

Development and use of occupational standards

Final report

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1 Executive summary

Occupational standards outline the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) needed to be occupationally competent in particular occupations. They are primarily used as a foundation for apprenticeships and other technical qualifications but can also be used by employers and training providers to develop job descriptions and curricula.

Occupational standards are developed in England by trailblazer groups of employers, with input from a range of sector stakeholders. Between 2017 and 2025, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) had responsibility for Occupational Standards in England; this role has now transferred to Skills England.

In the other UK nations, apprenticeships and technical qualifications are underpinned by National Occupational Standards.

This research focuses on England and **IfATE/Skills England standards**.

Aims

Pearson commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to conduct this research into the development and use of occupational standards. It explores if the current development and use of occupational standards are keeping pace with the changing needs of the economy. And how we can better develop and use occupational standards to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Methods

Research activities took place in spring and summer 2025 and included:

- A rapid review of existing evidence on the development and use of occupational standards
- A review of international effective practice including case studies on The Netherlands, Germany, O*NET in the USA and the Nesta Skills Taxonomy in the UK.
- Qualitative interviews with 20 stakeholders including awarding bodies, training providers, policy makers, route panel members and employers.

Key findings and considerations

1. Finding: The development and review of occupational standards takes too long.

Consideration: To help speed up the development and review cycles, Skills England should consider incorporating international good practice into their processes, including:

- **A fast-track system** for critical standards, as in Switzerland.
- **A time limit** for each stage of development, as in Germany.
- **Incorporating non-core elements** that can be quickly updated to reflect technological changes without the need for a full-scale revision of the standard, as in The Netherlands.
- **Pursuing a more data driven approach**, as in The Netherlands.

- 2. Finding:** Small groups of large employers have a disproportionate influence on the design of standards in some sectors.

Consideration: Skills England should trial new ways of including the views of SMEs to accurately reflect the sector as a whole, including utilising the insights of sector skills bodies and other employer representative organisations in trailblazer groups and route panels, conducting employer surveys, setting quotas around SME representation, and offering financial incentives to SMEs for their participation. AI and big data could also be used to gauge and analyse the views of a wide range of employers and other stakeholders quickly.

- 3. Finding:** Striking the balance between developing a generalisable standard for an entire sector, that includes sufficient detail around the tasks and skills required to perform a role competently, is a key challenge.

Consideration: Drawing on the approach taken in some European countries, Skills England should consider developing broader standards that equip workers for occupational clusters, with flexibility for specific roles.

- 4. Finding:** There are too many IfATE/Skills England occupational standards. As of 2024, there are over 670 occupational standards. By contrast, Switzerland has approximately 230 standards, while Germany has around 330. This increases the complexity of the system, making it difficult to navigate. Reviewing and updating so many standards also requires significant resource and time.

Consideration: Skills England should continue efforts to amalgamate and cut standards where possible, benchmarking against other countries.

- 5. Finding:** The content and quality of standards remains inconsistent despite IfATE/Skills England introducing tools – such as common sets of KSBs within routes – to tackle this.

Consideration: To improve consistency and quality, Skills England should build on existing practice (e.g. the use of cross route frameworks and common sets of KSBs) to ensure that product managers across sectors follow a consistent set of processes in the development of occupational standards. This could include, for example, expanding sets of common KSBs for whole routes, so that the same language is used for the same skills regardless of occupation or sector, and the development of frameworks to support the inclusion of essential and employability skills.

6. Finding: Finding the balance between stable standards that can stand the test of time and responding to change is a key challenge.

Consideration: Skills England should consider drawing from international good practice to design standards that have a longer-shelf life, requiring fewer revisions while staying relevant to technological change. In some European countries, occupational standards have a foundational core which can remain unchanged for a decade or so. Add-on elements can be updated more frequently in response to new technologies and industry changes.

7. Finding: There is a lack of transparency in the way Skills England manages communications regarding the review and development of standards with stakeholders.

Consideration: Skills England should further develop existing tools, such as the Revisions and Adjustments Status Report, to adopt a consistent approach to communicating the nature and timings of occupational standard review and development cycles with stakeholders.

8. Finding: IfATE/Skills England's standards are primarily used in the development of apprenticeships and other accredited training. However, there is scope for employers to use them more widely in drafting job descriptions, workforce planning and in developing their own non-accredited training.

Consideration: Skills England and sector skills councils should consider how to support and encourage employers to make greater use of standards in these ways.

2 Introduction

Pearson commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to conduct this research into the development and use of occupational standards. It explores if the current development and use of occupational standards are keeping pace with the changing needs of the economy. And how we can better develop and use occupational standards to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Aims

This research aims to:

- Explore if the current development and use of occupational standards are keeping pace with the changing needs of the economy.
- Understand how we can better design and develop occupational standards to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Research activities took place in spring and summer 2025 and included:

- A rapid review of existing evidence on the development and use of occupational standards
- A review of international best practice including case studies on The Netherlands, Germany, O*NET in the USA and the Nesta Skills Taxonomy in the UK.
- Qualitative interviews with 20 stakeholders including awarding bodies, training providers, policy makers, route panel members and employers.

Background and current context

What are occupational standards?

Occupational standards describe occupations. They outline the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSB) required to perform competently in a particular occupation.¹ Developed by employers, they underpin apprenticeships, T Levels and other Skills England-approved technical qualifications.

In England they are used by employers, educational institutions (including training providers) and awarding bodies to support the delivery and development of the technical skills needed for related occupations.²

IfATE and Skills England

In 2017, as part of the apprenticeship reforms in England³, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) took responsibility for the revision and development of occupational standards, as well as ensuring their quality. In 2024, Skills England launched, taking responsibility for occupational standards (IfATE has

¹ Skills England (2025) [What is an occupational standard?](#)

² Skills England (2025) [What is an occupational standard?](#)

³ House of Commons Library (2024) [Apprenticeships policy in England](#)

been abolished). Skills England is an executive agency within the Department for Education (DfE) (whereas IfATE was a non-departmental public body established on a statutory basis) which the Government says will also play a role overseeing the adult skills system.

National occupational standards

Prior to 2017, apprenticeships and other technical qualifications in England were underpinned by National Occupational Standards (NOS). The UK Commission for Employment & Skills (UKCES) was responsible for NOS, funded by the UK government. The 2012 [Richard Review of Apprenticeships](#) prompted a shift in apprenticeship policy. UKCES closed in 2017 and UK government for NOS ended. The management and funding of NOS was passed to Skills Development Scotland and the devolved administrations. Today, the other UK nations still use apprenticeships frameworks with qualifications based on NOS.⁴

Despite the official move to IfATE/Skills England standards, this research shows that there remains some usage of NOS in England within specific sectors. This includes health and social care⁵, 'civil contingencies' and 'hairdressing and barbering'.⁶

Overall, stakeholders felt that having two systems is a duplication of efforts, with significant cost, resource and time implications. Additionally, it was felt to have the potential to fragment rather than streamline the skills system. As one stakeholder said:

"Bottom line is there shouldn't be two. The only reason you have IfATE standards is because England decided to go off on its own...it's a duplication of time, effort, and cost, which is somewhat ironic in the current climate. But more importantly, what it leads to is a potential fragmentation of the accreditation outcomes that flow out from it" (Awarding body)

This research focuses on England and **IfATE/Skills England standards**. Much of the research was conducted while IfATE was in place, but as legislation was being passed to abolish it and transfer its functions to DfE, functions now performed by its executive agency Skills England.

