
THE SUNDAY TIMES
Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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Today's Workshop

Welcome & Introduction

Apprenticeship & Skills Policy Landscape

Nicki Hay MBE, Board Member, Skills England

Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

Martin Birchall, Managing Director, High Fliers Research

The Apprentice Voice

Lindsay Conroy, Chief Executive, Association of Apprentices

Expectations Gap: Reshaping Early Careers

Emma O'Dell, Skills & Capability Director, BPP

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LYCEUM EDUCATION GROUP

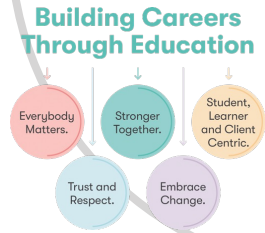
Policy Update:

Skills policy and funding



Nichola Hay,
Strategy and Policy Director, BPP

Skills policy and funding, hot topics update.



Government Updates

- **Political landscape &** impact on skills
- **Milburn Review** recommendations
- **Timms Review**
- **Autumn Budget**, 28 October 2026
  - Min wage for apprenticeships up by 3%
  - Local apprenticeship service launch
- **Devolution White Paper** expected, November 2026 – implementation plan
- **Skills England Annual Report** published use as evidence
- **Qualification Achievement Rates** (QARs) exceed 65% in 2024/25, with the Secretary of State signaling an ambition to reach 70%+

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-england-annual-skills-report-and-sectoral-skills-needs-assessments-2026

Reminder Changes to the Growth and Skills Levy Funding & Incentives

- **From 1st Aug 2026**
- Levy changes for employers10% levy top-up withdrawn
- Levy fund expiry reduced from 24 to 12 months
- Employer co-investment increases from 5% to 25%
- **New employment incentives**
  - **£3,000 Youth Job Grant** for 18 to 24-year-olds who have been claiming Universal Credit for six months or more
  - **£2,000 New Hire Grant** (from October 2026) for employers recruiting under-25s outside the levy system
  - **Expanded Jobs Guarantee** (from November 2026), available across Great Britain for 18 to 24-year-olds claiming Universal Credit for 18 months or more

Growth and Skills Levy Flexibilities

- **Skills England - Skills for Work review**
- **Streamlining apprenticeship standards** introduced from 1 August 2026
  - Includes Leadership & Management, Coaching
- **Apprenticeship Units**
  - Limited units to date available, but significant expansion potential
- Potential Opportunities include:
  - Bridging programmes for young people
  - Mentor training for line managers
- **Foundation Apprenticeships** potential expansion

National Apprenticeship Week theme: 20 years of apprenticeships

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High Fliers Research



Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

- Devised and developed by High Fliers Research
- Designed as data-led rankings to recognise employers with strongest commitment to apprenticeships
- Following a successful pilot study in 2020, the Top 100 was produced annually with the Department for Education until 2024
- Rankings are now compiled for *The Sunday Times*, bringing the UK's top apprenticeship employers to the widest-possible audience

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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Association of Apprentices

aelp

THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

MEMBER OF The 5% Club APPRENTICES AND GRADUATES INVESTING IN A GENERATION

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Launching the New Rankings





90-minute TV programme watched by 6,000 employers, apprentices, schools & sixth form colleges

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Launching the New Rankings

500,000 copies of the supplement were included in The Sunday Times



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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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The Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

1 BRITISH ARMY
ARMED FORCES

Taking the number one spot for the sixth year running, the British Army lives up to its slogan: Be the Best. The UK's largest apprenticeship employer has more than 13,500 recruits on its 40-plus nationally recognised programmes in areas from engineering, telecommunications and animal care to construction, logistics and business administration. About 90 per cent of new recruits enrol on an apprenticeship, which can take one to four years. The schemes are built into the army's Initial Trade Training and range from GCSE-level qualifications up to degree and master's level.

Travelling the world is one of the highlights of the job, from operations and exercises to adventure training. Other perks include free gym and sports facilities, subsidised food and accommodation and opportunities to try new activities – such as skiing and sailing. Soldiers' salaries start at £26,300 a year and increase as you progress through the ranks. Non-commissioned officers with 10-15 years' experience could be earning about £50,000, and those who become a commissioned officer could earn more.

jobs.army.mod.uk/regular-army/what-you-get/apprenticeships

WHAT THE APPRENTICE SAYS

"I'm an information services engineer with the 216 Parachute Signal Squadron based in Colchester. We maintain the servers, radio systems and general operations of the headquarters and we support the 16 Air Assault Brigade, the army's high-readiness response force. I've been all around the UK, to Sweden and the jungles of Belize. I also help run the cyber security team in my unit, so we go to international cyber security exercises. This February we went to Mongolia and the year before Quebec. I knew I would do all this fun stuff, but I didn't realise how diverse the job would be.

"I joined when I was 18 after I did my A-levels. I did English literature, maths and business. I thought about university but to be honest, it was Covid that made me a bit disillusioned with education, and it's a massive financial burden.

"I was keen to do something that mattered. I had done cadets in school so I always had the army in mind. I was initially thinking of more of the officer route, but the Royal Signals [the army's communications experts] came to my college, and I was already interested in the technical side and cyber security, so that drove me to apply.



"I have already completed a Level 4 network engineering apprenticeship. It's a two-year course but I finished it eight months early. It involved working on the job and additional learning online, so I had to understand things like GDPR and service-level agreements. I also wrote essays on network theory, and completed lab modules.

"I love the opportunities my apprenticeship has given me. I have been promoted to lance corporal but am waiting for my new job posting."

Signaller Isaac Queenan, 21, former network engineering apprentice



Map your future: Apprentices in the British Army learn about new technologies to locate targets. Below: BAE Systems is one of the world's biggest defence contractors

2 ROYAL NAVY
ARMED FORCES

There's clear blue water between the type of apprenticeships offered in the Royal Navy and elsewhere. Here you can become part of one of the world's most renowned military bands or join the Royal Marines Commando unit. Both have starting salaries of £26,300 a year with the potential to earn more than £64,000 a year.

The navy operates more than 70 ships and submarines across the globe to defend the UK's interests. It offers over 20 types of apprenticeships and new recruits are automatically enrolled onto entry-level programmes as "ratings", with an accelerated scheme available for engineers and a new Level 5 scheme for medics. More than a fifth of its 32,000 personnel are on an apprenticeship. At any point during your time as a rating, you can apply to become a commissioned officer. If you have what it takes, you can climb the ranks to captain, with earning potential of more than £88,000.

royalnavy.mod.uk/careers/joining-options/apprenticeships

3 ROYAL AIR FORCE
ARMED FORCES

The Royal Air Force is one of the country's most significant apprenticeship employers, with 97 per cent of new entrants undertaking one of its 20-plus programmes. It had about 3,800 apprentices last year, working in areas such as air operations, intelligence, the RAF Police and medical support. By far the most new recruits were in engineering, which accounted for nearly 60 per cent of all apprentices. More than 1,400 staff completed their programmes in 2025.

The starting salary for an enlisted aviator is £26,300 a year and you could go all the way to warrant officer, the highest non-commissioned rank, on more than £66,000. If you become a commissioned officer, then the sky's the limit. There are numerous adventurous and sporting training opportunities, from scuba diving in the Red Sea to climbing in the Himalayas, and since the RAF supports operations all over the world the travel opportunities are endless.

recruitment.raf.mod.uk/apprenticeships

4 BAE SYSTEMS
ENGINEERING & INDUSTRIAL

Apprentices at BAE Systems work on everything from designing and building the next-generation Dreadnought submarine and Tempest combat aircraft to cyber security. One of the world's biggest defence contractors, BAE Systems is the UK's largest private-sector apprenticeship employer, offering a wide range of options for school-leavers and those switching careers. This year the company has a record 5,000 apprentices working on more than 100 schemes from entry to degree level including nuclear engineering, systems, software engineering, welding, pipefitting and aircraft maintenance.

There is intense competition for places, with more than 27,000 applications for this year. As a founding member of the Movement to Work programme, BAE Systems also provides a pathway for young unemployed people into its apprenticeships. Career prospects are good – many of BAE's senior directors started as apprentices, including two managing directors. Applications for 2027 open in November.

careers.baesystems.com





5 BUSY BEE NURSERIES
CHILDCARE

Founded more than four decades ago by three families who were unable to find a nursery with everything they were looking for, today Busy Bees is a global business operating in ten countries. The company, now primarily owned by the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, runs more than 390 nurseries across the UK and Ireland. Its 7,500-plus UK employees live up to the company's name: more than 400 completed an apprenticeship last year and almost one in six are training.

Busy Bees offers Level 2 and Level 3 early years apprenticeships with the potential to progress to Level 5.

It plans to recruit over 500 new apprentices to add to the 1,000-plus already in training. Apprentice salaries start from £10 an hour (£20,800 a year based on a 40-hour week) rising to about £26,800 a year after completing Level 2, and about £27,800 after reaching Level 3, depending on location. Chloe Russell, the centre director of Busy Bees Chelmsford, started as an apprentice in 2014.

busybees/childcare.co.uk/working-at-busy-bees

6 DELOITTE
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

In 2023 Ben Newton became the first apprentice from Deloitte's BrightStart scheme to be made a partner in the firm, having worked his way up over 12 years since turning down a place at the University of Warwick to join the programme aged 18. Last year Emily Ilesketh became the first female apprentice to be made a partner. The pair are the most high-profile beneficiaries of the programme, which gives high-fliers the chance to gain professional and degree-level qualifications without racking up student debt.

Deloitte is the highest ranking of the "big four" accounting and professional services firms on our list, with more than 2,200 apprentices. Its schemes include degree-level programmes in areas from audit and assurance, tax consulting and business advisory to cyber, data and digital, which take between 15 months and four years to complete. There are also entry-level apprenticeships for post-GCSE candidates in business support roles and audit and assurance.

deloitte.com/uk/en/careers/early-careers

7 MITCHELLS & BUTLERS
HOSPITALITY

Mitchells & Butlers expanded its apprenticeship scheme in 2016 as a long-term investment in future talent, recognising that sustainable growth depends on attracting, developing and retaining people at every stage of their career. One of the biggest names in hospitality in the UK, M&B is a FTSE 250 company with more than 51,000 employees and runs 1,700-plus restaurants and pubs. These include All Bar One, Harvester, O'Neill's, Browns Brasserie & Bar and Miller & Carter Steakhouse.

About 1,400 started as management, chef or bar and waiting apprentices in the past year and the firm hires more than 50 new apprentices every month. Over 10 per cent of its general managers have completed or worked towards an apprenticeship with M&B, which also offers apprenticeships in areas including finance, IT and HR. In a challenging time for the sector, M&B reported half-year pre-tax profits of £143 million in May.

mbcareersandjobs.com/apprenticeships

8 KIDS PLANET NURSERIES
CHILDCARE

When Clare Roberts struggled to find childcare that offered the flexible hours she needed, she set up Kids Planet Nurseries with her father, John Hoban. Founded in 2008 with two branches in Warrington and Widnes in Cheshire, the company now has more than 230 nurseries across the UK looking after and teaching over 30,000 children. Everyone learns – in the past year more than 1,400 of the 8,500-plus workforce were in apprenticeships, including early years, playworker, team leader, outdoor learning, and management and leadership schemes.

About 73 per cent of staff have completed an apprenticeship or are enrolled in one, and the company expects the proportion to rise. Apprentices, who secure permanent roles on completion of the scheme, receive mentoring and ongoing career development opportunities through the in-house training academy.

kidsplanetdaynurseries.co.uk/careers

9 LONDON AMBULANCE SERVICE NHS TRUST
HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE

The London Ambulance Service is the world's busiest, answering two million 999 calls each year and attending more than 3,000 emergencies a day. Covering a 620-square-mile area, it serves a population of nearly nine million people across the capital as well as its many visitors and commuters. Almost a sixth of its 5,000 frontline, control room and support staff are apprentices, including 120 who began the paramedic degree apprenticeship last year.

The apprenticeship pathway allows someone with no previous medical experience to become a fully qualified paramedic, with a degree, in just over four years. Most apprentices start as a Level 3 assistant ambulance practitioner with a starting salary of about £31,000 a year. Once you qualify there is nothing to stop you progressing to the top of the organisation. The chief executive, Jason Killens, started as an emergency medical technician with the service. The trust has the highest diversity score in the Top 100.

londonambulance.nhs.uk/working-for-us



The London Ambulance Service attends to 3,000-plus emergencies a day. Left: Busy Bees Nurseries operates in ten countries. Below: Bill Brincat, an Amazon IT degree apprentice

10 AMAZON
RETAIL

The multinational technology and ecommerce giant delivers for staff as well as customers. The company, which makes our top ten for the first time, has more than 2,100 apprentices on over 50 programmes in the UK. They range from software development, cyber security and data analysis to automation and finance. Schemes last from 12 months to four years, depending on which one you join. Pay starts from £13.95 or £14.96 an hour depending on location, about £29,000-£31,100 a year based on a 40-hour week.

Employees also enjoy benefits including private medical insurance, life assurance, income protection and an employee discount. John Roumpbrey, Amazon's manager in the UK and Ireland, says its apprenticeship scheme "is an important part of our £40 billion investment in the UK – creating career opportunities in local communities, and giving people the skills they need for the jobs of the future."

amazonapprenticeships.co.uk/our-programmes

WHAT THE APPRENTICE SAYS

"I joined Amazon after finishing a Btec extended diploma in ICT and now work at its fulfilment centre in Tilbury, Essex, as part of the operational tech solutions team. In my first year, I completed a Level 4 network engineer qualification and I'm now working towards my bachelor's degree. Amazon partners with the University of Roehampton.

"I learn a lot more through practical work, so although I am doing a degree what I'm learning about in the lectures I'm then applying in the real world. It's exciting to be trusted to work on such big projects and be given responsibility so early in my career. Having a good salary while learning means I have been able to enjoy myself, and pay for driving lessons, my car and insurance. Because I'm living at home I've been able to put aside money each month to prepare myself for that next step in life."

Bill Brincat, 22, IT degree apprentice, Amazon

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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56 MONAHANS PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
Southwest-based Monahans is one of 20 accounting and professional services firms in the Top 100. One in eight of its employees are apprentices working as trainee accountants and business advisers at its 11 offices, including Bath, Bristol Chippenham, Swindon and Glastonbury.
monahans.co.uk/careers

57 GRANDIR UK CHILDCARE
Part of an international childcare group, Grandir UK operates more than 90 nurseries and pre-schools across the UK, used by 5,000 families each day. Last year some 150 of its 2,300 staff began an entry-level early years and education apprenticeship or progressed to a higher-level lead practitioner apprenticeship, which takes about two years to complete.
grandiruk.com/careers

58 HUNGRY CATERPILLAR DAY NURSERIES CHILDCARE
Former apprentices are now working as room leaders, deputy managers and nursery managers at Hungry Caterpillar Day Nurseries. The family-run company has grown from a single nursery in 1999 to nine nurseries in west London and Buckinghamshire, employing more than 180 employees. It offers a flexible range of apprenticeships, from early years educator to lead practitioner programmes for its experienced staff.
hungrycaterpillars.co.uk/careers

59 CCH GROUP HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE
Founded in 2009, the CCH Group is the UK's largest care company with more than 260 locations and 15,500 employees delivering 1.5 million hours of care each month. Its apprenticeships offer a career path from adult care worker to lead practitioner and registered manager. It also has a range of technology, finance, human resources and business apprenticeships for non-care staff.
cch.careers/why-join-us/training-development

60 PAINE MANWARING BUILDING SERVICES
Operating across West Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire, Paine Manwaring is a plumbing, heating, electrical and renewable energy contractor. One in six of its 100 employees are apprentices, and the company offers up to ten apprenticeships each year for plumbers, gas engineers and electricians.
painemanwaring.com/about/apprenticeship-programmes

61 SJ ROBERTS CONSTRUCTION CONSTRUCTION
Founded more than 30 years ago, SJ Roberts Construction is an independent building contractor working in Shropshire and mid-Wales, with its headquarters in Welshpool, Powys. A third of its 120 employees are on apprenticeships, working as bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, quantity surveyors, civil engineers, design technicians and site agents.
sjroberts.com/apprenticeships

62 MENZIES PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
Nearly a quarter of Menzies' 1,000 staff are on apprenticeships working towards AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians) accounting or tax qualifications and the ACA (associate chartered accountant), ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) or CTA (chartered tax adviser) qualifications. There are 11 offices in England and Wales.
menzies.co.uk/careers/early-careers/apprenticeships

63 BAGNALLS CONSTRUCTION
Headquartered in Cleckheaton in West Yorkshire, Bagnalls is a family-owned painting, decorating and specialist industrial coating contractor that offers up to 40 places each year on its three-year painting and decorating apprenticeships, as well as in administrative support and project management. Many supervisors and directors in its 600-strong workforce across 12 branches are former apprentices.
bagnalls.co.uk/careers/painting-and-decorating-apprenticeships

WHAT THE APPRENTICE SAYS

"I'm an IT support apprentice based in Ellesmere Port, but I work across our branches nationally. My role is first-line support, fixing IT issues and translating technical jargon into simple terms. I prefer practical learning. I found school exams quite overwhelming and knew I'd perform better by actually doing the job.

