

Employer Perceptions of Quality

Research report

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of the Employer Perceptions of Quality survey carried out in February and March 2023. Findings are based on responses from 292 employers in England.

Awareness and knowledge of vocational and technical qualifications and of IfATE

Employers were asked about their awareness and knowledge of apprenticeships, T levels, higher technical qualifications (HTQs), and other technical qualifications such as NVQs and BTECs. Nearly all (99%) had heard of at least one of these (driven by a high figure of 97% for apprenticeships, whereas a minority (42%) had heard of T levels), but only 30% had heard of all four. Most (66%) had good knowledge of at least one of these vocational and technical qualifications, though only 2% had a good knowledge of all four.

The vast majority of employers felt they had some or good knowledge of apprenticeships (90%) and other technical qualifications such as NVQs and BTECs (86%), whereas fewer than a quarter claimed to have some or good knowledge of HTQs (23%) or T Levels (18%). Half of all employers felt they had a good knowledge of apprenticeships (52%).

In the last five years 27% of employers had had an apprentice work for them, 4% had had somebody working for them that was undertaking a T Level placement and 8% had hired somebody because they had either of these qualifications. Overall approaching three in ten employers (28%) had engaged with the skills system in any of these ways in the last five years, though this was much higher among large employers with 250 or more employees (91%).

Almost a quarter (22%) of employers had heard of IfATE (rising to 42% among large employers) and 10% felt they had some or good knowledge of the organisation.

Understanding of the vocational and technical qualifications system

Most employers felt they understood how vocational qualifications at different levels of difficulty build upon one another by allowing an employee to upskill (68%), and that they can identify which vocational qualifications best suit their business needs (66%).

Despite this, only around half of employers agreed that they understood the current vocational education system (48% vs 23% disagreeing), understood which vocational qualification offered better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours (48% vs 24%

disagreeing) or had confidence in the vocational qualifications available in their sector (49% vs 27% disagreeing).

There was limited awareness that employers are involved in the design of vocational and technical qualifications. Just over half of employers aware of apprenticeships knew that employers had been involved in their design (54%), falling to around a third among those aware of HTQs (32%) and a quarter for T levels (26%).

Navigating the qualifications market

Three-quarters (76%) of employers had previously used at least one source of information about qualifications, most often local training providers (52%), Apprenticeships.gov.uk website (42%) and the Department for Education's website (23%). Overall, 6% had used IfATE's website.

Many employers find navigating the qualifications market difficult: 38% had found this difficult when reviewing qualifications, such as apprenticeships, T levels and other vocational qualifications. Among those experiencing issues, this was most commonly difficulty understanding which qualifications are most relevant or up-to-date for the business (38%), qualification content not being suitable for their organisation's needs (23%), or feeling they had a lack of knowledge, awareness or support (22%).

Employers were asked how important certain factors are when considering qualifications that potential applicants may have or which might be suitable for training existing or new employers. The two factors most often considered very important were knowing the qualification to be well-respected in their sector and knowing the qualification to include a blend of theory and workplace practice, each very important for half of employers (51%). Around three-quarters of employers felt it important when considering qualifications that they knew these had been designed by employers (important for 73%, and very important for 41%).

Perception of the quality of vocational and technical qualifications

When employers were asked for their confidence in the quality of apprenticeships, T levels and HTQs, more were confident than not. This difference was most marked for apprenticeships (48% confident vs 14% not), followed by HTQs (40% confident vs 20% not), whereas for T levels the picture was more balanced (31% confident in their quality compared with 22% not confident). Many employers did not know enough about the qualifications to be able to comment or answered that they were neither confident nor not.

Employers felt a number of factors were important when assessing whether a qualification will lead to a suitably qualified employee. They were most likely to rate course content being relevant and up-to-date for the needs of their sector as important (83%), followed by professional body or regulator recognition (78%), employers having helped design the content (76%) and the qualification being suitably regulated (76%). Least important was employers in their sector having had an input into the way learners are assessed, though 69% still rated this as important (12% felt this was not important).

Employers were very positive about the impact of employer involvement in the design of qualifications, and the vast majority felt employer involvement leads to more valuable qualifications for the workforce (90%), better developed qualifications (90%) and gives them increased confidence that qualifications meet skills needs (90%). Most felt that knowing employers were involved in their design would lead to their organisation being more likely to take on apprentices (76%) or T Level placement students (64%).

Employers were asked if a number of features would improve their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications. The vast majority (over nine in ten) felt their confidence would increase if there was better communication of how vocational education fits together as a whole, professional body recognition, and better communication of which qualifications meet particular sector needs.

Around three-quarters said their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications would increase with a recognised and understood quality mark such as the British Kite Mark (78%, rising to 91% of large employers) and improved profile and branding (76%). Approaching three-fifths (57%) felt that including IfATE in the title of qualification would increase their confidence in the quality of qualifications.

1. Introduction, background and methodology

This report presents findings from a survey of 292 employers undertaken by IFF Research on behalf of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).

IfATE plays a central role in delivering the government's employer-led skills reforms aimed at increasing quality in the skills system. A key principle of the new system is that the learning outcomes of all skills products such as apprenticeships, T Levels and technical qualifications are defined by employers.

The research was commissioned by IfATE to help understand the extent to which employers know which technical education products are built on IfATE-approved employer-specified occupational standards. Findings will help IfATE understand which interventions could increase employer understanding of the value of employer-led quality within the skills system and thereby increase employer engagement with apprenticeships, T levels and technical education more generally.

Methodology

The research involved a quantitative survey of employers in England. Sampling was undertaken at the enterprise rather than the site level (hence contact was made with head offices, not multiple branches of the same organisation). Sole traders with no employees other than the owner(s)/partners were excluded.

Fieldwork took place from 27 February to 13 March 2023. There were two strands to the research:

- A telephone survey of 275 employers. The sample for this element was drawn from Market Location's employer database.
- An online survey of employers with whom IfATE has high levels of engagement with (e.g. they sit on various IfATE panels). A total of 17 online responses were received. Email invites followed by one reminder to non-responders were sent by IfATE to 95 employers.

The questionnaire used for the two strands was the same and is appended. This took an average of 19 minutes to complete over the phone.

Quota targets were set for the telephone survey to try to ensure a broad geographic distribution of interviews and to overrepresent large employers to ensure enough were interviewed to enable reliable analysis. At the analysis stage the survey data was then weighted to be representative of the population of employers in England.

Table 1. Unweighted and weighted sample profile

	Number of interviews	Unweighted profile	Weighted profile
Size		%	%
1-9 employees	115	39	82
10-49 employees	76	26	15
50-249 employees	48	16	2
250+ employees	53	18	1
Sector			
Agriculture, Mining and Utilities	19	7	4
Manufacturing	23	8	6
Construction	41	14	13
Wholesale, Retail and Transportation	56	19	21
Accommodation and Food	26	9	10
Information, Communication, Financial and Real Estate	26	9	11
Professional Services	40	14	14
Administration	25	9	9
Education and Health	19	7	6
Arts and other	17	6	7
Region			
London, the South East or East of England	117	40	48
The Midlands	55	19	18
The North	87	30	24

The South West	33	11	10
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Further detail on the sampling approach, response rate, and maximum standard error can be found in the technical annex.

Reporting conventions

Throughout the report references to employer size are based on number of employees. ‘Large’ businesses refer to those with 250 employees or more, and businesses with 1 – 249 employees are grouped together for the purpose of analysis and reporting and are referred to as small to medium enterprises (SMEs).

Throughout the report, comparisons are made between employers who are ‘engaged in the skills system’ and those not. For the purpose of analysis and reporting, ‘engaged in the skills system’ refers to employers who work directly with IfATE¹ or have participated in the skills system in the last five years either by having an apprentice work for them, having somebody undertake a T level placement and/or employing somebody because they had an apprenticeship or T level qualification.

Unless otherwise specified, where percentages are discussed in the text for sub-groups, such as for large employers or SMEs, the proportion of this sub-group that gave an answer is statistically significantly different to employers in general at the 95% confidence level.

Unless explicitly noted, all findings are based on weighted data. Unweighted bases (the number of responses from which the findings are derived) are displayed on tables and charts as appropriate to give an indication of the robustness of results.

Please note that results may not sum to 100% due to rounding and/or due to respondents being able to select more than one answer to a question.

¹ This was defined as working with IfATE as a member of the apprenticeship panel, the trailblazer group, the route panel, T level panel or working directly with IfATE in any other way

2. Awareness of IfATE and vocational and technical qualifications

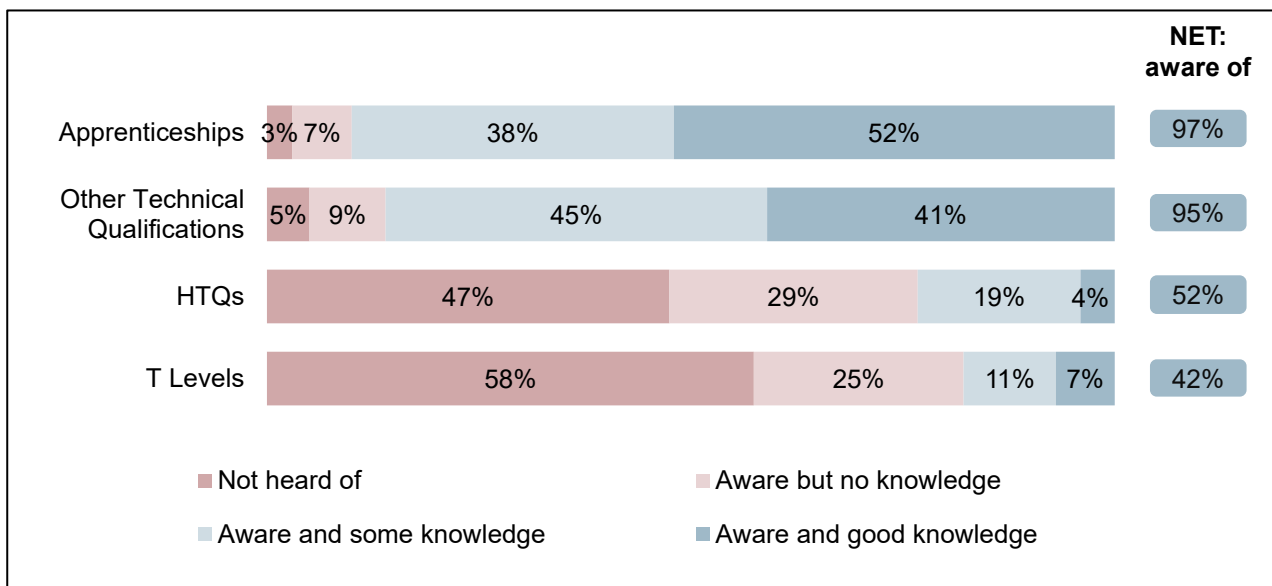
This chapter explores employers' awareness and knowledge of the different vocational and technical qualifications. It also looks at how engaged employers are in the skills system and their awareness of IfATE.

