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Perspective: Reclaiming the Vocational Mission: The 2025 Post-16 Skills White Paper

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Abstract

This article critically examines the evolution and future trajectory of technical and vocational education within the context of the 2025 Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper. It evaluates how emerging policy mechanisms — namely the Growth and Skills Levy, the Youth Guarantee, and the national ambition for two-thirds of young people to attain higher technical or degree-level qualifications by age 25 — reposition work-based learning as a cornerstone of England's education and economic strategy. Drawing on policy discourse, academic literature, and comparative international analysis, the article explores both the opportunities and structural tensions embedded within the current reform agenda. It concludes with evidence-informed recommendations to ensure technical education remains credible, equitable, and sustainable within England's evolving technical and vocational education and training (TVET) landscape.

Keywords

Degree Apprenticeships • Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) • Post-16 Reform • Growth and Skills Levy • Youth Guarantee • Work-Based Learning • Education Policy

Introduction

The 2025 *Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper* marks a pivotal stage in the evolution of England's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system. Its central ambition — to enable two-thirds of young people to achieve a Level 4 or higher qualification by the age of 25 — positions degree apprenticeships as a central instrument in the national skills and productivity strategy (Edge Foundation, 2025; Universities UK, 2021). This ambition responds to longstanding challenges in productivity, regional imbalance, and workforce adaptability (Nawaz et al., 2023).

The proposed reforms — principally the transition from the Apprenticeship Levy (used exclusively on apprenticeship programmes) to a new Growth and Skills Levy (which can be used across apprenticeship and modular non-apprenticeship training), the introduction of a Youth Guarantee, and the expansion of modular, flexible learning — reflect a shift towards employer-centred provision and system responsiveness. Yet, these measures also expose tensions between flexibility, quality assurance, and educational integrity. This article therefore interrogates how degree apprenticeships can fulfil their transformative promise without eroding their academic and developmental purpose.

Degree Apprenticeships and Social Mobility

Degree apprenticeships have become a distinctive policy tool for bridging higher education and employment. Evidence from Universities UK (2021) and the Office for National Statistics (2025) demonstrates that degree apprenticeships have widened participation among non-traditional learners and produced strong employment outcomes. They have, however, developed unevenly across sectors and regions, with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) facing barriers linked to administrative burden and limited financial capacity (Edge Foundation, 2025).

The white paper's emphasis on employer leadership reflects economic imperatives but risks instrumentalizing education by prioritizing short-term workforce needs over holistic learning (Holford et al., 2022). Bewick (2025) characterizes English skills policy as suffering from “structural churn”, repeatedly reinventing mechanisms rather than building a coherent, long-term tertiary model. This cyclical reform culture risks undermining stability and institutional confidence. Maintaining the social mobility mission of degree apprenticeships therefore requires balancing responsiveness with the preservation of critical thinking, civic engagement, and learner autonomy.

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Comparative Perspectives

Comparative international models, particularly those in Germany and Switzerland, illustrate how work-based systems can integrate academic rigour with vocational precision (Euler, 2013; Lassnigg, 2023). In these countries, apprenticeship systems are underpinned by clear progression pathways, well-defined quality frameworks, and strong social partnerships between government, employers, and education providers (BIBB, 2025).

By contrast, England's TVET landscape remains fragmented. The white paper's drive for greater coherence through Skills England and regional coordination is, therefore, a necessary step (Wolf, 2011; Richard, 2012). The proposed Youth Guarantee, which commits to providing all 18 to 21-year-olds with a pathway into work, training, or further education, has the potential to tackle persistent NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates. Yet, its impact will depend on equitable access to high-quality opportunities and the availability of sustainable progression routes (London Youth, 2024; UVAC, 2025).

Funding Reform and Employer Engagement

The transition to the Growth and Skills Levy introduces both opportunity and complexity. While increased flexibility could stimulate employer investment and expand provision, it also risks incentivizing lower-level, shorter-term training at the expense of high-quality, longer-duration programmes (Stephenson & Hulbert, 2024). The policy challenge lies in ensuring that such flexibility enhances rather than undermines system integrity.

Employer engagement is central to the success of degree apprenticeships. Research by McKenna (2024) and James Relly and Laczik (2022) identifies simplification, transparency, and tailored support for SMEs as critical enablers. Furthermore, the recognition of informal and experiential learning could expand participation by valuing workplace-based competence alongside formal qualification frameworks. Sustained employer collaboration — rather than transactional compliance — should therefore be at the heart of the reformed funding model.

