

A WHITE PAPER · BUDGET 2026

From Skills to Jobs

*Closing the gap between skills investment and
work*

Budget 2026: what it means for business, talent and
public-sector leaders, and what to do next.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

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Foreword

In our work with employers, universities and public bodies across the UK and Europe, we rarely meet a leader who cannot name their skills gaps. What we almost never hear is a confident answer to the question that follows: *is our investment in skills actually getting people into work, and helping them progress once they are there?* Training is counted in courses completed and hours logged. Hiring is judged on time to fill. Skills programmes, public and private, report how many people started them. Very few can say what changed as a result.

We call this the **skills-to-jobs gap**. It is why training budgets are the first to be cut when times are hard, and why young people with real ability struggle to prove it to an employer. At its root is a problem of sight. When skills data sits in separate systems, described in different languages and updated once a year, no one can see clearly the most valuable asset they have: the skills of their people. That is the problem Abodoo exists to solve.

Budget 2026 puts young people and skills at the centre of the government's plans. That is welcome. This paper sets out what the evidence says works, what the Budget leaves out, and the missing layer that ties them together: live, interoperable skills intelligence that connects industry and education, with the learner at the heart. It then sets out what leaders in business and government can do now to make sure this round of investment gets more people into good jobs and helps them progress.

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Executive summary

AT A GLANCE

981,000 young people aged 16–24 are not in education, employment or training	40% fall in youth apprenticeship starts over the past decade	£10.6bn real-terms fall in employer training spend since 2011	c.5% productivity gain associated with closing the skills-mismatch gap
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Sources: ONS, 2026; Skills England, 2026; Andrews, Égert and de La Maisonnette, 2025.

Budget 2026, delivered on 28 October, declared that the government “refuses to write off the nearly one million young people not in education, employment or training” (HM Treasury, 2026). For employers, it confirms the spring Youth Employment and Skills Package and adds new measures:

- a £3,000 Youth Jobs Grant for employers hiring 18–24-year-olds who have been on Universal Credit and looking for work for six months or more
- a £2,000 hiring payment for non-levy employers in England taking on new apprentices aged 16–24
- the Jobs Guarantee, now covering eligible 18–24-year-olds on Universal Credit
- £100m to extend mayoral apprenticeship services to every current mayor
- a new procurement policy, from March 2027, that will judge suppliers on jobs, skills and routes into work for young people

These are the right priorities. But like Skills England’s first Annual Skills Report (2026), the Budget counts places, payments and programmes, not results: how many people move into work, stay there and progress. The same is true inside most organisations, where skills investment is measured by activity rather than by who is hired, redeployed or promoted as a result. This is the **skills-to-jobs gap**.

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOUR ORGANISATION

- **Your future pipeline is thinning.** 981,000 young people are NEET (ONS, 2026), youth apprenticeship starts have fallen 40% in a decade, and entry-level job adverts fell by a quarter in 2025 (Skills England, 2026).
- **Training pays, mostly to the employer.** In British industries, a one-point rise in the share of staff trained is associated with about 0.6% higher value added per worker, twice the effect on wages (Dearden, Reed and Van Reenen, 2006). Few organisations can see that return, so training is cut first.
- **You are not using the skills you have.** The UK has above-average adult skills but poor matching of skills to jobs. Closing the mismatch gap is associated with almost 5% higher productivity (Andrews, Égert and de La Maisonnette, 2025).

- **Public buyers will soon ask for proof.** From March 2027, firms bidding for government contracts will be judged on their contribution to jobs, skills and young people (HM Treasury, 2026).

What the evidence shows. Skills passports and digital credentials are spreading across the UK, Europe, Australia and the US, but none has yet published outcome results. Measurable gains come where recognised skills meet real work and a genuine change in hiring: Singapore's Work-Study programmes (9–11% higher wages), the UK's Kickstart Scheme (11 more young people per 100 in unsubsidised work), and employers that actually changed how they hire (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2024; DWP, 2024; Fuller et al., 2024).

What closes the gap: seeing skills clearly. The missing measure needs a missing layer: live, interoperable skills intelligence that connects industry and education, with the learner at the heart. That takes infrastructure with three properties. It is *source-agnostic*: it reads skills from any system, from HR and learning platforms to job adverts and course catalogues. It is *interoperable*: it translates them into one shared language that employers, educators and government can all use. And it is *live*: it updates as work changes, not once a year. Without it, skills data stays in silos, decisions fall back on proxies such as degrees and job titles, and bias creeps in. The person who pays most is the individual learner or worker, whose skills go unseen. Organisations and governments lose sight of their most valuable asset: the skills of their people.

FIVE ACTIONS FOR HR AND TALENT LEADERS

1. **Sense before you spend.** Put a number on the skills gap in one critical team before the next learning budget or hiring round.
2. **Recognise skills in one language.** Connect HR, learning and recruitment data around a shared skills language, and let employees own their skills records.
3. **Deploy before you recruit.** Check internal talent on skills first, and assess skills directly rather than relying on degrees.
4. **Develop roles that last.** Pair the Youth Jobs Grant and apprenticeship payment with structured development and recognised skills.
5. **Measure what changed.** Judge skills investment on who is hired, retained, moved and promoted, and on productivity, not on completions.

