The Big Conversation

Research report

March 2023

Authors: Institute for Employment Studies (IES)

Contents

Acknowledgements

List of tables

Executive Summary

For this piece of research, employers from small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs; [fewer than 100 employees]) and larger organisations [100 or more employees] who were either defined as: not engaged, semi-engaged or engaged with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) were asked to provide their views. Employers were recruited from a total of 12 routes, and just under half of the employers were from the engineering and manufacturing and the education and childcare routes. More information about the interview sample, including engagement level with IfATE, company size, route and location is provided in Appendix 1. Views were captured through semi-structured interviews and focus groups on: the skills system; apprenticeships; technical education (including T Levels); IfATE communication and branding; equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI); and green skills.

Views on the skills system

Employers across the three engagement levels with IfATE (not engaged, semi-engaged and engaged) appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback on the skills system. In general, employers were unfamiliar with the IfATE skills system terminology, and most found it to include too much jargon. Overall, employers across engagement levels viewed apprenticeships positively and were impressed with the improved promotion and quality of apprenticeships following the introduction of the new apprenticeship standards.

Apprenticeships

Engaged employers demonstrated the most knowledge and understanding of apprenticeships, though apprenticeships were viewed as a useful alternative to traditional academia among employers across all three IfATE engagement levels. However, not engaged employers reported that they did not know what skill level apprentices would have at the end of their apprenticeships, and semi-engaged employers mentioned that they did not know what all of the benefits would be for employers.

Both not engaged and engaged employers noted that it would be beneficial for schools to make sure they are providing students with information about all of the available post-16 options, including apprenticeships and technical education. Engaged employers also reported that the apprenticeship standards do not always match what is needed on the job but also that it is useful for apprentices to gain broad, transferrable skills. Additionally, engaged employers noted that location often determines the availability of apprenticeships.

Technical education (T Levels)

Although asked about the range of technical education that falls within the IfATE remit, employers spoke mostly about T Levels. Employers across all three engagement levels with IfATE expressed concerns about the current reputation of T Levels compared to other opportunities in the skills system that are more established, such as apprenticeships. Employers responding to this research from the hair and beauty and the health and science routes mentioned that because their industries have had success with apprenticeships in the past, they believed many in their industry will most likely be continuing with apprenticeships and will not become involved with T Level placements at present. Additionally, employers from all three engagement levels noted that even though the 45-day work placement seems feasible, there were questions about what that would involve for employers and whether the 45-day placement needs to be continuous.

IfATE communication and branding

Employers who reported that they have received communications from IfATE mentioned that these communications were not always accessible, sometimes included disjointed or piecemeal information, and that SMEs were less likely to be involved in IfATE communications than larger organisations. Employers provided a range of suggestions for improving IfATE communications, such as more face-to-face meetings, targeting and tailoring messages to different routes, using layperson's terms instead of jargon, and having a point of contact at IfATE.

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

In general, employers had positive views about IfATE's EDI policy. Larger employers suggested that the policy should also address social mobility and neurodiversity. Not engaged, semi-engaged and smaller employers generally had less in-depth views on EDI than larger engaged employers, often emphasising the need to find people who are simply 'right for the job'.

Green skills

Although employers suggested that other skills shortages should also be considered a priority, employers across the board had positive views about the need to invest in green skills and jobs. Some employers suggested the inclusion of green skills and education in existing qualifications to help drive skill development across roles and routes.

Introduction

As a part of the work to improve the skills system being conducted by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), this report presents findings from externally commissioned research with employers as part of IfATE's [Big Conversation](1). This research draws on findings from 46 interviews and 2 focus groups with employers who were engaged, semi-engaged and not engaged with IfATE. This chapter includes the aims and objectives of the research, covering the period between October 2022 and March 2023.

Aims and objectives

The central aim of this research was to support IfATE's ongoing work to improve the skills system in England to find out what is working well and avenues for potential improvement. IfATE were particularly interested in talking with employers who were not familiar with the skills system and did not have apprentices, employees undertaking other technical qualifications or host T Level placements, to discover any potential barriers they faced. In this report, this type of employer is referred to as 'not engaged'.

IfATE chose a qualitative approach to this research in order to gather rich information from a range of employers that could capture the contexts in which they operate their business and their range of experience with the skills system. Further detail on the qualitative approach is included in Appendix 2.

Methodology

The research approach consisted of three phases: set-up, fieldwork, and analysis and reporting. Details of the set-up phase and fieldwork are provided below, and details about the analysis are provided in Appendix 2.

Set-up

The first phase of the research involved establishing the employer sample, setting out the recruitment approach and designing the research tools.

Sampling

IES worked with IfATE to develop a sample specification to guide the recruitment of employers. Initially, the key selection criteria were engagement/non-engagement with

---

[1] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/reviews-and-consultations/consultations/the-big-conversation/

IfATE and size (above or below 250 employees), with an initial aim of recruiting three groups of employers:

- Large employers (over 250 employees) who are engaged with IfATE.

- Large employers (over 250 employees) who are not yet engaged with IfATE.

- SMEs (fewer than 250 employees) including engaged and not engaged employers.

As described in the recruitment section below, the sizes for SMEs and larger employees were changed to fewer than 100 employees for SMEs and over 100 employees for large employers.

A secondary set of selection criteria included English regions and occupational routes. These secondary criteria were monitored to achieve a range/spread rather than minimum numbers or interlocking quota. This allowed for greater flexibility in recruitment to support the volume of interviews required within the time-frame.

Due to IES's experience suggesting that large employers may be reluctant to participate in research and may have a company policy of non-participation, IES recommended a target minimum of not engaged larger employers of ten.

Recruitment

Initially, two sources were used for recruitment. For engaged employers, IfATE shared names and contact details of engaged employers with IES. For not engaged employers, IES worked with Qa Research, a specialist research agency. IES and Qa developed a screener questionnaire to recruit employers, ensure that the interviewee would be able to provide feedback on the skills system and understood how their data would be used. Target interviewees would include individuals with responsibilities for (although not necessarily leadership of) recruitment, talent management and/or training. Qa Research purchased a database of contacts (Dun & Bradstreet) to recruit the required number and range of interviewees and arranged the interviews and focus groups for IES staff.

Two main recruitment issues emerged: time of year and suitability of warm contacts. Some of the initial 31 warm contacts provided by IfATE were not strictly employers (e.g. providers), and thus, not able to provide employer perspectives. These volunteers were invited instead to participate in shorter market research interviews with IfATE team members, so that this research could focus on employer perspectives. As expected, it proved difficult to recruit not engaged employers to interview to talk about the skills system. Both Qa and IES also sent out interview requests via Twitter, LinkedIn and an employer mailer to increase awareness of the research. Financial incentives were offered to interviewees and this amount increased part way through recruitment to further incentivise those harder to reach employers. Difficulties were also encountered due to the timing of the research, Initially, IfATE had specified that the research interviews

should be conducted in November-December. This pre-Christmas time period, combined with a resurgence of Covid-19 rates in the winter of 2022, meant that the fieldwork period extended to the end of January 2023 to ensure that minimum interview numbers were reached.

Considering these issues, IfATE agreed to divide the sample into two levels of business size (smaller employers consisting of fewer than 100 employees and larger businesses consisting of more than 100 employees) and three levels of engagement to ease recruitment quotas and reflect the 'fuzziness' of the boundaries between the groups. Initial analysis of the interviews found that rather than employers being not engaged or engaged in the skills system and with IfATE, there was a third group of employers that were involved with apprenticeships or in some strands of technical education, but had little to no awareness of the wider skills system. This group became the semi-engaged employer group.

- Not engaged (i.e. no engagement with IfATE and no apprentices, employees undertaking technical qualifications or T Level student placements).

- Semi-engaged (i.e. no engagement with IfATE but currently have apprentices and/or employees undertaking technical qualifications or T Level students).

- Engaged (i.e. have been in contact with IfATE and have apprentices, employees undertaking technical qualifications and/or T Level students).

Designing research tools

IES developed and provided all employers with a research brief and a privacy statement prior to agreeing to take part. These documents were shared with IfATE for sign-off before use.

IES also worked iteratively with IfATE to develop and finalise topic guides for the interviews and focus groups. For the interviews, IES made a total of two topic guides: one for the engaged employers and one for the semi-engaged and not engaged employers. The guides were used flexibly to ensure IES worked responsively with interviewees. Topic guides are provided in Appendix 3 for reference.

Fieldwork

Interviews

The research achieved a total of 46 semi-structured interviews with employers across the three key groups, including 13 not engaged employers, 10 semi-engaged employers and 23 engaged employers. These interviews achieved multiple perspectives on different routes, skills offers and contexts. Details about the interview sample, including engagement level with IfATE, company size, route and location are presented in

Appendix 1. Interviews took place over the telephone or through video-conferencing software (according to employer preference). Interviewers took notes, recorded the interviews with participants' permission, and retained a transcript of the discussion if the interview took place over Zoom or Teams. Interviews took place between 29th November 2022 and 30th January 2023.

Focus groups

In addition, the team recruited employers to two 60-minute online focus groups, representing each of the three target groups. Details about the focus groups sample, including engagement level with IfATE, company size, route and location are presented in Appendix 1. These took place over video-conferencing software and were facilitated by two researchers. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed (through Zoom or Teams in-built facilities) and the second facilitator also took notes. Focus group participants were predominantly recruited from the interview participants and also 'topped-up' with additional volunteers. The first focus group was held on 2nd February 2023 with a total of 8 participants, and the second focus group was held on 8th February 2023 with a total of 9 participants.

Findings

This chapter includes findings from the interviews and focus groups, organised by the following topics: views on the skills system, apprenticeships, technical education (T Levels); IfATE communication and branding; equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI); and green skills. Differences are highlighted among engagement levels with IfATE (not engaged, semi-engaged and engaged) as well as business size (SMEs (i.e. fewer than 100 employees) and larger). Throughout this report the authors have not quantified responses. Where appropriate, the text indicates where there are majority responses or from a small (one or two) number of participants, however the findings are primarily discussed using the main research questions.

Views on the skills system

Understanding the terminology

Interviewees were asked to describe in their own words what they understood by the term 'skills system' and technical education. While some information about the skills system and IfATE's role in skills was included in the research briefings, the aim was to understand how well known these concepts were amongst employers. The question was intentionally broad to capture the range of views that the employers may have, based on their engagement with apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

The definition that IfATE work to is focussed on the mode of delivery of skills (schools, further education colleges, universities, independent training providers, and employers), also the mechanism of delivery (apprenticeships, qualifications), and the reason for delivery (support national government priorities, support individuals and employers' skills needs).

Once interviewees had given their answers, the researchers read out the following text to ensure that the interviewees and researchers were working to the same definitions for the rest of the interview.

The 'skills system' is the way all the different parts of the technical education system work together: the range and quality of apprenticeships and technical education; the way apprenticeships and qualifications can support national government priorities; the way they can support people to progress in their careers, and the way employers can be involved to create a cohesive system across sectors and regions.

Technical (sometimes referred to as vocational) education provides people with the skills they need to build a successful career and helps employers to meet their skills needs – examples are Apprenticeships, T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

As a cohort of employers who were asked to participate in the research because they are not engaged with IfATE or the skills system more broadly, these employers were unfamiliar with the term 'skills system'. Several did not guess what the term might refer to. Some talked about the skills system as being about the mode of delivering skills, outside of the workplace, from school to university. One thought that it would include awards and accreditation as a way of learning and recognising skills. Technical education was also not a well understood term, with most of these employers thinking that it refers to information technology (IT).

Those that did have a better understanding commonly described technical education as 'hands on', 'practical' education and skills that are learnt by doing. Some saw it as separate from certain subjects or sectors: "not humanities or sciences" (*Not engaged SME,* Interview), "I can't see a link to my sector" (*Not engaged SME,* Interview, legal finance and accounting route).

Larger employers

Employers from larger businesses were also unfamiliar with the terminology 'skills system' and 'technical education', again with some not attempting to guess what the skills system is. One large employer that is currently investigating apprenticeships with a view to starting to offer them described the skills system as:

> the availability of skills for today and the future. – *Not engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

The not engaged larger employers described technical education as 'specific skills and competencies' and skills specific to a job role; for example:

> specific qualifications to fit certain professions and roles. – *Not engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

Two of the semi-engaged SMEs that provided their thoughts on what the skills system is had negative associations with the term as "bureaucracy" or "fluffy words" (*Semi-engaged employer*, Interview). Other employers were focussed on the mode of delivery as skills that are delivered outside of school and in colleges or in the workplace. One also described how they believed that the skills system links different skills to jobs.

These employers had a clearer idea about what technical education is – as with the not engaged employers referring to practical skills, there was one interviewee here who thought that it was to do with IT. For the semi-engaged employers, technical skills are about skills that are learnt on the job rather than academic skills, and related to trades: "learn how to fix things" (*Semi-engaged employer*, Interview).