"One of the most exciting things I've done is helping towards our Cyber Essentials Plus accreditation (the government standard for cyber security). I was trusted with a lot of responsibility during a company-wide laptop security compliance check. It has been 100 per cent worth it. I've gained real-world experience, grown in confidence and made great friends. My advice to others is to choose a path that suits how you work best."

Sam Magrath, 18, IT support apprentice, Bagnalls

64 UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS BIRMINGHAM NHS FOUNDATION TRUST HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE
Treating more than 2.2 million patients in Birmingham and Solihull every year, University Hospitals Birmingham is the largest NHS trust in this year's list with more than 26,500 staff. It has more than 840 apprentices, on programmes that range from entry-level up to degree apprenticeships.
www.uhb.nhs.uk/ohb-jobs/weve-got-the-right-job-for-you/apprenticeships

65 NATWEST GROUP BANKING & FINANCE
As one of the best-known names in banking and finance, NatWest Group includes the Royal Bank of Scotland, Ulster Bank, Coutts and Lombard. It has 700 apprentices, with nearly half having started roles in customer service, relationship management, digital technology, financial services and business administration in the past year.
jobs.natwestgroup.com





Top left: NatWest Group has 700 apprentices. Below left: a third of the workforce at SJ Roberts Construction, an independent contractor, are on apprenticeships

Building careers: the construction company Balfour Beatty has 800 apprentices. Below: Lewis Verran, an electrician apprentice at Pendennis Shipyard

66 JACOBS PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
Jacobs is a global professional services firm that provides consulting, engineering and programme management for large-scale infrastructure, environmental and technological projects, including Hinkley Point C nuclear power station and the Thames Tideway super-sewer. It has more than 450 apprentices, working in areas such as civil engineering, town planning, architecture, quantity surveying and transport planning.
careers.jacobs.com/en_US/careers/EarlyCareers

67 LONDON EARLY YEARS FOUNDATION CHILDCARE
Now running 43 nurseries in and around the capital, the London Early Years Foundation has a history that stretches back more than a century, beginning as Westminster Health Society in 1903. More than 80 of its 975 staff are on apprenticeships, with most working towards the early years educator qualification or on an entry-level chef apprenticeship.
leyf.org.uk/careers

68 DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION PUBLIC SECTOR
One of two big government departments in this year's list, the Department for Education is responsible for children's services and early years, schools and higher and further education policy in England. More than 270 of its 8,000 staff began an apprenticeship in 2025, with two-fifths enrolling for a Level 7 programme, equivalent to a master's degree.
www.civil-service-careers.gov.uk/working-for-dfe

69 PENDENNIS SHIPYARD MANUFACTURING
Pendennis Shipyard is a world-leading superyacht company based in Falmouth docks in Cornwall. It has successfully trained more than 400 apprentices during the past three decades – and more than a sixth of its workforce are on apprenticeships, including engineering, carpentry, woodworking and joinery, plumbing, marine electrical and yacht painting programmes.
pendennis.com

WHAT THE APPRENTICE SAYS

"I've always been way more of a hands-on, practical person rather than someone who enjoys sitting down and sweating over exams. After studying geography, sport, and business at Camborne Sixth Form, I had unconditional offers lined up from three universities, but I turned them down and I have zero regrets. I've got mates who went to uni, did the three years, and are now sitting on £30,000 of debt while hunting for work.

"Pendennis runs a four-year general programme. In your first year, you get to try out a bit of everything – engineering, electrical, joinery and fabrication. At the end of the year, you pick your specialty. Out of 12 of us, four went down the electrical route, including me. I attend college on Wednesdays.

"There were a lot of pleasant surprises. As part of the training, we did the Gold Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and we got a pay rise for every section we completed. I've done sailing and powerboat courses, and spent the last year and a half in the leadership team for the South West Apprenticeship Ambassador Network. We definitely progress at work, but the training also makes you feel like you're progressing as a person."

Lewis Verran, 22, electrician apprentice, Pendennis Shipyard

70 WESTCOTTS PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
Got a head for numbers? Get a head start on a career in accountancy at Westcotts, an independent accountancy and business advisory firm in southwest England, with 17 offices across Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire. A sixth of its 270 staff are on apprenticeships, working towards accounting qualifications including AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians), ACA (associate chartered accountant) and ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants).
westcotts.uk/careers

71 B&Q RETAIL
The DIY and home-improvement retailer B&Q, which is headquartered near Southampton, has more than 300 locations across the UK and Ireland, offers apprenticeship programmes from entry-level to degree and master's level. More than 500 employees are on apprenticeships, with roles in customer service, retail, finance, human resources, trade supplier, marketing, supply chain, and digital and technology.
bandqcareers.com/what-we-offer/apprenticeships

72 BELL GROUP CONSTRUCTION
The Bell Group, one of the UK's largest property and maintenance contractors, has offered apprenticeships for more than 35 years and today one in seven of its 1,600 employees are apprentices. Training is available in trades such as plastering, electrical, carpentry and joinery, painting and decorating, quantity surveying and customer service.
bellgroup.co.uk/careers

73 BALFOUR BEATTY CONSTRUCTION
Get your hard hat on. Balfour Beatty is an international infrastructure and construction company with 13,000 UK employees. It has 800 apprentices on schemes including quantity surveying; civil and mechanical engineering; highway maintenance; construction management; electrical; business administration; IT; data and software support; and health, safety and environment.
balfourbeatty.com/careers

74 GLOBAL BANKING SCHOOL EDUCATION & TRAINING
With ten campuses spread across London, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester, the Global Banking School is a private higher-education provider that delivers vocational, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including finance, technology, construction, tourism and healthcare. Almost 100 of its 2,400 employees began an apprenticeship in the past year.
globalbanking.ac.uk/about-us/jobs

75 APPLEBRIDGE CONSTRUCTION
The Applebridge Group includes civil engineering, construction and utilities companies in the northeast of England, Yorkshire and Derbyshire. It has its own Applebridge Academy to help bridge skills gaps in the construction sector and almost a quarter of its 260 employees are apprentices, on programmes including entry-level trade apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships.
applebridge.com

76 ARC GROUP LONDON CONSTRUCTION
Founded in 2005, Arc Group London is a multidisciplinary construction and property services company that works across design, building safety, roofing systems, mechanical and electrical installations and decarbonisation of buildings. A sixth of its 100 employees are apprentices on a range of entry or higher-level apprenticeships.
arcgroupuk.com/responsible-business/careers

77 ACTEMIUM UK ENGINEERING & INDUSTRIAL
A large industrial and infrastructure engineering firm, Actemium UK designs, builds and maintains electrical, automation and mechanical systems. It offers entry-level apprenticeships, with roles for electricians, engineering technicians, maintenance and operation technicians, and finance and business administrators, as well as electrical and mechanical degree apprenticeships.
careers.actemium.co.uk/page/apprenticeships

78 COUNTY DURHAM AND DARLINGTON FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE PUBLIC SECTOR
Climb the career ladder at the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, the only fire service in the list for 2026. More than 50 of its 525 uniformed and support staff are on apprenticeships, including 18 recruits on the two-year Level 3 firefighter and fire safety apprenticeship.
ddfire.gov.uk/careers

79 CAPGEMINI TECHNOLOGY
Capgemini is a consulting, technology services and digital transformation company with clients in more than 50 countries worldwide. It has run apprenticeships for 15 years in the UK and now employs more than 400 apprentices, mainly on its digital and technology solutions, digital user experience (UX) and environmental science degree programmes.
capgemini.com/gb-en/careers/career-paths

80 LAING O'ROURKE CONSTRUCTION
Headquartered in Dartford, Laing O'Rourke is a multinational engineering and manufacturing-led construction company. A tenth of its 4,300 UK employees are apprentices, working on technical apprenticeships such as welding, tower crane maintenance, heavy plant fitting and electrical – or on higher and degree apprenticeships in engineering, quantity surveying and health and safety roles.
careers.laingorourke.com/early-careers

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49 SELLAFIELD LTD
ENGINEERING & INDUSTRIAL

This government-owned company is responsible for the decades-long process of decommissioning the Sellafield nuclear site in Cumbria and restoring the environment there. The site no longer generates power, but it stores spent nuclear fuel from other stations and manages the UK's plutonium stockpile. It has more than 1,000 apprentices in areas such as nuclear operation, engineering and maintenance, project management, firefighting, design and safety.
careers.sellafieldsite.co.uk/early-careers

17 BISHOP FLEMING
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Almost two-fifths of Bishop Fleming's 520 employees are on apprenticeships – the highest proportion in this year's list. The mid-sized accounting and professional services firm offers Level 7 accountancy apprenticeship programmes for school-leavers, leading to a chartered accountancy qualification.
careers.bishopfleming.co.uk/early-careers/non-graduate-entry

7 MITCHELLS & BUTLERS
HOSPITALITY

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mbcareersandjobs.com/apprenticeships

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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Harder than Harvard... but worth it

A sixth-formers' guide to the competitive world of apprenticeships. By *Rob Kingston*

School. Sixth form. University. For many teenagers it's the default life path, whether by ambition, parental expectation or a bit of both. About 71 per cent of sixth-formers at mainstream state schools go on to apply for a degree.

But even the most enthusiastic would-be fresher might now be wondering if it's the right choice. The cap on tuition fees in England and Wales, frozen for almost a decade, is once again rising with inflation and is expected to break £10,000 a year in 2027-28. The average graduate in England now finds their degree certificate comes with £53,000 of debt.

Parents may be less keen on waving their children off to halls too: 75 per cent of those who graduated this summer needed support from the Bank of Mum and Dad while at university – averaging £19,000 over the course of their degree – according to High Fliers Research, which surveyed more than 15,000 graduates.

And even then, there is no guarantee of finding a decent job. The Higher Education Statistics Agency found that fewer than 45 per cent of students find full-time graduate-level work within 15 months of completing their degree.

"This is probably the worst time in the last 30 years to be leaving university," says Martin Birchall, the founder of High Fliers.

Of course, you could leave education for good at 18 and make your way in the working world. Find a job and you'll be earning straight away, but will you always be wondering "what if?" Will your career be limited by a lack of qualifications?

Now imagine you could get a decent salary and still study for a degree. And, even better, what if your tuition fees were paid in full, meaning zero student debt? That's the appealing combination offered by degree apprenticeships, which were introduced in 2015 to let students "earn as they learn". More than 300 firms, in sectors such as engineering, accounting, technology, healthcare, law, finance and £20,000-£25,000 a year. As part of the role apprentices are allowed time – often one day a week – to study for a degree-level qualification. This could be on a university campus, online or a combination of the two.

WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS?

Degree apprenticeships offer plenty of advantages, but they won't suit everyone.

PROS

- You're earning immediately. Salaries for degree apprenticeships usually compare favourably with typical school-leaver jobs, and pay often increases annually or when

> **Pay often increases annually or when milestones are reached**

study each week, or blocks of university time alternating with blocks of work. Having said that, large companies often employ hundreds of apprentices, creating their own communities of young people sharing similar experiences.

- You need a clear career goal. Many sixth-formers don't really know what role, or even which industry, they want to work in. "For the five out of six who haven't decided, going to university gives them three or four years of valuable thinking time," Birchall says. Apprenticeships come with a specific role in a specific company, so you need to be decisive – and confident that it's one you will enjoy.

the programme begins, which means applying near the start of year 13. Many continue to advertise positions starting in September until Easter and beyond. Some schemes have a January start date instead.

Once you have identified the employers you are interested in, visit their website for details of what's on offer. Some, such as the professional services firms BDO and Deloitte, have interactive questionnaire tools that direct to the most suitable schemes. Just as with any job application, the interview and selection process will vary by company, but is likely to involve multiple stages.

"For my application, I completed the

APPRENTICESHIPS WORK — SO WHY ARE FEWER YOUNG PEOPLE GETTING THEM?

When a young woman asked her school about apprenticeships, the response she got has stayed with me. "They're an option – but no one would tell you how to look for them or anything like that," she said. It is one voice. But my review into young people and work, published last month, found it echoed across the country. Despite years of talk and investment, apprenticeships still play second fiddle to university.

More than a million young people aged 16 to 24 are not in education, employment or training – at a cost of £125 billion a year. They do not lack motivation or ambition. They lack routes in. Wherever I go, parents tell me the same thing: they are more worried than ever about their children's prospects for a job, a home, a decent future.

Apprenticeships, done well, don't just fill a vacancy. They open a door that for many young people would otherwise stay shut. The organisations in these pages know that. In aerospace and ambulances, banking and broadcasting, they are proving that apprenticeships work – powerfully.

A Level 3 apprenticeship delivers over 50 per cent more lifetime economic value than the classroom equivalent.

Every successful career starts somewhere, and these employers have chosen to be that somewhere for thousands of young people every year.

So here is the question that should accompany every name on this list: if apprenticeships work this well, why are fewer young people getting them?

The numbers from my review are stark. Apprenticeship starts among under-19s have nearly halved in a decade – down from 130,000 to 75,000. Entry-level starts at Level 2, the traditional gateway for school-leavers, have collapsed by 68 per cent.

Much of this drift away from young people has a specific cause: the apprenticeship levy. Introduced in 2017 with good intentions, it has in practice been captured by the economic logic of upskilling existing, older employees.

Only about one in five apprenticeship starts in England is now made by someone aged 16 to 18, compared to nearly half in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The barriers to getting on an apprenticeship compound the problem. Application processes are far more complex than for university. There is no equivalent Ucas platform. Young people often don't know where opportunities even exist.

I have heard repeatedly from young people: "I want to do an apprenticeship, but I can't get one, so I'm going to have to go to university." Only 2 per

> **Parents tell me they are more worried than ever about their children's prospects for a job, a home, a decent future**

cent of those on apprenticeships now were previously not in education, employment or training. The route exists. We are just not letting enough people onto it.

I understand the pressures that employers face. The cost of hiring young people has risen. For smaller firms in hospitality, retail and care – the sectors that have historically been the easiest way in – the economics are genuinely difficult.

But there is a longer-term calculation to make. Migration is falling. The population is ageing. The employers who invest in young people now are not just doing the right thing. They are building the workforce their businesses will depend on in a decade.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

Government has begun to act. The new foundation apprenticeships, hiring subsidies and levy reforms are genuine steps forward. But a decade of structural drift will not be reversed by good intentions alone. Scale and pace matter.

We must make it easier to hire and train young people and direct opportunity towards those who need it most. And there are actions businesses can take right now – many already are.