Four asks of government: report outcomes for every Budget youth measure; build support for inactive young people into the early-2027 White Paper; pilot learner-owned, interoperable skills passports, including AI skills, with evaluation from day one; and make the March 2027 procurement statement measure progression, not headcount.

SECTION 01

Budget 2026: what changes for employers

Budget 2026 puts young people at the centre of the government's growth story. It quotes Alan Milburn's interim review of young people and work: "the welfare system should be more than a safety net. It should be a springboard" (HM Treasury, 2026). The Secretary of State's foreword to Skills England's report uses the same image: "The right skills are a springboard to a better future and the lifeblood of the economy" (Skills England, 2026). The question is whether the system being funded delivers that springboard.

What the Budget does. It confirms the Jobs Guarantee for eligible 18–24-year-olds on Universal Credit, extended to 22–24-year-olds in the spring. It also confirms the rest of the spring package: a £3,000 Youth Jobs Grant for employers hiring 18–24-year-olds who have been on Universal Credit and looking for work for six months or more, and a £2,000 hiring payment for non-levy employers in England, typically SMEs, taking on new apprentices aged 16–24. It adds £100m over 2027–28 and 2028–29 to expand mayoral apprenticeship services from 7 to 14 areas. A new National Procurement Policy Statement, due in March 2027, will prioritise "high-quality jobs, fair pay and skills opportunities, including pathways for young people". At least 3% of the workforce on large government construction and infrastructure projects must be apprentices. The government will respond to the final Milburn and Timms reviews before the end of the year, with a White Paper early in 2027 (HM Treasury, 2026).

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- **Hiring young people costs less.** Employers can claim £3,000 for each 18–24-year-old they hire who has been on Universal Credit and looking for work for six months or more. Non-levy employers in England, typically SMEs, receive £2,000 for each new apprentice aged 16–24.
- **Help is local.** From 2027–28, every current mayor will run an apprenticeship service to help employers, particularly SMEs, create apprenticeships and find young people to fill them.
- **Public contracts will reward skills.** Bidders for major government contracts are already judged on creating high-quality jobs, "tackling local skills shortages, and supporting young people into work". From March 2027, a new procurement policy statement will prioritise skills opportunities and pathways for young people. At least 3% of the workforce on large government construction and infrastructure projects must be apprentices.
- **Workers' learning is back on the agenda.** The Union Learning Fund returns with £15m a year from 2027–28 (HM Treasury, 2026).

For organisations that supply government, skills and youth employment are becoming part of how they win work. Those that can show outcomes, not just numbers, will stand out.

What it recognises. The Budget notes that the UK's high rate of degree-level attainment "masks weaknesses in technical and vocational skills, which can leave businesses without the capabilities they need" (HM Treasury, 2026). That is the "missing middle" Skills England also identifies.

WHAT IT LEAVES OUT

- **No new money for 16–19 education** and no new further education capital (FE News, 2026).
- **No AI-skills route for young people.** The Budget invests more than £700m in AI security, sovereign capability and public-sector adoption, but nothing in AI skills for young people.
- **A new work-experience route.** The main new route is Opening Shift, launched in September by DWP and the British Retail Consortium: more than 11,000 retail placements of two to four weeks for 18–24-year-olds on Universal Credit, as part of a sector ambition of 100,000 jobs for young people (DWP, 2026). Placements can lead to jobs or apprenticeships, but the evidence in section 7 shows that short placements alone rarely raise later earnings.
- **No outcome measures yet.** None of the youth measures says how success will be judged. DWP has confirmed that the Youth Jobs Grant “will not require employers to demonstrate that roles are additional”, and has committed to monitor the impact of its youth measures and report outcomes to Parliament (UK Parliament, 2026). Publishing those outcomes is the natural next step.

The direction is right. What is missing is the measure. And the missing measure is, at root, a missing data layer: no one can judge outcomes while skills data sits in separate systems across employers, education and government.

Employers are stepping back. Business spending on training fell from £49.4bn in 2019 to £44.8bn in 2024 (2024 prices), and by £10.6bn, or 19%, since 2011. Spending per employee is down £250 (13%) since 2019 (Skills England, 2026). Skills England describes “a long-term retreat by UK businesses from investing in their workforce’s training and skills”. Hiring intentions are also weak. Only 57% of private-sector employers plan to recruit in the next three months, the lowest on record outside the pandemic. Yet 31% still report hard-to-fill vacancies (Bon and Cockett, 2026). Low hiring alongside persistent shortages is a sign of a skills mismatch, not a lack of demand.

This retreat is a false economy. Evidence from British industries finds that a one-point rise in the share of workers receiving training is associated with around 0.6% higher value added per worker, roughly twice the effect on wages (Dearden, Reed and Van Reenen, 2006). A randomised trial in a Dutch workplace found that a one-week course raised worker performance by about 10% (De Grip and Sauermann, 2012). Employers capture much of the return on training. They need to be able to see it.

