

Learning the lessons

Understanding the history of adult learning and skills

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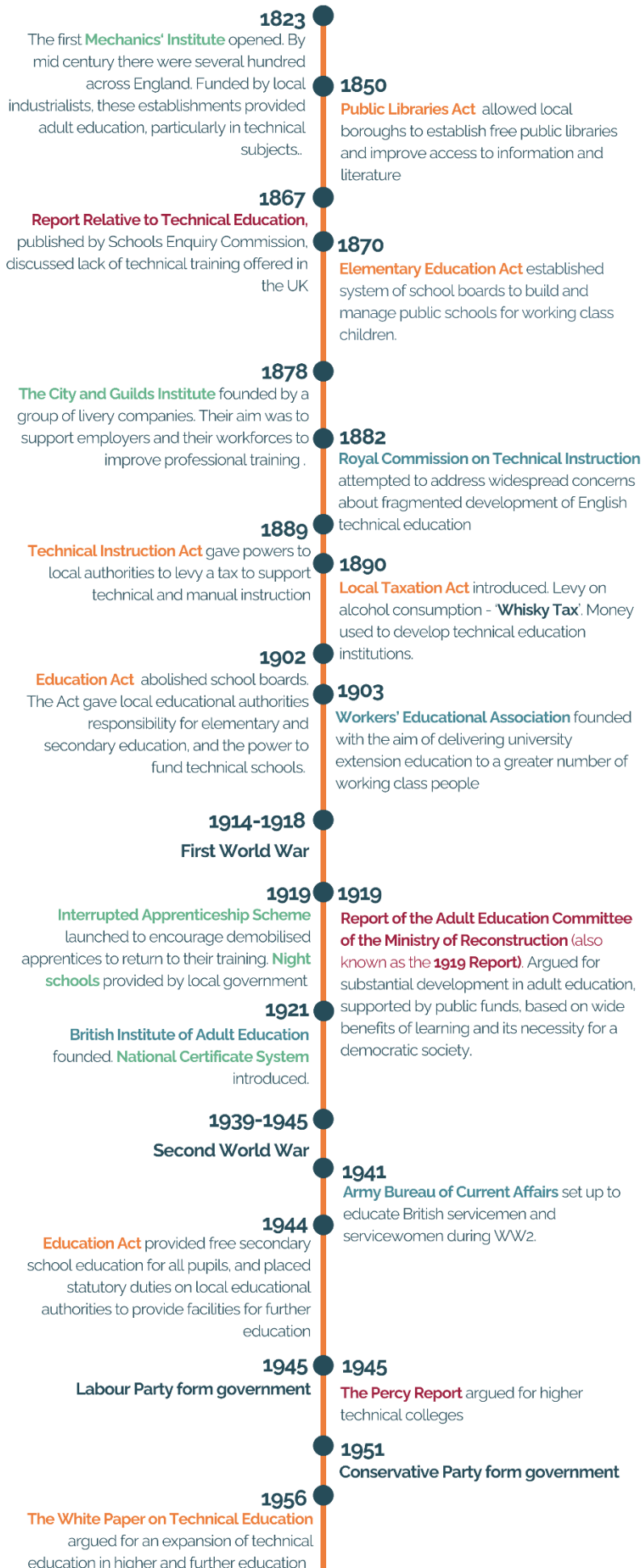
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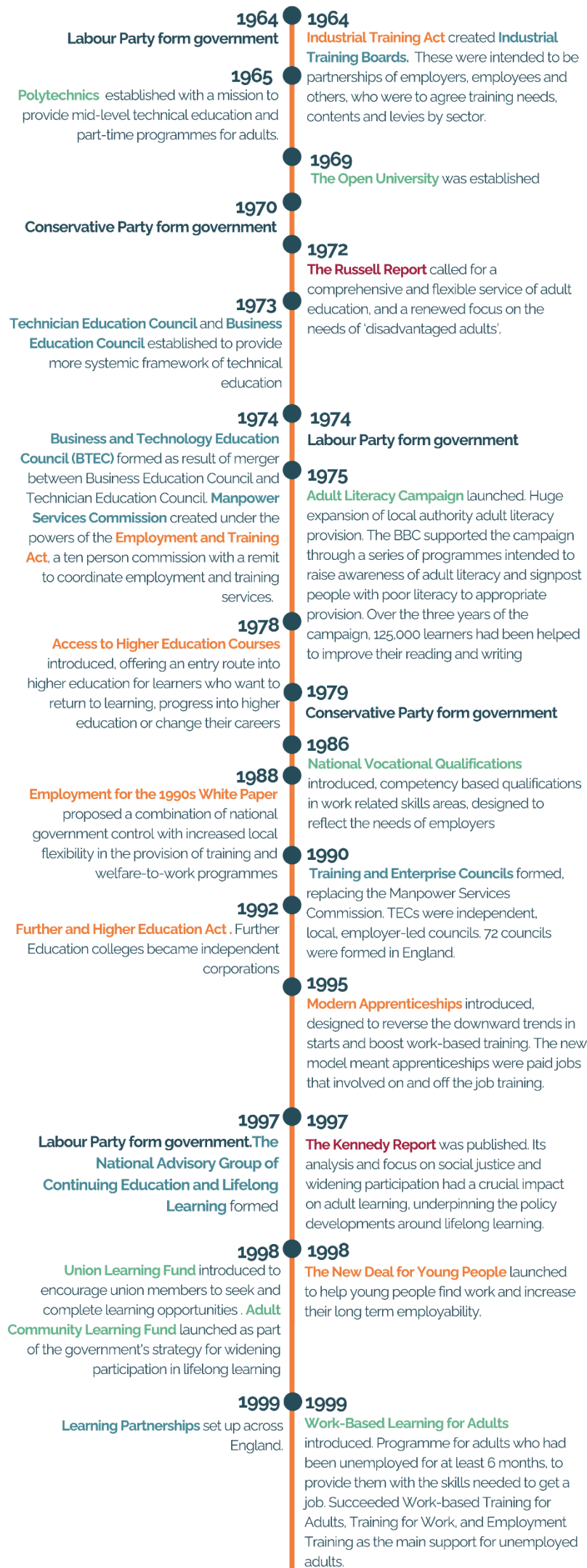
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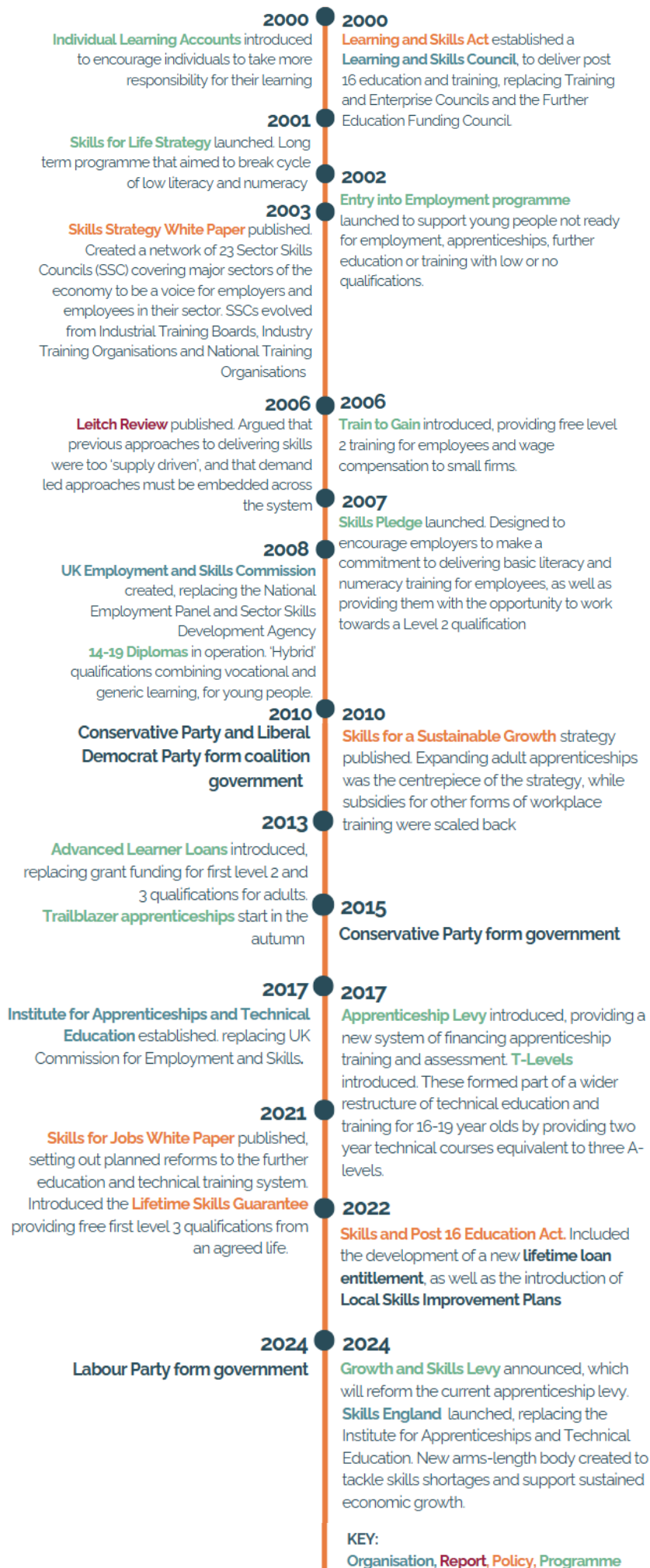
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A timeline of adult education and skills policy







Key findings

- There have been many approaches to adult education and skills over the last decades. Their success and staying power have partly depended on the economic, social and political context. But five common themes emerge:
 - **Value of learning.** Increasingly the focus is on skills for jobs, rather than learning for life, health, wellbeing and enjoyment. This risks limiting focus and impact.
 - **General approach.** Governments need to decide their overall approach and the balance between compulsion and voluntarism and between market-led and planning. This needs to be based on an analysis of the problems being tackled and lessons learned from the past.
 - **Success measures.** We need a clear sense of what a successful learning and skills system looks like and to focus as much on quality and impact as we do on the quantity of learners, though this matters too.
 - **Skills in context.** Skills policy needs to be viewed with other policy areas and focus at least as much on employer and individual investment in learning and skills utilisation as on what the Government spends and how.
 - **Empowerment and consistency.** Learning and skills policy has become increasingly centralised, with constant micromanagement and chop and change of short-run initiatives.
- **Adult education has a long and rich history**, with modern adult education practices dating back to the 18th century. The focus has usually been on a mix of two priorities: **economic**, growing the economy and helping employers' meet their skills needs; and **social**, reflecting the benefits of learning to health and communities and wider value of education in and of itself. The balance of responsibilities has varied over time between employers, individuals / communities, and the government.
- **During the 18th and 19th centuries, adult education was primarily delivered through a variety of religious and community organisations.** Responsibility for training at work sat mostly with employers (who delivered this to a mixed extent). The state played a relatively small role in adult education and skills policy.
- **The government played an increasing role during the 20th century and beyond.** A number of inquiries identified insufficient technical education as holding the economy back and adult education as essential to meet the needs of social change, such as the extension of voting rights. This led to a range of government initiatives and funding, many focused on trying to encourage sectors and groups of employers to identify skills needs and develop approaches to tackle them.