Larger employers

Larger semi-engaged employers described the skills system as about the mode of skills delivery, through colleges, vocational training, apprenticeships or work based learning.

For these employers, technical education is skilled, professional level training and separate from academic skills.

Engaged employers

SMEs

In line with the IfATE definition of the skills systems, some of the engaged SMEs described their understanding of the skills systems as being about the mode of skills delivery and also the mechanisms of delivery - for example formal or informal, apprenticeships and T Levels. An employer also described what the skills system is for – leading to careers, supporting recruitment and retention.

Engaged SMEs had less familiarity with the term technical education than 'skills system'. The answers were broad, and it was seen as terminology that employers were less confident about understanding. Common responses among the engaged SMEs were that it was about learning on the job, putting theory into practice and that it was about developing skills useful for jobs.

Larger employers

Larger engaged employers emphasised the role of education providers, separate from schools, as their understanding of the skills system. This group of employers talked about the infrastructure and modes of delivery as the 'skills system' including types of qualification in their responses (apprenticeships, T-Levels, traineeships) and different providers (schools, colleges universities and independent training providers). It was also described as being the 'eco-system' of learning and the way different stakeholders work together:

> a collaboration, which provides businesses with the skills they need to develop and grow and provides individuals with career developing opportunities both for young people to access and [others to] reskill.
> – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

In describing their views on the skills system, larger engaged employers also noted the role for employers and skills needed for businesses. Their views on what comprised technical education also reflected this tie to job roles and occupations. As with other employers they included examples of IT, but also engineering as an example of a technical role. Key words such as 'practical' and 'hands on' were common.

What is working well in the skills system

When a common understanding of the term 'skills system' had been established with the interviewees, they were asked to reflect on what is working well in the skills system in their view.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

As would be expected, the employers that were least engaged with the skills system found it difficult to report what was working well as they had limited experience of engaging with colleges and providers and did not know about the role of IfATE. For SMEs that did comment, they were pleased in their perception that there are more options available outside of the traditional academic routes so that people have opportunities to learn in ways that might suit them better.

Larger employers

Larger employers in the interviews had more experience of engaging with the skills system, either in the past or were currently looking to start recruiting or delivering apprenticeships. Similar to not engaged SMEs, some not engaged larger employers welcomed what they thought to be an increased emphasis on technical education and alternative routes to skill development outside of the classroom. This was welcomed by one employer as a means of recruiting from a broader pool of people with different skills. A couple of the larger employers had used the IfATE website to research options and found useful information about apprenticeships and apprenticeship providers.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

The semi-engaged SMEs had good awareness of apprenticeships in particular, and saw them in a positive light as a good way for individuals to develop skills, to drive up standards in industry and to open doors for in work progression.

Larger employers

Larger semi-engaged employers used similar language when describing apprenticeships – as opening doors, and a focus on broadening their talent pool:

it's more inclusive, it's widening participation, I believe that it's given people the opportunity to do this, who would not be able to afford to go to university normally, or didn't see that as an option. – *Semi-engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Much of the emphasis for these semi-engaged employers was on apprenticeships as this was the area they were most familiar with, without have direct, recent experience.

Engaged employers

SMEs

After hearing the definition of the skills system, the engaged employers had mixed views on how well the skills system is working. One employer described tensions between further education colleges and employers, between apprenticeships and T Levels: in their view, their occupational route (hairdressing) requires the entry of younger apprentices (aged 16-18) rather than this age group staying in full time education. They described that as an employer, they feel as though they "fight against the education system" (Engaged SME, Interview) as schools and colleges want young people to stay in college rather than go to apprenticeships which could be delivered by other providers. They believed that apprenticeship standards work well both for individuals and employers.

Across the interviewees, there was good awareness of apprenticeships, some awareness of T Levels and less awareness of Higher Technical Qualifications. For apprenticeships they had experience of employing apprentices or had researched their options, a small number had also been part of employer groups or trailblazer groups to design new apprenticeship standards. Many of the employers had positive views of apprenticeships and as such wanted them to be amplified in communications coming from Government through departments such as DfE, IfATE and from local education providers (the next section on apprenticeships gives more detail). These engaged employers were aware of T Levels but had not yet hosted an industry placement. The lack of awareness of Higher Technical Qualifications was shown through the lack of attention they gave these in their discussions.

Engaged SMEs that were more familiar with T Levels were concerned that they would not meet their needs as employers. The main concerns from these engaged SMEs was around the potential lack of practical experience offered in T Levels. For example, an employer on the engineering and manufacturing route was concerned that that T levels would be too theoretical with not enough practical experience in the workplace, and another in the education and childcare route thought that as a qualification equivalent to Level 3 that there may be a gap in 'ground-level' practical skills that would be missed by not having separate Level 2 training. Because of their greater familiarity with employer involvement in apprenticeship standards, they were more confident that they met their needs. This was a message from employers from the hair and beauty, engineering and

manufacturing, and agriculture, environmental and animal care routes. More detailed feedback on T Levels specifically is provided later on in this report.

Overall, these engaged employers could see the value in vocational or technical education:

> You can make the link between the knowledge and skills development, and we find that individuals are learning and they're developing, and... we've had people within the organisation developed and gone on to more senior roles in quite quick fashion, as well, which has been useful to the organisation. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

They valued the hands-on experience that technical education provides and how this could enable people to work to their strengths and succeed in on a non-academic pathway.

> Individuals may not be able to sit down and write a 10-page summary but can complete tasks (e.g., building and preparing race cars) brilliantly. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

As could be expected, the larger engaged employers had much more to say than larger employers that were less engaged. From their own experiences of working with the skills system they had feedback on what they believed was working well. These employers were often levy payers and looked to maximise their levy spending by using apprenticeships with a range of staff.

They believed that the skills system is working well in delivering a range of skills for businesses, especially through apprenticeships. Employers in particular cited the currency of the content of apprenticeship standards, that they are created with heavy employer involvement and can help apprentices to learn the specific skills they need for their roles as well as content that they could not cover in their own workplace setting.

In particular, larger engaged employers believed that apprenticeships helped them both with recruitment of new staff and retention of existing staff by offering development opportunities.

> I think there is links between putting people on qualifications, making them feel like they're invested in and that they're growing a career... It creates a loyalty from people, creates good staff turnover rates, rather than losing lots of people. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Technical education and employer involvement in education such as through placements was also welcomed by these employers.

> Great that people can learn on the job and get recognised qualifications (with consistency through the external assessments) – gives them skills employers need 'real experience hands-on from the horse's mouth to see the challenges people face and the good things. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Some also reported that employer involvement in the design of qualifications has 'never been better', as one employer described

> I think, wherever the industry input is in the qualification it is a really powerful thing. I think it makes sense. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

What is working less well with the skills system

Employers were also asked to provide feedback about what they thought was working less well within the skills system and where they would like to see change.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

For most of the not engaged SMEs, their feedback here focussed on the lack of information and clarity they had about the different skills training and technical education that they could access. They wanted more and clearer information about what they could access and how different education and training offers fit with each other, for example to create clear progression pathways.

For some employers, they wanted new employees to come to them with more of what they described as basic skills (use of hand tools, electrical circuits, understanding workplace cultures), but also wanted there to be accessible provision that could then train staff in more niche or specialist skills.

Larger employers

Larger not engaged employers also wanted more clarity on what they perceived to be a complex system of multiple competing providers and different funding options. These larger employers wanted more flexibility in the apprenticeship levy to pay for other training if an appropriate apprenticeship was not available. A request for more flexibility with where and how the levy can be spent was met with agreement during the focus groups.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

The semi-engaged employees also spoke about the skills system seeming very complex, especially as employers looking to take on apprentices for the first time, when there seemed to be many different organisations that they needed to register with to find out information. Examples from one small employer included registering for a digital account for apprentice employers, with 'government websites', the local council, with colleges, as well as being in contact with their industry body to advertise the apprenticeship (on the creative and design route). As a small employer they did not think they had the time to go through all the information that came back from these organisations after they had registered.

> It has not felt to me to be as straightforward at the moment...I have an office manager, but it's not really her job to sort this stuff out. So it is just down to me [owner/director] to get it sorted…I keep putting it off, because it's a bit of a pain. And, you know, that's not very helpful, but we've got too busy. So I think, I'd better get on with the busy stuff and the apprenticeship thing gets put to one side. – Semi-engaged SME (Source: Interview)

Several semi-engaged employers also talked about improvements in relationships that they would like to see. For some, this was regarding relationships between their own industry boards or professional bodies and IfATE and DfE, for another employer it was about better relationships between employers and independent training providers.

Larger employers

As described earlier, larger employers were more likely to be apprenticeship levy payers, some of the semi-engaged employers offered apprenticeships mainly because they wanted to make use of the levy that they had paid into.

> We predominantly use it because of the levy, we do pay the levy. And if you don't use it, you lose it. So that's why we are using it, we may go down a different route to train, if it wasn't due to the levy we may make different decisions. – *Semi-engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Some employers however had difficulties in spending their levy, in some cases because in their rural areas there were not the apprenticeships available locally or enough potential apprentices to apply for positions.

Engaged employers

SMEs

The engaged employers were more likely than the not engaged employers to know more about the employer boards creating new apprenticeship standards. While there were some employers who believed that the employer boards for apprenticeships standards worked well – a similar number of employers thought that they could be improved with a broader range of employer voices across the spectrum of each sector. In one case, this was predominantly about the earlier, trailblazer standards:

> [They are] very sector specific or employer-type focused. So they're not catering for all the sector. We've had a look at some of the standards, and you can see that in the actual standards, the early ones, predominantly, sometimes employers don't know what they want, or they want this general wish list. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

As with other employers, these engaged larger employers wanted better communication about the benefits of apprenticeships for employers (communications from IfATE are covered later in this report).

These employers were more likely to have access the IfATE website, with some wanting to see easier to access resources. For example, one employer reported that while the occupational route maps that IfATE has developed are useful, they could be made more prominent and they could better show how individual journeys could go across different routes or how people take different pathways to end up in the same place.

Some of the larger engaged employers were keen that IfATE should be well-resourced to carry out the multiple roles that it has – engaging with employers across the whole spectrum of routes and employer size, designing qualifications, and communicating with the public.

Summary

Employers across the range of engagement levels were generally unfamiliar with the terminology that IfATE uses referring to the skills system and technical education. As would perhaps be expected, the least engaged employers were most unfamiliar and had some negative associations with the terminology being jargonistic. More engaged employers understood the terminology in a similar way to IfATE's use and were able to talk about modes of delivery, mechanisms, and reasons for delivering skills. However, few employers were confident in their understanding and while they have may have reached a good explanation this was not due to familiarity with the terms which are central to IfATE's role.

As will be seen later in this report, many of the employers were generally positive about apprenticeships and believed that much progress had been made in popularising them and increasing the quality since the introduction of the new apprenticeship standards. Interviewees from the hair and beauty route were agreed that apprenticeships were working well but T Levels are not yet right for their industry which requires more on the job training than T Levels offer. There were also several representatives from motorsport (within the engineering and manufacturing route) who believed that the current suite of qualifications do not give employees the technical skills they need to succeed in this industry.

Employers in the interviews welcomed the chance to feedback about their opinions on the skills system in this research and many reported that they did not know of any other channels where they could give their feedback in an open way.

Apprenticeships

This section includes employer views specifically on apprenticeships, including the extent to which they provide an alternative pathway from traditional academia, the extent to which they provide skills and knowledge needed for jobs, and apprenticeship quality and progression.

Alternative pathway to traditional academia

Not engaged employers

SMEs

In general, not engaged SMEs viewed apprenticeships as a useful alternative to traditional academia (i.e. college, university). Apprenticeships allow for learning outside of a classroom, with apprentices gaining practical workplace skills.

Not engaged SMEs that were keen for young people to understand all of their post-16 routes reported that schools should highlight technical education, such as apprenticeships, early on.

> More vocational training very early on, just basic stuff, and then to really steer them towards that before age 16. Rather than sitting a load of meaningless GCSEs, which they're never going to use, maybe some form of alternative education, or qualifications to set them up to join a good technical college. – *Not engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

Larger not engaged employers did not have much to say about apprenticeships offering an alternative pathway to traditional academia, other than they seem like a useful option for those not well suited for university in general and those wanting to avoid the high costs sometimes associated with attending university.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

In general, semi-engaged SMEs viewed apprenticeships as a good alternative to traditional academia, as they mentioned that not all people will be well-suited or want to attend university.

Larger employers

Semi-engaged larger employers tended to view apprenticeships as providing a useful alternative to traditional academia, with earnings seen as a helpful component for apprentices (particularly when considering the debt that sometimes goes along with attending university). Indeed, apprenticeships were viewed as being a good (if not better) alternative for individuals who cannot afford to attend university. Additionally, apprenticeships for nursing were highlighted by an employers as providing useful pathways for people already in established careers. One semi-engaged employer also mentioned that apprenticeships are great for employers, given that companies are able to find apprentices that match their requirement.