“Low hiring alongside persistent shortages is a sign of a skills mismatch, not a lack of demand.”

Young people are paying the price. Youth unemployment reached 16.2% in early 2026, the highest since 2015 (Skills England, 2026). Nearly a million young people are NEET (ONS, 2026). Employers say they want “work-ready” recruits, yet the routes by which young people become work-ready – entry-level jobs, apprenticeships, part-time first jobs – are the ones contracting fastest.

Public investment cannot fill this gap alone. As Skills England itself puts it: “Public investment alone cannot close the skills gap.” What it can do is make every pound – public and private – count, by showing which skills investments actually get people into work and help them progress.

SECTION 02

The skills-to-jobs gap

Skills England's report deserves credit. It organises a complex system around five clear challenges: skills shortages, employer investment, AI adoption, young people's employability, and place. It publishes Sectoral Skills Needs Assessments for the Industrial Strategy's priority sectors plus construction and health and social care. It also identifies 150 priority occupations, which employ 7.6 million people and are projected to grow by 1.8 million jobs (24%) by 2035, against 14% for other occupations.

It is also candid about weaknesses. The UK ranks sixth in the G7 for adults whose highest qualification is at Level 4 or 5 – a “missing middle”. This matters because around 62% of extra demand in priority occupations will need Level 4 or above. The report admits that projections are “inherently uncertain” and that the effects of AI are “uncertain and highly uneven” (Skills England, 2026).

Yet read the report for outcomes and a pattern appears. Progress is described in inputs:

- apprenticeship units published
- standards updated
- budgets devolved
- pounds committed

Pilots are announced and “positive outcomes” are claimed, but metrics are not yet given. Skills passports are endorsed and a paper is promised, but pilot results are not yet reported. The tool for reading employer demand from job adverts, SkillsCompass, is still in alpha, so accuracy and outcome data are not yet available. The report does not yet show whether a skills intervention led to a job, a pay rise, a promotion or a productivity gain. That is understandable in a first annual report, and it is exactly the gap the next phase can close.

The UK has been here before. The Employer Training Pilots of the early 2000s subsidised training for low-skilled workers, yet a rigorous evaluation found no significant increase in training take-up in the first three years. Much of the subsidy appears to have paid for training that would have happened anyway (Abramovsky et al., 2011). Without outcome measurement, a programme can look busy while changing little.

“Without outcome measurement, a programme can look busy while changing little.”

This is the **skills-to-jobs gap**: the distance between counting skills activity and knowing whether it gets people into work, keeps them there and helps them progress, and through that, whether it improves the performance of organisations and the economy. It exists at two levels.

- **Nationally**, it shows up as programmes judged on starts and spend, as above.
- **Inside organisations**, it shows up when learning is reported in completions and satisfaction scores, hiring is judged on time to fill, and skills frameworks never connect to business results.

Organisations that close the gap start small: one team, one business problem, and one measure of success, such as hires, retention or progression, agreed before any money is spent. A new national agency, at the start of a new funding cycle, has the same opportunity at scale.

SECTION 03

Why organisations are flying blind

The skills-to-jobs gap persists because the system lacks the information to close it. Five blind spots stand out.

No shared language for skills. Employers, colleges, recruiters and government describe the same capabilities in different terms. Skills England acknowledges that “with no shared language for describing employability skills, young people struggle” to show what they can do, and commits to developing one (Skills England, 2026). The OECD makes the same point internationally. Skills policy must ensure everyone has “equal access to the opportunities to develop skills and have them recognised and valued in the labour market” (OECD, 2025). Without a common language, skills cannot be compared, tracked or rewarded.

Qualifications as a lagging proxy. “Recruiters rely heavily on formal qualifications and paid experience,” the report notes (Skills England, 2026). Qualifications matter, but they are slow to update. European research on renewable energy found that occupational classifications lack the detail to describe fast-emerging roles. It also found that interviewees saw recognition systems for new micro-credentials as “bureaucratic and slow” (ReSkill4NetZero, 2025a). When skills change faster than credentials, credentials stop telling employers what people can do.

Employers will look beyond qualifications when they have credible alternatives. In a German hiring experiment, employers responded to verifiable evidence of skills, not only grades (Piopiunik et al., 2020). In a randomised trial in South Africa, giving jobseekers certificates of their assessed skills that they could share with employers raised employment by 17% and earnings by 34% (Carranza et al., 2022). The certificates revealed skills people already had; they did not train them.

Education cannot see live demand. Colleges, universities and training providers plan provision from occupational classifications and periodic surveys, while employer demand shifts month by month. Analysis led by Abodoo for the Erasmus+ ReSkill4NetZero alliance set 42,073 renewable energy job adverts across 26 EU member states against 89 training courses. It found provision concentrated at degree level, leaving the technician tier, qualification levels 3–5, underserved (ReSkill4NetZero, 2025a). That is the same “missing middle” Skills England identifies at home. When industry and education describe skills in different languages, in different systems, neither can see the other, and learners train for yesterday’s jobs.