- **Since the 1980s there has been a shift to a primary focus of policymakers on adult education's role in economic growth, with less focus on learning as an intrinsic good.** This is reflected in increasing attention on adult learning for employment and employability and cuts to adult education funding.
- **Policy making has taken a yo-yo approach, varying between being more market-led and more centrally planned.** This has often involved creating bodies (with varying roles for employers) to either plan and design provision or set incentives for people and employers to make decisions. But the general thread is of greater centralisation, with apprenticeship standards and funding, most adult education rules and funding, decisions about most qualifications, and even specific programmes (such as Skills Bootcamps) determined by national government. This can mean that, despite the best intentions, the government drives policy and delivery rather than employer, local or individual need or demand.
- **There has been insufficient focus on employer investment in and use of skills.** Policy generally focuses most on how much public funding to invest and how it should be spent. But employer investment is much larger than public investment, has fallen 26% per employee since 2005, is skewed toward the already-highly qualified, and people's skills need to be used at work to improve productivity and raise earnings. Approaches have yo-yoed between voluntarism (encouraging employers to do more) and compulsion (requiring them to through levies and licenses to practice). The siloed nature of skills policy and lack of a truly joined up skills strategy hasn't helped.
- **There is insufficient evidence on the effectiveness of policy and recent decades have seen acute policy turnover.** Policy is usually seen as something to be announced and then delivered by providers, rather than being developed and delivered in partnership. Building a collaborative approach to developing policy, embedding evaluation in programme design, and taking a test and learn approach would also support longer-term, more sustainable policy making.¹
- **The result is that adult education is lower funded than it was, more narrowly focused, and more centrally driven.** Combined with chop and change in short-term initiatives and insufficient focus on employer and community investment in and utilisation of learning, this has left the UK in the middle of the pack internationally on essential and intermediate skills, holding back growth and opportunity.
- **Too often, learning and skills policy has been a merry go round,** with short-lived repeats of previous approaches that don't stand the test of time. Austerity means the proportion of adults in further or adult education is at its lowest since the Second World War. All of this needs to change.

¹ City & Guilds Group (2019) [Sense and Instability](#)

Introduction

This is the third report of L&W's Ambition Skills programme, supported by City and Guilds and NOCN. The programme considers the economic and social case for a higher ambition for learning and skills, and how we can achieve it. Its focus is largely on policy in England, but with lessons and analysis covering the whole of the UK.

The first two reports looked at how the UK's skills base compares to other countries, how skills profiles vary within the UK, and how both are likely to change by 2035.

This report looks at the history of learning and skills policy, going back to the late 19th century. There has been no shortage of focus on these topics or concern that the UK should do better; all the way back to the 1882 Samuelson Royal Commission on technical education.

But this has manifested itself in a merry go round of policy making, a constant churn of policy and institutions, and a narrowing focus on skills for jobs (rather than also learning for life) and the publicly funded system (rather than also employers' investment in and utilisation of skills).

Too often, we find ourselves taking a similar approach to that of the past and hoping for a different outcome only to be disappointed. The effect is of a playlist stuck on repeat. This is despite the amazing work that colleges, providers and others do every day to deliver inspirational learning that transforms people's lives and helps employers meet their needs.

To chart a different path in the future, we need to learn the lessons of history. That's what this report aims to help us do.

A brief history of adult skills and education

Adult education grew from the 18th century, driven by voluntary groups and employers. Through the 20th century, the government took an increasing role in both funding and direction. Approaches have varied between planning and quasi-markets, and between voluntarism and compulsion for employers.

This chapter explores key adult skills policy, from the 18th century to the contemporary policy landscape. It identifies changes in underlying approaches, the driving factors of each policy and, where possible, its effectiveness (how well it worked and why).

18th century – 19th century

Adult education was largely delivered through a variety of religious and community organisations. Primary responsibility for workforce training sat with employers.

The origins of adult education as we know it today began with religious organisations. In the late 1700s, churches provided literacy provision to enable people to read the Bible. Consequently, some of the first schools for adults were organised by the Methodist church and by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).² The first adult school is said to have begun in Nottingham in 1798 to meet the needs of young women in local textiles factories and run by volunteers.

The schools grew in popularity and their remit widened to evening classes in maths and geography. The leaders focused on learner engagement by offering wrap-around support including extra-curricular clubs and helping with finances. By the end of the 19th century, 350 church-run adult schools existed, with 45,000 learners. By 1909-10 there were 1,900 schools engaging over 114,000 adults.³

Participation dropped as a direct impact of the First World War and, as new secular adult education organisations emerged, the religious emphasis of this provision became less popular.

Employers also played a founding role in vocational and technical education. The first **Mechanics' Institute (1823)** was funded by local business owners and provided adult education particularly in technical subjects. This employer-led approach supported workers to develop skills truly needed by the employer, ultimately benefiting both parties. The provision revolutionised access to education in science and technology for many working people. See case study one for more information.

² PRIA International Academy (2014) [International Dimension of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning](#)

³ Ibid

Case study one: Mechanics' Institutes

Mechanics' Institutes delivered technical and vocational education, as well as social and cultural provision, to working people. The institutes were a product of the Industrial Revolution, which had created a demand for the workforce to manage the machinery that had revolutionised output. They were voluntary associations, which raised funds via annual subscriptions to be used for the education of their members through lectures, evening classes, and libraries.⁴ The first institute was established in Glasgow in 1823, and the second in London in 1824. The concept quickly spread around Britain - by 1850 there were 610 institutes in England and 12 in Wales, with a total membership of over 600,000.⁵

The Mechanics' Institute movement was in some ways the first attempt to create widespread learning opportunities for workers who wished to learn about the technical and scientific principles underpinning the processes they were using in their work. Early promoters of the movement believed the institutes should be founded and run by the people they aimed to serve. But in practice, most of the Mechanics' Institutes (including the first established in Britain) were founded and promoted by local industrialists, clergy and other members of the professional class, who would benefit from having more skilled and knowledgeable employees.

The Mechanics' Institutes were as concerned about values, citizenship and the intrinsic benefits of learning as they were about growth and prosperity. This perspective helped to shape and influence the practice of British adult educators, informing their view of their work as invested with social purpose.

However, some historians have argued that the Mechanics' Institutes failed to attract the working classes, and instead it was the lower middle class – clerks, shopkeepers and other small businessmen – who used these facilities.⁶ This has partly been attributed to the fact that political or religious discussions were not allowed in the institutes, with even newspapers banned.⁷ Other sources argued the establishments were largely successful in attracting the working men they intended to serve.⁸

As publicly funded provision of child and adult education and libraries grew from the end of the 19th century, the role of Mechanics' Institutes reduced. Often the members' subscriptions were insufficient to maintain the institutions. Overall, the institutes were

⁴ Royle, E. (1971). [Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes](#), 1840-1860. *The Historical Journal*, 14 (2), 305-321.

⁵ Gillard, D. (2018). [Chapter 5: 1750-1860. Towards mass education](#), Education in the UK: a history.

⁶ Royle, E. (1971). [Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes](#), 1840-1860. *The Historical Journal*, 14 (2), 305-321.

⁷ Gillard, D. (2018). [Chapter 5: 1750-1860. Towards mass education](#), Education in the UK: a history.

⁸ Royle, E. (1971). [Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes](#), 1840-1860. *The Historical Journal*, 14 (2), 305-321.

not able to achieve as wide a dissemination of scientific and technological knowledge as was originally hoped.⁹

Nonetheless, the movement did accomplish considerable educational work among clerical workers, trades people and manual workers, and laid the foundations for a system of technical education.¹⁰ Indeed, the legacy of the Mechanics' Institutes continues today, with several institutions, colleges and universities having their origins in these establishments – including Birkbeck College in London.

Another example of an employer-led initiative is the **City and Guilds of London Institute (1878)** which was founded by a group of livery companies and the City of London. Their aim was to support employers and their workforces to improve professional training within a national system of technical education. Employers were heavily involved in syllabus design and exams.¹¹

The Industrial Revolution gave new importance to adult education during the 18th century. The driving force for adult education during this time was training people to ensure they had the knowledge and skills required for increasingly specialised jobs. By the turn of the 19th century, adult education, in the form of schools and professional training centres for adults or young workers, was an established field of practice.

Increasing technological change and international competition also resulted in the state investing in improving adult skills. For example, in **1850 the Public Libraries Act** was introduced allowing local areas to establish free public libraries, giving people access to free information and literature. Public libraries had a major impact on adult learning in the latter half of the 19th century: by 1900, over 70% of men were literate and millions had engaged in informal learning.¹²

A series of reports (for example, the **Report Relative to Technical Education in 1867**) were published during this period highlighting that the lack of formal vocational training could put the UK behind its international comparators (a theme underpinning policy rationale throughout this review). Countries such as France and Germany had systems of education that provided for adult education in a range of subjects from craft to engineering.

The 1870 Education Act was perhaps the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in England and Wales, expanding access to primary

⁹ Technical Education Matters. (2009) [Chapter 5 – The Dissenting Academies, the Mechanics' Institutions and Working Men's Colleges](#).

