

# RAISING THE STANDARD

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Sectoral approaches to raising apprenticeship achievement rates

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS

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## AELP

Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) is a national membership body, proudly representing around 800 organisations. AELP members support thousands of businesses and millions of learners in England by delivering a wide range of training, vocational learning, and employability programmes. Our members support learners of all ages, in every community, and at every level of post-16 study.



## C&G

Since 1878 we have worked with people, organisations and economies to help them identify and develop the skills they need to thrive. We understand the life changing link between skills development, social mobility, prosperity and success. Everything we do is focused on developing and delivering high-quality training, qualifications, assessments and credentials that lead to jobs and meet the changing needs of industry.

We work with governments, organisations and industry stakeholders to help shape future skills needs across industries. We are known for setting industry-wide standards for technical, behavioural and commercial skills to improve performance and productivity. We train teams, assure learning, assess cohorts and certify with digital credentials. Our solutions help to build skilled and compliant workforces.



# FOREWORD

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## Raising the standard and hitting the mark

There is little doubt that we are facing a combination of extreme challenges to our economy, labour markets and society as a whole. There is also a real sense in which apprenticeships can make a significant contribution to resolving many of these, such as entry to work and development of skillsets within the existing workforce. Never has it been more important to attract as wide a pool of talent into the workplace as possible, to retain and grow that talent and allow the existing workforce to develop or transition across sustainable careers, yet we see worrying indications that some of the current skills education system is not working as effectively as it could.



When concerns were raised around the alarming achievement rate for apprenticeships in 2020-21, just 51.8%, it was clear that further investigation was needed to better understand what the reality behind these figures was, and exploring what strategies could be deployed to address the root cause of the challenges to improving them. Clearly, if the average figure was 51.8% there would be some programmes well above and some well below the average mark, suggesting that one panacea intervention would not be the best way to resolve what could be a far more complex problem.

Even allowing for the unpredictable societal and economic disruption on achievements caused by the pandemic it is clear that there is room for improvement in how we understand the challenges that all parties face in delivering a more successful apprenticeship system. We believe that this study helps to identify where effort should be placed to resolve some of these matters. All have a part to play in this solution – learners, employers, providers, EPAOs and Govt bodies. Getting this right is imperative if we are to realise the growth and productivity gains the UK economy so sorely needs, and the social mobility opportunities that the UK society deserves.

**PATRICK CRAVEN**

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, POLICY & STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS | CITY & GUILDS**

On behalf of AELP, I would firstly like to thank City & Guilds for their valuable support and input in the production of this report. It is in everybody's interests that we seek to maximise rates of apprenticeship completion and whilst we recognise it as a challenge, we very much support the Department's aspiration to drive this to 67% by 2025.



In the view of both organisations, a suitable starting point was the findings of City & Guilds' "Great Jobs" report from February 2022, which specifically examined skills needs in essential job sectors. By driving completion rates in these sectors we can also quickly begin to tackle skills shortages in areas recognised as pivotal to the running of the country and society as a whole.

I am confident that actioning the fifteen major recommendations put forward here would make a rapid and significant difference across wide range of industries and occupations. Key to this is ensuring that the recognised value of gaining an apprenticeship is much better reflected in recruitment to the labour market generally. Whilst their benefits – such as the increase in skills and productivity, the chance to learn whilst working, the improvements in career prospects – are well known, it was disappointing to find that apprenticeships are still not being widely cited as a qualification requirement in job adverts. It was doubly disappointing to realise that even the skills sector itself is guilty of this, and if we cannot put our own house in order, it will always be difficult to convince others of the need to do so. Simply by ensuring that apprentices see that their ultimate learning objective is publicly valued in the job market will surely do much to improve overall rates of completion - and that is before we address some of the more systemic challenges that were uncovered by our researchers.

I am confident you will find this report of interest, and we are keen to hear your thoughts on what we found, and the suggested ways in which we might tackle the issues identified.

**JANE HICKIE**

**CEO | AELP**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The report that in part prompted this study, 'Great Jobs' by City & Guilds (2022), raised the alarm about skills shortages in essential industrial sectors in the UK. It describes that half of the jobs in the UK are categorised as 'essential' by the government and predicts the number of roles in key industries will grow in the next five years, despite employers facing acute skills shortages already.

Apprenticeships could make a significant contribution to tackling these skill shortages. However, the achievement rate is still a critical problem, standing at only 51.8% in 2020-21. This is far below the 67% achievement rate ambition announced by the former Skills Minister Alex Burghart. Whilst neither figure is likely to accurately reflect the overall state of engagement and completion across all occupational sectors, nor explore the methods by which achievement is being measured, there is clearly a significant gap that requires urgent attention between the levels of achievement being attained and those that are sought.

Therefore, this research attempts to explore the underlying detail behind headline achievement rates across a range of sectors and levels, based on our assertion that only by understanding this finer level of detail can we begin to address what interventions might be required to improve the achievement rates and perceived standards of apprenticeships. We investigated the factors affecting the withdrawal of apprentices from providers' perspectives through interviews. The interview analysis identified a variety of sectoral and cross-sectoral issues around apprenticeships, as shown below.

## Factors affecting Apprenticeship withdrawal

We identified six major cross-sectoral themes driving apprenticeship withdrawals;

- 1 English and Maths requirements
- 2 malfunction of the Baker Clause,
- 3 trainer retention and recruitment,
- 4 employer engagement
- 5 challenges with EPA,
- 6 job or career change.

From these we have shaped fifteen recommendations which are detailed below, along with reflections on the following sector-specific issues that came to our attention. The sector is referenced in brackets where the issue was a dominant theme:

- Mental health issues amongst apprentices (Agriculture and Land-Based Industries)
- Apprenticeship duration related to level of content (Construction, Engineering)
- Lack of responsiveness in content of apprenticeship standards to industry requirements (ICT)

We do not consider this to be an exhaustive list of all sector-specific factors, but it is right that these themes should be reflected in our report.



Almost all the factors and themes noted above can ultimately be reduced to a single overarching conclusion and recommendation: Much more work needs to be done by government and providers on raising the perceived benefit and value of apprenticeship study. There continue to be significant questions around the perception of the overall value of apprenticeships in the labour market. Even amongst training providers, we found that apprenticeships are often not specified as an “essential” or even “desirable” qualification level to hold when recruiting for staff; if this is not happening in our own sector, it is easier to understand why it might not be happening across industry more generally. This is clearly a very big missed opportunity to raise the value of apprenticeships to jobseekers, and to address wider issues about the relative worth of apprenticeships when set against other forms of learning, or indeed the option to simply work and earn without undergoing any further meaningful training at all. At present where apprenticeships are recognised they are viewed simply as a passage into work or a development route rather than a valuable outcome in its own right to be set alongside A Levels, T Levels, Degrees or other professional qualifications. This in turn is likely to devalue the outcome as opposed to the journey.

## Summary of findings & Recommendations

### **1 Much more work needs to be done by government and providers on raising the perceived benefit and value of apprenticeship study.**

We found that whilst, in general, there is a good understanding of the potential value of apprenticeships, all too often, these are not considered strong enough to overcome potential objections to completion, such as the prospect of increased pay elsewhere or their perceived value in the labour market. Parents and guardians and other key influencers on decisions regarding apprenticeship participation are often not sufficiently convinced of their promise to give full support, and in many cases they can actively dissuade enrolment or encourage early withdrawal. Employers largely do not specify them as requirements for job roles, and view them more as a vehicle to gain entry into the workforce, or a programme of learning for employees where the final outcome is less important than the learning undertaken. Much more work is therefore needed both in communication and marketing strategies and in encouraging employers to recognise that the skills being honed by apprenticeships mean that their completion should have a strong bearing on their recruitment strategies and the value of the achievement to the learner themselves.

### **2 The inclusion of apprenticeships as a required qualification or indicator of skill level in job descriptions would be a simple and no-cost way to raise the perceived value of an apprenticeship in the labour market as a whole.**

It is not sufficient to merely explain that apprenticeships are valuable and beneficial – this must become more evident in how they are actually used in real labour market scenarios. Not doing so risks disillusionment that apprenticeships are not ultimately as valued in the “real world” as marketing would lead people to believe. Currently, not enough employers list apprenticeships as a requirement for a job role. As a result, apprentices do not see the full value in the apprenticeship, which leads to less incentive for them to complete it. In order to remove the stigma and improve the status and perceived value of apprenticeships, employers must be increasingly encouraged to list them as essential or desirable within job roles and job descriptions.

### **3 Apprenticeships funding must better reflect the actual costs of delivery of staff attraction and retention**

Increasing numbers of trainers are leaving providers and moving to industry to seek improved pay. This was happening even before the current cost of living crisis and is becoming more acute now. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) needs to more accurately take the actual costs of delivery, including salary rates, into account when considering funding bands for apprenticeship standards, improving provider staff recruitment and retention, enhancing the quality and learner experience of apprenticeships and thereby helping to reduce early withdrawal. The same challenge can be found with assessment personnel where funding bands do not always allow for adequate recruitment and retention of EPA personnel. The current short term review of a few standards is welcome but needs to be conducted on a much wider scale. It remains to be seen whether any uplifts will encourage greater engagement with those standards selected for review but if it does the same process should be applied more broadly..

### **4 Stronger and consistent enforcement of Baker Clause/Provider Access Legislation requirements is required**

The Provider Access Legislation (PAL) enacted in 2023 was created to improve the exposure of school-age children to options for technical learning and career pathways. Implementation is in its early stages, but there is still considerable scope needed for improvement in enforcement to reach this objective. Without access to information about apprenticeships (and other options for technical learning pathways), there is the opportunity for misunderstandings or mistaken assumptions about what an apprenticeship is, what it contains, and its value – all of which can lead to disillusionment, disappointment and early withdrawal. It is too early to say whether the new PAL arrangements will have the desired impact but we know that previous attempts to improve advice and guidance, plus access to employers and training providers have failed. We would suggest that schools and colleges run Professional and Technical Education fairs in the same way that University Fairs are run. Apprenticeships would then be an offer within a range of other technical qualifications and help associate them with accredited outcomes.

### **5 A robust strategy to reach out to parents and guardians, as significant influencers of young people's life and learning choices, is required.**

The attitude of parents and guardians towards apprenticeships was found to be a significant barrier for young people in pursuing and continuing them. External pressure, sometimes driven by factors out of the apprentice's control, such as the overall impact of their participation on household incomes, can lead to early withdrawal even where attainment might, under normal circumstances, have been expected. This requires a better understanding of the personal and social background of the apprentice to provide a level of risk assessment including consideration of the impact of the apprenticeship on any benefit payments they or their household may receive.

**6 Apprenticeship standards must not only be reviewed for content and fitness for purpose but also due regard should be given to the programme duration, particularly at lower levels where extended durations can be a barrier for young people to be motivated to complete them.**

Examples of this were regularly found in some specific industries, particularly construction. Consideration should be given to better ways of balancing on and off the job activity across the programme

**7 Onboarding and initial assessments in apprenticeships must be more robustly conducted to ensure that learning programmes are appropriate for the apprentice's objectives and aspirations, and that the content of the programme and their responsibilities within it are very clearly explained to all parties.**

All parties need to better understand their responsibilities in apprenticeships in order to fulfil their responsibilities. Training providers need to more clearly discuss and explain these obligations to both employer and apprentice, at the very start of the process. As a priority, providers must ensure that all these factors are clearly explained to both apprentice and employer, not as a tick-box exercise for regulatory compliance purposes, but as a meaningful exercise in its own right. This will help to ensure that the content and expectations of apprentices (and employers) are fully understood, reducing the likelihood that disillusionment or disappointment with the process leads to early withdrawal. The role of employers as mentors should not be underestimated in this process where the apprenticeship is undertaken by a new entrant to the workforce.

**8 Progress reviews must properly assess not only the distance travelled towards completion but must properly take into account all aspects of apprentice participation to that point, including adverse external pressures and deviations from learning programmes. These should clearly lay out mitigating steps to enhance the apprenticeship experience and improve the chances of completion and attainment**

This research often found that progress reviews, as with initial assessments, were too often being considered as compliance exercises rather than a chance to review all the factors affecting an apprentice's continued participation and potential achievement. More support is needed for both employers and providers to make progress reviews more effective in this respect.

**9 Ensure the content of Functional Skills qualifications is applied rather than theoretical in nature, and delivery is contextualised within job roles.**

Failure to complete, attain or even sometimes attempt literacy and numeracy qualifications to pass apprenticeships is often cited as a major barrier to completion. This is particularly frustrating where employers feel that the required levels or content of such qualifications do not match the needs of the role in question. There is a strong feeling across the sector that the content and delivery of Functional Skills is increasingly being converged with that of GCSEs, reducing learner choice and compounding failure amongst apprentices who did not fare well with these qualifications in the compulsory education period. A review of maths and English attainment expectations should be undertaken alongside apprenticeship programmes to explore the best profiles and models of accreditation. Maths and English should be clearly relevant and appropriate for the role but also instil a sense of achievability when prior experience of the subjects has been negative.

**10 Study towards (rather than attainment of) English and maths qualifications should be the default condition of apprenticeship funding, in line with T Levels and other 16-19 study programmes.**

This would bring apprenticeships in line with T Levels and other 16-19 study programmes, and decrease the likelihood of failure to achieve literacy and numeracy qualifications becoming a factor in early withdrawal. Attainment should still be the aspiration for all but not be used as measure of achievement, and especially where occupational competence is clearly being demonstrated and recognised by the employer.

**11 A transcript of attainment should be made available for apprentices who withdraw early from apprenticeships, detailing what they have learnt.**

Transcripts for partial completion are available under T Levels, but no such arrangement exists by default within the apprenticeship programme. Consideration should be given to making such transcripts available. This in turn may help with recognition of prior learning should they wish to return to a programme at a later date. This concept may also be worth exploring alongside models for accelerated apprenticeships and consideration of minimum duration rules.

**12 The end-point assessment (EPA) process must integrate industry qualifications more appropriately, and improve how EPA outcomes take these into account.**

Where qualifications can be obtained during a period of apprenticeship training earlier than the EPA, apprentices can struggle to see the value in completing the apprenticeship itself - rather, they use it as a means to get other qualifications. Also, apprentices' skills and knowledge are often tested again at the EPA stage, despite having been already proved through attaining industry qualifications. There should be more flexibility to recognise and acknowledge the skills accredited through qualifications as demonstrating competence, rather than requiring them to be repeated which can become an objection to sitting the EPA at all. This investigation may need to be more nuanced with regard to sectors as the relationships between mandated qualifications and EPA requirements will differ. The final approach does not need to be uniform across all sectors so long as the overall expectations of the standards of apprenticeship outcomes are maintained.

**13 End-point assessment methods and content should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate for the levels of study that precede them.**

Our research uncovered significant concern that EPAs can sometimes use inappropriate methods of assessment, or are more daunting than they need to be for apprentices, particularly at lower levels. A number of instances were quoted where although training had been completed, the prospect of the EPA content concerned apprentices enough for them to feel that putting themselves through it was not worth any added benefit it may bring. This area needs to be approached carefully as any accreditation model should be challenging but achievable. Any review should also take into account the likelihood that irrespective of their actual levels of skill and competence, an apprentice may be less inclined and confident to undertake final assessments due to poor experience of school examinations.





## **14** Consideration should be given to the introduction of a financial bonus to the apprentice on successful completion of their apprenticeship by either the government or employers.

Low apprenticeship wages can be a serious factor in persuading apprentices to withdraw, particularly in light of the current economy and the rising cost of living. Introducing an apprenticeship bonus for those who complete an apprenticeship would help them financially and be an incentive for them to stay in their apprenticeship until completion. Employers are currently free to implement this themselves, but consideration should also be given as to whether this policy may be expressly encouraged by delivery guidance, or even mandated for inclusion within apprenticeship agreements. Consideration could also be given to pro-rata incremental rises in wages across an apprenticeship duration to encourage engagement and provide targets to help retention and final completion. This would need to be considered alongside the minimum duration legislation constraints of an apprenticeship programme.

