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Skills Research Digest
Quarter 3 2024

The **Skills Research Digest** monitors recently published skills and labour market research relevant to the work of the Department for the Economy and to the strategic and policy issues that we face in Northern Ireland.

In each case, we provide a short summary of the key points and web links to the full article or report*. A full list of sources can be found at the end of the publication.

Highlights this quarter include:

- More items on AI & technology in education, including interesting items on public attitudes and assessment.

- An increasing profile for equality, diversity & inclusion, including to make the most of four-generation workforces and to help SMEs 'boost opportunity'.

- Future models for further & higher – or tertiary – education, from adopting a 'tertiary focus' such as through increased collaboration, to recommendations for a fully tertiary system.

- Major reforms to upper secondary education in three small advanced economies: Denmark's 'third way' between academic and vocational; Estonia's range of initiatives to strengthen vocational options; and Sweden's new form of upper secondary education for adults, dubbed 'National Vocational Training'.

* Links are correct at the time of publication, however it is likely that some will break over time. The list of sources has more general links, which should help the reader to track down the original report.

Contents

Preparing Young People for Work

16–19 EDUCATION

The Money & Pensions Service published *Literature Review: The impact of digital money on children and young people's financial education*, **reviewing the literature on young people up to age 25 and highlighting ten themes.**

- Digitisation of financial transactions in recent years has profound implications for young people's financial education.

- Evidence exists of young people's engagement in online economic activities, e.g.: receiving pocket money virtually, spending money on gaming; however, there is a scarcity of literature on how this impacts their learning about money.

- The shift towards increased digital financial transactions starts young but the impact is most pronounced among 16–17 year-olds, who largely receive money digitally.

- There is a lack of consensus around what constitutes effective digital financial literacy interventions, which leads to inconsistencies in content and difficulties assessing effectiveness.

- There is limited evidence around the effectiveness of any digital financial literacy interventions; rigorous evaluation and a greater focus on practical real-world skills are needed.

- There are benefits of digital money for young people, e.g. greater financial inclusion, new earning opportunities and enhanced financial management.
  - There are also risks, e.g. impulse buying, online fraud, cyber security threats and normalisation of financial risk-taking behaviours through gaming and online 'kidpreneurship'.

- There has been a shift towards young people consuming more information online, but they aren't always able to discern between real and fake news or ensure quality of content.

- Some young people have a perception of virtual money as tangible and effective for financial management, viewing physical cash as outdated; however, more research is needed.

- Digital games with pay-reward systems ('gamblification') can cause financial and emotional harm, and a dissociation of in-game expenses and real-world monetary value can cause confusion.

The Global Learning Network and the University College London (UCL) Development Education Research Centre published *The Case for Global Learning in the UK: Transforming our educational approaches in a complex, global world*.

- Global learning is a growing area of educational practice that enables pupils to reflect critically on the world they live in; it includes topics such as respect for human rights & inclusion, environmental sustainability and social & climate justice.

- Most countries with advanced education systems are developing policies and direct funding to support global learning.
  - Increasingly this is being promoted through ministries of foreign affairs working with education ministers, through educational bodies and both regional and local authorities.
  - They are responding to urgent calls for education to address global issues identified in key international agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and declarations by UNESCO and Global Education Network Europe.

- However, the UK is not currently one of these many countries and now provides no funding or policy support for any form of global learning, despite having done so in the past.

- The report lays out the evidence for the positive impact of global learning on society, the economy and the individual and outlines a workable basis for a national strategy that includes all the key stakeholders in education and takes account of the differences in the four UK nations.
  - It includes recommendations on support to help educators prepare learners with the skills to develop as global citizens, including the development of a new framework to embed global learning in the classroom.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) published *Education and Inequality: An international perspective***, a working paper that finds that expanding education is not a silver bullet for addressing inequality and, depending on how it is done, might even increase inequality.**

- The strong intergenerational persistence in education implies that generally subsidising higher education (HE) is more likely to benefit children from middle- and upper-income rather than lower-income families.
    - Evidence on the general equilibrium effects of educational expansion indicates that it may have little or even adverse effects on educational earnings differentials.
- The specific form of education system and educational expansion appears to matter; systems that open up opportunities have advantageous relationships with inequality, although those relationships vary by gender.
    - Systems that stream students towards vocational training are associated with greater educational mobility for boys but have a negative impact on earnings mobility for girls.
    - Systems that are characterised by substantial movements from the bottom of the parental education distribution to the top of the educational distribution for children are associated with good income mobility for girls but neutral mobility for boys.
    - No country appears to do well at both.
- Inequality wouldn't necessarily fall in high-inequality countries if they adopted one of the types of education systems that provide more mobility options.
    - But inequality in those countries extends beyond inequality in income alone to inequality in educational opportunities that are likely to be deeply related to feelings of self-efficacy and to the sense people have of the justness of their society.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING & MATHS (STEM)

EngineeringUK published *Advancing STEM careers provision in England: Key lessons and opportunities***, with recommendations relevant across the UK.**

- EngineeringUK research and recent data show strong institutional commitment and a trend towards broad, structured and inclusive guidance that's helping young people feel better prepared.
    - However, only 26% say that their school offers personal guidance interviews with a careers professional before Year 10 and only 61% that eligible students get STEM work experience.
- Recommendations:
    - Government to: publish a long-term careers strategy with sufficient funding attached, along with a linked work experience strategy; embed careers into the STEM curriculum from Year 7; ensure that careers advisers have the continuing professional development (CPD) necessary to be able to convey up-to-date knowledge of modern engineering and technology careers; learn from existing programmes that offer teachers first-hand experience and insights into industry practices.
    - Schools/colleges to: draw on support from local Careers Hubs to consistently link careers programmes with local and national labour market information and future career opportunities.
    - STEM employers to: continue to build key stage (KS) 3 engagement activities alongside improved work experience.
    - Career Hubs to: focus on recruiting more local STEM employers to teacher engagement and work experience programmes such as Teacher Encounters and Equalex run by the Careers & Enterprise Company.

The Royal Society published *A new approach to mathematical and data education [MDE]***, the culmination of its Mathematical Futures Programme (MFP) launched in February 2020.**

- Across the UK, maths education serves some students well but fails too many, with wide gaps between the lowest and highest achievers and a long tail of underachievement linked to economic disadvantage.
- With a 20-year time horizon, the MFP addressed three core questions:
    - What mathematical competences will be needed for citizens and society to thrive in the future?
    - How should education systems develop those competences?
    - What changes should be put in place to move towards that future?

- MDE is a radically new approach to equip citizens with the capabilities, skills, adaptability and resilience they need to thrive in a world where maths and data play increasingly important roles.
    - It involves a fusion of maths, statistics and data science, underpinned by digital technologies.
    - It proposes a greater focus on using and applying mathematical concepts and digital tools to solve real-world quantitative problems.
    - It extends beyond the maths classroom to address the growing need for data and statistics skills in other subjects, from physical education to history and design.
- Recommendations include:
    - A single qualifications framework that enables all students to continue to study MDE to 18; in England, the existing Core Maths qualification to be used as a starting point.
    - Computational tools and technologies such as spreadsheets, apps and programming platforms to be embedded at suitable stages.
    - Students to develop programming skills and learn the use of computational tools common in mathematically demanding undergraduate programmes.
    - New methods of assessment for general quantitative literacy that reflect how it is used in practice; online assessment methods that can grow as needed.
    - A major programme of teacher professional development, including initial teacher training, early career training and CPD to support implementation.
    - A cross-departmental independent task force to plan for long-term system changes in consultation with the devolved nations.

The European Commission published *Addressing the gender gap in STEM education across educational levels* by NESET (Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education & Training), comprising a literature review and analysis of EU-funded projects.

- Studies over the past decade have predominantly explored individual-level factors, e.g. attitudes and motivation, but lack definitive conclusions on the drivers of the gender gap.
- Key findings pinpoint factors and strategies across individual, contextual and institutional levels:
    - **Individual-level factors**: girls often show lower self-efficacy in STEM subjects compared with boys, despite achieving similar or better academic performance, suggesting that confidence plays a crucial role in girls' decisions to pursue STEM further.
    - Pedagogical strategies, including gender-neutral approaches, have the potential to enhance self-efficacy among both girls and boys.
    - **Contextual-level factors**: early exposure to STEM, supportive environments and overcoming societal stereotypes are essential to maintaining girls' interest in STEM fields.
    - There is a notable absence of the promotion of comprehensive support and targeted policies for families from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.
    - **Institutional-level factors**: barriers including curricula that are not gender-inclusive, teaching practices that reinforce stereotypes and a lack of female role models in STEM, contribute to the gender gap.
    - Gender-sensitive teaching methods and the integration of STEM subjects enhance girls' participation.
- Successful strategies for addressing the gender gap include: mentorship programmes; gender-neutral and inclusive teaching approaches; projects that involve hands-on, real-world applications; problem-based learning and interdisciplinary teaching.

EMPLOYABILITY & CAREERS

Enginuity published findings from a survey of parents and their 11–18 year-old children in 1k households across England, suggesting a significant shift in attitudes towards vocational education.

- Nearly 90% of parents are more interested in vocational than traditional university routes and 82% of their children would be interested in more vocational routes to their chosen career.
    - The shift is largely driven by the escalating costs associated with university education.
- 89% of parents and 80% of their children agreed that hands-on experience was now more critical than purely academic qualifications for certain tech careers.

- 56% of parents said the most important reason for supporting vocational routes was to help their children develop skills for the workplace and 54% to gain skills specific to their preferred career.

- 93% of parents wanted to learn more about apprenticeship opportunities, rising to 97% of parents of 15 year-olds.

  - 86% of their children would now consider an apprenticeship over a conventional university degree.

- Greater awareness among young people is supporting this change, with over 60% of the children saying their school highlights both university and vocational routes, suggests wider post-exam options and/or invitations to speakers to talk about technical careers.

Enginuity was previously SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council for the Advanced Manufacturing & Engineering Sector. The item lists some of Enginuity's activities seeking to capitalise on these changing attitudes.

Grant Thornton published findings from Censuswide surveys of 2k UK parents of 12–21 year-olds and 2k 16–21 year-olds in July 2024, exploring changing attitudes to the routes available to young people after leaving school.

- Parents are more likely to encourage their child to apply for an apprenticeship (44%) than university (40%), mainly due to: practical on-the-job experience (63%); getting paid while gaining a certified qualification (62%); no student debt (40%).

- 66% of parents believe that the cost of a university degree offers less value than it used to, up from 45% in 2018; 60% of young people share this view, rising to 67% among those who have a degree.

- 42% of parents and 37% of young people don't consider a degree essential to getting a well-paid job.

  - 84% of parents perceive apprenticeships as providing good career prospects, up from 79% in 2018; 73% of young people agree, while just 6% disagree.

- 42% of young people identify their parents as the main influence in their career decisions, followed by their school/college careers service (28%) and teachers (25%).

  - However, only 57% have received good advice on apprenticeships vs 63% for a university degree; most still feel pressure to go to university, with parents and teachers noted as the top sources.

- 44% of young people are considering or currently undertaking a university degree, citing 'to further education' as the main reason; 22% are considering or undertaking an apprenticeship.

The Prince's Trust and Solutions Research published *Decoding The Digital Skills Gap*, supported by Cognizant, based on a survey of 2k 16–30 year-olds and 20 focus groups, including those living in the 50% most deprived areas across the UK.

- Although young people are aware that most roles will require digital skills, there is a significant lack of appetite in pursuing these careers.

- Pursuing relevant skills, training and jobs is unobtainable for many, due to a mix of digital isolation and financial and personal pressures.

  - At the same time, a language barrier in relation to digital and technology skills, including a lack of consensus about terminology, is hindering their ability to engage with relevant training and jobs.

- Although early, positive engagement in these skills is crucial to forging future interest, 37% didn't study a digital or technology-focused subject beyond KS3 or equivalent.

- However, only 6% say they would *not* be interested in digital skills training.

- Recommendations are made for government, educators, employers and third sector bodies.

The OECD published *Innovation in career pathways across five countries*, exploring innovative practice in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and the US since 2010.

- The paper explores general secondary education programmes that allow students to undertake deep exploration of, and significant career preparation for, a vocational field, while keeping their future options open by completing general qualifications – known in some countries as 'Career Pathways'.

  - Over many years, they have provided students with an alternative to purely academic or vocational provision and longitudinal data reveal consistent patterns of better employment outcomes for participants.

- Seven lessons are identified for countries considering such developments:

- **Understand the case for reform with students at the centre**: the policy sits at the nexus of education, workforce development, youth employment, strategic economic growth and social equity; some countries have fundamentally redefined what it means to be an educated citizen.

- **Develop a shared vision for better career development**: provision has to be attractive to all key stakeholders, who have different needs and expectations; effective provision will ensure that the cost–benefit analysis works for all.

- **Build in the time and capacity to deliver at scale**: actively engaging stakeholders from education, employers, parents, students and the broader community requires time and resources; pilots can be helpful, e.g. in STEM, where recruitment is more challenging; engaging employers and tertiary institutions in programme design from the outset makes their active support more likely, while giving students confidence; meaningful changes in policy and investment are needed.

- **Make it easy for key stakeholders to engage**: ensure appropriate infrastructural support, involve relevant intermediary organisations and help schools to coordinate timetabling, student travel, teaching staff and learning resources; external teams can help facilitate high-quality work placements and provide advice and guidance; political leadership and funding are required to move from patchwork pilots to sustainable solutions.

- **Challenge reputational doubts by ensuring key stakeholder awareness and understanding**: career pathways offer a new approach to teaching, learning and completion of upper secondary; engagement should be an active choice based on career exploration and research; guidance activities need to start early to give time to investigate different pathways.

- **Create data systems to understand engagement and outcomes**, assess whether provision is meeting policy objectives and identify barriers; understanding the long-term return on investment enables educational resourcing to be rethought and effective break-even points determined; longitudinal studies can explore equitability of outcomes and psychological impacts.

- **Build or expand learning networks**: most of the initiatives described are relatively new and small; while each jurisdiction is exploring distinctive approaches, there is strong interest in learning from international peers.

The OECD published *Aligned ambitions? How to tell (and why it is important to know) if students' occupational and education plans are aligned*.

- By age 15, most students have a clear idea about both the type of job they expect to have around the age of 30 and the highest level of education they anticipate completing.

- Longitudinal studies find that those with high and aligned ambitions are commonly found to do better in their early career than peers who expect to work in a job that typically requires tertiary-level entry qualifications, but who don't intend to achieve that level.

- Across the OECD, such misalignment is common, especially among students from more disadvantaged social backgrounds.
  - Students who engage more strongly in career development activities by age 15 can be expected to show lower levels of misalignment.

The OECD published *Cultivating green futures: Helping students understand and progress towards green jobs*, highlighting the role of career guidance in connecting students' interest in the environment with the needs of the green jobs market.

- Drawing from OECD research and 87 green guidance programmes from 20 countries, the report defines green jobs and presents a framework for green career guidance.

- It emphasises the importance of authentic interactions with green industry professionals, work placements and hands-on learning experiences, especially in secondary education.

Eurofound published *Youth integration in the EU: Navigating digitalisation and labour shortages*, on the diversity of key indicators of employment, unemployment and those who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), and the implications of digitalisation.

- Youth integration into the European labour market remains a challenge: while the overall employment rate has improved, significant EU member state disparities persist, with concerns about precariousness and job quality.

- The digital revolution presents both opportunities and risks:
  - Young people's digital fluency can be a significant asset, but skills gaps in advanced competencies means targeted interventions are needed to ensure equitable access to digitalisation's benefits.

- Labour shortages offer potential pathways into employment, but skills mismatches and precarious working conditions remain a concern.

- Strengthening vocational education and training (VET), enhancing career guidance and promoting fair labour practices are crucial to ensuring that young people can capitalise on these opportunities without being exploited or trapped in low-quality jobs.

Plan International UK published _The State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024_, based on data including a survey of 2,963 girls and young women aged 12–21 in May–June 2023.

- Educational institutions were largely important and joyful for them; however, many felt education was letting them down, with only 54% agreeing it prepared them well for their future.
  - Only 20% in Scotland, 19% in Northern Ireland (NI), 14% in England and 11% in Wales were completely happy with their school, college or university.

- 36% of 17–21 year-olds weren't happy with their current or future job prospects.

- Only 54% overall felt they had the same education/employment opportunities as males.

The Institutional Landscape

THE FURTHER EDUCATION & SKILLS SECTOR

Jisc published _Learner digital experience insights survey 2023/24: UK further education (FE) findings_, based on 7,765 responses from 23 colleges. _[A similar survey was published for HE – a summary of results for both is on p. 9.]_

The Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) published _Creative further education in the four UK nations_, part of its _State of the Nations_ report series; it brings together 31 data sources from eight different agencies.

- FE has an important role to play in building the talent pipeline to the creative industries, not only in creative sub-sectors, but also in wider parts of the economy where creative skills are also in demand.

- **Creative FE enrolments are declining starkly** in all parts of the UK and at a faster rate than average across disciplines.
  - They fell: 28% in NI (2017–2022); 57% in England (2014/15–2022/23) vs 31% across subjects; 68% in Wales (2012/13–2022/23); 20% (full-time equivalent) in Scotland (2012/13–2022/23).

- **Apprenticeship take-up remains very low**; the share of all relevant frameworks/standards ranges from 1.7% (Wales) to 8.7% (England).
  - Over 85% are in ICT, so numbers in other disciplines (e.g. arts and design) are extremely low.

- **Creative FE is highly concentrated in cities and urban regions** (Belfast, Cardiff, Swansea, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, the South East and West Midlands).
  - This may be both a casualty of and a contributor to the spatial patterns of the creative industries.

- There is a **mixed picture of retention and achievement** across creative disciplines and nations.
  - In Scotland, achievement rates are below average for all creative subjects, although they are above average for Modern Apprenticeships, largely driven by ITC.
  - In NI, Wales and England, achievement rates are higher in arts, media and publishing, but lower than average in languages, literature and culture.

- **Student diversity**: they tend to be less ethnically/socioeconomically diverse than the wider student population; the vast majority of IT/software students are male; however, a higher proportion of creative students are disabled, have a health condition or have learning difficulties.

- Policy considerations include:
  - Policymakers and employers need to redouble efforts to make creative FE a viable, valued route.
  - A sharper focus is needed on FE quality and labour market relevance, and the extent to which courses retain, support and enable students to progress.
  - Efforts to 'level up' the creative industries and develop UK clusters needs a strong focus on skills provision to ensure the development of the talent base.
  - Stakeholders, employers and providers need to collaborate to build a skilled and diverse pipeline.

The European Commission published *Erasmus+ projects focusing on digital skills and engaging young people in vocational education and training: Analysis of a selection of good practices*, **based on in-depth analysis of 30 case studies.**

- Among the findings on strengthening VET learners' digital skills:
  - Personalised learning is crucial for adult learners, who need to integrate digital competences into an existing set of knowledge and skills.
  - Long-term partnerships with tech companies and industry leaders help to support the updating needed to address the constant evolution of technologies and enhance employment prospects.
  - They also help support real-world learning – especially relevant in relation to advanced skills.
  - Interactive and digital communication tools foster collaboration, enhance the learning experience and are essential in helping learners develop digital skills to adapt to new learning environments.
- Among the findings on project sustainability:
  - Projects should be designed so that methods, strategies and successes can be readily adapted and applied to different contexts, spreading the impact and sustainability of the project's results.
  - Engaging and training educators early ensures they are well-prepared to sustain the initiative.
  - Developing online platforms that are intuitive and that support continuous learning can help to sustain a project's results by providing ongoing access to resources and learning opportunities.

Cedefop published *The influence of learning outcomes on pedagogical theory and tools*, **exploring how the approach is implemented in VET systems in ten selected countries, including the small, advanced economies (SAEs** *[see p. 55]***) of the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Finland.**

- Learning outcomes are considered a tool for increasing VET's relevance and quality and a way to improve learner centredness and facilitate active and open learning.

- Providers of VET teacher training were mainly supportive, but several were dissatisfied with implementation to date; countries take different approaches to embedding the approach in the theoretical underpinnings of teacher training, with some making it explicit, some – including the RoI and Finland – implicit and others not referring to it at all.
  - The RoI is one of the countries that runs courses on how to apply the approach, but this depends on how learning outcomes are used in standards, qualifications and national curricula.
  - 75% of VET teachers had been taught some aspects of the approach, but only 50% felt ready to work with a curriculum based on learning outcomes, suggesting insufficient training; 66% said that introducing learning outcomes in their country had influenced their practice, whereas others criticised how learning outcomes were defined and implemented in teaching.

HIGHER EDUCATION (HE): APPLICANTS & ADMISSIONS

The Unite Group in partnership with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published the *Unite Students 2024 Applicant Index*, **based on a survey of 2k UK applicants to 2024/25 university degrees/degree apprenticeships.**

- The index combines responses to 36 questions to generate agreement scores for: finance, social, community, wellbeing, resilience, learning, employment, independence and sustainability; findings include *[no national data provided]*:
  - 40% strongly agree they are confident about getting the job they want (+6ppt on 2023); 63% are confident about their employability (+2ppt).
  - 52% believe they have a lot of work experience (+5ppt); 70% have been in paid part-time work over the last two years (+2ppt).
  - 36% say they have been absent from school due to their mental health (+6ppt), of whom 43% think they will probably miss lectures.
  - 49% worry they won't fit in; 43% (males 47%) think they will struggle to keep up (+8ppt).
  - 50% have learnt life skills from their parents; 69% are confident about their independence; 58% are confident about budgeting (-5ppt).
  - 53% are making sacrifices to live more sustainably (+5ppt).
  - 27% identify as LGBTQ+ and 66% say they will tell their university (55%).

Higher education retention in Ireland and Scotland: The role of admissions policies, **by researchers from the University of Edinburgh, the University of Turku (Finland) and the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI), was published in *Higher Education*.**

- The research investigated whether the way the Scottish and RoI systems differ in their emphasis on school subjects/grades and the degree of higher education institution (HEI) autonomy matter for retention; findings include:
  - In the RoI, students are more likely to drop out than in Scotland and there are differences between students from different social backgrounds.
  - The association between subject matching and grades and dropout is stronger in the RoI.
  - Tighter selection criteria in Scotland improve retention and reduce social inequalities in dropout.
  - Admission criteria are important in explaining both inter- and intra-country differences in rates.