⁴ Edge Foundation (2021) [Perspectives on National Occupational Standards: What do users think?](#)

⁵ Care Learning (2024) [What are the National Occupational Standards \(NOS\) in Health and Social Care?](#)

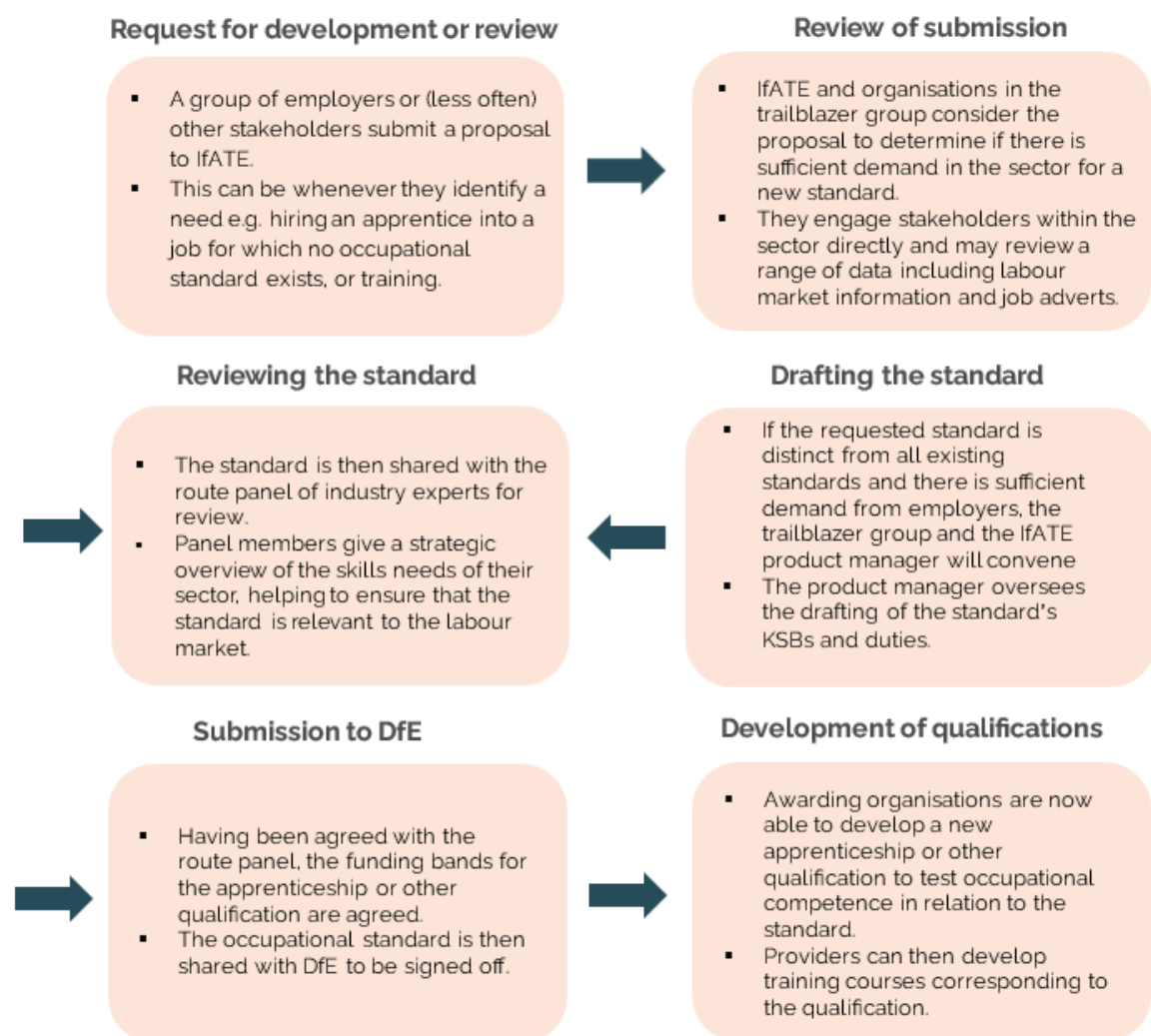
⁶ National Occupational Standards (2024) [NOS Annual Report 2023-24](#)

3 How are occupational standards developed and reviewed?

This section explores the development and review process of occupational standards. It focuses on the process of developing and reviewing standards, who is involved, how long it takes, how the process is managed, what evidence is used and the content and design of occupational standards.

This section sets out the process of the development and review of standards under IfATE, before its closure. At the time of writing, we are unaware of any reforms to the process going forward.

Developing and reviewing occupational standards: the process



According to IfATE's annual report, in 2024-25 they reviewed over 130 apprenticeship standards; 32 new standards were developed, while 20 were retired.⁷

Who is involved?

Trailblazer groups

The development and review of IfATE/Skills England's occupational standards is managed by trailblazer groups, who are comprised of employers and stakeholders who represent a particular sector or occupation. To develop a new standard, a trailblazer group must also consult with wider employers who are representative of the sector (i.e., by size and location).

An IfATE/Skills England Product Manager works with the trailblazer group throughout the review and development process to support them. IfATE/Skills England provide guidance on how to write an occupational standard, examples of what information to include under each statement and examples of existing standards – available on [their website](#).

Trailblazer groups remain live after a new standard has been published, to modify and update as needed.

Route panels

Before a new standard is approved by IfATE/Skills England, it is reviewed, quality assured and approved by a route panel (there are 15 panels, made up of over 120 employer leaders in total – one for each major industry).⁸ Panels are comprised of sector experts who give a strategic overview of the skills needs of their sector, helping to ensure that the standard is relevant to the labour market.

Employers

IfATE/Skills England state that the employer voice is “central to the design of skills products and at the heart of the skills system”.⁹

Similar to the objectives in previous White Papers, the 2021 White Paper [Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity](#) called for employers to play a central role in the development of occupational standards. Since then, IfATE/Skills England has consulted with thousands of employers of varying sizes to develop new occupational standards (and routes¹⁰), in sectors including agriculture, construction and hospitality.¹¹ The 2021-22 IfATE stakeholder survey, of 363 people, found that the majority of respondents said IfATE works well, helping employers to meet their skills needs. Over half (56%) felt they work well with employers, while 20% of respondents thought they performed poorly.¹² However, it should be noted that although IfATE/Skills England

⁷ IfATE (2025) [Annual report and accounts](#)

⁸ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

⁹ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

¹⁰ Related occupations are grouped together into 15 routes – see more at Gov.uk [What are the occupational maps](#)

¹¹ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#)

¹² IfATE (2021-22) [IfATE Stakeholder Survey results](#)

state that they capture feedback from a broad range of stakeholders in the survey, it may not be representative.

IfATE/Skills England's current strategies and practice focus on:

- **Involving employers on an ongoing basis** throughout the development and maintenance process.
- **Ensuring a fully representative sample of employers are engaged to ensure standards are relevant and fit for real-world application in different workplace contexts.** IfATE/Skills England states that their trailblazer groups, who develop occupational standards, must be reflective of those who employ people in the occupation.¹³ To this end, they support trailblazer chairs to recruit new employers as needed. For example, in 2022 they recruited over 70 employers to their catering and hospitality trailblazer group.¹⁴ In addition, they utilise employer bodies' networks to recruit employers, especially those harder to reach such as SMEs.¹⁵ In 2023, IfATE also committed to engaging more with local leaders and started to incorporate local data into the development of occupational standards process. This is to ensure that standards and qualifications support current and future labour market needs more effectively.¹⁶
- **Providing accessible and inclusive means of engagement to maximise engagement.** IfATE/Skills England find maintaining a core group who write standards, a group who readily engage to review standards and then a wider consultation process to reach a wider group works well to engage a range of employers in ways convenient to the employer.¹⁷ For example, in addition to their trailblazer groups and route panels, they ran a survey with the Chartered Institute for Plumbing and Heating Engineers (CIPHE) to gather perspectives from hundreds of employers to help them develop the Level 3 standard in plumbing and heating.

Involvement of wider stakeholders

In their 2024 paper, [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#) IfATE said that they engage with professional bodies, learners, combined authorities and the education sector to develop and enhance the quality of the skills training offer. They have built strong relationships with these stakeholders which enables them to understand sector changes and needs in depth as well as the challenges faced.

Current political context

As discussed, IfATE has now been abolished and replaced by Skills England. Within the transfer of power, the Secretary of State for Education has been allowed "exceptional" powers to design and approve apprenticeship standards and

¹³ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

¹⁴ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

¹⁵ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

¹⁶ IfATE (2023) [A Simpler Skills System](#)

¹⁷ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

assessments without the involvement of employer groups, making the system more responsive and agile.¹⁸ However, the minister has committed to co-creating occupational standards with employers.¹⁹ Although it is highly likely that an employer-led approach will continue, it raises questions for the development of occupational skills in the future.