Awareness of vocational and technical qualifications

Employers were asked about their awareness and knowledge of apprenticeships, T levels, HTQs, and other technical qualifications such as NVQs and BTECs. Nearly all employers (99%) had heard of at least one vocational and technical qualification, but only 30% had heard of all four. Most (66%) had good knowledge of at least one vocational and technical qualification, though only 2% had a good knowledge of all four.

As shown in Figure 2.1, employers were most likely to have some or good knowledge of apprenticeships (90%) followed by other technical qualifications such as NVQs and BTECs (86%). In comparison awareness and knowledge of HTQs (52% aware, 23% feeling they had some or good knowledge) and T Levels (42% aware, 18% with at least some knowledge) was much lower.

Figure 2.1. Employer awareness and knowledge of vocational and technical qualifications



	Not heard of	Aware but no knowledge	Aware and some knowledge	Aware and good knowledge	Net: Aware of
Apprenticeships	3%	7%	38%	52%	97%
Other Technical Qualifications	5%	9%	45%	41%	95%
HTQs	47%	29%	19%	4%	52%
T Levels	58%	25%	11%	7%	42%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. A4: Base all employers (n=292).

Knowledge of the different qualifications increased with size (see Table 2). For example, 92% of large employers with 250 plus employees felt they had good knowledge of apprenticeships and what they involved compared to 52% of those with fewer than 50 employees. Similarly large employers were far more likely to have good knowledge of T levels (30%) than those with fewer than 50 or with 50-249 employees (7% and 16%).

Table 2. Awareness and knowledge of vocational and technical qualifications by size

	1-49 employees	50-249 employees	250 plus employees
Base: all respondents	191	48	53
Apprenticeships			
Aware of	97%	100%	100%
Some or good knowledge	90%	96%	100%
Good knowledge	52%	68%	92%
HTQs			
Aware of	52%	58%	73%
Some or good knowledge	22%	26%	46%
Good knowledge	3%	4%	19%
T levels			
Aware of	42%	39%	69%
Some or good knowledge	17%	27%	51%
Good knowledge	7%	16%	30%

There was relatively limited difference in awareness and knowledge by sector, however, those in the Professional Services sector were more likely than average to have any knowledge of T Levels (30% vs 18% among all employers) and those in Retail, Wholesale and Transport had lower awareness of apprenticeships (81% vs 90% among all employers) and were less likely than average to have good knowledge of them (36% vs 52% among all employers).

Employers that had some or good knowledge of IfATE were more likely than those who had not heard of IfATE to have at least some knowledge of apprenticeships (100% vs 89%), HTQs (33% vs 19%) and T Levels (43% vs 14%).

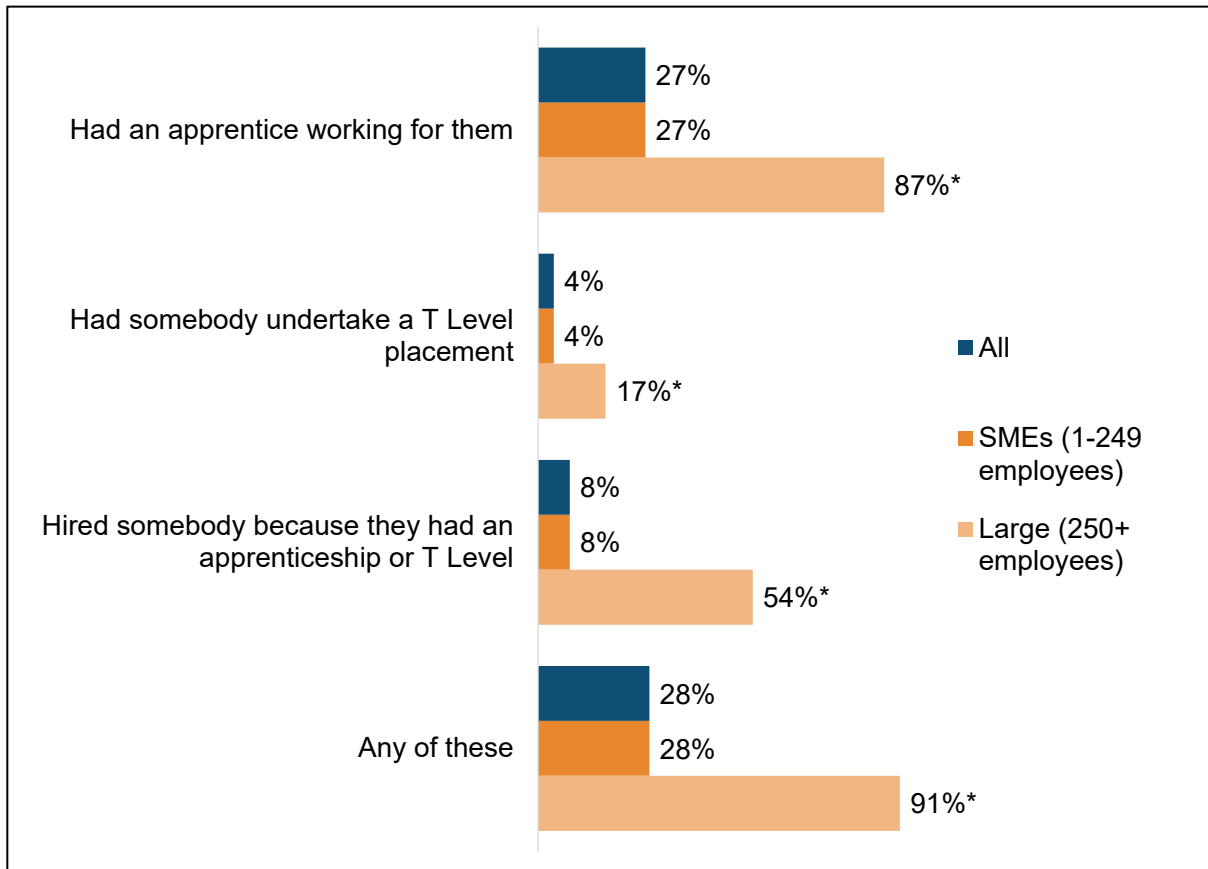
Engagement with the skills system

As an indicator of whether employers engaged in the skills system, respondents were asked if in the last five years their organisation had had an apprentice working for them, had someone undertake a T level placement or if they had hired somebody because they had an apprenticeship or T level.

Just over a quarter (27%) of employers had had an apprentice work for them in the last five years and 4% had had somebody undertaking a T Level placement. Nearly one-in-ten (8%) had hired somebody because they had either of these qualifications in the last five years. Overall approaching three in ten employers (28%) had engaged with the skills system in any of these ways in the last five years.

As shown by Figure 2.2, large employers were much more likely than SMEs to have engaged in the skills system (91% had done so vs 28% of SMEs). For example, 87% of large employers had someone undertaking an apprenticeship in the last five years compared to 27% of SMEs, and 54% had hired someone because they had an apprenticeship or T Level in that time period compared to 8% of SMEs.

Figure 2.2. Whether employers had engaged in the skills system in the last five years



	All	SMEs (1-249 employees)	Large (250+ employees)
Had an apprentice working for them	27%	27%	87%
Had somebody undertake a T Level placement	4%	4%	17%
Hired somebody because they had an apprenticeship or T Level	8%	8%	54%
Any of these	28%	28%	91%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. A1: Base all employers (n=292), SMEs (n=239), large (n=53). *Indicates where figures are statistically significantly higher between SMEs and large employers.

Employers in the Construction sector were more likely than average to had somebody on an apprenticeship in the last five years (45%) while those in Retail, Wholesale and Transport were less likely than average to have done so (14%).

Awareness of IfATE

Almost a quarter of employers (22%) had heard of IfATE²: 12% had heard of IfATE but did not know what the organisation does, 7% had some knowledge and 3% felt they had a good understanding of IfATE and what they do.

Large employers with 250 or more employees were more likely than SMEs to have heard of IfATE (42% vs 22% respectively) and to have some or good knowledge of the organisations (29% vs 10%).

Awareness of IfATE was lower than average in the Professional Services sector (9%) and in the Wholesale, Retail and Transport sector (11%).

² Results in this and the next section exclude the 17 respondents that were sampled via IfATE warm lead sample.

Whether employers work with IfATE on various panels or groups

Respondents with some or good knowledge of IfATE were asked if they worked with IfATE in any of the following ways: on an Apprentice Panel, a Trailblazer Group, a Route Panel or a T level Panel. Overall, fewer than 0.5% of all employers worked with the organisation in any of these ways.