¹⁰ Education and Employers (2020). [A short history of employer engagement: Once more round the buoy or set fair for a better voyage?](#)

¹¹ Huddleston, P (2020) [A short history of employer engagement](#)

¹² UCU (2009) [UCU's vision of adult learning](#)

education for working class children. This may have helped shift attitudes to education, including the importance of adult learning accessible for everyone.¹³

In 1882, the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction (also known as the Samuelson Commission) aimed to address concerns about the fragmented landscape of technical education and the UK lagging behind other countries. One of its main objectives was to compare technical education in the UK with that in other European countries. The commission started a conversation around the purpose and remit of technical education, and how it could be delivered more effectively. It produced two reports including recommendations to give more decision-making power about education policy to local authorities, provide more training for young people in work schools and increase employer investment in these schools.¹⁴

Despite these advancements in technical education, compulsory elementary education and the new optional secondary education curriculum placed emphasis on the arts and classics and less so on technical and practical subjects. This limited opportunities for students who wanted to progress into higher technical education.¹⁵

Apprenticeships (whose origins can be traced back to medieval times) were the main route for children to develop their skills and stay in work in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, by the early 19th century they became less popular as employers were able to find enough people to take on (often dangerous) factory work without training.¹⁶

Early 20th century: community-led learning

At the beginning of the 20th century, voluntary sector provision, self-organised and employer-led adult learning expanded (see case study two for an example). **In the wake of World War I, there was a renewed interest in adult education. At this time, there was still little state funding for adult education.** In 1902, 450,000 students were attending technical schools or evening classes.¹⁷

¹³ UK Parliament [The 1870 Education Act](#)

¹⁴ Science Museum Group, [Royal Commission on Technical Instruction](#)

¹⁵ Huddleston, P (2020) [A short history of employer engagement](#)

¹⁶ Huddleston, P (2020) [A short history of employer engagement](#); House of Commons Library (2015) [A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century](#).

¹⁷ Huddleston, P (2020) [A short history of employer engagement](#)

Case study two: Workers' Educational Association – example of community-led intervention

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was founded in 1903 by British educationists Albert and Frances Mansbridge. It has been viewed as the successor to the Mechanics' Institutes, the Working Men's College and the University Extension movement.¹⁸ These were all part of an adult education movement in Britain which sought to bring higher education to working people who would otherwise not be able to access education beyond a primary level. During this time, free, compulsory education was only provided to children between the ages of five and twelve.

The WEA was a self-governing, democratic, centralised organisation, supported by trade unions, trades councils, cooperatives, political groups, adult schools, churches and chapels.¹⁹ The main activities run by the WEA were Tutorial Classes, which involved university lecturers coming to working class communities to teach three-year courses, funded by universities, the Board of Education, and local educational authorities.²⁰ The WEA also ran several one year classes and study circles, many of which were conducted by former Tutorial Class students, and numerous public lectures, conferences and weekend schools.²¹

During the inter-war period, the WEA became the largest provider of adult education.²² In 1919–20, the WEA ran a total of 557 classes with 12,438 students. In 1941–42, the total number of classes the WEA ran increased to 3,288 with a total of 58,582 students.²³

The WEA was closely involved in campaigns for a better state education, in particular the campaign which led to the 1944 Education Act.²⁴ As well as providing free secondary education for all pupils, the Act placed statutory duties on local education authorities to provide adequate facilities in their areas for further education.²⁵ The WEA is now a national voluntary organisation which exists primarily to provide adults with access to organized learning.²⁶

¹⁸ Rose, J. (1989). [The Workers in the Workers' Educational Association, 1903-1950](#). *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 21 (4), 591-608

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Feis, H. (1920). [Economics' in the British Workers' Educational Association](#). *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 34 (2), 366-372.

²² Kumbhat, P. (2023). [Women in the world of adult education 1920-1945](#). *Women's History Review*, 32, (4), 540-559.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ [Workers' Educational Association Archive, 1903 – date](#).

²⁵ O'Hare, B. (1981). [Local Education Authority Provision for Adult Education in the United Kingdom](#). *The Irish Journal of Education*, 15 (2), 53-69.

²⁶ [Workers' Educational Association Archive](#), 1903 – date.

The turn of the century marked the beginning of the state becoming more involved in adult education. For example, in **1902 The Education Act** gave local authorities responsibility for funding technical education, and in 1919 local government were given funding to provide adult learning opportunities through night schools.²⁷ There were around 340,000 apprentices per year in the early twentieth century.²⁸

Alongside this, there was a rise in voluntary sector and self-organised adult learning, **The Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction (1919)**²⁹ called for adult education to be seen as a basic right for all citizens and as a social good. The report also recommended widening access to adult education provision, including provision for women, and increased state funding. See case study three for more information. The years that followed were marked by economic crises (in the 1920s and 1930s) and significant cuts to education spending.³⁰

Case study three: The 1919 Report – adult education as a social good

In 1917, the Ministry of Reconstruction was created to oversee the restoration and improvement of industrial, trading and social conditions at the end of the First World War. It set up numerous committees to consider different aspects of life in Britain – one of which was on adult education. The Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, known as the 1919 Report, called for adult education not to be regarded as a luxury, but as a 'permanent national necessity'.³¹

The report emphasised the social purpose of adult education, viewing it as necessary for an active informed democracy. It argued that the value of adult education should not be measured solely by increases in earning power or productivity, but also in the quality of life it inspires in the individual.³² The report highlighted the importance of different approaches to teaching and organisation for adults, emphasising the breadth of their interests and realities of their lives.³³ It also placed emphasis on the education of women, recognising that education was necessary for all members of society.

The committee called for substantial development in adult education, supported by public funds. This included an expanded role for universities in delivering adult education, and an increased role for the Workers' Educational Association and other voluntary organisations. The committee also recommended that Local Educational Authorities should treat non-vocational adult education as a key part of their activities,

²⁷ IES (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#); Stanistreet, P (2019) [1919 and all that](#), The Learning Age.

²⁸ FE Week (2016) [History of apprenticeships dating back to days of Elizabeth 1st](#)

²⁹ H.M. Stationery Office (1919) [Ministry of Reconstruction: Final Report of Adult Education Committee](#)

³⁰ UCU (2009) [UCU's vision of adult learning](#)

³¹ Stanistreet, P. (2019). [1919 and all that](#). The Learning Age.

³² Clancy, S [The 1919 Report and the 1918 Education Act: the respective roles of the state and voluntary sector – a report on the Society for Educational Studies research findings](#).

³³ Stanistreet, P. (2019). [1919 and all that](#). The Learning Age.

through organisational and financial support for university tutorial classes and the creation of non-vocational evening centres, which would focus on the education of young adults.³⁴

Despite the recommendations of the report, provision of adult education continued to be primarily offered by voluntary organisations. In 1921, the **British Institute of Adult Education** was founded led by Viscount Haldane, as a 'thinking department' focused on research and advocacy for adult education. In part, its remit was to revive interest in the report and its recommendations.³⁵

In 1918, the **World Association for Adult Education (now L&W)** was founded by a group including Dr Albert Mansbridge (who also founded the WEA). Its main aim was to provide a forum for key stakeholders in adult education to research and share good practice and provide a national voice promoting adult education. In 1921 it became the British Institute of Adult Education.

A local focus was cemented by the **1944 Education Act** which gave local areas the power to offer education for adults through community colleges as well as expand access to secondary education and raise the education participation age to 16. The Act legally founded the further education (FE) sector, defined as providing full-time and part-time provision for post-school aged pupils. Linked to the 1944 Act, the number of evening institutes offering courses for adults more than doubled between 1947 and 1950, from just over 5,000 to nearly 11,000, while the number of students increased from 825,000 to 1,250,000.³⁶

1940s – 1950s: Renewed focus on technical education

In the late 1940s and 1950s there was continuing focus on improving standards in technical education, driven by the government. Multiple bodies and initiatives were created by the government over time, many aiming to form social partnerships to improve skills at a sectoral or national level.

The report on Higher Technological Education (produced by a committee led by Lord Percy (1945)) was commissioned by the government as part of post-war plans to reconstruct Britain, with education playing a central role. The report furthered the case for technical colleges, arguing that part-time and evening provision had its limitations, and that colleges should offer high level technological courses of a standard equivalent to degree-level courses. A year later, the Barlow report on scientific education recommended more training for scientists, engineers and technicians.

³⁴ Stanistreet, P. (2019). [1919 and all that](#). The Learning Age.

³⁵ Stanistreet, P. (2019). [1919 and all that](#). The Learning Age; [Learning and Work Institute](#)

³⁶ [The Learning Age blog](#)

Participation in further education stood at 2.4 million in 1949 in England and Wales. In the same year, 7.7% of government spending was on education overall.³⁷

Part of the government's approach to meet this objective was to open 10 **Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) in 1955** (which were mainly further education colleges rebranded).³⁸ Most CATs delivered the Diploma in Technology (Dip. Tech.), a 'degree equivalent' qualification in subjects such as engineering and applied science. Dip. Techs were developed by the government (the Hives committee) in consultation with employers from key sectors such as transport, construction and mining. The qualification was primarily delivered as a sandwich course, including six monthly periods in industry often over four years. Participation increased fast, and the CATs became universities in the 1960s.³⁹

In **1956 the White Paper on Technical Education** advocated for investment in facilities for technical education and an expansion of provision and teachers. These calls were made in response to the government's concerns that England was lagging behind in Science and Technology compared to Russia. In the years that followed, the FE sector expanded, and participation patterns shifted from evening to daytime. Many young people opted to go to a college to take a variety of exams including O and A levels.⁴⁰

Completing an apprenticeship was a common pathway in many jobs in the mid-20th century, with trade unions, employers and the government working together in making vocational education policy. In the 1950s, apprenticeships were the main route into a job in many manufacturing industries, engineering and construction. By the mid-1960s, roughly 35 per cent of male school leavers aged 15 to 17 went on to do an apprenticeship.⁴¹ State support or intervention was minimal and there were no major reforms during this time, rather young people would work for a company before progressing into paid employment about three years later.⁴² This traditional model dates back to 1600, where the young person would sign a contract binding them to their employer for a number of years.⁴³

The government established **UK Industry Training Boards (ITBs) in 1964** under the Industrial Training Act. They were intended to plug the skills gap in traditionally skilled occupations and higher technician and engineering professionals. 28 ITBs were established, representing the majority of sectors and 15 million workers.⁴⁴ ITBs included employer, employee, trade union and training provider representatives responsible for agreeing training needs, contents and compulsory levies or training

³⁷ House of Commons Library (2012) [Education: Historical Statistics](#)

³⁸ Gatsby (2018) [The Missing Middle: Higher Technical Education in England](#)

³⁹ Evans, R (2009) [A Short history of technical education](#)

⁴⁰ Evans, R (2009) [A Short history of technical education](#)

⁴¹ FE Week (2016) [History of apprenticeships dating back to days of Elizabeth 1st](#)

⁴² UK Parliament [You're Hired: Apprenticeships since the 1950s](#)

⁴³ Training Standards Council (2000) [Modern Apprenticeships: A survey report](#)

⁴⁴ Department for Education (2017) [Building Support: the review of the Industry Training Boards](#)

grants by sector to fund training. In 1970, the 28 ITBs raised total levies of £175 million, equivalent to £2.4 billion in 2025.⁴⁵ This is not far short of the apprenticeship budget in England in 2024-25 (£2.7 billion, with an additional £500 million given to devolved administrations and a further £800 million retained by HM Treasury). But there are 9.8 million more people in work, so this is a cut in levy allocated per employee of 5% (though if the full levy raised was allocated to training by the Government, the spend per employee would be higher now than in the early 1970s).

