



# A Simpler Skills System

June 2023



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## 1. FOREWORD

In 2017, the government set up the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). Our mission was to transform and improve the skills system by putting employers at its heart. Since then, we have come a long way. Our Strategic Plan 2021-2024 commits us to building a more integrated skills system – a simpler skills system – that follows the lead of employers and makes it easier for people from all backgrounds to maximise their potential.

In partnership with thousands of small and large employers, we have now developed over 670 occupational standards. These define the learning outcomes for apprenticeships and technical qualifications. There is an increasing range of skills provision aligned to those standards. This helps ensure the skills learned are those that employers and the economy need.

I am proud that, led by employers we have approved more than 670 apprenticeships. We have approved over 100 higher technical qualifications and 18 T Levels. There are currently more than 630,000 apprentices learning and working with businesses of all shapes and sizes across the country, and around 15,000 T Level students.

We are transforming the quality of technical education. All apprentices now have to spend at least 20 per cent of their time training off the job. A single end-point assessment tests whether an apprentice has developed the competence to do a skilled job. Apprenticeships and technical qualifications now cover a broad range of skills levels. This means a better spread of opportunities for learners to progress their careers from entry level and reskill through their lives.

Our work to raise the bar has been achieved by placing employers at the heart of the skills system. Employers know best the skills they need now and for the future. This helps to give every business and individual the skills they need to succeed.

But we are not doing this alone. As well as employers and learners, we work alongside many partners in the skills system: education providers, awarding bodies, regulators, professional bodies, government departments, researchers and innovators. Each of us plays a critical part to realise our collective ambition.

As a country we face vital challenges. These include climate change, technological advancement, and the drive for regional and national growth. But alongside these challenges come opportunities for individuals to transform their lives through access to new skills and jobs, and to drive increased productivity with the benefit of economic growth and a ladder of opportunity felt equitably across our regions.

Technical education has such transformative power to change lives. It opens up opportunities and new ways of thinking and working. When I meet employers, I can see and feel the impact. When I hear learners share their experiences I am filled with pride. Pride at their care and commitment to helping others as they begin their careers as nurses and care workers. Pride in their passion and resolve to tackle climate change through modern methods of construction or renewable energy solutions.

Like those learners, we at IfATE are on a journey. Alongside our partners, we've been working to transform the skills system over the last six years with so much achieved already. But transformation takes time. The pride we feel when we see the impact of technical education is also a responsibility, and one that requires long term commitment.

This report reflects on the distance travelled so far and on what we've achieved. Importantly, it gave us space to listen to employers, learners, and others. By doing so we can better understand and shape our destination and the route we take to get there.

Here in this report, we share with you what we've heard and the insight gained. We set out our response along with the actions we will take on the next stage of our journey. We are building a simpler skills system. One that is flexible, future-facing, and easy-to-navigate – a skills system we can be proud of.

### **Jennifer Coupland**

Chief Executive





## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Skills are essential to our future success as a society, as an economy, and as individuals. Employers need a skilled workforce, fit for the future and ready to help businesses grow and provide career opportunities. We are building a simpler skills system that delivers on the ambition of the government's [Skills for Jobs white paper](#), published in 2021, to amplify the role of technical education. This will support people to develop the skills needed to get good jobs, improve national productivity, and see our businesses competing with the world's best. This is a system to be proud of. It is one that anticipates and supplies the skills required by a modern workforce and creates routes to sustainable, skilled employment, improving productivity, driving innovation, and providing a ladder of opportunity for all.

**“You are a better employer if you support growth in your employees.”**

(Training Provider)

IfATE supports employers to develop the occupational standards that are the building blocks of the skills system, and ensures that apprenticeships and technical qualifications are designed around the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers want and need.

We are the voice of employers in the skills system. In this role, we recently held a Big Conversation. We listened to the views of employers, education providers and learners, amongst others, taking stock of what works for them within the skills system and where they want us to focus further improvements. They told us the benefits of the current skills system, from the range of options available across apprenticeships and technical qualifications, to the value the system brings employers and the way learners can use it to build excellent careers.

**“The diversity of options available is working well. This diversity ensures education can be tailored to meet the needs of all sorts of people.”**

(University)

We also heard about the challenges in using the skills system. Respondents raised issues around awareness and understanding of the system, as well as concerns with complexity and keeping apprenticeships and technical qualifications up to date.

[Our Strategic Plan 2021-2024](#) commits us to building a more integrated skills system – a simpler skills system – that follows the lead of employers and makes it easier for people from all backgrounds to maximise their potential. This report uses the insights gained to set out how we will deliver a simpler skills system. It sets out three guiding principles for how to get there, and a clear set of actions for IfATE.

**The guiding principles recognise that employers and learners want:**

- **A skills system that delivers what employers need now and for the future**
- **A skills system that is clear and user-friendly**
- **A skills system that is joined up**

This report is just the first step in our plan to improve the skills system. We have committed to take forward a range of actions over the next year. We will publish regular updates on our progress and next steps on the IfATE website.