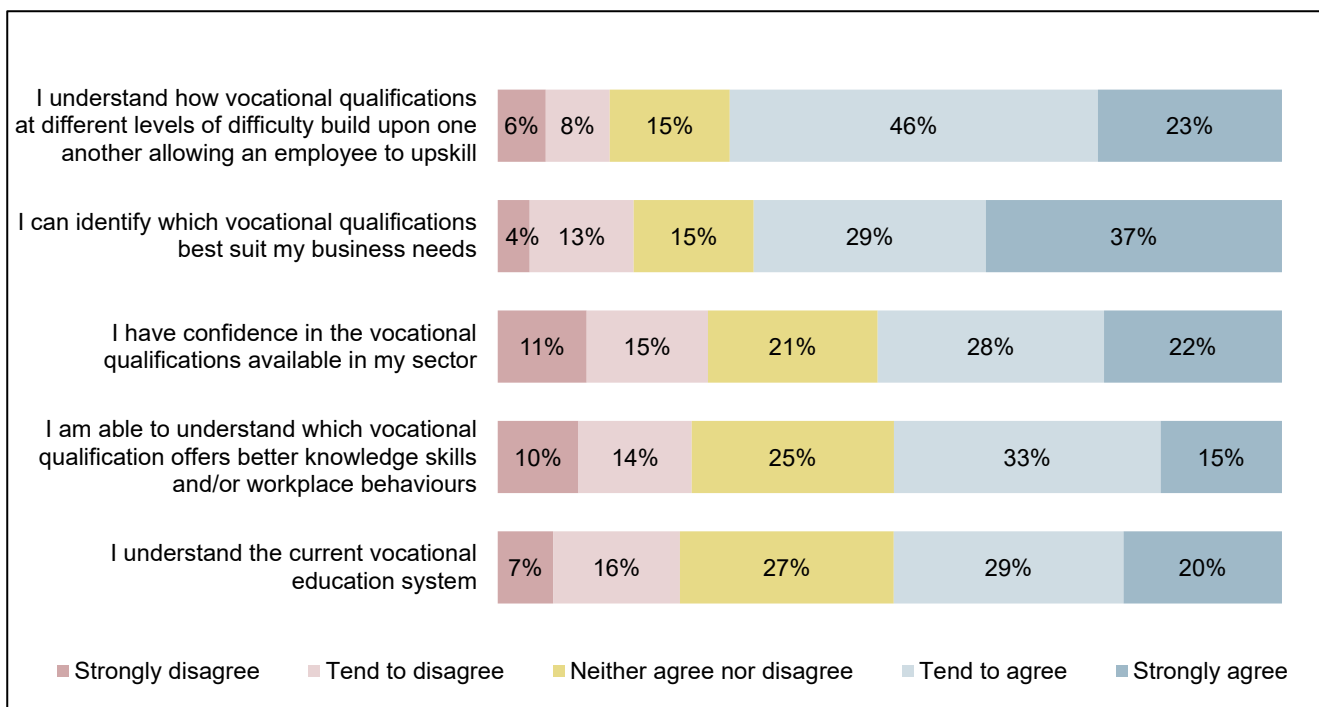
3. Understanding of the vocational and technical qualifications system

This chapter explores employer understanding of vocational qualifications and their design. The first section examines levels of agreement with various statements about knowledge of the vocational education system, the second looks specifically at awareness of employer involvement in the design of apprenticeships, T levels and HTQs.

Understanding of vocational qualifications and their design

Figure 3.1 shows the extent to which employers agreed or disagreed with five statements about the vocational education and qualifications system.

Figure 3.1. Extent to which employers agree or disagree with statements about the vocational education system



	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree
I understand how vocational qualifications at different levels of difficulty build upon one another allowing an employee to upskill	6%	8%	15%	46%	23%
I can identify which vocational qualifications best suit my business needs	4%	13%	15%	29%	37%
I have confidence in the vocational qualifications available in my sector	11%	15%	21%	28%	22%
I am able to understand which vocational qualification offers better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours	10%	14%	25%	33%	15%
I understand the current vocational education system	7%	16%	27%	29%	20%

Source: Employer Perceptions of Quality survey 2023. C1: Base: All employers (292). 'Don't know' responses not shown.

Employers were most likely to agree that they understood how vocational qualifications at different levels of difficulty build upon one another allowing an employee to upskill (68%) and that they can identify which vocational qualifications best suit their business needs (66%). In each case around one in six disagreed (14% and 17% respectively).

Despite this, only around half of employers agreed that they understood the current vocational education system (48% agreed vs 23% disagreed), understood which vocational qualifications offered better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours (48% vs 24%), or had confidence in the vocational qualifications available in their sector (49% vs 27%).

As shown in the below table, agreement was lower among smaller employers with fewer than 50 employees.

Table 3. Percentage agreeing with statements about the vocational education system by size

	1-49 employees	50-249 employees	250 plus employees
Base: all respondents	191	48	53
I understand how vocational qualifications at different levels of difficulty build upon one another allowing an employee to upskill	68%	81%	81%
I can identify which vocational qualifications best suit my business needs	65%	84%	82%
I have confidence in the vocational qualifications available in my sector	49%	47%	66%
I understand the current vocational education system	48%	55%	60%
I am able to understand which vocational qualification offers better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours	47%	64%	68%

Results varied by whether employers were engaged in the skills system (had someone on an apprenticeship or T level placement or hired someone because they had an apprenticeship or T level in the last five years) or not. Those engaged in the skills system were more likely to agree that:

- they could identify which vocational qualifications best suit their business needs (82% vs 59% of those not engaged); and
- they were able to understand which vocational qualification offered better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours (59% vs 43%).

Results were also higher among those engaged in the skills system than those not for understanding how vocational qualifications at different levels of difficulty build upon one another and for understanding the vocational education system (in each case by ten percentage points, though these differences are not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level).

Awareness of employer involvement in the design of vocational qualifications

Employers aware of apprenticeships, T levels and HTQs were asked whether they knew that employers had been involved in the design of each of these vocational qualifications.

Just over half of employers aware of apprenticeships knew that employers had been involved in their design (54%), compared with around a third for HTQs (32%) and a quarter for T level (26%).

Those engaged in the skills system were more likely to be aware of design input from employers, particularly for apprenticeships (65% compared to 50% among those not engaged in the skills system) and T Levels (35% vs 20% among those not engaged).

Large employers aware of each qualification were also more likely than SMEs to know that the qualifications had had design input from employers. For apprenticeships, for example, 72% of large employers knew this compared with 54% of SMEs. For T levels the difference was even more marked (60% of large employers vs 26% of SMEs).

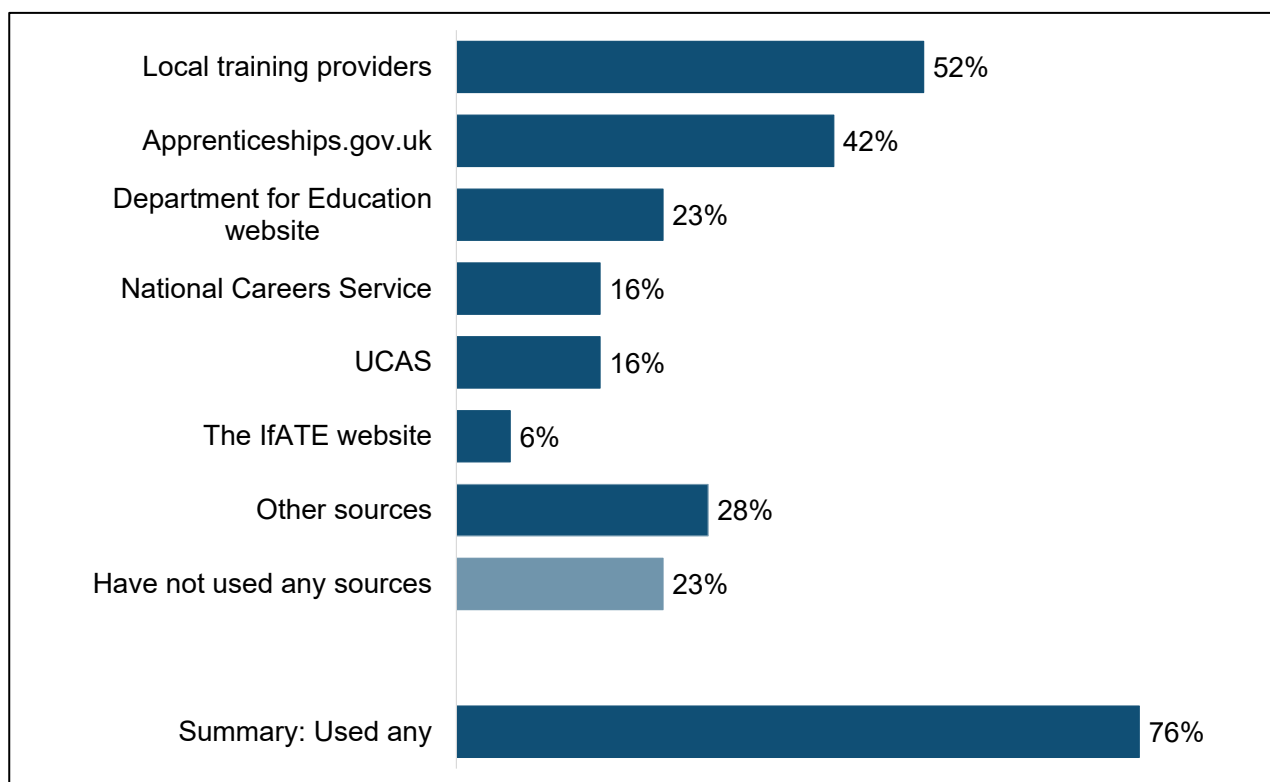
4. Navigating the qualifications market

This chapter explores how employers navigate the qualifications market. The first section looks at the sources of information used by employers to find relevant qualifications and the second section examines the difficulties employers face when navigating the market. Finally, this chapter investigates what factors employers deem important when considering qualifications potential applicants have or which may be used to train existing or new employees.

Sources of information used

Employers were asked which sources of information they had personally used to find out about qualifications relevant to their organisation or sector. As shown in Figure 4.1, three-quarters (76%) of employers had used at least one source of information, most often local training providers (52%), Apprenticeships.gov.uk website (42%) and the Department for Education's website (23%). Overall, 6% had used IfATE's website.