Employers, especially small ones, cannot see their own skills. SMEs make up 99.9% of UK businesses and employ 60% of the private-sector workforce. They “struggle with complex systems, limited capacity, and cost” (Skills England, 2026). Evidence from Ireland shows the same pattern with AI: adoption is far higher in large firms, and the gap with small firms is widening. The Irish government’s expert group warns this points to “the risk of a two-speed economy” (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2026). An employer that cannot see which skills it has, or what training would return, will under-invest. Falling training spend is partly a symptom of this blindness.

Skills that are not used. The problem is not only a shortage of skills but a failure to use the skills people already have. New OECD analysis of the latest international adult skills survey places the UK among countries with above-average skills but poor matching of skills to jobs. Across the OECD, closing the gap in skills mismatch with the best performers is associated with almost 5% higher labour productivity (Andrews, Égert and de La Maisonnette, 2025). For the UK, better use of existing skills may be as important as building new ones.

Workers feel it too. Among UK workers whose skills are in demand, 74% are confident in their job security, against 30% of those whose skills are not. Only half of workers confident in learning new skills say they have the learning resources they need. PwC warns of “the risk of a two-track workforce emerging” (PwC UK, 2026b).

SECTION 04

Closing the gap: Sense, Recognise, Develop, Deploy, Measure

Closing the gap needs a system that links five stages in a continuous loop, with the last stage feeding back into the first. The stages are not tied to any single programme or report. They apply to any employer, education provider, local area or national scheme that wants skills investment to lead to jobs, and they work as well inside a single organisation as across a national system. They can be used to tackle the challenges Skills England identifies, from skills shortages to young people's employability, and the priorities Budget 2026 sets out, from youth unemployment to getting young people into work.

TABLE 1 The skills-to-jobs loop: five stages, the evidence behind them and the challenges they address

Stage	The question it answers	What it requires	What the evidence says	Challenges it helps address
1. Sense	Which skills are needed now, and next?	Live data from employers, job adverts and education providers, connected through one shared skills language, not only periodic surveys	39% of workers' core skills are expected to change by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025); skills projections are "inherently uncertain" (Skills England, 2026)	Skills shortages; fast-changing skills, including AI
2. Recognise	What can people already do?	A shared skills language and portable skills records that are credible, relevant and usable by employers	Shareable evidence of existing skills raised employment by 17% and earnings by 34% (Carranza et al., 2022)	Young people out of work; over-reliance on degrees and paid experience
3. Develop	How do we close the gap fastest?	Modular, work-based training, especially at Levels 3–5, with a route into a real role	Training raises productivity about twice as much as wages (Dearden, Reed and Van Reenen, 2006); short placements alone did not raise later earnings (Gelber, Isen and Kessler, 2016)	Skills shortages; low employer investment in training
4. Deploy	Are skills reaching the jobs that need them?	Hiring and internal moves based on skills, not job titles or degrees	The UK is skilled but poorly matched (Andrews, Égert and de La Maisonnette, 2025); non-degree hires stayed longer where hiring truly changed (Fuller et al., 2024)	Skills mismatch; narrowing entry-level routes
5. Measure	Did it work?	Employment, pay, progression and productivity, measured against a baseline or comparison group	Subsidised training without outcome measures can pay for training that would have happened anyway (Abramovsky et al., 2011)	Unproven programmes; spending that changes little

The weakest links are the two ends. Without Sense, training follows last year's needs. Without Measure, no one can show whether it paid off, so employers cut it and government cannot target it. The international evidence in section 7 adds a third lesson: *Recognise* fails without Deploy. A skills record changes little unless employers change how they hire.

The loop at national scale. Skills England's Sectoral Skills Needs Assessments and SkillsCompass are a national *Sense*. Its planned shared language for skills and its passport work are a national *Recognise*. Sector skills packages and apprenticeships are a national *Develop*. The Budget's Jobs Guarantee, hiring grants and mayoral apprenticeship services are a national *Deploy*. What is missing, nationally and in most organisations, is *Measure*.

What makes the loop turn: infrastructure, not another programme. The loop only works if skills data can flow between its stages. Today it rarely does. Hiring, learning, workforce planning, education and employment services each describe skills in their own terms and in their own systems, so each stage sees only its own fragment, and assumptions and bias fill the gaps. Closing the loop needs skills intelligence infrastructure that is source-agnostic, interoperable and live. This is the layer Abodoo builds. It does not replace existing HR, learning, education or government systems; it connects them, so that every stage works from the same live picture of skills, and so that individuals can carry a trusted record of what they can do. With the learner at the centre, the same data that helps a young person prove their skills helps an employer hire on them and helps government see what its investment achieved.