Drawing on big data

In their 2023 strategy²⁰, IfATE cites the use of 'big data' as crucial to ensuring that training provision, and the occupational standards that underpin them, meet employers' current and future skills needs. They commit to:

"Ensuring our occupational standards, apprenticeships and technical qualifications meet employers' current and future skills needs by using big data to rapidly identify where change is needed to support the economy, streamline the way we work with employers to develop occupational standards, and prioritise reviews of those standards where change is most needed."

As one policy stakeholder explains, IfATE/Skills England use big data in a variety of ways, working with a range of partners in the skills system. They explain that some of their work in this area cannot yet be shared in the public domain:

"We use a variety of data techniques, data generation and data analysis in the work. We developed a variety of methods for sampling the job market, ...like live job advert data. We've actually developed this with skill system partners, awarding organisations, HEIs, employers [and] cross government. We've forged some great links with the Innovate UK Workforce Foresighting Hub. They use a three-part methodology for surfacing skills that are valuable in the future. We have some really exciting AI stuff that at the moment is not in the public domain and nor can it be just at this point in time." (Policy stakeholder)

This section sets out how IfATE/Skills England have used AI and big data to date.

Types of data

According to the literature and interviews, types of data used to inform the development and review of occupational standards include:

- Labour market information (LMI),
- Employer Skills Survey
- Job description and vacancy data
- Sectoral and legislative reforms

¹⁸ FE Week (2024) [From IfATE to Skills England via DfE: What you need to know](#)

¹⁹ Skills England (2025) [Skills England priorities](#)

²⁰ IfATE (2023) [A Simpler Skills System](#)

- Existing occupational standards (e.g. time since last review)
- Apprenticeship data (e.g. number of starts, completions, withdrawals, achievements)
- Interviews with key stakeholders.²¹

Reviewing existing qualifications

Policy stakeholders explained that IfATE/Skills England now use an algorithm to routinely review learner data for qualifications relating to occupational standards. Analysing the extent to which an apprenticeship is being used, the number of starts, withdrawals and achievement rates supports IfATE/Skills England's assessments around how well an occupational standard is working. A lack of starts on a particular apprenticeship, for example, might suggest that a standard is too specific and could be combined with another or that one standard duplicates another. Low achievement rates might suggest that the apprenticeship linked to a standard expects learners to develop KSBs and perform duties over and above what is required to be occupationally competent.

However, data pointing to a low number of starts or a low achievement rate on an apprenticeship does not necessarily stem from the design of an occupational standard. It may represent a success of other learning routes, alternative to apprenticeships, or could be a result of wider labour market factors.

Tracking emerging and changing skills needs to keep pace with change

In their 2023 paper [A Simpler Skills System](#), IfATE committed to developing and reviewing standards in high priority occupations so that they can be updated to take account of new skills needs. For example, in 2023 this included high demand jobs such as Adult Care Worker.²²

IfATE/Skills England have begun to implement AI approaches to understanding workforce needs. For example, in 2024 IfATE/Skills England secured funding to develop an AI based tool named the "Skills Compass" to better understand and identify new and changing skills within labour market information and from employer intelligence. For example, using robotics in shipbuilding or virtual wards in healthcare.²³ IfATE/Skills England uses the tool to process millions of job adverts and track emerging and changing skills demands.

They also partnered with Innovate UK's Workforce Foresighting Hub to help them to identify future skills needs. This has enabled them to connect employers representing existing occupations with employers working in emerging fields who have worked together to ensure that new occupational standards work for both.²⁴

²¹IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#); Carroll, G and Boutall, T, (2011) [Guide to Developing National Occupational Standards](#)

²² IfATE (2023) [A Simpler Skills System](#)

²³IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

²⁴ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

Moving forward, Skills England have outlined commitments to play a key role in bettering our understanding and identification of future skills needs, by drawing on IfATE's work as well as data collected by DfE's Unit for Future Skills.²⁵ It recognises that there is more work to be done in developing the organisation's insight capabilities to truly understand future labour market trends.²⁶

Drafting occupational standards

One policy stakeholder suggested that IfATE/Skills England and trailblazer groups in some sectors are already using AI on an ad-hoc basis as a tool to draft occupational standards. They explained that during the initial stage of drafting the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) and duties of an occupational standard, AI serves as a useful "starter for 10" around what should be included. It was suggested that you could get at least 50% of the way to the final occupational standard this way. They also felt that AI could be used to suggest which assessment outcome should be measured based on a set of KSBs. Using AI in this way can save on IfATE/Skills England's already stretched internal resource and the time spent by Trailblazer stakeholders in these discussions.

Tools to support the review and development of standards

Cross route frameworks

IfATE/Skills England, together with route panels, have developed cross route frameworks for employers developing or revising standards to help them to embed skills that are fundamental to all sectors and improve the efficiency of the review process. Examples include the [digital skills and characteristics framework](#), and the [green toolkit](#). As an example, the green framework helps trailblazer groups add green content to existing standards quickly and consistently;²⁷ 90% of the occupational standards submitted in 2024 included green skills²⁸ and over 65% of occupational standards are now "greened"²⁹. This means existing roles such as electricians are now encompassing new green skills – aiming to better future-proof the standard.

Common KSBs

In 2024/25, IfATE/Skills England worked with employers to develop sets of common KSBs for each route.³⁰ These tools can help to speed up the development time of a new standard as well as helping users to more easily identify transferable skills. A route panel member corroborated this, explaining how they are prioritising this approach now:

²⁵ FE Week (2025) [Skills and Productivity Board and Unit for Future Skills: what has been published so far](#)

²⁶ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

²⁷ IfATE (2024) [IfATE annual report 2023-24](#)

²⁸ (IfATE) (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

²⁹ IfATE (2024) [IfATE annual report 2023-24](#)

³⁰ IfATE (2025) [IfATE annual report and accounts](#)

"You want all the generic things to be presented and written in exactly the same way, so they are seen as transferable. There might be job profiles for two roles, but written and expressed in different ways, they can't be compared side by side, there's no clear way of being able to show what's common and where the gaps are, which is what we're trying to develop is a system that would allow that." (Route panel member)

How long does it take?

According to IfATE/Skills England, the process to develop a standard in England from the initial request to final approval takes between 6 months to two years. Between 2022 and 2024, the median time taken to develop a new standard was 15 months.³¹

³¹ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)

4 How are occupational standards used?

At the foundational level, occupational standards define the KSBs and duties required of an individual to perform a job in an occupationally competent way. In developing occupationally competent employees, skills sector stakeholders use standards in a variety of ways. Stakeholders that use occupational standards include employers, awarding bodies and training providers, while their development also involves policy stakeholders and sector skills bodies.

Employers

As discussed, IfATE/Skills England primarily engage employers within each sector to develop new, and review existing, standards.

Overall, stakeholders gave a number of examples of how employers use occupational standards. However, they noted that this practice is not widespread. Stakeholders felt that there was potential for IfATE/Skills England's occupational standards to be used more by employers widely than they currently are.

Some employers use occupational standards to:

- **Make hiring decisions.** In theory, the achievement of a qualification tied to a specific occupational standard is evidence that the individual is competent to perform that job role. They are then used by employers in making hiring decisions.
- **Develop job descriptions,** as with NOS. This would bring more consistency to occupations across the labour market, where most stakeholders tend to view occupational standards as synonymous with apprenticeships.
- **Develop workforce plans.** Occupational standards provide a framework that employers could use to evaluate their existing staff against the standard's KSBs. By identifying skills and knowledge gaps they can determine employees' training needs.

"If they're accurate and if they describe what is needed to achieve occupational competence, then they are a tool that employers could use in their workforce development plans in thinking about how to retain their staff, in supporting their staff to be able to progress to the next role." (Policy stakeholder)

- **Develop non-accredited training courses.** Employers could also use occupational standards as a guide to developing their own training courses

Awarding bodies

Awarding bodies use occupational standards as the framework for developing the accredited qualifications that are linked to each occupational standard. Typically, occupational standards are used to develop apprenticeships but also qualifications,

including Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and T Levels map on to IfATE/Skills England's standards. Vocational qualifications such as City & Guilds are still based on NOS.³²

One awarding body also explained that they develop their own bespoke qualifications for employers, who have engaged them directly and agree to fully fund the training. They explained that these qualifications are loosely based on occupational standards with additional content built on to cover technological, and other, developments experienced in the sector. They explained that in these instances, they cannot afford to wait for the occupational standard to be updated formally to reflect sectoral developments, given the immediacy of demand from customers.