HE: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

England's Office for Students (OfS) published the results of the UK-wide *National Student Survey 2024*; the data can be explored by provider and by student characteristic.

- 345,891 final-year undergraduates (72.3% response rate) in 520 HEIs responded to 28 questions – two of them nation specific – focusing on the quality of their course.

- Overall, there were improvements across every measure; headline positivity results, based on the percentage that gave the two most positive answers to the individual questions:
  - Teaching 85.4%; learning opportunities 82.4%; assessment & feedback 78.3%; academic support 85.5%; organisation & management 75.3%; learning resources 86.9%
  - Student voice 74.0%; students' union 72.9%; mental wellbeing 78.6%; freedom of expression (England only) 86.4%
  - Overall satisfaction: NI 80.2%; Scotland 78.1%; Wales 79.8%.

THE *analysis* *found that England's Bishop Grosseteste University gained the highest rate of positive results of 149 universities (89.4%); University of Ulster came top – out of two – in NI (82.6%).*

The Policy Institute, King's College London (KCL) published *Still worth it? Attitudes to university education among graduates, parents and the public*, based on a UK survey of 4k over-16s.

- 31% agreed that university wasn't worth the time and money (+13ppt on 2018); 37% disagreed.

- 76% wanted more apprenticeship opportunities; 38% thought a vocational education was better for dealing with changing job market demands vs 19% a university degree.

- 47% of parents of 11–17 year-olds said that their child going to university was important to them vs 19% for whom it wasn't; 59% said their child was likely to apply or had applied.
  - 70% said a university education should be valued for its own sake, not just for getting a job.
  - 40% would prefer their child to do a university degree; 48% would prefer an apprenticeship.

- Graduates said their degree was worth it for: knowledge and skills gained (84%); their experiences as students (78%); the overall experience and benefits (81%); finding jobs and advancing their career (66%); friends made (66%) (all figures virtually unchanged since 2020).
  - 87% would choose to do a degree again; 48% the same degree; 8% wouldn't go to university.
  - 80% of graduates who had started in or after 2012, when £9k fees were introduced in England, said student debt hadn't negatively impacted their life; 15% said it had.

- 29% without a degree wished they had gone to university, rising to 43% among 18–24s.

- Overall, the key drivers of positive attitudes towards universities are the perceptions that they are internationally renowned and benefit both the country as a whole and local areas.
  - Their role in helping students find jobs is less of a factor, fitting with wider public scepticism about their ability to equip people for the world of work.

- The main driver of negative attitudes is seeing universities as just in it for the money and selling degrees that don't offer good value for money.

- Concerns that universities are becoming less tolerant of different views or the recognition that international students make a positive contribution have only a marginal effect on overall attitudes.

Jisc published *Learner digital experience insights survey 2023/24: UK FE survey findings* **(7,765 responses), and** *Student digital experience insights survey 2023/24: UK higher education (HE) findings* **(28,679 responses).**

- 81% of courses in FE and 67% in HE (+3ppt on 2022/23) took place mainly on campus.
  - 67% of FE students/51% HE prefer mainly on-campus learning; 27% FE/38% HE prefer a mix.
- 72% in FE (+6ppt on 2020/21) & 83% in HE rated the quality of online learning above average.
  - HE providers continued to make improvements on three key measures: digital learning environment (85% 'above average'); quality of digital learning (83%); support to learn effectively (72%).
  - In FE, the digital learning environment has improved more modestly (74%); support offered to learners has now reached 68% above-average ratings after a pronounced decline in 2021/22.
  - 44% in FE (+8ppt on 2022/23) & 55% in HE (+6ppt) found online materials engaging and motivating.
- 52% in FE (-4ppt) & 54% in HE said they received guidance about the digital skills needed for their course.
  - In HE, 37% were offered a needs assessment; 28% were given formal recognition/accreditation.
  - 40% in FE & 37% in HE were given opportunities to build skills for future employment.
- Training opportunities in FE and HE had all improved but were still poor:
  - 54% in HE had been offered training in online learning (+8ppt); 53% in FE & 47% in HE (+11ppt) were offered training in basic IT skills; 26% in HE in data analysis (+5ppt); 23% in FE in handling digital information, data and media.
  - 41% in FE & 62% in HE asked other students for help with online and digital skills.
- 75% in FE & 92% in HE used laptops and 71% in FE & 73% in HE (+10ppt on 2021/22) used smartphones regularly for learning; 5% in FE relied only on a smartphone.
  - 60% in FE (+4ppt) & 55% in HE had difficulties with wifi; 45% in FE (+11ppt) & 42% in HE (+8ppt) had problems with mobile data costs.
  - 41% in FE & 34% in HE had no suitable device; in HE, this rose to 47% of international and Asian/Asian British students and 44% of Black/Black British students.
  - 22% in HE needed financial support to buy devices, although only 33% were offered such help if they needed it and only 13% were loaned/given devices by their provider.
  - 40% in FE were given or loaned a device; 8% needed some form of financial support to buy devices and 43% of them were offered it by their provider.
- Asked about artificial intelligence (AI) for the first time, 11% in HE said they had access to institutional systems, chatbots or virtual assistants.
  - 13% in FE & 22% in HE said they used AI as part of their learning.
  - 16% in FE had received training in using AI tools appropriately.
- Students wanted investment in: upgrading platforms and systems (FE 33%/HE 34%); specialist software for their course (FE 18%/HE 26%); more computers/devices (FE 31%/HE 17%).

FE responses were from 23 UK colleges including one in NI; HE from 40 UK HEIs, including two in NI.

Jisc published *Sector examples of improved practice in supporting the digital experience of international students* **highlighting how HE providers are drawing on its** international students' digital experience (ISDX) research **to support equitable access to teaching and learning.**

- Examples include:
  - Ulster University's mobile-friendly virtual campus experience.
  - Edge Hill's proactive involvement of international students in creating pre-arrival digital resources to provide advice and foster a sense of community.
  - De Montfort's use of international student lecturers at its Faculty of Business & Law, where 50% of the student population is international.
  - Teesside's 'graduate backpack' for international students looking for work due to the cost of living crisis, enabling them to showcase their skills and experiences to potential employers.
  - Northumbria's Action Learning Sets, introduced to promote community and collaboration.

HEPI and GW4, an alliance of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter universities, published *Who cares? How postgraduate parents [in England] fall through the gap for government childcare grants, and how to fix it*.

- England's postgraduate taught and research students who are parents have been forgotten by past governments and are currently ineligible for both childcare grants for undergraduates and the free hours entitlements for workers.
  - The lack of equitable provision disproportionately affects women and those from lower income communities, hampering efforts to increase the diversity of the HE and high-skilled workforce.
  - The issue is complicated by the fact that responsibility for postgraduates in England falls between the Department for Education and the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT).
- The situation in the other UK nations:
  - NI: ineligible for undergraduate grants but able to apply for loans to cover 'associated costs of study', including childcare.
  - Scotland: eligible for repayable living cost loans and discretionary University Childcare Funds.
  - Wales: the Childcare Offer has been expanded to include postgraduates.
- Recommendations:
  - Expand the eligibility of undergraduate Childcare Grants to include home-taught and research postgraduates, helping to remove barriers for economically disadvantaged parents.
  - Consider how to extend the free hours entitlements only available to workers to those in postgraduate education, a critical part of the research workforce.
  - Bring responsibility for postgraduate students' childcare provision fully within the remit of the Department for Education.
  - The Higher Education Statistics Agency to work with universities to improve data collection on postgraduate students with childcare responsibilities.

HE: WIDENING PARTICIPATION

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published *Achieving credit transfer at scale: An analysis of UK university policies*, the first such comprehensive review, based on the 461 publicly available policies.

- The discourse around credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL) has grown exponentially.
  - In England, primary legislation has been passed to enable the development of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and the new government's election manifesto included a commitment to a post-16 strategy that would consider how students move between institutions.
- 14% of England's providers don't have a policy, whereas all providers in NI, Wales and Scotland have one (except the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which uses auditioning for admissions), probably because they continue to use the UK Quality Code within their regulatory framework.
  - Most have a five-year limit on credit to be transferred, some allow over ten years, and a very small number have a discretionary limit based on subject and nature of prior learning.
- Policies are often difficult to access, use technical terminology, don't allow learners to transfer marks or grades and impose stricter limits on learning gained from experience than gained in education.
  - Many discourage engagement and experiences are likely to vary significantly by institution.
- Recommendations for providers include: make RPL policies easily accessible on websites; include clear signposting to support; undertake an efficiency review to assess the impact on student engagement and how the process could be streamlined.
- Recommendations for policymakers include: encourage the use of a single, sector-owned template for RPL policies; consult on how providers could be encouraged or incentivised to better utilise RPL.

UCL published *Belonging and Identity in STEM Higher Education*, comprising 17 contributions – empirical research, conceptual analysis and case studies.

- Despite rising enrolments and decades of efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, inequalities remain in terms of access, progression and success in STEM fields.
- Widening participation efforts in STEM must go beyond 'opening the door more widely' and make STEM somewhere people want to come, can thrive and can add to.

UCAS published *Next Steps: What is the experience of young adult carers in education?*, based on the 3.9% of 2021 UCAS applicants (18,915) who shared their status.

- Data on young adult carers: England 4.6%, Wales 5.5% (18–24); Scotland 9%, NI 7% (16–24).
  - Carers Trust figures suggest official data under-represent the numbers progressing to HE.
- 77% of carer applicants were accepted in 2023 vs 82% of all under-25s; 24% were placed at high-tariff institutions vs 31%.
- Among the findings from UCAS's new widening participation questions to applicants:
  - Unlike in the general population, there are similar proportions of female and male carers (4.0%/3.9%), making female carers under-represented among applicants.
  - They struggle to find the right information about HE; they are more likely to apply as mature students, so need tailored information and support.
  - They were 59% more likely than non-carers to apply for health & social care and 57% nursing & midwifery.
  - 63% considered how to balance study and part-time work when researching study options; they are 33% more likely to be commuter students.
- A separate survey of 1,155 of the applicants found:
  - Variable experiences of support in school and college; 24% felt supported academically.
  - 19% cared for 35+ hours per week, compared with 32% in the general population.
  - 72% never or rarely spoke to school/college staff about their caring role.
  - 63% didn't get tailored support for applying to HE, rising to 65% for an apprenticeship.
  - 69% were unaware of support available at their institution; 21% of those who were aware said the information was hard to find.
  - 70% had financial concerns; 63% took being able to balance study and part-time work into account when researching options.

The report makes five recommendations for universities and colleges to enhance the carer experience.

The OfS published *AI and data science postgraduate conversion course scholarship programme: Second interim report* by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC).

- The DSIT-funded programme aims to increase:
  - The diversity of graduates entering the UK AI and data science workforce
  - The supply of digitally skilled workers, by converting graduates with non-related degrees
  - Industry support to help diversify the UK AI and data science workforce.
- Funding for 818 £10k scholarships was made available in 2023/24 and funding for a further 818 for 2024/25 has been confirmed; they are available at 31 HEIs in England.
- Findings on participation and scholarship allocation as of spring 2024 include:
  - Demand for the courses exceeded projections; 5k enrolments are expected in 2023/24.
  - 90% of allocated scholarships have been awarded and the proportions of female, disabled and Black students are significantly higher than among non-scholarship students.
  - Industry co-investment in scholarships has been hard to attract, with only around 26 pledged or confirmed to date across two years; however, in-kind investment has been around £6.7m.
- Issues requiring attention include:
  - Demand for scholarships has been very uneven across providers.
  - Several reported both a lack of UK students applying overall and a lack meeting eligibility criteria.
  - The scholarship is now generally too low to meet rising fee levels and help with living costs.

The House of Commons Library published *Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England*.

- The research briefing covers: differences in access and outcomes between groups; barriers to equal access, participation and outcomes; government policy and actions; the role of the OfS; and responsibilities and actions of HE providers.

The OfS published *Year 2 Evaluation Report: Evaluating the joint Research England and Office for Students programme to improve access and participation for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research study (2021–2026)*.

- £8m, jointly funded by Research England, was provided to enable 25 lead and partner HEIs to run projects lasting up to four years that will all finish by January 2026.

- It is too early to measure impact on progression, retention, completion and further study; overall:
  - Activities including skills development, wellbeing support, internships, networking and mentoring have been well received and, according to focus groups and surveys, have improved confidence, aspirations and preparedness for postgraduate research studies.
  - However, there have been challenges around resources, senior leadership buy-in, staff turnover and staff experiencing incidents of bias and marginalisation, as well as inconsistent collaboration.

GRADUATES & GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

University Alliance, which represents 16 professional and technical universities, published *To What Degree? Understanding what UK businesses look for in graduates***, based on a poll of 252 UK employers conducted by CBI Economics.**

- The most important factors in determining graduate success on the jobs market are: enthusiasm for the role (68%); transferable skills, e.g. communication (55%); relevance of subject studied (52%); vocational experience during their degree (42%).

- The least important factors are: which university they studied at (8%); specific projects completed during their degree (4%).
  - Where there were preferences for university type, employers favoured those with specialisms in relevant subject areas and that specialised in vocational degrees (42%).

- Graduates with degrees that include vocational experience were considered to have substantially better performance throughout the recruitment process; 85% said it enhanced performance at interview.

The National Centre for Universities & Business (NCUB) published findings **from a survey of 1,593 UK graduates/postgraduates, exploring their employment outcomes.**

- 79% said their course was helpful in gaining skills for employment; 69% said it helped with promotion or to further their career.

- 70% found a paid job within two years of completing their course.
  - 42% did a work placement as part of their course, 89% of whom found it helpful for getting a job.

- 53% of those who had graduated within the past five years had senior-level jobs.

- 88% agreed businesses should collaborate more with universities to increase students' understanding of career paths.

Jisc published a set of reports from projects funded by its Research Grant, designed to support research by career practitioners in HE, help to disseminate findings and improve practices.

- *How has the cost of living crisis impacted commuter student career decision-making and transition?*, by University of Bradford researchers.

- *Leadership, gender and creative industries: a study of self-perception and future career aspirations among students*, by University of Northampton researchers.

- *LLMs [large language models] for HE careers provision*, by Arden University and CareerChat (UK) researchers.

- *'Empower': empowering creative students to have positive workplace wellbeing, and knowledge of their workplace rights*, by a researcher at Leeds Arts University.

- *The Global Leaders scheme: evaluation using contribution analysis*, by the University of Exeter, considers the impact of a scheme that provides opportunities for intercultural experiences to enhance employability, with priority given to those from a widening participation background.

The latter is also a case study of using contribution analysis to evaluate employability interventions.

TASO (Transforming Access & Student Outcomes in Higher Education) published *Education pathways: Equality gaps in earnings and employment***, analysing the earnings and employment status of over a million individuals from KS4 qualifications (e.g. GCSE) to 16 years later.**

- Educational qualifications are clearly and unambiguously associated with both increased earnings and likelihood of being in employment, compared to no qualifications beyond KS4.
  - However, there are variations in how different HE qualifications increase earnings and the likelihood of being employed, with the greatest economic returns from earning a degree at a higher tariff (or 'top third') university.
- While educational qualifications generally result in higher earnings, there are also differences by free school meals (FSM) status, gender and race.
  - Whatever qualification people gain, gaps particularly remain by FSM status, suggesting that other factors may explain or drive these gaps, and that education alone can't address the wider drivers of inequalities in the labour market.
  - Students from FSM backgrounds have stronger labour market returns across every level of qualification, indicating the importance of ensuring they have equal access to higher level qualifications as a priority for improving social mobility; this requires addressing inequalities in prior attainment in schooling.
- Some Level 5/6 qualifications in FE generate strong employment and earnings premiums; however, the supply of such qualifications is relatively low, and policymakers should consider if or how their provision could be expanded while still retaining their earnings premiums.
- Recommendations include:
  - HE providers should consider their own performance on similar metrics, diagnosing and addressing the reasons for gaps where they are under their control.
  - In particular, providers should foreground equality considerations in their work with graduate employers to boost outcomes for groups who have fewer existing labour market advantages.
  - Work should be undertaken to improve the quality and coverage of administrative data, such as the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset.

The Institute of Labor Economics (IZA) published *Unraveling the Gender Wage Gap: Exploring early career patterns among university graduates***, based on data for 5k master's graduates from a large German university.**

- Common reasons for gender pay differences include: family-related decisions (e.g. childbirth, marriage), career-related developments (e.g. promotions), work experience and firm-specific networks.
  - However, they may not yet be relevant or may be less relevant earlier in the career.
- Findings include:
  - A significant gender wage gap already exists even in the first job after graduation; the largest gap is among humanities and social sciences graduates, where the share of females is highest and the average daily wage is lowest.
  - The gap decreases in the first year, then increases slowly over time.
  - The decline in the gap is concentrated among those who change firms and occupations after their first job with a degree in economics, business, humanities or social sciences.
  - Female graduates are more likely to start their careers in jobs for which they are overqualified and subsequently correct this skill mismatch, leading to increased wages; correcting the mismatch is costly for females, which may be an additional explanation for the gap that emerges later.
- Universities have an important role in mitigating the risk of future skill mismatches through counselling interventions, including:
  - Providing information on effective job search strategies that overcome gender norms
  - Helping students to understand that their career prospects should be tailored to field of study.

HE: TEACHING & LEARNING

The Open University (OU) published *Innovating Pedagogy 2024: Exploring new forms of teaching, learning and assessment, to guide educators and policy makers*, **its 12th report.**

- It highlights ten promising innovations that are already in currency but have the potential to exert a more profound influence on education:
  - **Speculative worlds**: reimagining the present, past or future to critique and change the status quo, benefiting marginalised groups who often feel under-represented.
  - **Pedagogies of peace**: emphasising the role of schools and organisations in promoting societal harmony by addressing everyday and structural violence.
  - **Climate action pedagogy**: integrating environmental topics across curricula; creating a climate-conscious curriculum supported by scientific research and real-world examples.
  - **Learning in conversation with generative AI (GenAI)**: enhancing interactive learning through immersive simulations and role-playing, aiding language acquisition, professional skills and critical thinking.
  - **Talking AI ethics with young people**: the importance of centring young people's rights in AI debates, emphasising their voices in AI tool development for education.
  - **AI-enhanced multimodal writing**: enhancing educational practices by enabling diverse forms of expression such as images, videos, voice-overs and music alongside traditional text.
  - **Intelligent textbooks**: using AI to enhance learning experiences by integrating interactive features such as automated question answering and adaptive content delivery.
  - **Assessments through extended reality (XR)**: using immersive simulations for evaluating and developing practical skills; simulations allow for authentic assessments without real-world risks or logistical constraints.
  - **Immersive language and culture**: using digital games and role-playing to offer authentic learning experiences in historical contexts, providing engaging platforms for language acquisition and cultural understanding.
  - **Exploring scientific models from the inside**: 'embodied learning', allowing students to explore & manipulate scientific models first-hand, enhancing understanding through experiential learning.

QAA published *Enhancing Learning and Teaching Quality through a Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)*, **a guide produced through a Collaborative Enhancement Project involving Birmingham City, Loughborough and Wolverhampton universities.**

- The project was based on the premise that improving the student learning experience should start with improving the teacher learning experience.
  - It involved implementing and evaluating an innovative collaborative observation model, with groups of students and teaching staff from various disciplines observing and reflecting on the quality of their learning and teaching.
- The publication provides guidance for those who will train student and staff in the collaborative observation method, with training resources and the first in a series of video case studies providing insights into the experiences and practices of participants.

QAA published a collection of resources on measuring educational gain, developed as part of a Collaborative Enhancement Project led by Imperial College London.

- An *Educational Gain Project Report* analyses the widely varying approaches taken by 66 providers awarded gold overall or gold for student outcomes in TEF 2023.
  - The lack of standardisation and the varied quality of evidence used to support claims of educational gain make it difficult to establish baselines or compare across providers; some submissions present robust data, while others rely on less rigorous or partial reporting of metrics.
  - The absence of baseline measures in many cases complicates the assessment of true educational gain, as submissions may indicate change but lack precise measurement between points in time.
  - While the report provides a set of reflective questions and recommendations for improving its articulation, support and measurement, an educational gain 'schema' offers a more structured approach to defining and measuring educational gain.
- An *Educational Gain Literature Summary* provides insights into its measurement, determinants and potential implications.

12 English HEIs were partners in the project, most also contributing case studies.

The OfS published *[Subcontractual arrangements in higher education](#)*, an *Insight* brief on an increasingly common arrangement, also known as 'subcontractual partnerships', 'franchised arrangements' or 'franchising'.

- Between 2019/20 and 2022/23, the number of students taught in such partnerships doubled to over 138k – over 5% of the total.

- The brief sets out the key risks, examples of practice or allegations that raise concerns and the importance of effective management and governance of partnership activity.

Universities UK (UUK) published [Franchise governance framework](#), developed with GuildHE and the Committee of University Chairs to help universities create stable, high-quality partnerships that provide good value for money.

HE: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

QAA published *[Evaluation of International Pathway Programmes](#)*, commissioned by UUK, based on an evaluation of 185 programmes in 20 subject areas at 34 volunteer providers.

- 18 of the 32 providers that offered International Foundation Programmes had equivalent domestic programmes, mainly foundation year provision.
    - Ten of the 20 providers that offered International Year One Programmes had equivalents, all of them the first year of full undergraduate programmes.
    - There was broad equivalence in entry requirements for international and domestic programmes.

- Academic standards of both International Foundation and Year One Programmes were mostly in line with expectations of a course at that level.

- A number of providers were applying the same academic regulations to International Year One Programmes and other Level 4 programmes; in some cases, however, where the programme was offered through a partner, there were differences in the regulations.

- There were notable differences in progression rate between the international programmes and their domestic equivalents within providers, but no clear observable patterns within these differences.