## **15** Graduation ceremonies should be encouraged at all apprenticeship levels

Graduation ceremonies can enhance the sense of accomplishment, raise self-esteem and help improve confidence. Inviting employers, parents and guardians to such ceremonies would increase the awareness of apprenticeships as well as enhancing their perceived value and dispelling the stigma around them being somehow “second-rate” options to academia. Such events might be easier for large employers to arrange but can also be convened by large training providers or aggregated events facilitated by provider networks at a regional or local level

## Sector-specific findings:

The following issues were raised by particular discussion groups and interviewees during our research. We do not consider this to be an extensive list of all sector-specific factors, but it is right that these issues should be reflected in the report as follows:

### **Agriculture, Horticulture, & Animal Care Sector**

Mental health issues were raised consistently as an issue here. Multiple sector-unique factors, such as farm stressors, contextual stressors, and barriers to support, can make it harder for apprentices to continue to study. A greater emphasis is needed on developing workforce capabilities in the area of mental health support and mentoring duties.

### **Construction, Planning & the Built Environment Sector**

Long durations of apprenticeships can be a barrier to completion for some apprentices. This is particularly critical in lower-level apprenticeships as young people in particular often do not have clear career aspirations and find it difficult to commit.

Thus, **duration requirements must be explained clearly to potential apprentices at the time they are considering enrolling, in order to provide proper expectations and support for learners during a long apprenticeship journey.**

Consideration should also be given to whether the long durations of construction apprenticeships, particularly at lower levels that largely attract younger apprentices, are still appropriate in the modern labour market. Whilst this expectation may have been relevant in the context of the past labour market and working practices, it should be considered whether the overall structure and premise of apprenticeship standards – that they accurately reflect the demands and working conditions of the occupation and industry in question – are really being fulfilled in an age where the average stay in any one job has dropped significantly, and freelancing or “gig” economy working has come to the fore.

## Information & Communication Technologies

Some apprenticeship curricula are out of date, and what is taught in apprenticeship standards is not keeping up with the current demand by employers. This means current, once-in-three-year reviews are not appropriate for some apprenticeships. IfATE should better reflect the speed of change in the knowledge and skills required in the ICT sector and ensure a more appropriate frequency of reviews at all levels with this in mind. Consideration should also be given to more modular structures that would allow more flexible and fluid reviews to amend components of curriculum and occupational standards.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## Background to this study

### Increase in the essential workforce in the UK

**UK employers are struggling to fill vacancies and are facing acute skills shortages across many sectors, from retail and hospitality to construction and energy. Various factors are affecting the current skills shortages, such as Brexit and the lack of EU workers available. However, the important fact is that the skills shortage, particularly among the critical sectors, is a serious problem relating to the lifeblood of Britain's economy.**

In their report "Great Jobs - Recognising the essential jobs that keep the UK working", City and Guilds (2022) conducted research on the importance and trends in jobs, particularly focusing on what had been deemed as essential job roles by the UK government during the Covid pandemic in order to understand underlying labour market dynamics and help fill the skills gap. It reported that half of jobs in the UK are thus categorised as essential, and moreover predicted that the number of roles in key industries will grow in the next five years, with the prediction of 384,000 additional essential jobs and 3.1 million job openings.

**The report identified the following ten key job sectors as essential:**

- Education
- Construction
- Energy and utilities
- Government and public services jobs
- IT, Communications & Finance
- Transport & logistics
- Healthcare
- Social care
- Food production, agriculture and animal care
- Retail

Despite the importance of these jobs to society, skill shortages have persisted in many of these sectors. While an optimistic view considers a significant proportion of work will become automated in the following years, which may address some issues on skills shortages, this is less likely the case for essential jobs. City & Guilds (2020) describes that 70% of tasks are highly automatable in only 7% of essential jobs, while that of non-essential jobs is double (16%). Furthermore, the essential workforce has a slightly higher age profile than the non-essential sectors. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the essential workforce is aged over 35, as compared to 61% of the non-essential workforce.

Additionally, few workers in essential jobs are expected to stay in their current roles, with 16% of workers (equating to 2.5 million workers) planning to leave within the next year and 14% planning to stay only for one to two years. City & Guilds (2022) reports that lack of the right skills and qualifications is one of the critical reasons for workers not pursuing jobs in essential sectors. Therefore, providing relevant skills development and training, particularly in essential sectors, is an urgent issue to support workers to access these jobs and progress in their careers.

Apprenticeships can make a significant contribution to tackling these skills shortage problems. National Apprenticeship Service (2018) defines an apprenticeship as “a genuine job with an accompanying assessment and skills development programme” (p1). Apprentices can gain a wide variety of learning in the workplace, formal off-the-job training and the opportunity to practice new skills in a real work environment. Apprenticeships benefit individuals, employers, and the economy by boosting the workforce’s skills and overall levels of learning, capability and capacity in the workplace (National Apprenticeship Service, 2018).

Unfortunately, apprenticeships were severely affected by the COVID pandemic, and new apprenticeship starts have declined in recent years. As Table 1 shows, in the year 2019/20, when the COVID pandemic spread, apprenticeship starts dropped significantly compared to the previous year (2018/19), and this decline continued until 2020/21. However, 2021/22 finally saw a recovery from the pandemic, and apprenticeship starts rose, although the numbers are still low compared to pre-pandemic - total starts in 2021/22 increased by 9% from the previous year, though the most significant proportional rise was in 16-18 years old at 20%, followed by 19-24 years old with a 13% increase between 2020/21 to 2021/22 (Camden, 2022). This decline during the pandemic is perhaps to be expected as apprenticeships are so strongly linked to work – and many people were not working or companies were effectively ‘mothballed’. However we cannot allow this trend to continue as the country addresses the need to recover and grow the economy. Apprenticeships are a key feature of this solution and must be encouraged.

**TABLE 1: Apprenticeship Starts by Year**

APPRENTICESHIP STARTS BY LEVEL AND AGE FOR THE PROVISIONAL FULL 2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR, WITH EQUIVALENT FIGURES FOR 2018/19 TO 2020/21				
	Starts (reported to date)			
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
<b>Total</b>	389,200	319,000	319,400	347,900
<b>Under 19</b>	96,600	75,500	64,400	77,200
<b>19-24</b>	114,900	94,200	94,000	105,900
<b>25+</b>	177,700	149,300	160,900	164,800

*Note. Camden, B. (2022). Apprenticeship Starts For Young People Grow the Most in Full-Year 2021/22 Figures. From FE Week (<https://feweek.co.uk/apprenticeship-starts-for-young-people-grow-the-most-in-full-year-2021-22-figures/>).*

## The Current Apprenticeship Landscape

While new apprenticeship starts have been seeing a recovery and upward trend, achievement rates<sup>1</sup> and retention rates<sup>2</sup> are still critical problems. These are particularly severe among the apprenticeship standards introduced as part of the reform programme in 2017, rather than legacy apprenticeship frameworks pre-dating that time (which are gradually being phased out). Table 2 shows that the achievement rate of standards was only 51.8% in 2020/21, while that of frameworks is 68.9%. Similarly, the retention rate of standards in 2020/21 was 53%, whilst the framework was 70%.

**1** “The number of achieved learning aims as a percentage of the total number of learning aims in the cohort that ended” (Department for Education [DfE], 2022, p.5).

**2** “The number of learning aims that have completed all of the planned learning activities as a percentage of the total number of learning aims that ended” (DfE, 2022, p.5).





**TABLE 2: Apprenticeship Retention, Pass, and Achievement Rates**

Year	All Apprenticeships		Frameworks		Standards	
	2019/20 (revised)	2020/21	2019/20 (revised)	2020/21	2019/20 (revised)	2020/21
Retention Rate	58.7%	58.8%	69.2%	70.0%	46.6%	53.0%
Pass Rate	97.9%	98.1%	98.5%	98.5%	97.0%	97.8%
Achievement Rate	57.5%	57.7%	68.1%	68.9%	45.2%	51.8%
Leavers	<b>270,470</b>	<b>275,380</b>	<b>145,200</b>	<b>93,880</b>	<b>125,270</b>	<b>181,490</b>

**Note. Camden, B. (2022). 2020/21 Apprenticeship Achievement Rate Hit Just 51.8% For Standards. From FE Week. (<https://feweek.co.uk/2020-21-apprenticeship-achievement-rate-hit-57-7-and-just-51-8-for-standards/>)**

Given that frameworks are being phased out and that standards are liable to be the foundation of the programme for many years yet, these relative achievement rates pose serious concerns. Former Skills Minister Alex Burghart therefore announced an ambition to increase the achievement rate of apprenticeship standards to 67% by 2025 (FE Week, 2022a), highlighting the importance of this to ensure apprenticeships provide maximum value to apprentices, employers, and the labour market as a whole. He suggested that a strong collective partnership between providers, employers and assessment organisations was needed for this to improve.

Addressing this issue requires attention in a number of different areas – the processes of enrolment and initial information, assessment and guidance; the design and content of the standards; the means by which they are assessed and awarded – to identify where improvements could be made that would solve overall retention issues, reduce early withdrawals, and improve overall achievement rates. As Table 2 shows, there are very high pass rates in apprenticeship standards. From this, it is possible to infer that apprentices do not tend to struggle to achieve once they reach the EPA stage because if they enter it, they overwhelmingly tend to complete it and pass the apprenticeship. This rather suggests that the problem therefore exists before reaching EPA – it seems to be largely the apprentices’ failure to complete planned learning activities, possibly provoking an early exit from the programme, that drives low achievement rates, rather than attempting and failing to pass EPA.

In order to increase the retention rate and thus improve the overall achievement rate, we need to understand what causes apprentices to drop out and what solutions are required for different groups. While previous studies have explored factors behind dropouts from the perspective of apprentices, such research on providers’ perspectives is limited. We wished to examine more closely how this may be achieved in the essential occupational areas previously identified by City & Guilds, on the basis that as they are deemed essential to the economy, thus they should be given priority.

As training providers and employers are the main actors in the provision of apprenticeships, we need to understand their perceptions toward apprentices’ withdrawal and the necessary measures they consider are crucial to providing appropriate support for each group. Furthermore, training providers and employers need to take into account the feasibility of making such changes. Therefore, this study investigates the training providers’ and employers’ perceived factors that drive apprentices’ dropouts, mainly focusing on the essential sectors and examining suggested recommendations for improvement.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

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This research initially developed two research questions to understand the challenges and barriers to improving the apprenticeship achievement rate that training providers and employers perceive and suggested solutions for them.

**1** What issues do training providers and employers face around apprenticeship retention and achievement?

**2** What measures are required to address those problems?

This study adopted a qualitative method to investigate these questions - specifically, semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> and roundtable discussions<sup>4</sup> with training providers.

### Interviews

This study conducted interviews with 15 training providers and employers from eight sectors. The sampling technique was convenience sampling from a list of AELP membership groups in appropriate industry areas. The interview guide was developed considering the results of the literature review, and in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, which lasted approximately 1 hour per person and these were conducted between the 2nd to 30th of November 2022.

### Roundtable discussions

In addition to interviews, the study conducted roundtable discussions, which were organised with two facilitators. These roundtables are conducted within three Sector Forums organised by AELP online; Transport and Logistics, Digital and IT, and Land-based Industries. Participants were mainly training providers, and around 12 people took part in each roundtable between the 3rd to 23rd of November. While pre-planned topics to be covered were decided, participants were free to talk about issues they felt regarding apprenticeships, and a natural flow emerged in the proceedings with little formal direction.

**3** The semi-structured interview method allows the researcher to add or omit pre-planned questions and to elaborate on certain issues with participants. The main advantage of using a semi-structured interview is its flexibility, which enables researchers to adjust and change the direction of the questions. Furthermore, this flexibility helps the participants to tell more about themselves (Alamri, 2019).

**4** "A roundtable discussion is where two or more individuals meet to debate an issue, guided by specific discussion topics with an agenda" (<https://enddrowning.org/>, n.d.). A roundtable gives participants equal standing in a discussion, allowing them to contribute their perspectives and ideas freely and fully to the conversation.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

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We conducted a thorough literature review focusing on the factors associated with apprentices' early withdrawal in England. Kantar Public (2019) explains that dropout factors can be categorised into three key areas, and the probability of dropout increases when one of these three factors is not satisfied. These three key factors are; 1) core personal issues, 2) value and utility, 3) and functional delivery, as shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1:** Completion Requirement Model



**Source:** Kantar Public (2019). *DfE Learners and Apprentices Study: Reasons For Non-Completion*. London: Department for Education, pp.1–69.

#### Core personal issues: nature and emotional bandwidth

IFF Research (2021) reports that personal or domestic factors are dropout factors, which accounted for 40% of dropout reasons among non-completers in their study; particularly, these personal factors were higher among apprenticeships in the Health sector. Apprentices drop out when core personal issues such as **family**, **health**, and **finances** take priority over learning.

Apprentices who experienced family breakdowns, commonly relationship breakups, tend not to have the emotional bandwidth to attend the programmes and engage in their apprenticeship. Also, childcare is another common reason for dropout among young and middle-aged women. About 8% of apprentices referred to caring responsibilities as the dropout reason (IFF Research, 2022). These apprentices either could not afford childcare or could not arrange appropriate childcare (Kantar Public, 2019).

Health problems are another issue that affect dropout. Some apprentices, particularly older learners, cannot complete their courses because medical treatment is required due to physical health problems. Additionally, mental health issues impact apprentices' course engagement and dropout because of stress, anxiety, depression, and panic attacks (Kantar Public, 2019). This is echoed by IFF Research (2022) which reports mental health issues accounted for 9% of the dropout factors, and the St Martin's Group and Learning and Work Institute (L&W, 2022), which explains apprentices with a disability or long-term health conditions are more likely to withdraw from their apprenticeship.

Some apprentices cannot continue their programme due to financial insecurity, such as complications with student loans or redundancy. (Kantar Public, 2019). This situation is currently being compounded by the current significant increases in the cost of living.

## Value & utility: degree of misunderstanding

Value and utility become dropout factors when learners do not see their course as valuable - this is when apprentices' expectations and the course do not match, or apprentices misunderstand the course content and course level. Learners often have a limited understanding of the course details and delivery (Kantar Public, 2022; The St Martin's Group & L&W, 2022). IFF Research (2019) revealed that about 10% of apprentices were unaware that they were even on an apprenticeship. This percentage was even more significant in the Health sector, where 20% (or one in five) of apprentices claimed not to be aware they were on an apprenticeship. The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (2022) also reports that 13% of level 2 and below learners did not know the course they were studying. These results indicate the significance of a comprehensive induction at the beginning of the apprenticeship.

Apprentices often also seem to have a limited understanding of the end-point assessment (EPA). IFF Research (2022) explains that about 8% of the apprentices were unaware of them. This was especially low among the Health (13%) and Engineering (11%) sectors. This low awareness reflects the time when apprentices were first told about EPAs. On average, 76% of apprentices responded that they heard about EPA before starting or within the first month. While that of the Science sector was 91%, the Engineering, Construction, and Health sector was only around 70%. In the case of Construction, 18% of apprentices still had not heard about EPA even six months into their programme of study. Thus, there is a considerable disparity in the timing of information about the EPA. A similar problem was identified by St Martin's Group and L&W (2022), in which respondents found they tended to get details such as the quantity and frequency of assessments or the number of days spent with the employer and training provider, but lacked information about the training content of the apprenticeship.