Engaged employers

SMEs

Engaged SMEs believed, in general, that apprenticeships and technical education provide useful opportunities outside of traditional academia. An employer from the niche field of motorsport (in the engineering and manufacturing route) believed that hands-on experience (e.g. with car design tools) made for better engineers. However, it was noted that the apprenticeship wage is hindering recruitment for Level 3 apprenticeships as it is lower than the living wage. The apprenticeship wage was also mentioned during the focus groups as making it difficult for some apprentices to take part if it offered a low wage. More support with Universal Credit and bus fares for apprentices were suggested during the focus groups as other ways that could encourage participation and remove financial barriers.

Larger employers

Engaged larger employers tend to be in agreement in their view that apprenticeships and technical education provide strong alternative pathways to traditional academia by providing on-the-job work experience for individuals who may not have an interest in university or the academic skillset to perform well at university. However, similar to the

not engaged employers, many of the engaged larger employers emphasised that schools should highlight apprenticeships and technical education as viable pathways instead of only encouraging a traditional academic route. Likewise, they have found that students at career fairs often have a stereotyped view of what jobs are available through apprenticeships and technical education (e.g. female students tend to think of the hair and beauty route and male students tend to think of IT).

> They're massively powerful enablers of social mobility and, and really can appeal to those who either do not want to go through the traditional academic route, or, or have a learning preference not to do that, or just don't want to get into debt. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

> You're learning and the content of some of these apprenticeships is fantastic. You're learning while you're earning, which essentially is the point. But when you go to university, I think there's a bit of a problem with having the experience, because you've gone in you've done all the theory side of it, you know what you're talking about. But until you go and put that into experience in the workplace, it's very different. So people do struggle to find jobs when they come out of university, for that reason. I think apprenticeships are great, because you're getting that experience while you're also learning the content. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Larger engaged employers reported that apprenticeships and technical education also provide individuals with opportunities that would not exist otherwise. For example, one apprenticeship programme operated within a local authority department allowed individuals to pave their own way within the organisation without having any previous knowledge of what job opportunities were available within the local authority. One engaged larger employer noted that apprenticeships are available that are useful for mid-career individuals and other apprenticeships are available that are better suited for recruitment and developing the workforce.

Larger engaged employers also noted that apprenticeships provide opportunities to learn skills that are not offered at university, but the apprenticeship minimum wage acts as a barrier for some potential apprentices. According to this group of employers, this especially impacts individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. At university, it is possible to get a part-time job; however, this usually is not the case during an apprenticeship.

Skills and knowledge needed for jobs

Not engaged employers

SMEs

It was difficult for most not engaged SMEs to determine the extent to which apprenticeships provide the skills and knowledge needed for jobs from employer and employee perspectives. In general, these interviewees did not know the skill level apprentices would gain at the end of the apprenticeship and were not aware if apprentices' skillsets would meet their needs as an employer. To not engaged SMEs, apprenticeships seem to provide employees with more understanding of the practical side of the job and more experience with the type of job that they will eventually go into.

Larger employers

One not engaged larger employer in the engineering and manufacturing route mentioned that engineering-related apprenticeship standards appear to meet their needs as a company, but they have struggled to find apprenticeship standards for colleagues in other divisions, such as supervisors and team leaders. This employer also mentioned that it is difficult to know where to look or know which providers to choose and that the apprenticeship courses seem to be too long, with participants having to spend too much time out of the office.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

For people in the care industry, the technical skills (e.g. computer skills, writing skills) needed for apprenticeships are seen as a barrier for participation. A low-level certification in the care industry would be helpful (e.g. a certificate of achievement that does not require assignments or that could be completed through observations and on-the-job assessments).

> There's the lost souls, you know, who are really good carers, really
> good communicators, but wouldn't even do a diploma level 2
> because they're frightened to death of assignments and computers.
> And it's so sad, because there's a lot of people who have got lost. –
> *Semi-engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

For semi-engaged SMEs, it would be useful if the benefits of apprenticeships to employers could be clearly described. One semi-engaged employer mentioned that taking on an apprentice is a long-term investment for businesses; thus, making sure the apprentice is committed before recruitment (e.g. by taking a foundation course) would be of benefit. In general, semi-engaged SMEs viewed apprenticeships as a cost-effective way for training and hiring staff.

Larger employers

There were distinctive responses about apprenticeships among semi-engaged employers from different routes. A semi-engaged employer in nursing mentioned that apprenticeships have been an effective method for growing and upscaling staff, as well as a good retention tool (which they highlighted is especially important in the NHS and for nurses). According to this larger semi-engaged employer, nursing apprenticeships provide a practical way of learning. Nursing apprenticeships were also discussed in the focus groups as providing better training than degrees due to the mix of practical and knowledge-based components.

> It's growing our world greatly, and we've tried to promote it as we're growing our own staff. We've grown our own nurses, these are all people who have chosen to work for us because they live close by because it's near to them, it fits in with their life, they're used to doing shifts and things like that. And then we've invested in them all the way through. And I think that if you're in that, hopefully wants to stay because you've been offered these opportunities. – *Semi-engaged employer* (Source: Interview)

A semi-engaged larger employer in engineering and manufacturing noted that even though apprentices require a large commitment from businesses (i.e. ensuring that there is sufficient, regular work in place for them), he hopes that apprenticeships will help to address route-based skills gaps. He also mentioned that he had limited providers to choose from, which meant he was not able to find a perfect match to his needs (i.e. needed an electrician apprenticeship but had to go with a marine-specific course as that was what was on offer locally).

In the transport and logistics route, a semi-engaged larger employer noted that it can tend to take a long time for employers to truly reap the rewards of apprentices' training (i.e. apprentices do not have the necessary skills at the beginning). Thus, businesses have to find suitable tasks for the apprentices according to the status of their learning/knowledge.

Engaged employers

SMEs

In general, engaged SMEs reported that apprenticeships are well suited for the skills and knowledge needed for jobs. For example, an SME in the hair and beauty route mentioned that apprenticeships provide individuals with the exact set of skills and knowledge that they need to perform well on the job.

Larger employers

Sometimes, larger engaged employers reported that the content/standards of apprenticeships do not always match what people tend to do on the job (e.g. public sector compliance is not useful for street cleaning teams). It was also mentioned in the focus groups that apprenticeship standards tend to be designed with input from large employers, leaving SMEs at a disadvantage. Additionally, this group of employers mentioned that a potentially underutilised aspect of apprenticeships is that they can be used for continued learning, not just entry-level qualifications.

> What we're really trying to push with all of our staff is that learning is continuous. . . . I think, with some of the apprentices it focuses on the technical skill. And it is not [a] tick box, but there's not as much thought about actually the fact that this [learning] is continuous. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

In terms of apprenticeship standards, some engaged larger employers noted that the apprenticeships require too much too early on for some apprentices, especially considering that some apprentices are 16–17 years old.

> I think sometimes within those standards that have been approved, they kind of want people to run before they walk. We were trying to create a role profile for the opportunity that we had available for the student...it needed to map across to the objectives that they're trying to meet within the Standard and for a lot of it, it was really about getting involved in business strategy and business change, and they're quite big, responsible things for people who are 16–17. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Therefore, they believed that more can potentially be done at the foundation levels in apprenticeships with regard to the standards to ensure all apprentices have the underpinning skills needed to perform well. In the focus groups, it was also noted that apprenticeships provide a useful opportunity for social mobility. They believed that further refinement of foundation levels would help drive this benefit as well.

Quality and progression

Not engaged employers

SMEs

In terms of quality of apprenticeships, not engaged SMEs generally had positive views (for those who knew enough to comment). However, one not engaged SME noted that

more pathways for niche roles would be helpful, as not all areas of construction are currently covered by apprenticeships.

In terms of progression, not engaged SMEs were not familiar enough with apprenticeships to comment much. However, one not engaged SME mentioned that learning on the job seems to be easier for some people rather than having to do all of their learning in the classroom or from a textbook.

Larger employers

Not engaged larger employers did not know enough about apprenticeships to comment on quality or progression.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

In general, semi-engaged SMEs had positive views on the structure and quality of apprenticeships. Similar to engaged larger employers in the previous section on skills and knowledge needed for jobs highlighting the need to further develop foundational levels in apprenticeships, a semi-engaged SME in the construction and the built environment route noted that a foundation year has been useful for their plumbing business. This employer has apprenticeship applicants complete a foundation course, and then the applicant progresses into an apprenticeship if they pass the foundation course. This employer said that for those aged 16–17, it is sometimes difficult for people to know exactly what they want to do, and the foundation course allows them to see if plumbing is a good fit for them.

A semi-engaged SME in the care services route mentioned that it would be useful to have a pathway for people who lack strong academic skills but perform well in practical settings such as nursing homes or care homes.

> When Nursing 2000 came along, it became very academically based and I think it left a lot of people by the wayside. Bringing back the trainee nurse associate is good as it gives more people an opportunity. However, they still are expected to have that maths and English . . . to start off with. – *Semi-engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

Larger semi-engaged employers mostly had positive views about apprenticeship quality and progression. One larger semi-engaged employer mentioned that even though the pathway in nursing is clearly defined (from entry-level to a nursing degree), some nursing students are not aware of the value of a nursing apprenticeship qualification (i.e. view the degree qualification and the Nursing and Midwifery Council PIN as more meaningful than the apprenticeship). Another larger semi-engaged employer reported that the

administration tasks (e.g. reflection logs) associated with the apprenticeships can act as a barrier to progression for some apprentices.

> You can use apprenticeships to be able to get all the way through to be a qualified nurse, if you want to. We run a Level 3 health care apprenticeship within our Trust. So, you just get released one day a week for a set amount of time to go and to study and get your qualification. And then what's called the nursing associate apprenticeship foundation degree. So that's a two-year programme, so they can step onto that. And they get paid while they're training. And then you have the nursing degree afterwards as well. So you could within five or six years, you could be at that point. And you can be earning all the way through as well. – *Semi-engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Engaged employers

SMEs

An engaged SME in hair and beauty mentioned that there is an established progression pathway for apprentices that works well. After completing the hairdressing professional standard, there is the option to go on to the advanced standard, which provides more information about different aspects of the hair industry (e.g. show work, fashion work).

Larger employers

Engaged larger employers had mixed responses when asked about the quality of apprenticeships. While the majority of responses were positive, multiple engaged larger employers noted that apprenticeship quality tends to be dependent on both the providers and the employers. Indeed, one employer mentioned that regular audits of providers and standards are necessary to ensure high-quality content. This employer also mentioned that the reviews of different providers on the IfATE website is helpful and that employer involvement in and reviews of providers are also helpful to ensure high-quality content and transparency. Another employer mentioned that apprenticeship quality depends on the type of opportunities that employers provide to apprentices.

In terms of progression within apprenticeships, the majority of engaged larger employer comments were positive and viewed as providing a variety and breadth of skills and behaviours that can be transferred to a range of employers, rather than focusing on the potentially niche requirements of one company.

That just makes sure that when they want to take that next step up in the career, they've got the breadth [of skills] to take another apprenticeship to move to level 6, level 7. But they can equally move into other organisations or even between sectors because they've got such a broad base of skills, which I think is hugely important. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

However, similar to one of the semi-engaged larger employers, an engaged larger employer mentioned that the administrative aspects of the programme served as a barrier to some apprentices' progress. This employer also mentioned that some of the apprenticeship content is not dyslexia-friendly (e.g. large blocks of texts).

Suggestions for improvements were provided by engaged larger employers, including more comprehensive explanations of the apprenticeship progression pathways and more options to fill gaps between levels. Engaged larger employers noted that there are currently gaps between levels and that some routes/occupations are better served than others. For example, one engaged larger employer mentioned that there is a progression gap in the horticulture industry.

From an apprenticeship point of view, I think we're really solid, up to that initial sort of supervisory level. But we've got a big gap.... [I]f you want to go anything above level three, you have to go degree, but the degrees are much more focused on the more scientific horticulture or the landscape architecture, and for the intermediary skills that we need to maintain our green spaces, there isn't really anything. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

It was also noted that the availability of apprenticeship standards often depends on location. This was also commented upon in the focus groups during a discussion about the difficulty some employers face in finding providers who deliver the standards they need; apprentices sometimes have to complete alternative standards. Additionally, it was also mentioned during the focus groups that some employers find it difficult to find end point assessors.

So depending on where they are in the country depends on what standard they use. Someone doing an engineering [apprenticeship] in the Midlands, and an engineering technician further up north, it all really depends on what the training provider can get me. Sometimes there is a similar, like level two or level three engineering qualification

in there. But sometimes there is no qualification at all. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Summary

Across the employers, concerns were raised about the financial barriers facing some people undertaking apprenticeships with employers calling for higher wages for apprenticeship or other methods for supporting apprentices financially. Employers saw apprenticeships as a useful tool to help with social mobility. SMEs and larger employers described how they saw apprenticeships as a viable alternative to traditional academia but they thought that more should be done to encourage this pathway by school staff.