Figure 4.1. Sources of information used by employers to find relevant qualifications



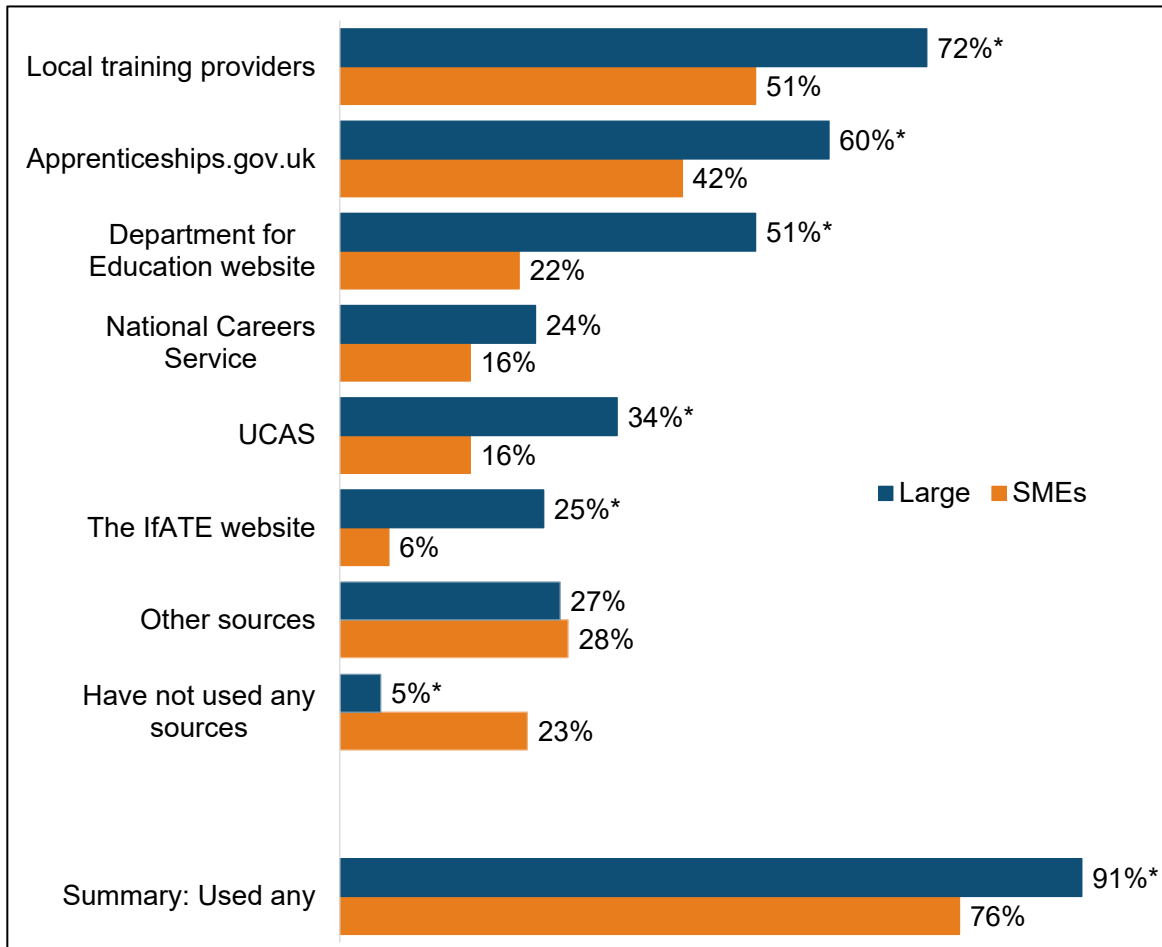
Source of Information	Percentage of Employers
Local training providers	52%
Apprenticeships.gov.uk	42%
Department for Education website	23%
National Careers Service	16%
UCAS	16%
The IfATE website	6%
Other sources	28%
Have not used any sources	23%
Summary: Used any	76%

Source: Employer Perceptions of Quality survey 2023. D1: Base all employers (n=292).

Those who were engaged with the skills system were more likely to have used any sources of information to find out about qualifications relevant to their organisation or sector (94% vs 68% of those not engaged), with the difference particularly marked for local training providers (84% vs 38%), the Apprenticeships.gov.uk website (64% vs 32%), the Department for Education's website (41% vs 15%) and the IfATE website (14% vs 2%).

Related to this, large businesses were also more likely than average to have used any sources of information to find out about qualifications (91% vs 76% among SMEs). For example, a quarter (25%) of large businesses used the IfATE website compared to 6% of SMEs and over a third (34%) had used the UCAS website compared to 16% of SMEs.

Figure 4.2. Sources of information used by large businesses and SMEs



Source of Information	Percentage of Large Employers	Percentage of SME Employers
Local training providers	72%*	51%
Apprenticeships.gov.uk	60%*	42%
Department for Education website	51%*	22%
National Careers Service	24%	16%
UCAS	34%*	16%
The IfATE website	25%*	6%
Other sources	27%	28%
Have not used any sources	5%*	23%
Summary: Used any	91%*	76%

Source: Employer Perceptions of Quality survey 2023. D1: Base Large employers (n=53), SMEs (n=239). *Indicates where figures are statistically significantly different between large employers and SMEs.

Difficulties navigating the market

Employers were asked if they found navigating the market difficult when reviewing qualifications, such as apprenticeships, T levels and other vocational qualifications. Just under two-fifths do find this difficult (38%), similar to the proportion disagreeing (40%). Quite a high proportion (22%) answered ‘don’t know’ suggesting these companies did not have recent experience of investigating the market for these qualifications, something confirmed by the fact that the proportion giving this response was much higher among those not engaged with the skills system (27%) than those engaged (12%).

Large employers were more likely to say they faced no difficulties navigating the qualifications market (55% vs 40% among SMEs), though still three in ten (30%) found it difficult. Employers in the Professional Services sector were more likely than average to find the qualifications market difficult to navigate (61% vs 38% of all employers).

As shown in Figure 4.3, the most common issue was that employers found it difficult to understand which qualification is most relevant or up-to-date for the business (38% of those experience challenges navigating the market).

Figure 4.3. Difficulties employers face when navigating the qualifications market



Issue	Percentage of employers facing issue
Difficult to understand which qualification is most relevant or up-to-date for the business	38%
Qualification content is not suitable for my organisation's needs	23%
Lack of knowledge / awareness / support	22%
Difficulty finding applicants	14%
Too many (similar) qualifications available	13%
Difficulty finding the right trainer	9%
Funding	9%
Unclear if learners gain practical skills from a qualification	7%
Difficulty finding qualifications which are recognised by our industry / which are professionally recognised	5%
Unclear if learners gain sufficient theoretical knowledge from a qualification	5%

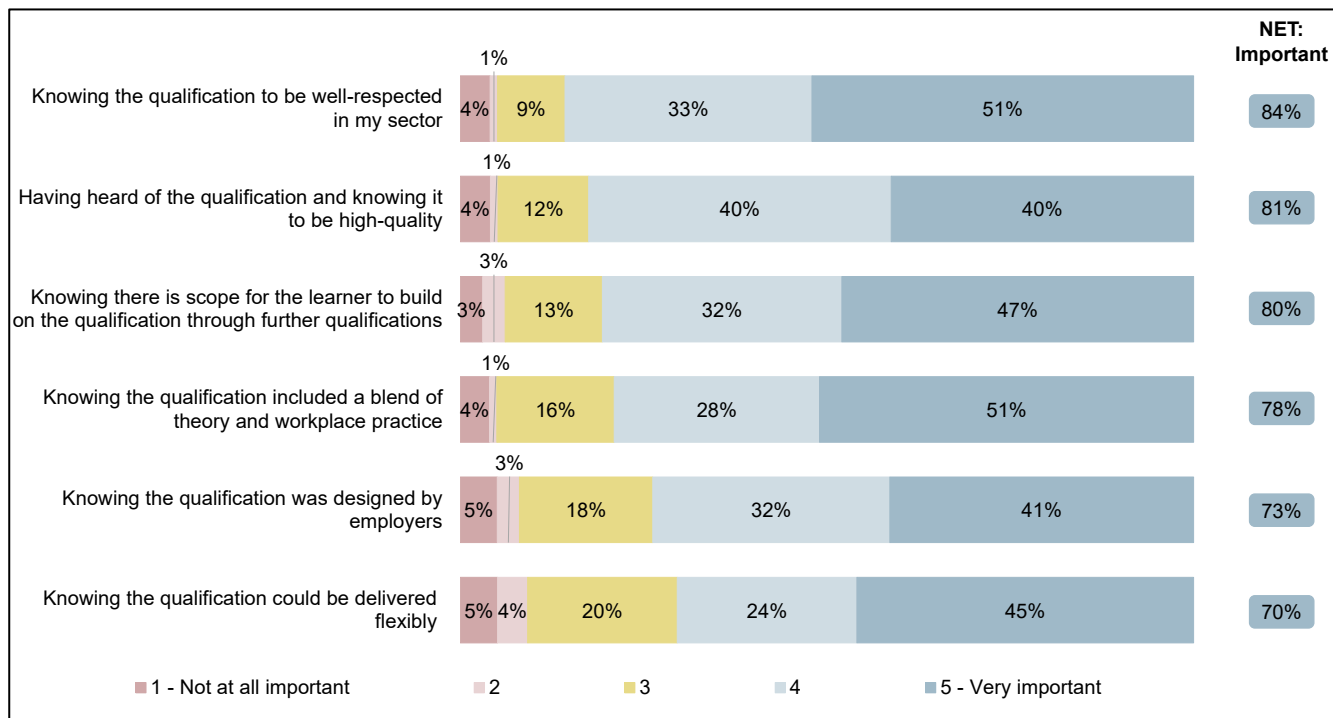
Source: Employer Perceptions of Quality survey 2023. D5: Base all who had issues navigating the market (n=111).

Employers who were not engaged with the skills system were more likely to find it difficult to understand which qualification is most relevant to their organisation (48% vs 22% of those who were engaged) but less likely to think that it was difficult to find qualifications which were recognised by the industry or professionally recognised (1% vs 12% of those who were engaged).

What employers look for in qualifications

Using a scale of 1 is not important and 5 is very important, employers were asked how important certain factors were when considering qualifications that potential applicants may have, or which might be suitable for training existing or new employers. As shown in Figure 4.4, employers thought that all the factors were important, with around two-fifths to half describing each as very important.

Figure 4.4. Factors employers consider when looking at qualifications



Factors considered by employers	1 - Not at all important	2	3	4	5 - Very important	Net: Important
Knowing the qualification to be well-respected in my sector	4%	1%	9%	33%	51%	84%
Having heard of the qualification and knowing it to be high-quality	4%	1%	12%	40%	40%	81%
Knowing there is scope for the learner to build on the qualification through further qualifications	3%	3%	13%	32%	47%	80%
Knowing the qualification included a blend of theory and workplace practice	4%	1%	16%	28%	51%	78%
Knowing the qualification was designed by employers	5%	3%	18%	32%	41%	73%
Knowing the qualification could be delivered flexibly	5%	4%	20%	24%	45%	70%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023: D2: Base all employers (n=292).

