectations from the outset, noting that it takes time and a build up of trust before some learners will discuss their neurodiversity and /or specific support needs. Indeed ,Hannah noted that she used to dread "the disability question" as she felt it labelled her and would give an adverse reaction from the questioner.

A panel discussion sponsored by SFEDI addressed another item on our wish list- listening to employers and the challenges that they face when negotiating apprenticeships and the relevant policies. The panel provide very useful insights into the challenges that they face, in particular the flexibility of curriculum design to meet the needs of a range of employers and apprentices. Employers all agreed that they wanted their apprentices to be work-place ready, so that they could immediately support the organisation in its mission and function, understand the nature and ethic of the workplace and are ready to take on the responsibilities of an employee, working and thinking independently.

John Ingham of BUD brought this intense day of learning to a close. He provided a succinct, clear focus and message for the audience- suggesting ways to harness technology to develop a system that is inclusive adaptive and enabling. Digital flexibility supports personalised and flexible delivery that enables upskilling and reskilling of a workforce and promotes the concept of lifelong learning that is a necessity in the world of work as it stands. AI has practical applications that can provide useful tools (e.g. when providing feedback) to reduce work in some areas to free up time where more human interaction is required. John noted that a cultural shift is needed, echoing the key points from many presenters during the day, about the importance of flexibility and innovation in curriculum design supported by effective and appropriate quality assurance mechanisms, that work in partnership with employers.

Mandy Crawford -Lee concluded the formal proceedings with a reminder that UVAC is here to help HEIs navigate the change and shifting policy landscape, with a range of products and learning resources to enhance quality based on research informed practice and the shared experience of others in the sector.

The drinks reception sponsored by BUD was well attended, with many colleagues carrying on the discussions that had arisen during the day. I had an interesting conversation with colleagues from the University of Hertfordshire about their work that supports workplace mentors and skills coaches to undertake their role efficiently and effectively.

So, in conclusion, the conference did meet both Jonathan and my hopes for the conference, it was undoubtedly future focussed, with some innovative ideas related to curriculum design and sharing of good practice. The voice of the employers was heard loudly, and we learned of the challenges they face and how some HEIs have addressed those challenges, with our exhibitors providing technology solutions to help us to navigate the challenges. Above all learners remain at the heart of the conference- everything I heard and learned was focussed on the learner experience, making sure that no-one is left behind. And, as ex- apprentice Hannah noted in her panel contributions, we should continue to "embrace learners for who they are, and the many facets of their life, rather than a label that they carry".

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References:

Minton A. & Lowe J. (2019) *“How Are Universities Supporting Employers to Facilitate Effective “on the job” Learning for Apprentices?”* Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, Vol. 9 Issue: 2, pp.200-210

Useful reading:

Ofsted toolkit (2025)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b975aa3f3e5483efdba9c3/Further_education_and_skills_inspection_toolkit.pdf

Ofsted Inspectors Operating Guide (2025)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/further-education-and-skills-operating-guide-for-inspectors-for-use-from-november-2025>

Ofsted provider information (2025)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025>