Education and Gaelic Committee
Tuesday 10 November 2026
8th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Apprenticeships

Background

1. The Scottish Government's post-school education reform agenda aims toward a system that is equitable, with high quality opportunities available to all. During Session 6, the Scottish Government legislated to give the Scottish Funding Council (the SFC) new responsibilities for apprenticeships. The SFC is expected to take these up from April 2027. Reforms to reduce the complexity of the apprenticeship system are expected to follow.

2. The apprenticeship system in Scotland offers work-based learning opportunities for young people from senior phase of high school all the way through to university. There are currently three types of apprenticeship offered in Scotland:

> **Foundation apprenticeships:** Foundation apprenticeships are offered to pupils between S3 and S6. This kind of apprenticeship leads to a qualification that is equivalent to a National 4, National 5 or Higher.
>
> **Modern apprenticeships:** Modern apprenticeships are primarily for 16 to 24 year olds, although there is no upper age limit. A modern apprentice is employed. They balance their employment and on the job training with some formal study at a college or other learning provider. A modern apprenticeship lasts for between 1 and 4 years. There are currently over 100 different modern apprenticeships offered.
>
> **Graduate apprenticeships:** Graduate apprenticeships are for people aged over 16 years old. A graduate apprentice is employed. This apprenticeship combines employment with a higher education course, contributing to a degree. Graduate apprenticeships last for between 2 and 5 years.

3. The Committee is looking at the progress being made on these reforms. It would like to understand:

- how apprenticeships are delivered to, and accessed by, young people
- whether current apprenticeship offers meets skills demand, and how this might improve
- the Scottish Government's aims for the reform of the apprenticeship system
- the progression of plans to give the Scottish Funding Council new responsibilities for apprenticeships

Committee meeting

4. This is the first evidence session on this short inquiry and the Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses—

    - James Withers, Director, JR Withers Advisory Ltd;
    - Dr Janet Brown, RSE – Vice President Education, Royal Society of Edinburgh;
    - Helyn Gould, Deputy Associate Principal for Education, Systems and Enhancement, University of Strathclyde.

Supporting information

5. SPICe provided a background briefing for this meeting which is attached at **Annexe A.** Written submissions from witnesses are attached at **Annexe B**. A written submission from Professor Sally Smith from Edinburgh Napier University has been published on the website.

Next steps

6. The Committee will visit a college on 23 November and a university on 30 November to speak directly to apprentices on their experiences. The Committee will also continue to take evidence at its meeting on 24 November.

Clerk to the Committee,
November 2026

Annexe A

SPICe Scottish Parliament Information Centre
Ionad Fiosrachaidh Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Apprenticeships

The Committee is holding the first session of its short inquiry into the apprenticeships system in Scotland. The Committee wishes to explore:

- access to, and delivery of, apprenticeships for young people;
- whether current apprenticeship provision aligns with skills demand;
- the Scottish Government's objectives for apprenticeship reform; and
- progress towards transferring apprenticeship responsibilities to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

The Committee is taking evidence from the author of the independent review of skills, James Withers, Dr Janet Brown, Vice President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Helyn Gould, Deputy Associate Principal for Education, Systems & Enhancement at the University of Strathclyde.

Overview of Scotland's apprenticeship system

The National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) states the importance of skills and lifelong learning to improving productivity, addressing labour shortages and supporting the transition to net zero. The Scottish Government sets out apprenticeships as a work-based learning pathway to meet these skills needs. There are three types of apprenticeship offered in Scotland. Information on each type is set out below.

Foundation apprenticeships are for school pupils between S3 and S6. They lead to a qualification equivalent to a National 4, National 5 or Higher. There are currently 15 different foundation apprenticeships offered in Scotland, such as software development, and food and drink technologies. A full list of foundation apprenticeship frameworks can be found in the SFC's 2025-26 guidance.

A joint report from the SFC and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) published in June 2025 set out that in 2022 there were 4,655 pupils enrolled in foundation apprenticeships in total. The report found that over 20,000 school pupils have enrolled in foundation apprenticeships since their introduction in 2016.

Modern apprenticeships are mainly aimed at people from aged 16 to 24, although there is not an upper age limit. A modern apprentice is employed and balances their employment and on the job training with some formal study at a college or other

learning provider. They last for between 1 and 4 years. There are currently over 100 different modern apprenticeship frameworks available.