Connecting industry and education, with the learner at the heart

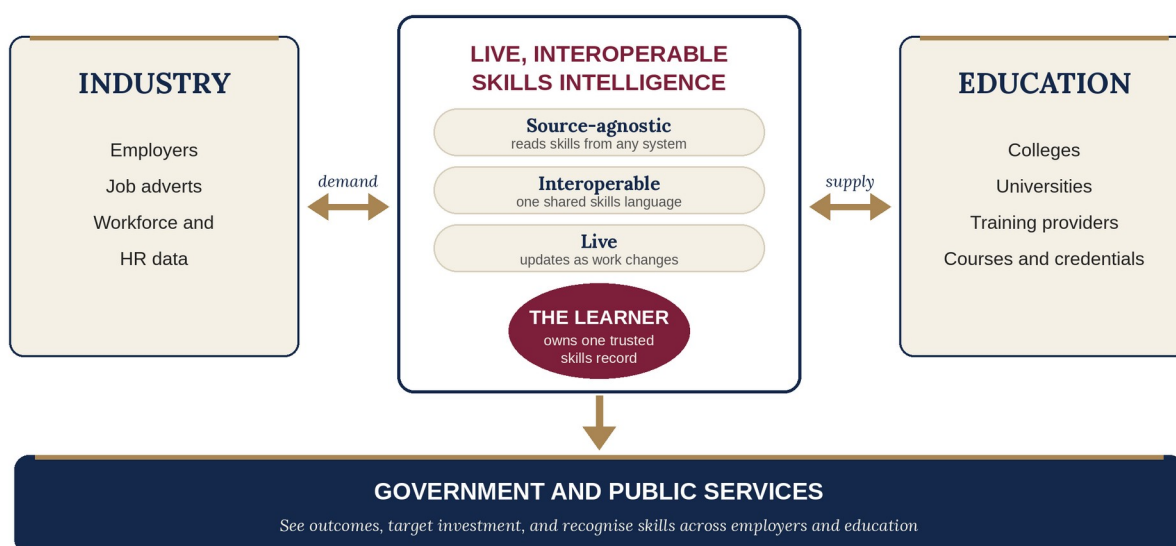


FIGURE 1 The missing layer: live, interoperable skills intelligence connecting industry and education, with the learner at the heart.

SECTION 05

Young people: your future talent pipeline

For employers, the NEET figures are not only a social problem. They describe tomorrow's workforce. The skills-to-jobs gap hits young people hardest, because they have the fewest ways to

prove what they can do. It hits employers later, when experienced staff retire or move on and there is no one trained to replace them.

The scale. In April–June 2026, 981,000 people aged 16–24 in the UK were NEET, 13.0% of the age group and 30,000 more than a year earlier (ONS, 2026). Most were not unemployed but economically inactive: 588,000, against 393,000 unemployed. Nearly one in five unemployed young people has been out of work for over a year (Skills England, 2026). Comparative research for the Youth Futures Foundation put the UK’s 2023 NEET rate of 11.9% among the highest in the EU and OECD (RAND Europe, 2024).

The long-term cost. Time out of work early in life leaves a lasting mark. British cohort data link youth unemployment to wages 12–15% lower at age 42 (Gregg and Tominey, 2005). Administrative data suggest each extra month out of work at ages 18–20 is associated with about 1.6% lower annual earnings in the long run (De Fraja, Lemos and Rockey, 2021).

“Policy for young people must do more than create places.”

The narrowing entry routes. Youth apprenticeship starts have fallen 40% in a decade. Graduate job adverts fell 45% in 2025 and entry-level adverts 25% (Skills England, 2026). Employers cite rising costs of hiring young people. The CIPD urges them to “maintain entry-level and apprenticeship intake even while overall hiring intentions are suppressed”, warning that cutting it now “risks compounding future hard-to-fill vacancies” (Bon and Cockett, 2026). The pattern is not unique to the UK. In Ireland, employment of 15–24-year-olds has been flat for two years and fell in the past year, while overall employment grew by an average of 2.2% (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2026).

The recognition problem. Young people often have skills they cannot evidence. Recruiters lean on qualifications and paid experience, which young people by definition have least of. Skills England found that work experience is “the most effective way” for young people to build employability skills, “but only when placements involve real responsibilities” (Skills England, 2026). The same applies to recognition: a record of skills only helps a young person if it reflects real tasks and an employer trusts it.

What it looks like for the learner. Picture a young person with one skills record they own. It starts in college, grows through a placement or apprenticeship, and follows them into work. Each skill is marked as verified or self-declared, and described in the same language an employer uses in a job advert, so a recruiter can read it without guesswork. When that young person applies for a role, they are judged on what they can do, not on qualifications and paid experience they have not yet had the chance to gain. Because the record connects to live demand, they can also see which skills to build next. This is what live, interoperable skills intelligence makes possible: industry and education reading from the same page, with the learner at the heart.

Young workers also feel less prepared. Only 39% of Gen Z workers in the UK say they understand the skills they will need in future, against 51% of millennials. One in five name a lack of skills or training as a barrier to their productivity, against 13% of millennials (PwC UK, 2026b).

What works for those furthest from work. Rigorous evidence on young people who are not looking for work is thinner than the wider NEET literature suggests. The strongest trial comes from Norway. Young adults aged 18–29 who were out of work and receiving benefits for health or social problems were offered either supported employment (Individual Placement and Support) or traditional vocational rehabilitation. Within a year, 48% of the supported-employment group were in paid work, against 8% of the comparison group (Sveinsdottir et al., 2020). The lesson is to help young people into real jobs with continuing support, rather than requiring them to become “work ready” first.