The report includes a number of recommendations for consideration by the sector.

The House of Commons Library published *[International students in UK higher education](#)*, exploring student numbers, their economic impact and government policy across the UK.

- In 2022/23 UK universities had 758,855, 26% of the total; 87.4% were from outside the EU.

- With a ten-fold increase since 2017/18, India replaced China as the top sending country in 2021/22; in 2022/23, India sent 126,600 students vs 102,800 from China; following rapid increases since 2017/18, Nigeria is now in third place (53,800).

- EU entrants increased gradually in the 2010s but fell 53% in 2021/22 and 8% in 2022/23 (95,505).

- Visa numbers and applications were down 17% in August 2024 (traditionally the peak month).

- The UK is the second most popular destination after the US; New Zealand and Canada are seeing substantial increases, as are European countries, which increasingly offer courses in English.

QAA published *[Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK Transnational Higher Education – Sustaining growth and quality in UK TNE [transnational education]: Interim findings from QE-TNE Scheme](#)*, covering the first three years of the scheme.

- The [QE-TNE Scheme](#), commissioned by UUK and GuildHE, launched in 2021, initially for five years, involving 75 UK HEIs, representing ~70% of the sector's TNE student population (400k).
    - The scheme has so far evaluated provision for nine countries: Germany, Egypt, UAE, China, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Greece and Cyprus; next year it will cover Malaysia, India and Oman.
    - The Scottish Funding Council is making participation in the scheme a requirement for all Scottish degree-awarding bodies engaging in TNE from 2024/25.

- The report covers governance, partnership arrangements, the student experience and the balance between adjusting to local contexts and ensuring the comparability of quality and standards.
    - During the first two years, participating HEIs' total TNE student population increased by 66%.
    - The most popular type of provision in 2022/23 was collaborative (mainly validated and franchised), representing more than 40% of the total.

The British Council published _Intra-regional mobility in East Asia_, drawing on student mobility data from UNESCO's Institute of Statistics.

- East Asia intra-regional mobility has increased significantly in the last ten years, with the region's attractiveness as an international study destination for students within the region increasing.
    - This is due to: established TNE collaborations; improvements in global rankings of domestic HEIs; and competitive fees and lower cost of living.
- Governments are developing policies and incentives to attract young people to study and stay to work afterwards, driven by the need to increase enrolments as their youth populations decline and demand grows for skilled workers.
- With key demand-side factors working in East Asia's favour over the short to medium term, intra-regional mobility is likely to continue to grow over the next five to ten years.
    - At the same time, supply-side factors are working to raise quality and provision, while some parents and students are prioritising proximity to home since the pandemic.
    - Rising post-pandemic inflation and the impact of higher global interest rates on local currencies have also affected the affordability of studying in pricier English-speaking countries.
- While the growth in East Asia intra-regional mobility could negatively impact student mobility to the UK, it stands to benefit from continued growth in East Asia TNE.
    - Continued investment is key to upholding the UK's reputation as a preferred global education provider in East Asia and to position the UK as an attractive study destination at some point in the HE/professional journey.
    - New and innovative partnerships could attract these students to the UK part way through or in the next phase of their studies, complementing their education in the region and contributing to the formation of truly global citizens.

HE: CURRENT IMPACT & FUTURE MODELS

London Economics published _The economic impact of higher education teaching, research, and innovation [2021/22]_, commissioned by UUK.

- For every £1 of public money invested in the UK HE sector, £14 was put back into the economy, resulting in a total economic impact of £265b (£4.83b in NI, 10.2% of the UK total).
    - This includes: research and knowledge exchange – £63b; teaching and learning – £95b; educational exports – £37b; university expenditure – £70b.
- On average, every UK graduate who does their first full-time degree generates an extra £75k for the exchequer compared to someone with A levels or equivalent who didn't go to university.
    - The net benefit ranges from £58k for undergraduate qualifications below degree level to £215k for postgraduate research.
- For every £1 of public funding for research, the sector generates £9.90 through its research and knowledge exchange.
    - Spending on research also supports 121,500 UK jobs in addition to jobs created by the knowledge generated through research; spending on knowledge exchange supports 39,600 jobs.

UUK also published Generating growth and opportunity across England: briefings_, including data on university impact, examples of activity and short case studies for each of England's nine regions._

The UPP Foundation published _The Kerslake Collection: The future of universities and their places, five years on from the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission_.

- Over 40 essays from leading thinkers across different sectors outline the economic and social benefits of universities for their local communities.

It is published in memory of Lord Bob Kerslake, Chair of the UPP Commission, who died last year.

UUK published _Opportunity, growth and partnership: A blueprint for change from the UK's universities_, with contributions on how government can support five big shifts.

- **Expand opportunity**, including through:
    - A tertiary-sector target of 70% of 25 year-olds studying at Level 4+ by 2040, with a focus on increasing access in low participation neighbourhoods; a Tertiary Education Opportunity Fund to respond to the needs of learners in low participation areas.

- Reinstating maintenance grants and increasing maintenance loans in line with inflation; a more consistent approach to contextual admissions and support for students and graduates, including five years' post-graduation access to careers services.

- **Improve tertiary collaboration**, including through: removing duplicate reporting to different regulators; reconsidering the design of *[England's]* LLE.

- **Generate local growth**, including through:
  - Universities as critical partners in local growth plans and partnerships
  - Stable incentives for universities to work with each other, business and the public sector; a long-term commitment to the HE Innovation Fund and consolidation and expansion of the Regional Innovation Fund; universities working with the NHS to support capacity expansion.

- **Secure future research strength**, including through: a sustained real-terms increase in quality-related funding; an ambitious GDP-based R&D intensity target; a Missions Innovation Fund to stimulate research and innovation.

- **A new global strategy** for universities to harness reach, reputation and impact, including through: commitment to the Turing Scheme and two-/three-year funding allocations; considering association to the next Erasmus scheme.

- In order to achieve these shifts: put universities on a firm financial footing; streamline regulation; and improve how the impact of universities is assessed.

The House of Commons Library published *Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges*.

- Although the four nations have a shared history for HE and students and staff flow between them, devolution of responsibility for the sector over the last 30 years has allowed them to take increasingly distinctive paths in how they manage their systems.

- The briefing covers: management and coordination; funding and student support; student numbers; teaching, learning and employability; the international context; research funding and output; HE, economy and society.

- Common challenges identified are: diminishing levels of financial resources for course provision; low staff morale and industrial action a near constant in recent years; student concern about the value for money of their HE experience, while cost of living pressures are undermining current levels of maintenance support.

HEPI published *Down with the world-class university: How our business models damage universal higher education*, arguing for more group and collaborative approaches.

- The UK lags behind other advanced economies in tertiary enrolment rates but over-reliance on the 'world-class university' model fuels the sector's financial crisis and limits its reach.

- The sector can learn from emerging non-university competitors how to offer HE at scale, in partnership and at lower cost; what's needed *[in England]* is:
  - **A redesign of the HE system** to achieve a universal offer, going beyond funding considerations to differentiate types of provider and introduce new business models.
  - **New credentials and value propositions**, designed by providers, working with the OfS and Skills England, as a central part of the universal offer.
  - **A major transition fund** to offer loans to providers to develop new business models, value propositions and organisational structures in line with the new system design.
  - **Group and federal structures**, with collaborative structures and joint ventures preferred to the use of mergers and acquisition, especially in the case of distressed providers.
  - **A sector-wide leadership body** overseeing the tertiary ecosystem, including distributing resource, scrutinising regulatory burden and shaping public understanding of the value of HE.
  - **Rebalancing the role of the OfS**: to have regard to the overall health of providers and the sector, alongside its responsibility to students; this should include managing regulatory burden.

HEPI published *An overview of US higher education*, covering the relationship between state funding and income from fees; the role of the federal government; student costs and trends in growth.

The Policy Institute, KCL published *Higher, further or tertiary: Lessons for the future of education from across the UK nations*, **a collection of papers written as part of KCL's** Future of Higher Education programme.

- The UK demonstrates that the funding of modern HE is highly political and consistently unstable.
  - Financial strains are increasingly evident in all four nations, and even in RoI, in spite of its higher recent economic growth.
  - Overall, much can be learnt from the different choices made within the UK even though, unfortunately, no nation provides clear answers on how HE might best evolve.
- The favoured source of income growth in recent years has been recruitment of international students but this is now under strain due to wider concerns about migration.
  - Australia and Canada recently introduced numerical caps on international students at short notice.
- Two papers focus on how the sector might address these challenges, other than by campaigning for better funding.
  - One focuses on the potential for greater efficiency, arguing that savings can be made without sacrificing quality.
  - The other argues for radical structural change, emphasising the underlying governance and regulation of a future UK system, which needs to be tertiary but, in the case of England, also far more regional in order to achieve the structural diversity and innovation that the sector requires.

WORKFORCE ISSUES

HEPI published *Unblocking the Pipeline: Supporting the retention, progression and promotion of Black early-career academics*.

- Based on a survey of nearly 100 Black early-career academics and 24 interviews, the report investigates how they feel about their workplaces and careers and the strategies used to support them; among the findings:
  - 68% say they have good relationships; 32% fair pay; 34% an inclusive workplace; 38% wellbeing support.
  - They often feel 'invisible' and passed over for promotion or not acknowledged for their work; but they are also expected to do more additional work, e.g. interview panels and mentoring.
  - 64% say there is EDI training where they work; 38% say it is effective and 14% ineffective.
  - 38% would feel comfortable reporting bullying or harassment; 27% feel race is a taboo topic at work.
  - 36% report efforts to 'decolonise' curricula and research; 24% the active recruitment of Black academics.
  - 35% consider decolonisation efforts effective and 14% ineffective.
- Three recommendations are made around: standardised mentorship programmes and mentor training and recognition; targeted studentships and scholarships, coupled with ongoing support; active leadership.

HEPI published *The characteristics and career pathways of third space research professionals: Reflections from practice*, **drawing on recent work in various research contexts in the UK and overseas to explore how the previously invisible third space is beginning to be seen.**

- 'Third space' staff are those in universities who are not academic or non-academic professionals, e.g.: technology transfer staff; scientific staff overseeing labs or equipment; those who develop citizen networks to maximise the impact of research; and staff serving external clients who are commissioning research from a university.
- Findings include:
  - Universities need to do more to support transitions of third space research and technology professionals, especially those coming in from other sectors.
  - Universities need to acknowledge and develop alternative career paths that aren't constrained by the current academic versus professional dualism.
  - Without the above changes, given the changing nature of work and the evolving social purpose of universities, further strain will be put on the university but more importantly on those working in the third space.

Advance HE published _Understanding Inclusive Leadership in Practice_, a guide produced as part of its Creating a culture for Strategic EDI [Equality, Diversity & Inclusion] Change initiative. *[The full report and accompanying video blogs (vlogs) are available to members only.]*

- The integration of inclusive practices within traditional leadership frameworks can have significant positive impacts on organisations, including:
  - Improved organisational performance – diverse and inclusive teams often outperform their less diverse counterparts, as the full potential of all team members is harnessed.
  - Higher employee satisfaction and retention – when individuals feel included and valued, they are more likely to be fulfilled in their roles and remain committed to their organisations.
  - Enhanced reputation and trust – organisations that prioritise inclusive leadership are seen as more equitable and socially responsible, enhancing their reputation and trust with stakeholders.

Advance HE published _The University of Portsmouth's Inclusive Leadership Exploration & Discovery [iLEAD] Programme's Evaluation_, early findings of a programme commissioned by and co-developed with the university in 2022 as a central feature of its vision and strategy.

- Pre- and post-programme survey data from 137 participants show a significant improvement in perceived knowledge and confidence around inclusive leadership, role modelling and empowerment towards inclusivity.
  - The biggest change is in confidence in inclusive leadership, which had the lowest score pre-programme: +21% overall, rising to +24% for leaders and managers.
  - Participants benefited most in: being curious about and open-minded to others' perspectives and experiences; being honest and open to critique about one's own potential biases and assumptions; being ready to adopt new ways of working in pursuit of inclusivity.
- 81% implemented practical changes after engaging with iLEAD, including:
  - Engaging in self-reflection, challenging their own biases and assumptions and how these influence decision-making and actions (17%).
  - Being more open towards other opinions, taking steps to include multiple voices in decision-making and being more responsive to questioning and challenge (14%).
  - Being attentive to practices, processes and opinions that are exclusive and trying to constructively 'call them out' and change them (14%).

Advance HE published _Leading strategic change in higher education in challenging times_ written with Wonkhe, based on three roundtable discussions with senior leaders, heads of schools and governors from HEIs across the UK and internationally.

- The insights highlight:
  - The foundational role of trust and collaboration within leadership teams
  - The necessity of agility in institutional decision-making processes
  - The importance of maintaining an active scrutiny of the institutional appetite for and tolerance of risk, in the service of innovation.

AI & TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION

The DSIT Responsible Technology Adoption Unit and England's Department for Education published _Research on public attitudes towards the use of AI in education_, based on a rapid programme of deliberative research with 108 parents and school students in England.

- Views of and trust in AI tools fluctuated throughout the sessions, as they reacted to new information and diverging opinions, highlighting the importance of building trust.
  - While awareness of AI was high, understanding wasn't deep; it is often associated with robots, machines and dystopian futures.
  - This resulted in initial scepticism, but there was openness to learning more; initial concerns were often based on a lack of understanding.
- All agreed that there were clear opportunities for teachers to use AI and were largely comfortable with it, although more hesitant about students interacting with it directly.
  - The main concerns centred on over-reliance by teachers and students, with the loss of key social and technical skills and reduced human contact-time leading to unintended adverse outcomes.

- They gradually understood the need to use student work and data to optimise tools but wanted anonymised data and clear rules for data sharing.
- Key conditions for the use of AI in education and the use of student work/data to optimise AI tools:
  - Human involvement to ensure teacher roles are not displaced, to correct for error and unfair bias and to ensure safeguarding.
  - Supporting informed decisions about the use of data.
  - Ensuring that tools introduced at schools are of a uniform standard to avoid exacerbating inequality, with strict oversight of tech companies providing them.
  - Using AI tools only where appropriate and where they add value.
  - Ensuring that tech companies share some of their profits so that these can be reinvested into the education system, while recognising the need to incentivise private companies to improve tools.

A [joint departmental project](#) is to make government documents available to AI companies specialising in education so that they can train their tools; the OU is also sharing learning resources as part of the project. Tests show that providing these kinds of data can increase accuracy from 67% to 92%.

The OECD published [The potential impact of artificial intelligence on equity and inclusion in education](#), focusing on learner-centred, teacher-led and other institutional AI tools.

- The working paper:
  - Emphasises the importance of balancing the potential benefits of AI with ethical considerations and the risk of exacerbating existing disparities
  - Highlights the need to address privacy and ethical concerns, enhance cultural responsiveness, manage techno-ableism and provide continuing professional learning in AI
  - Stresses the importance of maintaining educational integrity amidst growing commercial influence
  - Encourages more research to ensure that AI adoption in education supports a more equitable and inclusive learning environment.

The OU published [Developing robust assessment in the light of generative AI developments](#), an evaluation report funded by NCFE's Assessment Innovation Fund.

- 43 markers were asked to grade almost 1k scripts and flag those they suspected were AI-generated; among the findings:
  - AI answers for 58 of 59 questions received passing marks; the only exception was a question that required specific application of material supported by unambiguous marking guidance.
  - AI scored particularly highly at Level 3, with subsequent reductions at Level 4 and above.
  - The discipline didn't affect performance, but law, languages, maths and science presented unique challenges in AI detection due to the nature of the content.
  - Markers' ability to detect AI answers improved after training, apart from at Level 3; however, there was also an increase in false positives, with eight genuine student answers mistaken for AI.
  - The hallmarks found in AI answers were also present in student answers, particularly, but not exclusively, those of weaker students.
  - Detection was easier in subjects requiring critical thinking and application of knowledge, and more challenging in descriptive or straightforward tasks.
- Recommendations include that institutions designing assessments should focus on question design, marking guidance and student skills interventions rather than detecting AI misuse.
  - When students are identified as using AI in their assessments, institutions should focus on helping them develop their study skills.

The European Commission published [Digital transformation in blended learning environments](#), an analytical report by the European Expert Network on Economics of Education, examining how the digital dimension of blended learning benefits students and educators.

- The report explores: the development, impact and effectiveness of blended learning; and the importance of equitable access to new technologies and appropriate training for educators.
- Blended learning has the potential to enhance student engagement, improve learning outcomes and foster the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
  - Combining digital and traditional learning creates opportunities for personalised learning experiences as part of a student-centred approach.

- The effectiveness of blended learning is influenced by factors including:
  - The design and implementation of different models, appropriate pedagogical strategies, digital resources and learning platforms that align with curriculum goals and promote active student involvement
  - Educators' digital skills and their access to appropriate infrastructure; adequate training and CPD that focus on building digital and pedagogical competencies are essential
  - Collaborative partnerships between educational institutions, NGOs and the private sector, providing resources, expertise and ongoing support for teachers' digital development.

The Workplace

RECRUITMENT

The Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) published _Resourcing and talent planning report 2024_, based on a survey of 1k HR and people professionals.

- 69% say competition for well-qualified talent has increased over the last year; 84% have tried to fill vacancies, of whom 64% have experienced difficulties attracting candidates.
  - 52% in the public sector have struggled to recruit to senior and skilled roles.
- 51% currently offer apprenticeships, 44% graduate programmes, 35% intern schemes, 34% post-A-level entry routes and 34% career-returner programmes.
- 74% advertise at least some jobs as open to flexible working; 54% as 'open to location' (+7ppt).
  - 71% of those offering home/hybrid work say it helps improve attraction and retention and 30% say they have increased its use over the last 12 months.
  - 42% say it has increased engagement (+7ppt) and 45% increased retention (+13ppt).
- 40% are very active in trying to recruit diverse board candidates (+8ppt); 51% of those trying to fill vacancies say they recruited a more diverse workforce than the previous year.
  - However, 29% report challenges hiring diverse talent (+13ppt).
  - 73% report that line managers follow objective assessment and scoring criteria when recruiting (+6ppt), but just 28% train all interviewers on legal obligations and objectives.
- 10% are planning to reduce their recruitment of migrants and 18% are improving their offer to attract UK-born workers.
- 78% have increased their use of technology in recruitment and onboarding; 31% use some form of AI/machine learning (+15ppt), of whom 66% said it improved efficiency and 62% that it gave them more information for resource planning.
- 41% of those that have appointed in the last 12 months have had new recruits resign within the first 12 weeks; 27% have had new hires fail to turn up.

IZA published _Age Discrimination, Apprenticeship Training and Hiring: Evidence from a scenario experiment_.

- Older candidates encounter, on average, a 34% lower likelihood of receiving positive responses to their job applications than their younger counterparts.
- Recruiters hold negative perceptions about older workers': mental abilities; social, communication, physical and technological skills; trainability; flexibility; personality; creativity; motivation; attractiveness; hearing condition; and reasonableness of salary expectations.
  - Three stereotypes are particularly responsible for lower recruitability: more limited technological skills (18% of total discrimination); trainability (12%); and flexibility (11%).
- A scenario-based experiment involved recruiters evaluating the recruitability and human capital signals of fictitious candidates, who varied in age and willingness to participate or recent participation in relevant apprenticeship training.
  - Regardless of their age, those willing to participate/having participated in training fare better than those unwilling/without training.
  - However, recruitability differences between middle-aged and older candidates doesn't appear to be affected, so participation can compensate for age discrimination, but can't mitigate against it.

APPRENTICESHIPS & TRAINEESHIPS

The Edge Foundation (Edge) published *Flex Without Compromise: Preserving apprenticeships for young people under a growth and skills levy*, **informed by desk research, a discussion with policy experts and interviews with experts and stakeholders.**

- The Government's proposed growth and skills levy looks to offer businesses more flexibility in using levy funds but can't be all things to all people.
  - A primary concern is the risk of eroding *[England's]* already dwindling apprenticeship opportunities for young people, especially at lower levels.
  - SMEs will be key, as they predominantly offer apprenticeships at Level 2 or 3, are much more likely to take on school leavers as apprentices and operate outside big cities.
- Options in designing the new levy include:
  - Limiting the scope of non-apprenticeship skills training that qualifies for funding and limiting it to pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship-related training.
  - Adjusting the proportions of levy flexibility to minimise spending on non-apprenticeship training.
  - Ringfencing a portion of the levy for certain ages, levels and/or sectors; using an adjustable subsidy rate to prioritise apprenticeships for certain ages.
  - Extending the levy to more businesses.
- Options for reform 'beyond the levy' include:
  - Opening up apprenticeship opportunities in SMEs; addressing employer concerns about taking on younger apprentices.
  - Improving the apprenticeship advertising and application process.
  - Reconsidering the apprenticeship structure to better suit different sectors and learners; and making mentoring an entitlement for apprentices.
  - Addressing the functional skills requirement; and raising the quality of and support around off-the-job training.

The Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) published *The apprenticeship guarantee*, **on improving skills development opportunities for those who don't go to university.**

- The number of apprenticeship starts in England has significantly declined since the mid-2010s, when it hovered at around 500k.
  - However, three times more young people apply than the number of places available.
  - The decline in starts has also been associated with a shift towards higher levels, older ages and those from less deprived backgrounds.
- For young people in disadvantaged areas, it seems the pathway apprenticeships provide into a career is narrowing, with potentially large implications for their future work and wellbeing.
- There is space to use existing levy funds more efficiently to increase the allocation of apprenticeship funding to young people.
  - Ringfencing 33% of the apprenticeship levy for under 25s starting Level 2/3 apprenticeships would pay for around double the current number of Level 2/3 starts in levy-paying firms.
  - Level 2/3 apprenticeships are key to addressing low skills as they are the type 16–18 year-olds are likely to take.
- More broadly, vocational education in the UK can be improved by e.g.: increasing the availability of pre-apprenticeship courses in FE; and improving the quality of classroom-based vocational training offered to both apprentices and non-apprentices.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) published *Profile of Modern Apprenticeship [MA] Employers*, **analysing 19k enterprises with MA starts in Scotland between 2010 and 2019 using Office for National Statistics (ONS) data.**

- The report looks across industry sectors and employer sizes and explores the economic benefits of employing MAs.
  - Over 50% of employers were in: construction; wholesale & retail trade; motor vehicle & motorcycle repair; or manufacturing.
  - 91.9% of employers were SMEs (compared to 99.3% of businesses across the country).