## A skills system that delivers what employers need now and for the future

### We will:

- **Ensure our occupational standards, apprenticeships and technical qualifications meet employers' current and future skills needs** by using big data to rapidly identify where change is needed to support the economy, streamline the way we work with employers to develop occupational standards, and prioritise reviews of those standards where change is most needed.

**This year** we will review standards in occupations identified as high priority where updates are needed to support emerging skills, so that more people secure the skills they need to be successful in a future economy and we will take a future-facing view to skills need as we develop and update occupational standards.

- **Provide employers with flexibility to develop their future workforce** by supporting different types of training linked to occupational standards and working on the ways technical qualifications can be combined, creating learner journeys that meet a wide range of employer and learner needs.

**This year** we will start to approve level 3 qualifications which can offer the potential to 'top up' existing skills quickly with specialist learning. We will build flexibility into our approval processes to support the development of specialist qualifications and qualifications not currently within occupational standards.

We will build on the flexibilities that are being proposed through the Lifelong Loan Entitlement. We will explore how other provision, like Skills Bootcamps, can be used to respond quickly to emerging skills needs and provide flexible pathways to apprenticeships, for example through the Skills Bootcamp pathway to accelerated apprenticeships.

- **Set out a data-driven approach to monitoring the quality, relevance, and impact of apprenticeships and technical qualifications.**

**This year** we will publish an oversight strategy to set out how we will review the apprenticeships and technical qualifications within our remit to make sure they are working for employers and learners. We will consider the overall coherence of technical education provision within the system to ensure that the range of apprenticeships, qualifications and other technical education is appropriate.

## A skills system that is clear and user-friendly

### We will:

- **Ensure that everyone, from school leavers to employers, has access to the same, high quality, accessible information they need regardless of where they search** by making our occupational maps data freely available to partners.
- **Build greater awareness, trust and confidence in apprenticeships and technical qualifications** by establishing how we can best communicate employer involvement in their design and approval.

**This year** we will build on the success of our partnership with the Department for Education and UCAS to create a simple, easy-to-navigate journey through technical education. We will communicate with more partners, including careers guidance bodies, demonstrating the benefit of using our occupational maps data and working with them to embed it.

- **Transform the way users can access information about apprenticeships and technical qualifications and understand the future value to their career journey or workforce** through our agile, user-centred occupational maps.

**This year** we will launch our occupational maps service. We intend to transform the way in which users can stay informed about apprenticeships and technical qualifications through enhanced functionality and a user-centric design. Users of the maps will be able to access information on green occupations, progression options between occupations and much more.

**This year** we will build on our existing research on employer perceptions of apprenticeships and technical qualifications to identify the options to signal employer involvement in design, and whether a quality mark could play a role.

- **Make the strong case for the boost in productivity employers gain when they offer more skills training** for their existing workforce and future skills pipeline.

**This year** we will encourage consideration of environmental, social and governance reporting on apprenticeships and training offered by employers, to boost availability of apprenticeship and technical qualification opportunities.



## A skills system that is joined up

### We will:

- **Drive improvements in outcomes for technical education**, by working with our regulatory partners to share intelligence and agree actions that can improve quality across the skills system, with each partner having a clear role to play.
- **Create a seamless, relevant learning experience for technical education learners** by working with partners across technical education to ensure all qualifications and assessment are aligned.

**This year** we will use our oversight strategy to describe how we work with other organisations and regulators to strengthen quality across the skills system.

- **Ensure our apprenticeships and technical qualifications support future local labour market requirements** by working closely with local partners.

**This year** we will continue to build relationships with local partners and establish a method for incorporating locally-specific labour data into the approval process for new or reviewed occupational standards.

**This year** we will focus on rolling out changes to our policy on mandatory qualifications and integrated end-point assessments, to ensure that those taking apprenticeships secure qualifications key to their career success and are incentivised to complete their apprenticeships.





### 3. INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the government published 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth' (the Skills for Jobs paper). This policy paper focused on improving further education for learners aged 16 and over. It committed to continue reforms to technical education between levels 2 and 7 (equivalent to GCSE up to masters degree in scope). It set out a clear ambition to support people to get the skills needed to progress in their careers and to boost our economy.

#### Progress

The Skills for Jobs paper committed to put employers at the heart of the skills system. This would mean education and training would be more closely linked, filling skills gaps and addressing employer needs.

The skills system in England covers apprenticeships, technical qualifications and other courses relating to skilled occupations. The focus of this report is on government-funded technical education. Privately-funded training also plays a role in the skills system, but is not in scope of this report.

The skills system provides what employers need to build and develop their future workforce. It also provides what learners need to succeed throughout their careers. This can be when beginning working life, retraining, or upskilling in response to changing technologies. Technical education can also open doors to other forms of education, including university. The system covers occupation-specific skills alongside other broader skills, such as problem-solving and communication.

Apprenticeships and technical education are key to achieving this. They are excellent and aspirational ways for learners to gain skills throughout their lives and for employers to access the skills they need to build their workforce. Work is now well underway to deliver the roadmap set out in the Skills for Jobs paper and in line with this roadmap, we have a key role to make the skills system simpler to use.