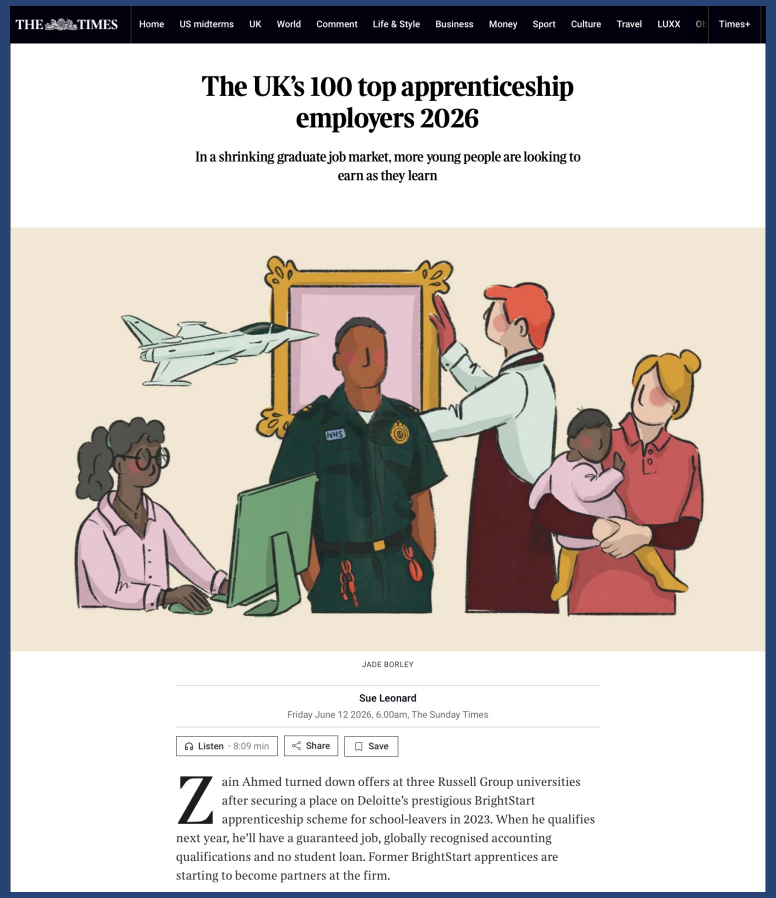
The ask is straightforward: prioritise young people. Commit to recruiting apprentices at entry level, not just upskilling existing staff. Work with schools and colleges to make opportunities visible and accessible. Simplify your hiring processes – the multistage application that works for a graduate role is a barrier for a 17-year-old with no track record. Offer the mentoring, structure and patience that turns potential into performance.

Top employers understand that talent is developed, not simply discovered – that aptitude, attitude and ambition matter just as much as qualifications already achieved. That is the mindset the whole country needs. When employers commit, young lives are changed. The question is whether the rest of British business is prepared to follow.

Alan Milburn is a former health secretary and chair of the independent review into young people and work

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The UK's 100 top apprenticeship employers 2026

In a shrinking graduate job market, more young people are looking to earn as they learn

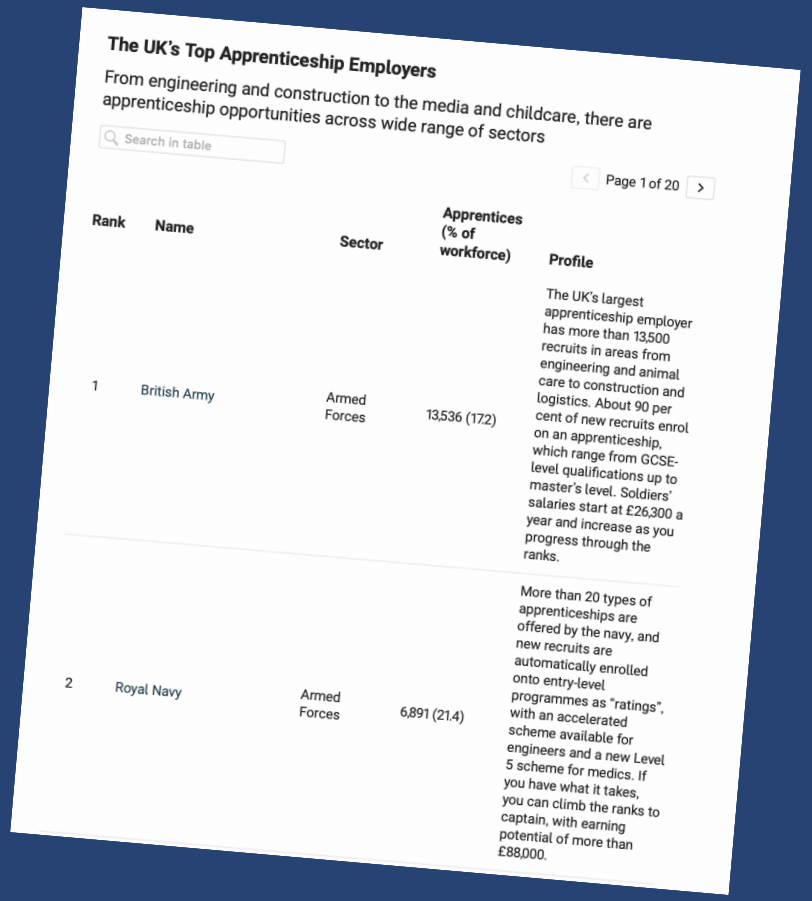
JADE BORLEY

Sue Leonard

Friday June 12 2026, 6.00am, The Sunday Times

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Zain Ahmed turned down offers at three Russell Group universities after securing a place on Deloitte's prestigious BrightStart apprenticeship scheme for school-leavers in 2023. When he qualifies next year, he'll have a guaranteed job, globally recognised accounting qualifications and no student loan. Former BrightStart apprentices are starting to become partners at the firm.



The UK's Top Apprenticeship Employers

From engineering and construction to the media and childcare, there are apprenticeship opportunities across wide range of sectors

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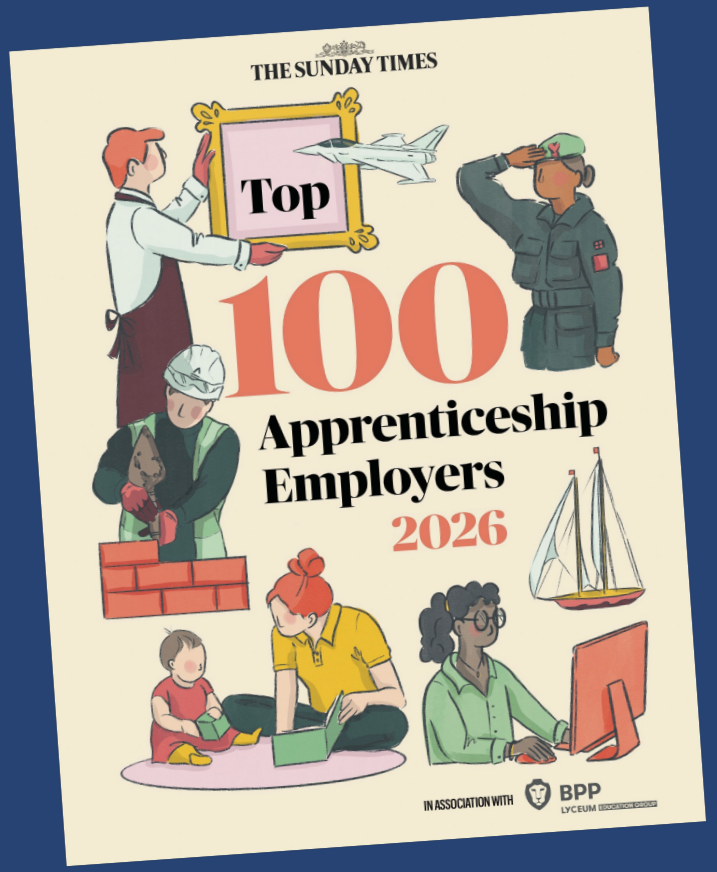
Rank	Name	Sector	Apprentices (% of workforce)	Profile
1	British Army	Armed Forces	13,536 (17.2)	The UK's largest apprenticeship employer has more than 13,500 recruits in areas from engineering and animal care to construction and logistics. About 90 per cent of new recruits enrol on an apprenticeship, which range from GCSE-level qualifications up to master's level. Soldiers' salaries start at £26,300 a year and increase as you progress through the ranks.
2	Royal Navy	Armed Forces	6,891 (21.4)	More than 20 types of apprenticeships are offered by the navy, and new recruits are automatically enrolled onto entry-level programmes as "ratings", with an accelerated scheme available for engineers and a new Level 5 scheme for medics. If you have what it takes, you can climb the ranks to captain, with earning potential of more than £88,000.

More than 200,000 readers for the Top 100 microsite

Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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www.Top100ApprenticeshipEmployers.co.uk

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

1 British Army
2 Royal Navy
3 Royal Air Force
4 BAE Systems
5 Busy Bees Nurseries
6 Deloitte
7 Mitchells and Butlers
8 Kids Planet Day Nurseries
9 London Ambulance Service NHS Trust
10 Amazon
11 Lee Marley
12 EY
13 Go-Ahead Group
14 Hopscotch Children's Nurseries
15 Department for Work and Pensions
16 PwC
17 Bishop Fleming
18 RSM
19 Babcock
20 Keys Group
21 Snapdragons Nursery
22 Bright Horizons
23 Forvis Mazars
24 Northern Trains
25 Family First Nurseries

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

26 KPMG
27 Whitbread
28 The Opportunity Provider
29 GXO
30 Grant Thornton
31 BDO
32 Tops Day Nurseries
33 BBC
34 Caroola
35 Lloyds Banking Group
36 Kido
37 Voyage Care
38 MCFT
39 Buzzacott
40 Southeastern
41 Childbase Partnership
42 Moore Kingston Smith
43 Capita
44 PKF Francis Clark
45 Aon
46 Navantia UK
47 Clarkson Evans
48 Price Building Services
49 Sellafield
50 Ivolve

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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

51 Armstrong Watson
52 Salutem Care & Education
53 Azets
54 Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust
55 North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust
56 Monahans
57 Grandir UK
58 Hungry Caterpillar Day Nurseries
59 CCH Group
60 Paine Manwaring
61 SJ Roberts Construction
62 Menzies
63 Bagnalls
64 University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust
65 NatWest Group
66 Jacobs
67 London Early Years Foundation
68 Department for Education
69 Pendennis Shipyard
70 Westcotts
71 B&Q
72 Bell
73 Balfour Beatty
74 Global Banking School
75 Applebridge

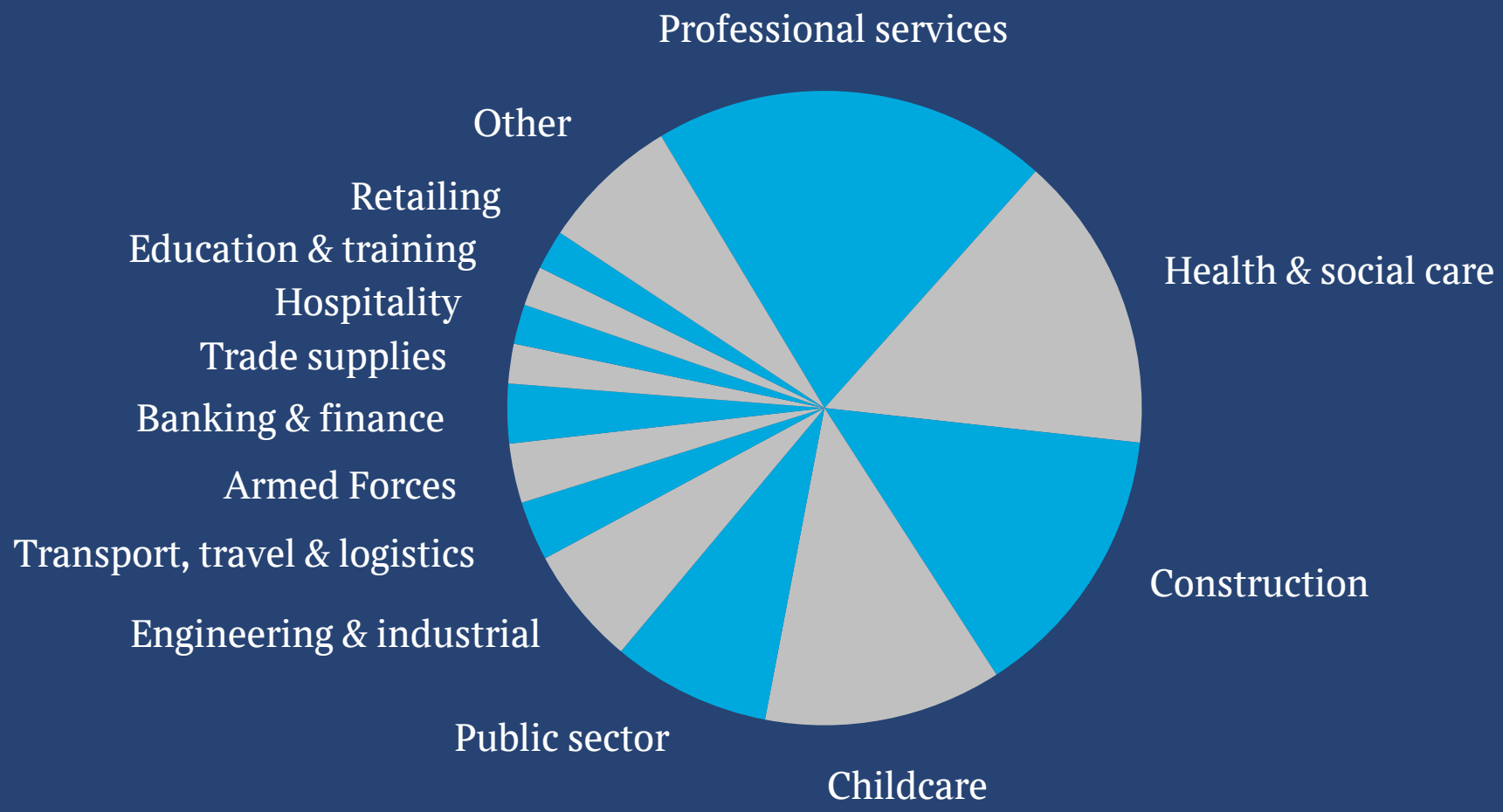
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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

76 Arc Group
77 Actemium
78 County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue
79 Capgemini
80 Laing O'Rourke
81 Connect Scaffolding
82 Marsh
83 Hill
84 CrossCountry
85 Howdens
86 University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust
87 TUI
88 Centrica
89 Christie's
90 Choice Care
91 Equans
92 Bank of England
93 DXC Technology
94 ESG
95 Kier
96 Greensleeves Care
97 Ian Williams
98 Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
99 RS Group
100 Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

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Apprenticeship Employers in the Top 100



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Researching the Top 100 Rankings

100+ Employees

10+ Apprentices



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Researching the Top 100 Rankings