- The construction sector employed the most MAs and had a high concentration as a proportion of the workforce (13.6%).
- There is a positive relationship between MA employment and enterprise productivity: on average, enterprises that employ more MAs are also more productive.

SDS also published *Quality Assurance National Thematic Report 2023–24: Employer engagement*, on the quality of engagement in MAs, based on interviews with 205 employers.

- The report covers: the extent of employer involvement in all aspects of MAs; the support they give to apprentices; consideration of support needs for equality groups; employers' perceived added value of their involvement in the training (vs leaving it all to the provider) and any link to their motivation for offering MAs.

- Findings include:
  - Active employer engagement in the design, planning and delivery of MAs is a key strength; and almost all report a positive working relationship with their learning provider.
  - Challenges include: staffing issues making it difficult to release apprentices for training; sector instability; and gathering evidence for apprenticeship units.

Recommendations are provided; SDS will use findings to benchmark employer engagement approaches.

The European Commission published a *Study exploring the context, challenges and possible solutions in relation to the quality of traineeships in the EU*.

- Four main types of traineeships – a limited period of paid or unpaid work practice that includes a learning and training component – are identified:
  - Open market traineeships, providing work experience through learning and training on the job, under an agreement between the employer and trainee
  - Active labour market policy traineeships, targeting unemployed/inactive young people, involving an agreement between employer, trainee and public employment service
  - Education curricula traineeships, part of formal education (school, vocational or HE)
  - Mandatory professional traineeships, with content regulated and completion a requirement to access a specific profession (e.g. doctors, lawyers, professional accountants).

- **Paid trainees** are predominantly young people, with ~80% below the age of 30.
  - They are slightly more likely to be male and have a high level of education, with over 85% having completed at least higher secondary education.
  - Traineeships tend to be in urban areas (over 40% in cities), in high-skilled occupations and more commonly found in the service sector and larger firms.

- **Unpaid trainees** are on average younger than paid trainees and slightly more likely to be female; they are generally highly educated, with the majority having completed either post-secondary non-tertiary education or tertiary education.

- There are three main issues:
  - **Problematic use**, e.g. where regular jobs are disguised as traineeships or where the trainee is considered a worker, but the employer fails to meet legal standards.
  - **Poor-quality** with regard to working conditions and the learning component: ~50% aren't paid; 25%+ claim not to have had access to any type of social security; and on average, 20%+ claim that what they learnt was not professionally useful.
  - **Unequal access**, especially to high-quality traineeships, for those from disadvantaged groups, particularly if they are unpaid; remote and hybrid traineeships, which could be easier for certain groups to access, face challenges in ensuring sufficient quality, especially of learning content.

- Challenges arise from:
  - The complexity of national regulatory approaches regarding the legal status of trainees; insufficient enforcement and lack of capacity for controls and inspections; and the weak position of trainees relative to providers.
  - External factors, e.g. changes in the labour market driven by the green and digital transition; shrinking working-age population; the rise of remote and hybrid working arrangements; and emerging phenomena like 'job-hopping'.

A range of policy options and their anticipated impacts are presented to support a new EU-level initiative aiming to improve quality, inclusiveness and access to traineeships.

TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

Cedefop published *Beyond subsidising training costs: Policies to increase training provision in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises [MSMEs]*.

- The study: investigates the causes of the MSME training gap; develops a novel taxonomy of policy strategies and instruments to help MSMEs increase their training provision; analyses a broad range of relevant policy instruments implemented across the 27 EU member states (EU-27) and the UK; and provides insights into their effectiveness, particularly on how they interact or are combined.

- Three main policy strategies for improving MSME training provision are:
  - **Instruments that provide targeted support**, helping MSMEs to identify and meet their training needs as shaped by their current business activities, work organisation and skill use and overcome/reduce specific barriers to training.
  - **Instruments that offer mediated support** for training in order to unleash innovation in MSMEs and therefore increase skill use at their workplaces.
  - **Instruments that seek to win over MSMEs** to cooperate in educational outreach, reflecting the fact that MSME employees are not only less likely to receive employer training but also demonstrate a lower propensity to engage independently in continuing VET (CVET) activities.

- Policy instruments can also be classified according to the different levers used:
  - **Financing instruments** are of vital importance, whether they provide public (co-)funding or induce forms of cost-sharing among employers or between employers or employees.
  - **Structural instruments**, which aim to overcome specific barriers, include: counselling and consultancy services; tailored CVET provision; promotion of knowledge creation; support for awareness-raising activities; support for networking with other MSMEs and other relevant actors; and support for interest aggregation and collective bargaining.

- A particular policy intervention can combine different strategies and different instruments.

A number of policy suggestions are made.

Cedefop published *Human capital utilisation, quiet quitting and employee retention*.

- Turnover is the most important cause of the under-provision of training in organisations.
  - Organisations that leverage human capital to be competitive see their investment in human capital threatened by turnover.
  - They also understand that turnover is an extreme manifestation of a more general threat to their investment in human capital: the withdrawal of work effort, i.e. 'quiet quitting', when workers only produce the minimum performance acceptable, denying the organisation access to their skills.

- However, organisations could use training provision as a means to stabilise turnover, as investing in skills tends to result in an increase in commitment, binding employees to the workplace.
  - Thus organisations that base their competitive advantage on human capital encourage workers to draw on their skills, establishing an employment relationship that also minimises the risk of withdrawal.
  - The type of employment relationship established is related to training provision – both paid and on the job – turnover, withdrawal behaviour and workplace morale; managerial support for training is able to generate similar effects.

SKILLS GAPS & SHORTAGES

The ONS published *Understanding skill and qualification suitability in the labour market, UK: August 2024*, statistics 'in development'.

- In 2022, 2.3m (6.6%) of the working-age population had the skills to work in at least one other occupation (women 7.4%; men 5.9%).

- In 2021, 52.5% of employed adults in England and Wales had average qualifications for their occupation, while 20.2% were more qualified than average (women 21.8%; men 18.7%).
  - The North East of England had the highest overqualification (22.3%); East (18.7%) and South East (18.4%) the lowest.

- The skills most required were 'establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships' and 'updating and using relevant knowledge', much more common among employed than unemployed people.

DSIT published *Cyber security skills in the UK labour market 2024*, the sixth analysis of the nature and extent of skills gaps and shortages in the industry.

- 44% of businesses have gaps in basic technical areas; gaps in incident management are up 21ppt on 2020 to 48%, possibly in part due to an increasingly challenging threat landscape.
  - Demand for cyber security professionals has fallen, with core job postings decreasing by 32% between 2002 and 2023.
  - 62% of the workforce are generalists.
- The UK has made significant improvements in training new potential talent for the cyber security labour market and the number of cyber security graduates has increased by 34%.
- The estimate of the cyber workforce gap – the annual shortfall in cyber security personnel – has decreased from 11,100 last year to 3,500; however, the gap remains persistent and annually cumulative in effect, due to unmet demand from previous years.
- Employers are increasingly asking cyber staff to be office-based, which places geographical restrictions on the available talent pool.
- The proportion of women and disabled people in the cyber workforce continues to be lower than both the UK workforce as a whole and the digital workforce.
  - The proportion from ethnic minority backgrounds is in line with the UK but is trending downwards.
- Employers can see the benefits of recruiting entry-level staff and apprentices but aren't sure about potential career pathways and what training resources and funding are available.
  - They would welcome financial help such as funding or tax incentives for apprenticeships, as well as information on benefits and practicalities, e.g. finding providers, putting programmes together and available support.
- AI has the potential to transform the cyber skills landscape, but training and recruitment will need to adjust to reflect the changes it brings about.

Business in the Community (BITC) published *Lifting Up the UK: State of the nation 2024*, its first annual report looking at what business leaders are doing to make a positive impact, based on responses from 450 of the UK's biggest companies.

- The top two challenges are:
  - Attracting and retaining talent, especially in green and digital skills (cited by 57%): many are innovating new, socially responsible ways of securing their talent pipeline, while tackling social mobility and local deprivation.
  - New technologies or GenAI (55%): while views on the risks of AI vary, CEOs agree that its rapid adoption can't be slowed or deferred.
- Top societal and environmental priorities include:
  - Net zero – from commitment to action: 84% identify climate change and the net zero transition as a top three risk, but many are being held back by pressures that include skills.
  - Tackling the 'S' of ESG (environmental, social and governance): 49% cite social inequalities and are taking action to secure their future workforce by tackling social mobility, investing in future skills and ensuring that their workplaces allow everyone to reach their full potential; they're also boosting efforts to retain talent and create inclusive workplaces.

BITC also published a toolkit to encourage and enable businesses to work with the third sector to develop skills-based, employer-supported volunteering.

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) in partnership with Experian published *Focusing on the Skills Construction Needs: Labour market intelligence report, UK 2024–2028*.

- In 2023, the workforce numbered 2.67m; 210k workers left the industry and 200k joined.
  - The industry needs to attract the equivalent of 50,300 (1.9%) extra workers per year (NI: 1,040/1.6%) to meet expected levels of work over the next five years, up from 45k in 2023.
  - An average of 38k vacancies overall were advertised per month and 31% of employers cited finding suitably skilled staff as their key challenge.
- The industry has a range of non-mutually exclusive options: increasing the number of people joining; reducing the number leaving; supporting those working in the industry to be more productive.

- There is also a mismatch between the workers that employers are looking for and those that are available, whether by occupation, location or both.
  - This presents opportunities for training and retraining, although uncertainty over growth means that employers may be holding back from making training investments.
- CITB will support the construction industry by investing over £267m in three priority areas:
  - Inform and enable diverse and skilled people into construction, by raising the profile of careers, supporting people into the industry and providing funding for new entrant training.
  - Develop a training and skills system to meet current and future needs, by: updating standards, working with industry to develop a more flexible, competence-based skills system and working to influence apprenticeships on the industry's behalf.
  - Support the industry to train and develop its workforce by: developing a new training needs analysis service for small businesses; providing financial incentives to help businesses do more training; and working with providers to identify gaps in training supply.

The report includes brief analysis for the devolved nations and each English region; separate, more detailed reports are also provided, including for NI, Scotland and Wales.

NOCN Group published *Global Construction Skills: Implications for UK Economy*.

- Over the next five years, there will be major growth in demand for construction workers and occupational skills are transferable across the globe.
  - The CITB estimates that the UK will need an extra 250k workers by 2030 and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB) forecasts 280k.
  - The new government's plan to build 1.5m homes over the next five years could add a further 150k to make a total of 430k – an almost 15% increase.
- Recommendations for government include:
  - Establish a long-term realistic strategic plan for investment in housing, infrastructure and net zero to give industry confidence in the future.
  - Develop the growth & skills levy to establish a single, less bureaucratic arrangement across the UK that could also embrace the current CITB/ECITB Levies.
  - Combine work on training, standards, occupational maps and competency frameworks into a single programme under the Building Safety Regulator and the Super Sectors Programmes.
  - Reintroduce UK-wide occupational standards, with more flexibility for SMEs.
- Recommendations for the construction industry include:
  - Develop the occupational standards and upskilling courses that industry needs; improve competence levels, particularly for those not even at Level 2.
  - Increase productivity, make the workforce more diverse and implement use of digitalisation, AI and new methods of working.

Several recommendations are critical to addressing the findings of the Grenfell Inquiry.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, RoI, published *Skills for Modern Methods of Construction [MMC]: An assessment of the current and future skills requirements for the transition to modern methods of construction*, by EY Business Advisory Services.

- The report is based on: a literature search; a review of best practice in England & Wales, Scotland, Hong Kong, Japan and Sweden; consultation with stakeholders; and an assessment of skills supply.
- MMC consists of construction techniques that improve productivity and aim to reduce time, cost, waste and errors; they include offsite construction, modular construction, pre-fabrication, 3D printing and onsite assembly.
- Findings include:
  - MMC requires the evolution of traditional design and planning skills and approaches, including continuous training to remain up-to-date with the latest technologies; the specific skills required are well understood.
  - There is a significant presence of demonstration parks and innovation hubs across the five countries reviewed, illustrating the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing between industry, government and academia.
  - 'Knowledge' rather than 'skills' gaps exist at senior levels of procurers and their advisers.

- Increased use of MMC may provide a solution to 'brain drain' as workers age.
- Barriers to accessing training persist, so many offsite manufacturers are training in house.

- 28 recommendations – requiring collaboration across government, industry, education and training – are made under eight themes:
  - Senior management training; information sharing; new roles and labour retention; use of digital and AI tools; certification; early learning engagement; policy levers; and training provision.
- Recommendations include:
  - Transitioning to offsite construction should increase the visibility of broadened construction careers, offer greater access for the regional labour force and new pathways for female entrants.
  - Training providers should consider increased use of alternative training practices, including the use of virtual reality, AI and onsite training roadshows to increase enrolments and uptake by industry.

The OECD published *Bridging Talent Shortages in Tech: Skills-first hiring, micro-credentials and inclusive outreach*.

- Talent shortages in the tech sector are hindering productivity, innovation, job satisfaction and economic growth.

- A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder strategy based on innovative policy is essential, including:
  - **Skills-first hiring**: employers should adopt skills-profiling tools and inclusive hiring techniques and tie employee progression to skills; providers should include shorter, targeted, modular options and engage social partners in curriculum design; governments should establish a system to validate non-formal/informal learning, encourage matching jobseekers to vacancies based on skills and introduce effective quality assurance systems.
  - **Micro-credentials**: employers should collaborate with social partners and providers to design and deliver them and recognise them in career development; providers should establish internal quality standards, break down courses appropriately and increase data collection; governments should accredit both programmes and providers, create online platforms, expand funding options and integrate them into national qualifications frameworks.
  - **Inclusive outreach**: employers should target under-represented groups, promote diverse role models and adopt inclusive workplace practices; providers should increase accessibility, partner with employers for post-training work placements and develop targeted awareness campaigns; governments should collaborate with schools on unbiased teaching materials and inclusive teaching practices and work with training providers to address barriers to adult learning.

- Successful implementation of these strategies requires robust collaboration among governments, education and training institutions and the private sector.
  - The report draws on exemplary practices from various countries to illustrate effective approaches to fostering such collaboration, ensuring sustainable solutions to alleviate global talent shortages.

SKILLS POLICY

Skills England published *Skills England: Driving growth and widening opportunities*, **its first assessment of skills needs in the UK economy.**

- Significant barriers to growth:
  - Over 33% of 2022 vacancies were due to skills shortages, up from a stable 22% 2013–20.
  - For employers: the qualifications landscape can be opaque; skills supply and demand may be mismatched; and there are insufficient mechanisms for encouraging them to invest in skills.
  - For learners: the pathways into skilled careers are not always clear; and the current skills system and employer investment aren't always equipping them with the literacy, numeracy and digital skills they need.

- 33% of average annual UK productivity growth is attributable to an expansion of skills 2001–19.
  - The UK's 300+ HEIs contributed around £265b to the UK economy in 2021–22.

- Specific sector skills are concentrated in different English regions; 61% in London are qualified at Level 4+ vs 38% in Cornwall and 33% in Greater Lincolnshire.

- Employer investment in training is at its lowest since 2011, down 19% in real terms.

- Causes may include: perceptions that staff are sufficiently skilled; lack of resources; a lack of a clear industrial strategy as the basis for a linked skills strategy; a strong supply of international labour and a flexible labour market; an assumption that upskilling is the job of government; low overall investment.

- 10% (2.5m) of UK roles are in critical demand, 90% of which need work-related education/training.
  - Health & social care has the highest volume, followed by education, manufacturing and professional scientific & technical industries.

- By 2035, many of the skills needed will be impacted by demographic and technological shifts and the green transition; many of the occupations in demand now will see employment growth; those requiring skills for HE and interpersonal skills are expected to see the most growth.
  - Sectors will be affected differently, e.g.: construction will need new qualifications to meet energy efficiency retrofit targets; in hydrogen, existing skilled workforces will need to grow.
  - There will be increasing demand for skills to harness tech developments, e.g. AI, while other developments, e.g. in cyber security, may change the focus of roles and lead to new specialisms.

- Skills England plans include:
  - Work with FE/HE to clarify and strengthen the qualifications landscape and focus hard on successful outcomes for students.
  - Work with employers to bring the skills agenda into the boardroom and encourage the celebration of continuous improvement and skills development in the workplace.
  - Encourage employers to step-change their investment in skills, partly through improved flexibility in the proposed new growth and skills levy* and partly through better sectoral cooperation.
  - Collaborate intensively with colleagues across government, in the regions and in the devolved nations to ensure a seamless experience for students and employers.

*On the day the report was published, the Government announced the new growth and skills levy that will replace the apprenticeship levy. Skills England is due to launch formally in 2025.

City & Guilds and the Lifelong Education Institute published _Making Skills Work: The path to solving the productivity crisis_, calling for an end to 'policy churn, duplication and reinvention' and including an account of the past 60 years of UK skills and education policy.

- In an Opium survey of 1k UK business decision-makers and 2k working-age adults:
  - 74% of decision-makers and 91% of CEOs identified building skills as crucial for productivity.
  - Only 48% of adults felt that they had left education with the right skills for their career of choice.
  - 40% of those not in work – students, unemployed, retired – weren't confident they had the skills now required to enter the workforce.

- **Recommendations for government** include: revive Sector Skills Councils to work in partnership with Skills England; drive further integration of all post-16 education to create a tertiary system; introduce a version of England's LLE that supports workforce upskilling/reskilling, especially modular courses at Level 4–6; create an Individual Learning Account to enhance the new levy and enable more people to access the training they need.

- **Recommendations for Skills England** include: ensure all Budget spending on skills is fully costed and evaluated on its likely returns to productivity; have oversight of England's National Career Service; play a key role in shaping VET as part of a comprehensive post-18 system; prioritise the higher skill needs of the existing workforce, while recognising the role of Level 2/3 in kickstarting careers, filling gaps and enabling progression into HE.

- **Recommendations for City & Guilds** include: raise awareness of the relationship between skills and productivity; promote further post-16 integration; conduct employer analysis to identify where investment in upskilling/reskilling is most urgently needed.

NCUB published _Collaboration for Future Skills: Bridging higher education and industry to meet the skills needs of tomorrow_.

- University-business collaboration plays a vital role in skills development, including on: student placements, apprenticeships, curriculum design, staff mobility and strategic skills planning.

- However, three major barriers limit the impact of this collaboration: a 'patchwork' policymaking framework that needs greater coordination; practical challenges that limit university–business collaboration; and current policy doesn't enable the necessary scale of collaboration – a comprehensive and disruptive new approach is needed.

- This is a moment of change for skills policy across the UK, including: in England, promised reforms to the apprenticeship levy and a major review of post-16 education; in Scotland, potential reforms to the tertiary education system; and in Wales, the recent implementation of a tertiary system.
- Emerging policy options to address the barriers include:
  - In England, Skills England and plans for the levy could enable greater collaboration.
  - National governments should find ways to coordinate their skills systems to respond to future needs, while supporting and maximising the impact of place-based, sector-first initiatives.
  - More comprehensive data are needed on the extent and breadth of collaboration.

NCUB will now work with universities, businesses and other stakeholders to develop detailed proposals.

The [UK 2040 Options](#) project run by Nesta published four reports proposing ways to alter for the better the apparently bleak trajectory of a child born today.

- *Education: the ideas* includes:
  - Revive **youth apprenticeships**: targeting apprenticeships at young people and offering a different approach for adults upskilling and reskilling.
  - Increase the supply and demand of **sub-degree qualifications**, introducing exit qualifications after each year of university study.

Other reports cover economic growth and productivity, net zero and health & social care.

Eurofound published *Company practices to tackle labour shortages*, on the recruitment and retention measures used by employers, and the impact of labour shortages on companies and their experiences of skills shortages.

- The report is based on 17 case studies in different sectors and across 13 EU member states.
  - Member states: four with vacancy rates above the EU average – Austria, Cyprus, Czechia and the Netherlands; two with rates around the EU average – Hungary and Sweden; seven with rates below the EU average – Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain.
  - Sectors: construction, health & social care, ICT, marketing, consulting, retail & tourism.
- Key findings – **labour and skills shortages and labour market 'slack'**, include:
  - Job vacancies appear increasingly to have been filled by workers moving jobs rather than by unemployed people; this could indicate ineffective activation policies, but also that more needs to be done to update education and initial VET (IVET) curricula and invest in ongoing training.
  - Around 80% of EU employers struggle to recruit workers with the right skills; 17% are overqualified and 13% underqualified.
  - In 2023, 25% of EU companies recruited workers without the required skills; a further 18% report that just 20% of recruits have the necessary skills.
  - Countries with high proportions of under-skilled workers also have lower shares of companies providing training; between 2015 and 2020, the share of EU companies providing training fell.
  - To address shortages, 42% of SMEs seek to better use existing talent, 33% to invest more in training and 32% to increase job attractiveness by improving benefits; less than 10% recruited candidates from outside the EU.
  - Drivers of shortages vary by sector and occupation, with some sectors particularly affected by low job quality, recruitment struggles in a tight labour market or changing skills requirements.
- Key findings – **organisational measures**, include:
  - Employers are scaling up their work with education and training partners and public and private employment services to better target training to their needs and ensure early, direct contact with graduates; the offer of ongoing training and routes to career progression is also key.
  - Greater competition means employers must increasingly work harder on marketing and employer branding, offering better pay, non-wage benefits and good working conditions.
  - In recruitment, more emphasis is being placed on soft skills and personality traits that fit organisations, rather than just formal qualifications.
  - Companies' willingness to use mobility and migration recruitment routes is greater than actual use, including due to challenges with recognising qualifications and skills, including language skills.