To date, we have worked with thousands of employers to help them define the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to be competent in skilled occupations. These are set out in more than 670 occupational standards. The standards underpin apprenticeships and, increasingly, the content of technical qualifications.

The apprenticeship offer in England has been significantly improved. All apprentices now spend at least 20 per cent of their time training off the job. Apprentices must also now complete an end-point assessment. This is taken at the end of an apprenticeship to confirm the apprentice has become competent in their occupation. In the academic year 2021-22, **there were more than 740,000 apprentices in England.**

### Case study:

#### Estelle Le Galliot

Chartered Manager Health and Social Care Degree Apprentice  
Macmillan/St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

**"As a single parent, the opportunity to pursue an apprenticeship was exactly what I needed.** Retraining is challenging for parents due to time and financial constraints but taking on a degree apprenticeship allowed me to invest in myself as an individual without the crippling student debt.

"Realising I needed a degree to advance my career, the Chartered Manager Health and Social Care Degree Apprenticeship provided me with all the skills I needed to advance my career. The apprenticeship filled vital knowledge gaps, enabling me to confidently work alongside senior staff. I even took on some of my manager's responsibilities during her maternity leave, demonstrating both personal growth and organisational trust.

"I would encourage anyone to go for an apprenticeship. I hear of the challenges of colleagues who have the experience but don't have the degree and vice versa. With a degree apprenticeship, you get the best of both worlds and it's so valuable for building your career. Apprenticeships remove that ceiling that's there for people who can't access further education and opens opportunities for a more diverse workforce."





Technical qualifications are also being improved. T Levels were introduced in 2020. **There are 16 currently available** with two more being introduced in September 2023. A further six are planned for 2024 and beyond. They are the flagship level 3 technical qualification. Employers have contributed to their design and also offer work experience placements as part of the two-year course. **Over 1,000 students completed a T Level in 2022** and 36 per cent of these were offered a place in higher education. **More than 15,000 learners are currently studying T Levels.**

The government is also improving the system for other technical qualifications, from level 2 to level 5. We have a leading role in approving technical qualifications, ensuring they cover our occupational standards, and only those we approve will qualify for

government funding. Level 4 and 5 IfATE-approved Higher Technical Qualifications are already being rolled out. These will be available in all occupational routes from 2025. We have also started to approve level 2 and 3 technical qualifications. The first of these will be available to study from 2025.

The government is also introducing a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) in 2025. This will provide people with a loan entitlement equivalent to four years of post-18 education. They can use this over their working lives. The loan entitlement will cover modules and courses at higher technical (levels 4 and 5) and degree level (level 6). We will make sure that all technical qualifications that can be paid for using the LLE are lined up with our occupational standards.

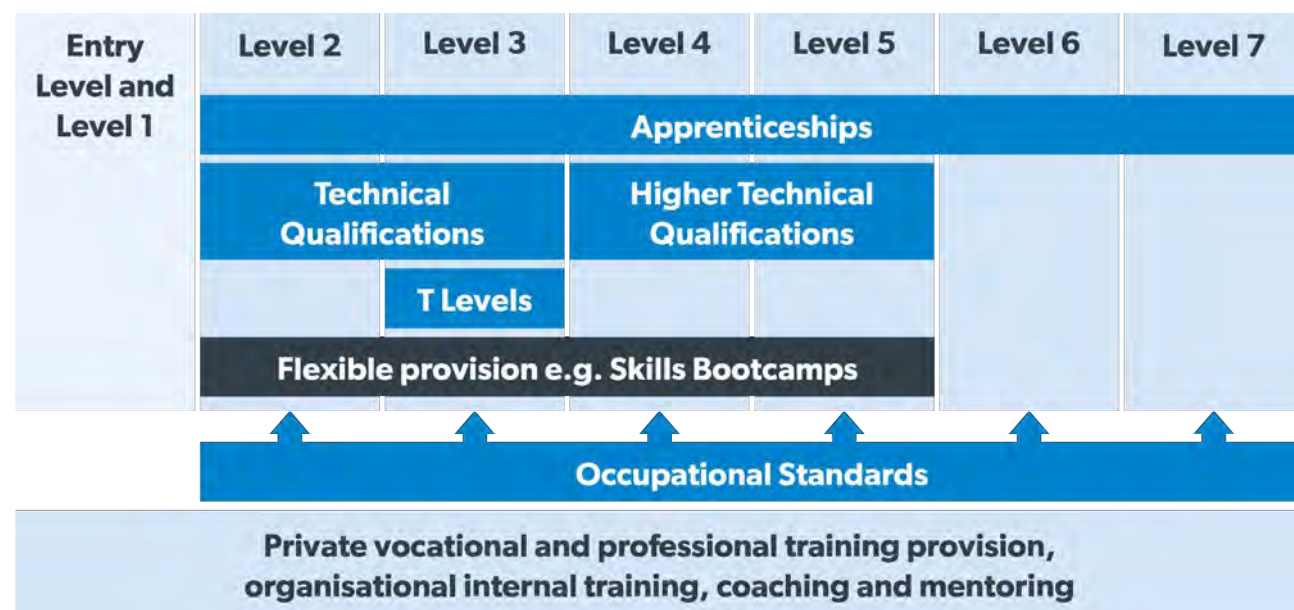
### IfATE’s role in a responsive skills system

As the voice of employers in the skills system, we work with employers of all sizes to approve and maintain occupational standards. Bringing the employer voice into the skills system ensures apprenticeships and technical qualifications provide what employers and the economy need.