Total number of apprentices employed

Diversity of new apprentices

Number of new apprenticeship starts in past year

Number of completions in last 12 months

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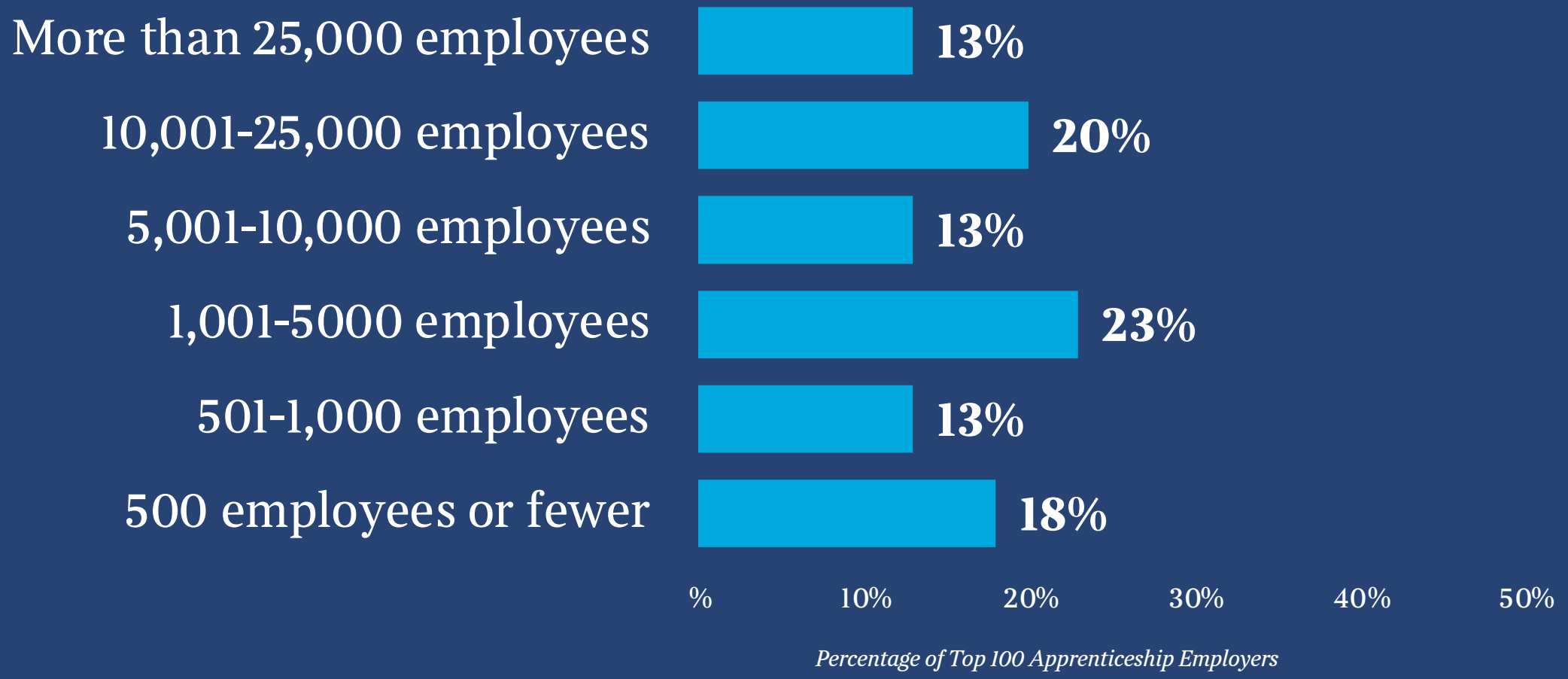
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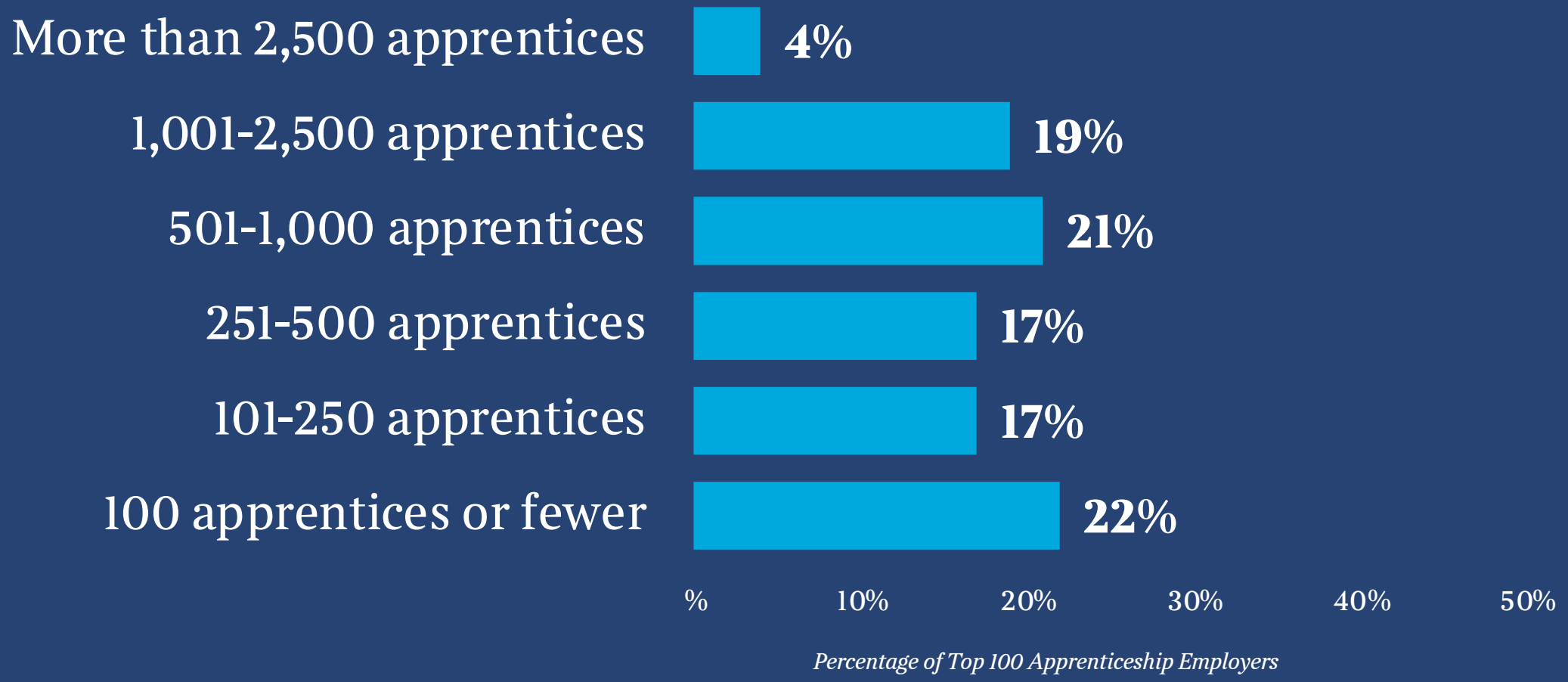
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Total Number of UK Employees



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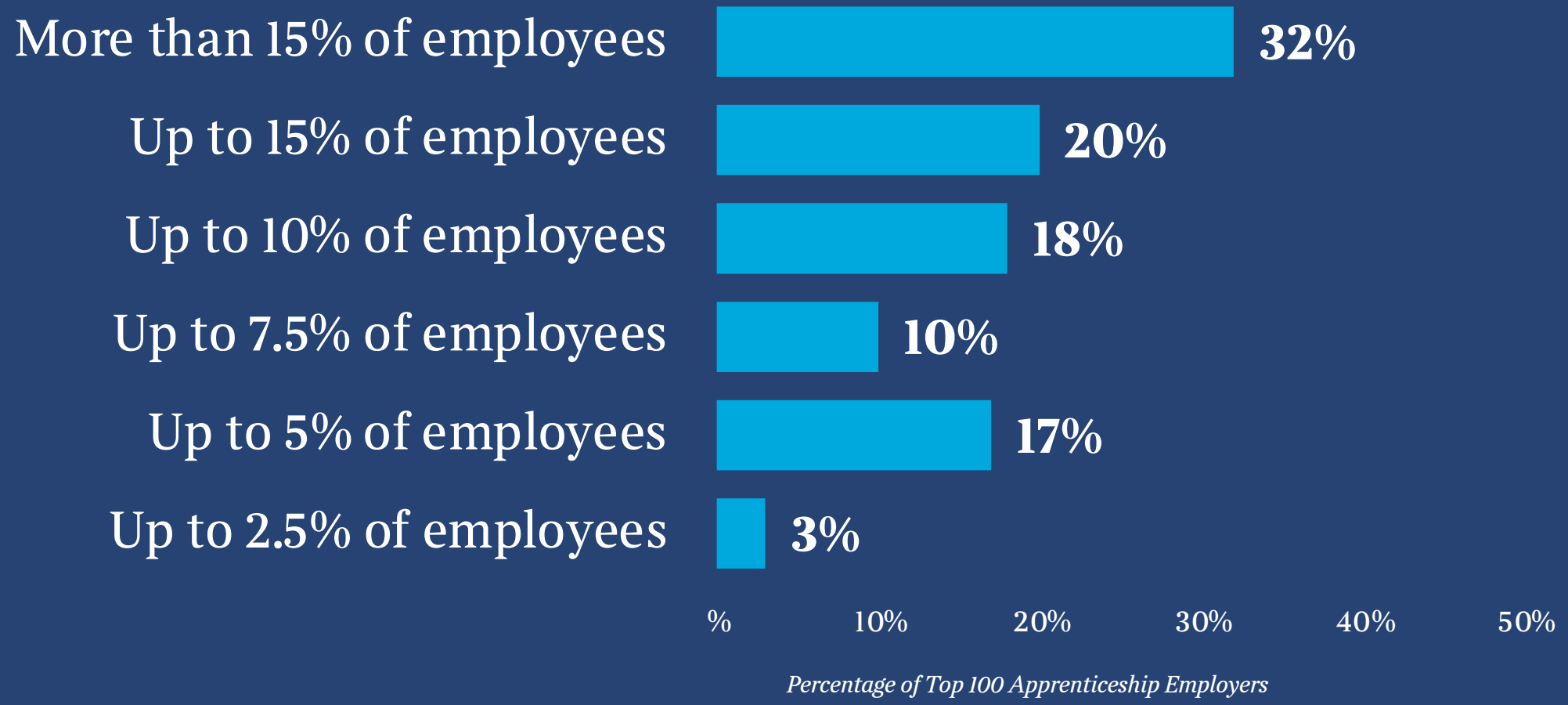
Total Number of Apprentices Employed



Percentage of Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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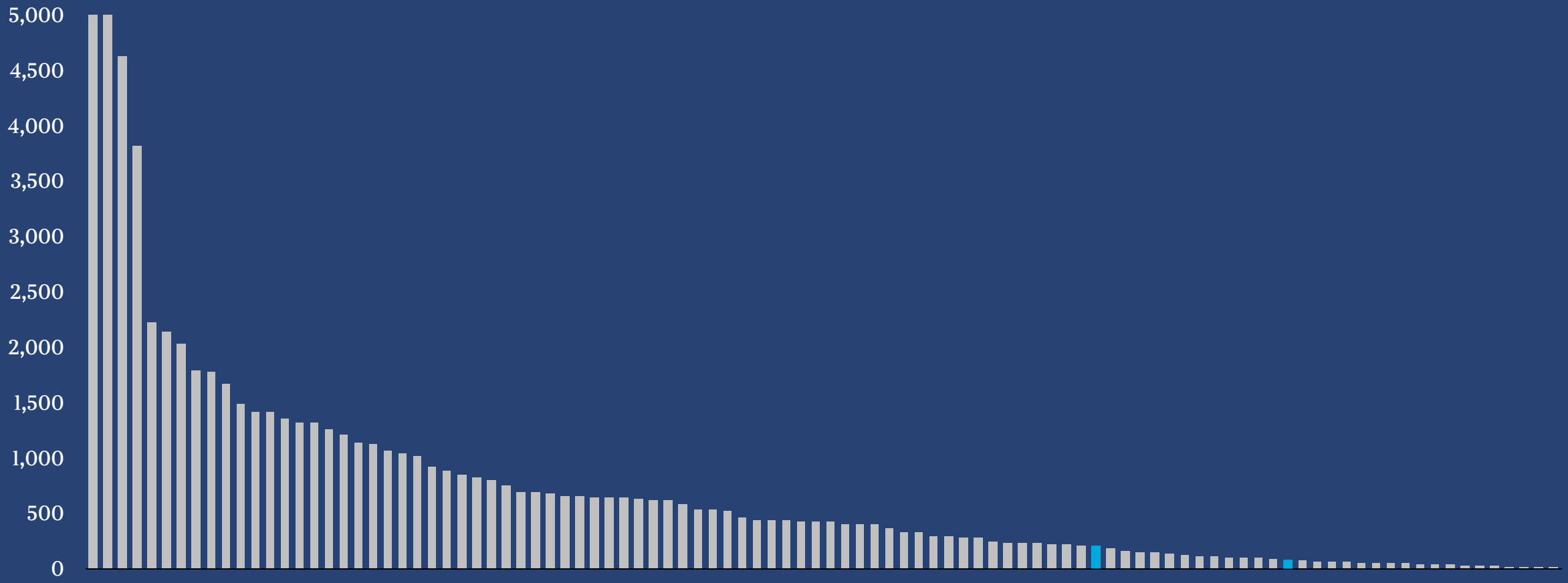
Apprentices as Percentage of Employees