Larger engaged employers valued the hand-on skills development offered by apprenticeships. Along with semi-engaged larger employers, they note opportunities for career progression through apprenticeships – this was particularly highlighted by employers from the care services and hair and beauty routes. However, some engaged larger employers saw gaps in the apprenticeships offered in their industries – for different roles, for progression or in their local area.

Semi-engaged employers welcomed apprenticeships as a cost effective means for hiring and developing staff as a successful apprentice taken on into a permanent position could save the business in recruitment costs.

Not engaged SMEs and larger employers did not have a firm grasp on how well or not apprenticeships developed individuals' skills and knowledge needed for jobs. They were not familiar enough to comment directly on the quality of apprenticeships and the opportunities for progression. Larger not engaged employers had struggled when navigating the information about different apprenticeship standards and struggled to find suitable ones for across their businesses.

Larger engaged employers were concerned that they had been overrepresented in the employer boards designing new apprenticeship standards and that SMEs had been underreported. They also had concerns about how far the content of apprenticeships could match job tasks across different employers.

Technical education (T Levels)

This section includes employer responses about technical education, including their current understanding of what T Levels are and how they might be useful. While higher technical qualifications (HTQs) were included in the question to employers about technical education, employers were not very familiar with them and preferred to talk more about apprenticeships and T Levels.

During the interviews, not engaged employers were provided with the following definition of T Levels from IfATE to ensure that interviewees were then responding to accurate information about the qualifications:

T Levels are an alternative to A levels, apprenticeships and other 16 to 19 courses. Equivalent in size to 3 A levels, a T Level focuses on vocational skills and can help students into skilled employment, higher study or apprenticeships. Each T Level includes an in-depth industry placement that lasts at least 45 days. Students get valuable experience in the workplace; employers get early sight of the new talent in their industry.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

A mixture of responses were given when not engaged SMEs were asked about what they thought T Levels were, taken altogether their responses did reflect fairly accurately what T Levels are – equivalent to A Levels, that they include work placements and practical learning, and that they last for 2 years.

After hearing the explanation about T Levels, not engaged SMEs generally thought that T Levels could be a better option than apprenticeships or A Levels for many young people, especially because of the industry placement component.

Overall, not engaged SMEs thought that the 45-day placement was a feasible aspect of T Levels because it does not place a large commitment on employers compared with apprenticeships. However, there were some questions about what T Levels would look like in practice and what would be expected of employers regarding the level of work that the T Level students would need (e.g. not simply making tea and coffee and photocopies). One SME hoped that there would be a 'placement officer' who would be able to match T Level students with suitable employers.

There were also concerns about employers and the general public viewing T Levels as second-best to apprenticeships and the not engaged SMEs had many questions about how they would be delivered.

> It sounds marvellous... The only thing is, is where would these T Levels be taught? What level of real-world experience would they be getting during these T Levels? ... Unless you actually come out of that with something really useful, from the individual's perspective, it's just going to be like a 'dunces' course, you weren't good enough to do A Levels so we're sticking you in a T [Level] course. And then you come out of that, and you're equally useless. – *Not engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

In general, not engaged larger businesses viewed T Levels as a good alternative to traditional academia, providing opportunities for people with different abilities and interests.

> I think these T Levels, if they're more specific to certain industries or certain sectors, then there's definitely a value... I think if there's that alternative to get a genuine and meaningful qualification, with those prospects, it's definitely a benefit and a positive. – *Not engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

However, concerns were raised in regard to financial viability for smaller and micro organisations; whereas T Level placements would be financially viable for larger organisations, the same might not be true for smaller ones. Additionally, they reported that voluntary-run organisations do not have the infrastructure to support T Level placements.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

Of the few semi-engaged SMEs who had heard of T Levels, most did not know much about them, apart from that they include work experience and are equivalent to A Levels. After hearing the description of T Levels, for some semi-engaged SMEs, T Levels sounded like they were best suited for manager or office roles (e.g. site managers, admin) rather than for more practical roles where more on-the-job experience would be most beneficial.

As with not engaged employers, there were many questions from the semi-engaged employers about the practicalities of T Level delivery. There were questions about the timing of the 45-day work placement in both the interviews as well as the focus groups. Semi-engaged SMEs in particular had questions about the placement being split up over time or delivered in a 45-day block. One SME in engineering and manufacturing viewed the 45-day block as more useful than splitting the placement up, as the block would allow employers to provide one discrete piece of work for the T Level student. Others viewed the 45-day placement as beneficial because it would allow them to provide T Level students with different small tasks here and there.

> If we could get one in? Yeah, definitely. I don't see why not. If it would benefit us, 45 days of getting someone in, we wouldn't have enough work to have someone constantly there, let's say in the finance department. But coming in and doing little projects with the

financial director, I think would be beneficial. – *Semi-engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

On the other hand, one SME mentioned that for his small organisation, it would be difficult to give T Level students something meaningful that they could learn from in 45 days.

Semi-engaged SMEs also mentioned a general lack of awareness among similar employers about what T Levels are available, and there was a question about whether T Levels would carry the same weight with recruiting employees as GCSEs or A Levels. However, semi-engaged SMEs generally had positive views about the usefulness of T Levels.

I think they're a really good idea. Without doubt, because it gives people an introduction, like particularly if you're looking at nursing, for instance, it's an introduction to it so that when you actually go on to say to go to university, you've already got that understanding and that that level of a better level of knowledge. – *Semi-engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

Larger SMEs generally viewed T Levels as a technical/practical alternative to A Levels and BTECs that include work placements. These larger employers were uncertain about how welcomed the introduction of T Levels have been and whether T Levels will be able to replace what the colleges are already providing.

As with the semi-engaged SMEs, semi-engaged larger employers had various concerns about the 45-day industry placement component, including its timing. A large health organisation mentioned that in present circumstances, it would be very challenging to offer quality supervision for the placement component of T Levels. Concerns about offering work placements to 16–18-year-olds was also discussed during the focus groups; concerns were expressed in terms of employers being able to provide placements that cover health and safety aspects that are suitable for the maturity level of young adults. Another semi-engaged large employer wondered when the industry placement would take place within the 2 years; if the industry placement could take place towards the end of the 2 years, there would be more benefit for everyone involved, including employers, and it could act as a potential recruitment method.

Because from our point of view, I would be thinking, 'Well, if we bring this person, then they may be interested in starting with us. And they're finishing the course within the next six months. So that could be a possibility there, to recruit in six months' time.' I think if it's

something where, they've still got a year and a half to go on the course. [Then,] One, they're still learning and developing so much and maturing, and we may not see the best in them. So, we might think, 'Oh, actually, they won't be for us.' But also, we'd be thinking 18 months is a long time, especially to someone in their late teens, for their perspective to change... And we could think, 'Well, is anything actually going to potentially come of it? – *Semi-engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Engaged employers

SMEs

In contrast to the not engaged and semi-engaged employers, the engaged employers had a strong grasp of what T Levels are: an academically robust qualification that includes practical skills as well as a theoretical component. Indeed, one engaged SME mentioned that a University Technical College (UTC) they were working fairly closely with has expressed concern about T Levels being too theoretical or academic.

An engaged SME in the hair and beauty route mentioned that they did not think T Levels worked well in that industry; this was also discussed in the focus groups, including a comment that T Levels have not been well received in the hair and beauty industry. For now, this employer is sticking with apprenticeships. This engaged SME did not believe that T Levels would provide the practical skills and experience people need to work in the hair and beauty industry.

> The T level wasn't wanted in my industry; it just sets another qualification out there that not enough people know anything about. And it kind of skews the pitch. Because if you are an employer and you don't know the difference between T level and the standard, and somebody says to you, but the T level of gives you this, and the government have put far more money into the T levels, you can be easily persuaded for a youngster to go the T level route. And then they don't come out with a practical qualification. And this is where this is where the problem is. And after the T level, they have to go on to an apprenticeship to get that practical level. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

There were also concerns expressed about the ability to achieve the T Level qualification. T Levels seemed, to the employers, to be 'all or nothing'. If T Level students do not pass all the elements, then they are not able to get the T Level qualification. However, with A Levels, it is possible to pass one A Level and achieve a Level 3 qualification. Other engaged SMEs were concerned about what level of skill and

equivalent qualification level the T Levels would provide: with concern that T Levels may not provide the ground-level practical and technical skills required for jobs.

> As a Patisserie chef, you're not going to go straight in at Level three, you have to start with the basics…GCSE to vocational is different to academic in terms of the progression route, you know. You do a GCSE in maths, you then go and do an A Level maths, you do a Level two patisserie and then you do a Level three, you can't automatically go straight in at Level three. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

Some of these larger engaged employers were very engaged within the skills system and were involved in apprenticeship trailblazer groups and have worked with the Department for Education (DfE) on T Level design early on in their development. Some of these employers highlighted that there needs to be more employer awareness of T Levels, especially of the industry placement element. One larger engaged employer mentioned that employers need to know how to offer good work placement opportunities for T Levels, and they are currently working on a toolkit with an industry body to support employers with this. An engaged larger employer mentioned that finding good quality work placements for T Level students is difficult, especially for routes that are not well represented in T Level students' regions.

Concerns were also addressed about the current reputation and standing of T Levels, especially in comparison to apprenticeships, which are more established than T Levels. In fact, many engaged larger employers mentioned that their companies are not actively interested in becoming involved in T Levels because the apprenticeship model is already working well for them. If they do actively look to be involved in T Levels, they would like to see how it is working in practice beforehand. As they are still so new the employers did not have a lot of information about the skills and knowledge of those that have completed a T Level. One employer noted that they are holding off from looking into T Levels, instead waiting to have more information about this before considering hosting placements or employing people with T Level qualifications.

An engaged larger employer mentioned that there needs to be increased understanding among employers about where T Levels fit within the wider skills system (i.e. how they compare to apprenticeships). Indeed, an engineering employer was interested in a digital and marketing T Level for their company, but they were not sure how it would fit. It seemed to them that engineering apprentices starting at age 16 and would have more knowledge and skills than someone completing a T Level by the time both reach age 18. Additionally, engaged larger employers mentioned that T Levels are not well understood by the public, including parents. This lack of awareness of T Levels was also expressed

during the focus groups, including one comment on the lack of knowledge of T Levels among employers limiting the number of available work placement opportunities.

Some employers were also concerned about T Levels encouraging young people to specialise too early. An employer thought that T Level students would be more specialised that if they did three A Levels.

> We just need to make sure that T Levels don't restrict individuals, or they find out two years later it's ruled things out. But otherwise, I think I think everything is moving in the right direction. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Other larger employers viewed T Levels as requiring less of a commitment from employers than apprenticeships, which was appealing. To these employers, the only commitment for T Level students is the work placement component; whereas with apprentices, employers need to commit to employing them permanently.

> It's, [a way to] kind of test them out and then put them in a job if you want to, but then there's no actual commitment to do so. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Summary

Not engaged employers had little awareness of T Levels, however once they had been briefly described to the employers, they were interested in them as an alternative to traditional academia and as less resource-heavy for employers compared with apprenticeships.

Employers in general across the sizes worried how viable it would be to nationally roll-out T Levels and their included 45-day placement and how there could be infrastructure to support the placements in particular. Larger employers were worried about how they could supervise multiple T Level industry placements and whether they would be able to meet health and safety requirements.

Given their unfamiliarity with T Levels, the less engaged employers were unsure whether they would recruit young people that came to them with a T Level qualification.

In contrast to the less engaged employers, the engaged employers generally had a good grasp of what T Levels are. They had questions and concerns about the nuances of how academic they are, the risks of specialisation so early for young people, and the risks of failing the T Level due to a poor placement – showing that they had already been exposed to information about T Levels prior to the research interview.

IfATE communication and branding

This section explores employers' views on the ways IfATE and the government communicate how the skills system work, how effective this communication is, and the branding of IfATE and technical education. Engaged employers were also asked for feedback and suggestions on IfATE's digital services.

Views on communication of the skills system

Not engaged employers

SMEs

Not engaged SMEs reported having little to no information about the skills system and what is available to them. They would appreciate easier access to information to demystify the skills system and make it seem more accessible. They suggested IfATE carry out marketing through email newsletters, television adverts as well as more engaging forms of media such as webinars. This was particularly important for small and microbusinesses where they reported that they had no training structures in place and their teams were not large enough to have pre-existing experience of the skills system. These SMEs also reported that apprenticeships should have more promotion and rebranding, which they believed to be an IfATE role. The perceived dearth of apprenticeship promotion was also discussed in the focus groups, with a mention that Apprenticeship Week is great but that more could be done to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships (e.g. IfATE presence at careers fairs) throughout the year.