SDS data on modern apprenticeship starts from 2020-21 to 2024-25 are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Modern Apprenticeship starts 2020-21 to 2024-25

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
18,655	25,401	25,447	25,365	25,507

Source: Modern Apprenticeship Starts 2020-21 to 2024-25, SDS

Graduate apprenticeships are for those aged over 16, with no upper age limit. A graduate apprentice is also employed, and works toward an ordinary or Masters degree by combining employment with study at a higher education institution (HEI). They last for between 2 and 5 years. There are currently 13 graduate apprenticeships offered in Scotland, including accounting and data science. The SFC's guidance sets out that, in 2025-26, the sector was expected to deliver "an intake of at least 1,378 new [graduate apprenticeship] opportunities".

Demand for graduate apprenticeships has grown in recent years, with some HEIs looking to increase their offer. However, the length of time required to develop new graduate apprenticeship frameworks has been identified by the sector as a challenge. The SFC told the Public Audit Committee on 29 October 2026 that it is working with Universities Scotland and the Scottish Government to look at how the development process can be sped up while maintaining standards.

Funding arrangements

At present, funding for apprenticeships is delivered by SDS, the SFC and SAAS. The SFC funds graduate apprenticeships and around half of foundation apprenticeships under its statutory powers for securing further and higher education provision, as well as contributing to the costs of providing modern apprenticeships. The majority of the modern apprenticeship programme and the remainder of the foundation apprenticeship programme are secured and overseen by SDS. SDS also funds some legacy graduate apprenticeships. SAAS provides the tuition fee support for graduate apprenticeships. **Table 2** sets out the funding split in 2024-25.

Table 2: Split of Apprenticeship Funding Across Agencies in 2024-25 (£m)

Type of apprenticeship	SDS (£m)	SFC (£m)	SAAS (£m)	Total (£m)
Foundation Apprenticeships	8	10		18
Modern Apprenticeships	91	50		141
Graduate Apprenticeships	3	30	6	39
Total	**102**	**90**	**6**	**198**

Source: Letter from the Minister for Higher and Further Education to the Education, Children and Young People Committee, January 2026

A written answer from June 2026 set out that, in 2026-27, the Scottish Government has provided funding to support around 25,500 new modern apprenticeship starts and 1,500 graduate apprenticeships starts. Funding for apprenticeships in 2027-28 will be considered as part of preparation for the Scottish Budget 2027-28. Funding for subsequent years will be a matter for future budgets.

From April 2027, the SFC will take on responsibility for the distribution of funding for modern apprenticeships as part of the wider post-school reform agenda [further information on this is set out under the 'Post-school reform' heading below]. This represents a significant change in the way modern apprenticeships are overseen. As a result of the change, 130 full-time equivalent staff are expected to transfer over from SDS in an 'as-is transfer'.

In the Programme for Government 2026-31 the Scottish Government committed to increase the number of apprenticeships delivered over the course of the Parliament to 150,000, expand the opportunities provided by graduate apprenticeships and develop a new Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant focused on supporting businesses, particularly SMEs. The Scottish Government has said further information about the grant scheme will be set out in due course, with funding considered as part of preparation for the Scottish Budget 2027-28.

Growth and Skills/Apprenticeship Levy

The Apprenticeship Levy (to become the Growth and Skills Levy) is a UK Government employment tax collected across the UK. It is paid by all UK employers with a pay bill of more than £3m per year. The levy is set at 0.5% of an employer's annual wage bill.

Scotland's share of the tax collected comes as part of the block grant to the Scottish Government. Scottish Ministers then decide how to allocate the block grant. Scottish Government officials told the Public Audit Committee on 29 October 2026 that there is "no direct link between the levy and the money that goes to apprenticeships". During scrutiny of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill in session 6, the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard evidence raising concerns about a lack of transparency around how levy funding is used in Scotland.

Post-school reform

Steps towards reform of post-school education began in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SFC's 2021 Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability set out recommendations for the college and university landscape. This included calls for the Scottish Government to establish an overall vision and strategy for further and higher education, increase collaboration between colleges and universities and move to multi-year funding.

The Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape (the Withers Review) was carried out by James Withers and published in June 2023. This set out 15 recommendations for transforming skills delivery, with a number of these related to apprenticeships. These included calls for the Scottish Government to take responsibility for skills planning at a national level and create a single funding body for provision of all post-school education, including apprenticeships.

The report highlighted the complexity of funding arrangements, with the SFC and SDS both responsible for funding different apprenticeship types. It recommended redesigning the process of allocating funding for learning and training provision including apprenticeships, with a focus on parity of esteem for all learning pathways and one public body having responsibility for distributing funding.

The report also recommended winding down the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) and replacing it with a network of regional employer boards and a national employers forum.

In evidence to the ECYP Committee on 15 November 2023, James Withers told MSPs that a 10-year timescale for skills reform is "not unrealistic". He added: "establishing a vision for what good looks like … should be the north star" to ensure clarity about the aims of change.

Following the Withers review, the Session 6 Scottish Government published Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills in June 2023. This is a framework intended to set the overarching policy direction for higher and further education. It has five key principles:

- Transparent, Resilient and Trusted
- High Quality
- Supportive and Equitable
- Globally Respected
- Agile and Responsive

The Scottish Government also published an Initial Priorities document. This said that apprenticeships must be considered alongside other pathways when considering student support and engagement. It also said the Scottish Government would lead work on the development and delivery of apprenticeships as part of an integrated post-school landscape.

A June 2026 report from Audit Scotland on skills reform set out that there are three phases to the Scottish Government's post-school education and skills reform plans

going forward:

- Phase one (2024-26) focuses on building new skills capabilities, including legislation the 2026 Act introduced to simplify the funding body landscape and skills planning taken forward by the Scottish Government.

- Phase two (2026-28) focuses on implementing new structures and improving outcomes, including reform of apprenticeships, changes made to the funding body landscape, and implementation of new skills planning processes.

- Phase three (2028-32) focuses on maximising outcomes, with the aims of creating clearer learning pathways that support economic priorities.

Impact of reforms on apprenticeships

To move forward areas of skills reform requiring legislation and address issues relating to apprenticeships identified by the Withers Review, the Scottish Government brought forward the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. The Policy Memorandum accompanying the Bill states:

> Evidence from the Withers Review suggests that the administration and funding of apprenticeships is complicated, not always transparent, and sometimes slow to respond to demand. There is also evidence of a perception of apprenticeships as being detached from the rest of university and college learning. - Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill Policy Memorandum

The Bill became an Act on 11 March 2026. The Act contains provisions that, once commenced, are intended to simplify the tertiary education funding landscape and improve the governance of the SFC.

While the Scottish Government did not adopt the Withers Review recommendation for the creation of a single funding body in full, responsibility for funding apprenticeships is to transfer to the SFC. The Act places a duty on Scottish Ministers to fund the SFC to secure and fund provision of national training programmes and all apprenticeships. SDS will cease to distribute modern apprenticeship funding from April 2027. The SFC will also establish an apprenticeship committee to advise on matters concerning apprenticeships [SAAB is to be wound up, as recommended by the Withers Review].

Following the passage of the Bill, the Scottish Government also announced a review of contribution rates for modern apprenticeships. In September 2026, the Scottish Government confirmed a 10% uplift to MA contribution rates for new starts and those in training for 2027-28 onwards. Stage 2 of the review – consideration of the cost of delivery across frameworks – will begin in 2027.

Audit Scotland's report assessing progress made toward post-school reforms concluded progress was slow overall, lacking a clear plan and adequate resources. The report set out actions to be taken by the Scottish Government, the SFC and SDS within six months (December 2026). These included:

- Scottish Government development of an overarching delivery plan with timescales and actions, strengthening leadership and governance of reforms and ensuring sufficient resources are provided for the reform plans and outcomes for partner organisations, industry and learners are set out alongside how they align with government objectives.

- The Scottish Government should work with the SFC, SDS and others to put in place a more consistent and structured approach to engaging with learners and industry on the reform programme.

- Development and implementation of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the reform programme, featuring outcomes and lessons learned.

The Audit Scotland report also highlighted the SFC and SDS Joint Implementation Plan covering transition up to April 2027.

A recent written answer from the Scottish Government on progress toward implementation of the Act stated that regulations came into force in October, enabling the SFC to "undertake the preparatory work required to assume its new responsibilities for securing and funding the delivery of national training programmes, apprenticeships and work-based learning on 1 April 2027."

