Skills England, Skills and Assessment Reform

What the changing skills landscape means for universities, professional bodies and employers

The landscape is shifting from ‘education routes’ to a skills system

Changes are converging at the same time

1. Skills England
A stronger national view of current and future skills needs.

2. Qualification reform
A levels + T Levels + new V Levels at Level 3.

3. Assessment reform
Apprenticeship assessment redesigned around occupational competence.

4. Devolution
Strategic Authorities gain a stronger role in skills and employment.

5. Flexible HE
Lifelong Learning Entitlement, modular study and credit transfer.

6. Employer accountability
More scrutiny of outcomes, relevance and pathways to priority jobs.

7. Degree apprenticeships remain important, but the funding and assessment environment is changing.

Skills England: what is the broad agenda

A single authoritative view of skills needs translated into provision and funding

- Use national and local labour-market evidence to identify priority occupations and skills gaps.
- Align apprenticeships, technical education and employer-funded training more closely with economic need.
- Support priority sectors including digital, engineering, construction, defence, health and clean energy.
- Strengthen progression through Levels 4–6 and tackle the UK's 'missing middle' at Levels 4 and 5.
- Create a more joined-up system linking employers, strategic authorities, colleges, universities and employment support.

Target: ⅔ of young people in higher-level learning by age 25

What does this mean for HEIs

Universities are being pulled closer to the skills, productivity and employment agenda

Portfolio

More pressure to evidence why courses matter: progression, skills demand, regional need and employer relevance. Flexible Level 4–6 provision becomes more strategically important.

Partnerships

Deeper relationships with employers, FE colleges, professional bodies and Strategic Authorities not just for recruitment, but for curriculum and assessment design.

Outcomes

A stronger focus on what learners can do, where they progress, and whether provision supports priority occupations and productivity.

The opportunity: HE can become the connector between academic depth, technical competence and regional growth.

Assessment reform: what is changing

For apprenticeships, assessment is moving toward a more integrated test of occupational competence

Less duplication

Where a mandated qualification already assesses relevant knowledge and skills, additional apprenticeship assessment may not be required.

More proportionate assessment

Assessment plans are being revised under the 2025/26 reforms, with methods selected for validity, reliability and value for money.

Competence remains central

The endpoint still needs to demonstrate that the apprentice can perform the occupation and meet the occupational standard.

Transition is standard-by-standard

Revised plans are being approved and implemented on different dates, creating a managed transition rather than one “big bang”.

For degree apprenticeships, universities need to align degree learning outcomes, KSBs and the apprenticeship assessment plan without creating unnecessary duplicate assessment.

Assessment reform: implications for professional bodies

Professional recognition can become a design advantage if alignment happens early

- Professional bodies should engage with occupational standards and assessment-plan revisions while they are being developed.
- Universities should map professional requirements, degree outcomes and apprenticeship KSBs together not as three separate compliance exercises.
- Integrated qualifications can reduce duplication, but only where assessment evidence is demonstrably valid and covers the required competence.
- Independent assessment, reasonable adjustments, quality assurance and clear grading remain critical.
- Professional bodies may need to reconsider where professional recognition sits when assessment methods or occupational standards change.

Devolution: skills policy becomes more place-based

Strategic Authorities will have a stronger role in joining up skills, work, health and transport



Implications for universities

- Regional relationships become strategic, not optional.
- Course planning may need stronger local labour-market evidence.
- Progression agreements with FE and employers gain value.
- Universities can position themselves as anchor institutions for local workforce development.

Routes into degrees are diversifying

The ‘traditional’ A-level route is only one part of the future talent pool

A Levels
Academic

T Levels
Technical

V Levels
Vocational

Apprenticeships
Work-based

Adult / modular
Lifelong

→ **Higher education: degree • degree apprenticeship • Level 4/5 • modular Level 6**

Recruitment opportunity:
Widen the definition of ‘university-ready’ and make progression requirements transparent to learners, schools, colleges and employers.

V Levels and T Levels: what should universities do now?

V Levels are intended to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels as the vocational Level 3 route

Recognise

- Set clear admissions positions for T Levels now and prepare principles for recognising V Levels as specifications develop.
- Avoid blanket assumptions about 'vocational' learners.

Map

- Map Level 3 content to first-year degree expectations.
- Identify where bridging, maths, academic skills or subject-specific preparation is genuinely needed.

Promote

- Work with colleges and employers to show real progression routes: Level 3 → Level 4/5 → degree / degree apprenticeship → professional career.

Admissions policy is part of skills strategy.

A more flexible HE model is emerging

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement changes the unit of participation from ‘a whole degree’ toward learning over a lifetime



- From September 2026, funding applications open for selected modules at Levels 4–6, with delivery from January 2027 in priority subject groups.
- Government has also signalled stronger use of transferable credit and possible ‘break points’ within Level 6 degrees.

Employers will expect more and should hold universities to outcomes

The relationship shifts from ‘supplier of graduates’ to co-owner of the skills pipeline

Employers can ask:

- Is curriculum keeping pace with occupational and technological change?
- Can learners demonstrate competence, not just knowledge?
- Are courses creating progression into roles where shortages exist?
- Are degree apprenticeships delivering value and usable workplace capability?
- Are universities making it easier for technical and vocational learners to progress?

A useful accountability test

Relevance
+
Access
+
Quality
+
Outcomes

Is there a threat to degree apprenticeships

Not an existential threat but there are real pressures and a change in emphasis

Why they remain important

- Government's higher-level participation target explicitly includes apprenticeships.
- Degree apprenticeships support employer-led routes into Levels 6 and 7 and can widen participation.

Where pressure is visible

- From 1 January 2026, government funding for Level 7 apprenticeships is restricted mainly to younger apprentices and certain under-25 groups.
- Levy funding is being targeted more tightly.

What changes for HEIs

- Providers need sharper employer demand, efficient delivery, assessment integration and a clear case for occupational and economic value.

The bigger risk is not 'degree apprenticeships disappear' it is that provision which cannot evidence demand, value or fit with the reformed system becomes harder to sustain.

What should universities do over the next 12–24 months

1. **Audit admissions**
   T Levels now; V Level readiness; adult and apprenticeship routes.

2. **Map provision**
   Courses against priority occupations, regional needs and Level 4–6 progression.

3. **Re-design assessment**
   Remove duplication and align degree, KSB and professional body outcomes/expectations.

4. **Strengthen partnerships**
   Strategic Authorities, employers, FE colleges and professional bodies.

5. **Build modularity**
   Credit transfer, break points and LLE-ready short learning.

6. **Evidence outcomes**
   Progression, competence, employer value and widening participation.

Strategic question: if the system is becoming more flexible, technical, employer-led and place-based where does your institution choose to lead?

Skills England

Closing thought

The question is no longer simply ‘who goes to university’

It is:

How do we build a system in which academic, technical and work-based learning connect and where learners can move through that system throughout their careers

Universities can be central to that system if they design/plan for it.

Questions / discussion