Value and utility can be a dropout factor when the apprentices find a decline in the course value due to finding a new job. This happens when they experience poor quality, or the course is no longer relevant to their career aspirations (Kantar Public, 2019). This is not confined to apprentices proactively looking for jobs; the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (2022) reports cases where other companies headhunt apprentices with better job offers. As some apprenticeship standards embed other qualifications as part of their exit requirements, this can sometimes result in apprentices who have obtained these qualifications then not entering the EPA phase at all because they are headhunted due to having the required skills and certifications already. Degree Apprenticeships are a case in point, whereby the apprenticeship levy pays for the degree and thus removes the need for a student loan for university tuition fees. Once the undergraduate degree is achieved, the apprenticeship itself can often become less valuable, and the learner leaves before the EPA. This has resulted in recent proposals from IfATE regarding the relation between mandatory degrees and EPA in Degree Apprenticeships that are worth examining in more detail for their relevance to other apprenticeship standards.

In this example, and in other instances of dropout through issues of value and utility, there is little that training providers and employers can directly do to mitigate it; instead, many apprentices see these as "positive" reasons for leaving, despite the fact that these "positive" apprentice drop outs are treated the same as all others in government statistics. IFF Research results show apprentices answered that 'job or career change/better job offer' accounts for 11% of the personal reasons given for not completing apprenticeships (2022).





## Functional delivery: level of personal priorities: level of quality of provision

Functional delivery issues refer to apprentices being dissatisfied with tutors' performance or teaching quality. Some apprentices responded that tutors do not have the appropriate skills and knowledge about what they are teaching (Kantar Public, 2019). About 43% of apprentices mentioned 'training was not as good as you hoped' as a dropout factor, and particularly this factor was higher among Retail sectors (IFF Research, 2022). Likewise, St Martin's Group and L&W (2022) state that 24% of apprentices cited poor-quality teaching as a reason for withdrawing.

Furthermore, apprentices shared a problem with tutors not showing up and being replaced multiple times throughout the year (Kantar Public, 2019). Some apprentices felt tutors were unsupportive and uninterested in their development, although tutors are responsible for supporting the apprentice pastorally and preparing them for EPA. This is evidenced by St Martin's Group and L&W (2022), which found that one in four apprentices cited a lack of support from their tutor as a dropout reason. Furthermore, IFF Research (2022) reports that three out of five top reasons for dissatisfaction with the quality of training among non-completers were tutor-related issues; 'tutors did not provide enough support/were unhelpful/disorganised (68%),' 'rarely saw the tutor (27%),' 'tutor kept changing (19%).' Regarding support from the training providers, work by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE, 2022) shows apprentices working in small/medium-size enterprises (SMEs) tend to perceive that their employers adjust to meet individual needs more than bigger companies. On the other hand, The St Martin's Group and L&W (2022) report that apprentices working in SMEs were also more likely to identify a lack of support from their employer as a reason for dropouts.

In addition to these tutor issues, a significant number of apprentices struggle to balance their work, learning, and life, often because employers, particularly small or micro-organisations, tend not to give apprentices time off to study or complete their off-the-job training. This triple workload overwhelms apprentices significantly, and 29% of apprentices answered that a high workload is a dropout reason (St Martin's Group & L&W, 2022). IFF Research (2022) revealed that the top reason for dropping out was cited as 'not enough time for learning/training (44%)', and even many of those who have completed an apprenticeship mentioned being unsatisfied with the balance of time between learning and working.

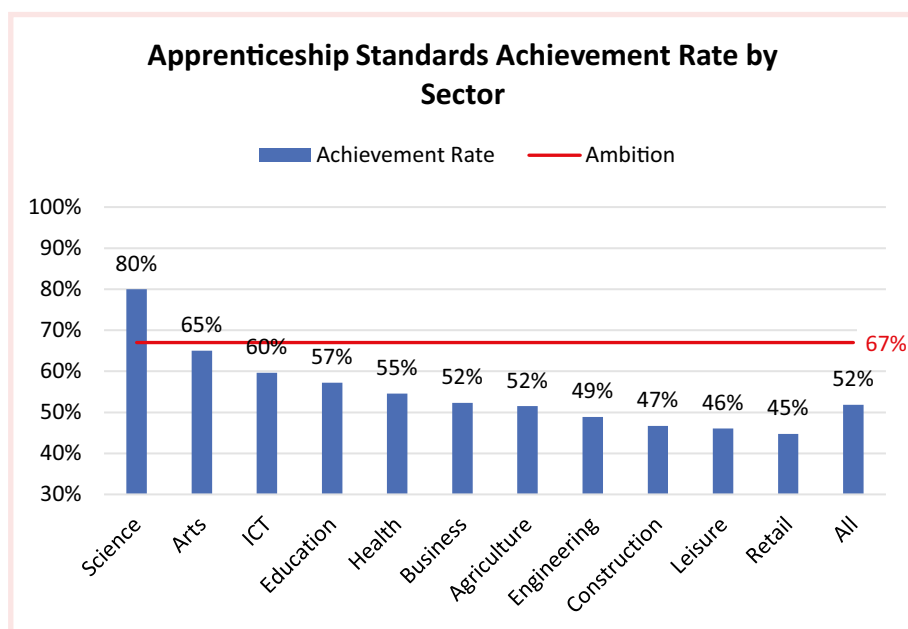
When we consider the characteristics of these three key areas (core personal, value & utility, and functional delivery), both value & utility and functional delivery are external factors of which at least some are within the scope of training providers' and employers' influence to affect. In contrast, core personal are internal factors, mainly under apprentices' influence and over which little control can be exerted by training providers and employers.

As IFF Research (2019) shows, issues with quality, which can be categorised into functional delivery, were the top reason for dropouts with 70%; the biggest problem is external factors. This indicates significant room for improvement in apprenticeships and the prospect of increasing the achievement rate with the cooperation and efforts of training providers and employers to improve the overall quality of delivery and experience of the apprenticeship itself.

## 4. SECTOR-SPECIFIC FACTORS OF APPRENTICES' WITHDRAWAL

This study adapted interviews and roundtable discussions to training providers and employers in multiple sectors to understand the barriers they face around apprenticeship retention and achievement rates. It was important to conduct interviews and roundtable discussions with different sectors as they can be very different from each other. Figure 2 shows the apprenticeship standards achievement rate by sector. The overall apprenticeship achievement rate is 52%. However, this rate varies significantly by sector. Some sectors, such as Engineering, Construction, and Leisure, are considerably lower than the average rate and, as things stand, are likely to struggle to attain the 67% achievement rate being set as a target by 2025. Therefore, the characteristics and situations of the sectors can be presumed to differ considerably by sector, and as a result, their barriers are also different.

**FIGURE 2:** Apprenticeship Standards Achievement Rate by Sector



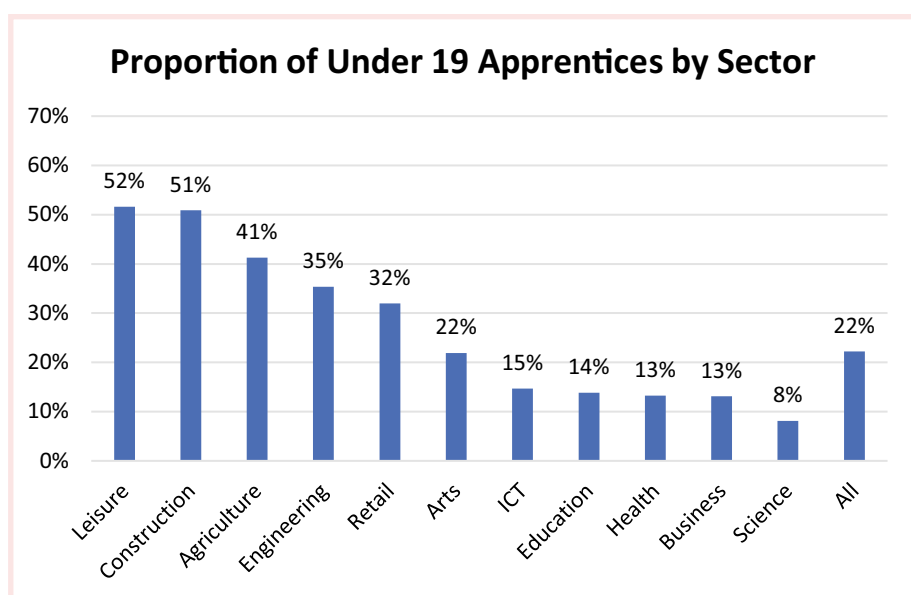
**Note.** Developed by AELP using data from DfE (2022)

Interviews were conducted with 15 training providers and employers, and three roundtable discussions were carried out among eight sectors (see Appendices for detailed information on interviewees). The interviews and roundtable discussions revealed that there are two broad categories of factors of apprentices' withdrawal: sector-specific and cross-sectoral factors. This chapter aims to explore and discuss these two different types of issues, particularly in major sectors of the economy previously described as "essential" by City & Guilds (City & Guilds, 2022).

## 4.1 AGRICULTURE, HORTICULTURE, & ANIMAL CARE

Providers from the agricultural sector raised apprentices' mental health concerns as one of the biggest issues in their sector. Mental health issues are serious among young apprentices. The characteristics of agricultural sector apprenticeships show a large proportion of younger apprentices. Figure 3 shows the proportion of apprentices aged under 19 in each sector, with agriculture having the third largest proportion at 41%, just behind the Construction sector (51%) and Leisure & travel (52%) (DfE, 2022).

**FIGURE 3:** Proportion of Apprentices Under 19 by Sectors



**Note.** Developed by AELP using data from DfE (2022)

These mental health issues were accelerated by the COVID pandemic when people had tough times due to many factors such as loneliness and isolation, anxiety about school/work and disruption in routine. Younger people were significantly affected by the pandemic because they are especially vulnerable to mental health problems. A survey by NHS (2021) shows one in six (16.9%) people aged 17-23 in England had a probable mental health disorder in 2021. Therefore, these younger generations who experienced the pandemic and have mental health problems are now coming into the work environment year after year.

Training providers from the agricultural sector mentioned that the number of mental health issues had increased significantly in the last two years. It is felt that this mental health epidemic has led to younger people being less resilient, which often results in early withdrawal from their apprenticeships.

“ constantly we are trying to make it [mental health issue] better. It is a permanent challenge. But half of our applicants at the minute say they have got anxiety and depression. We have never had that (before).

*(Agriculture, training provider)*

“ I think it [mental health issue] could be down to the [young] age group. [...] At the moment, I think that the whole age group is struggling. I think there is a real struggle with resilience and their ability to be put under pressure.

*(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)*

“ I think that it is such a big thing that there is a reduction in resilience [...]. **People are extremely anxious to the point of not wanting to do it if and when they come to the crunch.** [...] I think that, certainly, our number of learning disabilities for mental health has doubled in the last two years.

*(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)*

While the pandemic has had a major impact on mental health issues around young people in general, this issue is particularly being seen in the agriculture sector and not just for young people. It has been reported that 36% of the farming community in the UK is ‘probably’ or ‘possibly’ depressed (The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, 2021). Therefore, it needs to be highlighted that mental health is a serious problem in the agricultural sector in general, which needs to be solved urgently.

Training providers/employers explain multiple reasons that are contributing to the higher mental health issues in the sector. One interviewee describes as follows:

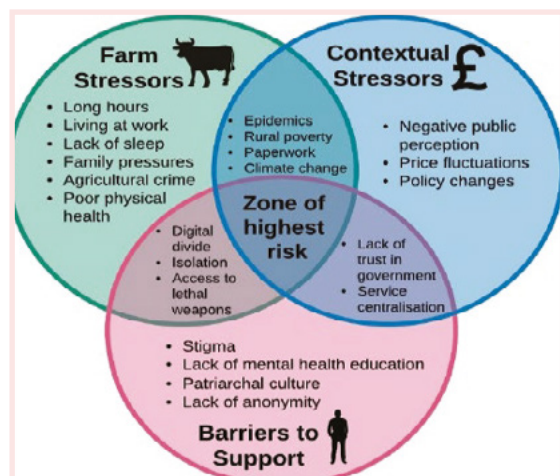
“ You have [apprentices] got extended days, and the concept of a five-day week, particularly with livestock, does not exist. [...] [Also], I think rural infrastructure; you are actually quite a remote worker and potentially may have challenges communicating uncertainty.

*(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)*



These factors mentioned by training providers/employers are aligned with three drivers of mental health issues among farmers provided by Forbes (2021), which are farm stressors, barriers to support, and contextual stressors, as shown in Figure 4. Farm stressors, such as long hours and living at work and barriers to support, such as isolation, were also mentioned by training providers and employers.

## || **FIGURE 4:** Drivers of mental Ill-Health



**Note.** Forbes, V.K. (2021). *Mental Health Risks to Farmers in the UK*. The University of Oxford, pp.1–7.

The last drivers of mental health issues, known as contextual stressors, are another serious area that training providers/employers highlighted in the interviews. In the case of apprentices in the agricultural sector, the contextual stressors can be the wage they receive. One interviewee told us that their sector tends only to be able to afford to pay minimum wage to apprentices.



“ [...] some of [the factors of apprentices’ withdrawal] are obviously around wages [...]. A lot of the land-based industries only pay minimum wage because that is all they can afford because they are small businesses.

**(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)**

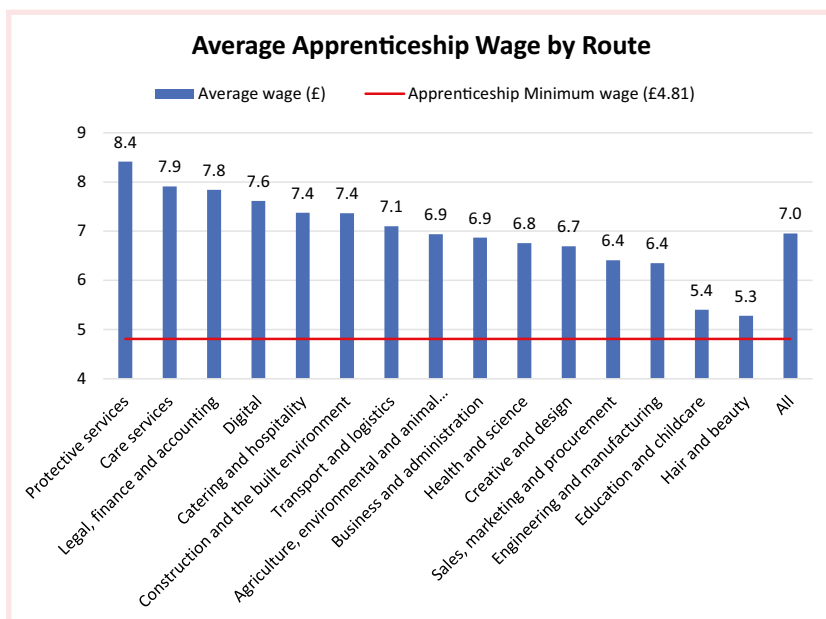
Other employers shared that apprentices withdrew from their apprenticeship due to better-paid job offers.

“ She has got two months left to go, and she is going to get £15.00 an hour in a call centre. With the employer, she is going to get £4.81 till she qualifies.

**(Agriculture, Training provider)**

As part of this research, AELP analysed 27,140 advertisements for apprenticeship vacancies posted between April 2022 and June 2022, noting the industrial sector and the wage rate being offered (Figure 5<sup>5</sup>). This illustrates that on the basis of a National Apprenticeship Minimum Wage of £4.81, the average wage in the agricultural sector of £6.90 ranked in the middle among other sectors, very slightly higher than the national minimum wage of £6.83 for 18 to 20 years olds, but significantly lower than that of £9.18 for 21 to 22 years olds, and £9.50 for those aged 23 and over. In part, this could be because the agricultural sector has a larger proportion of family-based (run) businesses that find it difficult to pay wage rates that can compete with other bigger employers and industries.

**FIGURE 5: Apprenticeship Route by Average Wage Offered**



**Note.** Developed by AELP using data from gov.uk Apprenticeships and traineeships Data (2022) and Apprenticeship Vacancies on the Apprenticeship Service.

As a consequence of these three main factors; farm stressors, barriers to support, and contextual stressors, in addition to the effects of the pandemic, apprentices in the agricultural sector can have greater challenges in the area of mental health than in other sectors.