In a letter to the Education and Gaelic Committee on 17 September 2026, Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education Alyn Smith highlighted the provisions coming into force on 1 October 2026. These included the following in relation to apprenticeships:

- Addition of securing coherent provision of a high quality of apprenticeships and work-based learning to the SFC's general duties.

- Extending Scottish Ministers' duty to provide support for the provision of fundable further and higher education to include apprenticeships and work-based learning.

- The introduction of a statutory definition of apprenticeships, inserted into the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 by the 2026 Act.

- Provisions for Scottish Ministers to provide grants to the SFC for the purpose of securing apprenticeships and work-based learning, and the SFC to make payments to providers for the delivery of apprenticeships or work-based learning.

- A requirement for the SFC board, referred to in legislation as 'the Council', to include at least two members representing the interests of employers.

- Provisions requiring the SFC to establish an apprenticeship committee, and a requirement for Scottish Ministers to issue guidance on the establishment and operation of the committee.

In a letter to the Committee on 1 October 2026, the Minister highlighted that the Scottish Government has now issued this guidance to the SFC. The letter also

included a copy of the guidance. This outlines the principles and requirements the SFC must have when setting up the apprenticeship committee, including in relation to ensuring representation for apprentices, employers and industry.

Recent research into apprenticeships

The OECD's 2022 report Strengthening Apprenticeship in Scotland described Scotland's apprenticeship system as "one of the most flexible and wide-ranging systems in the OECD", with apprenticeship starts rising 10% between 2013-14 and 2019-20 and around 90% of those completing modern apprenticeships in work six months later. The report identified areas for improvement including:

- Making the system more responsive to employer need with a more demand-led funding system.
- Increasing the number of small and medium-size employers taking on apprentices.
- Establishing minimum requirements for length, mix and trainers of apprenticeships.
- Providing strategic guidance and support for innovation in apprenticeships.
- Developing direct routes to final apprenticeship assessment for those with relevant skills.

The OECD report also highlighted that Scottish Government funding per student is "less generous than for tertiary degrees, potentially reducing the number of places on offer and driving some learners into less suitable programmes."

The Royal Society of Edinburgh's 2025 report Gaps, overlaps, and challenges: assessing the alignment of Scotland's education reform agenda with national priorities highlighted the importance of ensuring Scotland's education and skills system aligns with wider social and economic policy perspectives and actions. It identified challenges in building a skilled workforce, namely in relation to individuals having access to the right opportunities.

The report finds apprenticeships to be an effective workforce development route. It links them directly to Scotland's economic goals, identifying them as a way in which labour and skills demands can be addressed.

The report's recommendations included calls for the Scottish Government to:

- Link Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) to education reform "more deliberately".
- Review the eligibility criteria for the modern apprenticeship scheme and the age limitation on apprenticeship provision, removing age-related funding barriers to enable older adults and career changers to take up opportunities.

The report also highlights a 2023 SDS report which found that, for those qualifying

from courses in sectors relating to net zero and just transition, over 99% of modern apprentices work in Scotland 15 months after completing their apprenticeship, while for graduate apprentices this figure was 100%. By comparison, the report found that 40% of university graduates going into these sectors left Scotland.

The UK Department for Work and Pensions commissioned Rt Hon Alan Milburn to carry out an independent report into young people and work. Interim findings were published in May 2026 and the final report is expected later this month. The interim report found around 40% of apprenticeship starts in Scotland are made by young people aged 16-18, compared to 20% in England. It suggested that England should "learn from parts of the UK and examples internationally where younger people are more effectively connected to work-based pathways from compulsory education."

Research published in 2025 by Paul Quigley at the University of Glasgow explored why employers in Scotland offer apprenticeships. It found that employers took on apprentices to develop their workforce, support local communities, access funding or meet short-term recruitment needs. Other employers did not offer apprenticeships because they had limited knowledge of the frameworks available or preferred more flexible staffing arrangements. The report highlighted the need for different approaches to supporting employers, reflecting their reasons for offering or not offering apprenticeships. The findings were based on qualitative research focused on large organisations and are not representative of all Scottish employers.