"And increasingly these days, if we're trying to do things in the green skills space, we will on occasions now be developing a product directly with employers that they've agreed to fully fund and private pay cover, and we'll just design things and go to market with them because we can't afford to wait for the system to catch up." (Awarding body)

Training providers

For providers, occupational standards are the building blocks for delivering technical qualifications. Occupational standards inform the development of curricula and the design of teaching and training resources. Providers use KSBs to develop thematic areas to cover in the courses they deliver, with the aim of supporting learners to become occupationally competent.

"We actually map them into our framework, so even within things like the apprenticeship standards, we will use the occupational standards to ensure that our content is fit for purpose, that it develops individuals in line with a national set of standards, so that our ambition is that each individual apprentice or learner is meeting that requirement, and therefore the sector is meeting that requirement as well." (Training provider)

Some training providers explained that they also use occupational standards as a self-assessment tool over the course of an apprenticeship or other accredited courses. KSBs can be used to clarify skills gaps and the need for additional training.

One provider explained how they work with employers to achieve this. Employers can specify additional areas that they'd like to cover in the curriculum or KSBs, which deserve increased coverage. The provider reflected that this strategy had yielded valuable information and explained that they would appreciate the opportunity to share this information more widely to enrich the technical education sector.

³² [City & Guilds](#)

"So, we've built in additional content to be able to meet that sector demand. It's not part of the standard as such, but we know it's something that employers want, so we don't want to lose that for employers." (Provider)

There was some evidence that providers use occupational standards in drafting job descriptions. One provider discussed how they use occupational standards when working with employers to help them to understand the kind of job role they need filled. By comparing the employer's perceived skills needs to the KSBs featured within an occupational standard, they may then draft a job description focussed on a particular type of apprenticeship.

Another provider used occupational standards in the recruitment and retention of their own staff. They use occupational standards when drafting job descriptions and adverts for their teaching staff on technical courses. They emphasised that this ensured that they recruit individuals who have the required knowledge to then teach learners according to a standard's KSBs. Where current staff members may have skills gaps, the same provider explained that they use occupational standards to inform their own staff training.

"It underpins the job descriptions and the requirements and it has to have, and part of the interviewing process will be have they got those skills and knowledge, and then we can make a judgement on how sort of, have their depth of knowledge and understanding with that so that we can recruit appropriately, because we recruit industry experts, not teachers, and then we teach industry experts to be teachers." (Provider)

5 Key findings

Theme one: The slow review and development cycle

All of the stakeholders we spoke to agreed that the current review and development cycle takes too long. It was noted that, in certain cases, development cycles can span two to three years, far exceeding the average time set out above. This means that the total time to market for new qualifications underpinned by occupational standards could be three and a half years.³³ This section explores the factors that contribute to long development windows, the consequences of this and ways of speeding the process up.

Bureaucratic process

In the literature, IfATE/Skills England set out the importance of underpinning the review and development of occupational standards with robust management and quality assurance. This is to ensure that new standards are high quality, fit for purpose and can stand the test of time.³⁴ The majority of stakeholders acknowledged the importance of having a robust and rigorous process. However, all of the stakeholders we spoke to believed that the balance between robust governance and efficiency has not been found. There was criticism from all stakeholders that the process of developing and reviewing occupational standards is too bureaucratic. This has a significant impact on the development window:

"It's so bureaucratic it's taken them two or three years. From a customer's point of view, from an employer's point of view, I don't think it's the smoothest." (Route panel member)

Reaching a consensus

In line with previous OECD research³⁵, stakeholders noted that the other main cause of delays in the process is the trailblazer group reaching consensus and the number of meetings and consultations required:

"The main cause of delay is the drafting of the occupational standard and getting agreement amongst the trailblazer" (Policy stakeholder)

The time it takes to reach a consensus is influenced by a number of factors:

1. Employers' capacity

³³ Developing a technical qualification based on an occupational standard can take between 3 and 8 months depending on the type and size of qualification. a small cross functional qual could take 3 - 4 months while a larger TOEQ or Technical Progression qual could take 6 - 8 months.

³⁴ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#); UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2011) [NOS Strategy 2010-2020](#)

³⁵ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#)

The process can be particularly lengthy when employers have limited capacity to engage in trailblazer activities (i.e. attending meetings). This can affect some sectors (e.g., creative sector and hospitality) more than others:

"Perhaps things like creative sector or even catering and hospitality, employers are under a great deal of time pressure and that can limit the frequency of meetings for instance, which can slow down progress." (Policy stakeholder)

2. Trailblazer members have differing expertise, needs and priorities

Reaching consensus can also take longer when a trailblazer group is made up of employers of varying sizes as their needs can significantly differ, meaning differing content of the standard is prioritised. Some stakeholders explained that the expertise of the trailblazer group can also influence the development process. This is especially the case in sectors with a diverse range of different and varying occupations that require niche occupational standards. For example, the creative industries sector.

However, as discussed in Theme two: developing relevant standards, ensuring wide engagement in the process is crucial. Striking the balance between full engagement and efficient review and development cycles is therefore a key challenge.

3. The IfATE/Skills England project manager's capacity and experience

IfATE/Skills England recognise these challenges and highlight the project manager's role as key to mitigating these delays by taking overall responsibility for the management of the development process (rather than allowing trailblazer groups to manage it independently):

"If you give employers too much of a free rein, it's going to be difficult. A trailblazer maybe has 15 employers, it's just natural that you'll have 15 slightly nuanced views on what should be in the apprenticeship. And if you let them hold the pen, it'll just go round and round and round in circles, it'll take a very long time." (Policy stakeholder)

However, some stakeholders reported that limited IfATE/Skills England project manager's capacity can also cause delays in the process.

Trust also appears to be a key factor. Over time, an experienced manager may have developed an effective working relationship with trailblazer members. Members may have more buy-in to the process and a willingness to engage regularly with discussions, when they know and respect their product manager. This is then reflected in the maintenance of up to data standards that are responsive to technological change in the sector.

"Being completely frank, it is dependent on having people in IfATE, and now Skills England who are, very familiar with the policy and very confident about or very good at drafting. And just like any organisation, we have a mix of abilities in that area. If you have absolutely top-notch product managers...who deals with the trailblazer and gains the trailblazer's confidence, then it works very well. If you have someone who's maybe a bit newer or not quite so good in that area, you can still end up going round houses a little bit." (Policy stakeholder)

Stakeholders reported that there is currently no set time for how long development or review will take:

"There's generally no time frame of when they're going into review, or when they'll come out of review." (Policy stakeholder)

This means the process varies in length and that IfATE/Skills England's maximum estimate of two years is not always met (as described above).

Design of standards

Stakeholders highlighted that the design of occupational standards lengthens the revision process. As they are, the entire occupational standard needs reviewing, rather than segments. For example, minor amends to KSBs to incorporate emerging skills and technologies require a full-scale revision of the occupational standard.

"The bottom line is it just all takes too long [because] they moved away from this modular model. You end up looking at the whole thing even if little bits of it only need to be changed [instead of] looking at it and saying, OK, it's those two core units and then we need to design a new optional unit or something like that." (Awarding body)

This has time and cost implications:

"I've just dealt with one where it's a one-line difference in the EPA. But we've just had to go through a development process to change that one line that minor change means major costs. Putting the awarding organisations through quite a cost intensive process just to tweak and fiddle." (Awarding body)

Level of standard

Higher level standards are more complex and therefore often take longer to review than lower-level standards:

"Level 5, 6, 7 are by definition delivering more complicated skills into the economy, so the knowledge, skill and behaviour statements and duties of those jobs, it's got higher consequence for instance if they're wrong" (Policy stakeholder)

Occupations with statutory obligations

Occupations with statutory obligations (e.g. many health care occupations) can take longer to review and develop given the additional requirements in the content:

"Many clinical roles and jobs which have also got statutory guidance and statutory obligations to feed into the occupational standard. Nursing associate as an example. You've got to ensure you're meeting statutory requirements as well, so there are those sorts of complications." (Policy stakeholder)

Age of standard

Skills England representatives explained that older standards (pre-2018) are likely to take longer to review than new standards as they often need a more "radical overhaul" to meet current requirements, including the addition of learner duties.³⁶

Consequence of slow development cycle: Out of date standards in fast moving sectors

The rigorous but bureaucratic approach to reviewing standards does not suit sectors that experience considerable technological change. During interview, stakeholders explained their frustration that developments in the engineering, health sciences and green technologies were slow to be reflected in occupational standards because of inflexible review timelines.