## Recommendations

With mental health issues identified as one of the biggest issues in the Agriculture sector, it appears a more sector-specific system to support the mental health of apprentices is needed. Both training providers and employers should ensure emotional and pastoral support for apprentices in a way that recognises the particular challenges of the sector, perhaps through the use of mentors. Mental health support is not only about professional therapists; just having someone to talk to in the workplace can be great support. Therefore, providers and employers should ensure that apprentices have someone they can consult or talk to who has sufficient knowledge of mental health strategies to be able to support them.

“ They [apprentices] need some emotional and kind of pastoral support, and we can be there for that. But they need someone that they know they can go to in the workplace, and it does not always have to be the manager, but it could be a buddy. It does not even have to be someone in their team, but someone that they know. If you have got any problems, this is whom you go and see, and that is very emotional and sort of pastoral care

**ICT, Training provider)**

This suggests that a greater emphasis is needed on developing workforce capabilities and support in the area of mental health support, specifically in the agriculture industry. Such moves may help to alleviate disincentives to complete apprenticeship studies.



## 4.2 CONSTRUCTION, PLANNING & THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT SECTOR

The relatively long duration of some apprenticeships was raised as a major driver of apprenticeship withdrawal by providers in the construction sector. Young people, in particular, can find it difficult to commit to an apprenticeship for a long period of time, particularly if they have not yet fully decided what they want to do in the future - as a consequence, many withdraw well before completing their training. One interviewee told us,

“ Regarding electrical, I think sometimes it takes too long. It is such a long program, a four-year program, and they [apprentices] get a bit disheartened with it all as they all start young. Some of them would take it on at 16, and by the time they are 18, they decide they do not want to be an electrician anymore.

*(Construction, Training provider)*

Table 3 compares the duration of the Level 2 and 3 apprenticeship standards in construction, and engineering, against the average in all sectors. The average duration of Level 2 apprentices in all sectors is 17 months. However, multiple Level 2 apprenticeships in the construction sector take 30-36 months, which is significantly longer than the average. Similarly, while the average duration of level 3 apprenticeships in all sectors is 25 months (about two years), some of the apprenticeships in the construction sector take 42 - 48 months (3.5 to 4 years). Furthermore, there are many apprenticeships that exceed 40 months in Engineering, too, in the case of Level 3 programmes.

**TABLE 3: Level 2 & 3 Apprenticeship Standards Over 30 & 40 months**

LEVEL 2		LEVEL 3	
<i>All Sector's Average Duration: 17 months</i>		<i>All Sector's Average Duration: 25 months</i>	
Apprenticeship	Duration in months	Apprenticeship	Duration in months
Floorlayer	30	Installation electrician and maintenance electrician	42
Wall and floor tiler	30	Building services engineering ductwork craftsperson	48
Bricklayer	30	Building services engineering service and maintenance engineer	48
Mastic asphalter	34	Plumbing and domestic heating technician	48
Painter and decorator	36	Engineering design and draughtsperson	42
Plasterer	36	Engineering technician	42
Autocar technician	30	Heritage engineering technician	42
		Metal fabricator	42
		Engineering fitter	42
		Marine electrician	42
		Food and drink maintenance engineer	42
		Utilities engineering technician	48
		Gas network craftsperson	48
		Boatbuilder	48
		Marine engineer	48
		Pipe welder	48
		Healthcare engineering specialist technician	48

Construction
Engineering

Note. Developed by AELP using IfATE data (2022).

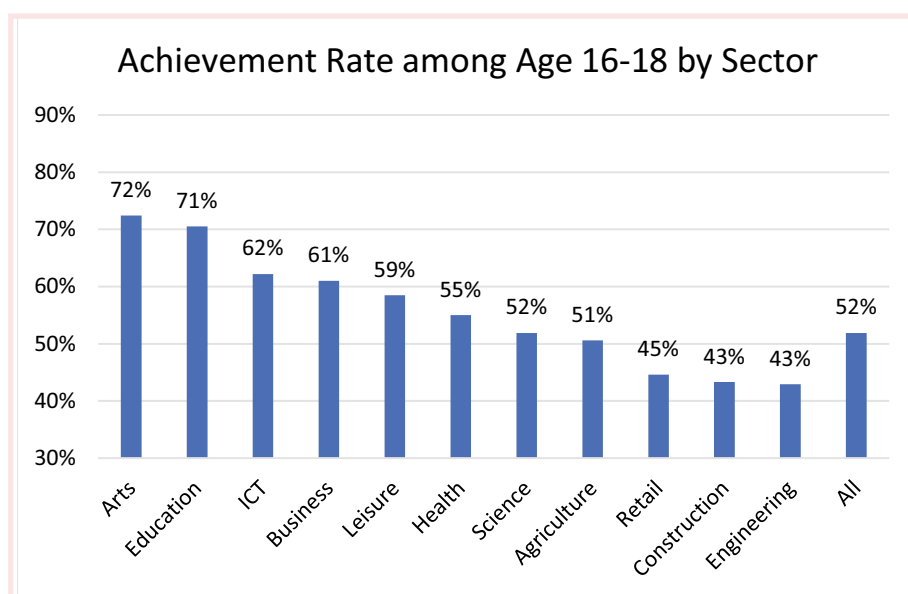
Moreover, a large proportion of the apprentices in the construction sector are young people. As discussed earlier, the proportion of younger people under 19 in construction is 51%, the second largest following the Leisure/travel sector (52%) (DfE, 2021). Young people tend to have unclear desires for what they want to do as a job in the future, and smaller programmes such as Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships can often play the role of an almost-introductory first step for them. It is possible to consider that the duration of some apprenticeships at this level is currently too long for some young people to be happy to commit to as a first step, as many seem to change their minds before completion. An interviewee echoed this point and was sceptical about the long duration of the programmes.

**“** *It makes a long program when they are young. I think when they come on, and they are 16, and they are saying a couple of years' time, then they realise it is not for them, and that is one of the barriers.*

**(Construction, Training provider)**

The struggle of younger apprentices to complete apprenticeships in the construction sector is reflected in achievement rates by age group. Figure 6 shows that the achievement rate among ages 16-18 is significantly lower in construction compared to the average achievement rates for this age group across all sectors; 43% against 52% respectively. Engineering also has a similar issue. Furthermore, the younger apprentices' low achievement rate among these two sectors is very apparent when compared to other sectors.

**|| FIGURE 6: Apprenticeship Standard Achievement Rate by Age groups**



**Note.** Developed by AELP using data from DfE (2022)

The availability of alternative and shorter options for attaining required construction skills, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), compounds problems of apprenticeship recruitment and retention. NVQ duration tends to be shorter than apprenticeships, and it usually takes around a year to complete NVQ Level 1 and Level 2. As Construction is one of the longest apprenticeship durations, with many Level 2 programmes taking more than two and a half years to complete, an NVQ is, therefore, potentially a much faster route to completion and finding a job. Perhaps also the lack of an entirely end weighted assessment model makes the NVQ the preferred route, either way it is interesting to note how NVQs have persisted in this sector as an option for work-based learning where in other sectors they have been withdrawn and replaced by apprenticeships.



“ [...] we have still got the old NVQ route. And some people find that route an easier way to get a CSCS card or get approved and finish. So they do not finish. And they opt for this easier route because they can get into work, they can earn a lot more money than being an apprentice, and they can still be qualified as long as they have got them [...]. [...] Youngsters have alternatives. They do not have to stick with a 3-4 year apprenticeship.

**(Construction, EPAO/ Training provider)**

Apprenticeships in construction trades are seen as “traditional” in many respects, and this may include the perceived need by employers for them to have an extended duration in order to qualify as competent. Whilst this may have been relevant in the context of the labour market and working practices in the past, it should be considered whether the overall structure and premise of apprenticeship standards – that they accurately reflect the demands and working conditions of the occupation and industry in question – are really being fulfilled in an age where the average stay in any one job has dropped significantly, and a freelancing or “gig” economy has come to the fore.

If it is the case that the level and content of apprenticeship standards nevertheless validly require extended durations of this nature, then providers and employers must be very clear with potential apprentices about the nature and duration of the study, they are about to undertake. This resonates with our findings on the role of initial assessment later in this report.

## Recommendations

For improvement, we would recommend a review of whether the durations of apprenticeships in construction are appropriate for the roles and levels they represent. If such longer durations are appropriate, it needs to be defined clearly why they need much longer periods compared to other sectors, and this requirement must be explained clearly to potential apprentices at the time they are considering enrolling. There is also a need to provide extensive support for learners to incentivise, motivate and retain them during what could be to them a long apprenticeship journey.

In addition, while interviews in this research did not highlight long duration of apprenticeship as an issue among the Engineering sector, this sector also has quite similar characteristics to the Construction sector in terms of long duration of apprenticeships and large proportions of younger apprentices and low achievement rate among younger apprentices. Therefore, further investigation in Engineering would be sensible as they may also need similar support.

## 4.3 ENGINEERING & MANUFACTURING TECHNOLOGIES

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The primary sector-specific factor referred to by the engineering sector was too much bureaucracy in apprenticeships, diverting money that could better be used to improve the quality of delivery and contact with apprentices.

“ [The issue is] the bureaucracy that is going on now, the paperwork and the back office staff that we have to have to fulfil it. How much of the training pound gets to the learner? I would say it is very little nowadays. We are spending probably 50-60% of the funding on that. And that is not what it is about. But you have to have them to keep up with the government requirements.

*(Engineering, Training provider)*

Another interviewee shared an example with us of the effect of an increase in rules requiring more regular formal reviews of apprentice progress:

“ We cannot put that on our assessors because they are so busy doing what they do, so we have had to employ two extra people to do that. That means 11 fewer electrical teachers, or all the electrical teachers on a bit less money, or a few more people in the classroom or whatever. Every time they change a rule, it costs us money.

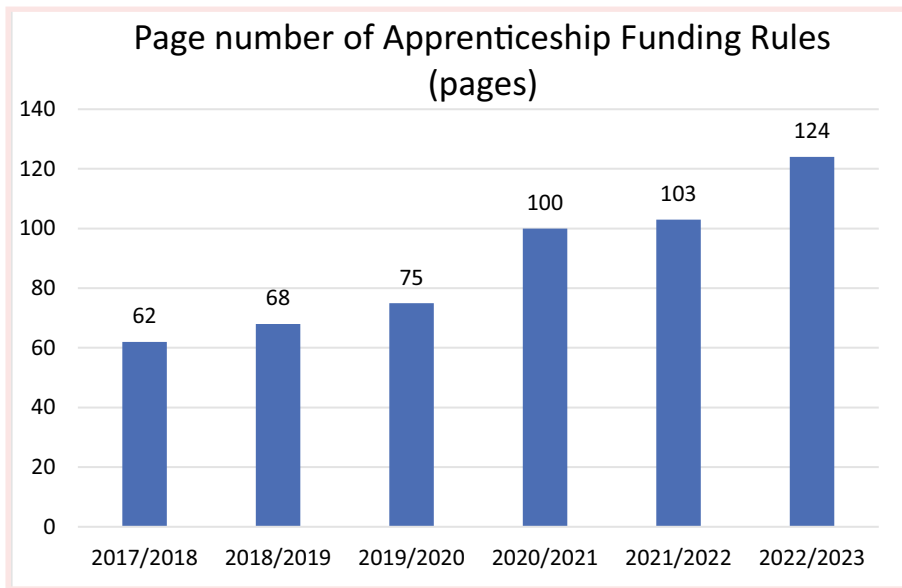
*(Engineering, Training provider)*

The increase in rules also encourages a feeling of risk-aversion amongst providers – particularly independent providers whose contracts for delivery can be summarily terminated if they are found to be in breach. This can often result in a disproportionate amount of human and financial resources being expended on compliance, which in the context of a finite envelope of funding, can result in less being spent on front-line delivery with the apprentices themselves. Indeed, the size of apprenticeship funding rules for main providers has increased significantly in the last five years. Figure 7 compares the number of pages<sup>6</sup> in the apprenticeship funding rules since 2017, when there were 62 pages, to 2022/2023, by which time it had doubled and was 124 pages.

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<sup>6</sup> Excluded Glossary and Appendix into page count

## FIGURE 7: Pages within Apprenticeship Funding Rules



*Note. Developed by AELP using data from DfE (2017-22).*

## Recommendations

While it is beneficial for the apprenticeship system to be more sophisticated and clear, too many external demands do not necessarily translate into a better apprenticeship. **The government must take into account the additional burden on providers and employers and develop funding and governance rules with careful consideration of feasibility and with an eye to costs that may be displaced from front-line training and support as a result.**



## 4.4 INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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Technology is constantly evolving in modern society, and the skills required, particularly in the Digital sector, are changing rapidly. The major problem identified by those we spoke to in this sector is the gap between the curriculum and the skills currently required in any one particular apprenticeship.

“ Our achievement and retention rate this year has been affected predominantly by [...] the standard called **network engineer**, which is a Level 4. What we found, though, is that (apprentices) **have not been able to get the exposure to what is required (by it) [...]** effectively you would be training them on things that were already out of date.

*(ICT, Training provider)*

Particularly in the ICT sector, where technology develops and changes quickly, what is taught in apprenticeship standards is not keeping up with current demands by employers, and this delay is seen as a problem. It is not just that the content is out of date in itself; if the standard requires exposure to technology that is increasingly not being used, it therefore becomes difficult to deliver, adding cost despite being seen as irrelevant, leading to apprentice dissatisfaction and potentially withdrawal.

There is, however, a good deal of importance attached to finding a balance in the timing of any review of standards with this issue in mind:

“ I think there is a fine line because what happens otherwise is you have just built the programme, you have just got it going, everybody has just got used to it from a training and delivery provider point of view, and then another review comes in again. And then I think you have got to kind of strike a balance. At the moment, isn't it every three years that they get reviewed? And then it takes another year for it to come out and then another year for it to be introduced. So it is really a five-year process.

*(ICT, Training provider)*

“ I think the ones in the environment that are changing so quickly really need to start to be reviewed at month 18 so that the new stuff is published. **It is not about when they start to be reviewed; it is the publish date.** I think as long as it does not fall under two years, but does not go beyond 2 1/2 years. I think you would just end up sitting just in about the right bracket where you are actually getting a program that, some elements might be slightly out of date, but not dramatically out of date.

*(ICT, Training provider)*

Each standard consists of knowledge, skills and behaviours developed by a trailblazer group of employers. According to IFATE, all Level 3 and 4 apprenticeship standards are reviewed every three years. There are only three apprenticeships that are reviewed every two years in the ICT sector - Data Scientist, Digital and Technology Solutions Specialist, and Digital and Technology Solutions Professional – yet these all fall into Levels 6 and 7.

## Recommendations

Skills and knowledge required in the ICT sector change at a very fast pace compared to other sectors. **IfATE should better reflect the speed of change in the knowledge and skills required in the ICT sector and ensure a more appropriate frequency of reviews at all levels with this in mind.** Perhaps there is also an opportunity to review the structure of standards to enable them to be reviewed and amended in a more modular fashion thus reducing the time and effort required for regular review.





## 5. CROSS-SECTORAL FACTORS OF APPRENTICES' WITHDRAWAL

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During this research, we were able to identify particular issues as being major drivers for withdrawal in specific sectors, but there were also a number of other issues that were more generally shared.

In total, six such cross-sectoral issues are found;

- 1 English and Math requirements
- 2 Career guidance
- 3 Trainer retention/recruitment
- 4 Engagement with employers
- 5 Challenges with EPA
- 6 Apprentices' job or career change/better job offer

The following sections describe and investigate these issues one by one.

### 5.1 ENGLISH AND MATHS REQUIREMENTS/ FUNCTIONAL SKILLS

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Accredited English and Maths qualifications are mandatory exit requirements for the successful completion of all apprenticeships. Level 2 apprentices must achieve Functional Skills in literacy and numeracy (or equivalent qualifications) at a minimum of Level 1 prior to completing their apprenticeship. Until relatively recently, they also needed to continue to study and sit (but not necessarily pass) examinations for Level 2 English and Maths, even if the apprenticeship standard did not require them to attain it<sup>7</sup>. Apprentices at other levels may be required by particular standards to reach further higher accredited levels of qualifications in order to complete.