A 2021 report from Scottish Centre for Employment Research at the University of Strathclyde explored how Fair Work First criteria could be applied to modern and graduate apprenticeships. Interviews with stakeholders, employers and apprentices found broad support for the criteria, although some employers raised concerns about the affordability of paying the real Living Wage. Apprentices saw potential benefits in minimum employment standards that could reassure young people considering an apprenticeship. The research recommended clearer communication about Fair Work First, assessment of the impact of the real Living Wage and targeted support for employers facing affordability challenges.

Research commissioned in 2013 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission highlighted significant gender segregation in Scotland's modern apprenticeship programme and low participation by disabled people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. It examined how public funding and contracting could be used to promote more equal access to training and employment opportunities. These findings provide historical context rather than a measure of current participation.

Lynne Currie, Senior Researcher – Further Education, Higher Education, Looked-after Children and Child Protection and Kelly Eagle, Senior Researcher – Financial Scrutiny Unit, Skills and Apprenticeships
5 November 2026

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B

Written submission from James Withers

1. Background and overarching findings

In May 2023, I submitted *Fit for the Future*, my independent review of Scotland's Skills Delivery Landscape, commissioned by Scottish Ministers. The Review made 15 recommendations, including significant structural reforms designed to create a more coherent, responsive and effective post-school learning system.

My formal appointment by Ministers concluded in June 2023. Since then, I have had no formal role in the implementation of the Review's recommendations, nor have I been a formal consultee on reform progress. I have remained an interested observer, with occasional informal contact with Ministers and some engagement with parts of the system by invitation. My comments should be considered in that context.

The Review was informed by extensive engagement with employers, learners, education providers, public agencies and other stakeholders. Its central finding was that Scotland had considerable strengths in its education and skills system, but that the system as a whole was fragmented, unnecessarily complex and insufficiently aligned with the needs of learners, employers and our future economy.

In particular, I identified:

- **A fragmented institutional landscape**, with overlapping responsibilities, competing priorities and insufficient clarity about accountability.
- **A fragmented funding system**, with different arrangements for colleges, universities and apprenticeships creating barriers to flexible provision.
- **A lack of strategic direction**, with insufficient national prioritisation of future skills needs and limited ability to translate economic priorities into provision.
- **Confusing learning pathways**, compounded by an artificial divide between academic and vocational education and a fundamental lack of parity of esteem.
- **Insufficient flexibility and responsiveness**, particularly at regional level, where providers and employers need greater freedom to respond to local economic opportunities.

My fundamental proposition was that Scotland should not have separate education and skills systems. It needs a single post-school learning system, within which people develop knowledge and skills throughout their lives.

I also concluded that reform could not be achieved through structural change alone. It required a fundamental cultural shift in how Scotland thinks about, values and supports different forms of learning. I remain convinced that this is one of the biggest barriers to national progress.

2. Apprenticeships: findings and recommendations

Apprenticeships were central to my recommendations, not because I considered the existing model fundamentally flawed, but because I believed their potential was being constrained by their separation from the wider learning system.

They offer an enormously valuable means of combining employment, learning and qualifications. Scotland should have ambitions to expand work-integrated learning significantly, with apprenticeships playing a central role.

However, I was reluctant simply to recommend more funding for apprenticeships in isolation. That risked perpetuating competition for resources between public sector agencies, apprenticeships, colleges and universities, rather than encouraging an integrated approach.

My principal recommendations were:

A single funding body (Recommendations 5 and 6). I recommended bringing funding for apprenticeships, colleges, universities and other publicly funded training under one national body. Crucially, this was not simply about transferring existing functions. It required a fundamental redesign of funding arrangements to encourage flexibility, remove unnecessary bureaucracy, align investment with national priorities and support regional responsiveness.

Clearer qualifications and pathways (Recommendations 8 and 9). I recommended a clear remit for the new national qualifications body, encompassing publicly funded post-school qualifications, apprenticeship frameworks and underpinning standards. I also proposed a comprehensive review of qualifications and pathways to improve articulation, simplify terminology and make the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) central to how learning is understood and valued.

Reconsidering Foundation Apprenticeships (Recommendation 9). I questioned whether Foundation Apprenticeships should be classified as apprenticeships at all. They are school qualifications incorporating workplace experience, rather than employment-based apprenticeships. Their design, naming, funding and delivery should be aligned with equivalent senior-phase qualifications.