Reviews of ITBs indicate mixed results: some positive impacts on the quantity and quality of training, but with many smaller firms facing high administration costs. The one-size-fits-all approach failed to meet the needs of every industry, with small and medium size businesses facing distinct challenges.⁴⁶ Most ITBs ended in 1981 when the government announced responsibility for training would be transferred to individual industries and employers (meaning that training costs would be met on a voluntary basis).⁴⁷ The rationale was to reduce bureaucracy and to give employers the power to manage their own training needs and how to allocate funding. In 2025, two ITBs with statutory levies remain – Construction and Engineering Construction.⁴⁸

In **1965** the government established **Polytechnics** that aimed to provide mid-level technical education, and part-time programmes for adults, helping to meet increased demand for higher education in England and Wales⁴⁹. By the late 1960s, there were 100,000 students in polytechnics in England and Wales.⁵⁰ In **1973 the Technical Education Council and Business Education Council** was established to provide a more systemic framework of technical education.

1970s: Reducing inequalities and widening access

By the 1970s, there was a mix of state-funded adult education provision, yet stark inequalities in access remained. For example, night schools were accessed more by adults from higher social grades with higher skills levels, while people who left school early, or with few to no qualifications were less likely to engage.⁵¹

In **1969 The Open University** was established, delivering part-time degree level distance learning (supported by in-person tutorials) for the first time.⁵²

The 1972 Russell Report aimed to make adult skills provision more inclusive. The report gathered evidence from over 230 sources including trade unions and women's institutes. It argued that adult skills provision had failed to meet the needs of

⁴⁵ [Industrial Training Boards \(Hansard, 12 November 1970\)](#)

⁴⁶ Evans, R (2009) [A Short history of technical education](#)

⁴⁷ [The National Archives](#)

⁴⁸ UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2012) [Understanding Training Levies](#)

⁴⁹ Edge Foundation (2022) [Polytechnics](#)

⁵⁰ Gatsby (2018) [The Missing Middle: Higher Technical Education in England](#).

⁵¹ IES (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#)

⁵² IES (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#)

disadvantaged groups and called for a focus on inclusivity. This report shaped the work of local authorities, the WEA and others.⁵³ It prompted change in non-formal adult education including a focus on adult literacy and numeracy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), family learning and access courses to higher education and employment.⁵⁴

In **1974 the Manpower Services Commission (MSC)** was established as a non-departmental body of the Department of Employment, under the powers of the Employment and Training Act 1973. It was a ten-person commission, made up of industry representatives, trade unions, local authorities and adult skills stakeholders brought together to coordinate employment and training services. It focused on training initiatives tackling the high unemployment rates in the 1970s and 1980s including the Youth Opportunities Programme, the Job Creation Programme and the Youth Training Scheme. It also took over responsibility for managing the ITBs activities.

Examples of subsequent initiatives that focused on widening participation and making adult skills provision more inclusive are the **Basic Skills Campaign (1975)** and **Access Courses (1978)**. In **1975 the Basic Skills Campaign** was launched on prime-time television aiming to reach the 6 million adults with low literacy and numeracy skills. Over the three years of the campaign, 125,000 learners had been helped to improve their reading and writing, and 75,000 volunteers had been trained.⁵⁵ Its impact is attributed to it being free at the point of take up and accessible from people's homes.⁵⁶

In **1978 Access to Higher Education (HE) courses** were introduced, offering an entry route into HE for learners who wanted to return to learning, progress into HE or change their careers. Their main purpose was to widen access and participation into higher education among mature and/or disadvantaged adults, and those wishing to upskill or transition into different occupations. They started as a pilot scheme in 8 Local Authorities, offering locally-developed, flexible learning options. Despite a lack of additional funding, they expanded quickly with courses on offer in 40 Local Authorities, attracting around 7,000 students by 1986. They still exist today as a well-established route into HE and have played a significant role in widening participation.⁵⁷

Late 1970s – 1990s: further centralisation of adult skills policy

Between the late 1970's and the 1990s, adult skills policy was increasingly driven by national government and focused on improving skills supply for growth.

⁵³ Jones, H (1974) The Russell Report on Adult Education in England and Wales in the Context of Continuing Education.

⁵⁴ UCU (2009) [UCU's vision of adult learning](#)

⁵⁵ Department for Education and Employment (1999) [Improving literacy and numeracy: A fresh start](#)

⁵⁶ Institute for Employment Studies (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#).

⁵⁷ Edge Foundation (2022) [Access to Higher Education Courses](#)

Significant policy churn continued. The Institute for Government highlights that between the 1980s and 2017, there were 28 major pieces of legislations relating to vocational education, FE and skills, 48 secretaries of state with relevant responsibilities, and no organisation survived longer than a decade. **Overall, this has created a complex and changeable landscape for its users and providers, making it difficult to navigate and understand.**⁵⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s apprenticeships starts fell. By 1990, the number of apprentices had dropped to just 53,000 partly due to the decline in the UK's manufacturing industries where apprenticeships were well established.⁵⁹ Young people also increasingly stayed in school, college or university education for longer.⁶⁰

In the early 1990s, the government decided to devolve responsibility for adult training provision by creating a network of local, employer-led **Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs)** (replacing the ITBs and MSC). They were independent private companies but received most of their funding from central government, which they used to fund local provision.⁶¹ They were given power over 25% of local authority budgets for work-related further education.⁶²

Less than a decade after their introduction, the government abolished the TECs in 2000, replacing them with the **Learning and Skills Council**. This was an attempt to once again rationalise the adult skills and training sector under one umbrella – a reversal in thinking from the devolution strategy just a few years before.

In **1992 the Further and Higher Education Act** introduced a more market-based system. FE colleges were incorporated (removed from local authority control) and made private. Instead of receiving a block grant from local authorities (which was the method prior to 1992), they received funding based on outputs such as the number of learners. The rationale was that this would incentivise providers to recruit more learners and maximise learner retention and achievement.⁶³

The 1997 Labour Government introduced a range of adult skills initiatives, including:

- Union Learning Fund (1998)
- Adult Community Learning Fund (1998)
- Individual learning accounts (2000)

⁵⁸ Institute for Government (2017) [All Change: Why Britain is so prone to policy reinvention and what can be done about it](#)

⁵⁹ FE Week (2016) [History of apprenticeships dating back to days of Elizabeth 1st](#)

⁶⁰ UK Parliament [You're Hired: Apprenticeships since the 1950s](#)

⁶¹ House of Commons Library (1997) [Training and Enterprise Councils: Research Paper 97/48](#)

⁶² Institute for Employment Studies (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#)

⁶³ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

- Skills for Life Strategy (2001).⁶⁴

They were informed by a wider narrative about making the social and economic case for adult learning, and aimed to give individuals more choice and control over the type of learning available.⁶⁵ They were also shaped by reports (for example [Learning Works](#) by Helena Kennedy) making the case for widening participation for vulnerable groups including those who left school with few to no qualifications, disabled people and people with learning difficulties and disabilities.⁶⁶

These initiatives had mixed results. **Individual Learning Accounts (2000)** gave a training grant of £150 to each individual account (which could then be topped up by learners and employers) and used by learners to pay for training of their choice. The government's rationale was to incentivise take up of learning by giving learners more purchasing power and subsequently stimulate competition between providers encouraging them to be more responsive to learners' needs.⁶⁷ However, the National Audit Office review found that the scheme was implemented too quickly and inadequately planned, with insufficient quality assurance, too many low-quality courses and some instances of fraud. Over the lifetime of the scheme, 2.6 million accounts were opened. Expenditure totalled £273 million, exceeding the budget of £199 million.⁶⁸

See case study boxes four and five for discussion of the **Union Learning Fund** and **Skills for Life Strategy**.

Case study four: Union Learning Fund – public initiative working with employers, employees and trade unions

The Union Learning Fund (ULF) was established in 1998. Funded by the government, the ULF was administered through the Trades Union Congress (TUC), with funds distributed to affiliated trade unions. Its aim was to develop the capacity of trade unions and Union Learning Representatives to work with employers, employees and learning providers to encourage greater take up of learning in the workplace.

The ULF enabled trade unions and Union Learning Representatives to provide advice, guidance, and support to help workers access learning opportunities. It was managed and administered by unionlearn, the TUC's Learning and Skills Organisation, under an agreement with the Department for Education, which directed the level and type of learning activity that should be supported by the ULF.

⁶⁴ Institute for Employment Studies (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#)

⁶⁵ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁶⁶ Tuckett, A (2017) [The rise and fall of life-wide learning for adults in England](#)

⁶⁷ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁶⁸ National Audit Office (2002) [Individual learning accounts](#)

ULF projects helped learners access a wide range of learning activities, from essential skills programmes, including literacy and numeracy, to vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and ongoing professional development. In total, the ULF supported more than 50 unions in over 700 workplaces.⁶⁹

Evaluations of the ULF found that, every £1 invested in the fund resulted in a total economic return of £12.50.⁷⁰ More than 3 in 4 employers reported that engagement with the ULF had a positive effect in their workplaces.⁷¹ In 2016, over two-thirds of learners with no previous qualifications, and just under half of those starting with entry level or Level 1 qualifications, obtained a higher-level qualification as a result of ULF support.⁷² Four in five learners with no qualifications said that they would not have taken part in learning had it not been for the support of the union.⁷³

In England, the ULF was abolished in March 2021, but similar schemes continue to exist in Scotland and Wales. In Wales, the Welsh government directly funds the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF), but the WULF also generates co-investment and often receives in-kind support from the union and partners. In Scotland, the Scottish government invests in Scottish Union Learning, managed by the Scottish Trades Union Congress. This provides both a development fund, which is used to build union capacity in relation to skills and learning, including through union learning reps, and an adult learning fund, to which unions can bid for funding to deliver courses.