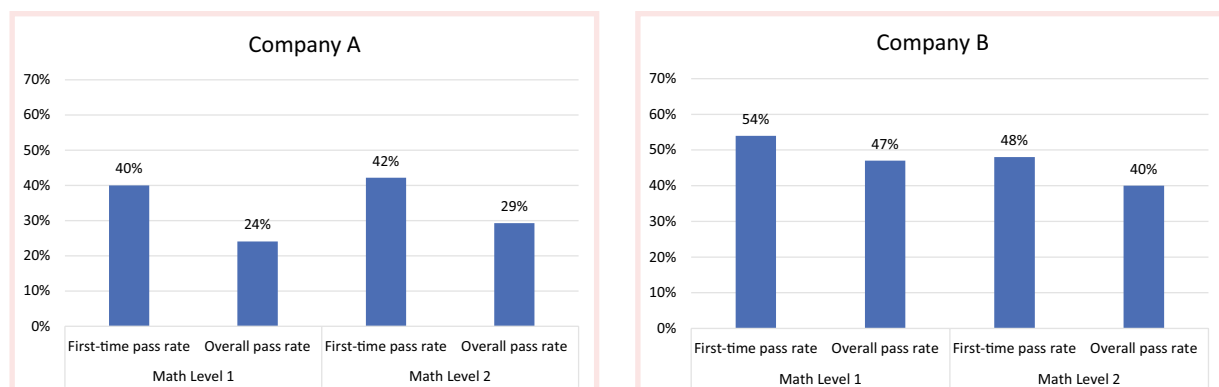
Organisations providing Functional Skills shared interesting statistics with us.

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<sup>7</sup> This requirement was suspended for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, and finally dropped permanently in 2022.

Figure 8 illustrates the comparison of the first-time pass rate and overall pass rate between two major awarding organisations. Both show that first-time pass rates are higher than overall pass rates. The reason appears to be that learners who fail the first time are more likely to fail on repeated sittings.

**FIGURE 8:** Comparison of Math First-Time Pass rate and Overall Pass Rates



**Note.** AELP analysis of awarding organisation primary data.

One interviewee was particularly clear that repeated unsuccessful attempts to pass minimum levels of English and Maths, even where these were not required by the standard, can lead to early apprenticeship withdrawal despite being occupationally competent or very near it:

“ It is a lot more of a struggle to get them to come back and do their maths and English. [...] And I think the more times that they repeat it, the more of a barrier it becomes because then they have just got a huge obstacle that they think they cannot overcome.

**(Health, NHS)**

Another interviewee explained English and Maths are particularly hard for many apprentices because of their experiences at school.

“ Many people come into land-based industries because they have not done particularly well academically at school anyway. So they have already had all those years of maths and English tuition, which has not actually helped them [...].

**(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)**

Furthermore, an interviewee from the NHS adds that current Functional Skills are increasingly no different to GCSEs and lack ‘functional’ or applied aspects. Given that eleven years of compulsory education had failed to bring the apprentice to Level 2 in English and Maths using the GCSE route, she highlighted the importance of differentiating English and Maths from this route by making it more contextualised, connecting the subject directly with the needs of the workplace.

“ One of the big issues is that people are being put off doing functional skills because it is so close to GCSEs, and they are just saying, what is the point?

**(ICT, Training provider)**

The issue of less functional aspects in Functional Skills was raised in our previous research, Access to the Future (AELP, 2022), as was the concept of “learned helplessness”, which can lead to disillusionment and a potential withdrawal from the study. The government, therefore, needs to reconsider whether the original intention to provide a contextualised route of learning in literacy and numeracy is continuing to be achieved by the current content of Functional Skills and by continuing a mandatory policy of achievement as an exit requirement.

## Recommendations

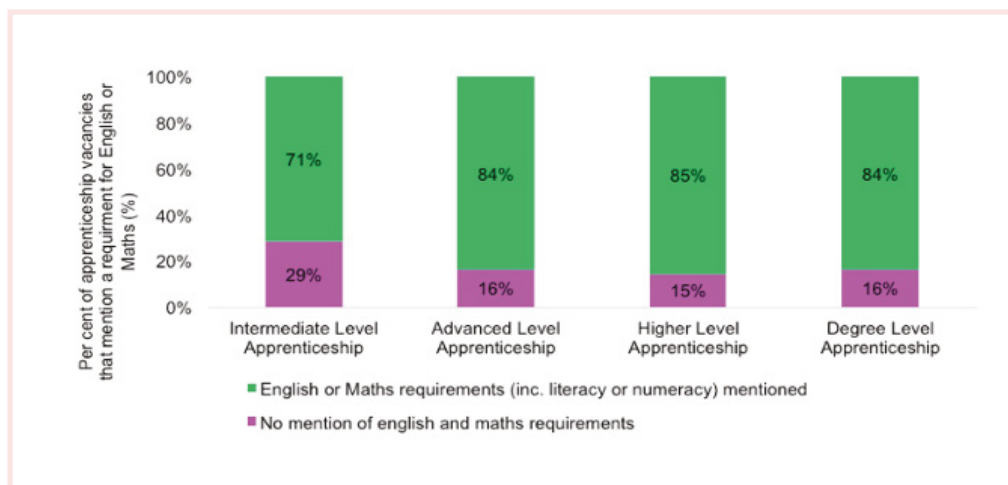
Functional Skills should be more contextualised, practical and related to the occupation to differentiate them from GCSEs and to make them more directly relevant to the role for which an apprentice is training. One interviewee suggested,

“ If they [functional skills requirement] could have a contextualised kind of stuff... Looking at NHS, weighing babies, BMI, blood pressure, and as long as they can be occupationally competent and their employers are happy to sign them off, that should be enough [...].

**(Health, NHS)**

This would give some discretion to the employer to decide whether the apprentice meets the criteria set and can be deemed to be competent for the job role they operate in. This is likely to increase the apprenticeship achievement rates of more disadvantaged learners without compromising employer requirements. In an article in FE Week (2021), Henry Faulkner-Ellis from NFER argued that exit requirements for literacy and numeracy actively disadvantaged learners who had not succeeded in this through the pre-16 education period. He also noted that nearly 30% of Level 2 standards did not specify the need for them at all, as Figure 9 illustrates.

**FIGURE 9:** Percentage of Apprenticeship Vacancies Advertised that Require English or Math Qualifications



**Note:** Faulkner-Ellis, H. (2021). *Employers keep asking for unnecessary maths and English grades from apprentices.* [online] feweeek.co.uk.

This does not water down the importance of English and maths more generally. Since qualification levels in these subjects ceased to be a mandatory exit requirement for T Levels in November 2021, so apprenticeships have become an outlier in the post-16 skills landscape. Whereas both T Levels and 16-19 provisions more generally have study towards (as opposed to the achievement of) Level 2 as a condition of funding, apprenticeship policy is now completely out of kilter with them. **Given that the attainment of literacy and numeracy qualifications that employers sometimes question the value of is being cited as a factor in early withdrawal, a reconsideration of this approach is urgently required.**

AELP has previously proposed disaggregating literacy and numeracy qualifications as a default and mandatory exit requirement of all apprenticeships. This would not prevent standards from specifying that particular levels or qualifications must be achieved in order to complete an apprenticeship or that study towards them should not continue – but where a standard does not specify a specific level of accreditation, then attaining a minimum level should not be an exit requirement. This would have the advantage of reinforcing the standard as being employer-led, reflecting what employers want rather than untidily leveraging a broader government policy requirement into the mix.

## 5.2 CAREER GUIDANCE

Since 2018, secondary schools in England have been required by law to allow vocational education providers access to every student in years 8-13 to discuss non-academic routes that are available to them. This is commonly known as the “Baker Clause”, and its main objective is to ensure that schools make young people aware of all the options available to them as they leave compulsory education so they are able to make an informed choice about the path that is right for them.



Despite this new law, it seems implementation of the Baker Clause remains patchy at best, and many training providers find that career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) remains a huge issue when they approach young people about the opportunities presented by technical or work-based learning, and in particular apprenticeships. Research by UCAS (2021) found that nearly a third of students said it was “very easy” to access information about higher education, whilst only 6% said the same about apprenticeships. IPPR also report that just two in five schools (37.6%) are complying with the requirements of the legislation. (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2019). 70% of technical education providers responded that it is difficult to access schools in their area to talk about their offer.

This was clearly reflected by the responses of training providers across the board during our research. Providers were clear that if young people, in particular, are given clear information about what apprenticeships are, how they are delivered, and how they can positively benefit career prospects, that rates of early withdrawal could be positively impacted.

“ Still a huge issue in terms of lack of impartial career advice and guidance. If we are looking at young people, are they really making an informed decision because a lot of them have to navigate that on their own? There is not as much support for them in terms of making those choices [...] it is just **the lack of understanding around apprenticeships**, the lack of parity that they still think it is the poor relation, or it is something that you do if you are not academic. I think that is a huge myth.

**(Health, NHS)**

“ I think one of the things we do need to improve is **career advice**. We do need to improve the image of (our) industry in schools so that people go into it and realise there is a good career in it if you really want it.

**(Construction, EPAO)**

Career guidance is not synonymous with the Baker Clause, nor is it confined to it. Improving Baker Clause implementation will help the situation, but it is not the complete answer. For example, providers particularly note the influence of parents and guardians on young people and highlight the importance of interventions for them in career guidance strategies. One training provider shared that they actively try to get parents involved to convince them of the importance and value of an apprenticeship.

“ We invite parents to come and see everything we do. It is as much trying to help parents get involved, but if you have got parents who do not want to be involved. [...] they maybe do not really see it as a career or job [...].

**(Agriculture, training provider)**



“ We are finding that [certain] kinds of parents are a huge blocker because they just do not understand that, actually, the apprenticeship could be a really good option for their child.

*(Health, NHS)*

“ We have got parents that say to the child, “oh well, if you do not like it, do not do it.” Or “if it is not going your way, do not do it.” [...] So when something goes wrong at work, instead of thinking right, they [learners] say, “Oh well, we will leave, we will just not do it.” [...] But we have never had anything like that before.

*(Agriculture, Training provider)*

Given all of the above, the announcement by UCAS that from February 2023 they will advertise thousands of apprenticeship opportunities to young people alongside undergraduate degrees, with an ability to apply for them within the UCAS hub from Autumn 2024, is very welcome (DfE, 2023). This will significantly increase the visibility and value of apprenticeship opportunities to both potential apprentices and those who can influence their decisions, and promote the perception of their overall value in learning and employment prospects going forward.

## Recommendations

Provider Access Legislation came into force on 1st January 2023, requiring schools to provide at least six encounters with technical training providers and/or employers for all students over the course of school years 8 to 13. Furthermore, Ofsted has updated its school inspection handbook to reinforce the focus on career guidance and clarified that inspectors will always report where a school falls short of the requirements of the legislation, as well as consider how it affects a school’s inspection grade. The government also encourages schools to involve parents in the encounter and suggests providers consider follow-up resources that are specifically tailored to parents to reinforce the information children received at the encounter.

Hopefully, enactment and enforcement of the Provider Access Legislation will make career guidance more accessible to young people, reduce the stigma of apprenticeships and help young people choose the best option from the range available. **However, the government still needs to provide a clearer strategy to get parents involved in career advice and support children’s journeys once they are in an apprenticeship.** In order for this to happen, information advice and guidance strategies must also reach parents and guardians as primary influencers of decisions. Every person who is interested in or related to an individual’s career and progression needs to be involved in the conversation. Perhaps also when engaging with parents/guardians some consideration needs to be given to whether the earning opportunity of apprenticeships will impact on any wider benefit support received by the household and appropriate advice given.

“ The failure of the government to implement the Baker Clause, [...], was a huge mistake and has had a massive impact because too many of those schools have gotten away with not meeting their requirements of the Baker clause. And frankly, that is not being picked up by the inspection regime either and is not being used as a tool to improve it.

*(FE Freelance consultant)*

## 5.3 TRAINER RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

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Multiple sectors raised trainer recruitment/retention as one of the factors that led to apprentices' early withdrawal. Interviewees said they struggle in both recruiting and retaining trainers, and the main reason for this struggle is often the difficulty in matching the higher salaries offered by the industry.

“ Our biggest one [issue] is staffing. And it is lack of good qualified, skilled staff [...] Move to another college or another provider for pounds and pennies. We have desperately tried to recruit our own, just so hard because you have got an electrician that can earn 50/60 grand a year working for themselves or being a supervisor on site. We cannot match that salary.

*(Engineering, Training provider)*

The issue is evidenced not just with movements from training to industry but within the skills sector itself with continuous “poaching” of staff.

“ It [trainer recruiting/retention issues] has always been there, but obviously, the gap is getting wider and wider than what people are earning in the industry to what a college or a training provider can pay.

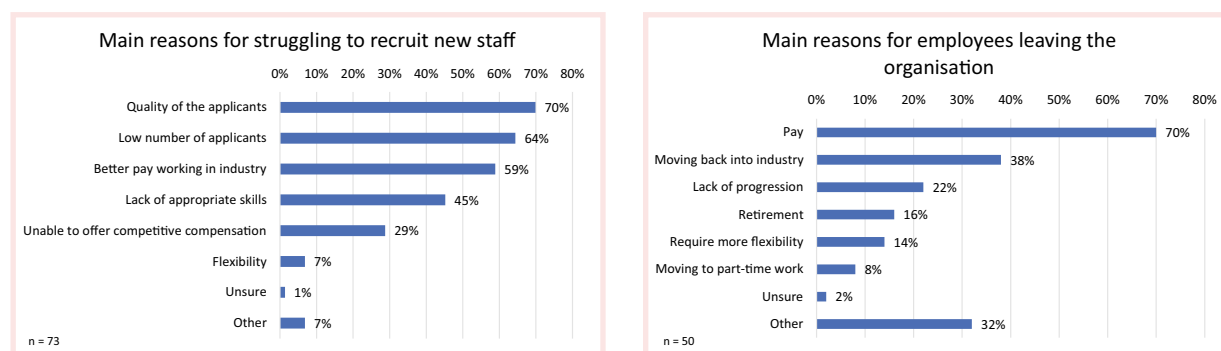
*(Construction, Training provider)*

The apprenticeship reforms in 2017 also created an entirely new part of the apprenticeship delivery process in an end-point assessment that required completely separate organisations to take on the role of assessment in order to ensure that providers did not “mark their own homework” by assessing skills they themselves have trained. However, by their own admission, the newly-created end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs) have had to recruit staff from the pool of talent at providers, making the recruitment and retention issues of training providers even worse. One EPAO noted to us that **“EPAOs have effectively bled resources from the provider talent pool.”**

The whole issue of recruitment and retention of training staff has been repeatedly raised as a serious issue by members of AELP, who conducted a survey to understand the problem in July 2022. This found that 27% of training providers had issues in recruiting staff, and 69% had an issue in both recruiting and retaining staff, particularly trainers and assessors.

Figure 10 describes the main reasons the survey found for these results. Following ‘quality of the applicants’ and ‘low number of applicants’, ‘better pay working in the industry’ ranked 3rd in recruiting issues and similarly ‘pay’ and ‘moving back into the industry’ were the top two reasons for retention issues, accounting for 70% and 38%, respectively.

**FIGURE 10: Main Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Staff**



**Note.** AELP Workplace recruitment and retention survey (2022).

Many respondents to the survey felt that they could not compete with salaries and conditions offered in colleges and industry. For example, colleges tend to have a broad spread of provisions which can act to cross-subsidise less financially robust areas of learning, have public funds available to allow them to offer higher salaries, and have access to capital funding from the government. Alongside this, the existence of more heavily-unionised workplaces means that pay and conditions can often be more attractive than in the private and not-for-profit sectors. On the other hand, for many independent training providers, their main or only income is through apprenticeship funding, which has remained broadly static since 2017, despite serious inflation. One interviewee noted,

“The amount of money we get for doing apprenticeships has not changed in five years when everybody else’s wages have gone up. So I do not blame anybody for leaving for more money.”