The two factors most often considered very important were knowing the qualification to be well-respected in their sector and knowing the qualification to include a blend of theory and workplace practice, each very important for half (51%). Around three-quarters of

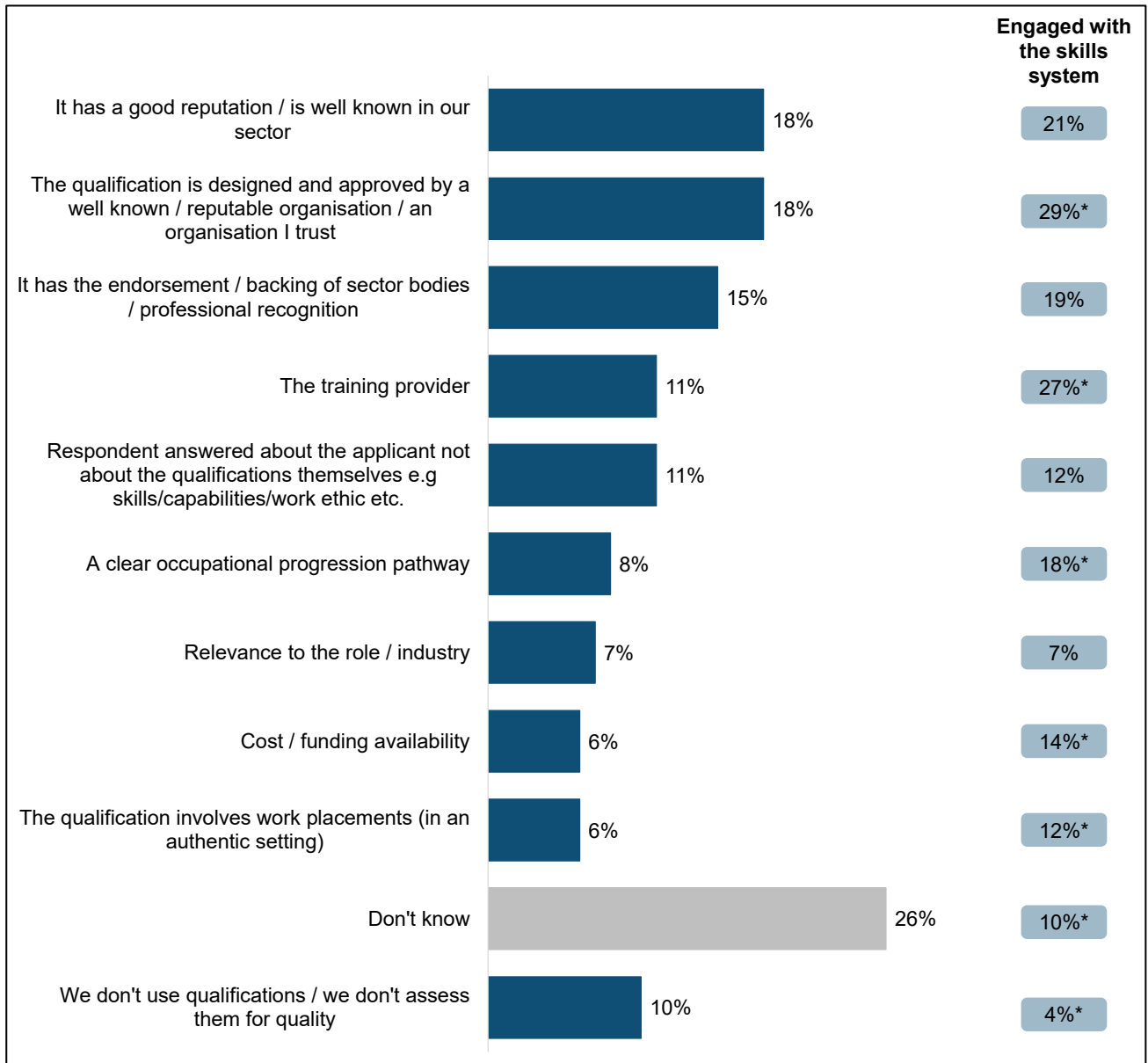
employers felt it important when considering qualifications that they knew these had been designed by employers (this was important for 73%, and very important for 41%).

Employers engaged with the skills system were more likely than those not engaged to consider each factor important. The differences were all statistically significant with the exception of knowing the qualification to be well-respected in their sector.

Large employers also rated each factor more important than SMEs: the difference was most marked for having heard of the qualification and knowing it to be high-quality (important for 98% of large employers vs 81% among SMEs; 58% of large employers thought this factor very important).

When employers were asked what general markers of quality they look for when selecting an apprenticeship, T level and other vocational qualifications, the most common markers of quality were knowing that the qualification had a good reputation and is well known in the sector (18%), that it is designed and approved by a well-known, reputable organisation (18%) and it has the endorsement of sector bodies or has professional recognitions (15%). Some gave responses that related to the quality of the candidate (11%) or the training provider delivering the qualification (11%).

Figure 4.5. General markers of quality that employers use



	Percentage of employers that use the marker	Percentage of employers who engaged with the skills system that use the marker
It has a good reputation / is well known in our sector	18%	21%
The qualification is designed and approved by a well known / reputable organisation / an organisation I trust	18%	29%*
It has the endorsement / backing of sector bodies / professional recognition	15%	19%
The training provider	11%	27%*
Respondent answered about the applicant not about the qualifications themselves e.g., skills/capabilities/work ethic, etc.	11%	12%
A clear occupational progression pathway	8%	18%*
Relevance to the role / industry	7%	7%
Cost / funding availability	6%	14%*
The qualification involves work placements (in an authentic setting)	6%	12%*
Don't know	26%	10%*
We don't use qualifications / we don't assess them for quality	10%	4%*

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. D6: Base all (n=292), Engaged with the skills system (n=146). Responses selected by <6% not shown. *Indicates where figures are statistically significantly different between those who engaged with the skills system compared with all respondents.

Large employers were more likely than SMEs to see the following as indicative of qualification quality:

- That they were endorsed by sector bodies or had professional recognition (30% vs 15% among SMEs)
- That they involved work placements in an authentic setting (19% vs 6% among SMEs)
- The assessment method (19% vs 5% among SMEs)
- It led to licence to practise, or you need it to work in the sector (13% vs 3% among SMEs).

As shown in Figure 4.5 above, employers who were engaged with the skills system were more likely than average to mention many of the elements as markers of quality, for example the qualification being designed and approved by a well-known, reputable organisation (29%), the training provider delivering the qualification (27%) and a clear occupational progression pathway (18%).

Employers who had some or good knowledge of IfATE (who were more likely than average to be engaged with the skills system) were also more likely than average to rate more than one element as an indicator of qualification quality, including that they were endorsed or professionally recognised (45%), the qualification having a clear occupational progression pathway (33%), qualifications having a good reputation and being well known in the sector (30%), and the assessment method they use (27%).

5. Perception of the quality of vocational and technical qualifications

This chapter explores employer perceptions of the quality of vocational and technical qualifications. The first section examines confidence in the quality of apprenticeships, HTQs and T Levels. The second section looks at what is important to employers when assessing whether qualifications will lead to suitably qualified employees. It then explores whether awareness of employers being involved in the design of qualifications leads to more positive perceptions of quality. Finally, it outlines the impact that various other factors may have on increasing confidence in the quality of the qualifications.

Confidence in quality of qualifications

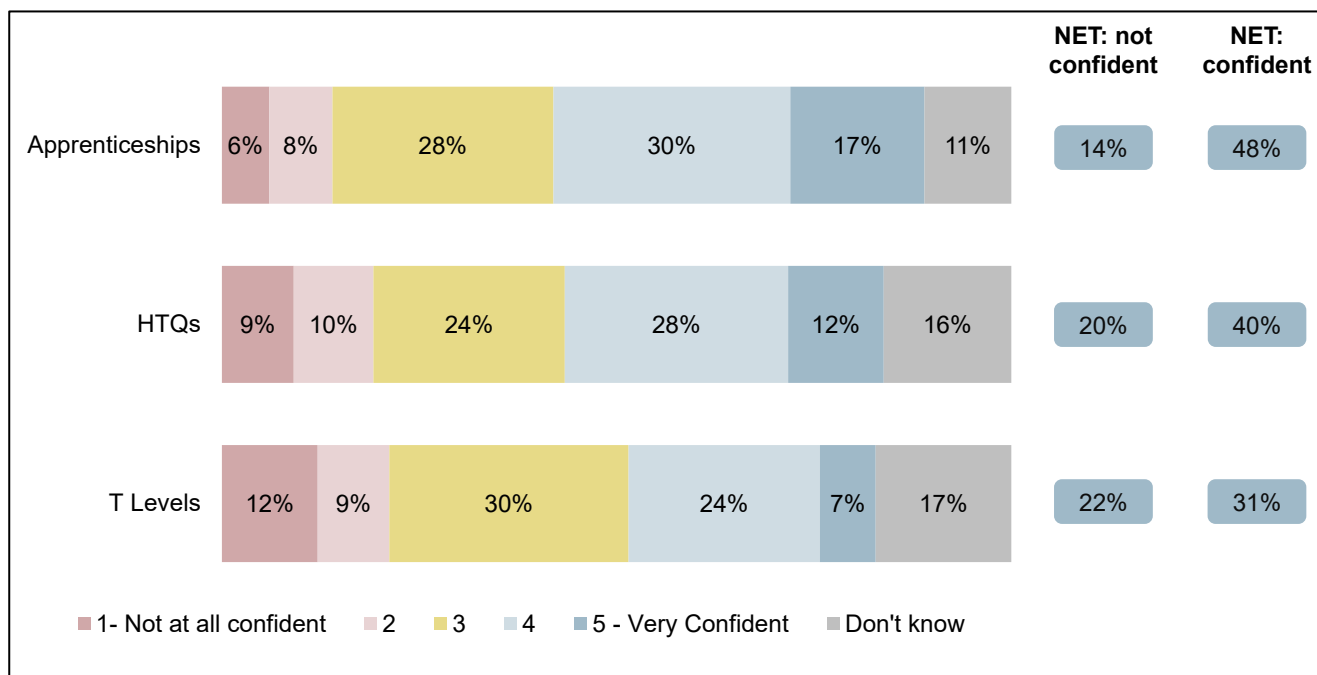
Employers were asked to rate their confidence in the quality of different qualifications, using a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning not at all confident and 5 meaning very confident. Quality was defined by how well they thought each training programme would prepare learners with the skills and knowledge needed for the job.