"Our higher-level standards like data scientist is changing daily. We know there's new information coming out about clinical trials or machine learning, but we're being held back from adding them into standards to then be funded to teach them because of a bureaucratic process that takes so long to do. The standard was written four years ago and can't keep up with the pace of change." (Sector skills body)

"The hardest thing is that lots of industries move really quickly and generally education doesn't. Think about green technologies - we need to develop our curriculum around green technologies, but a lot of the products aren't there yet." (Provider)

The slow review and amendment process means standards are regularly out of date in these sectors. This translates into training programmes which lack content covering emerging trends and ultimately learners with skills gaps, calling into question their level of occupational competence on completion of training.

³⁶ Gov.uk [What is an occupational standard](#)

"We know there's new information coming out about clinical trials or machine learning, but we're being held back from adding them into standards to then be funded to teach them because of a bureaucratic process that takes so long to do." (Provider)

Ways to speed up the development and review cycle

Case study box 1: Switzerland and Germany – streamlined process while maintaining rigour

The [OECD report](#) on occupational standards details that in addition to their standard process for revising standards, Switzerland has a fast-track procedure, enabling changes to be made to standards more quickly where needed. This is particularly useful for occupations affected by rapidly changing skills needs such as IT. The steps followed are the same as the normal process to ensure rigour, but strict timeframes are mandated, and resource allocation is concentrated over a shorter time period. Clear and transparent guidance, setting out step by step the process for developing or updating a standards and clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities are key enabling factors.

The report also highlights that Germany's standard setting process involves multiple stages, thorough research and consultation with numerous industry stakeholders. Similar to England, Germany has a transparent and well set out process for developing new standards. Unlike England, each step has a specific timeframe against it to ensure that all occupational and training standards take no longer than one year to be developed.

Fast-track approach

International comparisons showed that other countries have formal fast-track or time-controlled procedures (see case study box 1).

Transfer of powers

As mentioned, the bill transferring powers from IfATE to Skills England gives the secretary of state "exceptional" powers to review and approve occupational standards without consulting employers. By avoiding lengthy reviews by multiple stakeholders, this move has the potential to speed up the development and review process.³⁷

Use of big data and AI

Increasing the use of big data and AI could help to address these challenges, despite requiring significant short-term cost and time investment.

Although IfATE/Skills England have already started to incorporate big data and AI into standard development (see Chapter 3), stakeholders considered there to be scope to substantially increase its use. It was recognised that pursuing a more data driven

³⁷ FE Week (2024) [From IfATE to Skills England via DfE: What you need to know](#)

approach to standard development would require significant upfront financial and human resource from Skills England. Each stage, including scoping work to determine what data should be collected, developing systematic approaches to data collection across sectors and developing algorithms to support data analysis, would require significant investment. However, in the longer-term using data to replace, or reduce, the need for stakeholder conversations could speed up the review and development process and reduce the burden on stakeholders.

"I think it needs to be more data-driven. Rather than getting all the employers back in the room and having lots of conversations, we should be using data to tell us what is happening, what is trending, and what skills are needed." (Policy stakeholder)

"I think data analytics and artificial intelligence could be particularly useful. These technologies can help us analyse large amounts of data quickly and accurately, identifying trends and skills that are emerging." (Awarding body)

However, several stakeholders noted the disparity across sectors and occupations in the types and format of data available, which would make it challenging for Skills England to develop a consistent approach in assessing the demand for new, and reviewing existing, standards.

"The challenge with that data is that it's not always in the same format. Engenuity, who are the engineering sector skills body, for example, will do it in one way, energy and utility skills will do it in another way, so it then becomes hard for government to get consistency." (Policy stakeholder)

Occupational standards in niche sectors are unlikely to garner large datasets, for example, where a job role is uncommon in the labour market and there are few vacancies or where there are a low number of learners on a specific apprenticeship. In these cases, datasets may be too small to reliably infer trends to inform decision making around occupational standards. Skills England may be more reliant on stakeholder dialogue in these instances. It is therefore important for any data-driven approach to retain a degree of flexibility.

The Netherlands use big data (online job vacancies and survey data) to improve the review and development process of occupational standards (see case study box 2).

The design of standards: core and flex approach

In the Netherlands³⁸, standards are developed around a stable core which can mean that when under review, only small elements need updating. This can result in a quicker review process and overall a more efficient and responsive system (see case study box 3)

Case study box 2: The Netherlands – Data-driven approaches to reviewing standards

The Netherlands uses 'Competent NL' an online database, which classifies roles by competency and contains information about the content of occupations and the skills, knowledge and abilities required to perform specific occupations. It is used in vocational education and tied to the Dutch qualification structure enabling students and employees to easily transition in work.

Jobs are classified at three levels of specificity, providing a structured way to categorise roles. The broadest categorisation of occupations links to ISCO 2008 and is based on skill level and specialisation, while the most detailed level is aligned to the actual job title used in job postings.

Updates to CompetentNL follow feedback collected through employer surveys and through real time web scraping of online job vacancies. User feedback may focus on the database's usability, completeness, accuracy and gaps in specific occupations.

These data-driven approaches mean that reviews are efficient. Changes to standards take from between a few weeks to several months. They also ensure that the database is reflective of the Dutch labour market, by considering a large amount of vacancy data and employer feedback.

Case study box 3: Flexible standards for a more efficient and responsive system – The Netherlands

Technological change does not necessarily mean that every part of the occupational standard has to change. The Netherlands centres occupational standards around a stable core, derived from the International Standards Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO 2008). As technological change occurs, the two broadest categories of the standard (outlined in case study box 2) remain the same, while more specific changes can be made, to include additional transferable skills, competencies, or training requirements. Given the whole standard does not undergo review each time a standard requires updating, the process is more responsive to changes in the labour market.

³⁸ World Skills (2024). [Learning from WorldSkills Lyon and beyond.](#)

The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics (2014). [Occupation classification ROA CBS](#)

Theme two: Developing relevant standards

Stakeholders highlighted the difficulty in developing standards that are relevant to all stakeholders who use them. There was recognition from stakeholders that one standard might work perfectly for one employer's skills needs but be ineffective for another.

This section explores how past approaches of developing standards based on small scale requests has led to narrow standards. It considers stakeholders' views on the more recent efforts to increase and diversify engagement (as discussed in Chapter 1), the benefits and challenges of this and ways the process could be improved.

Past approaches: developing niche standards based on a small number of requests

Policy stakeholders explained that previously IfATE placed a greater emphasis on responding to needs identified by employers, often developing new standards based on requests from a small number of employers:

"Previously we might have been a little bit more pro whatever employers want. Whilst we've always had criteria, we might have erred on the side of-employers think that's needed. Whereas now I think that moving forward, we're going to need more evidence of real justification for the development of a new apprenticeship." (Policy stakeholder)

For example, one stakeholder gave an example of the duplication of an existing standard, due to the decision of employers in the hospitality trailblazer group to develop a standard specifically focused on small high-end hotels. Another stakeholder described how a standard was developed at the request of only one early years education provider.

Stakeholders explained that this previous approach had led to some standards being too narrowly focused on a few employers' needs and not relevant across a sector:

"There's a lot of standards that are not fit for purpose because you've got employers who've written it for what they want, not for what the industry." (Provider)

Engaging a range of voices in the development process

Despite efforts to engage a wider range of voices in the development process (as discussed in chapter 1), challenges remain with larger employers tending to be more engaged than SMEs and wider stakeholders feeling excluded.

Large employers account for approximately two-thirds of firms involved in route panels despite representing fewer than 1% of businesses in England overall, and accounting for over 40% of employment.³⁹ This can mean that they disproportionately influence the development process.

