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The future of skills investment:

How apprenticeship starts and attitudes to vocational qualifications are shaping the skills landscape



Introduction

The government's recent commitment to investing heavily in skills forms part of the Industrial Strategy. Part of the strategy involves making wider reforms to England's skills system, including 'short courses for the workforce' in Advanced Manufacturing. As employers look to boost their prospects in future-facing disciplines like battery manufacturing, they'll be looking to sweep up any newly qualified workers in these skills.

The demand for a skilled-up workforce continues to gather pace, but what can we learn about the routes to achieving the expertise that it needs? From apprenticeships to T Levels and across schools and colleges, we've gathered data on current training provision by the number of 'starts' on each type of course, to paint a picture of the next generation of engineering and manufacturing talent.

Enginuity has also collected insights from a survey of prospective post-16 students and their parents to provide an outlook on the nation's attitudes towards vocational studies. Are schools and colleges doing enough to spark a curiosity in STEM careers? Or do their efforts need a little fine-tuning?

Let's dive into the data and find out.

Apprenticeships statistics present a mixed picture

As apprenticeships undergo reforms to streamline and simplify the system, the figure for apprenticeship starts over the last three academic years has remained flat, averaging around 46,000 starts per year.

Data on apprenticeship starts by age and region shows there's a little more to the story.

Apprenticeship starts by age, 2021-2025

The number of starts for apprentices under 19 has seen a steady increase in recent years. It rose from 17,300 in 2021/22 to 19,400 in 2024/25, representing a 12% increase. But after peaking at 20,100 in 2023/24, numbers then dipped by 4% in the most recent academic year.

Starts for apprentices aged 19 and above in this academic year stands at 26,700. Although this represents a 16% decline since 2021/22, it is still an encouraging rise over the 2023/24 ow of 25,700.

Regional breakdown of apprenticeship starts

Only the North West region has seen an increase in apprenticeship starts since 2021/22, with just 0.8% this still marks a recovery from a dip in 2022/23.

All regions saw growth in under-19 apprenticeship starts up to 2023/24, followed by a small dip in 2024/25. One region which defied the dip was London, with modest growth between 23/24 and 24/25 of 2%.

Apprenticeship starts in manufacturing vs. engineering

Engineering starts across England have declined by 13% in recent years, while manufacturing starts have remained flat.

Despite the relative steadiness on a national level, there are still some striking stats on apprenticeships in regional terms. Manufacturing starts in the North East have dropped by 28% overall, and by more than half (52%) among over-19s since 2021/22.

Conversely, the North West saw a 17% increase in over-19s' manufacturing starts over the same period.



T Levels a popular route for engineering learners

Since their introduction in September 2020, T Levels have seen spectacular growth as learners benefit from a combination of classroom teaching and on-the-job experience. In most regions, T Level starts have surged by at least 200% since 2022/23, the first full academic year of delivery. The East Midlands, East of England, London, North West, and West Midlands regions each recorded T Levels growth rates above 300%.

The Design and Development Occupational Specialism covers training for a wide variety of potential future roles. Of the 5,077 starts in this specialism in 2024/25, 43% were in Mechanical Engineering, and 14% in Electrical & Electronic Engineering.

There are more interesting stats to look at when breaking these figures down by region. Mechanical Engineering is the most popular T Level route in every region except three: the North East, London, and Yorkshire & Humber. In the North East, maintenance-related specialisms occupy three of the top four spots for starts in 2024/25.

Education and training see sustained growth

Other vocational courses in engineering and manufacturing have enjoyed growth since 2019/20. We spotted the largest growth in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire & Humber. These regions have shown respective increases of 74%, 61%, and 59%. While all regions experienced growth in E&T starts for engineering and manufacturing courses over this period, the South West saw the lowest growth rate of 13%.

Finding the right level

Level 2 E&T qualifications account for the largest volume of Engineering and Manufacturing starts within England.

Level 1 starts peaked in three regions in 2023/24 but have since declined, with the South West now below 2019/20 levels. The North West continues to see strong growth at Level 1, with starts increasing by 48% over those seen in 2019/20.

There's been a general increase in starts for learners under 24 – the North West leads the charge with a 36% rise in 2024/25. For those over 25, starts have continually increased since 2019/20.

Are apprenticeships in decline?

On a national level, T Level and E&T starts are increasing, while apprenticeship starts are in decline.

This isn't the case for learners under 19. E&T starts have risen slightly (0.3%), but apprenticeship starts have increased by around 12%.

Among those aged 19–24, however, there's evidence of a shift from apprenticeships to E&T courses. For those aged 25 and over, E&T starts have soared by 40%, while apprenticeship starts have fallen by 30%.

Engineering maintains strong interest among new learners

Engineering remains the most popular sector for learners across all regions, followed by transportation and manufacturing. The North East has the highest proportion of learners in engineering (nearly 60%), while London leads in transportation (44%). The East Midlands, North East, and South West have the highest shares of learners in Manufacturing – a sign that those knowledge areas are in great demand locally.

Regional Summary - Radar Chart



Changing attitudes towards vocational study

Breaking down the results of our vocational attitudes survey on a regional basis reveals some surprising statistics, starting with the most significant scores.

North East shows a surge of interest in vocational training

More than half of parents (52%) surveyed in the North East region said they are 'very interested' in vocational options for their children – a huge leap from the 25% who answered the same in 2024. Children's 'very interested' responses also hit 50% in 2025.