**(Engineering, Training provider)**

Since training providers are struggling with recruiting staff, this impacts existing staff who have to cover the gaps, and this burden often negatively impacts staff retention, causing a vicious cycle of a need for further recruitment. In order to address this, some training providers said they ‘grow’ and train staff themselves. However, staff who became occupationally competent often moved on to colleges and industry anyway due to better pay, so this did not necessarily solve the retention issue. One training provider responded that they constantly trained staff to a good standard simply for them to join a college. These trainer recruiting and retention issues not only impact the quality of apprenticeship programmes but can also adversely affect apprentices’ trust and faith in them.

“ I do think that [trainer retention issue] is a big factor in terms of dropouts as well. I know that certainly, we are with some trusts and the providers that they work with where they have got a really high turnover of staff. Then the Apprentice gets disengaged, and they kind of lose faith in the program.

(Health, NHS)

## Recommendations

Macroeconomic factors beyond the direct control of the sector are the source of many of the issues being experienced by apprenticeship training providers in terms of staff recruitment and retention. To a large extent, they are similarly beyond the control of the government to directly affect, at least in the short to medium term.

Nevertheless, there is a clear need for the funding of apprenticeships to better reflect the actual costs of delivery, and this must take into account rising staff costs. As noted in previous chapters, IfATE has had criticism that its review procedures for the funding of apprenticeships standards are too slow and not responsive enough to changing market conditions, leaving providers languishing at funding rates that fall rapidly behind the actual needs of the business. In November 2022, Jennifer Coupland, CEO of IfATE, announced that a process of reviewing standards for temporary banding fund uplifts to recognise increased cost pressures would begin imminently<sup>8</sup>, but despite inflation levels of around 9/10%, it took until the following January for the process to be put in place.

It is imperative that funding for apprenticeships keeps pace with the costs being incurred in delivering them, which affects the ability of the sector to deliver a high-quality service that keeps apprentices engaged. Failing to do this often means that over time, the training infrastructure will become increasingly degraded, and its ability to retain apprentices will be compromised.

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<sup>8</sup> “What We Learnt from AELP Autumn Conference 2022” <https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/what-we-learnt-from-aelp-autumn-conference-2022/>

## 5.4 ENGAGEMENT WITH EMPLOYERS

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Strong partnerships with employers are essential to delivering high-quality apprenticeships. However, our interviews revealed that training providers think employers do not always understand their responsibility and lack support for working in tandem with training providers. Particularly, training providers mentioned that many employers fail to meet or appreciate the apprenticeship off-the-job training requirements. One training provider mentioned,

“ It is the off-the-job requirement of six hours, as well as paying them as well as supporting them that is the issue.

*(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)*

While there are some employers who do not understand their requirements in an apprenticeship, many training providers perceive that employers do understand their requirements but find it difficult to comply with them due to the current economic situation.

“ I think the company does understand, but circumstances are not letting them understand if that makes sense. The pressures of work inflate all that we have spoken about, which I think is making it very difficult for an employer.

*(Engineering, Training provider)*

“ We have had some feedback from employers who have said that [...] they cannot now afford to give an apprentice that off the job hours because they need it to be somebody who is actually going to work for the entire time and that is what they need to spend their money on.

*(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)*

Although employers are in a difficult situation, they nevertheless have an obligation to fulfil their responsibility for off-the-job training time, as the apprenticeship is delivered as a collaboration between the employer and training providers. An interviewee from an EPAO believed that many employers still do not fully understand their responsibility in an apprenticeship model despite the new employer-led system.



“ The fact is that it is supposed to be employer-driven, and now it is being a bit more enforced that it is employer-driven with the new types of standards. Historically employers have got the training providers to act as their proxies [...] they are almost half a step out of sync with how things should be ... It is not college; it is an apprenticeship. [...] It should be a collaborative process.

(ICT, EPAO)

The reasons for not completing off-the-job training requirements can therefore be manifold – it may be that work pressures mean the employer cannot or will not release the apprentice to do it; it may be that the provider has not properly worked it into learning plans, or there is a misunderstanding of what delivery guidance defines as ‘off-the-job’ and what it does not. In any event, where off-the-job training is not delivered properly, apprentices’ study time can be squeezed, and their life-learning-working balance is more likely to be disrupted, or they become dissatisfied that the learning they are receiving is not as complete as it could or should be. Either way, this can lead to early withdrawal from the programme.

As mentioned earlier, ‘not enough time for learning/training’ is the top reason raised by all apprentices as a programme-related factor for their withdrawal, which 44% of apprentices chose. Furthermore, this is a major issue even among those currently doing apprenticeships, with 13% saying they are not satisfied with the balance between learning and working (IFF Research, 2022).

## Recommendations

As multiple training providers mentioned, better awareness is still needed amongst employers about apprenticeships and EPA, and an understanding of their responsibility in facilitation, such as securing 20%-off-the-job-training and providing appropriate support for apprentices. Employers cannot expect fully trained apprentices from training providers without playing an active part in fulfilling their own responsibilities.

There is, however, a considerable onus on providers to help improve this situation. The obligations of the employer in providing suitable conditions in which an apprenticeship can be delivered should be clearly discussed with them, and indeed the apprentice as well, by the provider right at the start – just ensuring a signature by the employer on an apprenticeship agreement at commencement does not in itself ensure that this expectation is understood or embedded. Off-the-job requirements undoubtedly adversely impact short-term overall productivity levels, but the learning that takes place reinforces on-the-job learning and, in the medium to longer term, produces a more rounded, skilled and productive employee. **Apprenticeships must be presented by providers, and understood by employers, as much more than a simple training programme but as a complete, integrated set of working conditions that differ from those of non-apprenticed employees, that ultimately result in a higher-skilled and more productive workforce**

## 5.5 CHALLENGES WITH EPA

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Another area that both training providers and learners raised as a negative factor affecting apprenticeship early withdrawal was end-point assessment (EPA). EPA is an independent assessment of whether apprentices have, through their training, developed the skills, knowledge and behaviours required by the apprenticeship standards, and are assessed by independent end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs). This assessment was newly introduced for apprenticeship standards. The nature of EPA can vary from standard to standard, but can comprise various methods such as practical assessments, interviews, projects, written and/or multiple-choice tests, and presentations. Once apprentices successfully pass EPA, they can be awarded a certificate and can be considered to have passed the apprenticeship. It is therefore essentially used as the key benchmark for achievement and so a successful apprenticeship journey

We found four major challenges around the current EPA model;

- 1 lack of consistency and transparency with cost
- 2 the nature and content of the EPA
- 3 availability of EPA sessions
- 4 a lack of standardisation between EPAOs

### Lack of consistency and transparency with cost of EPA

The most frequently cited issues by training providers were the reservation of costs of EPA within the funding mechanism for apprenticeships. In this sense the challenge is not unlike the excessive administration and governance burden cited by the engineering sector. These are additional costs which impact the overall investment available to focus on training. The overall issue being raised was that funding for the training that apprentices need was being squeezed by the need for an entirely separate assessment mechanism that appeared to add cost for no great benefit to the learner, and that this may also be contributing to apprentice dissatisfaction with their training and contact time.

Providers are unable to claim 20% of the funding for an apprenticeship until an EPA is attempted, a factor designed to ensure that providers have a financial incentive to ensure that all apprentices sit EPA. There were, however, questions about whether this proportion of funding is a fair reflection in all cases of how much such assessments actually cost - the cash flow impact of this may be diluting the ability to offer learners the support they need in the lead in to EPA . There was also a perception – that it must be said EPAOs would argue against – that costs for EPAs were sometimes artificially inflated to match the 20% of funding set aside.

In reality the nature of EPA is dictated by the assessment models that Trailblazer Standards groups define, and in the early years of reform when neither providers nor awarding organisations were allowed into the process it produced some unfeasible models for delivery. This was often due to limited availability of experienced assessors and the relative costs of the process when compared to funding available. As such the EPAO has relatively little control over the assessment models they are asked to deliver but there could be better transparency and consistency within each apprenticeship. What it does mean is that in some apprenticeships with low funding bands the EPA can represent a high cost compared to the overall available funding for training – this is because the cost of EPA is directly drawn from the activity and not a flat percentage of the funding band available.

It is not clear how much of a factor this is in learner retention and achievement but clearly it is something that is impacting provider behaviour and application of effort, and so should be considered in a broader reflection of reform and improvements. .

“ EPA is very important, and I think it is a really good thing because it is nothing other than a phase test. [...] [Yet] we lose 20% of our funding to pay for that or to set aside for that.

**(Engineering, Training provider)**

“ 20% of the funding is on EPA. They do one knowledge test and one day of observation. We do 13 months of a slog for 80%. How can that equate to them having 20% for value for money? [...] The priority should be the front end, not the end.

**(Agriculture, Training provider)**

“ I find the EPA financial model, in some cases, difficult to understand and difficult to find where the value for money is on how much some EPAO's are charging for their telephone or zoom calls, which really impacts us.

**(Business, Training provider)**

## Nature and content of EPA

One of the advantages of the EPA is that it should offer a robust assessment of skills, knowledge, and behaviour. However, our interviews revealed that training providers feel that many EPAs were too long, daunting or difficult for the level or content of training being assessed, which leads to apprentice dropouts through being daunted at the prospect of what is to come. Interviewees told us,

“ It is about 20%, the first time [EPA] passes. But overall, for us, it is about a 70% pass rate eventually. Imagine doing a driving test for three whole days, and you make one mistake, you fail, and you got to do it again. So you find many drop out if they fail the 1st.

**(Engineering, Training provider)**

“ A lot of our learners failed the first time round, and now they have revised it. I think this professional discussion is really hard if they are not getting the experience on-site. So they all passed the practical, but now they have all failed the professional discussion.

**(Construction, Training provider)**

Demanding EPAs that are failed, sometimes repeatedly, place a lot of pressure on apprentices who may then choose not to continue their programme. All accreditation should be demanding but greater scrutiny could be placed on particular assessment models that have a high failure rate to ensure they are providing a fair judge of competence.

“ Our EPA is sort of six hours of observation, which is incredibly gruelling for everybody. Then an hour and a half professional discussion at the end [...]. It is unnecessary pressure on people.

**(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)**

One training provider shared that some of the EPA tests, such as interviews and professional discussions, require not only technical skills and knowledge but also soft skills. Thus, training providers need to foster soft skills, too, but this is not properly recognised by funding.

“ [...] there are some learners in some jobs where they do not need to actually day-to-day sit in front of people and publicly speak and express themselves and articulate what they need to do ...(that is) a completely different set of skills to the actual digital marketing apprenticeship itself. So providers need to cover a load more other soft skills (in addition to what the standard requires) to support learners to pass their endpoint assessment.

**(Business, Training provider)**

Overall, the content of EPA can particularly impact lower-level apprentices, because many of them are not academic and have struggled with examinations in the past. A disproportionate amount of young apprentices may have been ‘failed’ by the school examination system and so care should be taken to ensure that the balance of assessment methodology is not too heavily skewed towards the academic. Too often the examination is seen as a proxy for rigour and yet it may be having a detrimental impact on the ability of competent apprentices to complete and achieve their apprenticeships. Further investigation of correlation between assessment type and failure rates should be conducted to ascertain if there is a trend here.

“ They are not necessarily very academically based people coming in for land-based sectors. They appreciated the fact that they were not going to be faced with a huge exam at the end of their program and that they could show their development throughout the entirety. [...] the level of intensity of the endpoint is, you know, quite gruelling for a young person to go through.

**(Agriculture, Roundtable discussion)**

## Availability of EPAs

Training providers in some sectors complained that they could not book EPAs for when they are required, and apprentices have to wait for a long time after ostensibly completing their training before being able to be assessed. During this period, apprentices may get a better job offer or change their minds and withdraw from the apprenticeship without completing it.

It should also be noted that EPAOs often complained that not enough notice was given to allow sourcing and allocation of assessors for EPA sessions. This suggests that there is improvement to be seen on both sides for ongoing communication of apprentice readiness and EPA availability to ensure that the learner is not disadvantaged by long delays between completion of training and EPA activity.

“ I could not get tests for a lot of people in a timely fashion, so that meant people got sick. I left the apprenticeship early.

**(Transport, Roundtable discussion)**

“ There is a very long wait for the ICT assessment bookings at the moment

**(ICT, Roundtable discussion)**

## Standardisation

Another problem is the lack of standardisation of EPA methods between EPAOs. Training providers explain that different EPAOs can interpret assessment plans very differently, making it harder to prepare apprentices for EPA. This can be particularly the case where different EPAOs are used - perhaps because of availability issues - within the same employer workforce, as can often happen at larger companies.

This is one of the main reasons that all EPAOs and EPA have been moved under the jurisdiction of OfQual to help ensure that EPAOs are aware of and attend to issues around standardisation across common EPAs. This is an area that should see some improvement as a result.

“ Looking at the Level 3 senior healthcare support worker as an example, I think there are 17 EPO's delivering that standard, and there is no standardisation. [...] So that makes it more of a challenge to get your apprentice ready because you need to understand what that particular EPAO is going to focus on more than perhaps another one.

**(Health, NHS)**

“ One EPAO interprets the standard one way, another EPAO interprets it another way, and another one interprets it another way. That can hold us back in some cases.

*(ICT, Roundtable discussion)*

## Recommendations

“ I do think EPA's great. I do think they are worth it.[...]. EPA gives you that certificate that shows you have got occupational competence [...].

*(Retail, Employer provider)*

Six years have passed since the introduction of apprenticeship standards and the start of EPA, but in practice, interviews revealed many challenges surrounding it that are not properly being addressed. Training providers and employers understand the value of EPA and are not in denial about its benefits, but consider that there remains room for improvement in the EPA process as it is having a negative impact on apprentices and in turn apprenticeship completion and retention.

Training providers were not convinced that withholding 20% of their funding is necessary for EPA. EPAOs need to provide more clear and transparent information about where the value for money is on how much they charge as currently, many training providers and employers seem to think this is not commensurate with EPA costs and, therefore, adversely impacts funding available for the training elements. It is also recommended that high cost EPAs be reviewed with IfATE and Trailblazer Standards groups as they are the source of the assessment models. (During our research, it was suggested that EPA funding should be received directly by the EPAO and not channelled through the training provider. This discussion has been reflected among EPAOs themselves, of whom many would prefer direct contracts from the ESFA rather than receiving them via the provider. Whilst it was not clear that this sort of change would directly improve apprenticeship withdrawal rates, it adds to the overall view that there is much about the EPA process that is still not understood, is inefficient, or that generally requires improvement).

Moreover, IfATE must regularly review the required tests and assessment methodology in the EPA to ensure they are commensurate with the content and level of training received, thereby reducing unnecessary pressure on apprentices, which can lead to early withdrawal in order to avoid the EPA entirely. In turn OfQual should ensure a level of standardisation across sectors where multiple EPAOs are operating.

One EPAO suggested to us,

“ If you have already passed an element of it, you should not need to resit it at EPA. It should be banked [...] I think there should be more flexibility in terms of the way the EPA works.

*(Construction, EPAO/ Training provider)*



While EPA should be rigorous, the current double testing of industry qualification contents within EPA is widely considered a waste of time and money for both apprentices, training providers, and EPAOs. It can also lead to apprentices withdrawing from programmes after getting professional qualifications, but before EPA. To help remedy this, IfATE plans to review integration of professional qualifications with apprenticeship EPA, proposing to include at least one part of a professional industry qualification. However, Jake Tween, Director of Apprenticeships at DSW has pointed out that there are concerns that this could create monopolies of EPAOs with qualification bodies (FE Week, 2022). Furthermore, Simon Ashworth, Director of Policy at the AELP alerts that, in this case, the training providers' availability of EPAs may be affected as not all EPAOs are awarding organisations, and this could create an additional burden on training providers in post-gateway bureaucracy (FE Week, 2022). Withholding certification of embedded professional qualifications until after EPA has been completed is raised as another possible solution .