Larger employers

Large employers were similarly interested in receiving more information on the skills system, how to access it, and any communications from IfATE. They also thought technical education could be promoted more through social media, or a rebranding exercise:

> A branding exercise where you get that message across that it's a viable alternative. It's not a lesser alternative. It's only through demonstration that will potentially work. If you can, give case studies of people who have gone through them and their successes. – *Not engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

Semi-engaged SMEs also reported little direct correspondence with IfATE and generally believed that more communication would be beneficial for smaller businesses. One SME

that had little communication from IfATE and DfE relied on the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) for information and support, which had been very useful.

SMEs suggested that more engagement with industry would be useful for both IfATE and employers, and that this could include more face-to-face events and opportunities to meet with IfATE and other stakeholders, talks at the Chamber of Commerce (with its associated networking organisation) and occasional emails with relevant information about the skills system. One SME suggested more national messaging is needed to rebrand the apprenticeship as a viable alternative to university.

Larger employers

Employers fed back that there was scope for more communications about the skills system. There was further scope for IfATE to increase its prominence, through increased marketing and connecting more with employers. One employer looking to expand within the technology market reported that there did not seem to be one programme that fit their needs so they would appreciate advice on the different options from a contact at IfATE. They suggested it would be helpful if IfATE could have one central place for advice on apprenticeships, as well as a system connecting employers to the contact information for the correct person. Another said it was difficult to understand all the different stakeholders in the skills system, so they went straight to their local college after doing initial research about apprenticeships.

One employer reported being unaware of new training options:

> Sometimes you only hear about new apprenticeships that are coming out through other organisations that are already using them. And if you're not in those circles of discussing with other teams, then you might not be aware that they're actually there. – *Semi-engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

The employer suggested that someone in the region could be responsible for sharing information within apprenticeship teams, and that would be an efficient way of delivering information without taking too much staff time.

An employer in the engineering and manufacturing route was concerned that some of the more traditional skills would be lost unless clear training avenues for these are provided. They thought it would be helpful if they could communicate via local training providers who could then work with a variety of local employers to ensure people are being trained in the right skills.

Engaged employers

SMEs

SMEs were of the view that IfATE's communications could be improved to reach a wider set of employers, for example by increasing their social media presence (e.g. LinkedIn). This would help promote apprenticeships and awareness of IfATE.

These employers were more likely than the less engaged employers to have received communications from IfATE. However, for some SMEs, the communication they had received from IfATE appeared one-sided and detached. For example, one SME said it sometimes seemed like they are being talked to rather than part of a conversation. Another believed that IfATE did not show enough understanding about working in the industry. It was suggested by another SME that using language which is more accessible to employers would increase engagement.

One SME reported that IfATE and the government should deliver a strong, consistent national message to counter some of the negative reports and misconceptions about apprenticeships, and also to promote parity of esteem between vocational/technical and academic routes. They also commented that although there was a lot of information available about apprenticeships, this can be disjointed. They suggested that having one place for employers and apprentice candidates to go to would be useful, like the UCAS platform for A Levels.

> They've done a lot of messaging, don't get me wrong... However, there's so many different places and different websites of where you go and find a vacancy... I think if that can all be joined up, that would be most useful. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Some SMEs had negative views of the central system of apprenticeships which could be addressed through better national messaging. For example, one SME took issue with lack of funding for creative apprenticeships.

> It's very difficult when you are a creative profession, because a creative profession doesn't get as much respect as, say, a technical profession, like or a scientific profession. So they've got to look across the board. And you know, my industry are an industry that take more apprentices and the many others in this country, but we do not get a high enough level of funding for it. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

These employers were more positive than others across the piece about the value of IfATE's communications and information provision but raised concerns it was not reaching a wide number of employers. Employers referred to receiving information (and support) from talking to IfATE relationship managers, engaging with government consultations, being on apprenticeships groups, graduate content creators on LinkedIn, as well as by attending events. It was suggested that these dissemination/communication

routes were accessed primarily or solely by larger businesses. Employers were positive about the IfATE and government websites and individual support they had received.

> The [IfATE] website is massively improved, and I can pick the phone up if we've had any funding issues or anything like that. I always get the service I need, so no complaints. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Many of these employers believed that the increase in initiatives such as trailblazer groups were beneficial to feeding into the skills system, but there remains a lack of awareness of them. One employer who had worked closely with IfATE developing standards as part of a trailblazer group had found that interacting with lots of different people from different parts of the organisation was challenging but had improved.

> I'm quite impressed with how they're working. What is now the problem I think they're getting is industries hitting that point of saturation and fatigue [in terms of inputting into consultations etc]. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

As with the engaged SMEs, a large engaged employer said that although they had enough information and support from IfATE, it could be quite piecemeal. They would prefer briefings to cover everything needed.

> If it was a perfect world, I'd like maybe one communication or broadcast or meeting just to take us through everything rather than piecemeal. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

As with SME engaged employers, another said they would appreciate more updates, particularly regarding any new standards and new training providers offering standards.

Some employers suggested that the communication from IfATE and the government did not always seem relevant to certain employers, so could be better targeted to different employers and made more accessible. For example, one employer referred to inaccessible language, and messaging not having enough focus on what the benefits are for employers. Another said the skills system can seem complicated and bureaucratic which puts people off (e.g. understanding of the job training seems more complicated than when it was guided learning hours), so more communications to explain the system would be beneficial. One employer said more communication could combat the *"brand fuzziness"* around apprenticeships, with a perception that it is only for young people and manual types of jobs. To use a more personal and targeted approach, one employer suggested that putting messages out through trade bodies or Local Authority small business advisers may reach more employers.

Digitisation

The engaged employers were also asked for their view on how IfATE digital services work and how technology can facilitate access to the skills system.

SMEs

Engaged SMEs reported that digitisation in general can work well, as it reduces time and monetary costs. It was reported that some providers who had maintained remote learning since the pandemic were keen to continue digitisation. However, there were concerns that some industries are less likely to use IT (e.g. hairdressing):

> Some people do not like working on a screen. They just don't. –
> *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

SMEs reported that where processes are digitised (e.g. using automation to update common parts of standards), it needs to be consistent and rolled out carefully to ensure people are informed.

Larger employers

All larger engaged employers were positive about the scope for digitisation and its role in increasing efficiency.

> It definitely plays its part, technology, in completing an
> apprenticeship, particularly if you've got a really good platform, where
> you're able to communicate with your allocated coach, with your
> learner, and the work, keep it all in one place. I think that's central
> really. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

One said digital learning content is important and more of the knowledge base should be digitised as it helps uniformity of teaching and assessment.

Another employer suggested a way of communicating with IfATE through a portal would be helpful. They reported that the trailblazer group has mainly communicated by email, which has caused some human error when updating changes to standards, adding that endpoint assessments have also been *"stuck in the Stone Age"*.

> If they had a portal where we could agree the workflow where you
> know, the end of each month or whatever, we upload the current
> working version, then that date stamps it, that authenticates it, and
> they can see that, and then their feedback [is on the most recent
> version]. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

It was reported by some employers that the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS) could be used more effectively for communication, for example by updating more quickly and

providing more on levy spending predictions. Automatic updates for legislation changes were seen as particularly important. One employer highlighted that employers are likely to use digital systems as a first port of call for information, so it is important they give clear information on the different courses available and what skills they provide.

Summary

Although employers reported receiving communications from IfATE, these were sometimes not very accessible, and SMEs were less likely to be engaged in communications. Communications therefore need to be more accessible so employers understand the relevance of communications to them, and more targeted, especially towards SMEs and to certain routes. Overall, IfATE should demonstrate a greater connection with employers and need to build and maintain these connections (e.g. to ensure certain courses are being used).

There were some reports of disjointed or piecemeal sources of information, from IfATE as well as from all stakeholders in the skills system. A one-stop-shop for advice on apprenticeships would be useful, with a clear process for getting personalised advice (e.g. a contact at IfATE).

Employers were of the view that apprenticeships and technical education were a viable alternative to university and that IfATE (and the government) had a role in promoting this view.

Within their feedback were many ideas of how IfATE could improve communications:

- More promotion of apprenticeships and technical education, explaining the benefits and as a viable alternative to traditional academia.

- IfATE to work more with industry boards, trade bodies and local stakeholders including Chambers of Commerce and local authority business advisers.

- More face-to face opportunities for IfATE to meet and talk with employers.

- More targeting and tailoring of messages to different routes.

- Increased emphasis on engagement with smaller businesses.

- Clearer ways of accessing IfATE advice for businesses

- Greater social media presence

- More accessible language and demystifying the 'jargon'

- Greater use of the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS) for communications.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Interviewees were also asked about their views on areas of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) including IfATE's EDI policy, what they would do to improve EDI in their own organisations if there were no constraints and whether they believed that IfATE could do anything to help promote organisational ambitions for EDI going forward.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

Views from not engaged SME employers were largely positive towards IfATE's EDI approach, with their policy being described as "*pretty well rounded*". Others reported that the policy covered everything that it needed to and that it was good for IfATE to have a policy setting out their EDI approach, another said that the policy was "*very admirable*" and that more employers were beginning to realise the necessity of having a clear EDI policy.

> Very admirable. I'd like to think all companies take that approach but we're all still in the early stages, it's really only in the last couple of years that more people are waking up to this. – *Not engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Interviewees were also asked about their own EDI views and what they would do in their own businesses if they had no constraints in implementing policies. Views were generally positive, with interviewees saying that they would look to improve diversity in a number of ways. For example, one employer was trying to improve their workplace's approach to EDI through being diversity inclusive and had hired an external HR support company to ensure that their policies were correct.

A small number of not engaged SMEs acknowledged that they did not have a diverse workforce, with a male dominated culture being present and that they would "*love to get different perspectives in their business*" through hiring more women. Another discussed their own policy that champions EDI, noting that whilst it provides challenges it is key to be fair and people focused.

One participant did have a more negative outlook on EDI, claiming that there was:

> far too much onus on everybody accepting the difference, rather than people trying to fit in. – *Not engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

They did not consider how this could disadvantage people with characteristics that do not match the current workforce.

Finally, participants were asked if there was anything additional IfATE could do to promote ambitions for EDI within their businesses. A small number believed that there was nothing IfATE could do for them at the moment, with one saying they were currently busy with other areas of business, whilst another thought there was potential for them help in the future. One recommendation from a not engaged SME was that IfATE could provide more knowledge on EDI, particularly around how to improve EDI when starting from a lower baseline.

Larger employers

Not engaged larger businesses were also asked about their views on IfATE's EDI policy. The policy was also received positively by this group, being described as *"really comprehensive"* and that it aligned with internal aspirations for businesses.

When asked about changes within their businesses if there were no constraints one participant believed that their organisation had a good overarching HR and legal department who were well informed about EDI and that they were already doing what was necessary to ensure EDI had a focus. It was also thought that IfATE may be needed to support employers in the future, particularly with ensuring that employees have the right level of English and Maths to be able to enter the workplace.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

Semi-engaged SMEs were also generally positive towards the EDI policy established by IfATE. These semi-engaged SMEs agreed that it was important for every company to have an EDI policy, and that it is expected of organisations in 2023.

While one of the employers reported that IfATE's EDI policy covered everything it needed to, there were some contrasting opinions. An employer said that they believed that the policy needed some expansion, particularly around how the policy worked in practice and how it worked for businesses. It was also reported by another employer that IfATE could consider neurodiversity more in its broadest sense, particularly for those who may be less academic and need more support to reach the starting criteria for some technical qualifications.

When thinking about how to improve EDI in their respective businesses if there were no constraints, participants were acutely aware of where their businesses stood regarding EDI. One interviewee thought that they *"probably don't know where to go"* to gain further knowledge of EDI in work, but belonged to a number of organisations who could offer assistance. Another was aware that their industry was very male dominated, and that positive action was likely needed to achieve equity in their workplace gender balance. They further reported that improving participation in STEM would help employment

figures and that this could be achieved starting in schools and working with young people.

> It would be nice to have more females within the area that I work in…We tend to get more males than females, especially on the STEM side of it. Maybe improving that side or trying to increase that side. – *Semi-engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Finally, when asked about what IfATE could do to help improve EDI in their organisation participants voiced that help with recruiting females into the workforce would be appreciated. One participant claimed they employed whoever is capable of the job based on merit and had just hired their first female member of staff. The challenge they faced was getting women 'through the door' despite being sent interview invites. Another wanted advice on how to attract more women to work in the manufacturing and engineering side of their business as all women currently working there were in support or administration-based roles. Additionally, an interviewee also thought they could perhaps do more around supporting people with disabilities in finding work with the suggestion of financial incentives to provide adjustments from the employer's perspective.