- Policy pointers include:
  - Where skill shortages are widespread, active collaboration between employers and education and training providers as well as employment services must be enhanced to match skills supply and demand through initial and ongoing training.
  - Effectively integrating refugees and migrants by e.g. streamlining processes for recognising qualifications gained abroad and offering language training and integration services.

SKILLS FORECASTING

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) published *Shifting sands: Anticipating changes in the future labour market and supporting the workers at greatest risk*, the fifth working paper from the five-year Skills Imperative 2035 programme.

- Around 12m people in England work in occupations projected to decline between now and 2035, including secretarial, administrative, sales and various elementary occupations.
  - 1m jobs in such occupations could disappear in the coming decade.

- Workers in these jobs possess the lowest levels of Essential Employment Skills on average, posing a significant barrier to successful transitions, although some report not utilising all their essential skills.
  - Over the past decade, such workers have been significantly more likely than other workers to move either into unemployment or economic inactivity.
  - When changing jobs over the past decade, around 75% have moved into other jobs in high-risk occupations, where opportunities will be limited in the future.

- Mismatches between the skills and qualifications of workers in high-risk occupations and the job demands of growing occupations may pose significant barriers to successful transitions.
  - Of those in high-risk occupations, over 50% are qualified at Level 2 or lower.
  - Just over 25% are qualified to Level 4+, making them more likely to transition successfully into growing occupations, where 50% of workers are qualified to Level 4+.

British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) and Pertemps Network published *Employment Trends Report 2024*, exploring the skills businesses need for the future, what employees need from employers and how businesses are coping with the increasing role of AI.

- 59% of businesses cite a skillset or job role that would do most to increase their productivity over the next five years, most commonly: management and leadership skills; technical and digital skills; sales and customer engagement.
  - 52% feel current training options are fully (11%) or partially (41%) enabling them to meet this requirement, while 48% say they're not really (35%) or not enabling it at all (13%).

- 25% are currently using a specific AI technology, while 43% have no plans to do so, rising to 50% among customer-facing businesses; 24% plan to do so in the future.
  - Manufacturing firms are the least likely to be using AI (19%), with 49% saying they have no plans to adopt it; 24% intend to use it in the future.
  - 42% think AI would increase their productivity and only 2% expect it to decrease productivity.

Checkatrade and Capital Economics published *The UK Trade Skills Index 2024*, analysing the skills needed to achieve national goals.

- To meet strong growth in housing transactions and retrofitting over the next ten years, the workforce will need to expand by 515k and in the home improvement & repair sector by 219k.
  - To expand the workforce and replace retirees and leavers, the sector will need to recruit a total of 1.27m people, 377k in home improvement & repair.
  - An estimated minimum of 347k completed construction apprenticeships are needed by 2033, requiring around 700k starts.
  - Urgent upskilling is also needed as 29% of construction sector jobs will require new skills.
  - More inclusive recruitment and training practices are needed to widen the talent pool.

The Index provides detailed analysis, including a breakdown by trades and selected areas of England.

The three-year [Engineers 4 Europe (E4E)](#) project, funded by Erasmus+ and involving 13 organisations from eight EU countries, published *[Skills Strategy: Anticipating skills requirements for the engineering profession](#)*.

- The profession is on the verge of an important transformation and a clear, compelling positioning statement is needed to communicate its significance to the public; engaging the younger generation will require active participation from engineers themselves.

- Sustainability and environmental considerations, plus increased adoption of automation and AI, will shape the future engineering landscape; renewable energy and green infrastructure will be key areas of innovation, requiring engineers with a deep understanding of sustainable design and circular economy principles; defining the role of an 'engineer' is a challenge the skills strategy aims to tackle.

- An increasing expectation regarding professional skills is inter- or multi-disciplinarity, with an emphasis on the important interplay between technology and other disciplines such as social sciences and economics; open-mindedness and 'thinking outside of the box' are considered by some to be beneficial for the engineering curriculum, as well as a holistic approach to projects.

- The evolving job market calls for adaptability, with newly created roles and existing occupations transformed; local skills gaps are considered a greater barrier than a lack of capital investment.

- Industry and educational institution partnerships, plus increased R&D investment in emerging technologies, offer solutions to digital, green, resilience and entrepreneurship skill shortages.
  - Professional engineering bodies can foster an entrepreneurial mindset by advocating interdisciplinary collaboration and offering entrepreneurship training.

- Scholarships, mentoring and diversity/inclusion training are key to attracting under-represented groups, while training and inclusion programmes also need to be tailored to those with long careers.

- The green and digital transitions require unprecedented innovation with new technologies, processes and practices to drive positive change, as well as more advanced and widespread levels of knowledge and skills, nurturing learner awareness, engagement and responsibility.

Recommendations are made for HEIs, VET providers, professional bodies, engineering companies and policymakers. The project's objectives are: to set up a European Engineering Professional Skills Council; to identify new trends in engineering education; and to develop innovative training for the profession.

GREEN SKILLS & JOBS

The Royal Society published *[Towards a green hydrogen roadmap for the UK](#)*, from a workshop with the Royal Academy of Engineering exploring challenges, opportunities and enablers.

- The key requirements for developing a UK green hydrogen economy include:
  - Development and retention of green hydrogen skills, supported by training and a strong HE sector.
  - Strong R&D infrastructure to overcome technical barriers.
  - Coordination between industry and local and national government.

The Institute of Physics (IOP) published *[Physics Powering the Green Economy](#)*, setting out the central role that physics innovation and physicists will need to play in scaling up a sustainable, internationally competitive green economy in the UK and RoI.

- The report presents new insights into physics' role, drawing on the community's expertise, including analysis, business demographics, case studies and essays on the need for a systems approach.
  - Five technologies, underpinned by physics research, are key to advancing a green economy: nuclear; renewables; hydrogen and alternative clean fuels; energy storage; and carbon capture, usage & storage (CCUS); they have been driven by significant public investment.
  - Growth in clean energy has been realised by the 1,653 businesses in the UK and 119 in the RoI, with a combined turnover of £743.5b, that are building on the research to innovate and market technologies; almost half of all electricity production is now generated from clean sources.
  - However, 80% of IOP members believe that, on current trajectory, the UK will fail to meet its 2050 net zero targets; 68% see the current level of R&D investment as an obstacle.

- A dramatically expanded, skilled, diverse workforce is one of the essential factors for the continued development of the green economy.

- A broad range of investment strategies for physics R&D, business innovation, infrastructure and skills is required as part of a long-term systems approach to leadership, coordination and implementation.

Cogent Skills published *Green Jobs Delivery Group – the Hydrogen Task and Finish Group: Findings and recommendations*, the summary of a workforce assessment undertaken by the Hydrogen Skills Alliance.

- It estimates that 29k direct jobs and 64,500 indirect jobs will be available by 2030, with labour required in three phases: pre-construction, construction and operations (including maintenance).
  - 84% of employers believe that the UK's current workforce doesn't serve the sector's needs.
- Recommendations are made to address challenges relating to: skills and labour shortages; uncertainty around workforce demand; sector and technology awareness and attractiveness; lack of EDI; unknown usage supply chain requirements due to nascent technology; lack of clarity around hydrogen-specific related roles.

Ovo published *Building a workforce for greener homes*, produced with Energy & Utility Skills.

- 13.8m UK homes need to improve energy efficiency; areas with the highest percentages of homes with poor efficiency ratings are: Wales, Yorkshire & the Humber and the West Midlands.
- 137k people in GB are employed in design, manufacture and installation of low-carbon technologies.
  - Men account for 90%+ of the workforce, falling to 70% among estimators, valuers and assessors; 18% are aged 55+, rising to 40% in some specialist areas.
- 362k workers could be needed by 2035 to decarbonise homes relying heavily on upskilling existing plumbers, heating engineers and electricians.
  - Hurdles include: the significant portion nearing retirement; the lack of incentive to reskill due to current low demand; the busy workload from traditional jobs; and the cost of training.
- 78% of UK adults are eager to contribute to net zero objectives and 57% prefer to work for firms promoting this goal but newcomers face significant obstacles, including the requirement to train in general, non-pertinent skills (e.g. plumbing) before specialising.
  - This particularly deters complete novices, those unable to live on apprentice wages and those contemplating a mid-career switch.
- However, nearly 800k people may have a transferable skillset and a CITB survey found that nearly 90% of builders were open to retraining in response to evolving job demands.
- Areas like the North East, Wales, East Midlands and Yorkshire & the Humber face more challenges than the South East, East and London and could potentially be rich recruiting grounds for new talent.
  - However, data suggest only 0.2% of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants are pursuing relevant roles.
- There is a pressing need for strategic efforts to attract and develop talent in underserved areas to support a balanced, just transition across the country.

The report includes OVO's plan for green skills and a number of policy recommendations.

The Gatsby Foundation published *Ready for Retrofit? An analysis of Local Skills Improvement Plans [LSIPs] in England*, exploring whether employer-led LSIPs will be sufficient to bring about the necessary step-change in skills.

- Retrofitting is essential for the UK to reach net zero, and major programmes like the Social Housing Decarbonisation Scheme are ramping up, so it should be a national and local government priority.
- 2023 LSIPs will not ensure the retrofit skills needed to decarbonise England's homes; in particular:
  - There was wide variation in the extent to which they referenced retrofitting, and a lack of consistency, making some areas better placed to engage with government schemes than others.
  - Only a minority included estimates of retrofit skills and labour requirements, and these appeared higher than previous estimates.
  - Widespread labour and skills shortages in construction could create a bottleneck for retrofitting and other major net zero projects.
  - Many employers don't appear to yet understand the skills required to achieve decarbonisation.
  - The main actions included to develop retrofit skills were: creating short introductory-level courses; integrating new content into existing qualifications; and developing new facilities.
- Short-term recommendations include:
  - A government mandate for appropriate retrofit and/or broader green skills frameworks to support planning by local areas and bodies.

- In England's case, the Departments for Education and for Energy Security & Net Zero (DESNZ) should brief employer representative bodies on retrofitting skills and enable those with the greatest focus on this area to share their learning with others.
  - DESNZ should evaluate the quality assurance approaches used in its current retrofitting schemes to determine their viability for the wider market.
  - The FE sector should be encouraged to coordinate and share good practice nationally on developing retrofit training facilities and courses.
- Longer term recommendations call for:
  - A national retrofit strategy that reflects national decarbonisation targets and guides the development of local area-based plans.
  - Commensurate levels and duration of funding to provide employers and FE colleges with the long-term confidence they need to invest.
  - A new approach that will raise quality standards in the construction industry and prompt employers to take up training.
  - A communications strategy to boost employer, learner and public awareness.
  - Updating all relevant construction qualifications to include building physics and retrofitting content.

The 5% Club and GetZero published *The Journey to Green Jobs: Taking the pulse on the transition to green skills and jobs***, a practical guide to embedding green skills and jobs in an organisation, drawing on industry case studies and employer commentary.**

- The report considers the challenges and opportunities of the growing demand for green jobs and the importance of preparing the workforce; it aims to help employers consider whether green skills and jobs matter for their business and merit management time.
- The UK could see 135k–725k new green jobs by 2030, with the CBI estimating that the low-carbon economy could add £37b–£57b annually to GDP.
  - LinkedIn data suggest that only 12% of workers currently have green skills.
- Education systems have not evolved quickly enough to prepare students for such careers.
  - Vocational training needs to develop and expand for jobs in these sectors.
  - Greater awareness is needed among young people of the range of quality, stable jobs available.

Cedefop published *Tracking the green transition in labour markets: Using big data to identify the skills that make jobs greener***, a policy brief demonstrating the potential of using big data analysis of online job adverts (OJAs).**

- The main assumption is that the presence in OJAs of skills needed for the green economy defines whether or not an occupation is green and how green it is.
- A list of 182 English words obtained from various publications was translated into a number of languages in order to train a machine learning model; two indicators were constructed:
  - **Green pervasiveness**: presence of green skills in the OJAs, calculated as the ratio of all OJAs with at least one green skill to the total number of OJAs in occupations, sectors, countries, etc.
  - **Greenness**: compares the number of green skills to the total number of skills found in OJAs in such categories.
- Among the findings:
  - Green pervasiveness is at 4% overall, ranging from 17% for electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply down to 2% in the wholesale and retail trade.
  - Using available occupational data in the context of green transition is challenging, given that many relevant occupations have only recently emerged; OJAs help uncover crucial roles.
  - Mentions of the term 'circular economy' almost double every year, with manufacturing sitting last in the top ten.
- OJA analysis: vitally contributes to monitoring skill needs for the green economy, particularly for short-term forecasts; can inform curricula and programme updates; supports updates of occupation and skills classifications; and helps map the severity of labour and skills shortages.

Cedefop has started integrating OJA-based information into its skills forecast tool.

The European Commission published *Vocational Education and Training and the Green Transition: A compendium of inspiring practices 2024*, **highlighting overall lessons and focusing on topics that show the direction of developments.**

- VET's unique contribution to the green transition, based on its inherent connection to employment, encompasses: the development of transversal skills and practices that apply across occupations; the development of critical new technical skills; the ability to foster skills at different stages of working life, to create green 'change agents' in the workplace and to upskills managers and owners.

- Four key themes:
  - **Learning, teaching and training**: e.g. how curricula, programmes and learning methods need to adjust to and anticipate the green transition; and new relationships emerging between teachers, trainers and learners.
  - **Greening VET for the world of work**: how skill needs are changing, the nature of the response in different sectors, how VET can be key to the development of green(er) enterprises and the important role of careers advice.
  - **Promoting synergies**: how VET is ideally placed to forge important links to other agendas, notably fair transition and connecting the green and digital transitions.
  - **Joining forces for VET excellence**: the important role being played by social partners, from national social dialogue mechanisms down to local developments; and how wider stakeholders can be brought into interventions such as specialised competence centres to become centres of excellence for the green transition.

- Several 'lighthouse practices' include: an Austrian university course for upper secondary VET teachers; the RoI's National Network of Nearly Zero Energy Buildings and six Retrofit Centres of Excellence; Belgium's application of augmented reality to VET around electric, hybrid and autonomous vehicles; Norway's tripartite industry programmes for skills development.

The report includes an index of multi-country practices, as well as a list of practices by country.

Eurofound published *Job quality side of climate change*, **examining national-level research and debate on the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on job quality.**

- Key messages and policy pointers include:
  - 40% of workers in the EU will be directly impacted by the green transition; more attention should be paid to the job quality implications, while policy measures should aim to level up job quality.
  - Employment in sectors most impacted by climate change is dominated by men and seasonal, migrant and self-employed workers, who tend to lack legislative protection and often have lower levels of trade union organisation and workplace representation.
  - Research on the effects of climate change on workers and workplaces is still patchy; monitoring of the quality of greened jobs and those most exposed to climate change risks is needed.
  - A sectoral approach to monitoring and improving job quality is key; workers in the most impacted sectors should receive priority support for skills renewal and job-to-job transitions.
  - The development of industrial strategies and related skills forecasting, and the design of relevant training developed with social partners will be vital, particularly if skills and labour shortages are to be prevented from limiting progress towards decarbonisation.

The OECD published *Employment Outlook 2024: The net-zero transition and the labour market*.

- The report includes an examination of the following:
  - Recent labour market developments and an update of the OECD Job Quality indicators
  - Characteristics of jobs that are likely to thrive – 'green-driven jobs' – including their attractiveness in terms of job quality, and comparisons with jobs in high-emission industries that tend to shrink
  - The cost of job displacement in high-emission industries, along with the trajectories of workers towards new opportunities and the labour market policies that can facilitate job reallocation
  - Upskilling and reskilling strategies to facilitate transition into fast-growing, green-driven occupations.

The OECD published *The "clean energy transition" and the cost of job displacement in energy-intensive industries*, **analysing the costs in 14 OECD countries*.**

- Workers displaced from energy supply and heavy manufacturing experience larger earnings losses than those in non-energy intensive and transport sectors.

- Larger earnings losses mainly result from weaker re-employment outcomes in terms of wages and job instability but also challenges with finding another job.

- They reflect significant differences in the composition of workers and firms in energy supply and heavy manufacturing and the rest of the economy; displaced workers in these sectors tend to be older, less skilled and more likely to be previously employed in high-wage firms.

Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

The OECD published *Readying Adult Learners for Innovation: Reskilling and upskilling in higher education*, the last in a series of three short Education Spotlights on policy and practice to enable adult learners to contribute to green and digital innovation.

- The paper brings together key messages from related analysis, the OECD Higher Education Policy Survey 2022, case studies and two international peer learning events organised as part of the Education & Innovation Practice Community.

AUTOMATION & AI

LSE published *What an LSE-CBI survey found about AI adoption in UK firms*, a blog post sharing results from the most recent joint survey of 396 UK firms, conducted by the CEP and the CBI in May 2024.

- 66% had adopted new digital technologies since the pandemic, of which 70% said that this was prompted or accelerated by the pandemic, while 25% considered that the pandemic had prompted a continued process of adoption.

- The most commonly adopted digital technologies in the 2020s related to online sales and marketing, remote work, cloud computing and cyber security (65–70%); only 25% had adopted AI, while another 23% planned to do so.

- AI penetration appears highest in IT and marketing & sales (30% using/trialling), followed by core business functions such as production, management & administration and engineering (20%).

- When asked about reasons for adopting AI, 40% cited creating new/improved operational processes or products and services; only 20% cited automating tasks previously carried out by people.
  - Only 10–15% have seen any impact as yet on turnover, profitability, workforce size, training or overall business resilience; however, over 40% expect a positive impact on turnover, profits, training and resilience and 22% on employment.

- The main barrier to adopting digital technologies is finance (55%); while this is also a barrier to adopting AI, lack of information is a bigger issue (60%).

BCG (Boston Consulting Group) published findings from the 2024 Data & AI Capability Maturity Assessment survey (the fourth survey since 2015) of almost 1,200 companies worldwide, representing nine major industry clusters.

- 95% are attempting to use AI to drive new business value, but the proportion qualifying as the most mature has fallen from 13% in 2021 to just 8%, due to maturity levels being recalibrated.

- Leading companies are using their capabilities to better ideate, prioritise and ensure adoption of more differentiating and transformational uses of data and AI.
  - As a result, they have four times more use cases scaled and adopted across their business than laggards in data and AI; for each use case they implement, the average financial impact is five times greater.

- The difference between leaders and others is most pronounced in five areas, including: attracting and retaining top AI talent; creating data ecosystems; and fostering a data-driven culture.

The OECD published *Measuring the demand for AI skills in the United Kingdom*, deploying a natural language processing algorithm on online job postings collected by Lightcast, providing detailed insights into labour demand for different professions 2012–2022.

- A new methodology allows for comparisons between 'data-hiring intensive' jobs – the share of jobs related to data production tasks – and 'AI-hiring intensive' jobs.

- There has been a significant rise in economy-wide AI-hiring intensity over the last decade, but only to 0.6% on average since 2017; demand has also broadened to all industries.

- Over time, the demand for AI-related jobs has spread outside the traditional ICT industries, with finance & insurance increasingly demanding AI skills.
  - At a regional level, higher demand is found in London and research hubs.
  - At the occupation level, there are also marked changes in demand, with professions such as data scientist, computer scientist, hardware engineer and robotics engineer estimated to be the most AI-hiring intense occupations.

The data and methodology will allow exploration of cross-country estimates; given rapid change, it needs to be revisited regularly and, in due course, it will be possible to match the data with firm-level data.

The Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW) published *Firm-level adoption of AI and automation technologies: Case studies report***, prepared for the Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing*.**

- The purpose of the 11 case studies, which include manufacturing, logistics, healthcare and public sectors, was to understand how AI and advanced robotic systems change the way people work, and how workers experience these changes.

- Findings and policy implications for skill use include:
  - Employees are required to acquire skills that allow them to use new systems – but there is limited scrutiny or understanding on whether or not this leads to greater overall discretion and skill use.
  - Contrary to expectations, manual tasks requiring perception and dexterity are very resource-intensive to automate, therefore much manual labour may remain insulated from automation.
  - Workers are experiencing highly varied skills transitions: costs for reskilling are a barrier to workforce adaptation for some, while others are incentivised to upskill by their employers; they are less likely to expect financial compensation for learning and development in a culture of CPD and support.
  - Workers can find themselves 'accidentally' deskilled when systems become capable before roles are displaced; many are actively resisting 'upskilling' where they are allegedly being 'augmented', but experiencing reduced demand for their capabilities.
  - There is a hollowing out of mid-level skills, raising concerns about younger workers not coming through to learn such skills, creating a risk of reliance on steadily improving automation.

- Key findings overall include:
  - Worker displacement was rare relative to workers co-existing alongside new technologies; however, other changes to the nature of work are significant, with divergent impacts on different people, from different demographics, in different roles.
  - The impact of having to move the UK workforce to new types of tasks, requiring new training, is large; however, technology adoption is not reliably or commonly associated with workers being upskilled or rewarded for developing new skills.
  - Poor practices in the design, development and deployment of technology have become barriers to gains in productivity and quality of work.
  - The adoption of new technologies highlights the need for improved governance and regulation.

- Overarching implications for policies that will support the creation and sustaining of good work through the period of technological transformation:
  - As automation is often existing alongside workers, bringing changes to job quality, a wider lens on its impacts is needed, along with tools to understand and prioritise its effect on good work through the process of design, development and deployment.
  - The large training demand of technology adoption should be recognised in policies that support firms to adopt ongoing reskilling – fiscal policies that incentivise investment in people alongside technology adoption, and regulation that extends rights to access training should be explored.
  - The nuanced relationship between technology adoption and productivity, and the key role of managerial support, suggests policies that support high-involvement HR practices.

*The Pissarides Review is a collaboration between IFOW, Imperial College and Warwick Business School, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

CEPS (Centre for European Policy Studies) published *AI at work: Why there's more to it than task automation***, a 'CEPS Explainer'.**

- To better understand impact on jobs and employment, a task perspective is a good starting point, as it provides insights into the automation potential of the current task content of occupations.

- However, it isn't sufficient for a holistic understanding because it ignores several important concepts that lie in between individual tasks and labour market outcomes: jobs, processes and organisations mediate technology's impact on workers, which is not captured.