Case study five: Skills for Life strategy

In 2001, the government launched Skills for Life in England, aiming to raise literacy and numeracy skills among adults. It was triggered by the 1999 Moser Report 'Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start'⁷⁴ that set out the national basic skills challenge. Improving basic skills would reduce the cost to the country caused by lower incomes, reduced productivity, poorer health and spending on benefits and welfare services.⁷⁵

The strategy set targets for the number of adults reached and qualifications to be gained. It aimed to target groups including:

- Those in regular contact with the government and its agencies e.g. those who are unemployed

⁶⁹ [Union Learning Fund](#)

⁷⁰ Union Learning Fund. [Prospectus: Round 19](#)

⁷¹ Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation & Change (2016). [Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund Rounds 15-16 and Support Role of Unionlearn. Final Report](#) October 2016.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Moser (1999) [A fresh start: Improving literacy and numeracy](#)

⁷⁵ Further Education Trust for Leadership (2021). [Skills for Life: A new strategy for English, Maths, ESOL and Digital.](#)

- Public sector employees with literacy and numeracy needs in central government, local government, the Armed Forces and the NHS
- Groups at high risk of exclusion due to poor literacy and numeracy skills including refugees, successful asylum seekers, and parents.⁷⁶

The aim was to identify and engage those who needed help through a range of referral bodies, then provide free training, family literacy programmes, full and part time, and 'mentored' learning.⁷⁷ The Department for Education and Employment set up a Basic Skills Unit aiming to improve standards in and quality of teaching and learning, ensure effective planning and funding of provision, ensure that provision was accessible, and improve data collection on effectiveness of the programme. Frontline workers received a qualification that recognised their referral skills, as well as guides and toolkits to take away the burden of additional work.⁷⁸

Over 10 years, 14 million adults participated in literacy and numeracy provision, with over 8 million qualifications achieved. This produced a 13% improvement in literacy in the adult population, with over 5 million more adults gaining skills at Level 2.⁷⁹

However, an evaluation found that Skills for Life was less effective in helping improve the skills of people with the lowest levels of proficiency. Over time, funding had shifted away from those with the fewest skills, towards those with the shortest journey to qualification,⁸⁰ indicating that the improvement in literacy and numeracy was smaller than suggested by the number of qualifications achieved.

The 1990s also saw efforts to revive apprenticeships, with the government launching **Modern Apprenticeships** in 1995.⁸¹ The new model meant apprenticeships were paid jobs that involved on and off-the-job-training. Instead of being a fixed-term, Modern Apprenticeships were awarded when apprentices had demonstrated necessary skills and competencies against a framework. By 1996, there were more than 20,000 apprentices in training, rising to 250,000 by 1998. The most popular sectors were business administration, engineering and retailing. The majority of employers were small firms.⁸² Today, there continue to be a lot of high-quality apprenticeships, benefiting people and employers. However, there are concerns that quality could be

⁷⁶ Department for Education and Employment. (2001) [Skills for life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.](#)

⁷⁷ Department for Education and Employment. (2001) [Skills for life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.](#)

⁷⁸ Further Education Trust for Leadership (2021). [Skills for Life: A new strategy for English, Maths, ESOL and Digital.](#) <https://fetl.org.uk/publications/skills-for-life-a-new-strategy-for-english-maths-esol-and-digital/>

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Training Standards Council (2000) [Modern Apprenticeships: A survey report](#)

⁸² FE Week (2016) [History of apprenticeships dating back to days of Elizabeth 1st](#)

higher in some cases and that the system is driven more by the government than employers.⁸³

2000s: further increased focus on the economic case

Adult learning and skills became increasingly focused on economic benefits, with the UK government taking an increasingly directive view. There has been a shift away from mechanisms aimed at giving greater power to individuals to drive the system (in part the legacy of the problems with Individual Learning Accounts) and growth in government asking employers to lead processes.⁸⁴

Examples include the **Learning and Skills Council (LSC)**, established in 2001 to plan and fund post-16 education and training focused on meeting the needs of the labour market primarily, and **Entry into Employment programme (2002)** supporting young people with low or no qualifications move towards the labour market. In addition, cuts to community-based adult education were made in favour of provision that developed skills needed for the labour market.⁸⁵

The LSC was responsible for planning, funding and regulating all post-16 education and training (except HE).⁸⁶ The LSC was closed in 2009 and was split into two new agencies: the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) responsible for 16 to 19 education and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) responsible for adult provision. To an extent, this reversed previous aims to streamline and integrate funding, but this was later reversed again when the two bodies were merged into the Education and Skills Funding Agency.⁸⁷

The **Skills Strategy White Paper** (2003) was published in response to concerns about England's productivity and skills gap compared to international competitors (a trend identified throughout this review). It aimed to put employers needs at the centre of its proposals – recommending designing programmes that met employers needs and requirements, including employers in the design and delivery of initiatives such as apprenticeships, and providing better information for employers about how to improve the skills of their workforce. It also highlighted the important role of the 23 Sector Skills Councils covering major sectors of the economy being a new voice for employers and employees. The government promised to support the development of these Councils to set long-term agendas for raising productivity in each sector, develop the skills needed for international competitiveness, and encourage collaboration between

⁸³ Learning & Work Institute (2024) [Flex and match: a new Skills Levy for growth and opportunity](#); House of Commons Library (2015) [A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century](#).

⁸⁴ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁸⁵ Tuckett, A. (2017) [The rise and fall of life-wide learning for adults in England](#).

⁸⁶ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁸⁷ Ibid

employers to invest in necessary skills. The Councils were expected to shape national and local level skills strategies, given the variation of skills needs between regions.

In 2004, apprenticeship eligibility was widened as the upper age limit of 25 was removed, and pre-apprenticeships were introduced as a pipeline pathway for people not ready to enter a full apprenticeship. Young apprenticeships were also introduced for 14–16-year-olds still at school (this scheme then ended in 2010 following the general election).⁸⁸

Mid 2000s: incentivising employer leadership followed by austerity

Since the mid-2000s, the adult skills policy narrative has shifted further towards paying greater attention to the issue of employer demand for and utilisation of skills, with attempts to implement employer-led funding models.⁸⁹

This change was supported by **the government-commissioned Leitch Review (2006)** which argued that previous approaches to delivering skills were too 'supply driven', and that funding should be demand-led by employers and individuals with a focus on economically valuable skills and the wider benefits of learning too.⁹⁰

Subsequently there were a flurry of policies focused on incentivising employer and individual engagement in adult skills development and training.

For example, **Train to Gain (2006)** was an England-wide service for businesses to identify and source work-based training that would improve their business performance and the skills of their workforce, up to level 2 and 3 (identified as a key shortfall and market failure).⁹¹ There were high levels of deadweight, partly because of the limited choice of qualifications and partly because providers and employers were incentivised to train (or provide qualifications to) people who either already had the skills but not the qualification, or who were close to the line.⁹² See case study box six.

Case study six: Train to Gain

Train to Gain was launched by the government in 2006 and managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). It focused on basic skills and qualifications up to levels 2 and 3, approved by Sector Skills Councils. It had three components:

- A skills brokerage service to advise employers on identifying training needs and sourcing training
- Flexible training, for example delivered in the workplace and at a convenient time

⁸⁸ House of Commons Library. (2015) [A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century](#).

⁸⁹ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Learning and Skills Council (2009) [Train to Gain Learner Evaluation: Report from Wave 3 research](#).

⁹² Tuckett (2017) A [The rise and fall of life-wide learning for adults in England](#).

- Full public funding of training for eligible employees taking specified courses and qualifications, and contributions to certain other training.⁹³

By July 2009, Train to Gain had supported more than 1.4 million learners, representing around 5% of the workforce.⁹⁴ An evaluation of the programme documented high levels of employee satisfaction and development in terms of improved work skills, increased attitude and self-confidence.⁹⁵ One quarter of employees also reported receiving a pay increase, promotion or bonus as a result of achieving a qualification.⁹⁶

However, the limited choice meant employers couldn't always get funding for qualifications they wanted.⁹⁷ The budget of £747 million was underspent by £151 million. Then, widening eligibility, combined with recession led to an overspend in year three of £50 million.⁹⁸ In 2009, a report by the National Audit Office concluded that over its full lifetime, the programme had not provided good value for money.⁹⁹ Issues included: **deadweight**, with around one half of employers stating they would have invested in comparable training without the public subsidy, although this training may not have led to achievement of full qualifications;¹⁰⁰ **impact of inflexibility**, with one study suggesting this led to shoehorning of employers needs into available options;¹⁰¹ and **insufficient monitoring and evidence on impact on business performance**.¹⁰²

In 2010, the Coalition government scrapped Train to Gain and began shifting focus and funding away from workplace learning onto new apprenticeships.

In **2007 the Skills Pledge** launched (a Leitch Review proposal). An example of voluntarism, it was designed to encourage employers to provide more basic literacy and numeracy training for employees, as well as providing them with the opportunity to work towards a Level 2 qualification. Evaluation findings show that it had a positive impact on employers' approach to training and professional development. Impact on productivity was less significant, with only one quarter of employers seeing an increase having invested more in staff training. In addition, only a limited number of employers signed up to the Pledge (only 4% of all employers by 2009).¹⁰³ Encouraging

⁹³ National Audit Office. (2009) [Train to Gain: developing the skills of the workforce](#).

⁹⁴ House of Commons Committee of Public Account. (2010). [Train to Gain: Developing the skills of the workforce](#).

⁹⁵ City & Guilds Group. (2019) [Sense and Instability](#)

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Institute for Government (2012) [Choice and competition in further education](#).

⁹⁸ House of Commons Committee of Public Account. (2010) [Train to Gain: Developing the skills of the workforce](#).

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ National Audit Office. (2009) [Train to Gain: developing the skills of the workforce](#).

¹⁰¹ Edge Foundation (2021) [Learning from the Past Paper No. 8: Train to Gain](#).

¹⁰² City & Guilds Group (2019) [Sense and Instability](#)

¹⁰³ Ibid

employers to do more for those who are missing out works to an extent, but it is challenging to reach everyone who would benefit.

The 2010s saw further reforms to apprenticeships, aimed again at ensuring they better matched employer need. This includes the **trailblazer apprenticeship standards (2013)** with employers designing apprenticeships to ensure apprentices developed the skills needed by industry, replacing the previous frameworks (which had a similar aim). This model also introduced co-funding to incentivise employer investment.

Since 2010 the government has reduced public spending on adult education in England by £1 billion in real terms.¹⁰⁴ Within this, significant investment has been made in apprenticeships, at the expense of other forms of adult education.

As part of this, a number of approaches aimed to encourage employers and individuals to invest more, in place of state funding.¹⁰⁵ This policy rationale is reflected in the **Skills for Sustainable Growth strategy (2010)**. Expanding adult apprenticeships was the central focus of the strategy, while subsidies for other forms of workplace training were scaled back.