The implication is clear. Policy for young people must do more than create places. It must help them show their skills, give them real work in which to build more, and track whether they progress.

SECTION 06

AI and the future of entry-level work

AI makes the skills-to-jobs gap both more urgent and harder to see. Skill requirements are changing faster than the systems that track them, and the evidence on jobs is genuinely mixed.

Skills are changing fast. Employers worldwide expect 39% of workers’ core skills to change by 2030. Of every 100 workers, 59 will need training, and 11 are unlikely to receive it (World Economic Forum, 2025). In the UK, the wage premium for AI skills has risen to 34.2%, from 11% a year earlier (PwC UK, 2026a). Around 70% of UK workers are in occupations containing tasks AI could perform or enhance (Skills England, 2026).

The effect on young workers is contested. US payroll data show that employment of 22–25-year-olds in AI-exposed occupations is now 19% below where it would be had it kept pace with less-exposed peers, up from 13% in the study’s first release. The gap comes mainly from fewer young people being hired, and experienced workers show no comparable gap. The authors describe these as “early, descriptive indicators” rather than causal estimates (Brynjolfsson, Chandar and Chen, 2026). In the UK, job postings for the least AI-exposed occupations have more than doubled since 2012, while those for the most exposed are flat (PwC UK, 2026a). Yet the OECD concludes that young people face growing difficulty entering work but that “current evidence does not show that AI is driving this trend” (OECD, 2026). Danish administrative data find no significant effect of AI chatbot use on earnings or recorded hours across 11 occupations (Humlum and Vestergaard, 2025). Skills England similarly says it is “too early to say” what AI means for graduate jobs (Skills England, 2026).

What both sides agree on. Whatever its cause, the squeeze on entry-level work is real, and AI is reshaping tasks within jobs faster than it is replacing whole jobs. Ireland’s expert group calls for analysis to “focus more on the impact of AI on tasks as opposed to jobs” (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2026). Skills England suggests that “human skills – like empathy, emotional intelligence, judgement – may become more important as processes are automated” (Skills England, 2026).

“A system that tracks skills at the level of tasks, from live data, is no longer a nice-to-have.”

This has a direct policy consequence. Standards, qualifications and job titles that update every few years cannot keep up with tasks that change every few months. A system that tracks skills at the level of tasks, from live data, is no longer a nice-to-have. It is the only way to know which skills to fund.

What this means for leaders. Organisations adopting AI face a choice: cut the entry-level roles where people learn, or redesign them. Mapping skills at task level shows which tasks AI will take on, which new tasks appear, and who can move into them. That is the case for redeploying before recruiting, and for keeping the first rung of the ladder in place while AI changes what sits on it.

SECTION 07

International evidence: what has worked

Skills England plans to publish a paper on skills passports in 2026, noting that “there are already active skills passport schemes in sectors like construction and clean energy” (Skills England, 2026). What does the wider evidence say about passports, skills-based hiring and youth programmes? The short answer: recognition tools are spreading fast, but the results so far come from programmes that combine skills with real work and a genuine change in hiring.

TABLE 2 Skills recognition and youth employment initiatives: what the evidence shows

Initiative	Country	What it does	Evidence of results
Energy Skills Passport (2025)	UK	Maps oil and gas workers' qualifications onto offshore wind roles; industry-led with UK and Scottish government support	None yet. Industry research finds 90% of oil and gas workers have transferable skills (RenewableUK, 2025)
National Skills Passport (consultation 2024)	Australia	Proposed national digital record of skills and qualifications	None yet. Business case in development (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2024)
European Digital Credentials for Learning	EU	Free, tamper-proof digital certificates and micro-credentials, linked to the EU's ESCO skills framework	No published adoption or outcome data (European Commission, n.d.)
Alabama Talent Triad (2023)	US	Statewide credential registry, skills-based job adverts and learning and employment record	Early employer feedback only (Aspen Institute, 2023)
Shareable skills certificates	South Africa	Jobseekers' existing skills assessed and certified in a form they could show employers (randomised trial)	Employment up 17% and earnings up 34% (Carranza et al., 2022)
Sharing online credentials	Global	800,000+ online learners encouraged to share certificates with employers (randomised)	New employment up 6% within a year, 12% for the least employable (Athey and Palikot, 2024)
MySkills skills tests	Germany	Tests of skills gained outside formal qualifications for jobseekers	No immediate effect; about 6 points higher monthly probability of regular employment by year four, mainly via better-targeted support (Nivorozhkin and Promberger, 2026)
STAP learning budget	Netherlands	Individual training budgets for adults	Participants without a job found work more often than a comparison group in year one; no gain for those already employed (SEOR and Ockham IPS, 2024)