We work with trailblazer groups of employers to develop the content of occupational standards. Route panels of employers provide expertise in approving content and strategic direction on how the offer within each route (roughly equivalent to sectors) should develop.

Our occupational standards inform apprenticeships and technical qualifications from level 2 up to level 7. They are also helping to shape other training, including Skills Bootcamps. These are shorter, government-supported courses aimed at building specific skillsets. While entry level and level 1 qualifications can equip learners with broader vocational skills, they do not directly develop technical skills specific to skilled occupations, so are not within our remit.

### The skills system:





Our **occupational maps** provide an accessible way to explore occupational standards. They group the standards against 15 routes across the economy. The maps show the relationships between apprenticeships and technical qualifications developed with employers and occupations. They can help employers, make the connection between technical education and boosting productivity and opportunity. This ambition is at the heart of our work.

**IfATE’s occupational maps show where technical education can lead:**



We are responsible for approving government-funded apprenticeships from levels 2 to 7 and technical qualifications from levels 2 to 5. As well as this, we procure and manage the contracts with awarding organisations for T Levels and provide advice on the maximum funding available for apprenticeships.

Our role is continuing to grow. In line with a new oversight duty recently given to us through legislation, we have begun to develop an approach to keep under review all technical education and training within our remit for the benefit of employers and learners, to ensure there is an appropriate range of training. And we are producing this report in response to our commitment to build a more integrated skills system, acting in our capacity as the voice of employers in the skills system. The report sets out how we plan to do this, with specific commitments for the year ahead. We will continue to build on these commitments in the future.

Multiple partners are key to making the skills system a success and we work closely with others in the system to ensure a coherent approach to securing quality. Our role and our links continue to expand to allow us to continue to meet employer need. For example, we are now working with the **Unit for Future Skills** to better understand the skills employers need and the pathways to developing those skills.





## Taking stock

In our role as the voice of employers in the skills system and to support our commitment to simplify it, we have taken the opportunity to reflect on how the skills system is working and how we can contribute to improving it. Over the past six months we held a 'Big Conversation', speaking with more than 2000 people who work in, use and rely on the skills system. We also commissioned two independent research reports on employer experience. A report of the Big Conversation and the independent research reports are available on our website alongside this report.

We found that employers who use the skills system benefit because it supports them in attracting new talent and helps fill skills gaps. Other benefits noted included increased employee confidence and enhanced career opportunities. These endorsements show that the government's reforms are having an impact.

Many employers also told us they could see the benefit of greater employer involvement in the skills system. The independent research carried out alongside this report revealed that 90% of the nearly 300 employers surveyed believed that employer involvement leads to more valuable qualifications for the workforce.

**"It is vital that all employers (SME, micro etc) are able to engage in the skills debate, they are central to achieving productivity and growth"**

(Trailblazer member & Professional, statutory or regulatory body)

We also heard views that some barriers remain. Lack of awareness and understanding of the skills system were key themes and people do not always know which training on offer is high quality. Other issues included concerns over lack of flexibility in the design and delivery of technical education, the complexity of the system and how to ensure that skills being taught are relevant or up-to-date.

In this report we focus on areas where IfATE can have a direct impact on improving the skills system experience for its users. We have referred all insights from our research that go beyond our remit back to colleagues at the Department for Education to consider.

## Looking forward

What we found through our research underpins our ambitions for delivering on our commitment to build a simpler skills system. It has shaped three guiding principles and a clear set of actions.

**The guiding principles recognise that employers and learners can benefit from a skills system that:**

- **Delivers what employers need now and for the future.** We want to unite employers' insights and learner needs, striking the ideal balance of improvement and stability in the system.
- **Is clear and user-friendly.** We want to promote informed choices about the opportunities and support available to access training for all levels of skilled roles.
- **Is joined up.** Working together, we want to build on the government's reforms to strengthen and simplify the skills system.

We also heard a wide range of views on investment in skills and funding. This included the need to incentivise an increase in the uptake of technical education by maximising the impact of government-funded initiatives and encouraging a cultural change in attitudes to investment in skills. Spending by employers on skills must be viewed as a long-term investment, not a short-term cost. We think IfATE's part to support this cultural shift is best played through delivering on the three principles set out here.







## Case study:

### Jemma Hughes

Firefighter apprentice,  
Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Jemma is in the process of completing a level 3 operational fire fighter apprenticeship at Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service in Liverpool. She is proud to be part of Merseyside which has the second largest number of female firefighters in the country. "It wasn't an easy process, and my fitness and agility were tested throughout," she recalls. "I remember being the only woman on the assessment day."

Jemma made it with 19 others and says no two days are the same. In just one week, Jemma has dealt with grass fires, a car crash and a hotel fire. Getting to work at one of the busiest stations in the area has been a great learning experience and enabled her to get lots of support from other colleagues.