Advanced Learner Loans (2013) are an example of loans replacing public subsidies. The loans were aimed at adult learners aged 24 and above enrolled on qualifications at level 3 or above, both to allow reductions in public spending and so (like ILAs) people would be better incentivised to make learning choices that supported their future careers. In 2016, Advanced Learner Loans were extended to all learners aged 19 and above to achieve even more extensive savings to adult and further education budgets. Around £130 million was lent through advanced learner loans in 2022–23, equating to 3% of the overall skills budget.¹⁰⁶ Since the introduction of the policy, there has been a steady decline in the number of adult learners (up to 31%) enrolling on FE courses at level 3 and above. FE providers and other sector experts have attributed the reduction in learner numbers to the introduction of Advanced Learner Loans.¹⁰⁷

Following a review led by Lord Sainsbury, the government launched the **Post-16 Skills Plan (2016)** setting out how it intended to create a simpler and more coherent vocational education system for young people, to ensure a clear line of sight to employment opportunities and that employers needs are met.

T Levels (2020) – badged as the technical equivalent to A-levels - were central to these reforms. They were developed with employers and education providers to ensure the content meets the needs of employers and prepares learners for entry into

¹⁰⁴ Learning & Work Institute (2024) [The great skills divide: how learning inequalities risk holding the UK back](#)

¹⁰⁵ Social Mobility Commission (2019) [Adult skills gap and the falling investment in adults with low qualifications](#)

¹⁰⁶ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) [Adult education and Skills](#)

¹⁰⁷ City & Guilds Group (2019) [Sense and Instability](#)

skilled employment, an apprenticeship or further education. They include classroom based learning and on-the-job experience. Since their roll out, participation rates have been low, with just over 16,000 students enrolled across 18 T Level routes in 2023/4.¹⁰⁸ Only two-thirds of entrants in 2021-22 completed their course and assessments within the standard two-year timeframe.¹⁰⁹ An Ofsted review found that students, teachers and employers identified a lack of clear information about the course and learners on industry placements ill-matched with their subject area.¹¹⁰

In **2017, the Apprenticeship Levy** was introduced - an example of a state-led initiative mandating employer investment. See case study seven for an in-depth exploration.

Case study seven: The Apprenticeship Levy and standards

In 2017, the government introduced the Apprenticeship Levy, a 0.5% tax on payrolls above an annualised £3 million. In England this funding is ring fenced in employers' digital account for apprenticeships. If they don't use this within two years it is returned to the Treasury. Smaller, non-levy paying employers have 95% of training costs funded by the government (100% for apprentices aged 16-21). All employers must still pay the wages of apprentices and other costs such as staff time spent on on-the-job training.

The aim of the levy was to create long-term funding for apprenticeship training in England, while giving employers the freedom to fund any approved apprenticeship at any level within their sector, assuming they would be best placed to make choices that support their firms' productivity. Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland receive a share of funding raised to spend as they wish.

Alongside the Apprenticeship Levy, other changes were introduced in England aimed at improving apprenticeship quality. These included a minimum apprenticeship duration of 12 months, a minimum 20% off-the-job training time during an apprenticeship, and standards setting out what an apprentice should be able to do by the end of their apprenticeship, designed by groups of employers. Whether or not an apprentice has met the required standards is judged by an end point assessment, undertaken by a different organisation to the one providing the training.

Apprenticeship numbers have fallen 34% since the reforms, with the sharpest falls among young people, in deprived areas, and at lower levels.¹¹¹ Average training hours and duration on an apprenticeship have risen, but only just over one in two apprentices completes their apprenticeship – lower than prior to the reforms. In some cases, apprenticeships are not chosen because they are the best training option, but so businesses can claim levy funds.¹¹² Often large employers paying the levy choose

¹⁰⁸ Edge Foundation (2024) [What do students really think about T Levels](#)

¹⁰⁹ Department for Education (2024) [T Level Action Plan 2023 to 2024](#).

¹¹⁰ Ofsted (2023) [T-level thematic review: Final report](#)

¹¹¹ Learning & Work Institute (2024) [Flex and match: a new Skills Levy for growth and opportunity](#).

¹¹² Learning & Work Institute (2020) [Levy paying employer decisions and accounting for prior learning](#).

apprenticeships to fund higher level training for older, existing employees, rather than young people starting out in their careers.

Employers want greater flexibility in what they can spend their levy payments on (such as short courses), while others are concerned that the existing freedoms and lack of incentives mean young people and those starting a new job or career are missing out.

Against this context of cuts to funding, there were external calls for the government to see the importance of the wider impacts of learning, such as health outcomes. For example in L&W's [Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK](#) and the [Centenary Commission on Adult Education](#) which highlight the social, health and wider outcomes of learning as well as the economic benefits.

The [Skills for Jobs White Paper](#) (2021) continued to focus on how to ensure public funding was better aligned to employers' needs, with little attention on employers' own investment in and utilisation of skills. It also introduced the [Lifetime Skills Guarantee](#) - covering funding for a first level 3 qualification in subjects approved by the government. This returned to previous grant funding at this level, following falls in participation after the switch to loans.

The 2022 [Skills and Post 16 Education Act](#) included the development of a new **lifetime loan entitlement**, as well as the introduction of **Local Skills Improvement Plans**, with local employer groups drawing up plans that providers should focus on in planning provision (though without a clear 'enforcement' mechanism).¹¹³

In 2024, the new Labour Government outlined its plans to broaden the existing Apprenticeship Levy into a **Growth and Skills Levy**. Employers will be able to use a proportion of their levy funds (Labour's manifesto said 'up to 50%') on training other than apprenticeships, from a list approved by the newly-created Skills England (which replaces the Institute for apprenticeships and technical education). The idea is to have greater flexibility and recognise that other training can have value. But the choice will be constrained by Skills England (like Train to Gain) and it is not clear how much flexibility there will be or how smaller firms might be supported.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Department for Education (2024) [Local skills improvement plans and local skills improvement fund](#)

¹¹⁴ FE week (2024) [Priority employers consulted on growth and skills levy](#)

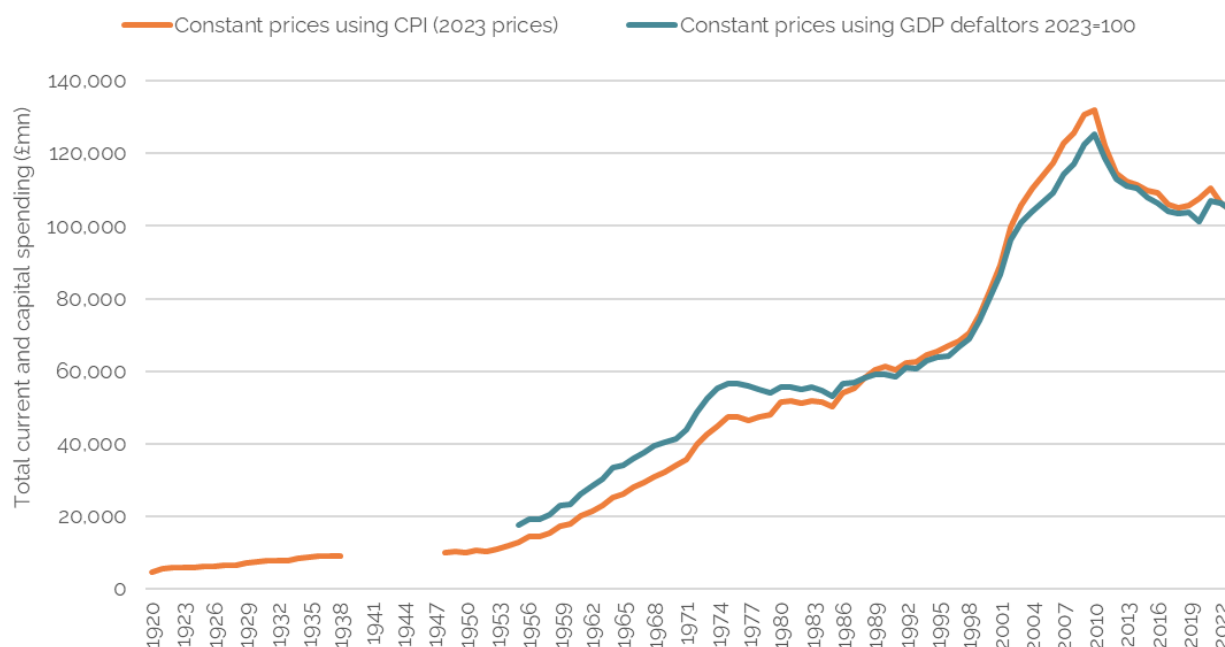
Investment and participation in adult learning

Investment and participation in adult learning generally rose over time, up to the 2010s. Both employers and the Government have cut investment since then.

Investment in adult learning

There was an upward trend in government spending on education throughout the 20th century, reflecting a growing population as well as increased participation in education by young people, **before falls during the 2010s**. L&W estimate total investment in adult learning is £111 billion per year, split between the government, employers and individuals, with this balance of responsibilities varying by level and type of learning.¹¹⁵

Figure 1: Total UK current and capital government spending on education, (£m)



Sources:

Macroeconomic data for the UK, Bank of England

CPI and GDP data, ONS

Education expenditure, DfE

Public investment

During the 2010s there was a significant real-terms decline in total public funding of adult education. From its peak of £6.3 billion in 2003-4, it dropped 30% by 2022-23, with spending at around £4.4 billion. Within this there has been a shift toward apprenticeships, with classroom-based learning falling (the adult education budget in

¹¹⁵ Learning & Work Institute (2023) [Time to learn: increasing participation in learning](#)

England was halved between 2010 and 2024).¹¹⁶ On top of this are tax reliefs, which bring total public investment to £6.8 billion.¹¹⁷

The Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning explored public expenditure on adult learning provision (including higher education) in 2007-8. One of the key findings is that **public investment is weighted towards higher education and young people**, with around two thirds (65%) of total expenditure being spent on higher education and estimates suggesting three quarters of this went to learners under 25. Similarly, around 90% of the £2.1 billion maintenance loans and grants was spent on higher education, and just 10% on further education student support. The research estimated that the state spent about £3.7 billion of public subsidy on vocational training.¹¹⁸

Employer investment

There has been a significant decline in employer investment in training, cutting their investment per employee by 26% in real terms since 2005.¹¹⁹ Employees who have a degree-level qualification are three times as likely to get training as those without such qualifications.¹²⁰

A review of adult education categorised employers into 4 main types: non-training, ad hoc or informal trainers, formal, systematic trainers and learning organisations. It suggests that the majority of employers fit into the first two categories, providing limited training, ad hoc training to meet specific needs or informal training led by more experienced employees.¹²¹

Individual investment

Individual investment has been significant in adult education since the 19th century, when individuals funded vocational education opportunities such as the Mechanics' Institutes and the WEA, to today, with adults investing their time and money in learning and skills development.