Percentage of Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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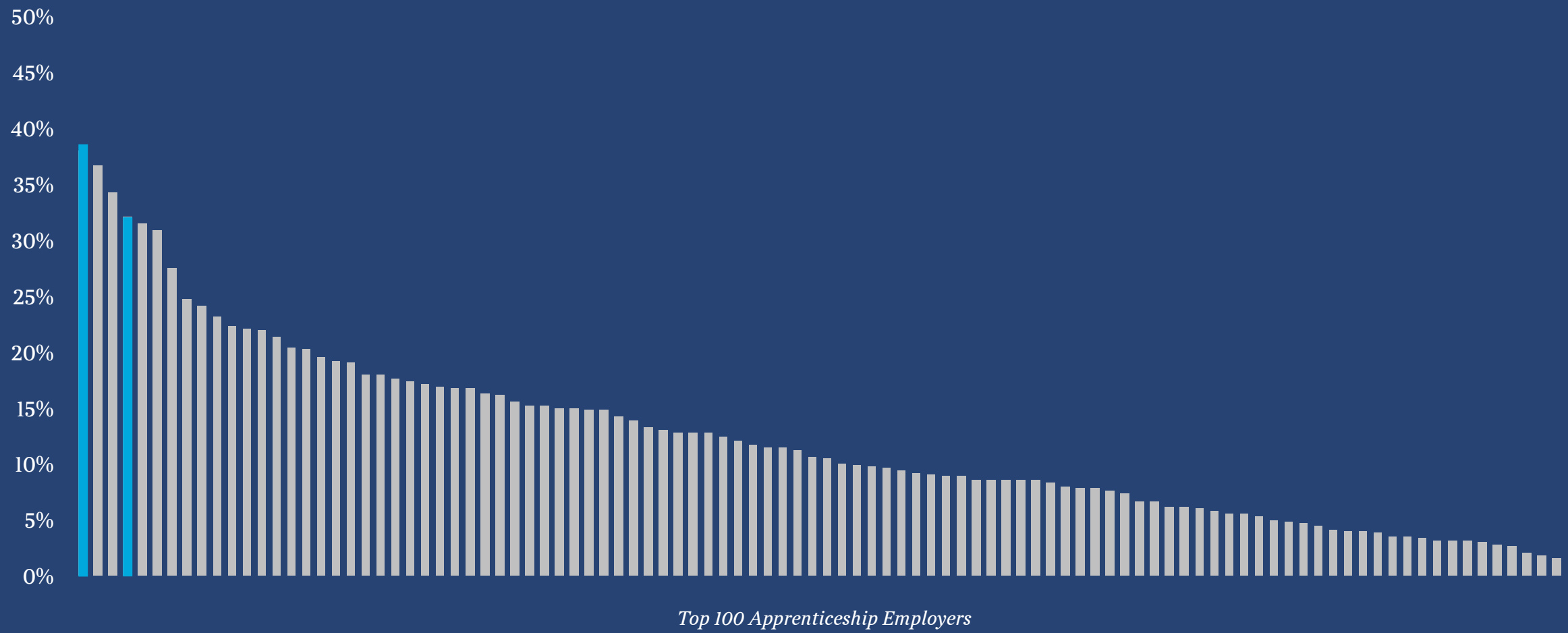
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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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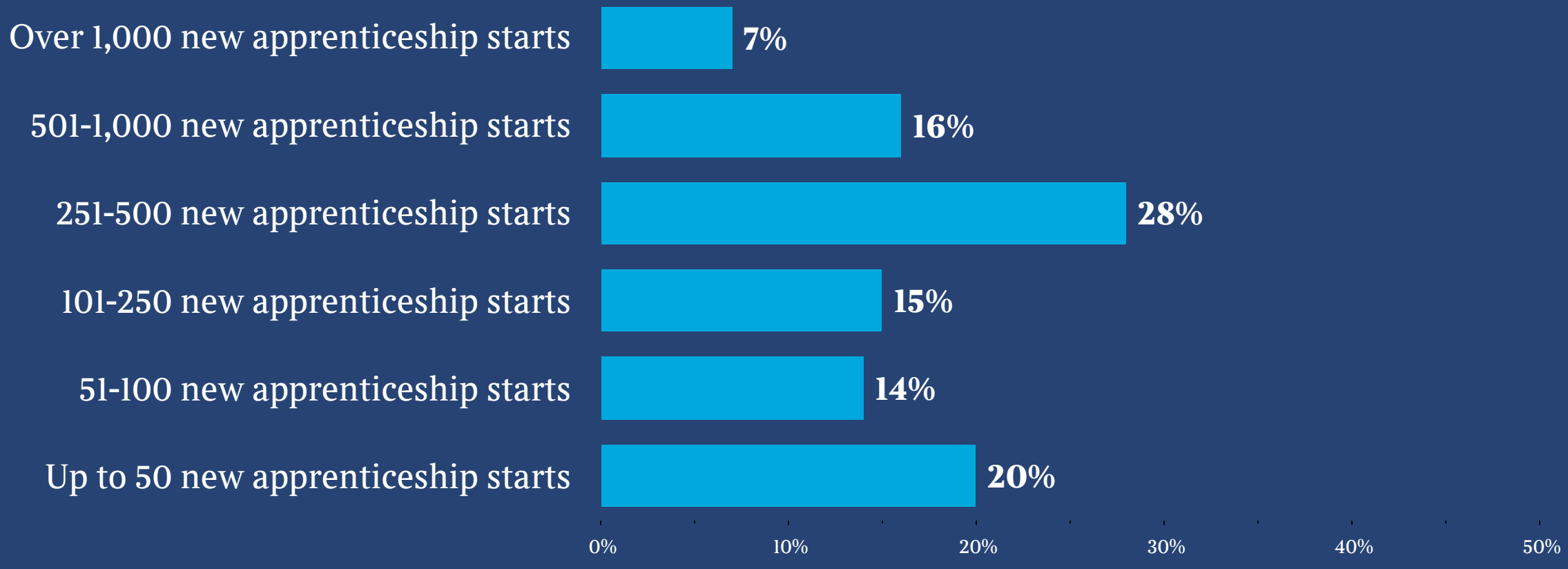
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Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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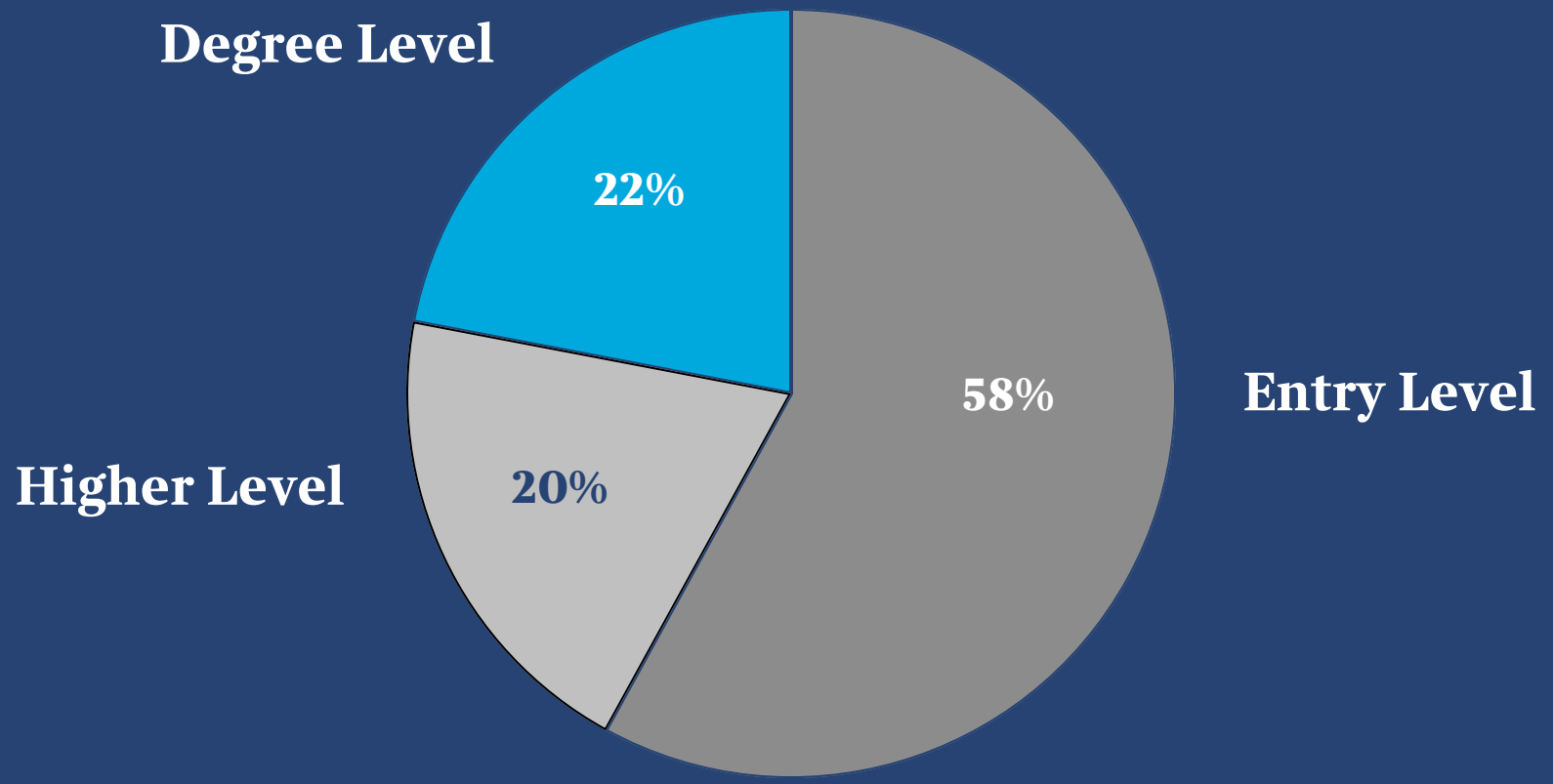
New Apprenticeship Starts



Percentage of Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

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New Apprenticeship Starts



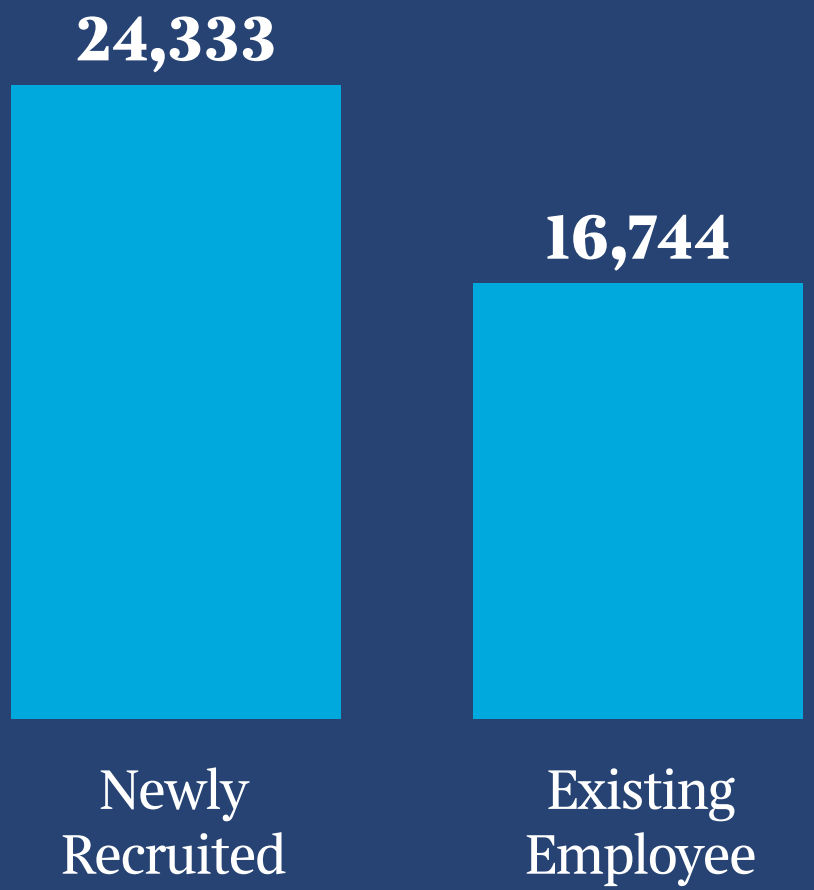
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New Apprenticeship Starts

Industry or Employment Sector	*Apprentices*	*Industry or Employment Sector*	*Apprentices*
Armed Forces	9,954	Construction	1,256
Professional services	5,733	Public sector	1,217
Health & social care	4,517	Business services	969
Engineering & industrial	3,369	Media	670
Transport, travel & logistics	3,357	Technology	566
Childcare	3,178	Energy	410
Hospitality	2,391	Trade supplies	358
Retailing	1,660	Education & training	141
Banking & finance	1,305	Fine art	26

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New Apprenticeship Starts



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Diversity of New Apprentices

58% are men
42% are women

18% are from an ethnic minority

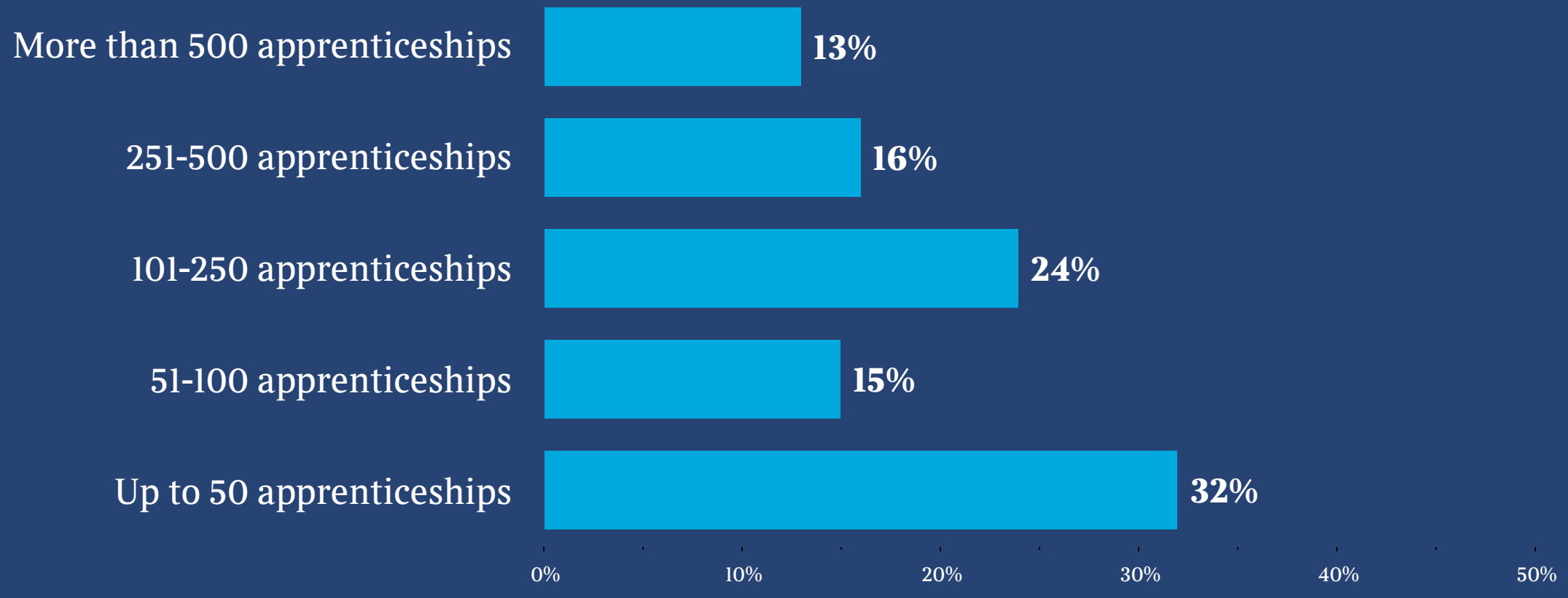
64% are age 16-24
36% are age 25+

12% have a learning difficulty or disability

Median profile of Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Apprenticeships Completed



Percentage of Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entry Feedback



Entry Feedback

Amazon

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeshi
UK's outstanding apprenticeship employers -
to creating new apprenticeships, the diversit
the number of apprentices who successfully

The prestigious annual rankings are entirely
employers from more than twenty different
entered for the rankings in 2025.

Employers entering for the rankings provide
apprenticeship starts in 2024, the diversity o
the number of apprentices that completed ap
and weighted according to the size of the em

Apprenticeship employers ranked in *The Sur*
285 apprentices and **6,830 employees** in th

Amazon was ranked in **47th place** in *The Su*
place in the **Retailing** sector.

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship starts in

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeshi

A total of **1,034 apprentices** started a new
starts at employers ranked in *The Sunday*

Diversity

Diversity of new apprentices

Median for employers ranked in Top 100

Male Female Ethnic Minority Disability Ag

59% of new apprentices in 2024 at **Amazo**
100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025 is 59%
ethnic minority apprentices (16%), **13%** ha
24 (64%) and **25%** were age 25+ (36%).

Completions

Number of completed apprenticeships in

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprentic

A total of **473 apprentices** successfully co



Entry Feedback

BAE Systems

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers celebr
UK's outstanding apprenticeship employers - recognising their c
to creating new apprenticeships, the diversity of their new appre
the number of apprentices who successfully complete their appr

The prestigious annual rankings are entirely data-driven and ap
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apprenticeship starts in 2024, the diversity of these new apprent
the number of apprentices that completed apprenticeships in 20
and weighted according to the size of the employers' UK workfor

Apprenticeship employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 .*
285 apprentices and **6,830 employees** in the UK - on average **8.**

BAE Systems was ranked in **9th place** in *The Sunday Times Top*
1st place in the **Engineering & Industrial** sector.

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship starts in 2024

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

A total of **1,373 apprentices** started a new apprenticeship at
new starts at employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100*
apprentices.

Diversity

Diversity of new apprentices

Median for employers ranked in Top 100

Male Female Ethnic Minority Disability Age 16-24 Age 25+

71% of new apprentices in 2024 at **BAE Systems** were male (1
Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025 is 59%), **29%** were fer
ethnic minority apprentices (16%), **16%** had a learning difficul
24 (64%) and **22%** were age 25+ (36%).

Completions

Number of completed apprenticeships in 2024



Entry Feedback

Department for Food Envi Rural Affairs

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers celebrates the
UK's outstanding apprenticeship employers - recognising their commitm
to creating new apprenticeships, the diversity of their new apprentices,
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Apprenticeship employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenti*
285 apprentices and **6,830 employees** in the UK - on average **8.2%** of t

Department for Food Environment and Rural Affairs was ranked in
100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025 and in **8th place** in the **Public** secto

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship starts in 2024

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

A total of **357 apprentices** started a new apprenticeship at **Departm**
Affairs in 2024. The median number of new starts at employers ranl
Apprenticeship Employers 2025 is 139 apprentices.