Table 4 shows the apprenticeships in the first wave for EPA integration with regulated qualifications announced by IfATE. However, most of the apprenticeship routes are higher levels, such as degree apprenticeships and lower apprenticeships are not yet included. Therefore, the integration of industry qualifications into EPA may take some time to spread to the lower-level apprentices, and different solutions may be required.

**TABLE 4: Apprenticeships in the First wave for EPA Integration with Regulated Qualifications**

Apprenticeship route	Level	Apprenticeship Route	Level
Digital technician	5	Speech and language therapist (degree)	6
Clinical dental technician	5	Therapeutic radiographer (degree)	6
Orthodontic therapist	4	Hearing aid dispenser	5
Dental nurse	3	Officer of the watch	3
Pharmacy technician	3	District nurse	7
Arts therapist (degree)	7	Specialist community public health nurse	7
Diagnostic radiographer (degree)	6	midwife (degree)	6
Dietitian (degree)	6	Registered Nurse (degree) (NMC 2010)	6
Occupational therapist (degree)	6	Registered nurse (degree) (NMC 2018)	6
Operating department practitioner (degree)	6	Nursing associate (NMC 2018)	5
Paramedic (degree)	6	Social worker	6
Physiotherapist (degree)	6	Insurance practitioner	3
Podiatrist (degree)	6	Marine electrician	3
Prosthetist and orthotist (degree)	6		

**Note.** IfATE, as cited in FE Week (2022).

Lastly, for the issue of long waiting times for booking EPA, maintaining close contact between training providers and EPAOs is significant. EPAOs explained that the delay in EPA is often caused by not having enough notice when apprentices reach the gateway. Interviewees from EPAOs suggested,

“ One of the largest contributing factors to delays is not having enough notice coming through from training providers as to when learners are reaching the gateway. [...] So the more notification and the more communication that we have from training providers around the readiness of learners or when they are expected to can really help us to pipeline plan.

(ICT, EPAO)

“ I think a lot of that is down to communication and making sure that your EPAO understands that you have got this bulge of learners coming through the pipeline so that they can adjust their assessor pool. [...] We need to know where the learner is and when we can expect to do the assessments.

(Transport, Roundtable discussion)

Apprenticeships cannot be completed by one organisation; it needs to be a joint effort by training providers, employers, and EPAOs. Thus, close communication and close working are essential elements for a better apprenticeship experience which would help with completion rates given the better alignment of readiness and timing.

## 5.6 JOB OR CAREER CHANGE/ BETTER JOB OFFER

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Throughout this research, the biggest problem cited by training providers and employers was apprentices' withdrawal before EPA. This problem is seen as an issue across sectors, particularly those sectors with apprenticeships that offer industry qualifications before EPA.

Of equal significance here is the way that achievement is currently measured with regards to destination of apprentice and reflection on the providers and employers. More nuance should be applied here to factors impacting achievement and not all exits should lead to a penalty for providers or employers. If a learner leaves an apprenticeship for a better paid job in the same sector or drops the programme after completion of the professional qualifications, should this be viewed as a total failure?

Where an employer wishes to prematurely exit from the apprenticeship programme as they cannot accommodate any more off the job training, perhaps an additional payment from the funding band would discourage this type of behaviour.

As noted above, we have found that apprentices' withdrawal before EPA can very often be largely attributed to two factors, which are a) better job offers (mainly better pay), and b) having the necessary qualification(s) to get or fulfil a job role before EPA takes place.

## Apprentice pay

Interviewees mentioned that apprentices drop out of the programme halfway through because they find a better-paid job at a higher rate than an apprenticeship wage. As described before, the apprenticeship minimum wage (£4.81) is lower than the national minimum wage if aged 18 and over (which can be up to £9.50). Considering that the all-sector average apprentice wage was £7.00, as shown in Figure 5 in Chapter 4, this shows why apprentices can often consider themselves very underpaid.

Interviewees shared with us their struggles with losing apprentices.

“ If they can get 50p extra an hour working at ALDI up the road, they will go to ALDI up the road. So it is definitely the economic climate that has had a massive impact on the retail sector.

**(Retail, Training provider)**

“ If somebody next door pays a bit extra, and then they just move over, it is a shame.

**(Transport, Roundtable discussion)**

Apprenticeship wages have been lower than minimum wages for some time, but apprentices who really want to work in that position remain in the lower apprenticeship wage category. However, it is possible to presume that the recent rising cost of living does not allow them to prioritise the work they want to do over their cost of living expenses.

Raising apprentice wages generally would resolve this problem, but it is not economically practicable for many employers and particularly in the current climate. **An issue that needs to be considered, therefore, is how the value and currency of an apprenticeship are expressed** – if an apprentice is choosing short-term higher wages over the completion of an apprenticeship, this must be at least in part because the long-term value of an apprenticeship to them is not rated as highly. This in turn may suggest that better progression and career information should be available to the apprentice so that they have more reassurance around the longer term benefits of completion.

When we explored this more fully with interviewees and roundtable attendees, we often found this deficit was inadvertently being reinforced by recruitment strategies within providers themselves, let alone employers more generally. Job vacancies were very much more often than not, not specifying the holding of an apprenticeship as an essential or even desirable element for applicants to job roles. If young people and apprentices do not see their apprenticeship being required in any way by potential employers, it is less surprising to find that they may be tempted to withdraw from them before completion, particularly when faced with higher wages for which apprenticeships are not a precondition. **The whole issue of not just the benefit of apprenticeships, but the presentation of their currency and value, requires serious consideration.**

## Having the necessary qualifications to get a job before EPA

Another reason for the withdrawal of apprenticeship before the EPA is because an apprentice gets the necessary qualifications they need to work before the EPA is even attempted.

“ The learners realised that for this industry, they just need the qualifications. I have seen learners take those certificates, leave the employment of their apprenticeship and go and get a fully paid role rather than (completing) an apprenticeship.

**(ICT, Training provider)**

“ So there are learners that want the professional qualification first, learners that have got that qualification then turn around and say that they are not willing to finish the apprenticeship.

**(Business, Training provider)**

“ With a gas apprenticeship, one of the things you have to do before you can take your endpoint assessment is get on the Gas Safe register. That is all you need to operate. [...] You get those before you get to the endpoint assessment, so it is of no interest in doing the endpoint assessment at all.

**(Engineering, Training provider)**

Withdrawing from an apprenticeship before EPA is not purely a decision made by learners, but they are sometimes incentivised by employers who tend to value other qualifications over completing an apprenticeship. Alternatively, many employers value the fact that an apprentice has, through their training, attained the skills they require for the job even though they have not formally completed the apprenticeship through undertaking EPA.

“ If they have already got their gas safety certificate, and they failed the EPA the first time, the employees literally go, ‘well, we do not need it’.

**(Engineering, Training provider)**



“ In the LGV apprenticeship [...], it is quite evident to me that both the learner and the employer just want the (driving) licence, and that is all they are interested in.

**(Transport, Roundtable discussion)**

“ Digital marketing and software people are cherry-picked because they already have a set of proven skills, and they can do the job from wherever. [...] Learners are cherry-picked by employers not purely because of having qualifications but because they also have the necessary experience through their apprenticeship.

**(ICT, Training provider)**

These cases show apprenticeships are often used as a means to get the industry qualifications necessary for a job rather than to get an apprenticeship certificate. This is being compounded by the vast majority of employers not specifying the holding of an apprenticeship as being necessary or even desirable when recruiting staff.

## Alternative options

Meanwhile, other forms of learning provision have either maintained their attraction, or have appeared and are impacting engagement with apprenticeships.

One of the options which many choose over apprenticeships is Skills Bootcamps. These were developed in 2020 as free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks for adults aged 19 or over – but only available in certain sectors. As with some historical NVQs, skills bootcamps allow learners to complete much faster than apprenticeships. It is right that there should be an appropriate mix of training routes available to learners and employers but when reviewing any drop in apprenticeship starts we must consider what else is available, and whether those options have become more attractive. This must then be factored into any statistical analysis of apprenticeship start rates.

Roundtable discussion within Transport & Logistics shared that the introduction of bootcamps had made the situation regarding apprenticeships worse as some employers prefer Skills Bootcamps over apprenticeships. One interviewee told us there are 18 different bootcamp routes that are no longer than 16 weeks long while the apprenticeship takes 18 months. The advantage of the short duration to gain qualifications, lower cost and quicker access to talent make them more attractive than apprenticeships for many employers.

“ There is a bootcamp, and you can get the licence fully funded through a boot camp, and you can do that in 12-16 weeks. [...] What we found is that some of the large employers have gone the bootcamp route, and they do not value the apprenticeship.

**(Transport, Roundtable discussion)**

## 5.7 THE VALUE OF APPRENTICESHIPS

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All these issues combine to raise questions about the perceived value of apprenticeships.

“ I think that [the value of apprenticeships] varies massively from sector to sector. [However], it was absolutely clear that for many employers, it was purely about the qualification. [...] It is just the qualification that they are worried about. For others, I think that is different, and I think you know that there are many where the apprenticeship itself and the experiences of being in training are highly valued.

*(FE Freelance consultant)*

“ Those professional qualifications are far more valued than the apprenticeship value. [...] I think that the apprenticeship model, the employer-LED model, has been sold in some cases from some quarters just as a means to pay for them.

*(Business, Training provider)*

As noted previously, apprenticeships tend not to be listed as a required certification in job descriptions, despite a Level 2 apprenticeship being equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades 4-9, and Level 3 being equivalent to an A level.

“ That [apprenticeships being undervalued] was raised about the fact it is never in job adverts. It is potentially not deemed as strong or as weighty as another recognised qualification [...]. And perhaps people do not understand the weighting and the recognition.

*(ICT, Training provider)*

As apprenticeship certifications tend not to be listed in job descriptions, so they are often not valued at the same level as other qualifications/certifications. This clearly impacts adversely on the perception of the inherent worth of an apprenticeship, from which then it is perhaps an easier decision to withdraw.



On the other hand, some interviewees acknowledged the value of apprenticeships as more than solely a route to other qualifications.

“ [In the Transportation and Logistics sector], some of the added benefits [of apprenticeships] are reduced accident rates in fuel, improved fuel consumption, and better customer service. [...] when you asked about what is the value of an apprenticeship to an employer, I think it is going to become more important as they start looking at clean fuels, different alternative technologies that transport companies are going to have to use, which is something that you do not get when you just do licence acquisition.

**(Transport, Roundtable discussion)**

“ I say anybody can study CIPD. Anybody can go and take an LGV licence. But it does not mean you have worked as a driver. It just means you know how to drive a lorry. [...] When we are looking for colleagues, we do want them to have that technical knowledge, but we do want them to have that working experience. Because it is about those relationships, they build the behaviours, and the soft skills that come with it. [...] The whole, rather than just the qualification.

**(Retail, Employer provider)**

There are many different vocational training options that are becoming available to learners. It is important to be clear about the value of apprenticeships and differentiate them from other options. As a first step to getting rid of the stigma around apprenticeship, achievements, listing apprenticeship certifications in the required qualifications in job descriptions may be effective

# APPRENTICES' VOICES

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## Noah

Noah is undertaking an apprenticeship of a vehicle, damage Mechanical, Electrical Trim (MET) technician in the Engineering sector. He decided to pursue his apprenticeship because he did not think university offered the best value and considered an apprenticeship to be a gentle introduction to the world of work.

Noah thinks an apprenticeship certificate is valuable for him, particularly when he wants to work for a larger company and its beneficial to climbing the ladder faster.

Noah highlighted that employers' awareness of apprenticeships and cooperation in working together is crucial for the improvement of the apprenticeship so that apprentices' training time will be secured.

## Theo

Theo is an electrical apprentice. He found out about the apprenticeships by himself, as he did not get career guidance from his school.

In Theo's apprenticeship, he is expected to complete many work portfolios outside of working hours in his own time. Thus, balancing work-life-learning is very hard.

In electrical apprenticeships, which Theo undertakes, apprentices do not get the industry qualifications until they complete their EPA, which is different from other apprenticeships.

Theo valued the work experience above the apprenticeship certificate and said he would highlight this more on his CV as the industry qualifications are what will give them better pay.



## Oliver and George

Oliver and George are undertaking apprenticeships in the automobile sector under the same training provider. Oliver is on the track course, and George is on the car course.

While both agreed that the advantage of an apprenticeship was being paid while they learned and gained experience, they had a different perception of the value of the apprenticeship certificate itself.

Oliver, who specialises in the car course, said the level 3 certificate is a requirement and listed on job adverts for the industry, so the apprenticeship certificate was as important as the experience.

To the question of 'do you drop out of your apprenticeship if someone tries to headhunt you with double salary?' Oliver answered 'no.'

In the case of George, who specialises in the track course, he perceived the value of his apprenticeship differently from Oliver.

George said he could work as a semi-skilled mechanic without the apprenticeship certificate and may eventually get to the mechanic grade (although this is not guaranteed). Thus, he appears to place a higher value on the skills rather than the certificate provided by the apprenticeship.

To the same question asked Oliver, George answered, 'either drop out or seriously consider the new job offer.'

# EMPLOYERS' VOICE

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## Construction Sector:

### Employer A's View

**Q.** What is the biggest issue of apprenticeship dropouts in your company?

**A.** People leave saying, 'it is not for me.' Many apprentices come into the company because of the money; it looks appealing and attractive. But it is hard work, and then they walk away from there and think, not for me at all. And they walk into completely different opportunities.

**Q.** What do you think is the value of apprenticeship?

**A.** Competency can only really be proved when you have done the EPA. So two people (one holding qualifications and completed an apprenticeship and the other just holding qualifications) could be equally competent, but one of them has been measured and formalized through EPA. On the other hand, the other person, we do not know until they have had that independent measurement.

**Q.** What kind of measurement is required to improve achievement rates?

**A.** Some employers would take apprentices if they had an NVQ card. Employers need to start asking people to say you have completed your apprenticeship; let me see your apprenticeship badge because that is the currency that we need to have.



## Engineering Sector:

### Employer B's View

**Q.** What do you think is the value of apprenticeship?

**A.** The value is you know exactly what they have covered and at what standard. It is those who have industry qualifications elsewhere; we tend not to know unless they actually started work here.

**Q.** Do you have any issues with EPA?

**A.** The discrepancies of endpoint assessors. The first endpoint assessor we had was highly academic, and he marked our apprentice down as a pass. The other two apprentices had an endpoint assessor who worked in the industry, and they both got distinctions. It created a bit of tension for the one who just got the pass because he was far better in his presentation and his knowledge.

**Q.** What would you suggest to improve the value of apprenticeships (certificates)?

**A.** When you get the endpoint assessment certificate, it does not tell you what you have done or what you know; it just tells you HM Government and the title of the apprenticeship. When you used to get all your NVQ certificates, everything was itemised by unit and skills. If a person was going for a job with an endpoint assessment certificate on its own, what does that actually mean to the person interviewing? It does not cover anything, and I think that is why skill should be written in it.

## Recommendations

It is clear that there are still some issues surrounding the perceived purpose and worth of apprenticeships that can contribute to decisions to withdraw from them prematurely. Specifically, current apprenticeships often require industry qualifications to be obtained earlier than the EPA, so apprentices can often not find much value in the final completion of the apprenticeships themselves - rather, they use an apprenticeship as a means to pay for and get other qualifications. Thus, system change is required, such as integrating industry qualifications into the EPA. One interviewee told us,

“ I think broadly, with the new versions of standards, that has pretty much been fixed by removing the need for those mandatory qualifications. If they wanted those qualifications, to be achieved as part of a standard, then make it part of the EPA.