When asked if she would recommend an apprenticeship, Jemma could not be more enthusiastic. She said: **"It's completely changed my life – I only wish I had known about it sooner!"**

She now regularly goes back to schools to speak about her experience as she had never heard of apprenticeships or considered them as an option when she was at school.



## 4. A SKILLS SYSTEM THAT DELIVERS WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

We want to unite employers' insights and learner needs, striking the ideal balance of improvement and stability in the system.

### What needs to improve?

It was clear from our research that people who rely on the skills system need to have confidence that apprenticeships and technical qualifications will provide the skills that employers need.

**“Personally, as an apprentice, it is about the competency. I am learning the things I need to do the job”**  
(Apprentice)

Many respondents spoke about how the right training is already helping them to address skills gaps and future skills needs. Some noted that there is an ongoing challenge to continue to benefit from the way in which occupational standards now underpin and connect apprenticeships and technical education. It is important that standards continue to meet the needs of employers and take account of emerging skills needs.

It was also clear that skills gaps and future skills challenges would only be met if training provision was available in ways that worked for employers and particularly for people already in employment seeking to develop their skills alongside their work. Many raised the flexibility of the skills offer. They suggested that new qualifications may be required and that existing products may need to be adapted or redesigned to meet skills needs.

**“We need these qualifications to be fit for purpose and fit for the future”**  
(Employer and Training Provider)

### Our response

**We will:**

- **Ensure our occupational standards, apprenticeships and technical qualifications meet employers' current and future skills needs** by using big data to rapidly identify where change is needed to support the economy, streamline the way we work with employers to develop occupational standards, and prioritise reviews of those standards where change is most needed.

**This year we will:**

- Review standards in occupations identified as high priority where updates are needed to support emerging skills, including digital and green skills, so that more people secure the skills they need to be successful in a future economy.
- Take a future-facing view to skills needs, in line with our **innovation strategy**.
- Work with partners to foresight emerging skills and occupations, reflecting on insights and data as we develop and update occupational standards, apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

- **Provide employers with flexibility to develop their future workforce** by supporting different types of training linked to occupational standards and working on the ways technical qualifications can be combined, creating learner journeys that meet a wide range of employer and learner needs.

**This year we will:**

- Continue to implement and improve our approach to the approval of technical qualifications at level 3 and below building further flexibility into our processes to support approval of specialist qualifications and qualifications not currently within occupational standards.
- Start to approve level 3 qualifications which can offer the potential to 'top up' existing skills quickly with specialist learning.
- Build on the flexibilities being proposed through the LLE, ensuring technical qualifications within the LLE are aligned with occupational standards and targeted options are available at levels 4 and 5.

- Explore how other provision, like Skills Bootcamps, can be used to respond quickly to emerging skills needs.
- Provide flexible pathways to apprenticeships where Skills Bootcamps are specially designed for participants to move on to an accelerated apprenticeship, which is reduced in duration by at least 3 months (all apprenticeships are required to have a minimum duration of 12 months, even with this reduction).
- **Set out a data-driven approach to monitoring the quality, relevance, and impact of apprenticeships and technical qualifications.**

**This year we will** publish an oversight strategy to set out how we will review the apprenticeships and technical qualifications within our remit to make sure they are working for employers and learners. We will consider the overall coherence of technical education provision within the system to ensure that the range of apprenticeships, qualifications and other technical education is appropriate.



## Impact

With employer-led occupational standards at the heart of apprenticeships and technical qualifications, the skills offer is becoming more coherent and with more time the full effect of the current reforms to technical education will be felt. We have been steadily improving the system to ensure it fully meets employer needs. The commitments we set out above will build on these improvements to deliver a step change in the offer we provide, in direct response to feedback.

In 2022, we introduced route strategies across each of our 15 routes. These consider the priorities for each sector and how individual apprenticeships and technical qualifications need to evolve to deliver these. This includes reviewing occupational standards to ensure individuals get up-to-date training in line with employers' requirements. The reviews of standards we will complete this year include high demand occupations such as Adult Care Worker. This is directly linked to tackling national skill shortages in the social care sector in line with the government's 2022 policy paper 'People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform'.

In reviewing these standards, we will make sure that they are up to date regarding green and digital skills and other emerging technologies, and that if an apprentice needs to complete qualifications, these directly form part of their end-point assessment. This is an important step in cementing apprenticeships as the gold standard route to professional recognition and occupational competence.

We will also withdraw apprenticeships which are under-used and have no prospect of supporting employers or economic development to ensure the options are all high quality. We will work innovatively with employers to deliver urgent requirements, for example, the urgent need for more urban drivers following a significant skills shortage. Our new commitments will enable us to embed our review process into a more flexible, responsive offer that delivers what employers need.

Taken together, we believe our new commitments, and the work we already have in train will allow us to deliver a fully responsive, targeted solution to employers' skills needs, mindful that changes driven by emerging technology and skills do not impact all employers or all sectors at the same time, or at the same pace.