Diversity

Diversity of new apprentices

Median for employers ranked in Top 100

Male Female Ethnic Minority Disability Age 16-24 Age 25+



Entry Feedback

Nissan

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers c
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Apprenticeship employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top*
285 apprentices and **6,830 employees** in the UK - on aver

Nissan was ranked in **4th place** in the **Manufacturing** sec

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship starts in 2024

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

A total of **284 apprentices** started a new apprenticeship
starts at employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100*

Entry Feedback

HSBC

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprent
UK's outstanding apprenticeship empl
to creating new apprenticeships, the d
the number of apprentices who succes

The prestigious annual rankings are e
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Employers entering for the rankings p
apprenticeship starts in 2024, the dive
the number of apprentices that compl
and weighted according to the size of t

Apprenticeship employers ranked in 7
285 apprentices and **6,830 employee**

HSBC was ranked in **6th place** in the

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Ap

A total of **251 apprentices** started a
starts at employers ranked in *The S*

Diversity

Diversity of new appren

Median for employers ranked in Top 100

Male Female Ethnic Minority Disabil



Entry Feedback

Royal Navy

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers celebrates the UK's outstanding apprenticeship employers - recognising their commitment to creating new apprenticeships, the diversity of their new apprentices, and the number of apprentices who successfully complete their apprenticeships.

Employer Information
6,884 *apprentices in the UK*
22.3% *of UK employees are apprentices*

Ranked 2nd
Armed Forces Sector

The prestigious annual rankings are entirely data-driven and apprenticeship employers from more than twenty different industries & business sectors entered for the rankings in 2025.

Employers entering for the rankings provided details of their new apprenticeship starts in 2024, the diversity of these new apprentices, and the number of apprentices that completed apprenticeships in 2024. This data was independently verified, scored and weighted according to the size of the employers' UK workforce, in order to compile the final rankings.

Apprenticeship employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* had a median of **285 apprentices** and **6,830 employees** in the UK - on average **8.2%** of their employees were on apprenticeships.

Royal Navy was ranked in **2nd place** in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* and in **2nd place** in the **Armed Forces** sector.

New Starts

Number of new apprenticeship starts in 2024

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

New apprenticeship starts in 2024, as % of UK employees

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

A total of **2,305 apprentices** started a new apprenticeship at **Royal Navy** in 2024. The median number of new starts at employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* is 139 apprentices.

Diversity

Diversity of new apprentices

Median for employers ranked in Top 100

Male Female Ethnic Minority Disability Age 16-24 Age 25+

Combined diversity of new apprentices in 2024

Employers that entered for The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025

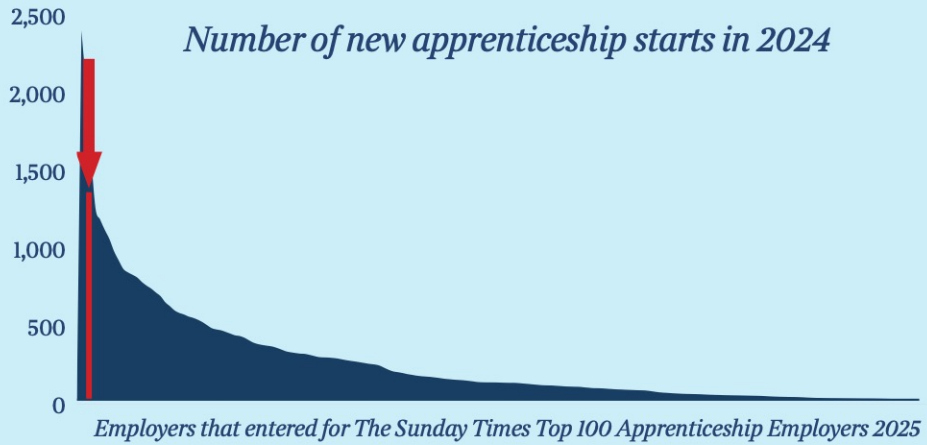
92% of new apprentices in 2024 at **Royal Navy** were male (the median for employers in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* is 59%), **8%** were female apprentices (the median is 41%), **10%** were ethnic minority apprentices (16%), **17%** had a learning difficulty and/or a disability (11%), **77%** were age 16-24 (64%) and **23%** were age 25+ (36%).

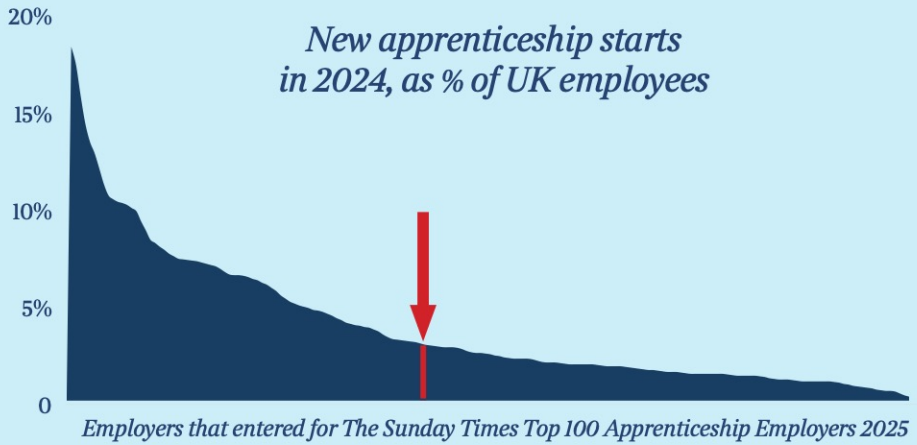
Completions

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entry Feedback

New Starts



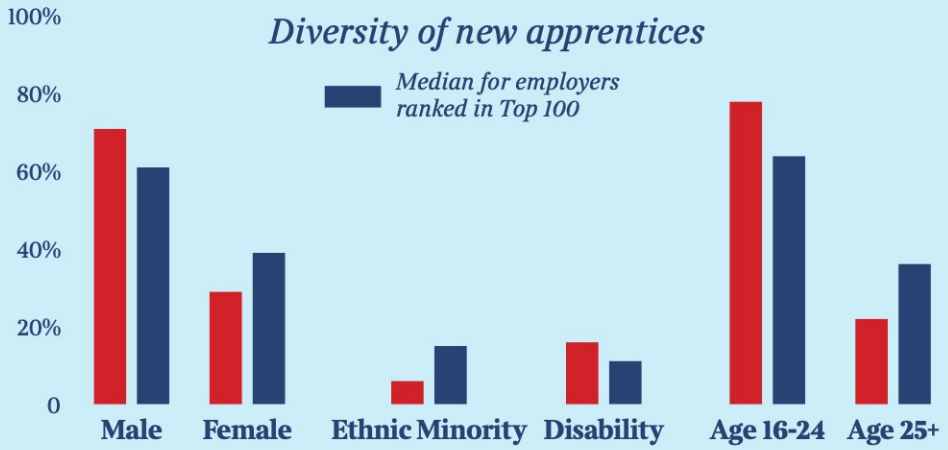


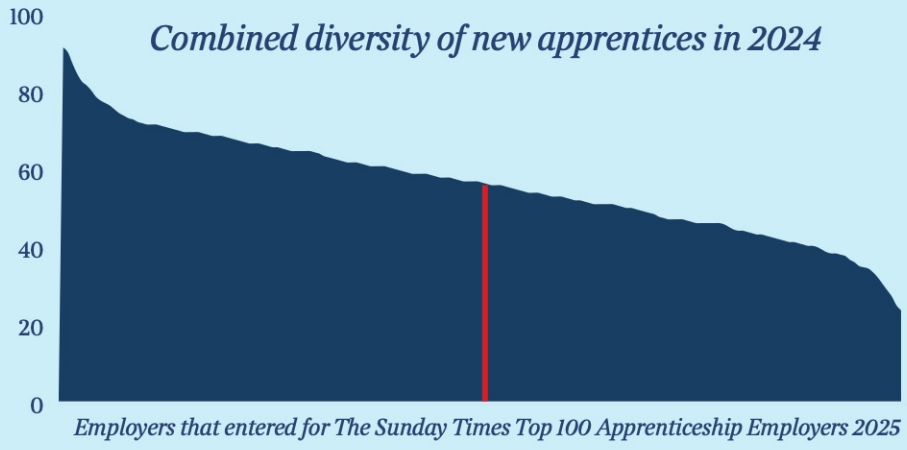
A total of **1,373 apprentices** started a new apprenticeship at **BAE Systems** in 2024. The median number of new starts at employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* is 139 apprentices.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entry Feedback

Diversity



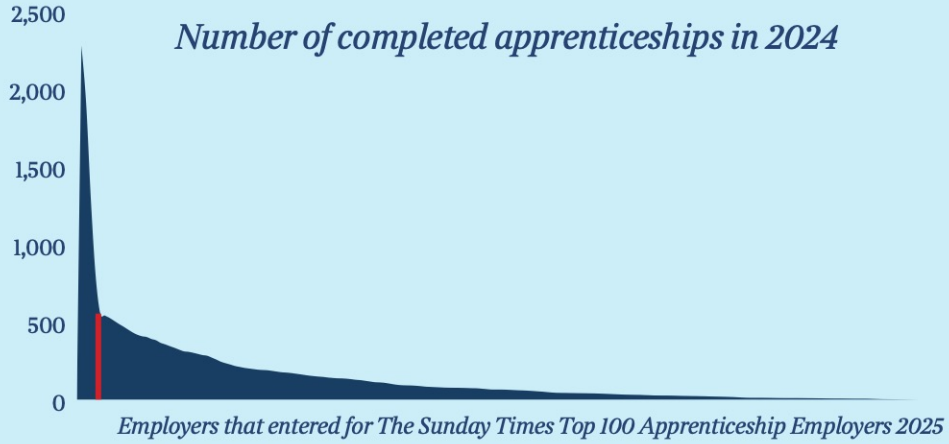


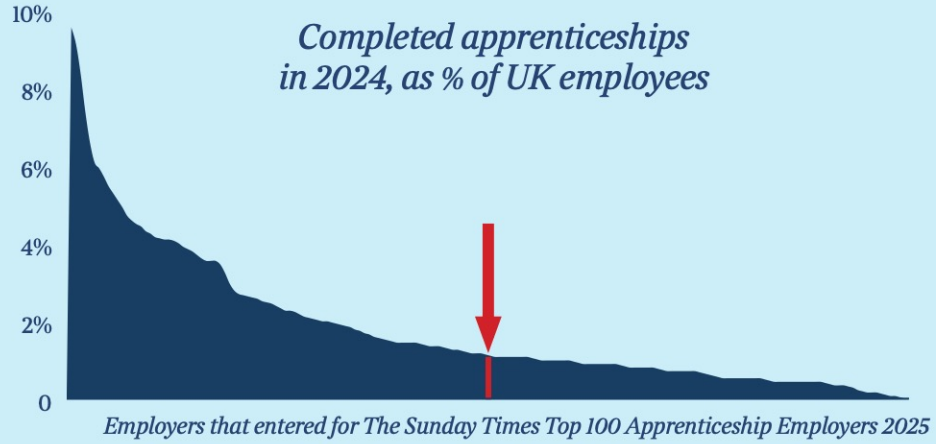
71% of new apprentices in 2024 at **BAE Systems** were male (the median for employers in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* is 59%), **29%** were female apprentices (the median is 41%), **6%** were ethnic minority apprentices (16%), **16%** had a learning difficulty and/or a disability (11%), **78%** were age 16-24 (64%) and **22%** were age 25+ (36%).

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entry Feedback

Completions





A total of **574 apprentices** successfully completed their apprenticeships at **BAE Systems** in 2024. The median number of completions at employers ranked in *The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2025* is 78 apprentices.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entering for the Top 100 in 2027

- The Top 100 is open to UK apprenticeship employers with a minimum of **100 employees** and at least **10 apprentices**
- Confirm your entry by using the special **QR code** on your table
- From January, **submit details** of your current apprentices, new apprenticeship starts in 2026, the diversity of your new apprentices, and your successful apprenticeship completions
- Take part in the **verification process** by email and telephone

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entering for the Top 100 in 2027

- Your entry data will be **independently assessed, scored** and **weighted** according to the size of your UK workforce
- The new Top 100 rankings will be launched in **summer 2027** and published in *The Sunday Times*
- Entries include ranking within your **industry or business sector, entry feedback** – and 5 subscriptions to *The Times & Sunday Times*
- The entry cost is **£495**+VAT

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Entering for the Top 100 in 2027

Be among the first to enter for the new Top 100 rankings

www.Top100ApprenticeshipEmployers.co.uk


THE SUNDAY TIMES
Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

Association of Apprentices

THE APPRENTICE VOICE

Findings from the BIG Apprentice Survey 2026

The Sunday Times Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers



THE APPRENTICE VOICE

What helps an apprentice stay and succeed?

4,503

apprentices shared their experiences

Surveyed November 2025 across all ages, levels and regions.

BIG Apprentice Survey Report 2026

80%

current apprentices

20%

completed apprentices

Association of Apprentices

Apprenticeships can lead to lasting employment



98%

of respondents who had completed their apprenticeship reported continuous employment afterwards

69%

Increase in confidence

60%

enhanced employability

Association of Apprentices

The line manager makes the difference.



1/3

of apprentices receive only occasional or no support from their line manager.

Yet strong line management support is one of the biggest predictors of long-term success and retention within the organisation.

So how do we know that good line management is consistent across our programme?

Association of Apprentices

TRUSTED SUPPORT AND BELONGING

Someone to turn to. Somewhere to belong.

62%

Felt having a mentor would have improved their development.



Someone who can:

- **Provide honest feedback**
- **Help build confidence**
- **Navigate the workplace**

Association of Apprentices

THE CHALLENGES

What are the challenges apprentices face?



42%

Work-life balance

36%

Time management

31%

Off-the-job training

83% Of respondents report experiencing stress or anxiety related to their apprenticeship in the last 12 months.

Association of Apprentices

The first weeks set the tone



Good or outstanding onboarding is associated with:

01 Easier access to support

02 Better work-life balance

03 Lower levels of regular stress

These benefits are lasting and stay with the apprentice, to the end, and beyond.

Association of Apprentices

SUPPORTING THE JOURNEY

What do your apprentices need to understand now, then and later?



Start:
Set clear expectations



Middle:
Support work-life balance



End:
Preparing for the end assessments

Association of Apprentices

Inclusion isn’t just cultural, it impacts outcomes





Inclusive environments lead to substantially higher rates of pay increases and promotion.



Poor inclusivity leads to unemployment, job searching and moving to a new organisation.

Inclusive environments are associated with greater stability, retention and upward mobility.

Association of Apprentices

HOW CAN WE HELP

What practical support are apprentices really asking for?



24% Consider uncertainty about their career progression and future plans to be a source of anxiety and stress.

Association of Apprentices

AS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT

AoA membership is free for apprentices

- Build networks & connection
- Learn & develop
- Have their voice represented
- Recognition of their achievements

Scan to find out more about how to work with us

Association of Apprentices


THE SUNDAY TIMES
Top 100 Apprenticeship Employers 2026

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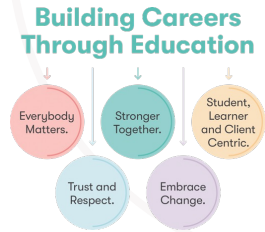
The Expectation Gap:

What it is, what it isn’t, and why it matters



Emma O’Dell,
Skills & Capability Director, BPP

There are three forces, connected through one system.