**(ICT, Training provider)**

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, EPA should be more flexible, allowing exemptions from tests where industry qualifications already prove the skills of the apprentice. The assessment can be rigorous enough without doing tests twice.

To help counter issues on pay, one interviewee suggested providing a financial bonus for apprentices when they complete their EPA to incentivise them to stay in an apprenticeship after getting industry qualifications.

“ Potentially, a gratuity payment at the end for the apprentice as congratulations, like a bonus payment [could be a solution]. [...] That is because I know that I would be more inclined to stick it out the 18 months, finish, complete, go through the endpoint assessment, and build my skill set if I knew that at the end of it, I was going to be getting 1000 or 2000 pounds.

**(ICT, Training provider)**

One of the simplest methods of encouraging retention in apprenticeships would be the inclusion of apprenticeships as some form of requirement within job roles. In part, this will be achieved through stronger and more consistent messaging of the apprenticeship brand, allied with structural changes to delivery that encourage their completion and achievement.

One training provider suggested holding graduation ceremonies for apprenticeships as another way to clarify and increase the value of apprenticeships. Particularly, it is important to hold graduation ceremonies not just for higher apprenticeships but also for lower-level apprenticeships.



“ In our country, you only really start to graduate at around level 5. [...] If there were centralised apprenticeship graduations, even from level 2, for people to go and attend in either major towns or cities around to bring everybody together as a conglomerate, I think it might start to give it the weight.

*(ICT, Training provider)*

Holding graduation ceremonies has the potential to improve the self-esteem of apprentices by celebrating their achievements in public and also make apprenticeships more known by people by inviting parents and guardians. This solution may contribute to improving the stigma around apprenticeships and increase their positive word-of-mouth value. The Kent Association of Training Organisations (KATO) has, for some time, organised an annual and spectacular event at Rochester Cathedral. In 2022 this celebrated several hundred apprentices from all over the county, paying especial attention to those who had been studying in the health and care sectors and within the NHS. As an example of how well this spread the message and value of apprenticeship completion, this was hard to beat.



# 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The apprenticeship achievement rate in 2021 was 51.8% and this means nearly half of apprentices withdraw before completing their programme. Although we must be mindful that some of these statistics are drawn from the highly disruptive pandemic period we cannot be complacent about the underlying causes of such poor achievement rates. These are serious problems which compound skills shortages in the UK, which need to be addressed as soon as possible. Therefore, this study investigated the factors of apprentices' withdrawal, particularly focusing on some of the essential sectors in the UK identified by City & Guilds (2022).

The higher-level question that overarched many discussions as we conducted this research was 'what is the value of an apprenticeship?' Interviewees said apprentices withdrew because they got a better paid job offer, got necessary qualifications to get a job, or found better and faster options such as bootcamps and NVQs where these options existed. Some potential apprentices never start at all because of the way the compulsory education system appears to prioritise higher education and academia as a preferred route structurally, and can portray apprenticeships as a lower-level or second-rate option

There is therefore a strong need to be able to more clearly show the value and benefit of taking an apprenticeship, differentiating this from other options in order to motivate and incentivise learners to keep pursuing them. There is much to commend apprenticeship routes in the current climate and so their 'brand' must be celebrated more widely than it is now and the success of their graduates heralded with younger learners.

As a result of these findings, we have formulated multiple recommendations to improve the 'perceived value' of the apprenticeship and improve the retention and achievement rates ultimately.

## Cross-sectoral Recommendations

- 1 Much more work needs to be done by government and providers on raising the perceived benefit and value of apprenticeship study.**

In general, there is a good understanding of the potential value of apprenticeships, but all too often these benefits are not considered strong enough to overcome potential objections to completion, such as the prospect of increased pay elsewhere or their ultimate perceived value in the labour market. Parents and guardians and other key influencers on decisions regarding apprenticeship participation are often not sufficiently convinced of their promise to give full support, and in many cases they can actively dissuade enrolment or encourage early withdrawal. Employers largely do not specify them as requirements for job roles. Much more work is therefore needed both in communication and marketing strategies and in encouraging employers to recognise that the skills being honed by apprenticeships mean that their completion should have a strong bearing on their recruitment strategies for recruitment, not least by recognising the value of the achievement to the learner themselves.



## **2 The inclusion of apprenticeships as a required qualification or indicator of skill level in job descriptions would be a simple and no-cost way to raise the perceived value of an apprenticeship in the labour market as a whole.**

It is not sufficient to merely explain that apprenticeships are valuable and beneficial – this must become more evident in how they are actually used in real labour market scenarios. Not doing so risks disillusionment that apprenticeships are not ultimately as valued in the “real world” as marketing would lead people to believe. Currently, not many employers – including, astonishingly, training providers - list apprenticeships as a requirement for a job role in their organisations. As a result, apprentices do not see the full value in the apprenticeship in the labour market, which leads to less incentive for them to complete it. To get rid of the stigma and improve apprenticeship values, employers must be increasingly encouraged to list apprenticeships as essential or desirable within job roles and job descriptions.

## **3 Apprenticeships funding must better reflect the actual costs of delivery of staff attraction and retention**

Increasing numbers of trainers are leaving providers and moving to the industry to seek improved pay. Due to this, it is very difficult to maintain high-quality training capacity with the current levels of funding. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) needs to more accurately take the actual costs of delivery, including salary rates, into account when considering funding bands for apprenticeship standards, improving staff recruitment and retention, enhancing the quality and learner experience of apprenticeships and thereby helping to reduce early withdrawal. The same challenge can be found with assessment personnel where funding bands do not always allow for adequate recruitment and retention of EPA personnel. The current short term review of a few standards is welcome but needs to be conducted on a much wider scale. It remains to be seen whether any uplifts will encourage greater engagement with those standards selected for review but if it does the same process should be applied more broadly.

## **4 Stronger and consistent enforcement of Baker Clause/Provider Access Legislation requirements is required**

The Provider Access Legislation enacted in 2023 was created to improve the exposure of school-age children to options for technical learning and career pathways. Implementation is in its early stages, but the overall feeling of the sector is that there is still considerable scope to improve enforcement to reach this objective. Without access to information about apprenticeships (and other options for technical learning pathways), there is the opportunity for young people to have misunderstandings or mistaken assumptions about what an apprenticeship is, what it contains, and its value – all of which can lead to disillusionment, disappointment and early withdrawal. We suggest that schools and colleges run Professional and Technical Education fairs in the same way that University Fairs are run. Apprenticeships would then be an offer within a range of other technical qualifications and help associate them with accredited outcomes.

**5 A robust strategy to reach out to parents and guardians, as significant influencers of young people's life and learning choices, is required.**

The attitude of parents and guardians towards apprenticeships as a result of an adverse perception of their value was found to be a significant barrier for many young people in pursuing and continuing them. It is not sufficient to assume that solely because young people have access to the required information, that they will, in turn, be able to counter the views of other players around them. External pressure, sometimes driven by factors out of the apprentice's control, such as the overall impact of their participation on household incomes, can lead to early withdrawal even where attainment might, under normal circumstances, have been expected. This may require a better understanding of the personal and social background of the apprentice to provide a level of risk assessment and consider whether wider benefit implications can be addressed to encourage completion. In some circumstances travel and food subsidy may also be an issue where minimum wage is adopted..

**6 Apprenticeship standards must not only be reviewed for content and fitness for purpose but also due regard should be given to their duration, particularly at lower levels where extended durations can be a barrier for young people to be motivated to complete them.**

Examples of this were regularly found in a number of sectors, particularly Construction. Consideration should be given to better ways of balancing on and off the job activity across the programme.

**7 Onboarding and initial assessments in apprenticeships must be more robustly conducted to ensure that learning programmes are appropriate for the apprentice's objectives and aspirations, and that the content of the programme and their responsibilities within it are very clearly explained to all parties.**

All parties need to better understand their responsibilities in apprenticeships in order to fulfil their responsibilities. Training providers need to more clearly discuss and explain these obligations to both employer and apprentice, at the very start of the process. As a priority, providers must ensure that all these factors are clearly explained to both apprentice and employer, not as a tick-box exercise for regulatory compliance purposes, but as a meaningful exercise in its own right. This will help to ensure that the content and expectations of apprentices (and employers) are fully understood, reducing the likelihood that disillusionment or disappointment with the process leads to early withdrawal. The role of employers as mentors should not be underestimated in this process where the apprenticeship is undertaken by a new entrant to the workforce

**8 Progress reviews must properly assess not only the distance travelled towards completion but must properly take into account all aspects of apprentice participation to that point, including adverse external pressures and deviations from learning programmes. These should clearly lay out mitigating steps to enhance the apprenticeship experience and improve the chances of completion and attainment.**

This research often found that progress reviews, as with initial assessments, were too often being considered as compliance exercises rather than a chance to review all factors bearing an apprentice's continued participation and potential achievement. More support may be needed for both employers and providers to make progress reviews more effective in this respect.



**9 Ensure the content of Functional Skills qualifications is applied rather than theoretical in nature, and delivery is contextualised within job roles.**

Failure to complete, attain or even sometimes attempt literacy and numeracy qualifications to pass apprenticeships is often cited as a major barrier to completion. This is particularly frustrating where employers feel that the required levels or content of such qualifications do not match the needs of the role in question. Considering that many apprentices had negative experiences in school, and not all of them are natural academic learners, Functional Skills need to be more applied, so apprentices see their relevance to their working environment and feel they are worthwhile to learn. There is a strong feeling across the sector that the content and delivery of Functional Skills is increasingly being converged with that of GCSEs, reducing learner choice and compounding failure amongst apprentices who did not fare well with these qualifications in the compulsory education period. A review of maths and English attainment expectations should be undertaken alongside apprenticeship programmes to explore the best profiles and models of accreditation. Maths and English should be clearly relevant and appropriate for the role but also instil a sense of achievability when prior experience of the subjects has been negative.

**10 Study towards (rather than attainment of) English and maths qualifications should be the default condition of apprenticeship funding, in line with T Levels and other 16-19 study programmes.**

Attainment should still be the aspiration for all but not be used as measure of achievement, and especially where occupational competence is clearly being demonstrated and recognised by the employer. With this in mind, English and maths requirements within apprenticeship standards should be more employer-led by bringing them into line with 16-19 qualifications and T Levels by using study towards English and maths qualifications as a default condition of funding, rather than their attainment at a specified level as a mandatory exit requirement (except where an apprenticeship standard explicitly specifies this to be so).

**11 A transcript of attainment should be made available for apprentices who withdraw early from apprenticeships, detailing what they have learnt.**

This should summarise achievements to date and improve the likelihood that the apprentice may wish to re-engage and complete at a later date, and that when doing so, prospective employers and providers have a clearer idea of what areas of study they have already completed. Transcripts for partial completion are available under T Levels, but no such arrangement exists as standard within the apprenticeship programme. This would help to encourage resumption, completion and achievement at a later stage and increase the perceived value of an apprenticeship's content. This concept may also be worth exploring alongside models for accelerated apprenticeships and consideration of minimum duration rules.

**12 The end-point assessment (EPA) process must integrate industry qualifications more appropriately, and improve how EPA outcomes take these into account.**

The current apprenticeship can allow (or even require) industry qualifications to be obtained earlier than the EPA, so apprentices can struggle to find much value in completing the apprenticeships itself - rather, they use the apprenticeship process as a means to get other qualifications. Also, apprentices' skills and knowledge are often tested again at the EPA stage, despite having been already proved through attaining industry qualifications. There should be more flexibility to recognise and acknowledge the skills accredited through qualifications as demonstrating competence, rather than requiring them to be repeated. This investigation may need to be more nuanced with regard to sectors as the relationships between mandated qualifications and EPA requirements will differ. The final approach does not need to be uniform across all sectors so long as the overall expectations of the standards of apprenticeship outcomes are maintained.

**13 End-point assessment methods and content should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate for the levels of study that precede them.**

Our research uncovered significant concern that EPAs can sometimes use inappropriate methods of assessment, or are more daunting than they need to be for apprentices, particularly at lower levels. A number of instances were quoted to use where although training had been completed, the prospect of the EPA concerned apprentices enough for them to feel that putting themselves through this process was not worth any added benefit it may bring. This area needs to be approached carefully as any accreditation model should be challenging but achievable. Any review should also consider the likelihood that irrespective of their actual levels of skill and competence, an apprentice learner may be less inclined and confident to undertake final assessments due to poor experience of school examinations.

**14 Consideration should be given to the introduction of a financial bonus to the apprentice on successful completion of their apprenticeship by either the government or employers.**

Low apprenticeship wages are serious factors leading apprentices to withdraw, particularly in light of the current economy and the rising cost of living. Introducing an apprenticeship bonus for those who complete an apprenticeship would help them financially, and more importantly, become an incentive for them to stay in their apprenticeship until completion. Employers are currently free to implement this themselves, but consideration should also be given as to whether this policy may be expressly encouraged by delivery guidance, or even mandated for inclusion within apprenticeship agreements. Consideration could also be given to pro-rata incremental rises in wages across an apprenticeship duration to encourage engagement and provide targets to help retention and final completion. This would need to be considered alongside the minimum duration legislation constraints of an apprenticeship programme.

**15 Graduation ceremonies should be encouraged at all apprenticeship levels**

Graduation ceremonies can enhance the sense of accomplishment, raise self-esteem and help improve confidence. By inviting employers, parents and guardians to the ceremony, it can be expected to increase the awareness of apprenticeships as well as enhancing their perceived value and dispelling the stigma around them being somehow "second-rate" options to academia. Such events might be easier for large employers to arrange but can also be convened by large training providers or aggregated events facilitated by provider networks at a regional or local level.



## Sector Specific Recommendations

### Agriculture, Horticulture, & Animal Care

One of the biggest issues in Agriculture sector was the mental health problems among apprentices. Multiple sector-unique factors such as Farm stressors, contextual stressors, and barriers to support becomes big struggles for many apprentices particularly, among younger apprentices. To improve this problem, **a greater emphasis is needed on developing workforce capabilities around mental health support.** Mental health support is not only about professional therapists; just having someone to talk to in the workplace can be a great support many apprentices.

### Construction, Planning & the Built Environment Sector

Long duration of apprenticeship is a huge barrier for apprentices in lower levels as they find it difficult to commit for a long period of time, and particularly if they have not yet fully decided what they want to do in the future. **These requirements must be explained clearly to potential apprentices at the time they are considering enrolling.** This reflects a need to provide extensive support for learners to incentivise, motivate and retain them during what could be to them a long apprenticeship journey.

**Consideration should also be given to whether the long durations of construction apprenticeships, particularly at lower levels that largely attract younger apprentices, are still appropriate in the modern labour market.** Whilst this expectation may have been relevant in the context of the past labour market and working practices, it should be considered whether the overall structure and premise of apprenticeship standards – that they accurately reflect the demands and working conditions of the occupation and industry in question – are really being fulfilled in an age where the average stay in any one job has dropped significantly, and freelancing or “gig” economy working has come to the fore.

### Information & Communication Technologies

The skills and knowledge required in the ICT sectors changes at much faster pace than other sectors. Under the current frequency of the review, once in three years, some of the curriculum of the apprenticeships in ICT sector are already out of date. Therefore, **IfATE should take into account that the speed of change in knowledge and skills required in sectors are different and decide the frequency of the curriculum review with this in mind.**



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# APPENDICES

## List of Interview and Roundtable Discussion

Number	Type	Sector
1	Local authority	Business
2	Training provider	Agriculture
3	NHS	Health
4	Training provider	Engineering
5	EPAO	ICT
6	Employer provider	Retail
7	ITP	Construction
8	N/A	FE freelance consultant
9	Training provider	Business
10	EPAO / Training provider	ICT
11	Training provider	Construction
12	Training provider	Engineering
13	Roundtable discussion	ICT
14	Roundtable discussion	Transport & logistics
15	Roundtable discussion	ICT
16	Roundtable discussion	Agriculture



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