To ensure we really get to the heart of what employers need we have recently published our future-facing innovation strategy. This strategy sets out our vision for a dynamic, future-facing technical education system that can flex to support employers of all sizes and meet future skills needs. We will work with employers, innovators, technologists, and researchers to identify emerging skills needs and embed them into apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

Building on our recent innovation strategy, we set out below our approach to meeting emerging skills needs, where different parts of the system work together to provide training, reskilling, and upskilling for employers and for individuals.

Our occupational standards establish a high threshold for approval and change. They are designed to provide an assured, stable base for technical education, shaping apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

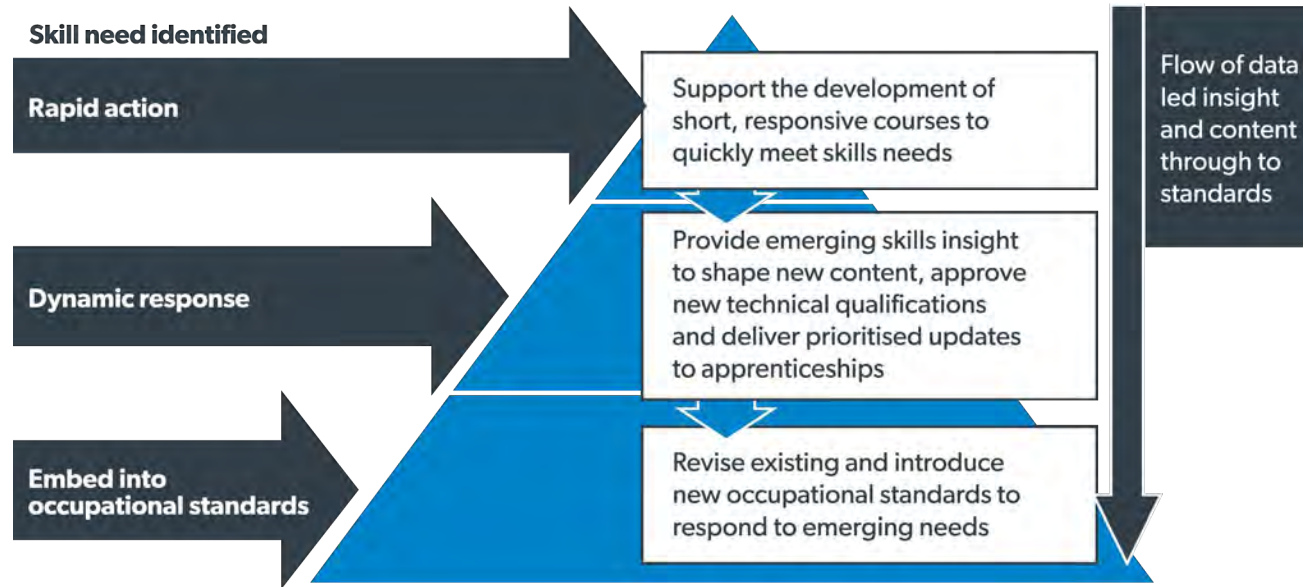
More responsive provision such as Skills Bootcamps and the inclusion of additional specialist qualifications offer a means to support and prepare the skills system for emerging and evolving skills requirements. There is a flow of insight, skills and content from more rapid responses through to the underpinning occupational standards, informing their development over the medium to long term, where occupational standards act as a stable base





## Our responsive model for meeting employer skills needs

Below we set out how we will use flexible options, underpinned by occupational standards to respond to employer need.



This responsive approach will provide flexible options to meet workforce skills and career progression requirements. There are a range of responses available across the skills system, through apprenticeships, technical qualifications and other forms of training.

### Rapid action

- Work with the Department for Education to support the development of short, responsive courses to quickly meet need including to upskill and reskill a workforce (for example, provide advice on Skills Bootcamps to deliver emerging skills not currently in occupational standards).

### Dynamic response

- Annual update of content in qualifications (for example, T Levels)
- Approve new additional specialist qualifications and introduce additional content (not yet in standards) within post-16 technical qualifications where needed
- Provide awarding bodies with emerging skills insight through employer strategic guidance and pre-defined areas (post-16).

### Embed into occupational standards

- Develop and introduce new and revised occupations and occupational standards
- Commission and approve new and revised technical qualifications aligned to standards.





## Case study:

### Denzel Boye

T Level graduate (Digital Production, Design & Development)

Denzel studied for a T Level in Digital Production, Design and Development at La Retraite 6 in London. "I saw it was different from an A Level – more hands on," he said, "and I want to do software engineering, which I think you shouldn't just learn about in the classroom. You should be around people who are experts."

Part of his course featured a placement with coding company Vector Ltd **"The work at the placement was more advanced than in the classroom; I was actually helping the business...** I did database, programming and security - I enjoyed database the most because of the way it was laid out and explained to me."

He is so proud to be one of the first T Level graduates. "My year was the first in the country - we were the pioneers of this course," he said. "It's an adventure and worthwhile... I feel like I'm ahead of most people in A Levels because I've had the work placement."