Equity and Regional Development

Geographical disparities in access to degree apprenticeships persist, reflecting uneven regional economic capacity and variable employer engagement. The establishment of regional TVET hubs — collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions, local authorities, and employers —

could enhance coherence and address inequity (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2023; McKenna, 2024).

Equity also extends to demographic inclusion. Women, disabled learners, and ethnic minority groups remain under-represented in higher-level technical pathways (Chola & Kiplagat, 2025; Okoth, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Targeted outreach, mentoring, and flexible delivery modes are therefore essential to ensure degree apprenticeships fulfil their promise as engines of social mobility and regional regeneration.

Quality, Modularity, and Public Perception

Quality assurance remains fundamental to the legitimacy of vocational routes. Standardized assessment frameworks, transparent performance indicators, and co-created curricula can reinforce rigour while maintaining relevance to industry (Ascend Education, 2025; Mesutoglu et al., 2024).

The move towards modular learning offers flexibility but also introduces risk. Without robust progression mapping and credit transfer systems, modularity could lead to fragmentation rather than coherence. Policy must therefore ensure that modular frameworks retain pedagogical depth and meaningful accumulation of learning.

Public perception presents a further barrier. Despite strong policy advocacy, vocational and technical routes continue to be regarded as second-tier compared to academic pathways (LSE, 2023; Ofqual, 2025; SMF, 2021). Changing this narrative requires national communication campaigns, employer advocacy, and visible alumni success stories that demonstrate parity of esteem. Elevating the status of vocational learning is essential if the white paper's ambitions are to translate into cultural as well as structural transformation.

To strengthen the social mobility impact of degree apprenticeships, policymakers must consider embedding wraparound support services such as career coaching, mental health provision, and financial guidance. These services are particularly vital for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who may face additional barriers to completion and progression. Furthermore, integrating civic education and ethical reasoning into apprenticeship curricula can help ensure that learners develop not only occupational competence but also the capacity for democratic participation and social responsibility. England could benefit from adopting elements of the dual education systems seen in continental Europe, such as mandatory employer-educator councils that co-design curricula and assessment standards. These councils ensure that vocational programmes remain responsive to labour market needs while preserving educational integrity. Additionally, the integration of regional labour market intelligence into programme planning could help align apprenticeship offerings with future economic demand.

To deepen employer engagement, government and sector bodies could introduce incentive schemes that reward long-term investment in apprenticeships, such as tax credits or public recognition awards. Additionally, establishing regional apprenticeship innovation hubs could facilitate knowledge exchange between employers, providers, and policymakers. These hubs would serve as incubators for new delivery models, digital tools, and pedagogical approaches tailored to local economic contexts.

To operationalize lifelong learning, England must invest in a national digital credentialing infrastructure that allows learners to accumulate, verify, and share their skills across platforms and employers. This system should be interoperable with international standards to support mobility and recognition. Moreover, embedding micro-credentials within degree apprenticeships could enable learners to gain recognition for discrete skill sets, enhancing employability and adaptability. To address these disparities, policymakers should consider mandating equity impact assessments for all new apprenticeship programmes. These assessments would evaluate potential barriers to access and propose mitigation strategies. Additionally, funding should be allocated to community-based apprenticeship navigators — trusted local figures who guide learners through application, onboarding, and progression.

Conclusion

The *Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper* articulates an ambitious, future-focused vision for English technical and vocational education. Apprenticeships are central to this vision, offering a model that blends academic credibility with occupational relevance. Yet, their long-term sustainability depends on coherence across funding, governance, and pedagogy.

As Bewick (2025) notes, the resilience of reform depends less on policy ambition and more on sustained execution. The transition to the Growth and Skills Levy, the expansion of modular learning, and the operationalization of the Youth Guarantee must be implemented through collaboration between government, universities, and employers. Only through such alignment can degree apprenticeships evolve from a policy innovation into a stable and respected pillar of England's tertiary education landscape.

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About the Author



Thomas Burton

Thomas Burton has developed his career in education, skills, and workforce development, with extensive experience across further education, higher education, and apprenticeships. His background combines

operational leadership, teaching, assessment, and governance, giving him a detailed understanding of how policy and practice come together to support learners and employers.

Currently, Thomas is Head of Apprenticeships at York St John University, where he leads the delivery of degree-level apprenticeship programmes. His role spans programme design, regulatory compliance, and employer engagement, ensuring that apprenticeships combine academic standards with real-world application. He also acts as Ofsted Nominee for the university, overseeing inspection readiness and quality assurance processes, and working with staff across the institution to embed a culture of compliance and improvement.