The following descriptions were given to employers:

- An apprenticeship is a paid job where the employee undertakes on-the-job training and spends at least 20% of their working hours completing classroom-based learning which leads to a nationally recognised qualification
- A T Level is a national recognised qualification for 16 to 19-year-olds that takes two years to complete and is roughly equal to three A-levels. It is compulsory for students to undertake an industry placement lasting at least 45 days to achieve the qualification
- Higher Technical Qualifications, or HTQs, are specialist technical courses based on standards developed by employers. They are offered at Level 4 and 5, which refer to the level of difficulty contained within the qualification.

Results are summarised in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1. Employer confidence in the quality of qualifications



	1- Not at all confident	2	3	4	5 - Very Confident	Don't know	Net: not confident	Net: confident
Apprenticeships	6%	8%	28%	30%	17%	11%	14%	48%
HTQs	9%	10%	24%	28%	12%	16%	20%	40%
T Levels	12%	9%	30%	24%	7%	17%	22%	31%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. B1, B2 and B3: Base all employers (n=292).

For all three qualifications more employers were confident in their quality than were not. This difference was most marked for apprenticeships (48% of employers confident vs 14% not), followed by HTQs (40% confident vs 20% not), whereas for T levels the picture was more balanced (31% were confident in their quality compared with 22% not confident).

Confidence in the quality of apprenticeships was higher among those engaged in the skills system (60% vs 42% of those not engaged; among both groups the proportion not confident was similar (15% and 13% respectively)). This was not the case for HTQs or T levels where confidence was similar between those engaged in the system and those not.

Large employers were more confident in the quality of apprenticeships than SMEs (85% vs 47%). Similarly, for HTQs large employers were more positive than SMEs (51% confident and 9% not, compared with 40% confident and 20% not among SMEs). In this context it was interesting that slightly more large employers were not confident about T levels (24% vs 19% confident), and that confidence was lower than found among SMEs (among whom slightly more were confident (31%) than not (22%)).

Those aware of each qualification before the interview were more confident in their quality: 49% of those aware of HTQs, 48% of those aware of apprenticeships and 40% aware of T levels were confident, compared to 29%, 27% and 25% respectively of those not aware of each.

There was no clear correlation, however, between knowing that a qualification had employers involved in its design and having increased confidence in it. As shown in Table 3, awareness of this appeared to improve confidence in HTQs, make no difference for apprenticeships, and if anything lower confidence for T levels (for T levels almost half (46%) of those aware of employer involvement said they were neither confident nor not).

Table 4. Confidence in the quality of qualification by those aware that employers had been involved in their design

	Aware that employers involved in the design of the qualification	Aware of the qualification but not aware of employer involvement in the design
Base	68	96
HTQs		
Confident	63%	44%
Not confident	11%	18%
Base	146	103

Apprenticeships		
Confident	49%	45%
Not confident	11%	14%
Base	53	78
T levels		
Confident	24%	47%
Not confident	5%	18%

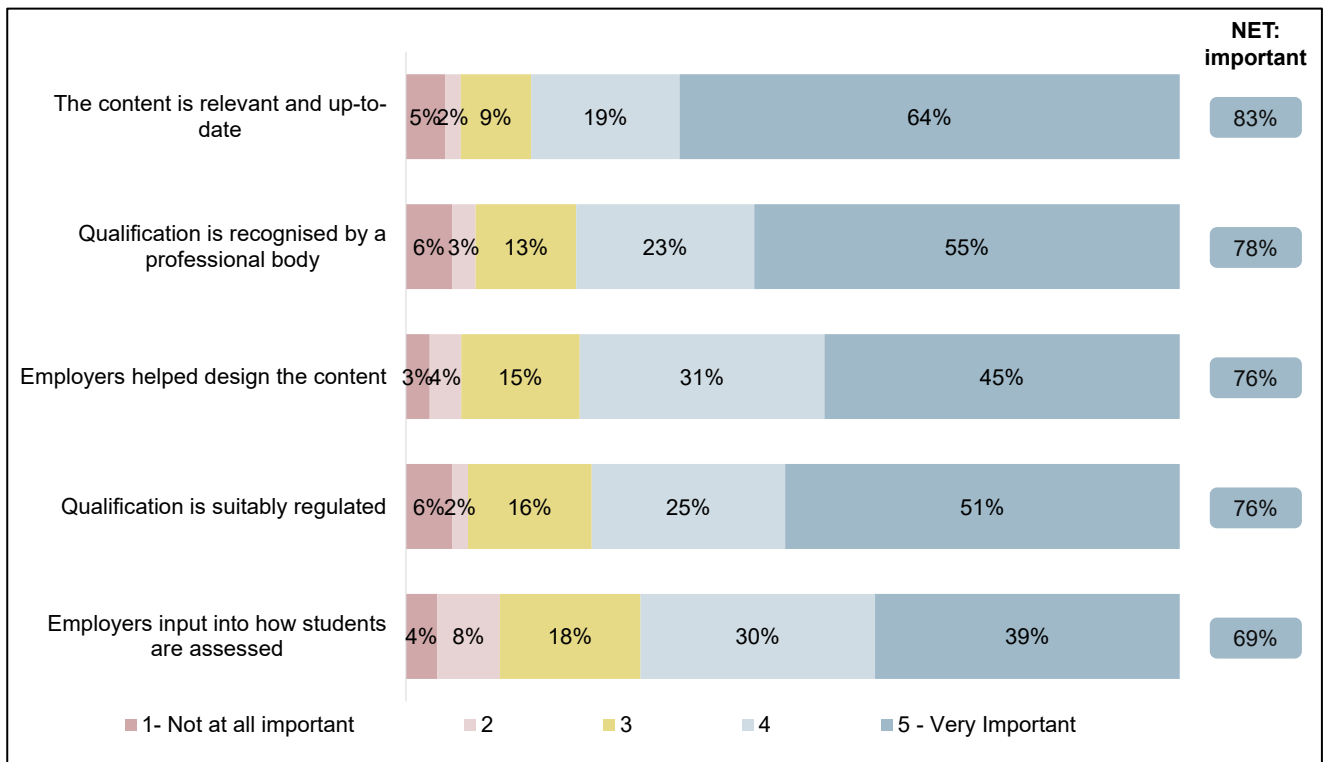
What is important when assessing whether qualifications will lead to a suitably qualified employee

Employers were asked to rate how important a range of features were to them when assessing whether a qualification will lead to a suitably qualified employee, on a scale of 1-5, where 1 meant not important at all and 5 meant very important.

Employers were most likely to rate course content being relevant and up-to-date for the needs of their sector as important (83%). Around three-quarter rated each of the following important: professional body or regulator recognition (78%), employers having helped design the content (76%) and the qualification being suitably regulated (76%). As shown by Figure 5.2, relatively least important was employers in their sector having had an input into the way students were assessed (69% rated this as important).

Relatively few employers considered each factor unimportant: this was highest for employers in their sector having had an input into the way students were assessed (12%); for the other factors 7%-9% felt each were unimportant.

Figure 5.2. The importance of certain features to employers when assessing whether a qualification will lead to a suitably qualified employee

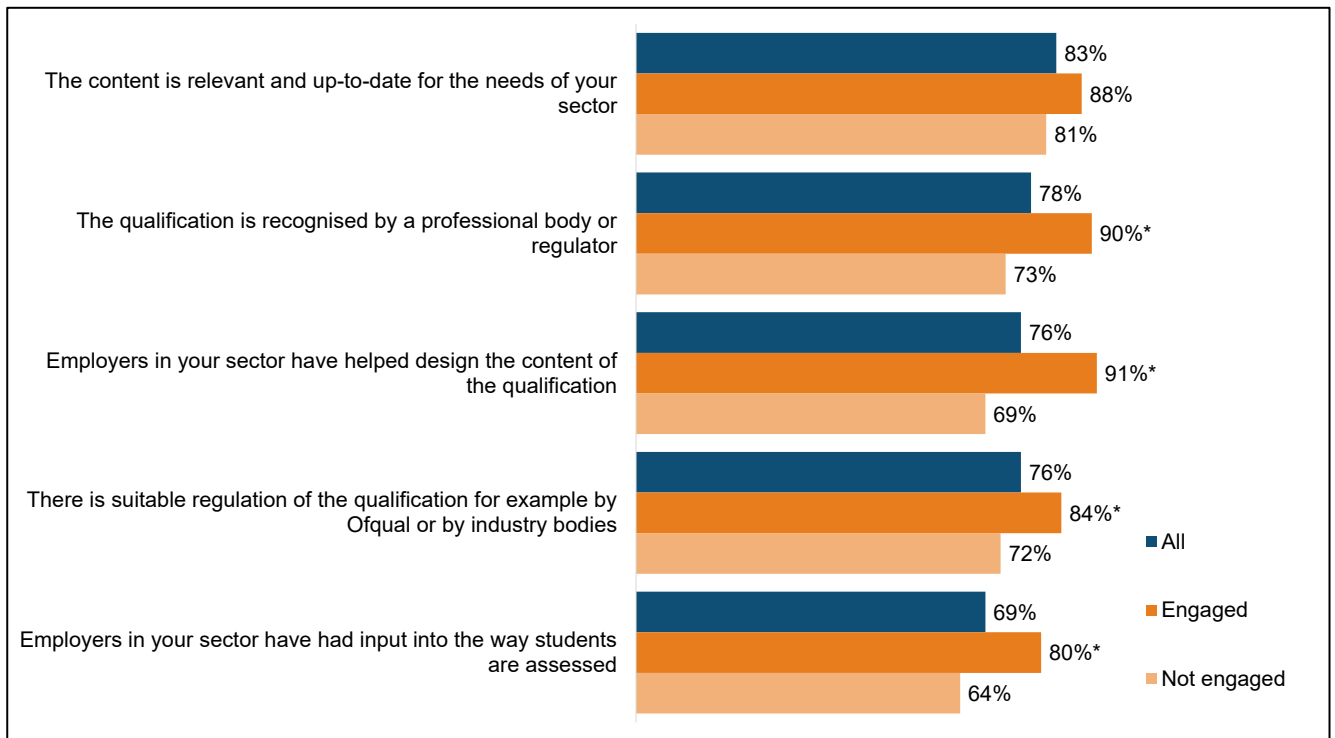


	1- Not at all important	2	3	4	5 - Very Important	Net: important
The content is relevant and up-to-date	5%	2%	9%	19%	64%	83%
Qualification is recognised by a professional body	6%	3%	13%	23%	55%	78%
Employers helped design the content	3%	4%	15%	31%	45%	76%
Qualification is suitably regulated	6%	2%	16%	25%	51%	76%
Employers input into how students are assessed	4%	8%	18%	30%	39%	69%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. C4: Base all (n=292). 'Don't know' responses not charted (in each case <2%).