Initiative	Country	What it does	Evidence of results
SkillsFuture Work-Study	Singapore	Earn-and-learn programmes combining work and training for young graduates	Wage premium of about 9–11% after 1–2 years against similar graduates (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2024)
Kickstart Scheme (2020–22)	UK	163,000 six-month paid placements for young people on Universal Credit	About 11 more per 100 participants in unsubsidised work after two years (DWP, 2024)
Summer Youth Employment Program	US (New York)	Short paid summer jobs for young people, allocated by lottery	Higher income that summer, but no gain in later earnings (Gelber, Isen and Kessler, 2016)
Employers removing degree requirements	US	Firms dropping degree requirements from job roles	Reforms created extra openings for non-graduates in fewer than 1 in 700 hires. Where hiring really changed, non-degree hires had two-year retention 10 points higher than graduates (Fuller et al., 2024) and earned about \$6,000 a year more for at least five years (Lyttelton, Nelson and Wilmers, 2025)
EU Youth Guarantee (2013–)	EU	Offer of work, training or education within four months for every young person	Fell short of expectations; inactive NEETs “barely changed” (European Court of Auditors, 2017)

FIVE LESSONS FOR ENGLAND

1. **A passport is not a result.** None of the passport and credential schemes reviewed has yet published outcome data. Implementation is running ahead of evidence. Skills England can lead internationally by building evaluation into its passport work from the start.
2. **Recognition works when employers can trust and use it.** Where evidence of skills was credible and shareable, employment rose substantially (Carranza et al., 2022; Athey and Palikot, 2024). Where employers ignored it, it changed little: 45% of US firms that dropped degree requirements did so “in name only” (Fuller et al., 2024). Recognition and deployment have to move together.
3. **Structured work with a route to a real job works; short placements alone do not.** Singapore’s Work-Study programmes and the UK’s Kickstart Scheme show measurable gains. New York’s summer jobs raised income at the time but not later earnings. The difference is a credible path into lasting employment and recognised skills.
4. **Funding training is not the same as changing outcomes.** Learning budgets help some groups, such as jobseekers in the Netherlands, but not others. Subsidies can pay for training that would have happened anyway (Abramovsky et al., 2011). Targeting and measurement decide whether the money works.
5. **Inactive young people need a different offer.** Europe’s Youth Guarantee mainly reached young people already looking for work (European Court of Auditors, 2017). With 588,000 of the UK’s NEETs inactive, programmes built only for jobseekers will miss most of them. Supported employment is the best-evidenced approach for those with health barriers (Sveinsdottir et al., 2020).

Europe’s direction: portable, stackable skills. Europe is moving towards recognised, portable skills records. The ReSkill4NetZero analysis in section 3 found, across the EU, the same technician-tier gap that England calls its “missing middle”. The alliance’s skills strategy, also led by Abodoo, calls for

qualifications aligned to EU frameworks, “digital skills passports via Europass” and stackable micro-credentials. It also finds that recognition of skills across borders remains limited (ReSkill4NetZero, 2025b). The UK does not need to copy this model. But passports designed to connect with European and international frameworks will be worth more to workers than closed, sector-only schemes.

SECTION 08

The Budget, measure by measure

Each youth and skills measure in Budget 2026 can be strengthened by adding the missing measure of results: whether people get into work, stay and progress.

TABLE 3 Budget 2026 youth and skills measures: what is missing and what we propose

Budget measure	What it does	What is missing	What we propose
Jobs Guarantee, now covering eligible 18–24-year-olds (extended to 22–24 in spring 2026)	Paid work for eligible young people on Universal Credit	No published outcome measures yet	Report unsubsidised employment and earnings at 12 and 24 months, as Kickstart’s evaluation did
£3,000 Youth Jobs Grant; £2,000 apprenticeship hiring payment for non-levy employers	Incentives for employers, especially SMEs, to hire young people	Roles need not be additional (UK Parliament, 2026), so some payments may fund hires that would have happened anyway	Track additionality, retention and progression
£100m to expand mayoral apprenticeship services from 7 to 14 areas (2027–29)	Local brokerage for young people and employers, particularly SMEs	No common outcome measure across areas	A shared local outcomes framework through the Local Skills Improvement Plans
National Procurement Policy Statement (March 2027); 3% apprentices on large government projects	Uses public spending to create routes into work	Counts headcount, not progression	Report completions, progression and skills gained
More than £700m for AI, including £15m for local AI partnerships	AI security, sovereign capability and adoption	No AI-skills route for young people	Link local AI partnerships to youth AI skills at Levels 3–5
Response to the Milburn and Timms reviews; White Paper early 2027	Reform of support for young people and for disability and health	Design still open	Build in an offer for inactive NEETs and skills recognition
Union Learning Fund re-established (£15m a year from 2027–28)	Union-led learning for workers	Outcome reporting	Measure what learners go on to do

The decision points ahead (all dates from HM Treasury, 2026, except where noted)

1. Government response to the Milburn and Timms reviews: before the end of 2026

2. Skills England's paper on skills passports: due in 2026 (Skills England, 2026)
3. White Paper on young people, work and disability: early 2027
4. National Procurement Policy Statement: March 2027
5. Expansion of mayoral apprenticeship services: from 2027–28

Each is a chance to close the skills-to-jobs gap before the money is spent.

SECTION 09

What leaders should do now

The actions below follow the Sense, Recognise, Develop, Deploy, Measure loop in section 4. Each is tied to the evidence above and to a decision point the Budget has already set.