Larger employers

Semi-engaged larger employers were also largely positive towards IfATE's EDI policy. One employer described it as exactly the type of policy that should be in place and that it made good business sense whilst promoting positive change. They also thought IfATE's position meant it should be a driver for these positive changes. Another reported that the policy seemed to cover all the bases at the forefront of organisational thinking around EDI.

An employer that discussed how they might better apply EDI in their own organisation thought that it was challenging to have a set percentage of employees fall under a certain diversity label, particularly within smaller organisations. They had taken steps to help their diverse members of staff including confidence coaching for female engineers and had ensured that there was an anonymous CV hiring process whilst also providing training to staff to avoid unconscious bias. Another had faced difficulties facilitating international employees into apprenticeships and would like to see flexibility with how long staff have to live in the UK to access apprenticeships. They also reported that restrictions on qualifications, particularly those achieved abroad needed to be loosened as there were too many restrictions that prevented people from obtaining employment. Another said they would have placed a larger focus on social mobility and instead place a focus on the right attitude and willingness rather than focusing in on qualifications. They also wanted to increase accessibility of opportunities for people with disabilities and were happy to make adjustments but had not seen any applicants applying for roles.

When thinking about what IfATE could do to better facilitate EDI in their organisations, these employers gave feedback on wanting advice on how to reach candidates from different backgrounds for their business in the engineering and manufacturing route and how to address concerns around an aging workforce.

Engaged employers

SMEs

Insights from engaged SMEs were limited, however, they again were positive towards IfATE's EDI policy with it being described as a *"good start"* that should be reviewed regularly to ensure it is delivering its aims. Another believed that IfATE adhered well to all of their policy.

Participants did not think they could do much more to improve EDI in their businesses with employers from the hair and beauty route in particular citing the diversity in their industry.

> It's never been an issue in my industry, you are what you are. As long as you do the job properly, and you enjoy it. We'll accept anything, anyone from any background. My industry has always been inclusive from that point of view. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Larger employers

These employers were more critical of IfATE's EDI policy than less engaged employers. They indicated that they had a high level of understanding of EDI challenges and they were looking beyond such a standard policy. For example, one participant described the statement as "*great, a good start point*" and that their organisation was incorporating

> a much more kind of inclusive approach in terms of not just protected characteristics, but also social mobility. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Another reported similarly:

> That statement's great, a good start point. I think that's fine. I know for us we are incorporating a much more kind of inclusive approach in terms of not just protected characteristics, but also social mobility for example. I think at the heart of it is enabling everyone to thrive and I'm glad they've got equity in there, because that's slightly different as I was learning the other day to just equality. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

As seen from a semi-engaged employer earlier in this section, neurodiversity was also reported by a larger engaged employer as an important element not seen in the IfATE policy. This also translated to delivery of technical education with this employer reporting that they saw a lack of understanding of neurodiverse needs such as ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia in the end-point assessors they had worked with.

In response to being asked what they would do to improve EDI with no constraints within their organisations, participants generally had a deep understanding of the current EDI challenges their businesses were facing. For example, as seen elsewhere they were aware of gender imbalances in their workplaces, and some could state figures for the different characteristics within their workforce, others could point to areas where they were working withing their organisations to make changes.

When asked what IfATE could do to support integrating EDI into their organisations, employers provided useful feedback on what could be done. For example, an employer that described themselves as being *"extremely engaged in EDI"* said that IfATE could do more to ensure that gender inclusive language ran through all apprenticeship standards and supporting information. They also thought that IfATE could encourage employers to be more inclusive through rethinking GCSE requirements for apprenticeships to open them up to more applicants.

> What can be done through just the websites, the standards, to make sure that we're using gender inclusive language? It's not as obvious for example, that male pronouns are being used. But it's more that I know that we do work on all of our adverts, because certain language is more inclusive, and just engages both women and men and non-binary people, whereas certain other language doesn't. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Another interviewee thought that IfATE could support companies to better understand what EDI means and what good practice looks like. They also wanted IfATE to look at different groups and intersectionality's to see what more can be done to help people across multiple diversity characteristics. The potential for financial incentives from IfATE to make a difference to smaller employers was also suggested by a larger employer, they thought that this could help with reasonable adjustments for example. An employer they also reported that IfATE could engage more with local communities about opportunities for upskilling via a technical qualification or vocational route and that this could be instigated through conversations with different community organisations.

Summary

The IfATE EDI policy was generally well received by interviewees. Most agreed that it covered what they would expect to see in an EDI policy. Larger engaged employers were

more guarded in their support of the policy saying that while it was a good starting point it could go further in including social mobility and give an increase in focus to neurodiversity.

While many of the larger engaged employers were well-versed in the IfATE's and their own EDI policies and where they should be taking further action to increase the diversity of their workforces, this was not as common with less engaged and smaller employers. There was one not engaged SME that emphasised the importance of fitting in and did not consider EDI in their recruitment. This view was also found in other employers that reported that they took the 'best person for the job' from those that applied or qualified for an interview. Several semi-engaged employers noted how male dominated their routes were and that further actions were needed outside of their own organisations to increase diversity and achieve workplace gender balance. These views taken together show the need for increased awareness for employers to understand the role they can play in achieving greater EDI.

Green skills

Participants were asked about green jobs and skills and whether they thought that creating technical education in green-focused jobs should be a priority for IfATE over the next five to ten years. Overall, employers were generally positive about this prospect no matter their current engagement status.

Not engaged employers

SMEs

Not engaged SMEs held positive views of green jobs and a number of participants had made changes to improve the climate impacts of their organisations. For example, an employer noted that they had decreased their climate impact by embracing a *"fractured and remote set-up"*. They thought that other organisations needed to prepare people to work remotely, and therefore, the promotion of digital skills should also be prioritised.

Employers here generally reported that as green jobs and skills were vital, everybody should understand that they need to reduce emissions, and these employers therefore believed there should be a thread running through all forms of technical education in the same way that health and safety is promoted.

Larger employers

Larger not engaged employers also held positive views of green jobs. One described this area as a *"huge element for us"* and they now look at apprenticeship standards that also take into account energy transition.

There was agreement from these employers that green-focussed qualifications and jobs should be prioritised given the context of rising energy costs and the environmental impacts of fossil fuels.

> Given the cost of energy, and the environmental impacts of fossil fuels, I think it's an absolute no brainer, and especially with the evolving workforce and promotion of STEM. I think if we can link that to these new industries, it makes perfect sense. – *Not engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Only one employer here was more negative, saying that it was the responsibility of the government to put money behind the decision to promote green jobs and skills, and whilst they did think these areas should be prioritised, they also thought there were lots of other areas that also needed prioritisation.

Semi-engaged employers

SMEs

Semi-engaged SMEs gave limited feedback on green skills and jobs, but views were positive. There were positive views of green technology and in particular incorporating green skills into existing qualifications rather than having separate qualifications.

As before, there was one employer that reported that other priorities should not be lost sight of in favour of green skills.

Larger employers

Some employers from the health and science route noted the current challenges being faced by the health industry and the difficulties of incorporating greater sustainability practices into their day-to-day work.

Larger semi-engaged employers discussed how important they believed green skills and jobs to be. They also noted the importance of senior stakeholder and industry-wide support for green innovations and skill development when thinking how employers might need to change their practices.

Engaged employers

SMEs

As with a few other employers, there were some engaged SMEs that believed that green skills needed to be considered a priority alongside other areas, such as project management skills and technical skills shortages.

I think it's important to look at it [green skills and jobs] but I don't think it's the most important thing. I do think it's important to be aware. My industry are becoming more aware of it and I think most of our industry try and be as green as we possibly can. You can't force that on somebody, it's what I call a choice factor, and people like to have to make their own choice. – *Engaged SME* (Source: Interview)

Positive feedback included an employer on the engineering and manufacturing route who was concerned about a lack of education about sustainable energy and transport, believing that *"technical education is way, way behind the curve"* around these subjects. Another in the agriculture, environmental and animal care route thought that green elements were a fundamental aspect of the route and were built into their work practice already.

Larger employers

Feedback was most pronounced from larger, engaged businesses. Again, insights were generally positive with some interviewees offering a more critical view of how green skills and jobs should be promoted and what these roles looked like in practice.

Positive feedback included employers that reported that green skills and jobs were high on their list of priorities. For example, a large employer in the construction and the built environment route had a sustainability team in their company and had discussed looking into a sustainability apprenticeship. Another employer had been involved in sustainability work regarding apprenticeships and green classification so had a depth of knowledge in the area.

Several employers here believed that green skills and education needed to be incorporated into existing and future qualifications rather than be standalone qualifications, as all employees will need to have a good grounding in fundamental green skills. This included an employer on the transport and logistics route who said that while their roles would not initially be thought of as being able to be 'green' they did need to have a focus on green skills as they enable other more green jobs to exist.

you need more electrical engineers, in order to support all of the different green technologies that are coming. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Another employer thought that this balance between green jobs and jobs with green elements was something they had not yet fully understood:

Everybody acknowledges that these are skills that we need now and will need but are they going to develop specific roles? You know, will

there be sustainability practitioners, will that be a job? Or will it be a thread that runs through different job roles. – *Engaged larger employer* (Source: Interview)

Another employer thought that IfATE could drive further engagement for organisations to understand what was meant by green jobs and that there needed to be a wider conversation and understanding of these roles, as not all industries and routes see the relevance at the moment.

As with other employers, the main criticism of the engaged larger employers was with regard to their perceptions of competing priorities of other skill areas, particularly on going skills shortages (reported by employers on the hair and beauty route and the education and childcare route).

Summary

Employers across the spectrum of engagement in the skills system were generally positive about the need for more investment in green skills and jobs.

Where employers were more negative, expressing that other skills shortages were also a priority, these views were expressed by SMEs and larger employers, engaged and less engaged.

Some employers believed that green skills and education should be incorporated into existing qualifications to drive forward skill development across different roles, not just roles that will be labelled as green jobs.

Guideline recommendations

Employers provided a range of recommendations for IfATE and the skills system. While much progress has been made in recent years to improve the overall view and reputation of apprenticeships, employers involved in this research believed that schools and career services are not doing enough to explain the range and quality of post-16 opportunities and technical education. Therefore, students and parents are often left in the dark regarding available pathways outside of traditional academia. Additionally, some employers mentioned that apprenticeships and technical education provide opportunities for social mobility and a way for employers to recruit more diverse talent; both of these features would be helpful for schools and career advisers to advocate and support. Additionally, while the communications for apprenticeships over the past few years have been successful in raising the profile of apprenticeships and messages about T Levels are starting to get through to semi-engaged and engaged employers, other qualifications with IfATE's remit have not had the same attention; thus, the employers in this research were not at all familiar with HTQs.

It was also noted by employers who took part in this research that apprenticeship standards should be broad enough that apprentices gain transferrable skills but also specific enough that the apprentices learn what they need for the job. It might also be useful to provide employers with a menu of different apprenticeship content to pick and choose from to create tailored experiences for their apprentices. It was also suggested by employers that it would be useful to change the levy so that it can be used more flexibly and that providing credit for prior learning or prior work experience might be useful for existing employees who wish to complete an apprenticeship (so that more time can be spent on the job).

In contrast to apprenticeships where the pathway after completing the apprenticeship is clear to employers, employers who took part in this research were generally not aware of the pathways available after the completion of T Levels; as they are so new there are not big enough cohorts to have established a pathway. Employers were aware that employment is an option after T Levels but it was not clear to all employers what skill level T Level students will have after completing their placements and if that skill level is comparable to apprenticeships.

In general, employers mentioned how complex the skills system appears to be, with multiple interacting components and relationships among different technical education pathways (e.g. A Levels vs T Levels vs b techs vs apprenticeships). Thus, employers suggested the development of a clear pathway or map to help explain how all of the different technical education opportunities interact. Additionally, providing employers with a definition of the skills system in a way that employers understand (i.e. no jargon) may lead to more employers becoming involved with IfATE. Only a handful of employers who took part in this research could successfully describe the skills system.

One potentially helpful avenue of approach for future research on the skills system is more information about the availability of skills provision in terms of location and providers. Employers in this piece of research reported that provision availability often depends on where they are located. Thus, it would be useful to map out the hot and cold spots of what provision is available in relation to local skills plans. Employers often reported good relationships with industry boards, professional bodies and local stakeholder such as LSIPs and Chamber of Commerce. One potential approach would be linking information on provision with the Local Skills dashboard recently published by the Department for Education (DfE).[2] The dashboard includes labour market and skills data for different areas as well as a map with local economy and skills information.

Further potential areas for additional IfATE support to employers include:

- Providing suggestions for employer roles in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) including more information in neurodiversity and social mobility. This might differ between SMEs and larger employers, with larger employers having more general knowledge and capacity to develop their EDI policies.

- Encouraging SMEs to become more involved in the skills system by specifically targeting SMEs to engage with IfATE.