³⁹ IfATE (2024) [Written Evidence from Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#); IfATE (2023) [A Simpler Skills System](#); House of Commons Library (2024) [Business Statistics](#)

All stakeholders agreed, noting that there is a particular over-representation of large employers in sectors with a higher proportion of SMEs and freelance workers (for example creative industries). They attributed this primarily to capacity constraints. In some sectors, employers may have less time to contribute representatives to take part in route panel or trailblazer discussions. These groups may then lack the full diversity of the sector, resulting in a less complete occupational standard 'final product' that fails to meet the needs of all employers.

"I think the challenge is to make the route panel as diverse as the as the routes, which is really hard. It comes back to the freelancing and SME nature of the sector, because when you're working on the route panel, you're giving up time, which as a freelancer you could be billing somebody for. So, we do struggle to make the route panel as diverse as the sector." (Route panel member)

One stakeholder highlighted that in the education sector, employers face attitudinal barriers to engaging in the standards setting process as they see occupations within the sector as degree-only. They explained that securing buy-in from stakeholders tends to be easier when a sector has a "greater tradition of apprenticeships".

A training provider explained how standards developed by larger employers may not be relevant to the SMEs that they work with:

"Our employers locally to us about 90% are SMEs. You've got some fantastic employers that have fed into [occupational standards but] it's not necessarily relevant to the majority of our employers" (Training provider)

Stakeholders explained that while employer engagement is key to the development of occupational standards, it needs to be balanced with input from different types of employers representative of the sector and other stakeholders.

Stakeholders welcomed IfATE/Skills England's decision to expand eligibility into trailblazer groups to include additional stakeholders; including awarding bodies and training providers was also viewed positively. This has led to standards that tend to be more reflective of the full range of employers and other stakeholders they serve. With the rigorous development and review processes there is also ample opportunity for stakeholders to offer feedback on challenges surrounding the use of specific standards.

However, they recognised ongoing challenges to diverse engagement. One training provider explained that there are still limited opportunities for them to get involved in the development process:

"There's limited opportunity for training providers to feedback on occupational standards. I think that would be really useful in moving occupational standards forward." (Provider)

The benefits of diverse and full representation

The range of stakeholders involved in developing occupational standards can determine how well they work.

In particular, where employers of different sizes and from specific industry niches input to trailblazer discussions and route panels, alongside representation of other stakeholders including training providers, awarding bodies and sector skills bodies, the occupational standard is likely to be more reflective of the diversity of needs within a sector.

Several providers discussed how occupational standards within the 'early years' sector work well, given the clear alignment between their KSBs and the needs of the sector. This then translates into the provider offering impactful training that produces occupationally competent learners ready to work in the industry.

Niche versus broader KSBs

A key challenge for IfATE/Skills England is in finding the balance between developing a generalisable standard for an entire sector, that includes sufficient detail around the tasks and skills required to perform a role competently.

Overall, stakeholders had mixed views on the level at which standards should sit. Some favoured broad, high-level standards. Others said standards that are too broad run the risk of deleting niche yet important details:

"I think [IfATE/Skills England] have tried over the years to standardise the language in apprenticeship standards, but with that comes an element of dilution of the niche elements that we want to sometimes include" (Sector Skills body)

Stakeholders gave examples that highlighted the need to find a balance between having broad occupational standards that meet employers' needs across the sector, are occupationally-relevant (rather than job-specific) and prepare people for long-term careers, and making sure that their use is flexible enough to meet local labour market realities and employer needs.

For example, the diversity of businesses in the agriculture sector means that it can be difficult for providers to fulfil all KSBs included in a standard, because they do not always have access to the necessary specialist equipment. One provider in the sector explained that as a requirement of offering an agriculture T Level, learners were expected to spend time learning skills required in dairy farming. They explained that not all providers offering the T Level had access to a dairy, highlighting the tension between preparing learners for a general occupation versus a specific job. It also points to the wider issue of patchy availability of T Level job placements across the country.

One provider explained that when KSBs are too specific, providers can struggle to cover all of them which can result in their funding being cut:

"If they can't prove that every element of their delivery matches to a KSB, then...funding might be clawed back. The training provider has to bend over backwards to make sure that everything that they teach can be mapped back to a KSB. If the KSBs are so specific, then it doesn't give you a lot of wiggle room to give you a lot of flexibility." (Training provider)

Similarly, in the sport and leisure sector, the 'leisure team member' occupational standard requires individuals to gain experience working in gyms and in swimming pools. Given many centres do not have a swimming pool, they are unable to utilise a key occupational standard and the related HTQ in the sector without partnering with a centre that does have a pool and is happy to provide work experience.

"It doesn't work particularly well for employers because of the mandated qualifications and because it's got that wet, dry and a lot of sports facilities don't have both. If you're a gym, you can't use the leisure team member apprenticeship because you also need to have a pool. So, it's a bit of a blocker for some at the minute." (Sector skills body)

Occupational standards may also be less useful in broad sectors. For example, the creative industries sector covers a diverse set of organisations and roles, from museums and galleries to TV and film production companies and stonemasons. A stakeholder in this sector explained that this diversity means there are few unifying features of organisations within trailblazers and route panel organisations. Furthermore, they reported that in some of the more niche occupational standards it was difficult to find experts to critically review standards.

Conversely, stakeholders who used other standards questioned whether they were sufficiently comprehensive. Despite the stated aim of occupational standards supporting learners to become occupational competent, they argued that the set of KSBs in most standards were too narrow to achieve this. In particular, they were said to be unsuitable for smaller employers whose employees perform a wide range of tasks.

"There's this idea that on completion that you're occupationally competent in any organization, and that really is wish fulfilment, you know it's a dream, but it's never going to happen." (Provider)

"For employers, occupational competence is absolutely the key concept. If a standard doesn't support someone to achieve occupational competence in a role, then it's not a good standard. The starting point for development of a standard should always be occupational competence. I know that sounds really kind of basic, but there are some standards where perhaps it doesn't start from that point." (Policy stakeholder)

Ways to ensure standards are relevant

According to the literature and stakeholders, ways to engage a wider range of voices in standard setting could include:

Using Sector Skills bodies as representative voices with rich intelligence.

These organisations often play a crucial role in coordinating the development and maintenance of NOS within their respective sectors in Scotland and Wales. For example, [CITB](#) has a statutory role as an Industry Training Board in developing and maintaining NOS for the construction industry.

“Sector skills bodies have got really rich intelligence, really rich labour market information and quite a lot of that is shared with government, but they have no formal role in the system. Government probably isn't utilising everything that they could and everything that they might gain if sector skills bodies were strategic partners rather than the role that they've got at the minute, which isn't formalised in any way.” (Awarding body)

However, it is important to note that sector skills bodies that do not have a statutory role might not be fully representative of their sector, and so their views should be considered alongside wider sector stakeholders.

Setting quotas for SME engagement

Setting targets for SME engagement could encourage increased efforts to be made to secure SME involvement in standard development.

Providing financial incentives to boost engagement.

For example, in Germany to ensure representation from SMEs in the development of occupational standards, SMEs can receive a financial incentive.⁴⁰

Building on existing use of big data to gauge a cross-sector consensus and large-scale trends

Rather than only using the handful of insights collected through dialogue with employers, expanding the use of large datasets encompassing employers from across the sector could ensure that IfATE/Skills England's decision making around occupational standards is fair in meeting the needs of stakeholders within sectors.

“Data can give you patterns that sort of dialogue can't. That's the vital role of data is providing patterns in the economy at a much bigger scale that are not detectable to the human eye for a variety of reasons.”
(Policy stakeholder)

Developing broader standards, with flexibilities to ensure specificity

To strike the balance between developing a generalisable standard for an entire sector, that includes sufficient detail around the tasks and skills required to perform a role competently, stakeholders suggested a best of both worlds solution. Drawing on the approach taken in some European countries⁴¹, standards could have broad KSBs as

⁴⁰ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#)

⁴¹ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#);

a semi-permanent core, with the option to add on more precise statements that provide clear information on required KSBs for a particular role:

"You create a set of occupational standards around professions and jobs where you've got core optional, and the core would tend to be the bare minimum that any SME as well as a large employer should need to cover and can cover to redeem your occupational competence in an area. You then develop some optional things, which if you work for a larger company or a specialist SME, you can add in to a set of qualifications or accredited outcome, which allow you to have both the narrower core and the broader breadth." (Awarding body)

Stakeholders noted that increased flexibility could lead to a more tailored response and better meet different groups of learners' or employers' needs. Flexes could be used to meet need by employer size, employer location, employer budget, learner age and learner route/sector. For example, larger employers tend to have differing needs to SMEs and younger learners commonly have differing needs to older learners.