As shown below by Figure 5.3, those engaged with the skills system were more likely to feel all the features discussed were important than those not engaged in the skills system. In particular, 91% of those engaged in the skills system felt that having employers in the sector design course content was important, compared with 69% who were not engaged.

Figure 5.3. Proportion of employers who thought each feature is important when assessing whether a qualification will lead to a suitably qualified employee, by engagement in the skills system



	All	Engaged	Not engaged
The content is relevant and up-to-date for the needs of your sector	83%	88%	81%
The qualification is recognised by a professional body or regulator	78%	90%*	73%
Employers in your sector have helped design the content of the qualification	76%	91%*	69%
There is suitable regulation of the qualification for example by Ofqual or by industry bodies	76%	84%*	72%
Employers in your sector have had input into the way students are assessed	69%	80%*	64%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. C4: Base all (n=292), engaged in skills system (n=146), not engaged in skills system (n=146). *Indicates where figures are statistically significant compared to businesses not engaged in the skills system

There was some difference in whether employers thought a feature was important by employer size. Large employers were more likely than SMEs to think a qualification being recognised by a professional body or regulator was important (98% vs 78% among SMEs), that the content is relevant and up-to-date for the sector (98% vs 83%) and whether there is suitable regulation of the qualification (91% vs 76% among SMEs).

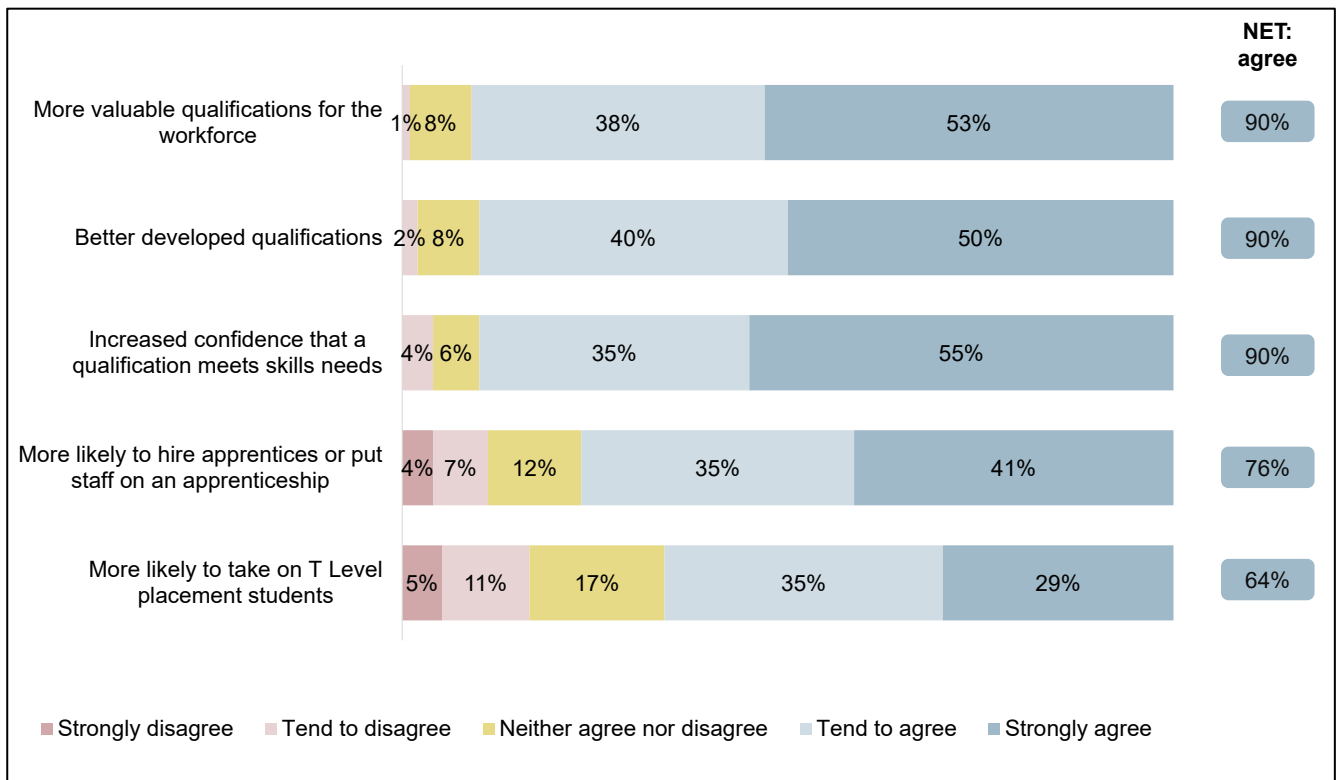
Employers who had heard of IfATE were more likely than average to think that it was very important for employers to have helped design the content of qualifications (57% vs 41% of those not aware) and for content to be relevant and up to date (75% vs 60% among those not aware of IfATE). Similarly those with some or good knowledge of IfATE were more likely than average to think that it was important that employers in the sector had an input into the way students were assessed (83%) and that employers help design the content of the qualifications (92%).

Views on the impact of employer involvement in the design of qualifications

Employers were asked to what extent they agreed that employer involvement in the design of qualifications leads to a range of positive outcomes. As shown by Figure 5.4,

employers were most likely to believe that employer involvement leads to more valuable qualifications for the workforce (90%), better developed qualifications (90%) and increased confidence that qualifications meet skills needs (90%). Relative to these very high levels, fewer, though still the majority, agreed that employer involvement would lead to their organisation being more likely to take on apprentices (76%) or T Level placement students (64%).

Figure 5.4. Whether employers agree that employer involvement in the design of qualifications leads to positive outcomes



	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree	Net: agree
More valuable qualifications for the workforce	0%	1%	8%	38%	53%	90%
Better developed qualifications	0%	2%	8%	40%	50%	90%
Increased confidence that a qualification meets skills needs	0%	4%	6%	35%	55%	90%
More likely to hire apprentices or put staff on an apprenticeship	4%	7%	12%	35%	41%	76%
More likely to take on T Level placement students	5%	11%	17%	35%	29%	64%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. C3: Base all (n=292). 'Don't know' responses not charted.

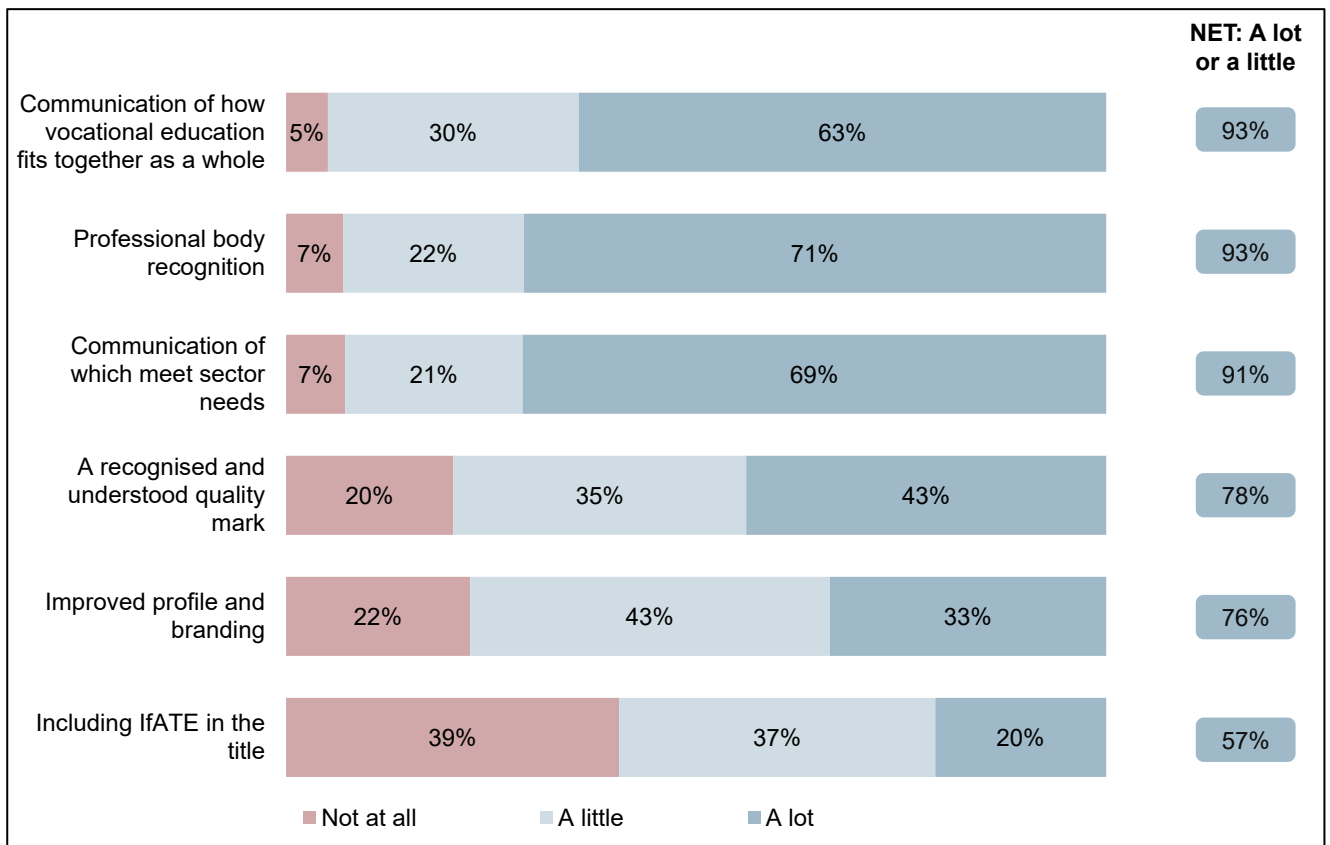
In most cases there was no difference in employer views by size. However, SMEs were more likely to agree that employer involvement in the design of qualification would lead to their organisation being more likely to take on T Level placement students than large employers (64% vs 46%).