- A comprehensive framework for analysing AI's impact on work is provided by moving through the concepts of tasks, jobs, processes and organisations.
  - It highlights how AI is not only an automation or augmenting technology for productive tasks but can also be used to better coordinate work and ensure the best people are hired, impacting directly on job quality and inclusive access to work.
  - The redesign of organisational processes surrounding AI's adoption will shape the future of work.

- Policymakers and other stakeholders are strongly encouraged to use the framework and glossary to help foster a shared vocabulary and a holistic understanding of AI at work, as well as identify policy gaps and opportunities to proactively shape the future of work.

The ESRI published *Skill requirements for emerging technologies in Ireland*, funded by the RoI's Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science, on jobs in automation, AI and blockchain.

- The research combined: job advert data for analysis of the skills and competencies required by employers in emerging technology jobs; course provision information; occupational forecasts; and consultations with employers.

- Key findings include:
  - The labour market demand for new entrants in AI, automation and blockchain-related jobs is being met by supply projections from RoI universities in the medium term.
  - While employers place much emphasis on technical competencies, there is significant demand for workers to also be equipped have transversal and business skills; 50–60% of skills required by employers are technical, 20–30% are transversal and 20% are business.
  - There is a good degree of overlap in employer requirements for AI and blockchain jobs; and a very high degree of overlap in the transversal and business skills required across the three areas.
  - Substantial labour market requirements will likely arise from the impending regulatory environment, e.g. the recently approved European Artificial Intelligence Act; policy needs to be developed to help companies in implementing change at a national level.
  - Employers stressed that high levels of uncertainty regarding the development and adoption of AI could still result in levels of demand exceeding those predicted by the research.

Cedefop published *Digital skills ambitions in action: Cedefop's skills forecast digitalisation scenario*, new analysis of the complex interlinkages between digitalisation, digital skills and learning and their direct and indirect impacts on employment across sectors and occupations.

- Digital transition will reduce aggregate employment, but not dramatically: automation and AI will take over part of the work typically performed by humans, reducing labour demand in most sectors.
  - In absolute terms, most of the impact will be borne by wholesale & retail trade, and the construction sector, with varying impact across EU member states.
  - It is important to consider second-order effects: productivity increases mean that less labour is needed; digital skills training translates into higher wages, which makes labour more expensive (relative to technology) and can be expected to reduce employment.

- It is also important to be aware of AI-infused productivity and employment gains, which can't be fully captured by the analysis.
  - Policies that help leverage such gains will contribute to economic growth, stimulate demand and ultimately lead to job creation that possibly outweighs the negative impacts.

- Europe must skill a workforce that knows its way around AI and other technological innovations.
  - Organisations must encourage employees to embrace change and become proactive learners and continuous learners.
  - A mix of education and training programmes, targeted up/reskilling and other learning opportunities will help people to stay abreast with the latest trends and technologies in their fields.
  - AI-powered training programmes can greatly enhance learning processes and results.
  - Corporate wellbeing and mental health professionals can help organisations integrate stress management and resilience into training to equip the workforce with the socioemotional and adaptation skills required to navigate increasingly complex and dynamic worlds.

Eurofound published *Human–robot interaction: What changes in the workplace?*, exploring the opportunities and challenges, drawing on survey data and case studies in advanced robotic systems and applications.

- Key challenges arising from interaction with advanced robots relate to skills requirements.
  - The European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience aims to ensure individuals have the skills necessary for current and future job markets.

- Key messages include:
  - The use of robots is becoming more concentrated: while fewer companies are using robots, the number per company is increasing, with demand expected to increase due to labour supply challenges stemming from an ageing population.
  - Robots are not causing widespread job losses: the impact on employment has been more nuanced, currently leading to more changes in job profiles than cuts.
  - Truly effective human–robot interaction requires a stronger focus on job quality, underpinned by the active involvement of workers affected.
  - Automation can result in productivity growth, leading to the creation of good-quality jobs.

- Policy pointers include continuing to direct efforts towards supporting training initiatives that prioritise the development of skills relevant to human–robot collaboration, e.g. digital literacy and adaptability, and resilience in the face of automation.

ADULT & LIFELONG LEARNING

The Learning & Work Institute (L&W) published regional reports from its 2023 Adult Participation in Learning survey, covering NI, Scotland, Wales and each of the nine English regions, to help inform targeting of interventions and support.

- The NI report includes the following findings, with comparisons made against the rest of the UK:
  - 46% said they had learnt over the past three years, lower than England (51%) and the fifth lowest of the nations and regions; this can partly be explained by 27% of NI survey respondents being in the AB social grade – more likely to participate – vs 31% across the rest of the UK.
  - Younger adults are significantly more likely to take up learning than older adults, as in the other regions; however, 25–49s are significantly less likely to take part than in the UK.
  - As in the UK, adults are: more likely to be learning for work than for leisure; mainly learning independently or through work; doing at least some of their learning online.
  - Work and other time pressures are the most common challenges, but 78% of those who hadn't engaged with learning in the past three years identified at least one barrier vs 71% UK; 58% reported dispositional barriers vs 51% UK.
  - 78% said people like them could change career (71% UK) and 33% that financial support towards costs of learning/training would be most helpful to change career (26% UK); 19% would go to Jobcentre Plus for advice (15% UK).

L&W published *The Rising Cost of Living and Access to Adult Education in London*, a summary of research commissioned by the Greater London Authority that has widely relevant findings.

- Increased challenges around finances, particularly housing, utilities and food bills, mean that learning is not a priority.
  - At the same time, the rising cost of living has exacerbated mental health issues caused by the pandemic, so that many aren't considering learning and can't think beyond the immediate future.
  - Refugees and asylum seekers and learners with additional learning needs are particularly vulnerable to the rising cost of living.

- Those out of work view learning as a route into employment and demand for fully funded courses has increased, largely driven by growing demand for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), as well as vocational and employability courses.

- Key barriers include: digital exclusion, with more course information, applications and provision now online, poor digital skills and less money to pay for devices and data; travel costs and the cost of food and course materials; childcare costs, with free childcare not covering all hours.
  - If learners overcome initial cost barriers, they tend to stay, but withdrawal rates have been impacted by an increase in variable shift patterns and multiple jobs; mental health can also make learners less resilient to challenges in other aspects of their lives.

- Fewer learners are progressing to Level 3–5 courses in most subject areas.

- Providers are offering support such as information, advice and guidance (IAG) on mental health, employment and money management, but are sometimes failing to meet increasing demand.
  - Learners' suggestions included: tailored careers coaching and IAG; pastoral support from dedicated teams; practical help with transport, food, childcare, course materials and digital costs.

- Providers report challenges with staff recruitment and retention, particularly related to staff leaving the area due to rising rents and leaving adult education for better-paying sectors.

- Providers' changes in response to the rising cost of living include increasing class sizes and minimum viable class sizes and reducing community-based provision, which can be expensive.
  - To accommodate changing needs they have moved learning online and offer shorter, more intensive courses.
  - Where possible, they have offered learners more financial support, e.g. for travel and childcare costs, as well as signposting specialist support for mental health services and financial advice.

- Providers have had to adapt their outreach and engagement as a result of reduced marketing budgets and usually use other funding, such as their Multiply allocation, to pay for these activities.
  - Examples of activities include running taster sessions in communities and working with new partner organisations to engage learners.

Cedefop published *Exploring the emergence of microcredentials in vocational education and training (VET)*, based on a literature review and the development of four scenarios that attempt to capture the state of play of this diverse and dynamic ecosystem.

- Research shows that micro-credentials are popular not only among university-educated people already in employment but also with low-skilled unemployed individuals in their efforts to up/reskill.

- Credentials offered in the labour market include but aren't limited to: credit-bearing certificates; licences; apprenticeships; badges; nano/microdegrees; vendor certifications; and industry or professional certifications.
  - This proliferation and their variable added value contributes to fragmentation.

- Seen as the future of lifelong learning, micro-credentials are said to make learning more accessible, and thus easier to value.
  - They are said to be more likely to be completed since they are small and, when 'stackable', may constitute substantial credentials.

- Scenario one suggests that, when micro-credentials are part of larger, dependable qualifications systems and integrated into qualifications frameworks, they make existing systems flexible.
  - When regulated within existing systems, they also tend to come with a higher level of trust.

- Scenario two suggests that when transparency around competences is lacking, micro-credentials holders can't realise their full value, despite investing time and effort to obtain them.

- Scenario three suggests that, when micro-credentials flourish outside formal education and training, they cover a variety of occupation-specific skills, addressing mismatches in a demand-led system.
  - When their content aligns with workplace needs and job opportunities, it affects quality.
  - How key employers and employees perceive micro-credentials and the companies that provide them is related to their value and reputation.

- Scenario four shows the benefits of audience-specific, purpose-driven micro-credentials to improve inclusion and opportunities for underserved groups.
  - If micro-credentials are driven by purpose and context – i.e. have a clear audience in mind when created – they are more likely to have a beneficial effect for their intended learners.

- Overall, one of their basic benefits could be accessibility, as they provide an opportunity to acquire small blocks of learning rather than invest in a long programme from the outset.
  - However, this requires the recognition of micro-credentials in emerging policies such as individual learning accounts or in eligibility for funding.
  - It also requires further exploration of how learning, irrespective of where it has taken place, is accredited, recognised in national qualifications frameworks and/or validated within countries.

The European Commission published *Building trust in micro-credentials for improving employability: Synthesis report from the Peer Learning Activity [PLA] 28-29 May 2024*.

- It includes examples from Estonia, Denmark and Croatia, plus an overview of the EU policy framework, Cedefop's research in the area, and experiences from the Erasmus+ project Skills for Long-term Unemployed; findings include:
  - The development and implementation of micro-credentials requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders to ensure trust and quality assurance at national, regional and local levels.
  - Their design should be based on labour market demands – possibly on sectoral needs; this requires continuous updating to maintain flexibility and robust quality assurance mechanisms.
  - Trusted providers play an important role, often undergoing institutional accreditation or licensing procedures, which reduces the burden; some countries maintain public registers of providers.
  - Assessment procedures must be transparent and appropriate, focusing on learning outcomes and incorporating RPL, despite the challenges involved.
  - User feedback from learners and employers is essential for quality assurance, offering insights into their effectiveness and practical impact in the labour market.
  - Financial support systems for learners and employers are crucial, as are advisory and information systems, e.g. through trusted platforms.
  - EU-funded cross-country collaboration is already in place for development and testing, and there is interest in continuing these efforts in the future.

QUALITY OF WORK & GOOD JOBS

The Work Foundation published *No Progress? Tackling long-term insecure work*, **exploring the impact of quality of work on long-term employment outcomes, based on the employment journeys of 10,804 workers between 2017–18 and 2021–22.**

- 20% of UK workers are in severely insecure work, facing a mix of low pay, unpredictable hours, poor protections and limited career progression.
  - Women, those from ethnic minorities, disabled workers and young people are more affected.
- At the same time, the UK has a workforce that is becoming sicker; it is the only G7 country with a smaller workforce than before the pandemic.
- Among the findings:
  - 44% of insecure workers fell into 'long-term insecurity' over the four-year period, challenging the approach that assumed any job would support progress into secure and sustained employment.
  - 79.5% of workers who started in secure work in 2017–18 held a secure job by 2021–22 compared to 39.5% of those who started in insecure work.
  - Progression into secure roles often requires moving sectors: 28% of insecure workers moved vs 9.6% of secure, often leaving sectors where insecure work is concentrated, e.g. social care.
  - 48.8% of workers aged 45–54 were stuck in insecure work vs 28.2% of 16–24s.
  - Insecure workers were 1.4 times more likely than secure workers to become unemployed or economically inactive due to ill-health, suggesting that job security could be a factor in staying in employment while managing a long-term health condition.

The Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) published *ReWAGE Evidence Paper: Pay and conditions in gig work*, **using the UK Parliament definition of work 'mediated by a platform', also known as 'platform work'.**

- Apart from examining pay and conditions, it considers the legal context and regulation of gig work and compares pay and conditions to some other precarious and insecure forms of work in the UK.
- Estimates from the UK Labour Force Survey suggest that in 2023, around 1.4% of the employed workforce was in gig work.
  - This compares with 1% in temporary agency employment, 4% in zero-hours contract work, 4% in temporary work and 14% in self-employment.
- Policy recommendations around all these forms of work include:
  - A presumption of worker status and a strengthening of arrangements to ensure that they have effective access to any social protection available to those dependent on income and hours.
  - A single contract status covering both employees and workers to equalise employment rights.

- Stronger systems of state-provided training provision so they can update skills and have portable qualifications that help them to transfer and progress to more secure and higher paid work.
- Training for line managers, senior managers and HR managers should recognise the complexities of precarious forms of work; existing training and guidance in organisations should be assessed to ensure it is fit for purpose in terms of the management of gig and other precarious workers.

'*Bad Jobs' in Europe: Derivation and analysis of a wellbeing-related job quality threshold*, by academics from UCL and Warwick IER, was published in *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.

- A method is proposed for defining the threshold of a 'bad job', based on a discontinuity in the relationship between a composite index of job quality and subjective wellbeing.
    - Such a definition could be valuable for assessing policy priorities if they are to be influenced by their potential effects on wellbeing.

- There is a consistent relationship between the job quality index and psychological wellbeing; however, there is a distinctly large increase in psychological wellbeing and several measures of work-related wellbeing between workers in the lowest decile of job quality and those in the second lowest.
    - 'Bad jobs' should therefore be designated as those in lowest decile, thereby discriminating on wellbeing far better than definitions based only on low earnings and job insecurity.

- Bad jobs are associated with lower education, migrant status and working in traditionally low-wage industries such as agriculture, confirming what is long known from the literature on wage studies.
    - Similarly in line with expectations, the probability of being in a bad job is lessened in richer countries and in countries with stronger labour regulation.

- However, three findings differentiate the distributional pattern of bad jobs from that of low-earning jobs: the prevalence is greater in large establishments; there is no gender gap in prevalence; and working in the private sector raises the chance of a bad job but not of a low-earning job.

The Scottish Government's independent advisory Fair Work Convention published *Fair Work in the Hospitality Industry*, the report of a two-year inquiry into working practices in the sector.

- The hospitality sector is characterised by: a younger workforce; a higher proportion of ethnic minority and migrant workers; a higher proportion of part-time workers; a higher number of jobs with a low level of occupational skills.
    - 50% of all employees work in businesses employing fewer than 50 people, which often have fewer resources to create fair work environments.
    - The sector frequently gives young people their first contact with the labour market, providing an opportunity to work, often while also in education or other training roles.
    - Employers reported key skills shortages, particularly for chefs.

- Many workers did not feel supported by their employer to access training.
    - Some employers ask workers to undertake training in their own time and/or at their own expense, even for training directly related to their current role.
    - Concern around the staff churn and the loss of investment in training appears to act as a disincentive for some employers to provide certain types of training.
    - Training in rural areas can be challenging; employers and/or workers can face increased costs due to transport issues and additional time away from the business; online training could be impacted by connectivity issues.

- Focusing on providing equal access to work, training and progression opportunities, along with tackling pay gaps could support improved retention and fair work outcomes, particularly for workers with protected characteristics.

- Recommendations include supporting the CIPD, Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and Scottish Qualifications Authority to develop accredited fair work training for senior managers.

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Timewise published *Flexible working for all: Achieving greater equity for frontline and site-based workers*.

- The two-year action research programme with three employers in the NHS, construction and retail introduced flexibility into frontline roles and evaluated its individual and organisational impact.

- Key findings include:
    - Increased flexibility improved health and wellbeing, work-life balance and job satisfaction.

- Organisational benefits included reduced sickness absence, increased loyalty and improved performance.
- All three organisations experienced a cultural shift in the way work was done; good practice change management processes were highly relevant to implementing flexible working policies successfully (e.g. piloting, monitoring change and internal advocacy).
- Individual autonomy was central: where employees were able to choose approaches that worked for them and their team, they were better able to balance work and personal priorities.
- There is a strong demand for flexible options among employees; managers need to be encouraged to take a proactive approach to ensuring that employees in all roles are afforded flexibility.

CEP published _Not incentivized yet efficient: Working from home [WFH] in the public sector_.

- As public sector workers typically don't get pecuniary incentives but have strong job security, studying them enables the establishment of baseline estimates of the impact of WFH, net of the impact of incentives.

- The research establishes an average positive effect of 13% under random allocation, which more than doubles once a human selects tasks that best suit a worker's comparative advantage.
  - WFH increases workers' productivity and this doesn't come at the cost of lower quality; increasing the proportion of time spent WFH doesn't seem to offer additional productivity benefits or generate additional costs relative to a hybrid work environment.

- This positive picture of WFH from a purely productivity perspective further improves when taking into account the fact that it also saves commuting costs and time and allows organisations to save money on office space.

- It should be noted that the study was undertaken in a setting involving data inputting and was therefore individual, with workers benefiting from reduced distractions.
  - Estimated gains may not translate to settings where the nature of the job is creative, requiring teamwork, constant interactions and inputs from multiple workers.

Investors in People published _When the Perks Don't Work: The true value in a culture of wellbeing_, including findings from a survey of over 1k employees and 500 HR decision-makers exploring the effectiveness and popularity of wellness initiatives.

- Employees choose long-term fundamentals such as supportive management, rewards and recognition and flexible working above wellness perks when it comes to job satisfaction.
  - 90% say flexible working is valuable to health and wellbeing, 83% see it as effective in improving their wellbeing and 68% say they use it often.
  - Although 72% of HR decision-makers think gym memberships are valuable to staff, only 41% of employees think they are and 59% have never used them.
  - 49% never use stress management workshops and only 25% think they are effective; 47% never use health and wellness apps and only 27% think they are effective.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION (EDI)

The Work Foundation published _Working Together: Maximising the opportunities of a multigenerational workforce_, exploring a little-examined phenomenon, including through a survey of senior GB business leaders.

- Workers aged 55+ in G7 countries will exceed 25% of the workforce by 2031 and countries including the UK, France and Japan have all raised their retirement age in response.
  - As a result, for the first time in history, there are now four generations in the workplace, with workers born in the 1950s and 1960s working alongside people born in the 2000s.

- 73% of those surveyed reported more generations in work today than in the past and 61% agreed that there were significant differences in work culture between generations.
  - Baby Boomers (born 1946–1963) have often lived through considerable economic growth and technological progress and have reached or nearly reached retirement age.
  - Gen X (1964–1980) have experienced financial strains and the decline of traditional industries but are now experienced employees and more likely to hold senior positions.

- Millennials (1981–1996) have grown up around mobile phones and computers and are considered the most-educated generation but their early careers have been impacted by the 2008 financial crisis, restricting their income.
- Generation Z (1997–2012) are digital natives, but their studies and early careers have been impacted by the pandemic and cost of living crisis.

- However, there is an increasing consensus that generational differences can be overstated, and the focus should be on the benefits that each bring and the common threads that unite them.
  - 70% of those surveyed agreed that their organisation benefited from their diverse perspectives, while intergenerationally-inclusive work practices are shown to increase productivity.

- 31% of leaders agreed an emphasis on EDI initiatives was important in creating a positive multigenerational work culture but only 18% included age in their EDI policies.
  - 49% agreed flexibility in work hours and location was important, but only 32% of SMEs offered training for remote and hybrid working (vs 44% of large organisations).
  - 45% agreed clear communication and transparency from leadership was important, but only 21% offered training to support managers to lead in multigenerational workplaces.
  - 34% of leaders agreed opportunities for socialising in person were important, but 81% had no guidance on inclusive social events and just 21% had a policy on workplace alcohol consumption.

- Employers should be guided by the following principles:
  - Develop proactive and long-term policy planning to support line managers and workers
  - Implement age-inclusive policies to unlock the benefits a multigenerational workforce
  - Develop lifelong learning opportunities for all staff to support their career growth
  - Embrace flexible working arrangements
  - Develop policies and procedures that promote inclusion, diversity, and choice.

The CMI published *Walking the Walk? Managers, inclusivity and organisational success*, informed by the Everyone Economy Advisory Committee*, based on a survey of over 500 HR leaders and 1k employees with no management responsibilities.

- Findings include:
  - 79% of HR leaders/67% of employees believe their organisation has an inclusive culture; yet 48%/33% report having seen discrimination and/or micro-aggressions in their workplace.
  - 73%/50% believe their organisation has clear and transparent progression and promotion criteria.
  - Inclusive practice seems to be more prevalent in firms where HR leaders consider that the organisation is achieving its organisational objectives.
  - Where HR leaders say their workplace views EDI as business-critical they also report: better success rates in attracting talent (80% vs 52%), better retention of existing employees (76% vs 57%), better use of technology to enhance business performance (83% vs 64%).
  - Having a supportive manager was the most influential factor in people feeling supported and included at work.
  - Employees who say that their manager has received formal management training – not just in EDI – are significantly more likely to feel supported, fairly treated and that they can be themselves.

- Practical actions that appear to make a positive difference include:
  - HR leaders: senior management diversity; having an inclusive strategy that includes formal management training.
  - Employees: feedback platforms like EDI committees and inclusion hubs.

- Recommendations include:
  - **For leadership teams**: use data, model inclusive behaviour and provide manager training.
  - **For managers**: push for formal management training and commit to ongoing learning.
  - **For government**: commit to a UK-wide management development strategy, recognising the role of trained managers and leaders in improving inclusivity, culture and organisational outcomes; introduce greater EDI accountability, including through public sector procurement requirements.

*Led by former head of the Equalities & Human Rights Commission, Sir Trevor Phillips.

BCC published *[Boosting Opportunity and Realising Potential: Report of the Workplace Equity Commission](#)*, **in partnership with The Youth Futures Foundation, exploring how to help SMEs create more equitable workplaces.**

- A nationwide call for evidence and roundtable events with UK businesses culminated in a five-point plan comprising over 40 recommendations, including:

  - **Set out an ambitious and enabling framework for the public and private sector** by government: updating and streamlining legislation; devolving skills budgets; joining up policy and activity; normalising and simplifying the language of equality policy; using trusted resources to boost SME capacity; using public procurement policy to encourage large firms to share practice with SMEs; championing business champions; embedding equity in education and training; and improving careers IAG for all age groups.

