

## From Improvement to Consistency: What Apprenticeship Achievement Rates Tell Us About Delivery

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The latest national apprenticeship achievement rates (NARTs) show that overall achievement has reached 65.4%, representing a 4.9 percentage point increase on the previous year and a significant recovery from 51.4% just a few years ago. While this falls just short of the government's ambition of 67%, and with calls from Pat McFadden to exceed 70% in the coming years, the direction of travel is clearly positive.

However, the more important question is not whether achievement rates are improving but whether this improvement is sustainable. Insights from the Department of Education's Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) programme, delivered through a consortium of partners and facilitated by University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC), alongside wider sector discussions, suggest that while progress is evident, consistency remains a challenge. The programme supported by the Education Training Foundation was designed to strengthen quality and improve achievement rates (QAR), providing an opportunity to explore factors that underpin successful apprenticeship delivery across the sector.

This is further reinforced by wider sector discussions, where practitioners continue to highlight challenges in embedding apprenticeships effectively within workplace practice, particularly in relation to employer engagement and the integration of learning.

### **Achievement is Designed, Not Delivered**

A key theme emerging from AWD programme and workforce development activity is the role of curriculum design in shaping learner outcomes. Practitioners consistently identified the relationship between curriculum sequencing, assessment mapping and retention, with growing recognition that poorly designed programmes contribute directly to withdrawal and delayed achievement.

Where providers have embedded structured sequencing and aligned knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) from the outset, and integrated assessment throughout delivery, improvements in engagement and progression are evident. However, implementation remains uneven across the sector.

This suggests that further gains in achievement will depend on strengthening capability in curriculum design, not simply sharing good practice but embedding it consistently.

### **Employer Engagement: A Persistent Constraint**

Employer engagement continues to be one of the most significant factors influencing apprenticeship outcomes. Feedback from workforce development activity highlights that a substantial proportion of withdrawals are linked to limited employer support.

Despite this, employer engagement is still often concentrated at onboarding, rather than embedded throughout the apprenticeship journey. Where employers are actively involved in curriculum design, progress reviews, and off-the-job learning, learner outcomes improve. Where they are not, the risk of disengagement increases.

If achievement rates are to improve further, the sector must move from viewing employers as stakeholders to recognising them as active partners in delivery. This reflects a broader sector challenge, where apprenticeships are still not always fully embedded within organisational systems. In many cases, apprentices sit on the periphery of workforce development activity, rather than being fully integrated into how organisations support learning and progression.

### **From Reactive to Predictive Practice**

Another emerging theme is the increasing use of RAG rating, forecasting, and early intervention models. High-performing providers are beginning to identify risk earlier and intervene before issues escalate. However, this approach is not yet consistent across the sector. In many cases, intervention remains reactive, taking place once learners have already disengaged or fallen behind.

Sustained improvement will depend on embedding predictive, data informed approaches across all provision.

### **Apprenticeship Assessment Readiness: Starting Too Late**

Apprenticeship assessment remains a critical milestone, yet workforce development activity highlights that preparation is often introduced too late in the programme.

There is growing recognition that apprenticeship assessment readiness must be embedded from the outset through early assessment, ongoing benchmarking, and continuous alignment to occupational standards. Where this is done effectively, learners demonstrate greater confidence and improved outcomes.

This reinforces a broader point: achievement is not secured at apprenticeship assessment; it is the result of a programme intentionally designed to lead there.

This also aligns with wider concerns across the sector regarding system complexity, including delays in processes and inconsistencies in assessment experience, which can further impact learner progression and timely achievement.

### **The Role of Workplace Support and Mentorship**

A further consideration, often underemphasised in policy discussions, is the role of the workplace as the primary site of learning within apprenticeships.

In practice-based sectors such as adult social care, the effectiveness of apprenticeship delivery is shaped by how well on- and off-the-job learning are integrated within day-to-day practice. Where this integration is weak, learning can become fragmented, reducing its relevance and impact for the apprentice.

Sector discussions continue to highlight that this is not simply an issue of compliance, but of design. Where off-the-job learning is not meaningfully connected to workplace activity, it risks being perceived as separate from the role, rather than part of it.

This reinforces the need for structured workplace support, clear employer involvement, and deliberate alignment between curriculum and practice. Without this integration, improvements in curriculum design and assessment alone are unlikely to translate into sustained improvements in achievement rates.

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## **From Progress to Consistency**

The rise to 65.4% achievement reflects a sector that is actively improving. It demonstrates increased collaboration, stronger workforce development, and growing focus on quality.

However, persistent challenges including variable curriculum design, inconsistent employer engagement, late-stage apprenticeship assessment preparation and uneven approaches to early intervention continue to shape outcomes.

These are not new issues, but they are now more clearly understood. Importantly, many of these challenges are interconnected, often rooted in how apprenticeships are designed and delivered within organisational contexts, rather than isolated issues of performance.

## **Beyond Targets**

If the sector is to move beyond 70% achievement, the focus must shift from measuring outcomes to strengthening the systems that produce them. Curriculum design, employer integration, early intervention and workplace mentorship are not peripheral considerations they are central to successful apprenticeship delivery.

**The challenge now is to ensure improvement is consistent, embedded, and scalable across all provision.**

As the Apprenticeship Workforce Development programme draws to a close, it provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on the progress made and the insights gained. The programme has demonstrated the sector's strong commitment to improving quality and achievement, while also highlighting the need for greater consistency in how apprenticeships are designed and delivered.

The role of University Vocational Awards Council, as part of a wider consortium of partners, has been instrumental in supporting collaboration, sharing practice, and driving sector-wide improvement. As the sector continues to build on this progress, the challenge will be to ensure that these insights are embedded in practice, enabling sustained improvements in achievement rates across all provision.