Some differences existed by sector. Employers in the Professional Services sector were less likely to agree that employer involvement in the design of qualifications leads to more valuable qualifications for the workforce (81% vs 90% among all employers). Those in the Construction sector were more likely to agree than average that employer involvement in the design of qualifications leads to better developed qualifications (100% vs 90% among all employers).

What would increase confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications

Employers were asked whether a range of features (listed in Figure 5.5) would increase their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications a lot, a little or not at all.

Figure 5.5. Whether employers thought certain features would increase their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications



	Not at all	A little	A lot	Net: a lot or a little
Communication of how vocational education fits together as a whole	5%	30%	63%	93%
Professional body recognition	7%	22%	71%	93%
Communication of which meet sector needs	7%	21%	69%	91%
A recognised and understood quality mark	20%	35%	43%	78%
Improved profile and branding	22%	43%	33%	76%
Including IfATE in the title	39%	37%	20%	57%

Source: Employer perceptions of quality survey 2023. D7: Base all (n=292). 'Don't know' responses not charted.

A majority felt that each of the features discussed would improve their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications, with this particularly the case for better communication of how vocational education fits together as a whole (93%), professional body recognition (93%) and better communication of which qualifications meet particular sector needs (91%).

Around three-quarters said their confidence in the quality of vocational qualifications would increase with a recognised and understood quality mark such as the British Kite Mark (78%, rising to 91% of large employers) and improved profile and branding (76%).

Approaching three-fifths (57%) felt that including IfATE in the title would increase their confidence in the quality of qualifications, rising to seven in ten (71%) among those with some or good knowledge of IfATE.

Those operating in the Construction sector were more likely than average to be reassured about vocational qualifications if they had a recognised quality mark (95%), had IfATE in the title (92%) and improved the profile and branding of vocational qualifications (93%).

6. Conclusion

Awareness and perceptions of the quality of vocational and technical qualifications

Awareness of the current vocational and technical qualifications system was mixed. While most employers (around two-thirds) felt they understood how vocational qualifications at different levels build on each other, and which qualifications would best suit their business needs, only around half felt they understood the current vocational educational system or understood which vocational qualification offered better knowledge skills and/or workplace behaviours (around a quarter felt they did not understand these aspects).

Large employers and those engaged in the skills system were more likely to have a good awareness and understanding of the vocational and technical qualifications system and were more likely to have used a range of sources of information to find out about qualifications relevant to their business.

Confidence in the quality of vocational and technical qualifications (apprenticeships, T levels and HTQs) was also quite variable. While for all three qualifications more employers were confident in their quality than were not, still a minority were confident in each. Fewer than a quarter lacked confidence in apprenticeships, T levels or HTQs, but many employers did not have a view one way or the other or felt unable to comment. Those aware of each qualification were more likely to trust in its quality, but even amongst the 'aware' group it was still a minority that were confident in the quality.

This could be underpinned by a lack of knowledge among employers around what to look for when assessing the quality and suitability of qualifications. The most commonly reported barrier to navigating the qualifications market was that it is difficult to understand which qualification is the most relevant or up-to-date for the business (despite this being reported as the most important factor in determining whether a qualification would lead to a suitably qualified employee) and around a quarter of employers did not know what general markers of quality to look for.

Awareness that employers are involved in the design of vocational qualifications and the impact of this on perceptions of quality

Only just over half of employers aware of apprenticeships knew that employers had been involved in their design; this fell to around a third for HTQs and a quarter for T levels.

Findings suggest more should be done to make organisations aware of employer involvement in the design of qualifications: around three-quarters of employers felt that knowing a qualification was designed by employers is an important factor when considering qualifications that potential applicants may have or which might be suitable for training existing or new employees (and two-fifths described this as very important). A similar proportion also felt that employer involvement in the design of content was an important factor to consider when assessing whether a qualification would lead to a suitably qualified employee (broadly similar to the proportion saying qualifications being recognised by a professional body or regulator, the content being relevant and up-to-date, and the qualification being suitably regulated were important considerations). Employer involvement in design was seen as a more trusted marker of quality than employer involvement in how learners are assessed.

The vast majority of employers felt that employer involvement in the design of qualifications would lead to a range of positive outcomes, particularly more valuable and better designed qualifications and increased confidence that the qualifications would meet skills need. The majority also reported that knowing employers had been involved in the design of the qualification would make them more likely hire apprentices or take on T level placements.

Awareness of IfATE and the impact of this of IfATE endorsement on perceptions of quality

Just under a quarter of employers had previously heard of IfATE, but only a small minority (3%) felt they had good understanding of the work that IfATE does. The IfATE website was not a commonly used source of information by employers, who were much more likely to use their local training provider or other government websites for information about relevant qualifications.

Despite low levels of awareness of IfATE prior to the survey, almost three-fifths of employers felt that including IfATE in the title of vocational qualifications would increase their confidence in their quality. However, employers were much more likely to view professional body recognition as a marker of quality.

The 10% of employers with some or good knowledge of IfATE were much more likely to feel that IfATE endorsement would increase their perception of quality. This suggests that IfATE were trusted amongst employers that know the organisation, and that the impact of IfATE endorsement would be much enhanced with a greater knowledge amongst employers about the work that IfATE does.

Appendix A: Technical Annex

As outlined in the methodology section of the main report, all fieldwork took place from 27 February to 13 March 2023. There were two strands to the research:

- An online survey of employers with whom IfATE has high levels of engagement with (e.g. they sit on various IfATE panels). Throughout the technical annex this group is referred to as “IfATE engaged employers”.
- A telephone survey of 275 employers. The sample for this element was drawn from Market Location’s employer database. Throughout the technical annex this group is referred to as “non-engaged’ employers”.

This technical annex covers both strands of the research and provides further detail on the sampling approach, response rate and maximum standard error.

Sampling

IfATE engaged employers

A total of 95 employers that IfATE had existing contact with, for example because they sat on an IfATE panel, were invited to take part in the online element of the study.

Non-engaged employers

Sample for the telephone survey was purchased from Market Location’s employer database.³ A total of 3,979 business records were sourced, representing a 16:1 ratio to the target number of interviews.⁴ The sample was at organisation/head office level rather than site level, so branches of the same organisation were not sampled.

The sample drawn was of England in England and excluded sole traders with no employees.

Screening questions in the survey script checked that employers operated in England and had employees in addition to any owners and partners. A total of 68 screened out at these questions. These ‘out of scope’ records are not included in response rate calculations and are excluded from Table 6 below.

³ This is a commercially available database of UK businesses, similar to Dun and Bradstreet or Experian. Market Location is the market leading database of UK businesses, using AI and its own call centre to keep contacts up to date. There is likely to be a bias within the database of very new businesses, due to the processes of capturing details, however it is likely that these businesses would not be in scope for this research.

⁴ The initial target for telephone interviewing was 250 completes. An additional 25 interviews were carried out to make up for the low online response rate.

Table 5. Original targets for telephone fieldwork (sector by number of employees)

Sector	1-249 emps.	250+ emps.	Total
Agriculture, mining and utilities	9	6	15
Manufacturing	12	6	18
Construction	27	6	33
Wholesale, retail and transportation	42	6	48
Accommodation and food	19	5	24
Information, communication, financial and real estate	22	5	27
Professional services	27	4	31
Administration	18	4	22
Education and health	11	4	15
Arts and other	13	4	17
Total	200	50	250

Response rate

IfATE engaged employers (online)

Following an initial invite email and one reminder email, a total of 17 employers completed the online survey from. This represents a total response rate of 18%.

Non-engaged employers (telephone)

The survey response rate is shown in the following table amongst all eligible sample (7%) and among sample where a definite outcome had been reached (36%).

Table 6. Call outcomes for eligible sample

Call outcomes	Number of records	Percentage of total eligible sample	Percentage of calls with definite outcome
Completed interviews	275	7%	36%
Refused / opt out	214	5%	28%
Number unobtainable	144	4%	19%
Not available during interviewing period	125	3%	16%
Active records at close (Records where a definitive call outcome had not been reached at the end of fieldwork period)	2,975	76%	-
Over quota (records removed as target quota reached)	178	5%	-
Total	3,911	100%	100%

Weighting

All data was weighted by region, size and sector, using BEIS Business Population Estimates 2022,⁵ the latest available data at the time of survey. Weighting was applied using the Random Iterative Method (RIM), and population targets were not interlocking. Details on the unweighted and weighted profile of respondents can be found in Table 1 – Unweighted and weighted sample profile.

Maximum standard error

Across both the online and telephone fieldwork, a total of 292 interviews were conducted. Given this sample size in this survey, statistically we can be 95% confident that for a survey finding of 50% based on all respondents, the ‘true’ value (if all employers in England had taken part rather than a sample of 292) lies with a +/- 5.7% range (i.e. 44.3% - 55.7%). Results based on a sub-set of employers interviewed are subject to a wider margin of error. A breakdown of achieved interviews by business size and

⁵ [Business population estimates 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/business-population-estimates-2022)

'engagement in the skills system' (two commonly reported subgroups) can be found in Tables 7 and 8, with the corresponding maximum standard error for each subgroup. Standard error is shown based on the 'worst case scenario' of a response of 50%, at the 95% confidence level.

Table 7. Achieved sample profile and maximum standard error for a survey result of 50% by size

Business size	Achieved number of interviews	Maximum standard error
1-9 employees	115	+/- 9.1
10-49 employees	76	+/- 11.2
50-249 employees	48	+/- 14.1
250+ employees	53	+/- 13.5
NET: SME	239	+/- 6.3

Table 8. Achieved sample profile and maximum sample error for a survey result of 50% by engagement in the skills system

Engagement with the skills system	Achieved number of interviews	Maximum standard error
Engaged with the skills system	146	+/- 8.1
Not engaged in the skills system	146	+/- 8.1