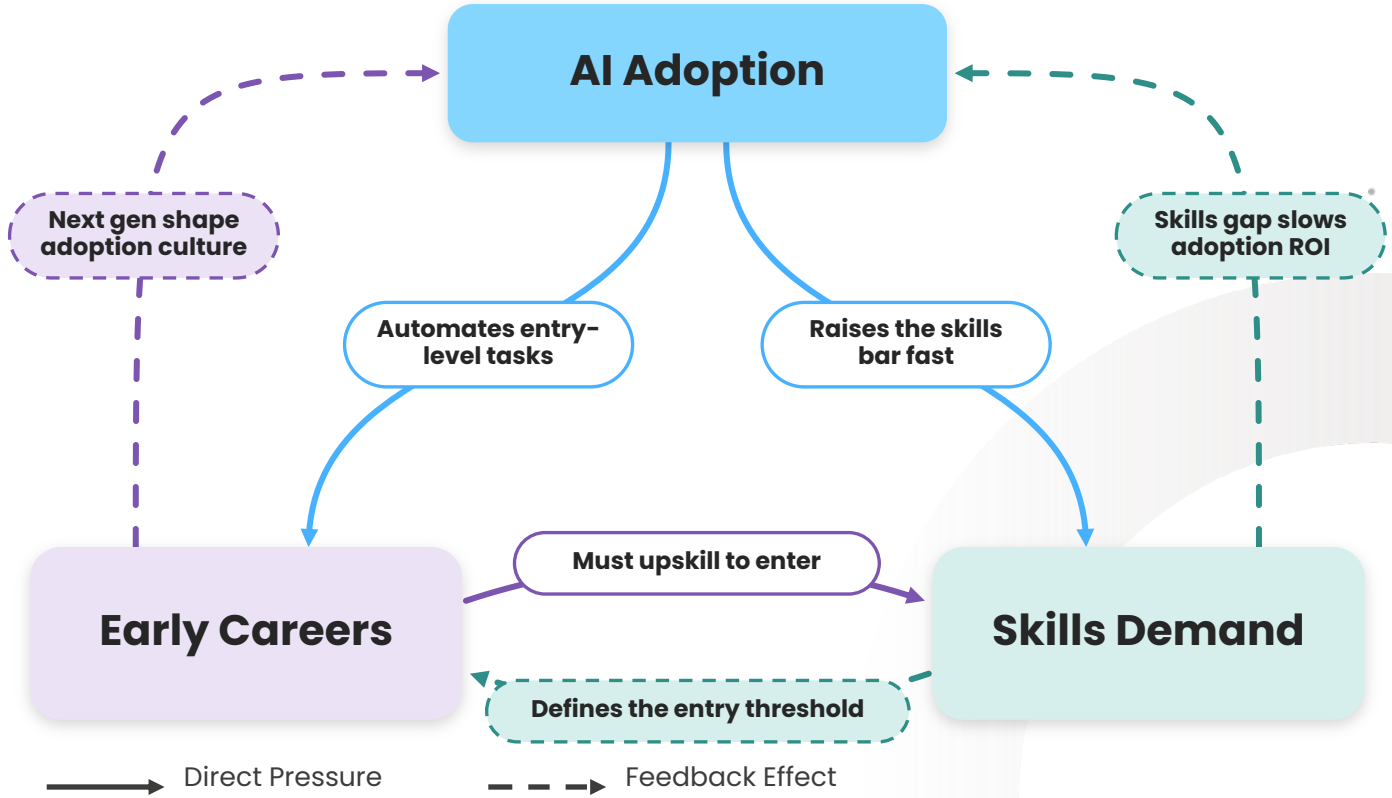
AI adoption, skills demand, and early careers are not separate problems.

AI is
changing tasks and number
of entry level roles

Which
changes the skills
needed for higher order tasks

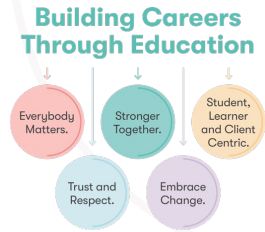
That
impacts the threshold
for early career entrants to upskill and enter the workplace

Which influences how successfully
AI is adopted



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AI adoption is raising the value of human capability.



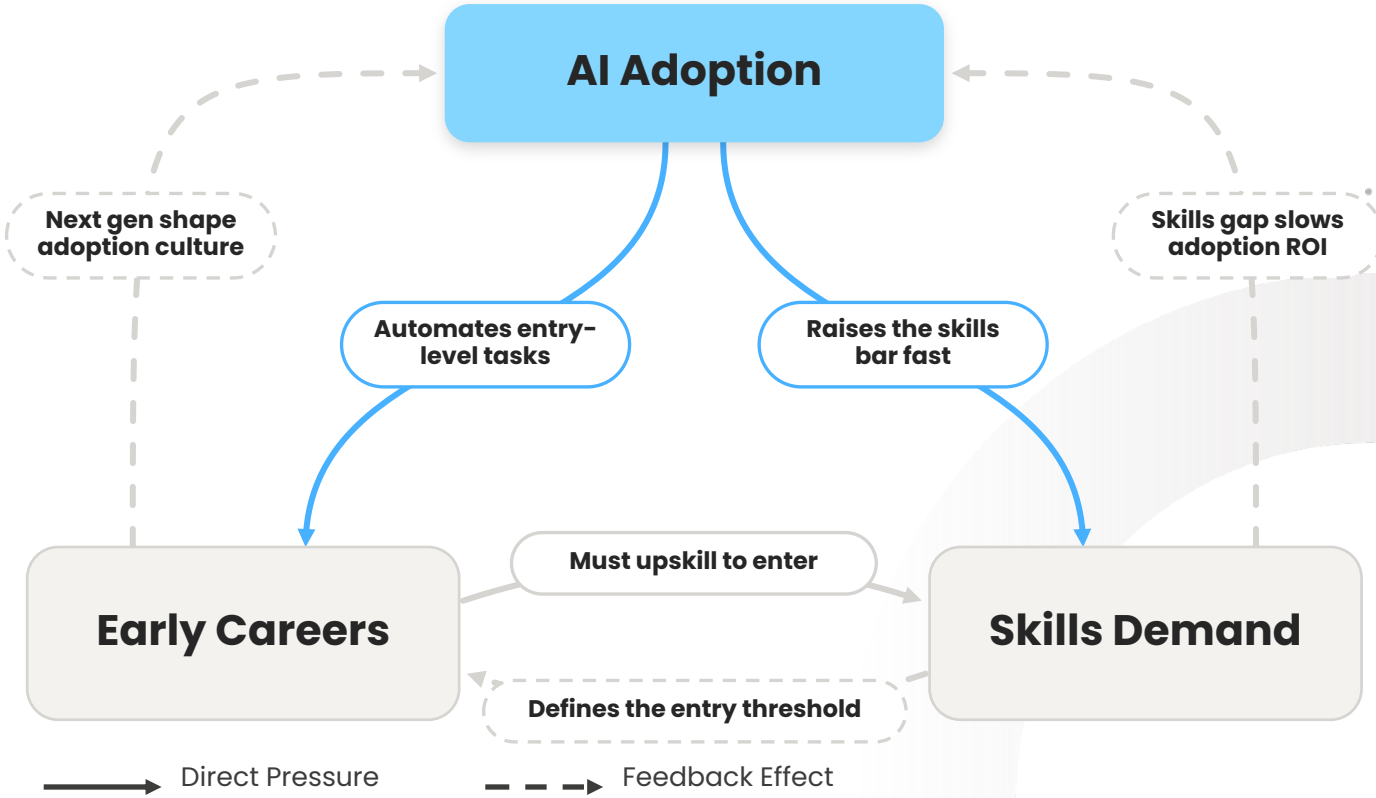
AI is causing a "seniorisation" of work.

Routine tasks are increasingly
automated

Greater value is placed on
judgement, problem solving and communication

22-year-olds are being expected to demonstrate
skills once developed later in a career

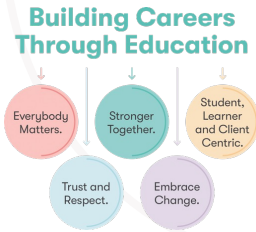
Wage premium for AI-capable workers hit
34% (up 11%)
in 2025



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The skills bar was already moving.

AI has accelerated an existing trend. Professional standards in law, medicine, nursing, and engineering have all been formally raised over the last decade. The bar is not new. The pace is.



UK professional standards frameworks have been **rewritten**

Day 1

Solicitor model, centralised threshold on top of Medical school finals and emerging skills in accountancy

40%

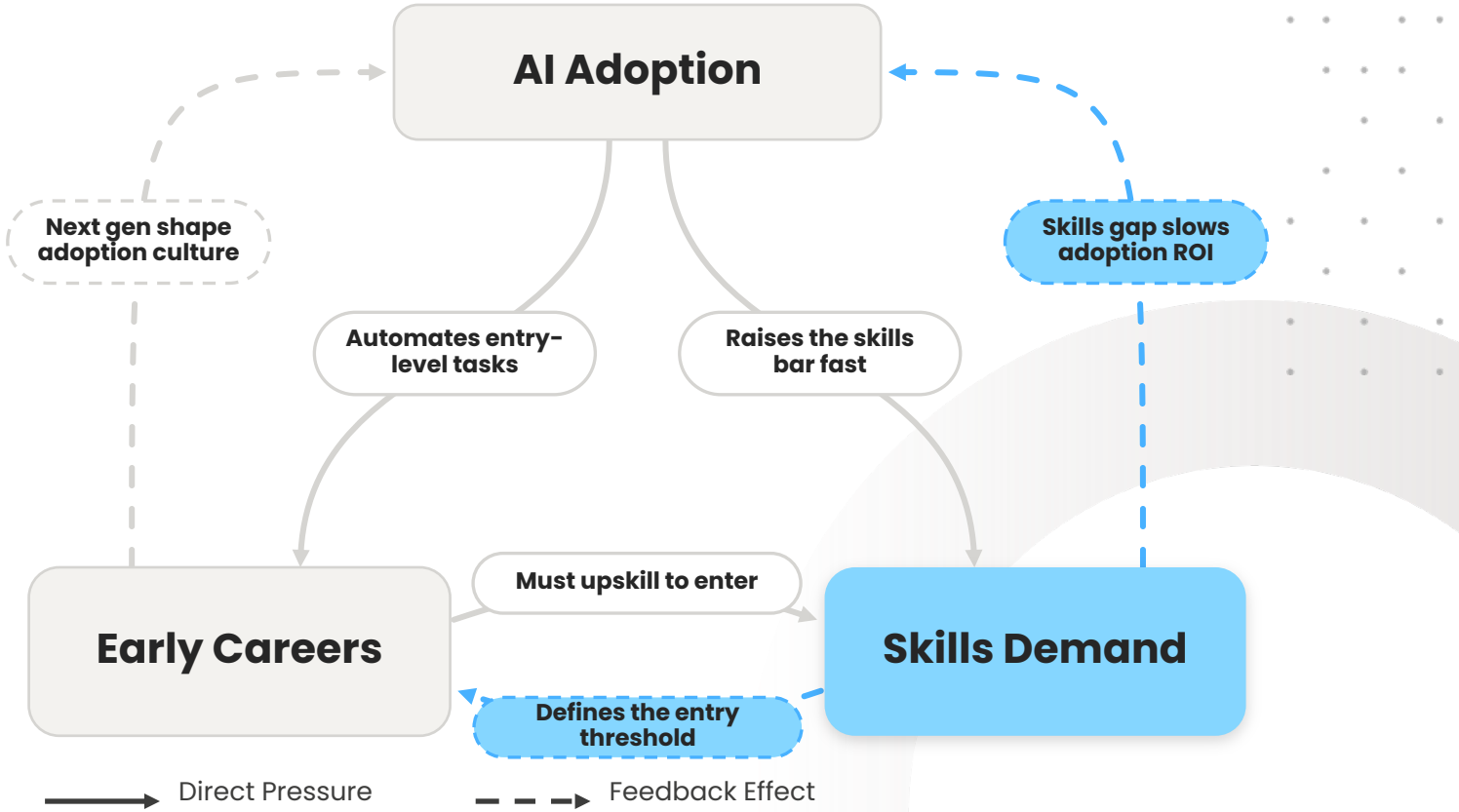
of first-class degrees cannot be explained by entry tariffs and demographics (OfS 2024)

140:1

average applications per graduate vacancy in 2024–25 (ISE, 2026)

35%

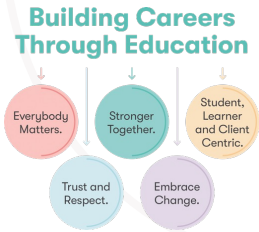
of employers rate graduates below expectations on **adaptability**, (ISE, 2026)



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And the pipeline of work ready candidates is narrowing.

Building Careers Through Education



Young people are being asked to arrive more ready than any previous generation, for a set of roles that used to be where readiness was built.

19%

of 16-to-17-year-olds are in part-time paid work today, down from 35% in 2006 (Young People and Work 2026)

40%

decline in apprenticeship starts for young people over the past decade.

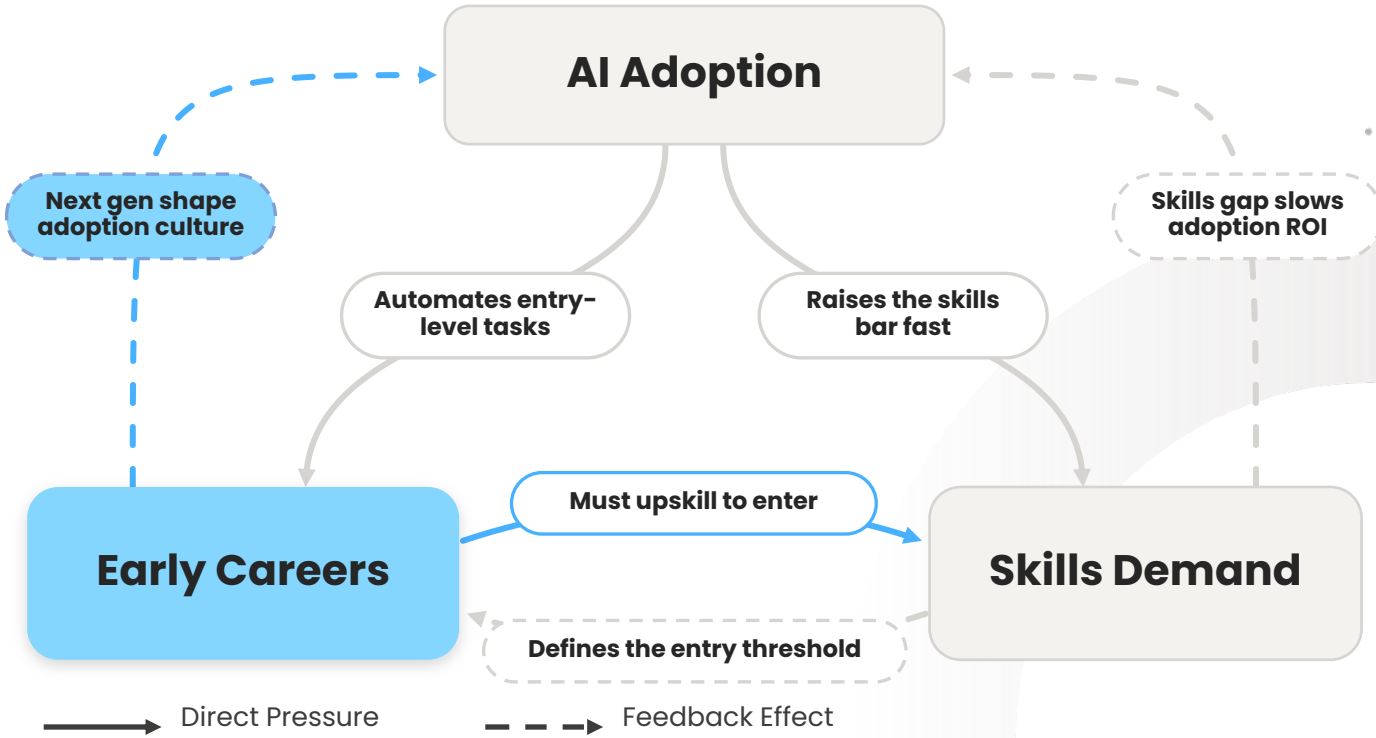
Level 2 starts fell by

68%

(Young People and Work 2026)

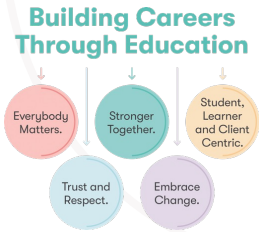
62%

of NEET young people have never had a paid job (Young People and Work 2026)



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The national workforce pipeline is also over claimed.