  - **Ensure diverse leadership and management** *by employers*: promoting the business case and building it into business strategy; creating an equitable culture; training and supporting managers to manage diverse and hybrid teams; gathering data and assessing the impact of interventions; and seeking peer support through Chambers and other business networks.

  - **Improve access to opportunity** *by employers*: ensuring recruitment practices aren't deterring people; seeking out talent through Job Centres, charities, specialist recruitment businesses, etc; and publicly demonstrating commitment to equity; *by government*: building equity into the new Skills England framework and enhancing access to those experiencing digital exclusion.

  - **Help people stay and progress in work** *by government*: removing the tax on private medical insurance and health cash schemes; boosting the capacity of the Access to Work scheme; and reviewing childcare provision; *by employers*: providing the broadest range of flexible working solutions and understanding the behaviour of under-represented groups, in order to retain skills.

  - **Support the future workforce** *by government*: preparing them better; ensuring progression pathways; adopting new technologies; and providing practical business support for SMEs to redesign jobs to support individuals.

SOLAS (Further Education & Training Authority), RoI, published *[Summer Skills Bulletin 2024: Occupational gender segregation in Ireland: unlocking labour supply to meet key skills needs](#)*, **based on Q4 2023 Labour Force Survey data.**

- The report explores: occupations with gender segregation and their key characteristics; the extent to which hours of work and family structures differ across gender-segregated occupations.

- There are more males in female-dominated occupations than vice versa, possibly due to longer average hours in male-dominated occupations.

  - Males in male-dominated occupations account for 45% of all those working 40+ hours, while the highest average hours worked by females were in male-dominated occupations.

- Family structures also play a role in occupational gender segregation.

  - Females with children work fewer average hours, particularly those in female-dominated occupations; for males, average hours increase in line with numbers of children and among those with younger children.

  - Males in a couple working in male-dominated occupations have the lowest level of partners working full time; being the main earner in the family may result in an increased burden to work longer hours for males in these roles.

International Comparisons

Cedefop published *[Evolution of European Skills Systems: Performance 2015 to 2022](#)*, **a briefing note drawing on the European Skills Index (ESI).**

- The report shows systems have adapted to challenges such as the financial crisis, climate change, the pandemic, technology development, population change and the invasion of Ukraine.

- There has been an overall increase in performance across all dimensions and a trend towards convergence across member states; however, the improvement rates vary by sub-pillar.

  - Overall, the 'skills matching' pillar has seen the biggest improvement, mainly based on better 'skills utilisation'; however, the ability to address skills gaps has only slightly improved.

  - There is negligible improvement in the 'basic education' sub-pillar, arguably the most important challenge for European skills systems.

- The RoI is one of two countries (the other is Cyprus) that has seen the most striking overall improvement in the period.
  - SAEs Czechia, Denmark, Austria, Finland and Sweden, which were above average in 2015, were below average in 2022; Estonia is among those to have moved from below to above average.
- The ESI also considers the influence on system performance of three key external contextual factors: demography, economic structure and technological development.

Cedefop published *Moving towards common policy goals and aligned progress reporting*, a briefing note taking stock of European countries' work on the 2020 common priorities in VET.

- The priorities are long term and broadly defined, allowing each country to develop specific activities responding to their national circumstances and needs.
  - They aim to make VET more flexible and adaptive to labour market needs, to ensure it is high quality and to provide progression routes and lifelong learning opportunities to all learners.
  - They also aim to make VET more inclusive and attractive, fostering excellence and innovation, offering continuous training to teachers and trainers and access to state-of-the art infrastructure for learners.
- The note provides an overview of interim findings on what countries have achieved so far and the areas needing further attention.
  - It briefly highlights examples of practice, including in Belgium, Luxembourg and Denmark.

The OECD published *Education at a Glance 2024*, providing 100+ charts and tables on the state of education around the world and many more in the data explorer.

- Data cover: the output of educational institutions; the impact of learning across countries; access, participation and progression in education; the financial resources invested in education; and teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools.
- The 2024 edition focuses on equity in education, providing indicators on gaps in educational outcomes and discussing the effect of educational attainment on labour market outcomes; among the headlines:
  - Since 2016, the average share of OECD 25–34 year-olds with an upper secondary qualification has increased from 83% to 86% and the share of 18–24 year-olds NEET has fallen from 16% to 14%.
  - The employment rate for 25–34s without an upper secondary qualification has risen from 59% to 61%, and for those with upper/post-secondary non-tertiary attainment from 76% to 79%.
  - 47% of female 25–34s without an upper secondary qualification are in employment, 25ppt lower than the male rate; 84% of tertiary-qualified women are employed, 6ppt lower than for men.
  - Students whose parents have not attained upper secondary education are 17ppt less likely to successfully complete their studies than those with tertiary-qualified parents; the gap rises to 19ppt for those starting tertiary programmes.
  - 72% of adults who have at least one parent with a tertiary qualification have also obtained a tertiary qualification vs 19% of those whose parents haven't completed upper secondary.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) published *Better recognition of qualifications*, a policy briefing with evidence, practice and advice for policymakers.

- The paper: explains the purposes of recognition; describes and compares recognition practices in different education sectors (VET, HE) and regulated professions; and identifies the obstacles to efficient recognition and offers recommendations to overcome these.
- Recognition is important in contributing to better labour market matching, fairness and other gains, regardless of the prevailing policies; recommendations for better recognition include:
  - Use common methods and instruments to make qualifications easier to understand and recognise
  - Modernise and link qualifications databases to systemise and exchange information
  - Use guidance to recognise micro-credentials, for compatibility and easier recognition
  - Use public employment services to promote qualification recognition services to employers and migrants
  - Implement validation systems for non-formal and informal learning, enabling people to make the skills that they have acquired outside formal education visible
  - Develop guidance services for departing and returning people.

Eurofound published _Developments in working life 2023_, a set of individual country reports in each of the EU-27 and Norway, based on national research and survey results.

- It includes updates on policy developments in: lifelong learning and skills development; employment contracts; reducing the gender pay gap; health and safety; and work–life balance.

Government

NORTHERN IRELAND (NI)

The Department for the Economy (DfE) published _Step Up Project: Interim evaluation_ by CEA Regulation.

- Step Up was launched in April 2023 and comprised tailored FE and HE support programmes for those economically or socially disadvantaged and previously regarded as 'hard to reach'.

- There were original challenges regarding clarifying target cohorts and the duration of strands, and also recruiting staff within short time frames.
  - However, evidence points to an overwhelming success in reaching priority groups and in providing support and training that has a positive impact.
  - The provision of mentors has been particularly important, as has engagement with external agencies such as food banks, community groups and health trusts to reach out to individuals.

The DfE's Careers Occupational Information Unit and Analytical Services Division published a 'newsflash' on _Top Green Jobs Likely to be Important to the Local Economy_.

- Drawing on existing research and evidence from Lightcast, it explains what constitutes a green job and the many sectors that green jobs encompass.
  - It also examines jobs trends and top occupations, top job titles and top skills in demand in NI.

The DfE published _Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) UK: NI Report 2023/24_.

- GEM is an international project that provided information on the entrepreneurial landscape of 46 countries in 2023, based on its unique annual survey measuring new business formation at the level of the individual.
  - The results are used as key entrepreneurial benchmarking indicators by regional and national authorities around the world.

- NI has historically lagged behind the rest of the UK in terms of enterprise start-up activity: in 2023, its Total Early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate was 9.7% (+1.0ppt on 2022), compared with 10.7% for the UK and 10.8% in England.
  - The female TEA rate was 8.2%, +0.9ppt on 2022; the male rate was 11.3% (+1.1ppt), leaving the gender gap unchanged.

- UK 25–34 year-olds typically have higher TEA rates than other groups; however, in 2023, NI (and Wales) diverged from this pattern, with 18–24s having the highest rate (NI: 13.0%, +2.5ppt).

- The NI graduate TEA rate has stayed almost the same since 2022 (12.3%), whereas its non-graduate rate has increased from 6.0% to 7.7%; in the other UK nations, graduate rates are significantly higher than non-graduate.

- NI scored 4.2 on the National Entrepreneurship Context Index, which provides an overall view of how favourable the environment is; a score below 5/10 indicates room for improvement.
  - NI scored 4.2, compared with UK 4.6 and Scotland 4.9; UAE scored highest at 7.6; Lithuania had the highest score in Europe (6.1), while the Netherlands and Estonia scored 5.9.

- Entrepreneurial education at school is the only one of 13 entrepreneurial framework conditions deemed insufficient in every nation.
  - In NI, just two are deemed to be sufficient: physical infrastructure and government policies on taxes and bureaucracy.
  - The other conditions include: support and relevance of government policy; government entrepreneurial programmes; entrepreneurial education post-school; and social & cultural norms.

The Productivity Institute's Northern Ireland Productivity Forum published *Investing in Management How to improve management practices in your business*.

- A survey of local businesses found that, while there are firms that have adopted best practice, there is a 'long tail' of businesses that lag behind.
    - Those that score poorly: have fewer employees; have fewer managers qualified to degree level; don't provide regular leadership training for managers; generate a high proportion of their turnover from the local NI market.

The short publication includes a self-assessment 'scorecard' for businesses and sets out areas to consider when choosing management training plus a list of accredited qualifications and training available in NI.

ENGLAND

The British Academy published *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England: Investigating subject choice over the past 20 years* **by NFER.**

- AS/A level take-up has fallen across all major subject groups – arts, humanities, social science and STEM – since 2015/16, probably due to the decoupling of the qualifications in England that year.

- Between 2003/04 and 2021/22, the proportion exclusively taking AS/A levels from a single subject group almost doubled from 18% to 35%, with most of the increase taking place since 2015/16.
    - The proportion studying a three-way combination of subject groups fell from 14% to just 5%.

- The likelihood of a student studying a humanities/arts subject is around 21ppt/15ppt lower in than in 2003/04, whereas take-up of social sciences has been relatively stable at around 62%.
    - The decline from 60% for humanities has mainly occurred since decoupling, driven by a decline in traditionally popular subjects, e.g. English, history, religious studies and modern foreign languages.
    - The decline in arts subjects started in the early 2010s and has been more gradual, from a high of 42% in 2006/07 to 24% in 2021/22; it is seen across all arts subjects.
    - Patterns in subject choice vary widely but only decoupling has driven changes to this extent.

- The proportion of all Level 3 students studying the major subject groups broadly mirrors these trends; however, among those studying at least one STEM/social science subject, there has been an expansion in the proportion exclusively studying them via vocational qualifications (VQs).
    - Among those studying arts subjects, there appears to have been a shift towards studying Level 3 VQs, away from AS/A levels, although overall take-up is still declining.

- AS/A level subject choices vary significantly by student characteristics, particularly gender and ethnicity:
    - Females are more likely to engage in arts, humanities and social science subjects than males.
    - Those from non-white backgrounds are more likely to study STEM/social sciences than white students.
    - Across individual subjects, females are more likely to study social science subjects like psychology and sociology; males business studies, economics, geography and government & politics.

- Almost all providers offer AS/A levels in each major subject group, but they have reduced the range of subjects on offer since 2007/08.
    - Most humanities subjects have declined in availability, with French, German and religious studies offered by significantly fewer providers.
    - Fewer offer business studies and law than in 2007/08, but economics is now more widely available.

The House of Commons Library published *Careers guidance in schools, colleges and universities (England)*.

- It covers: the current state of play; government strategies and relevant white papers; organisations providing support; how well schools and colleges are discharging their duties; and a number of select committee reports.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) published *[Closing the Forgotten Gap: Implementing a 16-19 student premium](#)*, making the case for a premium and considering who might be in scope, how much it might cost and wider considerations around implementation.

- Recommendations for England's Department for Education:
  - Introduce a student premium for disadvantaged students in 16–19 education, based on eligibility criteria that combine student-level (FSM6) and area-level (IMD) measures of disadvantage.
  - Initially peg the premium to the secondary education rate to help address the age 16 cliff-edge in funding for disadvantaged students but keep this rate under review; the annual cost of this would be £340m.
  - Develop the 16–19 evidence base on what works and at what cost and use it to inform the value of the premium in the longer term.
  - Ensure that institutions are automatically able to identify which students are eligible and evaluate their use of the shared data system to ensure it is fit for purpose.
  - Hold 16–19 institutions to account by publishing information on how much premium funding they receive and how they are using it to support their disadvantaged students.
  - Consider a staggered roll-out in order to evaluate its effectiveness.

Edge published *[Debating the first principles of English vocational education](#)*, the report of its sixth annual debate bringing together researchers, employers and policymakers.

- It comprises overviews of three debates along with 'provocations' contributed by experts:
  - What counts as a workplace and how do learners fit into it?
  - What should non-formal learning in the workplace look like?
  - How should we best connect informal workplace learning and formal training?

The first piece highlights tensions in Icelandic VET between trusting employers to exercise their responsibilities in relation to training while ensuring quality.

The Department for Education published *[Technical Education Learner Survey 2023: end-of-course surveys](#)*, including detailed findings from surveys of students taking T levels, the T Level Transition Programme (TLTP) and Level 4/5 qualifications.

- It also compares the experiences of T level and TLTP students with those of A level and other Level 3 technical students; among the findings:

  T level/TLTP
  - 57% of T level students were satisfied with their programme vs 76% Level 3 technical and 72% A level; satisfaction ranged from 79% for education & early years to 39% for health & science, while digital fell 20ppt to 51%.
  - Students were most satisfied with the teachers and teaching and least happy with programme management, assessment, preparation for future study and level of employer contact.
  - 42% cited lack of study materials as a barrier, rising to 65% in health & science.
  - 94% on T levels had an industry placement and 75% other employer contact vs 49%/53% Level 3 technical.
  - 78% were planning further learning, mostly a degree (41%) or apprenticeship (25%).
  - The one-year, post-GCSE TLTP scored 71% for satisfaction; during the course, the proportion planning to go on to a T level dropped from 42% to 33%; only 55% felt it had prepared them for the T Level.

  Level 4/5 qualifications
  - 51% of Level 4/5 students were working alongside their course; 56% chose their programme due to an interest in the area, 35% to upskill for work and 30% to increase earnings; only 19% wanted to retrain for a different area of work.
  - 24% had completed work experience or an industry placement, but almost 66% reported no course contact with employers.
  - The biggest barriers to learning were family responsibilities (26%) and part-time work (23%).
  - 77% were satisfied overall; employer contact (35%) and careers advice (51%) scored lowest.
  - The most common next step was studying for a degree (42%), followed by paid work (19%) or another Level 4/5 qualification (15%); among those who had continued to work for their previous employer, 73% intended to stay in their current job.

NFER published *Building a stronger FE college workforce [in England]: How improving pay and working conditions can help support FE college teacher supply*, **commissioned by the Gatsby Foundation.**

- The research focused on technical education, where pay gaps relative to industry occupations and unfilled vacancy rates are highest: construction & the built environment; engineering & manufacturing; and digital.

- Teachers and department heads highlighted many positive aspects to teaching in FE: the fulfilling nature of teaching; holiday allowances and pensions; working locally; and a better work-life balance.

- However, numerous barriers face those willing/able to enter and remain in FE teaching in England:
  - In 2021, median full-time earnings for engineering and digital teachers were 11% lower than in relevant industry occupations; in construction, they were 3% lower, although this excludes self-employment earnings, which are often higher in construction.
  - In 2021, FE teachers tended to earn 23% less than those working elsewhere in education, similar to existing estimated gaps relative to England's school teachers.
  - Widening industry earning gaps have made it more challenging to recruit from industry, particularly among those nearing the end of their careers.
  - FE salary bands are narrow, limiting opportunities for pay progression, particularly when teachers are recruited at the top of the pay band to reduce the pay gap.
  - Workload is excessive and focused too much on unfulfilling administrative work.
  - Due to staff shortages, new recruits often don't get the support they need.
  - Some report that student behaviour and mental health have deteriorated since the pandemic, which also adds to workload pressures.

- Recommendations: fund colleges to bring pay in line with that of school teachers; improve onboarding procedures and promote the positive lifestyle benefits; a strategy and resources to reduce workload; continue improving the new FE Workforce Data Collection.

HEPI published *Stronger Together: Challenges of devolved regional economic development – A new and expanded role for universities and university groupings [in England]*.

- There are currently three sorts of regional structure in England:
  - The greater city regions with elected mayors and combined authorities
  - The wider regions of Pan-Regional Partnerships (PRPs), such as Midlands Engine, Great South West Partnership or the Oxford to Cambridge PRP
  - Conceptual regions such as the Eastern Powerhouse, Thames Valley or Golden Triangle, which are useful for marketing but lack elected leadership, administrative entity or umbrella partnership.

- While universities are part of a range of partnerships, few are members of a regional group; excluding London Higher members, 37 universities are involved with PRPs out of 119 in England.
  - The most organised groupings are drawn from research-led institutions, organised into six PRPs and four university groups: Midlands Innovation, GW4, N8 Universities and Arc Universities Group.

- The report has three recommendations:
  - In its formulation of a new industrial strategy, the Government should plan for at least five years and look towards an impact over 50 years, promoting the strength in applied R&D and innovation alongside local and regional capabilities.
  - University leadership should embrace the full impact they can have on other regional partners through their convening power both within regions and internationally, performing a prominent and vocal role in trade missions and acting as champions.
  - Universities should build much deeper linkages with other regional partners, with a particular effort towards engagement with those who hold the greatest devolved powers, e.g. new mayors.

HEPI published *Undergraduate fees revisited* **by a former Department for Education chief analyst.**

- It argues for **ten changes** that would ensure: universities were better funded; students would receive more maintenance support; students from the poorest backgrounds would no longer graduate with the most debt; nobody would see their debt rise year on year; and graduates would be debt free in their early 40s.
  - A 20-year repayment term on loans; no increase, even nominal, of the amount owed.

- A minimum post-graduation loan repayment of £10 a week; and an additional repayment of 3% of income between the income tax and student loan repayment thresholds.
- Reintroduction of an interest rate supplement for graduates earning over £40k p.a., with a maximum of 4% for those on over £60k.
- Letting graduates reduce their pension contributions in order to make higher repayments more affordable.
- A 1% National Insurance surcharge for employers with graduates.
- New maintenance grants for students with parental incomes up to £65k, with full grants of ~£11k for those with household incomes below £25k.
- Maintenance loans for students not receiving a full grant with parental income below £100k p.a.
- Additional teaching grants averaging £2k per student, paid for from the extra National Insurance charge.

Public First published *[Institution Overboard: Managing the risk of disorderly market exit in English higher education](#)*, arguing that the current policy landscape isn't prepared to deal with large-scale individual institutional failure.

- Current approaches to protecting provision have no force in insolvency law; there is a risk of second-order knock-on effects – both geographically around the university and to the wider ecosystem of UK teaching and research – and a huge risk of contagion to student, staff and lender behaviour.
    - Most importantly, the current financial model could deter international students.
- The report calls for:
    - A rebalancing of the role of the OfS to take a more proactive approach to managing and forecasting financial risk, and to strengthen student protection plans.
    - The creation of a new HE enhancement & transformation scheme offering repayable loans to institutions that can make a compelling case for restructuring, pre-empting exit or forced closure.
    - The creation of a new HE commissioner within the Department for Education to liaise between the sector and government and to manage the deployment of the above fund.
    - The creation of a new special administration regime for HE, modelled on the one that already exists in FE, which would allow for a more orderly form of exit should restructuring be neither possible nor effective.

EDSK published *[Augar Reviewed: Why post-18 education in England is still broken, and how to fix it](#)*.

- The 2019 Augar Review sought to put the whole tertiary education system on a more sustainable path, but little progress has been made in the intervening five years.
- Without fixing the underlying imbalances, inconsistencies and inequities between HE, FE and apprenticeships, any new funding for universities would most likely vanish into the institutional landscape without necessarily resulting in appreciable benefits for learners.
- Five recommendations to ensure a new foundation for tertiary education in England:
    - Create a consistent and coherent approach by dividing the system into: primary (4–11); lower secondary (11–14); upper secondary (14–18); and tertiary (18/19+), covering all levels and bringing together classroom-based and workplace training.
    - Create a single approach to funding, regulation and oversight through a new independent national tertiary education council, acting as the steward for the whole system.
    - Cap the fees for classroom-based tertiary education at £6k a year rather than the present £9,250.
    - Operate a single tertiary tuition loan system for Levels 4–6; use a 'stepped repayment' system to make repayments more progressive; free up government funds through reduced tuition fee and maintenance loan write-offs and use the funds to create a £2b Student Support Fund (SSF) for poorer students and widening participation activities.
    - Introduce a single tertiary maintenance support system; alongside the new SSF, increase the level of student loan maintenance funding and the earnings thresholds for maintenance support.

The House of Commons Library published a research briefing on *[Higher education finances & funding in England](#)*.

- The financial sustainability of England's HE sector has come under increasing strain following reductions to government grants and an ongoing freeze in undergraduate tuition fee caps.

- Recent inflationary and cost of living pressures have also increase demands in relation to pay settlements, energy costs and building projects.
- In May 2024, the OfS said 40% (108) of all providers expected to be in deficit by the end of 2023/24.
  - More than 50 universities have consequently announced redundancies and course closures.
- There are growing concerns about reliance on international tuition fees and the Public Accounts Committee has warned that of exposure to significant financial risks.
  - Other risks include the likelihood of increased expenditure (e.g. through higher pension obligations) and a reduction in the growth rate of domestic undergraduate students.
- The briefing covers: the 2010 Browne Review and 2019 Augar Review; concerns about financial stability; income and expenditure; public sources of funding; comparisons with the rest of the UK and other countries; and alternative funding models.

The Department for Education published *Apprenticeship SME Brokerage Pathfinder: Early evaluation*.