Unlocking Graduate Apprenticeships (Recommendations 6 and 9). I saw enormous untapped potential in degree-level apprenticeships, particularly as an alternative pathway for school leavers. I recommended removing artificial barriers between conventional university provision and degree-level apprenticeships, with greater funding flexibility to support expansion.

Embedding employer leadership (Recommendation 12). I recommended moving beyond apprenticeship-specific employer advisory structures towards a stronger, regionally grounded employer voice across the whole learning system. Employers should be integral to identifying future skills requirements, shaping qualifications and influencing provision.

3. The fundamental challenge: changing culture, not simply structures

I would particularly encourage the Committee to consider apprenticeships in the context of a much wider cultural problem in Scotland's education system: the persistent failure to achieve genuine parity of esteem between different learning pathways.

We continue to describe academic and vocational learning as though they are fundamentally different and competing pursuits. University remains widely regarded as the pinnacle of educational achievement, with other pathways too often treated as lesser alternatives. This distinction is deeply damaging to individuals and to our economy.

In a country with a shrinking working-age population, we cannot afford an education system that leaves many young people believing they have failed simply because they have not followed a particular academic route.

These attitudes are particularly entrenched in secondary education, where they influence the choices available to young people, the advice they receive and the perceived value of their achievements.

Foundation Apprenticeships provide a compelling example. A Foundation Apprenticeship at SCQF Level 6 is at the same level of learning complexity as a Higher. Yet they are not consistently afforded the same standing or recognition. Their different names and institutional treatment reinforce the suggestion that one qualification is somehow more valuable than another.

Different forms of learning and assessment are entirely appropriate. But different does not mean inferior.

In my Review, I argued that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework was one of Scotland's greatest, and most underused, educational assets. I now believe even more strongly that it should become the organising framework for how Scotland describes and values learning.

Imagine a system where a young person talks about achieving Level 6 English, Level 6 Software Development or Level 6 Construction, rather than one being called a Higher, another a Foundation Apprenticeship and another an Award. They represent different kinds of achievement at the same level of learning complexity and yet the names imply a hierarchy of worth.

This is not simply a matter of terminology though. Language shapes perceptions, perceptions shape choices, and choices shape the future workforce.

If we genuinely want to increase apprenticeship participation and ensure that young people can make informed decisions about their futures, these cultural barriers must be challenged from within the school system itself.

Scotland does not need another campaign promoting parity of esteem. We need a

system whose design, language, funding and treatment of qualifications actually demonstrate it.

4. Priorities for the next phase of apprenticeship reform

The transfer of apprenticeship responsibilities to the Scottish Funding Council creates an important opportunity. However, the Committee should distinguish between the successful transfer of functions and the achievement of meaningful reform.

I would highlight five priorities:

1. **Move beyond structural change to redesign funding.** A single funding agency must translate into simpler arrangements, greater flexibility and a more consistent approach to investing in different learning pathways.
2. **Make apprenticeships integral to national and regional skills planning.** Investment must respond to credible evidence of current and future economic demand, supported by clear national priorities and meaningful regional autonomy.
3. **Create clearer, more flexible learning pathways.** Apprenticeships should be considered alongside college and university provision, with easier progression between pathways and greater opportunities for work-integrated and lifelong learning.
4. **Strengthen employer leadership without creating new complexity.** New governance arrangements must preserve the strengths of employer-led apprenticeship development while connecting employer insight to wider skills planning.
5. **Make parity of esteem a practical objective of reform.** The Scottish Government, schools, colleges, universities and employers must collectively challenge the hierarchy of qualifications. Careers education, qualifications frameworks, progression arrangements and public messaging should reinforce the equal value of different learning pathways.

5. Progress since the Review

I want to emphasise again that I have had no formal involvement in implementation since my appointment concluded in June 2023. I have not been systematically consulted on progress, nor have I had access to the detailed work underpinning reform decisions (nor have I requested either). The following is therefore a high-level assessment based on publicly available information and occasional informal engagement, rather than an authoritative evaluation of implementation.

I welcome the significant legislative progress since 2023, particularly the decision to consolidate funding responsibilities for post-school education and training within the SFC. This is an important step towards the more coherent landscape I

recommended.

However, I would distinguish between progress on institutional reform and evidence of system-wide transformation.