Workforce plans are competing for the same finite talent pool.

1.8 million
additional workers needed by 2035

24%
growth across priority sectors

Shared priority occupations

Supply constraints

Education
pipeline insufficient

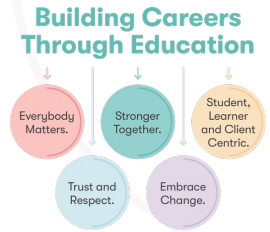
PRIORITY SECTOR	EXPANSION DEMAND	EXPANSION %	PRIORITY OCCUPATIONS	SHARED PRIORITY OCCUPATIONS
Construction	**493,000**	26%	30	**19 of 30**
Creative Industries	**416,000**	27%	30	**15 of 30**
Digital & Technologies	**239,000**	27%	30	**25 of 30**
Prof & Business Services	**116,000**	9%	20	**14 of 20**
Adult Social Care	**281,000**	28%	5	**0 od 5**
Health	**—**	—	26	**1 of 26**
Financial Services	**130,000**	22%	10	**6 of 10**
Advanced Manufacturing	**47,000**	13%	25	**19 of 25**
Life Sciences	**66,000**	44%	31	**28 of 31**
Clean Energy	**63,000**	71%	31	**28 of 31**
Defence	**53,000**	58%	14	**12 of 14**

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At the intersection of all of these…

…is an “expectations gap.”

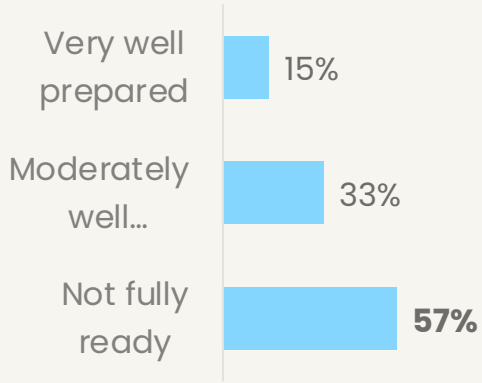
Growing distance between employer expectations and the system's ability to develop people who can meet them.



41%
believe

“The UK education system is preparing young talent well for the realities of today's workplace”

Most early career hires are not fully job ready



Skills gaps are now constraining hiring

32%

say skills/readiness is a major barrier to expansion

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So, organisations need to build work readiness more deliberately.



Adaptability is the biggest readiness gap

9 core skills:

Problem Solving:
Navigate complex challenges with structured thinking

Creative Innovation:
Generate novel solutions and approaches

Analytical Reasoning:
Make sense of data and complexity

Effective Communication:
Influence, inform, and engage across contexts

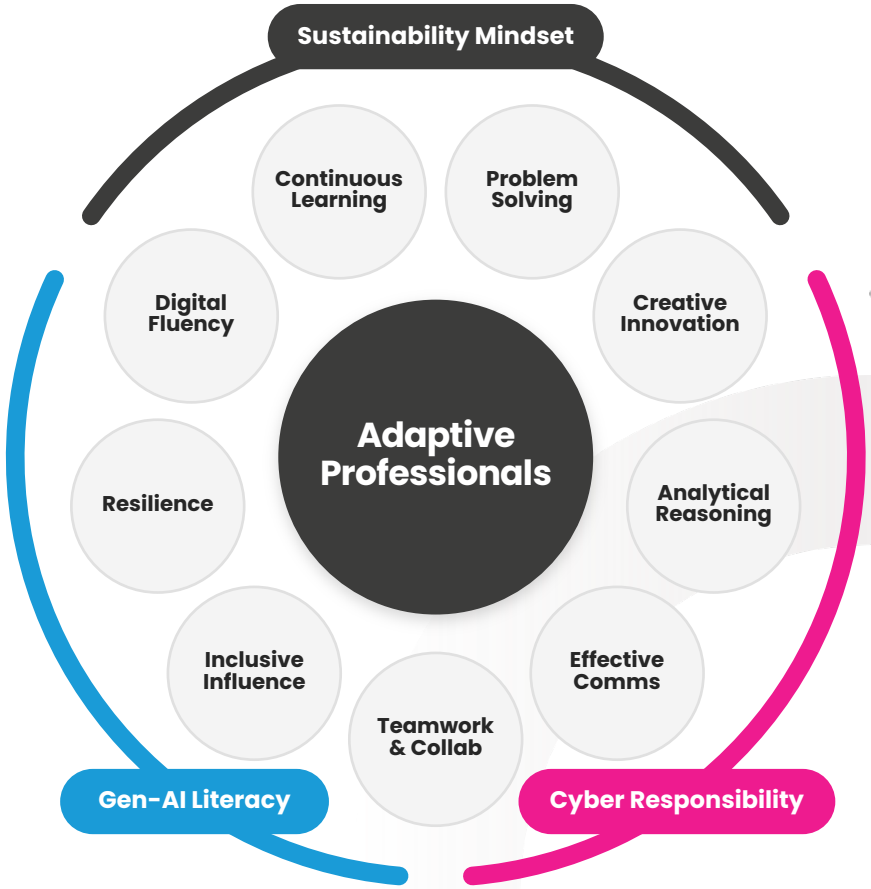
Teamwork & Collaboration:
Work productively across boundaries

Inclusive Influence:
Build coalitions and bring diverse voices forward

Resilience & Adaptability:
Thrive through uncertainty and change

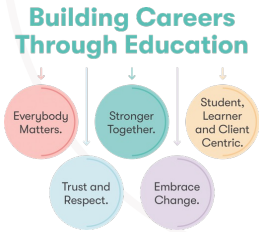
Digital Fluency:
Leverage technology effectively and responsibly

Continuous Learning:
Evolve capabilities constantly and systematically



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Work readiness skills impact how AI will be applied.



Problem Solving

Framing the right questions for AI to help solve

Creative Innovation

Turning AI generated ideas into business value

Analytical Reasoning

Validating AI insights with context and judgement

Effective Communication

Translating AI outputs into action and influence

Teamwork & Collaboration

Building trust and relationships that AI cannot

Inclusive Influence

Ensuring AI works fairly for diverse groups

Resilience

Thriving as technology and roles evolve

Digital Fluency

Working effectively alongside AI and emerging technologies

Continuous Learning

Keeping skills current in a tech-changing world

Sustainability Mindset

Applying AI responsibly for long term value

Cyber Responsibility

Using AI securely, ethically and safely

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Employers need to create a pathways ecosystem.

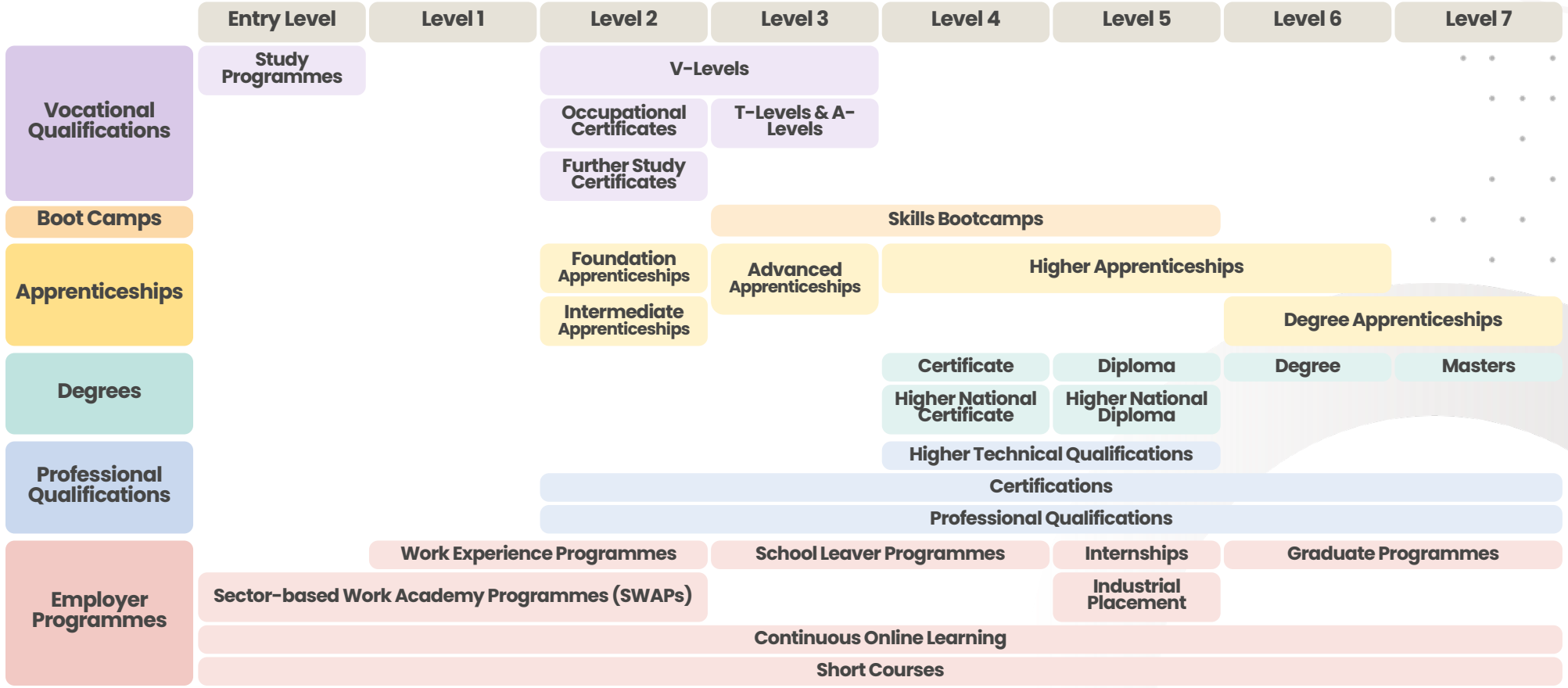
Building Careers Through Education

Everybody Matters. · Stronger Together. · Student, Learner and Client Centric. · Trust and Respect. · Embrace Change.

Connect pathways across the whole talent lifecycle.

- Established **education** routes
- Direct **hiring** routes
- **Pre-hire** pathways
- **Post-entry** development routes

Relying on a single pathway is both a pipeline and equity **risk**



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Developing adaptive professionals through multiple pathways has its benefits.



INNOVATION CATALYSTS

Fresh perspectives from diverse experiences

Cross-pollinate ideas between domains

BRIDGE BUILDERS

Translate between functions and teams

Enable cross-functional collaboration

CHANGE NAVIGATORS

Resilient through transitions

Guide others through uncertainty

LEARNING ADVOCATES

Embody continuous development

Model growth mindset behaviours

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AI, skills and early careers are part of a self reinforcing system.

Building Careers Through Education

Everybody Matters. Stronger Together. Student, Learner and Client Centric. Trust and Respect. Embrace Change.

Feedback effects make the challenge harder to solve over time.

Skills Demand → Early Careers:

Higher expectations raise the entry threshold and narrow pathways

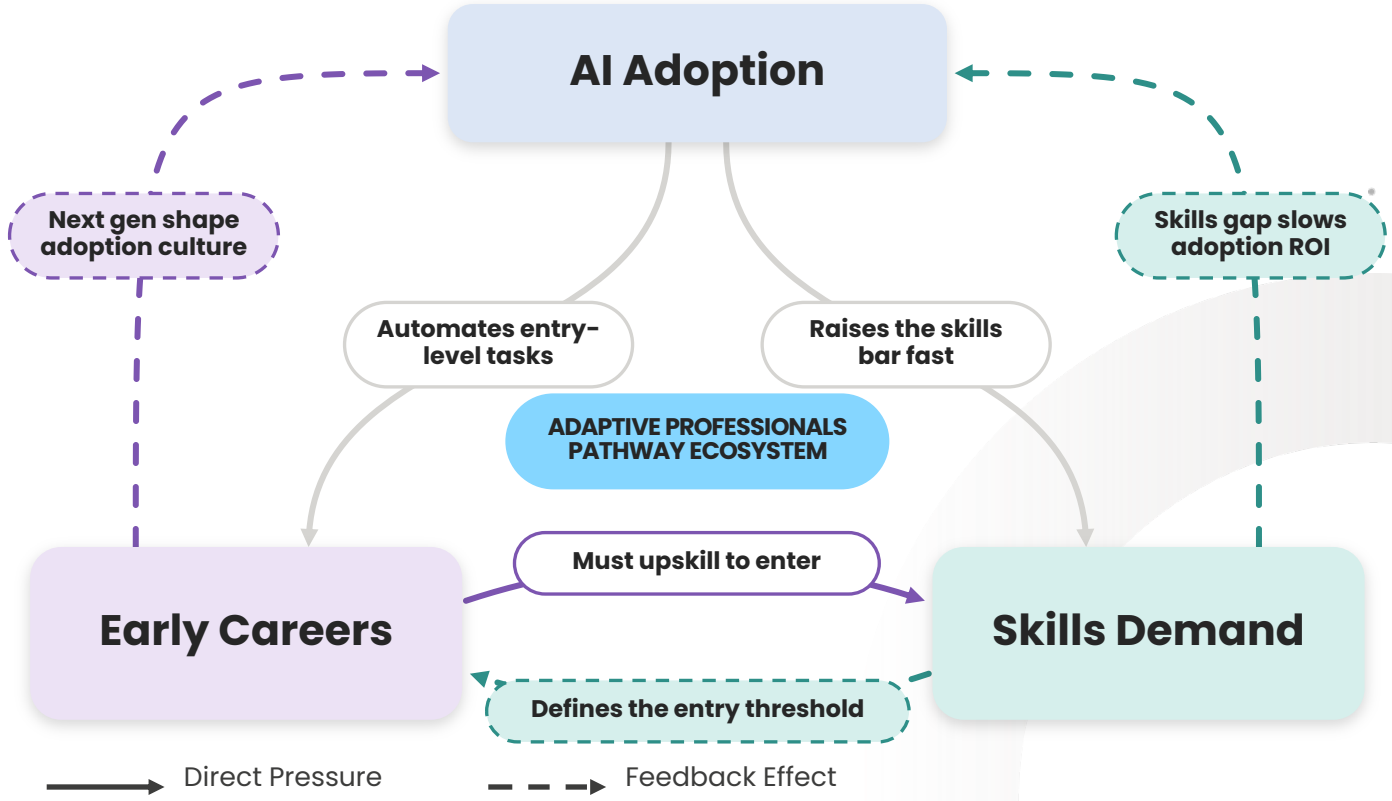
Early Careers → AI Adoption:

Narrower pathways reduce the flow of AI-ready talent into organisations

Skills Demand → AI Adoption:

Capability gaps limit AI adoption and reduce return on investment

Building **adaptability** and offering multiple **pathways** are a strategic workforce issue



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So, what you need to ask yourselves…

If early careers is now a capability system, employers need to design it deliberately.



Future capability

Are you building the capabilities you need in three to five years, or filling this year's vacancies?

Expectations

Is the bar you are setting based on what the role requires, or drifting upward in response to uncertainty?

Pathways

Do you have a portfolio of routes into work, or are you relying too heavily on one pathway?

Work readiness

Are you creating the conditions where adaptability, judgement and professional confidence can develop?

AI and judgement

Are you teaching people to use AI before you have taught them how to question, judge and apply it well?

Measurement

Do you know whether your early careers investment is creating human and tech capability, not just generating hires?

Early Careers and Skills Report:

Equipping the Workforce for What's Next

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