- Providing employers with specific contact points within IfATE, such as a team that responds to employer queries about the skills system.

- Providing clear distinction between the roles of employers and qualification designers when working to establish new qualifications and/or programmes.

- Continuing to encourage feedback from employers by establishing a permanent 'Big Conversation' digital portal for employers to be able to express what is working well and less well. As part of this research, employers were able to opt-in to sign up to IfATE mailing lists and the majority took this opportunity suggesting untapped appetite for more contact with IfATE.

- Continuing to invest in upskilling the workforce in green skills by adding this to existing qualifications as well as bringing in new, specific qualifications where needed.

---

[2] The Department for Education (DfE) Local Skills dashboard can be found here: https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/oTIWCx1JPC9ogAf8qt0E?domain=department-for-education.shinyapps.io/.

Appendix 1: Sample details

The following tables provide detailed information about the achieved sample, including engagement with IfATE, business size, routes and regions. SMEs were categorised as having fewer than 100 employees, and larger businesses had 100 or more employees.

Table 1: Sample engagement levels and business sizes

Engagement and business size	Interviews	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
Not engaged SME	8	0	1
Not engaged larger business	5	1	1
Semi-engaged SME	6	2	0
Semi-engaged larger business	4	1	0
Engaged SME	6	0	4
Engaged larger business	17	4	3
TOTAL	46	8	9

Source: IES, 2023

Table 2: Sample routes

Sector	Interviews	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
Agriculture, environmental and animal care	1	0	1
Business and administration	1	0	1
Care services	1	1	0
Catering and hospitality	1	0	0
Construction and the built environment	5	1	0
Creative and design	1	1	1
Digital	0	0	0
Education and childcare	7	0	2
Engineering and manufacturing	14	2	3
Hair and beauty	2	0	1
Health and science	2	1	0
Legal finance and accounting	2	0	0
Protective services	0	0	0
Sales marketing and procurement	0	0	0
Transport and logistics	3	0	0
Other	6	2	0

Source: IES, 2023

Table 3: Sample regions

Region	Interviews	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
London	4	1	0
North East	2	2	0
North West	8	1	0
Yorkshire and the Humber	8	2	2
East Midlands	5	1	1
West Midlands	3	0	2
East of England	4	0	0
South East	6	0	1
South West	5	1	3
National	1	0	0

Source: IES, 2023

Appendix 2: Analysis

Interviewer notes for the 46 interviews were analysed using an Excel-based 'framework' tool. Framework ensures a systematic and consistent treatment of all units of data. In framework, columns represent the key sub-themes or topics from the guide and notes whilst the rows represent individual participants. Data from each respondent is summarised into the appropriate cell, using substantial quotes where appropriate. During analysis, we can more easily find contextual information and other responses from each interviewee (from reading across the row); and if further depth is required framework can link back to original source materials (interviewer notes, recordings and Zoom/Teams transcripts). Framework allows for iterative development in the early stages of its use, comparison of groups of cases such as larger versus smaller employers (through filtering) to draw out patterns, similarities and differences, and detailed thematic analysis by reading down columns. The framework was developed initially after the first few (pilot) interviews, drawing on the topic guides, and then refined after a whole research-team meeting to identify and share emerging themes.

Due to the small number of focus groups (2 total), these were analysed using detailed write-ups – with each write-up containing notes according to the focus group topic guide headings.

Qualitative research aims for rich detail in individual stories where a range of themes are explored and researchers look for and report on similarities and contradictions rather than counting responses. Interviews are conducted with a semi-structured set of questions to guide the researcher but they are flexible and some questions may be skipped or worded differently in the conversation between researcher and participant – again meaning that counting responses is not a robust approach to analysis.

While this qualitative research does not aim for (statistical) generalisability in the evidence that has been collected, some common themes are apparent in the analysis – e.g. smaller, less engaged employers across different industries being less able to articulate the benefits of technical and vocational education.

Appendix 3: Topic guides

Not Engaged Employer Interviews Topic Guide

Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) has been commissioned by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to undertake an evaluation of their integrated skills system.

IfATE work with employers to define occupations and design and approve apprenticeships and technical qualifications (including T Levels) to meet the needs of employers, learners and the economy. Further details about IfATE can be found on their website.[3]

We want to hear from employers using apprenticeships or technical qualifications to understand their views on the current system – what works, what doesn't and what can be improved. We also want to hear from employers who do not currently use technical education.

These views will be analysed and used to inform a major IfATE report next year and will help us deliver the technical education system to meet the country's future needs. Find out more on the IfATE Big Conversation website.[4]

IfATE are gathering views on the skills system, which include:

- The range of apprenticeships and technical education

- The quality of apprenticeships and technical education

- The ability to progress through technical education

- How far technical education supports national schemes like Levelling Up or green skills.

I would really like to have a conversation with you about your views of the apprenticeship and technical education system. Your views will help us shape what the skills system of the future may look like.

With your permission I would like to record the interview – I will be taking notes as we talk, but it helps to have a back-up. No one outside the research team will be able to access the recording and it will be deleted at the end of the project. The information will be kept **confidential** within the research team, and we therefore encourage you to be

---

[3] www.instituteforapprenticeships.org
[4] www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/bigconversation

open and frank in your answers. Please say if anything you say is strictly off the record and I will make sure it is not reported. We will be writing a report based on our findings, but the information will be **anonymised**. Is that OK?

The interview will last for about 45 minutes. **Are you happy to go ahead?**

Please can you repeat for the recording that you have happy for the interview to be recorded.

Organisation details

We are interested in knowing a bit about your role so that we can understand your views in context.

> Researcher note: Check the details already given during interview recruitment (in SharePoint interview tracker) – check to confirm this information.

1. Please could you start by introducing yourself: your job title, your organisation description including size (large employer, SME or micro-business), route and region, a brief overview of your responsibilities and your business's priorities?

   If unaware of routes, read the following and ask which category most closely fits with their organisation.

- Agriculture, environmental and animal care

- Business and administration

- Care services

- Catering and hospitality

- Construction and the built environment

- Creative and design

- Digital

- Education and childcare

- Engineering and manufacturing

- Hair and beauty

- Health and science

- Legal finance and accounting

- Protective services

- Sales marketing and procurement

- Transport and logistics

- Other (if other, please specify)

2. Do you currently, or have you previously, run an apprenticeship, T-Level or Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)?

   a. If yes, do you run any apprenticeships in-house or do you use a training provider?

Researcher note: If YES, please use the ENGAGED topic guide

3. Have you already had a 'big conversation' with a member of staff at IfATE?

4. What, if anything, do you know about IfATE? *(it's okay to have not heard of IfATE before)*

Views on the skills system

The following set of questions are about your views on the English skills system – we are speaking with employers that have a variety of familiarity with the terms we use, if you are not familiar with these terms that is fine.

5. What do you think of when you hear the term, 'skills system'?

6. What do you think of when you hear the term, 'technical education'?

Researcher note: now read out this definition of the skills system and technical education as follows:

The Skills System is the way all the different parts of the technical education system work together: the range and quality of apprenticeships and technical education; the way apprenticeships and qualifications can support national government priorities; the way they can support people to progress in their careers, and the way employers can be involved to create a cohesive system across sectors and regions.

Technical (sometimes referred to as vocational) education provides people with the skills they need to build a successful career and helps employers to meet their skills needs – examples are Apprenticeships, T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications

---

7. To what extent do you think apprenticeships and technical education upskills the workforce to meet the needs of the labour market?

   a. Why do you think that?

8. To what extent do you think apprenticeships and technical education provide an alternative pathway from 'traditional academia' (A levels and degrees)?

   a. What more (if anything) can IfATE do to encourage this alternative pathway?

9. To what extent do you think that apprenticeships and technical education provide the skills and knowledge (occupational competence) needed for jobs

   a. For employers?

   b. For employees?

10. What do you think is already working in the skills system that IfATE should keep? If needed, prompt for:

(1) employer involvement in creating qualifications

(2) nature and design of apprenticeships, T Levels, HTQs and other TQs

(3) the way the system is explained and marketed to employers and learners

(4) the way employers and/or learners can participate in the skills system

(5) range of apprenticeships and qualifications available

(6) the way the system is funded

(7) the way that training providers and employers grow skills in the labour pool

(8) partnership between employers, training providers and awarding organisations

(9) ability to distinguish and recognise the best qualifications

11. What do you think is working less well that IfATE need to change? *If needed, prompt for:*

(1) employer involvement in creating qualifications

(2) nature and design of apprenticeships, T Levels, HTQs and other TQs

(3) the way the system is explained and marketed to employers and learners

(4) the way employers and/or learners can participate in the skills system

(5) range of apprenticeships and qualifications available

(6) the way the system is funded

(7) The way that training providers and employers grow skills in the labour pool

(8) partnership between employers, training providers and awarding organisation

(9) ability to distinguish and recognise the best qualifications

12. Do you think employers have enough say in apprenticeships and technical education?

    a. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

13. What do you think of the quality of apprenticeships and technical education?

    a. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

14. How easy or difficult do you think it is to progress through apprenticeships and technical education?

    a. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

15. Have you ever had thoughts of running technical education (apprenticeships, taking on T Level placement students, Higher Technical Qualifications)?

16. What are the barriers that prevent you from being able to offer a technical education placement?

17. Is there anything that IfATE can do to support you in offering a technical education placement?

IfATE Communication

We are interested in hearing your views on the effectiveness of IfATE communication with businesses.

18. What would you find (more) helpful in the way that IfATE and the rest of the government communicates how the skills system works?

19. Do you face any barriers in the way that IfATE and the rest of the government communicates how the skills system works?

T-Levels

We are interested in learning what you currently know about T-levels. T Levels are still rolling out, so please don't worry if you don't know much about them.

20. Have you heard of T-levels?

    If YES,

    a. Can you describe what a T-level is in your own words? *Prompt for: where their knowledge of T-levels comes from.*

    b. Are you already offering or planning to offer T-level industry placements?

        IF YES to offering T-level placements, ask interviewee to explain and provide detail on what is working well and what could be improved. *Prompt for: how long the placement lasts and which route it falls under.*

> **If NO** to offering T-level placements, ask the following: What are the barriers that prevent you from being able to offer a T-level placement? Do you currently offer anything else (for example activities with local colleges)?
>
> **If NO or UNSURE**, read the following definition of T-levels:
>
> *T Levels are an alternative to A levels, apprenticeships and other 16 to 19 courses. Equivalent in size to 3 A levels, a T Level focuses on vocational skills and can help students into skilled employment, higher study or apprenticeships. Each T Level includes an in-depth industry placement that lasts at least 45 days. Students get valuable experience in the workplace; employers get early sight of the new talent in their industry.*

21. Please can you tell us about your thoughts on T Levels overall? **If you read the definition of T Levels earlier, ask the following instead:** Having heard the definition of T Levels, what are your initial thoughts on T Levels overall?

22. Is there anything else you would like to say about T Levels that we haven't covered?

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

We would like to hear your thoughts on equity, diversity and inclusion. IfATE has the following equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy: *"We have a vision to ensure that people from all backgrounds are able to access and complete quality technical education equitably. IfATE's EDI strategy outlines our commitments for how we act as an employer, a technical education decision-maker, and how we influence positive changes. IfATE is committed to embedding EDI into everyone's thinking and to all of our decision-making processes. This includes how we recruit our staff, how we develop our policies, how we consult and in our technical education products. We will also champion the benefits of EDI to those we serve and those who use our products – using evidence wherever possible to make clear the benefits of doing so, for example, to their business."*

23. What are your thoughts on IfATE's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy?

24. If there were no constraints (e.g., time, finance), what would you do in your business for EDI?

25. Is there anything IfATE can do to support your ambitions for EDI within your business?

Green jobs and skills

We are interested in your thoughts on technical education in green-focused jobs.

26. Do you think that creating technical education (apprenticeships, T-levels, HTQs) in the new green-focused jobs should be something that IfATE prioritises over the next 5 – 10 years?

    a. Why/why not?

Close

That is now the end of the questions that we had for you

27. Is there anything else you would like to add about apprenticeships and technical education, or IfATE that we have not covered so far?

Thank you for taking part today, it has been helpful to speak with you about your experiences and views on apprenticeships and technical education. If you do want to know more about this, further details about IfATE can be found on their website:

www.instituteforapprenticeships.org

Would you like to be added to an IfATE mailing list to be contacted about further research? Please note that this may lead to IfATE being able to identify you.

> Researcher note: Please record this response in the SharePoint interview tracker.

My colleague will be in touch to send you a voucher to thank you – check contact details.

Thanks and close

Engaged Employer Interviews Topic Guide

Introduction

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) has been commissioned by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to undertake an evaluation of their integrated skills system.