"There should be a headroom of 10% or 15%, which is slightly more discretionary which allows employers to embrace the future if [they can afford to]. Some of the machinery and the capital investment is massively expensive...have to be careful you don't introduce something which might work for the leading-edge manufacturer but won't arrive to other manufacturers for a decade." (Policy stakeholder)

Other stakeholders explained this would also enable assessment requirements to be flexed to meet learners' needs. For example, in the creative industries sector practical assessments might be favoured over written ones.

Theme three: a busy, messy system

Overall stakeholders argued that the skills system, including occupational standards, is a busy, messy space.

This section explores the factors that contribute to this – too many standards, inconsistent terminology across standards and occupational routes, varying quality of standards, too few common KSBs and cross sector skills frameworks – and the key implications for end users. It also considers ways to make the system more streamlined and coherent.

Too many occupational standards (and some duplication)

In general, it was felt that there are too many occupational standards. As a reference, as of 2024 there are over 670 occupational standards.⁴² In comparison, in Switzerland there are approximately 230 standards, and Germany has around 330 state-recognised craft and technical Standards or Occupations.⁴³

⁴² IfATE (2024) [IfATE annual report 2023-24](#)

⁴³ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#); NOCN (2023) [England vs Germany: The apprenticeship game](#)

Stakeholders attributed this to previous approaches (highlighted above in theme two) that placed greater emphasis on responding to needs identified by employers, often developing new standards based on requests from a small number of employers.

This means that the occupational maps, while thought to be a useful resource, are also complicated to navigate for employers, training providers and learners. Several stakeholders suggested that there was also some duplication between standards.

“There's a lot of standards, there's 600 to 800, I think. And that feels like quite a lot. I don't know to what extent there's duplication, but I think that's certainly something that should be kind of checked.” (Policy stakeholder)

As discussed in the introduction, the fact there are two sets of occupational standards in England (the IfATE/Skills England standards and NOS) further complicates the system for users.

Inconsistent terminology between routes and standards

Overall, stakeholders felt the content and quality of standards remains inconsistent. As noted, IfATE/Skills England have introduced tools (common sets of KSBs within routes) to tackle this.

Stakeholders also pointed to a lack of consistency in the language and format across different standards and routes. Where the same skill may be required across two standards, the trailblazer groups and route panels may have used different terminology. One stakeholder explained that the 15 routes feel like 15 separate organisations given the different approaches taken to developing standards by route panels.

Stakeholders highlighted that this inconsistency can complicate the process of identifying transferable skills between occupations. It can also create challenges for providers in interpreting what skills need to be covered when developing a curriculum based on the standard.

The number of standards in each route also varies considerably. For example, Engineering and manufacturing has 381 standards while Hair and Beauty has just 15 (numbers include potential standards and standards in development).

The quality of standards – the role of IfATE/Skills England Product Manager

Stakeholders recognised that variations in experience of IfATE/Skills England product managers, who are responsible for drafting standards, leading trailblazer groups and convening route panel discussion, is one factor in the quality of standards produced. As noted in Theme One, where a product manager has been responsible for a standard for many years, they may have a better understanding of the sector and the needs of different stakeholders. An experienced manager may also have honed their ability to draft concise and clear KSBs, which are easily interpreted by wider stakeholders and translated into qualifications.

Few cross-sector skills

Skills England have started to use sets of common KSBs, but other pan-sector skills are missing.

Some stakeholders also noted that occupational standards lack statements on developing soft, essential or employability skills – skills fundamental across occupations. Embedding these skills across statements would benefit young people who might have lower employability skills (e.g. communication skills and time management) as they have not worked before. It would also support adults who have low literacy, numeracy or digital skills.⁴⁴

Ways to make the system more streamlined and consistent

Developing fewer standards

As discussed in Chapter 1, IfATE/Skills England have adopted a more conservative approach to developing new standards in recent years in order to tackle duplication and over-development of standards.

Increasing consistency across standards

Stakeholders called for Skills England to build on existing practice (e.g. cross route frameworks and common sets of KSBs) to create a more standardised approach to managing the review and development of standards in order to improve consistency and quality.

“We have the same [route panel] members on different groups, and they see different styles of developing standards which shouldn't be right. It needs to be one set of guidelines, one policy, one standardised language across all apprenticeships and that really isn't the case.” (Route panel member)

One Policy stakeholder highlighted that more consistent language across standards would increase the efficiency and usability of the skills system:

“I think the more that occupational standards can recognise transferable skills, the more efficient the skills system will be because the more you can recognise that an employee already has X, Y and Z and they now just need to develop A, B and C, the better.” (Policy stakeholder)

Increasing accessibility

One training provider highlighted that the language in standards is starting to become more accessible which improves usability for learners, employers and providers. They called for a continuation of this approach:

⁴⁴ Around 9 million working-age adults in the UK have low literacy or numeracy skills.

"With the language being used, they were quite complex beforehand, and education is a complex sector anyway, but we need to make sure that everything can be read and understood, it's accessible, and that for me is something where it's certainly seen that it's started to improve." (Training provider)

Theme four: Keeping pace and standing the test of time

A key challenge for IfATE/Skills England in occupational standard setting is finding the balance between stability and responding to change. Stakeholders noted that on the one hand it is desirable to have a current standard, which has evolved in line with technological change. On the other hand, a stable standard is likely to be more respected and does not undermine the credibility of qualifications achieved by previous learners.

There was disagreement between specific stakeholders around which of these factors should be favoured. In general, awarding bodies favoured stability, given the cost and resource implications of incorporating regular changes to their qualifications. They also argued that regular change can undermine the credibility of a standard. Stakeholders (in particular awarding bodies) called for standards to be designed to have a longer-shelf life, requiring fewer revisions while staying relevant.

"They've got to think about how they keep occupational standards current but have some element of consistency over time." (Awarding body)

A learning provider compared the frequency of change in the UK system to that of German, Finnish and Swedish systems, which were said to be more stable making for a more effective system overall.

"One of the features of the German, Finnish and Swedish system is it is extremely politically stable. A new minister doesn't come in every 18 months and, rearrange the furniture and, it's very stable over a period of sort of 20 years or more. And those groups that are working together, the educators and the employers working together, have a chance to develop some sort of longevity and consistency in the way they're practising and so on." (Provider)

Employers on the other hand favour dynamism, to ensure that learners are trained in emerging skills required for occupational competence. This could be achieved by keeping occupational standards relatively stable and developing specific qualifications or modules (that do not necessarily map onto occupational standards) to meet changing needs.

Ways to keep pace and stand the test of time

Core and flex approach

As discussed in previous themes, in some European countries, occupational standards have a foundational core which can remain unchanged for a decade or so, while the

add-on elements can be updated more frequently in response to new technologies and industry changes.⁴⁵ For example, customer service core skills can remain unchanged for years, with more fluid statements that can be applied even when skills needs change and new ones emerge (e.g. online customer service).

Some stakeholders explained how some flexibility would enable standards to stand the test of time:

"You do have to be quite careful with change and dynamism because something can be the fashion du jour one day and it hasn't got much shelf life. Do we build in a bit of flexibility into other duties, knowledge, skills and behaviours for instance by skilful equivocation in knowledge, skills and behaviours." (Policy stakeholder)

"The other real benefit for designing things flexibly is it allows far more future proof - you don't have to go back and revisit the whole standard when the world moves on." (Awarding body)

Use of AI and big data

As previously noted, increased use of AI and big data could help to ensure standards meet employers' needs. Nesta's Skills Taxonomy is an example of how AI can be used to highlight skills gaps and emerging needs (see case study box 4).

⁴⁵ OECD (2024) [Getting Skills Right: Agile Occupational and training standards for responsive skills policies](#);

Case study box 4: Using AI to highlight skills gaps and emerging skills needs

In 2018 Nesta developed its 'Skills Taxonomy' to provide policymakers, employers, training providers and individuals with access to up-to-date information on skills needs within different occupations in the context of a rapidly changing labour market landscape. The taxonomy is a visual network of jobs grouped by skills type, enabling users to identify occupations suited to their existing skill capabilities. It can be used to measure the demand for skills by employers, the current supply of those skills within the labour force and the potential supply based on what can be offered by learning providers and employers.

