

SME APPRENTICESHIP ESSENTIALS.

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Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) Programme: SME Apprenticeship Essentials – Case Study from the University of Warwick

Why this free CPD programme for SMEs matters to the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy

The UK's Industrial Strategy identifies eight priority growth sectors critical to productivity, resilience and global competitiveness:

- AI & Digital
- Advanced Manufacturing
- Clean Energy
- Creative Industries
- Defence
- Financial Services
- Life Sciences
- Professional & Business Services

Alongside these, construction and healthcare remain foundational to national infrastructure, housing delivery, levelling up and population wellbeing.

Across all ten sectors, SMEs form the backbone of supply chains, innovation ecosystems and regional employment. Yet many smaller employers report limited capacity or confidence in managing apprentices effectively — particularly in technically complex or highly regulated industries.

The SME Apprenticeship Essentials programme, launched four meaningful, well designed, and highly bespoke, modules during National Apprenticeship Week 2026 (9–15 February), designed to address this known gap. The modules equips SME managers, supervisors and mentors and coaches with practical capability to support apprentices in work-based roles that underpin sector growth, from AI technicians and manufacturing engineers to site supervisors, healthcare practitioners and financial analysts.

Evidence from the University of Warwick's SME apprenticeship partners demonstrates what “outstanding” looks like — and how it can be scaled.

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1. Individualised, Person-Centred Support

(Supporting talent development in technical and regulated sectors)

In growth sectors such as AI, advanced manufacturing, life sciences and clean energy, apprentices are often working in fast-moving, knowledge-intensive environments. In healthcare and construction, they operate in safety-critical settings.

Warwick's SME partners demonstrate that personalised managerial engagement significantly strengthens competence development.

Effective SME practice includes:

- Tailored development planning aligned to sector-specific Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs)
- Stretch assignments relevant to sector innovation (e.g., digital automation projects, sustainability audits, service redesign)
- Flexible adjustments that recognise operational pressures (e.g., shift work in healthcare, project cycles in construction)
- Regular informal coaching conversations — addressing confidence, safety awareness and professional identity early
- Senior-level mentoring exposure in regulated sectors such as financial services, defence and life sciences

This high-touch approach accelerates occupational competence while improving retention in sectors facing acute skills shortages.

Industrial Strategy relevance:

In AI, clean energy and advanced manufacturing, rapid technology adoption requires adaptive learners. In healthcare and construction, safe practice and accountability are paramount. Managerial capability directly influences whether apprentices reach productivity thresholds quickly and sustainably.

Pilot contribution:

The SME Pilot builds line manager confidence to deliver structured yet practical people support — even in small firms with limited HR infrastructure.

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Developing Leadership Capability Through Real Work

(Strengthening sector resilience and SME productivity)

Across the Industrial Strategy sectors, leadership capability is not confined to senior roles. SMEs particularly depend on early responsibility and distributed leadership.

Warwick's SME apprenticeship partners embed leadership development through:

- Early participation in operational or innovation meetings
- Ownership of defined workstreams (e.g., digital implementation, process improvement, compliance reviews)
- Exposure to strategic planning in professional and financial services SMEs
- Leading small site teams in construction
- Contributing to quality improvement initiatives in healthcare and life sciences

These experiences build:

- Decision-making capability
- Commercial awareness
- Safety and regulatory understanding
- Communication and stakeholder management
- Professional confidence

In advanced manufacturing and clean energy, this may involve lean improvement or sustainability reporting. In creative industries, it may involve client-facing project coordination. In defence or life sciences, it may involve compliance oversight and documentation integrity.

Industrial Strategy relevance:

Sector growth depends not only on technical skills, but on leadership density within SMEs. Apprentices who develop leadership behaviours early contribute to innovation diffusion and productivity gains.

Pilot contribution:

The programme helps managers identify everyday leadership opportunities within routine operations — without requiring additional budget or complex structures.

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High-Quality Progress Review Through Shared Responsibility

(Securing completion and competence in complex sectors)

In technical and regulated sectors — including defence, financial services, life sciences, healthcare and construction — robust progress review is essential for compliance, safety and workforce readiness.

Warwick's SME partners demonstrate strong tripartite collaboration between employer, apprentice and training provider.

Good practice includes:

- Active employer attendance at progress reviews
- Clear alignment between workplace evidence and apprenticeship standards
- Constructive behavioural and technical feedback
- Forward planning for new responsibilities aligned to sector demand
- Shared accountability for gateway readiness and completion

This approach reduces drop-out risk, strengthens evidence quality and ensures apprentices are genuinely occupationally competent — not merely compliant.

Industrial Strategy relevance:

Completion rates and quality of competence directly affect labour market supply in shortage occupations — from digital engineers and laboratory technicians to site managers and healthcare practitioners.

Pilot contribution:

The SME Pilot demystifies progress reviews for managers and reframes them as a productivity tool — improving retention, morale and sector pipeline strength.

Overall Learning for the Industrial Strategy

Across AI, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, defence, financial services, life sciences, professional services, construction and healthcare, a consistent finding emerges:

Apprenticeship success is less determined by organisational size and more by confident, engaged line management.

Where SME managers:

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- Provide personalised support
- Create structured leadership stretch
- Engage meaningfully in progress review

Apprentices:

- Reach occupational competence more quickly
- Contribute to innovation and productivity
- Progress into wider roles within SMEs
- Strengthen sector resilience

Strategic Implications

The SME Apprenticeship Pilot is not simply a workforce initiative. It is an economic intervention aligned to Industrial Strategy goals:

- Closing sector skills gaps
- Accelerating SME productivity
- Strengthening supply chains
- Supporting regional growth
- Increasing apprenticeship completion and progression

By building managerial capability at SME level, the programme enables smaller employers across priority sectors — and in construction and healthcare — to convert apprenticeship participation into measurable economic impact.

Signpost your SME partners to the four modules, which are highly recommended and available to use. Have a look at the module content yourself as a provider who understands best the approach and strategies you need to embed in your signature pedagogy and practice in apprenticeship delivery:

- [Coaching Apprentices and Developing a Learning Culture in Apprenticeships](#)
- [Getting Apprenticeships Right from the Start](#)
- [Managing and Supporting Apprentices in the Workplace](#)
- [Supporting Apprentices Through Assessment, Wellbeing and Next Steps](#)