IfATE work with employers to define occupations and design and approve apprenticeships and technical qualifications (including T Levels) to meet the needs of employers, learners and the economy. Further details about IfATE can be found on their website.[5]

We want to hear from employers using apprenticeships or technical qualifications to understand their views on the current system – what works, what doesn't and what can

---

[5] www.instituteforapprenticeships.org

be improved. We also want to hear from employers who do not currently use technical education.

These views will be analysed and used to inform a major IfATE report next year and will help us deliver the technical education system to meet the country's future needs. Find out more on the IfATE Big Conversation website.[6]

IfATE are gathering views on the skills system, which include:

- The range of apprenticeships and technical education

- The quality of apprenticeships and technical education

- The ability to progress through technical education

- How far technical education supports national schemes like Levelling Up or green skills.

I would really like to have a conversation with you about your views of the apprenticeship and technical education system. Your views will help us shape what the skills system of the future may look like.

With your permission I would like to record the interview – I will be taking notes as we talk, but it helps to have a back-up. No one outside the research team will be able to access the recording and it will be deleted at the end of the project. The information will be kept **confidential** within the research team, and we therefore encourage you to be open and frank in your answers. Please say if anything you say is strictly off the record and I will make sure it is not reported. We will be writing a report based on our findings, but the information will be **anonymised**. Is that OK?

The interview will last for about 45 minutes. **Are you happy to go ahead?**

Please can you repeat for the recording that you have happy for the interview to be recorded.

Organisation details

We are interested in knowing a bit about your role so that we can understand your views in context.

> Researcher note: Check the details already given during interview recruitment (in SharePoint interview tracker) – check to confirm this information.

2. Please could you start by introducing yourself: your job title, your organisation description including size (large employer, SME or micro-business), route and region, a brief overview of your responsibilities and your business's priorities?

---

[6] www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/bigconversation

- Agriculture, environmental and animal care

- Business and administration

- Care services

- Catering and hospitality

- Construction and the built environment

- Creative and design

- Digital

- Education and childcare

- Engineering and manufacturing

- Hair and beauty

- Health and science

- Legal finance and accounting

- Protective services

- Sales marketing and procurement

- Transport and logistics

- Other (if other, please specify)

3. Do you currently, or have you previously, run an apprenticeship, T-Level or Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)?

   a. If yes, do you run any apprenticeships in-house or do you use a training provider?

4. Have you already had a 'big conversation' with a member of staff at IfATE?

5. What, if anything, do you know about IfATE? *(it's okay to have not heard of IfATE before)*

Views on the skills system

The following set of questions are about your views on the English skills system – we are speaking with employers that have a variety of familiarity with the terms we use, if you are not familiar with these terms that is fine.

6. What do you think of when you hear the term, 'skills system'?

7. What do you think of when you hear the term, 'technical education'?

Researcher note: now read out this definition of the skills system and technical education as follows:

> The Skills System is the way all the different parts of the technical education system work together: the range and quality of apprenticeships and technical education; the way apprenticeships and qualifications can support national government priorities; the way they can support people to progress in their careers, and the way employers can be involved to create a cohesive system across sectors and regions.
>
> Technical (sometimes referred to as vocational) education provides people with the skills they need to build a successful career and helps employers to meet their skills needs – examples are Apprenticeships, T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications

8. To what extent do you think apprenticeships and technical education upskills the workforce to meet the needs of the labour market?

   c. Why do you think that?

9. To what extent do you think apprenticeships and technical education provide an alternative pathway from 'traditional academia' (A levels and degrees)?

   b. What more (if anything) can IfATE do to encourage this alternative pathway?

10. To what extent do you think that apprenticeships and technical education provide the skills and knowledge (occupational competence) needed for jobs

    a. For employers?

    b. For employees?

11. What do you think is already working in the skills system that IfATE should keep? If needed, prompt for:

    (1) employer involvement in creating qualifications

    (2) nature and design of apprenticeships, T Levels, HTQs and other TQs

    (3) the way the system is explained and marketed to employers and learners

    (4) the way employers and/or learners can participate in the skills system

    (5) range of apprenticeships and qualifications available

    (6) the way the system is funded

    (7) the way that training providers and employers grow skills in the labour pool

    (8) partnership between employers, training providers and awarding organisations

    (9) ability to distinguish and recognise the best qualifications

12. What do you think is working less well that IfATE need to change? If needed, prompt for:

(1) employer involvement in creating qualifications

(2) nature and design of apprenticeships, T Levels, HTQs and other TQs

(3) the way the system is explained and marketed to employers and learners

(4) the way employers and/or learners can participate in the skills system

(5) range of apprenticeships and qualifications available

(6) the way the system is funded

(7) The way that training providers and employers grow skills in the labour pool

(8) partnership between employers, training providers and awarding organisation

(9) ability to distinguish and recognise the best qualifications

13. Do you think employers have enough say in apprenticeships and technical education?

    b. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

14. What do you think of the quality of apprenticeships and technical education?

    b. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

15. How easy or difficult do you think it is to progress through apprenticeships and technical education?

    b. Why do you think this? (ie from direct experience or other knowledge)

16. What roles do technical qualifications play for you [why are you involved with technical qualifications]? These can include apprenticeships, T-levels and Higher Technical Qualifications. *If needed, prompt for:*

(1) Give competence and support business need

(2) confidence that the qualification will be respected and of reliable, high quality

(3) ability to distinguish and recognise the best qualifications

(4) reliable

(5) provide wider experience (e.g., workplace training) or transferable skills

(6) personal development and satisfaction of employees

(7) preparing the workforce for the future

(8) to meet the needs of professional development, career changers and career entrants

(9) to give back to local people/ the local area

17. What is the primary reason your business runs an apprenticeship and/or technical education?

18. Is there anything that IfATE can do to support your technical education placements?

IfATE Communication

We are interested in hearing your views on the effectiveness of IfATE communication with businesses.

19. What would you find (more) helpful in the way that IfATE and the rest of the government communicates how the skills system works?

20. Do you face any barriers in the way that IfATE and the rest of the government communicates how the skills system works?

21. IfATE is interested in digitisation. Specifically, they would like to know how technology can facilitate access to the skills system and update the offer more quickly. For example, using automation to update common parts of standards that relate to green skills in manufacturing. Do you have any feedback or suggestions on how IfATE digital services work?

T-Levels

We are interested in learning what you currently know about T-levels. T Levels are still rolling out, so please don't worry if you don't know much about them.

22. Have you heard of T-levels?

   If YES,

   c. Can you describe what a T-level is in your own words? *Prompt for: where their knowledge of T-levels comes from.*

   d. Are you already offering or planning to offer T-level industry placements?

      IF YES to offering T-level placements, ask interviewee to explain and provide detail on what is working well and what could be improved. *Prompt for: how long the placement lasts and which route it falls under.*

      If NO to offering T-level placements, ask the following: What are the barriers that prevent you from being able to offer a T-level placement?

Do you currently offer anything else (for example activities with local colleges)?

If NO or UNSURE, read the following definition of T-levels:

T Levels are an alternative to A levels, apprenticeships and other 16 to 19 courses. Equivalent in size to 3 A levels, a T Level focuses on vocational skills and can help students into skilled employment, higher study or apprenticeships. Each T Level includes an in-depth industry placement that lasts at least 45 days. Students get valuable experience in the workplace; employers get early sight of the new talent in their industry.

23. Please can you tell us about your thoughts on T Levels overall? **If you read the definition of T Levels earlier, ask the following instead:** Having heard the definition of T Levels, what are your initial thoughts on T Levels overall?

24. Is there anything else you would like to say about T Levels that we haven't covered?

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

We would like to hear your thoughts on equity, diversity and inclusion. IfATE has the following equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy: *"We have a vision to ensure that people from all backgrounds are able to access and complete quality technical education equitably. IfATE's EDI strategy outlines our commitments for how we act as an employer, a technical education decision-maker, and how we influence positive changes. IfATE is committed to embedding EDI into everyone's thinking and to all of our decision-making processes. This includes how we recruit our staff, how we develop our policies, how we consult and in our technical education products. We will also champion the benefits of EDI to those we serve and those who use our products – using evidence wherever possible to make clear the benefits of doing so, for example, to their business."*

25. What do you think IfATE does well to promote equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)?

26. What more could IfATE do to promote EDI?

27. If there were no constraints (e.g., time, finance), what would you do in your business for EDI?

28. Is there anything IfATE can do to promote your ambitions for EDI within your business?

Green jobs and skills

We are interested in your thoughts on technical education in green-focused jobs.

29. Do you think that creating technical education (apprenticeships, T-levels, HTQs) in the new green-focused jobs should be something that IfATE prioritises over the next 5 – 10 years?

    a. Why/why not?

Close

That is now the end of the questions that we had for you

30. Is there anything else you would like to add about apprenticeships and technical education, or IfATE that we have not covered so far?

Thank you for taking part today, it has been helpful to speak with you about your experiences and views on apprenticeships and technical education. If you do want to know more about this, further details about IfATE can be found on their website:

www.instituteforapprenticeships.org

Would you like to be added to an IfATE mailing list to be contacted about further research? Please note that this may lead to IfATE being able to identify you.

> Researcher note: Please record this response in the SharePoint interview tracker.

My colleague will be in touch to send you a voucher to thank you – check contact details.

Thanks and close

Focus group topic guide

Background

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) has been commissioned by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to undertake research concerning their integrated skills system.

IfATE work with employers to define occupations and design and approve apprenticeships and technical qualifications (including T Levels) to meet the needs of employers, learners and the economy.

We want to hear from employers to understand their views on the current system – what works, what doesn't and what can be improved. These views will be analysed and used to inform a major IfATE report this year and will help us deliver the technical education system to meet the country's future needs. Please keep in mind that everyone here today has a different level of experience with IfATE and technical education; everyone's views

are appreciated, and it is completely fine if you aren't as familiar with the skills system than other people in the group. There are no right or wrong answers.

With everyone's permission, I would like to record the focus group – I will be taking notes as we talk, but it helps to have a back-up. No one outside the research team will be able to access the recording and it will be deleted at the end of the project. The information will be kept **confidential** within the research team, and we therefore encourage you to be open and frank in your answers. We also want to make sure that you can talk freely in the group and therefore, ask that **each of you** keeps what you hear from other participants confidential.

Please say if anything you say is strictly off the record and I will make sure it is not reported. We will be writing a report based on our findings, but the information will be **anonymised**. Is that OK?

Introductions

- To start us off, could each of you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your organisation and your role within the organisation?

Current practice

- What type of involvement do you have with the skills system – apprenticeships, T levels, higher technical qualifications, or any other skills training? (Check if anyone delivers apprenticeship in-house.)

  Use the following prompt if needed: T Levels are Level 3 qualifications that take 2 years to complete and include an industry placement lasting at least 45 days. Higher technical qualifications include Level 4 or Level 5 qualifications.

- How does your company decide on what training to offer to staff?

  o Is that the same or different for others in the group?

  o If different – why do you think it is different?

  o How do you decide whether to use in-house training, a training provider or recognised qualification?

- Thinking specifically about apprenticeships, how well do these work for your organisations' skills needs?

  o Is that the same or different for others in the group?

  o If different – why do you think it is different?

  o Is there any way that apprenticeships can help to fill local and national skills gaps in the next 15 years?

- What aspects of apprenticeships are working well?
- Do you experience any barriers in regard to being able to offer apprenticeship placements?

- Thinking specifically about T Levels, how well do these work for your organisations' skills needs?
    - Is that the same or different for others in the group?
    - If different – why do you think it is different?
    - Is there any way that T Levels can help to fill local and national skills gaps in the next 15 years?
    - What aspects of T Levels are working well?
    - Do you experience any barriers in regard to being able to offer or T Level placements?

- What works well for your organisation when you are dealing with external training providers for technical education?
    - Is that the same or different for others in the group?
    - If different – why do you think it is different?

- What works less well when dealing with external training providers for technical education?
    - Is that the same or different for others in the group?
    - If different – why do you think it is different?

- Thinking more specifically about IfATE – what has worked well about your involvement with them?
    - Is that the same or different for others in the group?
    - If different – why do you think it is different?

- Staying with IfATE, what has worked less well about your involvement with them?

The future

- How can nationally or locally delivered technical education support your organisation to succeed in the future?
    - Is that the same or different for others in the group?
    - If different – why do you think it is different?

- Thinking about both technical education and the 'traditional' university route, what can IfATE do to encourage parity?

IfATE branding

- Do you understand how apprenticeships, T Levels and other technical education products are developed and the role employers play?

- Do you understand the role IfATE plays in the development of apprenticeships, T Levels and other technical education products?

- If not, what would help you to do so/increase awareness?

- Would understanding that apprenticeships and T Levels are designed by employers working with IfATE make you more or less likely to hire an apprentice or T Level student?

Thanks and close

- Is there anything else you would like to add that you have not had a chance to raise yet?

Thanks again for your time today – we will be getting in touch with you about the £50 voucher.

Please remember that what we discussed today is confidential within this group and should not be shared.