L&W research estimates that in total, people spend around £7.3 billion per year on learning, 0.3% of GDP. This equates to £323 per learner. However, this average covers significant variation. Almost one half of learners (10.8 million people) said they didn't pay anything. This suggests the costs of their learning were covered by their employer or the Government, or that there was no cost (e.g. self-directed online learning). One

¹¹⁶ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) [Annual report on education spending in England 2023](#)

¹¹⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2023) [Time to learn: increasing participation in learning](#)

¹¹⁸ National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (2010) [Expenditure and funding models in lifelong learning](#).

¹¹⁹ Learning & Work Institute (2022) [Raising the bar: increasing employer investment in skills](#)

¹²⁰ Learning & Work Institute (2022) [Raising the bar: increasing employer investment in skills](#)

¹²¹ Institute for Employment Studies (2000) [Adult Learning in England: A Review](#)

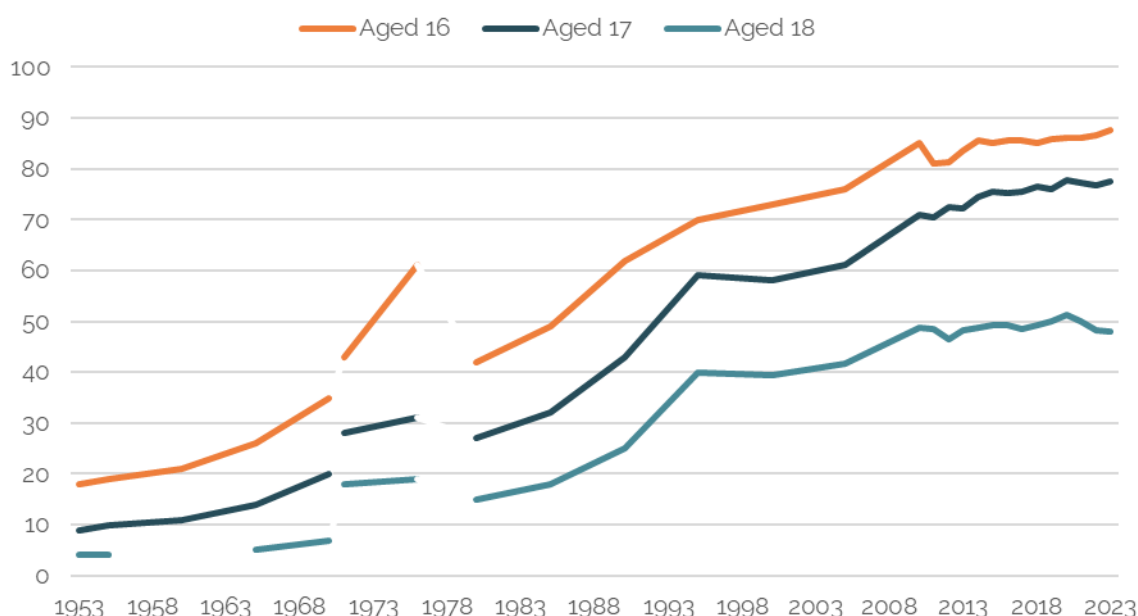
third of learners said they paid between £1 and £500, 7% paid £501-750, and one in ten said they paid more than £1000.¹²²

In terms of opportunity cost, the same research estimates that people spend around 5 billion hours learning per year in total at a value of £55.5 billion. This means the average learner spends 225 hours per year learning: 13 hours per week for 17 weeks a year.¹²³

Staying in education

The proportion of young people staying in education has generally increased over time, in common with many countries.

Figure 3: Pupils in full-time education beyond the leaving age, percentage of population, UK



Notes:

1913-1938 data is for schools and colleges in England and Wales only

1953-1970 data compare cohorts, i.e. the number of 16 year olds in 1960 compared to 13 year olds three years previously

Major breaks in series

1963 -Christmas leaving data abolished in England and Wales, only affects 15 year olds

1980-81 onwards, age at preceding 31 August, previously 21 December was used.

2011-14 England and Wales only

2015-17 & 2023 England, Wales and Scotland only

2018 to 2022 England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland

Sources:

"Statistical abstract for the United Kingdom 1938 and earlier, Board of Trade

Statistics of Education 1962 part one, Ministry of Education

Education statistics for the United Kingdom 1970, DES

Education and training statistics for the United Kingdom 2011 and earlier, DCSF

¹²² Learning & Work Institute (2023) [Time to learn: increasing participation in learning](#)

¹²³ Learning & Work Institute (2023) [Time to learn: increasing participation in learning](#)

2009/10 onwards:

Further education statistics for England, DfE

Further education statistics for Wales, StatWales

Further education statistics for Scotland, Skills Development Scotland

Further education statistics for Northern Ireland, Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

Mid-year population estimates by nation, ONS

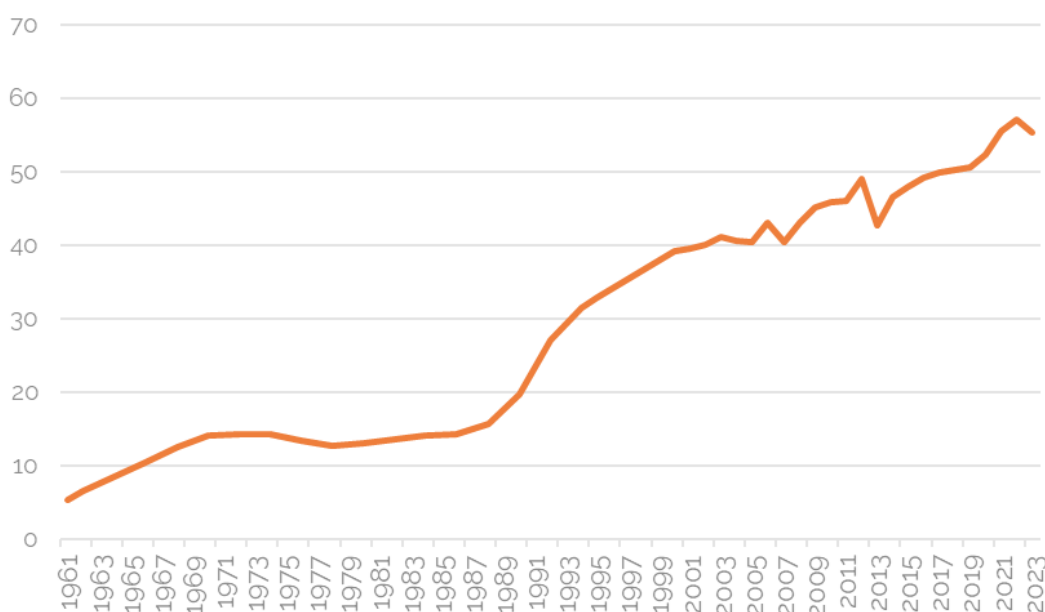
England and Wales

England, Wales and Scotland

England, Wales, Scotland & NI

Higher education

Figure 4: Higher Education Participation, Great Britain (England only from 2021) (%)



Notes

Participation rate (API) for Great Britain (1961–2001): The Age Participation Index (API) is defined as the number of UK-domiciled young (aged less than 21) initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses of higher education, expressed as a proportion of the averaged 18–19-year-old GB population. The measure was discontinued in 2001 and replaced with the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR).

The Higher Education Initial Participation rate (HEIPR) is a projection of the likelihood that a 17-year-old would participate in higher education by age 30 if current participation levels persisted into the future. This was used from 2001 to 2021.

The HEIPR was replaced by CHEP in 2023. The Cohort-based Higher Education Participation (CHEP) measure is used to monitor Higher Education (HE) participation by school cohorts. It calculates the proportion of the population aiming to complete a qualification at HE level.

The CHEP measure was published for the first time in January 2023 and referenced the 2020/21 academic year.

Rates from 1961 to 2021 are for Great Britain

Rates after 2021 are for England only

Source:

The Dearing Report (1997), Higher Education in the learning society

IFS Working paper W10/04, Widening Participation in Higher Education

DfE, Participation measures in higher education

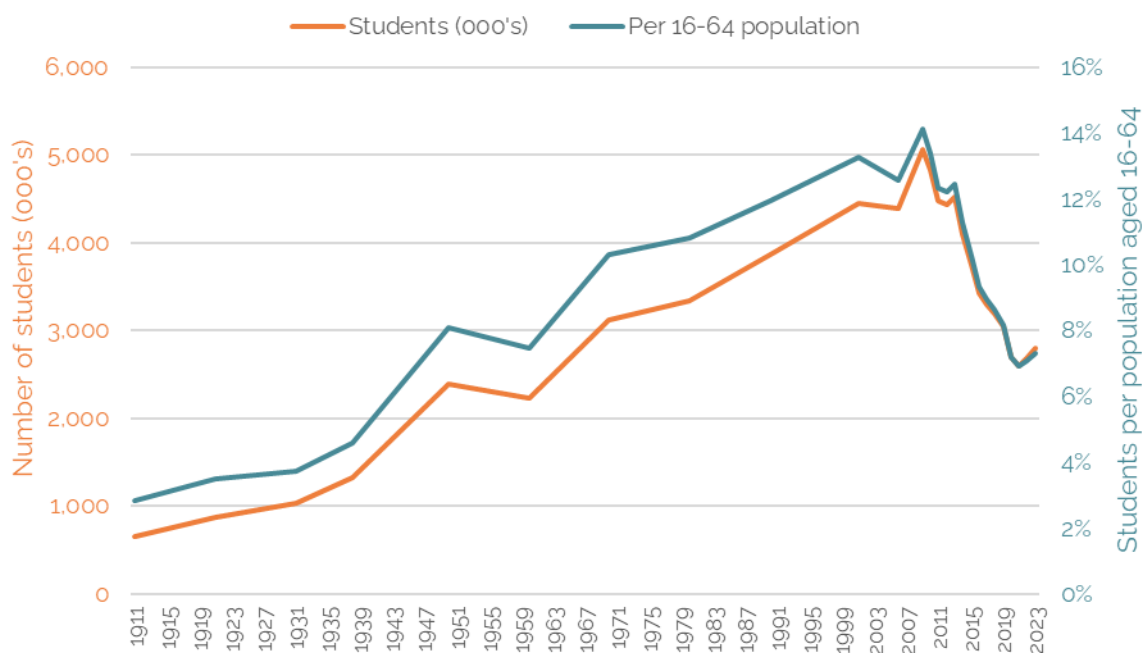
CHEP Participation measures in higher education

Participation in adult learning

There is no single, comprehensive and consistent measure over time of adult participation in learning. But different data sources can help paint a picture over time.