It was developed using machine learning to analyse job vacancy data in real time. It extracted information from an estimated five million UK job adverts between 2015 and 2021, which highlighted 7,000 individual skills requested by employers grouped and ordered in layers of specificity. The taxonomy provides new information on the skills landscape, including:

- Identifying core (or transferable) skills that are relevant to many jobs.
- Highlighting regional disparities around the supply and demand for skills in local areas.
- Identifying changes in skills needs over time. For example, the taxonomy highlights a spike in demand for healthcare skills since the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Identifying emerging skills to inform future qualifications and training.

Frontier Economics (2022) [Review of Skills Taxonomies](#); Gallagher, E et al (2022) [Building a skills taxonomy for the UK](#)

Theme five: Communication

Overall, providers and awarding bodies noted a lack of communication from IfATE/Skills England regarding the review and development of standards as a significant challenge.

IfATE/Skills England have an online product called the Revisions and Adjustments Status Report which lists the standards in review, what stage of review they are at and the estimated completion date of the change. It provides a notice period of the change to avoid issues for training providers.

Policy stakeholders indicated that providers know it's there and look at it regularly. One awarding body uses the report but says it lacks detail on the scale of change which leaves them "working in the dark". Another stakeholder questions how well the report is managed:

"There doesn't seem to be any sort of like dramatically consistent context of KPIs around how quickly something will be responded to, then how quick it is to mobilise something" (Awarding body)

Providers explained that they would find it useful to know which standards are being revised or developed, why, when, to what extent and how to get involved. Without this, their ability to plan provision – design curriculum, conduct staff training, invest in equipment, and manage learner and employer expectations – is impacted.

"I think it seems to happen behind the scenes rather than involving training providers. It's key for us to be able to understand." (Provider)

"My bigger frustration is the lack of communication. We get a report monthly that tells you if something's in revision or being developed but you very often don't have where it is in the process or when it is due for release so it's really hard to plan. They kind of drop on you out of nowhere either a revision or a new one and then employers think you're going to be ready to deliver it the next day. Managing conversations and expectations is really hard because the communication around that process is poor" (Provider)

For awarding bodies, not having forewarning about the extent and nature of upcoming changes to existing standards puts them at risk of developing qualifications and courses that are out of date. Additional, late notice changes then have significant cost implications for these organisations.

"So, we're developing a qualification against an old standard, knowing that standard is going through review. Knowing the qualification that we're developing is going to be actually out of date before the thing even launches because the standard is being up there updated behind the scenes...we don't know the extent of the update of that." (Awarding body)

Awarding bodies also discussed how the misalignment of qualification and academic schedules with occupational review schedules is a challenge. As discussed previously, awarding bodies may be into the process of developing a new qualification, just as the underpinning occupational standard begins to undergo a review.

Some stakeholders attributed patchy management and poor communication to IfATE/Skills England having limited capacity given the large number of occupational standards due to be reviewed. As explained, England has significantly more standards than some other European countries.

Stakeholders called for transparent and timely communications from IfATE/Skills England about standard reviews and development.

6 Conclusions

- 1. Finding: The development and review of occupational standards takes too long.** Although stakeholders recognised the need for rigour in the design and review of occupational standards, most agreed that too much time is spent on these processes. Lengthy development processes are incompatible with the needs of stakeholders in fast moving sectors. By the time a standard is ready to use, the apprenticeships and training programmes built from it may be out of date.

Consideration: To help speed up the development and review cycles, Skills England should consider incorporating international good practice into their processes, including:

- **A fast-track system** for critical standards, as in Switzerland.
- **A time limit** for each stage of development, as in Germany.
- **Incorporating non-core elements** that can be quickly updated to reflect technological changes without the need for a full-scale revision of the standard, as in The Netherlands.
- **Pursuing a more data driven approach**, as in The Netherlands, to reduce the need for stakeholder consultation. This could include increased use of AI to develop an occupational skills database, to systematically identify when existing standards should be reviewed or new standards developed.

- 2. Finding: Small groups of large employers have a disproportionate influence on the design of standards in some sectors.** The research shows that SMEs tend to be more time poor than larger employers and less able to contribute to route panels and trailblazer discussions.

Consideration: Skills England should trial new ways of including the views of SMEs to accurately reflect the sector as a whole. Solutions to this issue could include utilising the insights of sector skills bodies and other employer representative organisations in trailblazer groups and route panels, conducting employer surveys to inform occupational standard design, setting quotas around SME representation, and offering financial incentives to SMEs for their participation. AI and big data could also be used to gauge and analyse the views of a wide range of employers and other stakeholders quickly, including summarising responses to employer surveys.

- 3. Finding:** Striking the balance between developing a generalisable standard for an entire sector, that includes sufficient detail around the tasks and skills required to perform a role competently, is a key challenge.

Consideration: Drawing on the approach taken in some European countries, Skills England should consider developing broader standards that equip workers for occupational clusters with flexibility for specific roles. This could include having broad KSBs as a semi-permanent core, with the option to add on more precise statements that provide clear information on required KSBs for a particular role.
- 4. Finding:** There are too many IfATE/Skills England occupational standards. As of 2024, there are over 670 occupational standards. By contrast, Switzerland has approximately 230 standards, while Germany has around 330. This increases the complexity of the system, and can make it difficult to navigate for individuals, employers and learning providers. Reviewing and updating so many standards also requires significant resource and time. Evidence from the research suggests, however, that Skills England are focused on cutting the number of standards and amalgamating those that are similar.

Consideration: Skills England should continue efforts to amalgamate and cut standards where possible, benchmarking against other countries.
- 5. Finding:** The content and quality of standards remains inconsistent despite IfATE/Skills England introducing tools – such as common sets of KSBs within routes - to tackle this. Stakeholders consider that the quality of standards varies across sectors. There is also a lack of consistency in the language and format across different standards and routes, that limits their transferability.

Consideration: To improve consistency and quality, Skills England should build on existing practice (e.g. the use of cross route frameworks and common sets of KSBs) to ensure that product managers across sectors follow a consistent set of processes in the development of occupational standards. While the quality of standards can depend on the experience and expertise of trailblazer groups, the setting of clearer guidelines on the development of standards by Skills England could raise quality across the board. This could include, for example, expanding sets of common KSBs for whole routes, so that the same language is used for the same skills regardless of occupation or sector, and the development of frameworks to support the inclusion of essential and employability skills.

- 6. Finding:** Finding the balance between stable standards that can stand the test of time and responding to change is a key challenge. The research shows that employers generally favour increased dynamism, to ensure that learners are trained in emerging skills. However, too much flexibility could lead to inconsistency, a lack of specificity and a failure of occupational standards to deliver full occupational competence to learners. Striking the balance is key.
- Consideration:** Skills England should consider drawing from international good practice to design standards that have a longer-shelf life, requiring fewer revisions while staying relevant to technological change. In some European countries, occupational standards have a foundational core which can remain unchanged for a decade or so. Add-on elements can be updated more frequently in response to new technologies and industry changes.
- 7. Finding:** There is a lack of transparency in the way Skills England manages communications regarding the review and development of standards with stakeholders. A lack of detailed communication about which standards are being revised or developed, why, when, to what extent and how to get involved impacts on the ability of awarding bodies and training providers to ensure their qualifications and provision remain up to date.
- Consideration:** Skills England should further develop existing tools, such as the Revisions and Adjustments Status Report, to adopt a consistent approach to communicating the nature and timings of occupational standard review and development cycles with stakeholders.
- 8. Finding:** IfATE/Skills England's standards are primarily used in the development of apprenticeships and other accredited training. However, there is scope for employers to use them more widely in drafting job descriptions, workforce planning and in developing their own non-accredited training. This would ensure that employees at all levels of experience would have a consistent set of skills. Our research highlighted that NOS and standards developed in other countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, are already used successfully in these ways.
- Consideration:** Skills England and sector skills councils should consider how to support and encourage employers to make greater use of standards in these ways. This could include greater clarity on whether the suitability of standards for these wider uses should be considered during the development process.