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Rethinking Equity and Policy Coherence: The Implications of Age-Restricted Funding for Level 7 Apprenticeships

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From 1 January 2026, the UK Government will significantly alter the funding model for Level 7 apprenticeships in England (GOV.UK, 2025). While funding will remain for young people aged 16–21, and for those under 25 who are care leavers or have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), older applicants will no longer be eligible for government support for these advanced programmes. Existing apprentices will remain funded through to completion.

This change is part of a broader strategy to refocus skills investment on young people and earlier stages of training. In its recent [announcement](#), the government emphasised the need to rebuild the domestic workforce and reduce skills shortages in key sectors like construction, healthcare, and digital technology. With over £3 billion allocated to apprenticeships, including the creation of 120,000 new training opportunities, the policy aims to provide meaningful employment pathways for the growing number of 16–24-year-olds not currently in education, work or training.

Who Benefits? And Who's Left Out?

Prioritising access for young people who are just entering the labour market is a legitimate and understandable policy goal. However, such a decision risks undermining the very objectives that apprenticeships, including Level 7, were designed to fulfil: widening access to high-level professional roles, fostering social mobility, and equipping the workforce with the advanced skills needed in a rapidly changing labour market.

However, this renewed focus on youth must be balanced with a recognition that skills development does not, and should not, stop in early adulthood. Level 7 apprenticeships have been a vital route for people in the workforce to advance into senior and specialist roles. The Social Market Foundation considers the age profile of level 7 apprentices a concern, where in 2023/24, fewer than 500 Level 7 apprentices were aged 16–18, while more than 15,000 were over the age of 25 (SMF, 2025). They also criticise how most learners (72%) already held at least a Bachelor's degree or equivalent.

However, these figures reflect the nature of these programmes: Level 7 apprenticeships are typically undertaken by individuals transitioning into high-level roles in sectors such as law, accountancy, and senior leadership. These are not entry-level pathways, but rather vehicles for career progression, often taken by individuals who have already accumulated substantial academic and professional experience.

Undermining Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development

The shift in funding policy therefore risks overlooking the needs of older learners and sectors that rely on upskilling their workforce at higher levels. While the government has [reaffirmed support](#) for adult skills in other areas, such as Skills Bootcamps and localised training programmes, these generally serve different purposes and qualifications.

To restrict level 7 funding to those aged 16-21 is a fundamental misalignment with the demographics and purpose of level 7 qualifications. Restricting access to funding based on age ignores the reality of modern career trajectories, where individuals retrain or upskill multiple times across their working lives, and may disincentivise employers from investing in the development of their workforce.

Employers have warned that removing government funding for older applicants could make these programmes financially unviable, especially for smaller firms (FE News, 2025). This shift could lead to a narrowing of opportunity and a reduction in overall participation, contradicting efforts to increase social mobility through vocational and technical routes.

Towards a More Inclusive Apprenticeship Model

The central question is not whether young people should be prioritised, but whether this should come at the expense of inclusive, lifelong access to education. People change careers, return to education, and retrain later in life for a variety of reasons. Public investment in advanced learning should reflect that reality.

The government's broader plan to strengthen the skills system is timely and necessary. But as the country seeks to “rebuild Britain,” there is a risk that focusing solely on age could narrow the pathways available to those who still have much to contribute. A thriving, modern economy depends not just on the next generation, but on supporting people to learn, adapt, and grow at every stage of life.

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Biography:

Dr Jordan Allison is a Senior Lecturer in Computer Science within the School of Business, Computing and Social Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire. He is the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Educational Computing Research, and he is the author of many journal articles and conference publications regarding educational computing research. Jordan is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA), a Professional Member of the Association of Computing Machinery (MACM), and serves on the committee of the Cheltenham and Gloucester Branch of the British Computer Society (BCS), the Chartered Institute for IT. His research primarily focuses on educational computing, computing education pedagogy, curriculum design, and teacher development.



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