Between 1911 and 2008-9, the number of adults attending further and adult education institutions in England and Wales grew. **Since 2010, the number of adult learners has declined significantly**, reflecting cuts in funding.

Figure 2: Learners at further education institutions, England and Wales (000's)



Major breaks in series

Includes students in Adult Education Centres up to 2005/06. Includes all learners (including community learners) after that.

1951 and onwards show learners at a single point in the year, earlier data cover numbers who attended at any time during the year

1965 and onwards includes agricultural colleges and excludes colleges of advanced technology.

1970 to 2005/6 England only. Then England and Wales from then on

1993 includes sixth form colleges from then on; 1994 excludes former Polytechnics from then on

Source:

Further education book of facts, DfES; Education and training statistics for the UK 2008 onwards; Mid-year population estimates from the ONS

In 2004-5, the number of FE qualifications started in England stood at 5.6 million. By 2020-21, this had more than halved, to 2.1 million. The most significant decline has been participation rates of learners studying at level 2 and below.¹²⁴

The result is that, while there are differences in coverage and methodology that make like-for-like comparisons difficult, **the proportion of adults taking part in further or**

¹²⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) [Participation in classroom-based further education qualifications by adults \(19+\) in England](#). This is slightly lower than the data in Figure 2, as that includes participation in Wales.

adult education is now at its lowest levels since World War 2. Longer participation in education by young people has changed rather than reduced the need for adult learning: one in three adults are qualified below level 2 and nine million adults in England have low literacy or numeracy.

L&W's [Adult Participation in Learning](#) survey, starting in 1996, is the longest running and most frequently occurring study of adult learning in the UK. On a broad definition of learning, it finds that around one in two adults say that they are current or recent learners. However, it shows stark and persistent differences in adult participation:

- Participation in learning declines with age
- People in higher socio-economic groups are more likely to participate
- People in work and unemployed people are more likely than economically inactive people and retired people to participate in adult learning.

Common themes

Learning and skills have been held back by too narrow a focus on learning for work and the publicly funded budget, along with increasing centralisation, constant chop and change, and lack of proper success measures.

There has been no shortage of initiatives aimed at improving skills and promoting adult education over the last century. Yet few would argue that we have 'solved' the issue: Britain's skills base still lags other countries, holding back productivity; fewer adults are taking part in formal learning than 15 years ago; and participation in learning remains beset by stubborn inequalities. This chapter identifies some of common themes of policy over the decades and some of the factors that continue to hold us back.

Lack of common, broad and sustained vision of the value of learning
Policymakers have too narrow a focus on skills for jobs, undervaluing learning for life, health, wellbeing and enjoyment.

Adult education grew from a desire to ensure everyone had access to a broad education in life and support from employers both out of self-interest and for these wider reasons.

Today, most leaders talk about skills for jobs far more than learning for life, and employers are far more focused on the skills they need for their current jobs and ways of working. There is less of that broader focus on the value of learning, despite the clear evidence that it can help improve health, wellbeing, community cohesion etc, as well as being about self-actualisation and enjoyment.

The need for this broader focus is perhaps less than in the 19th and early 20th centuries, given the expansion of compulsory education. But constant changes in society, in technology along with an aging population and rising prevalence of long-term health conditions make this broad value of learning just as important, but in different ways.

Linked to this are issues of prioritisation and evidence. While every government talks about the importance of lifelong learning and skills, ultimately schools and higher education tend to be higher funding priorities (perhaps because of relative political salience) within education, and other areas (such as health) can at times be higher priority than education.

Stronger evidence on the direct causal impact of learning on outcomes such as health, as well as relative value for money, might help (but not be sufficient on its own) to break this link. There *is* evidence but it tends to be associative rather than causal, and general rather than specific.

Changing approaches

Governments need to decide their overall approach and the balance between compulsion and voluntarism and between market-led and planning. This needs to be based on an analysis of the problem and lessons learned from the past.

The overall approaches of governments have included:

- **laissez faire**, more dominant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as communities and employers largely self-organised. The challenge here was insufficient breadth and depth or learning and reach into communities and match to economic and social need coupled with achieving sufficient scale, given this is reliant on voluntary action.
- **planned approaches**, particularly from 1945 to the 1980s, with bodies such as the Industrial Training Boards and Manpower Services Commission aiming to assess skills needs in different sectors and agree approaches and plans to meeting these. The challenge here is both effectively assessing skills needs (given these are made up of millions of employers in a market economy and with unpredictable change ahead) and ensuring plans have effective traction (see discussion on compulsion vs voluntarism below) to make a difference.
- **quasi markets**, strongest from the 1980s on, with providers competing for contracts and learners and various attempts to put employers in the driving seat. The challenge here is the focus has largely been on public funding and skills supply, rather than employer and individual demand and utilisation. Approaches have also too often been fragmented and short-term. The system has often, in truth, often been driven more by the government than employers or individuals.

Cutting across each have been switches between voluntarism and compulsion for employers. At times, the focus has been on encouraging employers to invest in skills (for example, through making training expenditure deductible from Corporation Tax) or involving employers (or subsets of employers who volunteer) in the design of the publicly funded skills system (such as qualification or apprenticeship design or through bodies like the Learning and Skills Council). At other times, there has been compulsion through sector or economy wide skills levies (such as in construction and the apprenticeship levy) and licenses to practice (e.g. in health and social care).

Voluntarism has not effectively tackled the underlying reasons for low employer investment in skills. Compulsion has not always had the reach (the apprenticeship levy is only paid by a small number of large firms) or impact (firms can pay levies effectively as taxes, without changing their training or skills utilisation behaviour) or has had unintended consequences (the apprenticeship levy has led to firms shoehorning training into apprenticeships where other options might be better and, without incentives or requirements to do otherwise, focusing on already higher skilled and paid employees rather than career starters).

At times, governments have combined elements of each approach. For example, governments from 1997 on have aimed to assess future skills needs (through the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Unit for Future Skills and now Skills England), encourage collective plans to help meet these (through Sector Skills Councils, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and now Local Skills Improvement Plans), and run quasi-markets in provision (through Train to Gain, the apprenticeship levy, and commissioning of other funding).

Combining elements from different approaches can sometimes give you the best of both worlds, sometimes an incoherent mess. It is more likely to be the former if there is a clear overall plan, consistency over time, and a sense of what success looks like. This has not often been the case.

Unclear and unhelpful success measures

We need a clear sense of what a successful learning and skills system looks like and to focus as much on quality and impact as we do on quantity of learners.

The 50% target for participation of young people in higher education was a clear measure for policy (whether you agreed with it or not). For a short time (2007-10) the government aimed (following the Leitch Review) for the UK to be upper quartile in the OECD at all qualification levels. The 2015 Conservative government aimed for three million apprenticeships in the Parliament.

All of these targets (barring the 50% HE participation target) were missed by some distance. Each was also focused more on inputs and outputs than outcomes. For example, even if there were three million apprenticeship starts, completion rates are currently just over 50% and it doesn't tell us if they are high quality and helping people's careers and employers' skills needs.

In a trade-off between quantity and quality in public policy, quantity is often going to win, not least as it's easier to measure. For example, the Government has said it is removing red tape by ending English and maths study requirements in apprenticeships in England and reducing their minimum length from 12 to 8 months. This is likely to mean more apprenticeship completions. But will those apprenticeships be of sufficiently high quality, when a 12-month minimum duration was already short by international standards, and when apprentices in Germany get 400 hours of general education like literacy and numeracy compared to 100 (soon to be less) in England?

Partial picture: skills in isolation and insufficient focus on employers and communities

Skills policy needs to be viewed alongside other policy areas and focus at least as much on employer and individual investment in learning and skills utilisation as on what the government spends and how.

The roots of adult education and employer training lie in community action, such as the WEA, and employer imperative, for example establishing the Mechanics' Institutes. Over the decades, both have become more dominated by government action (although both also struggled to gain equal reach or be self-financing in the longer-term). Much of the debate today is about levels of government investment, whether this is meeting employers' needs, and whether government contracts are well designed and going to the right providers.

There is far less debate about what employers themselves are going to do about their own skills needs, particularly given their investment per employee has fallen 26% since 2005 and graduates are three times more likely to get training at work than non-graduates.¹²⁵ Similarly, there is far less focus on how to support communities to self-organise to promote and provide learning.

Linked to this, considering skills policy in isolation from the other drivers of economic growth and skills demand is like pushing on a piece of string.

Creeping centralisation combined with constant chop and change

Learning and skills policy has become increasingly centralised, with constant micromanagement and chop and change of short-run initiatives.

Linked to this lost focus is a creeping centralisation to central government in England. From community and employer led investment in the late 19th century, we now have the government designing and commissioning very specific programmes like Skills Bootcamps and traineeships, generally without significant input from potential beneficiaries or those that might deliver them. Similarly, City and Guilds was formed by the City of London and 16 livery companies; now we have T levels with the government determining their content (with input from selected employers) and the awarding body for each.

The history of skills policy is littered by acronyms from short-lived institutions. It takes time for institutions to set up, build relationships, and learn what does and doesn't work. But rarely do institutions in England get that time. Even where people TUPE from one organisation to another, this change involves disruption and takes focus. The same is true of policy, beset from short-term initiatives, with significant time spent

¹²⁵ Learning & Work Institute (2022) [Raising the bar](#)

developing, bidding for, ramping up and closing down schemes. Colleges and providers are left with a patchwork quilt of funding.

There is always a need for different programmes and initiatives, times change, and it is important to ensure value for money and a diversity of provision. So this is about where we are on the spectrum between the same institutions getting ongoing funding and full autonomy and a blizzard of initiatives and procurements that allow insufficient time for relationship building and delivery.

None of this is to say that there isn't often genuine commitment to adult education and skills, or lots of positive developments, or provision that transforms lives and helps employers. The problem is that the learning and skills system is too often less than the sum of its parts because of the factors identified above, with much of the good delivered despite policy and infrastructure rather than because of it.

Like someone turning off the computer midway through a game they're losing so they can have another go, a new minister or government often involves pressing the reset button. But often without a full analysis of why a century's efforts haven't delivered as well as they might, nor an account of why it will be different this time.

Delivering change means learning the lessons of history, looking at the full picture, and then staying the course.