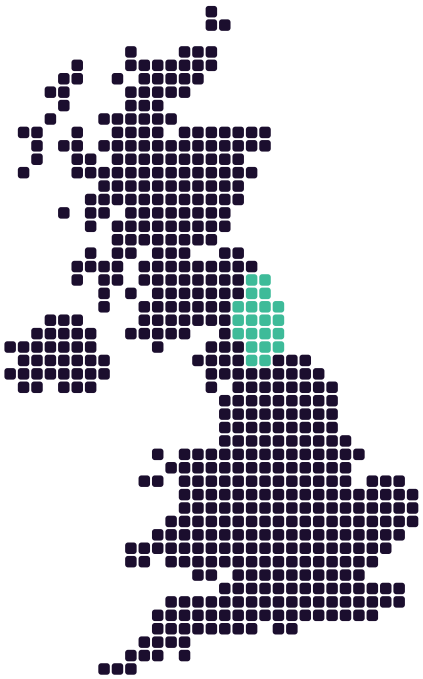
More than half of both parents *and* children in the North East now 'strongly agree' that hands-on experience is becoming more important than purely academic qualifications for careers in tech. The North East is the only region surveyed where this statement exceeded 50% of 'strongly agree' responses from children.

The number of 'very interested' responses from North East parents in apprenticeships as an alternative to university soared from 36% in 2024 to 62% in 2025. This might reflect growing concerns about university costs.

Both parents and children in the North East displayed the largest increases in willingness to consider apprenticeships over university, with children's 'would strongly consider' responses exceeding 60% – the highest of any region overall.

And there's a growing sentiment among North East respondents that schools are signposting more towards university than they are vocational routes – the region had the most 'strongly agree' responses of all (36%), and even more than last year's 25%.

- Manufacturing starts have dropped by 52% among over-19s since 2021/22
- The North East has the highest proportion of learners in engineering (nearly 60%)
- More than half of parents are 'very interested' in vocational options for their kids.



East of England shows dramatic shifts in attitude among young people

The number of students who 'strongly agree' with the idea that hands-on experience is becoming more important for a career in tech than purely academic qualifications has rocketed in the space of just a year. From 2024's response rate of 13% to 48% in 2025, t's a change which could reveal much about local prospects.

Both parents and children in this region showed the largest increases nationally in being 'very interested' to know more about apprenticeships, with young learners' interest more than doubling to 52%.

- One of five regions to record T Levels growth rates above 300% since 2022/23
- Young learners 'very interested' to learn more about apprenticeships more than doubled in 2025 to 52%
- Students who 'strongly agree' hands-on experience more important than academic quals rocketed from 13% in 2024 to 47% in 2025.



Mixed signals on enthusiasm for apprenticeships in the West Midlands

The idea of hands-on experience trumping academic qualifications for a tech career has lost some support in the West Midlands, with 'strongly agree' answers from children dropping from 43% to 35% in the space of a year.

Fewer students in 2025 (18%) gave 'strongly agree' replies than in 2024 (30%) that schools are speaking about both university and vocational routes to make school leavers aware of all choices. Fewer respondents also strongly agree in 2025 than in 2024 that schools are bringing in speakers to discuss vocational careers post-school.

- Also recorded more than 300% growth in T Levels starts since 2022/23.
- Students' support for hands-on experience declined from 43% to 35% in a year
- Fewer students strongly agreed (18%, down from 30% in 2024) that schools are promoting both uni and vocational routes.



Summary

We've examined these data sets together because, when viewed together, we can learn a lot about the nation's ability and desire for access to skills, and whether training providers and educators are prepared enough to get our learners to the next level.

The data tells us that while apprenticeship starts are under pressure, especially for older learners and in certain regions, T Levels and E&T pathways are expanding rapidly.

Meanwhile, the attitudes survey reveals a growing appetite for learners to take vocational routes towards their ideal career. For those who are concerned about university costs, or those who value the potential that hands-on experience has in developing their career, vocational routes seem the more attractive post-16 option.

However, a closer look at the figures reveals some regional disparities.

The North East stands out for its surge in vocational interest and concern about university costs, while the West Midlands shows some cooling-off in enthusiasm and less positive perceptions of schools' support for vocational options.

The challenge ahead

England's engineering and manufacturing vocational landscape is in flux. We are seeing some growth in the numbers of people taking up technical education, and the decisive turn towards vocational routes, especially in regions where economic pressures and local advocacy are strongest.

The challenge now is for schools and policymakers to ensure that information and opportunities are balanced, accessible, and aligned with the aspirations of both learners and their families.

It's hugely positive news that we now see perceptions of apprenticeships improving, just as the government begins its heavy investment in skills development. But we also need to recognise the challenges the sector faces. Right now, there is something of a mismatch between supply and demand: employers are finding it increasingly difficult to offer apprenticeship opportunities to young people. As a result, we've seen the number of apprenticeships starts decline.

Vocational learning has too often been undervalued or seen as less important than academic routes. At Enginuity we've long argued the opposite – that vocational education, apprenticeships, and T Levels are fantastic routes into our sector, and we've been committed for years to championing them.

That's why we're joining with EAL to launch a new national day, to shine a spotlight on the value of vocational pathways. We want **Vocational Celebration Day** to challenge those outdated perceptions and help to grow this vital sector.

Right now, the UK's advanced manufacturing, engineering, and related sectors urgently need more people with hands-on, technical, work-ready skills to drive growth. We are looking to help unlock these people's potential – the engineers, makers, and problem-solvers who turn challenges into progress. Through data, insight, and collaboration, we connect skills with opportunity and imagination with impact.



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