FOR HR, TALENT AND LEARNING LEADERS

1. **Sense before you spend.** Before the next learning budget or hiring round, baseline the skills of one critical team and put a cost on the gap. Agree, in advance, the measure of success, such as hires, retention, progression or performance, that will show whether closing it worked.
2. **Recognise skills in one shared language.** Connect HR, learning and recruitment data around a common skills language, aligned with open frameworks such as the EU's ESCO. Mark which skills are verified and which are self-declared, and give employees ownership of their records.
3. **Deploy before you recruit.** Check internal candidates on skills before advertising. Remove degree requirements that are not needed and assess skills directly. Track the retention and performance of skills-based hires (Fuller et al., 2024; Lyttelton, Nelson and Wilmers, 2025).
4. **Develop roles that last.** Use the Youth Jobs Grant, the £2,000 apprenticeship payment and your mayor's apprenticeship service to create entry-level roles with structured development and recognised skills. Short placements on their own rarely change long-term outcomes (Gelber, Isen and Kessler, 2016).
5. **Measure what changed.** Judge skills investment on hires, retention, internal fill rates and progression, and then on productivity, not on completions or satisfaction scores. Report it to the board as you would any other investment. If you bid for public contracts, this evidence will also set you apart when the new National Procurement Policy Statement arrives in March 2027.

FOR PUBLIC-SECTOR LEADERS

6. **Apply the same discipline inside government.** As the Civil Service streamlines and adopts AI (HM Treasury, 2026), redeploy people on the basis of their skills, and measure the result.
7. **Mayors and Strategic Authorities:** as apprenticeship services expand to all 14 mayoral areas in 2027–28, agree common outcome measures through the Local Skills Improvement Plans. Use the £15m local AI partnerships to create AI-skills routes for young people at Levels 3–5.

FOUR ASKS OF GOVERNMENT

1. **Report outcomes for every Budget youth measure.** Building on DWP's commitment to report outcomes to Parliament (UK Parliament, 2026), the Jobs Guarantee, the Youth Jobs Grant, the apprenticeship hiring payment and Opening Shift should report unsubsidised employment,

earnings and progression at 12 and 24 months, as the Kickstart evaluation did (DWP, 2024). Tracking whether incentives create new jobs would show where each pound works hardest (Abramovsky et al., 2011).

2. **Reach inactive young people.** The response to the Milburn and Timms reviews, and the White Paper due early in 2027, should include support for the 588,000 inactive NEETs, starting with supported employment for those with health barriers (Sveinsdottir et al., 2020; European Court of Auditors, 2017).
3. **Build skills passports with evaluation from day one.** Skills England's passport work is a chance for the UK to lead internationally. A funded, independently evaluated pilot for 16–24-year-olds, including AI skills, would test that records are credible, relevant and used by employers (Carranza et al., 2022). Passports should be built on open, interoperable standards and one shared skills language, so that records move between education, employers and public services and remain owned by the learner. Tools such as SkillsCompass can build confidence by reporting accuracy as they mature.
4. **Make procurement count progression, not headcount.** Suppliers meeting the 3% apprenticeship target should report completions, progression and skills gained.

SECTION 10

Conclusion

Skills England's first annual report sets out the right challenges, and Budget 2026 sets the right direction. What neither yet provides is a way to know which answers work. The same is true in most organisations.

Closing the skills-to-jobs gap does not need a new agency or another programme. It needs the missing layer: live, interoperable skills intelligence that connects industry and education, with the learner at the heart. And it needs leaders in business and government who ask four questions of every skills investment: what is the gap, what skills do we already have, how will we put them to work, and how will we know it worked? Organisations that can answer them will get more from their people, give young people a fairer first step, and be ready when public buyers start asking for proof. In Skills England's own words, "Skills must be an enabler of opportunity" (Skills England, 2026). Our task as leaders is to show that they are.

Where to start

For business leaders. If you know you need a skills-first strategy but are not sure where to begin, join a Skills to Performance online workshop, delivered with Abodoo, and leave with a skills-first strategy for one critical team: skillstoperformance.com/programme.

For government, mayoral authorities and education bodies. To discuss live, interoperable skills intelligence for public programmes, contact the authors: info@abodoo.com. To see live skills passports in action, visit abodoo.com/aiskillspassport.

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About Abodoo. Abodoo builds skills intelligence infrastructure: source-agnostic, interoperable and live. Through SIIO Skills Intelligence Infrastructure™ and SkillSuite, it connects skills signals from hiring, learning, education and workforce systems into one shared skills language, so that employers, educators and governments can see the skills they have, the skills they need and whether their investment closes the gap, with the learner at the heart. Abodoo works with employers, universities and public bodies in the UK, Ireland and across Europe. Read more: abodoo.com/what-is-skills-intelligence-infrastructure.

About Skills to Performance. Skills to Performance is a preferred partner of Abodoo. It runs online workshops for leaders who know they need a skills-first strategy but do not know where to start. Leaders work with practical tools and technologies, including Abodoo's skills intelligence, and leave with a skills-first strategy to guide their next investment decisions.

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