## 5. A SKILLS SYSTEM THAT IS CLEAR AND USER FRIENDLY

We want to promote informed choices about the opportunities and support available to access training for all levels of skilled roles.

### What needs to improve?

Our research showed that many individuals and employers do not find it easy to find out what skills options are available to them. In particular, the feedback came through strongly that many people did not know the best option to address a particular skills need and did not know how to choose between qualifications which seemed to offer similar outcomes.

**“There are lots and lots of qualifications, but it is bewildering and tricky to understand”**  
(SME)

Some respondents did not know where best to go to find information. Others reported having to piece together information from different sources or finding information that conflicted. We heard that, as the system offers lots of different opportunities, navigation might take some work. But the message came through strongly that more could be done to support people to understand what is available to them, and how they can access it.

**“The academic route is clear and understood. We need to do more on occupational pathways”**  
(Big Conversation Respondent)



### Our response

#### We will:

- **Ensure that everyone, from school leavers to employers, has access to the same, high quality, accessible information they need regardless of where they search** by making our occupational maps data freely available to partners.
  - **This year** we will build on the success of our partnership with DfE and UCAS to create a simple, easy-to-navigate journey through technical education. We will communicate with more partners, including careers guidance bodies, demonstrating the benefit of using our occupational maps data and working with them to embed it.
- **Transform the way users can access information about apprenticeships and technical qualifications and understand the future value to their career journey or workforce** through our agile, user-centred occupational maps.
  - **This year** we will launch our occupational maps service. We intend to transform the way in which users can stay informed about apprenticeships and technical qualifications through enhanced functionality and a user-centric design. Users of the maps will be able to access information on green occupations, progression options between occupations and much more.
- **Build greater awareness, trust and confidence in apprenticeships and technical qualifications** by establishing how we can best communicate employer involvement in their design and approval.
  - **This year** we will build on our existing research on employer perceptions of apprenticeships and technical qualifications to identify the options to signal employer involvement in design, and whether a quality mark could play a role.
- **Make the strong case for the boost in productivity employers gain when they offer more skills training** for their existing workforce and future skills pipeline.
  - This year we will encourage consideration of environmental, social and governance reporting on apprenticeships and training offered by employers, to boost availability of apprenticeship and technical qualification opportunities.



## Impact

These commitments will build on recent IfATE successes and wider improvements in improving access to the skills system. We recently launched our **new occupational maps**. We see these and associated data as the basis for the planning, development and communication of the skills system in England. The maps set out all occupations that can be accessed through the technical education system and show career progression opportunities and workforce development plans. They include salary information and the benefits to learners and employers of particular options, for example, the opportunities they offer for progression between occupations.

The public application programming interface (API) our maps offer enables other organisations to use the information they hold. We have already worked with UCAS to embed this within their own products and services, and extending this to other organisations will result in an improvement in the quality and consistency of information available across England.

More widely, we recognise the value in providing consistent, high quality information to support the government's ambition of boosting productivity. The customer journey for users of the skills system needs to be improved, with clear, user-friendly pathways. This will need to ensure that everyone – regardless of their particular circumstances – can easily discover what options are available to them, confidently decide what is best for them and engage or apply through accessible platforms.

In schools, there has been an active push to increase awareness and understanding of technical education. For example, **all state schools are now required** to link pupils with colleges to discuss apprenticeships and technical qualifications. The Skills for Jobs paper built on this, pushing for greater alignment between the National Careers Service and The Careers and Enterprise Service to ensure that individuals of all ages and at all stages in their careers had access to high quality advice. More recently, UCAS has confirmed that it will allow learners to view side-by-side the different routes into careers. From 2024, UCAS will take applications for apprenticeships at all levels alongside undergraduate degree applications.

Ensuring that the skills system delivers for all goes further than providing information and confidence in quality. We also recently published an **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy** which sets out our role in widening opportunity through technical education. It is designed to show how we can build a skills system that supports everyone, no matter their background, to access high quality technical education opportunities which lead to good jobs and careers. As part of this we have also published an EDI toolkit that will put EDI consideration at the forefront of how we develop, approve, and review occupational standards, apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

## Case study:

### Shannon Main

#### Bricklaying apprentice

Shannon is currently training to become a bricklayer. Knowing that she prefers being onsite and working and meeting new people, Shannon chose to do a level 2 apprenticeship.

**“I think you learn more with hands-on experience and meet a lot of different people in your trade. This means you work with people who have a lot of different experiences and ways of doing things.”**

Shannon wanted to become a bricklayer after she visited a college and spoke to one of the tutors. She found it very interesting how brick walls are formed, and the techniques required to ensure a perfect outcome every time.

Bricklaying is a core function within the construction sector, particularly the house building sector. The government has a target to build significantly more new homes over the coming years and therefore the demand for bricklayers has never been higher.

Being a woman in a male-dominated industry, Shannon takes it upon herself to break the stigma. She goes out of her way to talk to new people and shows them she's just as good as the men on-site.

