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'Skills England' and the Future of UK Apprenticeships: A More Agile Skills System?

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In October 2024, the Skills Minister introduced a new bill to the House of Lords to reform the skills system for apprenticeships. Since 2017, apprenticeships were developed and regulated by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) which is an employer led organisation funded on behalf of the UK government. IfATE works with employers to identify skills gaps and then develop occupational standards. However, the [bill](#) intends to abolish IfATE and transfer its functions to the Secretary of State (2024) in an attempt to unite stakeholders in a single approach to help support nationwide growth. This blog post will consider the potential implications of this policy reform and whether it will result in a more agile skills system.

A new Policy Vehicle for the England Skills System

In July 2024, the Prime Minister and Education Secretary [announced the new policy vehicle for the England Skills System, 'Skills England'](#), to address what has been described as a 'fragmented' and 'broken' skills system (GOV.UK, 2024a). Skills England will be situated in shadow form within the Department for Education and have a wider remit than IfATE in developing a single picture of skills needs by working with industry, unions, committees, and local and regional government (IfATE, 2024).

Towards Greater Government Control

While seemingly logical and considered, the change brings potentially larger implications on the skills system. Currently, IfATE is an executive non-departmental public body which operates on behalf of the government, instead of being part of the government and accountable to Parliament. Hence, Skills England means there will be greater government control on apprenticeship standards and provision, which has been more employer led previously. For example, the Bill states: "The Secretary of State may prepare an apprenticeship assessment plan if satisfied that it would be more appropriate for the plan to be prepared by the Secretary of State than by a group of persons". While this could be deemed as a more agile skills system, allowing greater speed in establishing apprenticeship standards to be created for national skills gaps, these instances would bypass employer led panels.

Apprenticeship Levy Reform

This comes amidst an apprenticeship levy reform which will fund shorter apprenticeships but require more funding for businesses to fund level 7 apprenticeships equivalent to a master's degree (GOV.UK, 2024b). The change largely indicates a shift to focus more on investing on younger workers as opposed to upskilling the existing or more mature workforce. However, the level 7 apprenticeships naturally invite those who already have prior academic qualifications or professional experience (Cook, Sims, Brindley and Poole, 2024), and this is potentially a good thing.

The first Skills England report indicates UK digital and computing occupations are facing significant skills shortages (Department for Education, 2024), where over two thirds of UK businesses are not confident they will be able access the digital skills required over the next 3 to 5 years. Hence, upskilling existing employees who already have a degree to change career may be an attractive value proposition for businesses, but the levy change may diminish this.

A required change, or perception of progress?

A shorter-term problem with the move to Skills England is that apprenticeships or qualifications currently under approval may face disruption, with employers and training providers confused about the current policy regime for skills training. In any case, there are reports degree apprenticeships have been successful in meeting the government's intention for the programmes, such as improving social mobility and productivity (Nawaz, Edifor, Holland, Cao, and Liu, 2023). Unfortunately, UK policy has been subject to perpetual change with Norris and Adam (2017) contending there is the "tendency to abolish and recreate organisations as a proxy for demonstrating progress". Hence, whether Skills England will present itself as a more agile skills system will take time to prove itself.

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