- The Pathfinder operates in areas selected due to declining apprenticeship starts and to support 'levelling up'; it prioritises four sectors with declining starts: construction, manufacturing, adult social care and digital.
- Take-up has been low, with a lack of upfront marketing budget limiting brokers' ability to raise awareness and target eligible employers.
- Economic uncertainty, business pressures and competing priorities, as well as misconceptions about what the Pathfinder can offer and negative perceptions of apprenticeships have made it difficult to engage SMEs.
  - Training providers have also been difficult to engage due to competing priorities.
- However, SMEs interviewed have mainly positive experiences in their interactions with brokers, who have supported them through processes and helped them identify the best qualifications and/or training provider for their business.
  - Training providers also found value in brokers' research on and interactions with SMEs.
- The report offers a number of recommendations, including continued involvement by the broker once the apprenticeship has begun and offering the brokerage support through training providers.

The Department for Education published *Apprenticeship English and mathematics flexibilities for learners with learning difficulties & disabilities: Pilot evaluation*, an overall positive report.

- In 2016, it was recommended that the minimum standard of English and maths for England's apprentices be reduced from Level 2 to Entry Level 3 for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are able to meet the occupational standard but struggle to achieve standard English and maths qualifications.
  - Current arrangements in England are that such flexibilities can apply only to learners who have an Education, Health & Care Plan.
- In March 2023, 20 providers – a mixture of colleges, independent training providers and employer-providers – were selected to begin a 12-month pilot.
- Based on 17 in-depth interviews with providers and 19 with participating learners, the findings were:
  - Providers were confident in the robustness of the evidence to apply the flexibilities, although there were challenges relating to the time required for collecting and assessing the evidence.
  - Overall, learners didn't find the evidence collection particularly burdensome and appreciated the opportunity to gain an apprenticeship without the anxiety of achieving qualification requirements.
  - Providers were strongly supportive of the pilot's intentions and potential to become policy, considering it inclusive and appropriate.
  - If taken forward, requirements, systems and processes need to be clear and robust to ensure that only those who should receive the flexibilities do so.

The Department for Education published *Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and non-completer surveys*.

- 48% were recruited for their apprenticeship, +4ppt on 2021; those 25+ and at Level 4+ were more likely to already be working for their employer.

- The most cited main reason for taking an apprenticeship was to enter into or progress in a specific career (37%), followed by developing work-related skills (18%) or gaining a qualification (14%).

- 86% were satisfied overall; key reasons for dissatisfaction were lack of training provider support or contact, bad organisation and poor-quality training.

- 92% said they gained skills that could be used across a range of jobs, including communication (87%) and collaboration (81%); 64% improved their digital skills, 56% their English and 50% their maths.
  - 97% reported at least one resulting positive impact on their job or career prospects; 91% felt it had prepared them well for their next moves; 68% were still employed by their apprenticeship organisation.

- Among non-completers: 36% cited personal/domestic factors, including caring responsibilities (11%), mental health issues (8%), physical health (7%) or personal/family issues (7%).
  - The most common apprenticeship-related reasons were: poor organisation (49%); poor training (46%) and not enough time for learning/training (43%).
  - 59% felt it had differed from their expectations, most commonly: worse than expected treatment by their provider or employer (11%); no face-to-face training (9%); training didn't cover the expected range (9%).
  - 91% had continued in work, 48% with a different employer and 40% with the same company.

The Gatsby Foundation published _Apprenticeship completion, EPA [end-point assessment] and the role of employers_, exploring the role of EPA in England's high non-completion rate (46%).

- EPA is generally well supported and valued by both employers and apprentices, with employers particularly valuing the independent status of EPA organisations and their assessors; however:
  - In some cases the value of the EPA is undermined by the existence of mandatory qualifications, which often results in unnecessary duplication of assessment.
  - Employers report that maths and English requirements are the single biggest barrier not only to completion but also to entry; while generally happy to include content required by the occupation, they resent having to cover topics that 'should be [taught] in school'.
  - Where apprenticeships are being used by already-competent staff, sometime to gain additional industry credentials, the EPA is not valued, leading to lower completion rates.

- Nine recommendations are made to improve employer/apprentice engagement in EPA.

Edge published _Traineeships in England: Lessons from the past and perspectives for the future_, the report of a short project undertaken by students from LSE.

- England's traineeship programme launched in 2013 and was withdrawn in 2022, due to challenges including low uptake and limited funding.

- The new government has committed to reintroducing pre-apprenticeships and the research explores how they might be revitalised, drawing on comparable international models and previous experience.

- Key requirements include:
  - A stakeholder-friendly approach to policy design, beginning with consultation across business, industry and education to ensure they are aligned with current labour market needs.
  - Cross-sectoral collaboration, involving the Departments for Education, Work & Pensions and Business & Trade.
  - Curricula that are flexible and designed with direct input from employers.
  - A shift from quantity to quality, including through a clear quality assurance framework, strong oversight by providers and hands-on support for both trainees and employers.
  - Positioned as an attractive route to employment through good career guidance, improved access to information online and on social media and the promotion of success stories.
  - Integration into a broader vision of comprehensive educational reform, including refocusing apprenticeships on 18–24 year-olds.

The Department for Education published _Evaluation of Skills Bootcamps: 2022–23 (wave 3) implementation report_, considering the effectiveness of the provision, the experiences of those involved and early perceptions of outcomes.

- Areas for review include:

- The need for a consistent approach to providing guaranteed interviews for appropriate jobs in relevant sectors, combined with personalised employability support.
- Further pre-application IAG, so that participants enrol on the 'right' course, expectations are managed and completions maximised.
- Tailored IAG about the Pathway to Accelerated Apprenticeships scheme to increase learner and employer awareness and understanding and encourage employer engagement.
- Further promotion to help increase the number/diversity of employers engaged, especially SMEs.

SCOTLAND

Audit Scotland published _Scotland's Colleges 2024_, drawing on analysis of annual audits.

- Financial challenges for the sector have increased since 2023, with at least 11 colleges reporting deficits to date (up from eight reports in 2021/22).
  - Scottish Government funding reduced by 17% in real terms since 2021/22 and by £32.7m in cash terms in 2024/25.
  - Staffing costs are ~70% of expenditure and a key area for cost reduction; 496 staff left through voluntary severance in 2022/23, with further staff reductions forecast.
- Colleges may not be able to do all they have done in the past, which will impact upon students' learning experience; the Scottish Government needs to provide more clarity on aspects to prioritise.
- The lack of reform of the post-school sector is also causing continuing uncertainty for colleges.

Of Scotland's 24 colleges, 19 are incorporated public bodies subject to audit by the Auditor General.

The UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence published _Student housing options and experiences of homelessness in Scotland: A report by the Cross-Party Group on Housing_, highlighting significant shortfalls in student accommodation.

- The shortfalls are particularly severe in Edinburgh (13,852), Glasgow (6,093) and Dundee (6,084).
- Recommendations include taking a collaborative approach, producing more robust data and integrating student housing into local housing strategies.

The Scottish Government published a _Green Industrial Strategy_.

- Five key opportunity sectors are identified: wind; CCUS; green economy professional & financial services; hydrogen; and clean energy-intensive industries of the future.
- Actions include investing in strong R&D foundations and the development of a skilled workforce, including:
  - Ensuring the education and skills system is responsive to green economic priorities
  - Raising the profile of green job opportunities and supporting people to retrain for them
  - Enhancing the transferability of skills
  - Encouraging and supporting employers to invest in training.

Global Ethical Finance Initiative (GEFI) published _Scottish Taskforce for Green & Sustainable Financial Services: Final report_; the Taskforce was set up with the Scottish Government in 2022 and supported by Scottish Financial Enterprise (SFE).

- The aim was to create a blueprint for green finance that would enhance Scotland's global standing and attract talent, institutions and international capital.
- Sustaining a world-class training and education offer for the sector was one of four key aspects identified.
- 31 recommendations are made under the headings: policy, promotion, investment and skills, including:
  - Stakeholders should collaborate to develop a 'Sustainable Finance SkillsNet' to support the upskilling and reskilling of sector professionals.
  - GEFI's 2022 _Sustainable Finance: A guide on education, qualification, training opportunities and the enabling Scottish culture_ should be regularly updated.
  - SFE should work with stakeholders to identify and promote current education, training and qualification programmes, and to inform recommendations for future programmes.

The Scottish Government published *Learning: For All. For Life. A report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD)*.

- There is strong evidence that CLD is delivering positive outcomes and improved life chances for marginalised and vulnerable learners.

- However, action is needed to develop a clear and consistent framework of outcomes, and a more standardised approach to reporting them.
  - CLD staff and volunteers need to be clear on expected standards and supported to meet them.

- There needs to be greater equity of resource distribution within a joined up formal and informal lifelong learning system that gives parity of esteem to those being educated as well as educators.

- 20 recommendations are made under six headings: leadership & structures; overarching policy narrative; focus on delivery; budgets and funding; developing workforce standards; and demonstrating impact.

The Scottish Government also published *Community Learning and Development in Scotland and Internationally: Literature Review*, **part of the evidence base for the CLD review.**

- Findings relate to CLD learner experiences, including the education and employment outcomes of participation, and the CLD workforce and the values and approaches underpinning CLD provision.

- International data focus on the EU (especially Denmark and Finland), New Zealand and Canada.

WALES

[No relevant material sourced for this quarter's release.]

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND (RoI)

SOLAS published two documents on *Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a consistent learner experience*, **developed with Educational & Training Boards (ETB) Ireland and FE and training (FET) providers.**

- *A framework guide*, aiming to support access and achievement and enhance the overall learner experience within FET; it consists of:
  - Three pillars: skills, pathways and inclusion
  - Four inclusion priorities: literacy and numeracy; embedding FET in the community; targeting priority cohorts; and consistency of learner support
  - Six key areas: ETB budget for consistent learner support; develop and standardise support and apply good practice; integrate support via universal design; technology to address support needs; more consistent and reflective financial support; and cross-FET programme independent learner support resources.

- **An accompanying** *Position paper*, including case studies demonstrating how a range of support is already being provided and highlighting the progress being made by FET practitioners.

EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

The ETF and the European University Institute published *Navigating the Future: The role of geopolitics in shaping the education and skills of the next generation*, **a policy briefing on ways in which education and skills can help build resilience, promote peace and drive sustainable development.**

- The briefing is based on discussions in January 2024 analysing future scenarios, involving 50 thought leaders including EU policymakers, academics, business representatives, international financial institutions and civil society organisations.
  - Current education systems reinforce inequalities, widen gender and digital divides and face diminishing public funding.
  - Education is increasingly perceived as a competitive advantage between nations, rather than a global enabler promoting mutual learning and open knowledge sharing, worsening existing disparities.
  - However, new education systems that reflect 21st century dynamics are beginning to flourish, creating opportunities that can be capitalised on due to increasing demand for foundational and future skills.

- Recommendations include:
  - View education as a strategic investment, as one of Europe's main international trade products and the foundation of international solidarity and diplomacy, and a critical advantage that enhances global competitiveness.
  - Revise budgetary allocations to prioritise education and skills development initiatives, increase funding to enhance education infrastructure and promote lifelong learning.
  - Leverage education for diplomacy: harness its soft power to promote diplomatic relations and mutual understanding; and embrace a decolonialised perspective – recognise and address historical inequalities and promote a more inclusive and equitable global education system.
  - Address fragilities and inequalities through education: tackle the growing inequalities exacerbated by current systems; prioritise public funding for education and promote accessibility.
  - Promote global collaboration and partnerships in education and skills development; focus on foundational skills and diverse literacies that prepare learners for an unknown future; and facilitate knowledge sharing, innovation and mutual learning through public–private partnerships to address emerging challenges.

The European Commission published its second _2030 Digital Decade: Report on the state of the Digital Decade 2024_, plus individual country reports, on progress towards a digital transformation for people, businesses and the environment, with updated country and cross-cutting recommendations.

- The EU aims to improve the digital skills of at least 80% of 16–74 year-olds and to have 20m ICT specialists by 2030.

- The pace of progress on some targets is slower than anticipated: only 55.6% of the population have at least basic digital skills and, at the current pace, there will be just 12m ICT specialists by 2030.

- Urgent action is needed to achieve a more coherent and strategic framework of investment, governance, and capacity-building for effective and inclusive digital skills and talent development.

- Member states should prioritise investment in digital education and skills, including targeted policies for groups most in need, e.g.:
  - Early exposure of young people, particularly girls, to STEM
  - Promote VET and lifelong learning in the domain of ICT
  - Increase the academic offer in advanced digital skills, facilitate collaboration among HEIs and boost industry integration
  - Foster diversity and inclusion, particularly of women.

SMALL ADVANCED ECONOMIES (SAEs)

Includes relevant items by/about the following SAEs chosen by the DfE Northern Ireland for comparative purposes: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland (in addition to Scotland, Wales and the RoI, covered above).

Cedefop published a thematic perspective series: _Implementing European priorities in VET: Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive and quality-assured_, with individual country reports submitted by members of its ReferNet network.

- Countries featured in the series include: Estonia, Finland, Norway and the RoI.

Denmark

The Ministry of Children & Education published Virtually all young people must have access to upper secondary school: the government will establish a new vocational and professional upper secondary school, a press release.

- Currently, young people in Denmark have to make an early choice – for which they are rarely prepared – between academic and practical education offered separately in general high schools (stx) and commercial high schools (htx).
  - This is despite the fact that an increasing number are looking for an education that combines theory and practice.

- At the same time, in 2035, approximately half the country's municipalities will experience a 10%+ drop in youth cohorts, making it increasingly difficult to run youth education outside large cities.

- The Government plans to introduce a third option with a new, two-year business- and profession-oriented upper secondary option (epx) that will combine practical and theoretical teaching.
  - It will give access to vocational education as well as to certain professional degree-level qualifications, e.g. in radiography and social work.
  - It will be possible to take a one-year extension, giving general access to other professional courses such as primary school teacher and nurse; a further subject package of up to six months will give access to academic degree programmes.
- Entry to epx will require a pass in the school leaving exam, while the standard required for entry to stx and hhx will be raised to ensure they only attract those who want a 'high level of literacy' and are motivated to go on to HE.
- Epx will be offered in all 87 'education cities' in the country, through existing vocational schools and colleges, with the government also proposing institutional mergers to create larger units.

Cedefop published _Denmark: New agreement strengthens VET for green transition_, a news report.

- In a significant step towards bolstering Denmark's green transition, the Ministry of Children & Education announced an agreement focused on enhancing vocational education.
- The initiative includes funding for work-based learning, upskilling teachers in green competences, promoting learning mobility for the acquisition of green competences and introducing a green component in the final VET exam to assess proficiency in green technologies and practices.
  - The agreement further establishes the role of _knowledge centres for VET_, which emerged out of Europe's 2015 VET reforms and serve as expert hubs, providing resources and support for both students and teachers.
  - It also promotes international study tours and exchanges, aiming to raise understanding of international standards and innovations in sustainability issues.
- A campaign will be launched focusing on role models to inspire students to pursue careers in green sectors and help address current skills shortages.

The OECD published _Addressing labour and skills shortages [in Denmark] in a fast-changing economy_, exploring post-pandemic structural factors that are contributing to persistent shortages, despite a strong labour market.

- These include: late labour market entry by young people; changing skills requirements; and obstacles to the recruitment of migrants.
- Proposals include: adapting the workplace to an ageing population and adjusting early retirement schemes; targeting the tenth grade to students with greater learning needs; reducing student allowances and introducing an income-contingent loan system for master's students; increasing the recruitment of foreign-born workers and improving their integration.

Estonia

Cedefop published _Estonia: Boosting VET with extended compulsory education_, a news report.

- From 2025/26, the compulsory education age in Estonia will be raised from 17 to 18, bringing important changes to VET in the country.
  - The reform aims to tackle several issues: the increasing number of young people who don't continue their studies after basic education; the high dropout rate in the first year of upper secondary vocational education; and the growing number of young people without qualifications.
  - Estonia has a target of 90% of 20–24 year-olds having at least upper secondary education by 2035, up from 83% in 2022.
- Students will have five options after graduating from basic school: academic upper secondary education; applied upper secondary education (formerly upper secondary VET); adult education; vocational education; and 'preparatory studies' aimed at those not ready to continue in upper secondary or vocational education.
- To strengthen VET as a competitive and attractive learning option, the government plans to:
  - Increase flexibility and learning options in VET through: updated programmes at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Levels 2–5; RPL; more support for transition from preparatory to further studies, or between academic and applied upper secondary education.

- Introduce four-year applied upper secondary programmes focusing on STEM.
- Increase the scope of general education in VET to strengthen basic skills and/or improve access to further studies, and provide more elective studies focused on individual interests.
- Establish a legal basis for offering paid vocational education for adults alongside free provision, aligning vocational training opportunities with employer needs and labour market forecasts.
- Establish connections between general upper secondary courses and VET and HE credit systems.

Iceland

Cedefop published _Iceland: Digital microcredentials in hospitality industry_, a news report.

- Hospitality digital micro-credentials offer flexible, short-term qualifications that are closely aligned with industry standards.

- In response to calls for better quality assurance and governance, the EU's MCEU Hospitality project aims to develop digital micro-credentials with an emphasis on digital and green skills and to pilot the issuing of digital credentials within the industry.
  - MCEU will integrate practical skills with quality elements built on EU standards for micro-credentials, thereby increasing their value.
  - The project aims to issue digital credentials that are secure, unique and easily shareable by developing an open-source platform for issuing digital microcredentials and using the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure to ensure portability and recognition.

The project is actually based in Denmark and is a collaboration between a number of EU partner companies and schools, including the Icelandic Iðan education centre.

The OECD published _Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Iceland_, an in-depth analysis of the Icelandic integration system.

- Relative to its population, Iceland experienced the largest inflow of immigrants over the past decade of any OECD country.
  - 80% have come from EU and European Free Trade Association countries, although there has been a recent increase in humanitarian arrivals.

- Employment rates are the highest in the OECD for both men and women, reflecting the recent and labour market-oriented nature of most immigration to Iceland.
  - However, immigrants' skills are often not well used, as witnessed by the high rate of formal overqualification; at the same time, their language skills are relatively poor and there is evidence of growing settlement of immigrants.

- Against this backdrop, Iceland is seeking to develop its first comprehensive integration policy.

- The review considers: the development and assessment of skills for integration in Iceland; leveraging the skills of immigrants; and transmitting skills to the children of immigrants.

Earlier reviews in this series looked at integration in Sweden (2016), Finland (2018), Norway (2022) and Flanders (2023).

New Zealand

The Ministry of Education published _Ngā Ara o te Mātauranga: The pathways of education, 2023_, an overview of how the education system is performing from early learning to tertiary.

- The report shows long-standing declines in student achievement and low levels of attendance.

- Deep systemic issues need to be addressed around achievement, safety, inclusion and equity.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) published _Real-world examples of good practice in tertiary education: Stories of provider success against NZQA's Tertiary Evaluation Indicators_, an insights paper into how providers ensure their programmes match needs.

- Good practice examples are grouped into eight themes: strong, collaborative industry relationships; meaningful, active community engagement; other partnerships to improve learner outcomes; workplace relevance and real scenarios; all staff contribute to programme development and review; organisational motivation and processes to support continuous change; collecting feedback formally and informally; data-led programme development and review.

Norway

Cedefop published *[Norway: Mapping of international cooperation in higher vocational education](#)*, a news report.

- Norway's higher vocational education sector encompasses a wide range of institutions and offerings, with this diversity extending to the number of students, subject areas and study formats, as well as the student demographic, which varies in age and employment status.

- Over the past two decades, mobility in VET has increased significantly and Norway is preparing a White Paper on higher vocational education, emphasising international cooperation.

- In May, it published a [mapping](#) of such cooperation *[only available in Norwegian]*, focusing on the perceived benefits and challenges for the sector; among the findings:

  - While many institutions engage, the number of projects and partnerships remains relatively limited; it mostly involves higher VET employee mobility, collaboration between employees and educational trips abroad, occasionally including students; some students participate in short internships.

  - It's mostly larger colleges that engage, particularly around key technical subjects that offer professional or higher professional degrees.

  - The primary aim is to gain insights into professional development globally to inform the content of existing and new courses; cross-border cooperation also provides inspiration for education schemes and organisational development.

- Norway's Ministry of Education & Research is continuing to work on measures supporting qualification transparency and opportunities for all learners to engage in flexible and inclusive pathways.

Eurydice published *[Norway: Research points to increasing participation in flexible higher education](#)*, a news report.

- In Norwegian HE, both provision of and demand for part-time, decentralised and/or web-based studies have increased and 30% of students are now aged 30+, partly due to higher enrolments in such courses.

  - At the same time, Norwegian students are on average older than those in other countries when they start their studies, with 20% starting at least two years after completing upper secondary, choosing to do their military service, improve grades, study at 'folk high school' or work first.

- Norwegian-born children of immigrant parents have a significantly higher propensity to study than the rest of the population, and Norway has one of the highest proportions of women in HE in Europe.

  - However, research shows that socioeconomic background is still one of the most important indicators of participation and many people with disabilities drop out before starting their studies due to challenges with getting their needs met at their chosen educational institution.

- In tertiary vocational education, students are aged 33 on average and are mainly established, experienced workers who want to study while working.

  - Part-time students account for 90% of the increase in student numbers and 70% of all students.

- In 2019, HEIs were allowed to offer studies with less than 30 credit points and a tri-partite sectoral programme giving working students the opportunity to participate in short courses relevant to their daily work.

  - Research has found that VET institutions collaborate extensively with the labour market and that companies often find it easier to engage with them than with universities and colleges.

Sweden

Cedefop published *[Sweden: VET reform tackles skill shortages](#)*, a news report.

- The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (MYH) is launching a three-year pilot of a new form of upper secondary education for adults, called National Vocational Training.

  - According to the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, businesses experiencing skills shortages are struggling to find applicants with the right vocational skills at that level.

- National Vocational Training is based on the successful higher vocational education model and is designed to complement local authority-run vocational training.

- The courses focus on skills needed in the labour market and are overseen by sector-based business groups; they vary in length from six to 18 months and many consist of work-based learning.

- MYH has approved 38 programmes out of 86 applications received; the government is providing €2m in funding this year and €8.8m p.a. in 2025 and 2026.

  - The initial programmes have been limited to: construction & civil engineering, electricity & energy, vehicle & transport, industrial technology and agriculture.

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