She also has become very aware of men's mental health due to being a female on-site. **“Bricklaying is male-dominated, and men can find it difficult to talk to others about their feelings. I feel being a female on-site when I talk to people, they open up more to me and talk about their problems. We need to champion men's mental health more.”**

Shannon believes that everyone needs to consider doing an apprenticeship. **“I personally say go for it, have a laugh, and make the work fun. Also keep at it. Some days will be harder than others, but you will get there!”**





## 6. A SKILLS SYSTEM THAT IS JOINED UP

Working together, we want to build on the government's reforms to strengthen and simplify the skills system.

### What needs to improve?

The government is already working to simplify the skills system. Its reforms have created a shared foundation of occupational standards, designed with employers, on which the skills system is built. We all know there is more to do on simplifying the system and our research highlighted that some respondents held the perception that the structure of the skills system is complex. Some respondents recognised the range of functions and uses of the skills system but a number noted that opportunities were missed to bring it all together.

**“Need organisations in sector to come together and agree common ground so skills are portable and give better guidance for qualifications.”**

(Professional, Statutory, or Regulatory Body)

Some we spoke to reported that they knew there are a range of organisations involved in the skills system but did not find it easy to understand their varying roles. Others thought that skills system partners did not always work together in a coherent way, for the benefit of the end user.

**“There needs to be more a joined up approach to recruitment; government, schools, colleges, providers etc. need to work together more to inform and educate potential candidates about apprenticeships”**

(Trade association)

### Our response

#### We will:

- **Drive improvements in outcomes for technical education** by working with our regulatory partners to share intelligence and agree actions that can improve quality across the skills system, with each partner having a clear role to play.
  - **This year** we will use our oversight strategy to describe how we work with other organisations to strengthen quality across the skills system.
- **Ensure our apprenticeships and technical qualifications support future local labour market requirements** by working closely with local partners.
  - **This year** we will continue to build relationships with local partners and establish a method for incorporating locally-specific labour data into the approval process for new or reviewed occupational standards.
- **Create a seamless, relevant learning experience for technical education learners** by working with partners across technical education to ensure all qualifications and assessment are aligned.
  - **This year** we will focus on rolling out changes to our policy on mandatory qualifications and integrated end-point assessments, to ensure that those taking apprenticeships secure qualifications key to their career success and are incentivised to complete their apprenticeships.





## Impact

The commitments set out above build on our ongoing engagement with partners and wider efforts to make the skills system work more effectively.

In IfATE, we already work well with thousands of employers of all sizes, including our specialist employer route panels and trailblazer groups. We continue to expand the list of employers we work with to ensure the relevance of apprenticeships and technical qualifications. We also continue to refine the ways in which we work, to manage our demands on employers. We want to make sure we look to them for the viewpoints only they can bring because of their experience and how they use the skills system.

We are also committed to working closely with other partners in the system to keep under review the quality of what is on offer. Along with the Department for Education, we run [the Quality Alliance](#), which brings together key partners involved in apprenticeships and technical education. We share insights and will build further on this to deliver our oversight strategy. We will only be able to do this effectively by continuing to work closely with partners.

We work with Ofqual and the Office for Students (OfS) to approve technical qualifications making best use of each organisation's remit and expertise. IfATE is responsible for approval decisions, but bringing together expertise in a complementary way increases confidence in the quality of technical qualifications and minimises the burden on the organisations designing the qualifications.

We have now simplified the quality assurance process for apprenticeship end-point assessments. It is critical to make sure that apprentices complete assessments that fairly and consistently evaluate their occupational competence. The quality of end-point assessments is now overseen by the relevant statutory regulator. This is OfS for degree apprenticeships and Ofqual for all other apprenticeships.

We have also looked at how qualifications could work better within apprenticeships. We consulted recently on where qualifications should be mandated in apprenticeships to make sure they add value. Alongside this we are streamlining assessment to ensure apprentices complete apprenticeships and the qualifications they contain at the same time. In making these improvements, we've worked closely with DfE to ensure the changes support national priorities for apprenticeships and help drive up completion rates.

The success of the skills system relies on all partners uniting around a common goal and playing their part to deliver it. The Skills for Jobs paper set a goal to unite the skills system to increase productivity, competitiveness and individual opportunity. There are initiatives in progress to address some of these challenges, and in particular to build on the opportunity of willing, knowledgeable partners. An example of this is the creation of Local Skills Improvement Plans in 38 areas of England this year. Our commitment to ensuring qualifications are joined up and relevant, including locally, will go further to addressing these challenges.

We are also part of a cross-government network which looks at how to better join up and communicate government skills programmes, and on a number of cross-government groups focusing on key issues, such as the [Green Jobs Delivery Group](#). This is made up of industry and government representatives and aims to support the delivery of up to 480,000 skilled green jobs by 2030. We have a role in ensuring appropriate training is available to deliver on this ambition. We have also recently published a [Climate Change and Environmental Skills strategy](#) which sets out how we will work with employers so that apprenticeships and technical education can help the country to achieve sustainable growth while meeting net zero targets.

## 7. NEXT STEPS

This report is just the first step in our plan to improve the skills system. We have committed to take forward a range of actions over the next year. We will publish regular updates on our progress and next steps on the IfATE website.





**Institute for Apprenticeships  
& Technical Education**