- **Funding structures:** Significant legislative progress, with the transfer of apprenticeship responsibilities planned for April 2027. The more fundamental redesign of funding arrangements remains a critical next step.
- **Qualifications and standards:** Qualifications Scotland has been established, but responsibility for apprenticeship frameworks will sit with the SFC. This differs from my recommendation for coherent national oversight of qualifications, frameworks and occupational standards within the qualifications body.
- **Apprenticeship pathways:** The extent to which reforms will simplify pathways, improve progression and integrate work-based learning more fully into the wider education system remains to be demonstrated.
- **Strategic planning and employer engagement:** New arrangements offer opportunities for improvement, but their effectiveness will depend on how they operate in practice.
- **Parity of esteem:** I have yet to see evidence of the fundamental cultural shift that I believe is essential, particularly within secondary education. Structural reform will have limited impact if long-established attitudes towards different qualifications and learning pathways remain unchanged.

My overriding message to the Committee is that **changing which public body funds apprenticeships is an important step, but it is not the destination.**

The real test is whether Scotland emerges with a simpler, more coherent learning system that gives individuals clearer choices, gives employers greater confidence in investing in skills and enables public investment to respond effectively to the needs of our economy.

Three years after my Review, I remain convinced that the greatest prize is not simply a better organised system, but a different national culture of learning: one in which every pathway is valued for the opportunities it creates, rather than its position in an artificial educational hierarchy.

We have begun to change structures. The much harder, and ultimately more important, challenge is to change culture.

Written submission from Royal Society of Edinburgh

Dear Members of the Education and Gaelic Committee,

The Royal Society of Edinburgh's Education Committee welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Gaelic Committee's inquiry into apprenticeships. Our contribution for the meeting draws on RSE work, as well as further consultation with members of the RSE's Education Committee for the purposes of this specific session.

General remarks

We would begin by making a general remark, which has important connotations for what the inquiry is intending to cover. The inquiry description frames apprenticeships as mainly relevant for young people. We suggest that the Committee may wish to consider a wider scope of technical and work-related training, recognising that learners are diverse and often require not only initial training such as provided through apprenticeships, but upskilling and reskilling through their working lives. The RSE has repeatedly emphasised the need to consider the education and skills system across the lifespan particularly given today's rapidly evolving world of work, influenced by technological, social, and environmental changes.

This requirement is also aligned with Scotland's ambitions for just transition and to address current skills shortages.

The strongest argument for expanding apprenticeships is their effectiveness in converting training investment into sustained employment. By design, Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships integrate learning with paid employment, providing an immediate connection between skills development and labour market demand.

However, the capacity to expand apprenticeships is fundamentally constrained by employers' ability and willingness to recruit. More than 90% of Scottish apprenticeship employers are SMEs, many operating within sectors heavily influenced by public expenditure and procurement. Fiscal pressures, uncertain demand, rising employment costs and short-term contracting arrangements all undermine confidence in long term workforce investment.

The recently announced 10% uplift in Modern Apprenticeship contribution rates is welcome and, while long overdue, goes some way towards addressing the growing affordability challenges facing training providers. However, it should be recognised as a first step rather than a comprehensive solution. Funding arrangements must reflect the true costs of delivery, including the specialist facilities, equipment and staffing necessary to maintain high-quality technical education.

Skills planning and national priority setting

One of the points raised by your inquiry is whether current apprenticeship offers meet Scotland's skills demand. This is a key point that has been explored in the work of the RSE Education Committee, which highlighted wider systemic issues in the general approach to education and skills training and the associated reform

programme at national level.

In several of the RSE's education-focused documents, including our publication *Education and Skills 2050: Future proofing Scotland*, we have emphasised the importance of increasing the pace of educational reform and developing a long-term strategy for education and skills (with a proposed time frame of 2050). To achieve this purpose, there needs to be further clarity on the purpose and goals of our education system and how its effectiveness can be measured. Arguing for parity of esteem, the RSE recognises that apprenticeships are a key part of this holistic approach to education, which values different pathways equally.

In this context, we have recommended that further education reform is geared towards bringing in more flexibility and agility in the system, making different opportunities, including through apprenticeships, available to individuals and employers. This requires diverse lifelong learning pathways that are adaptable, technologically enabled, mutually respected across education and the economy, and lead to a wide range of meaningful post-school destinations.

In our recent report, *Policy in Practice – How Scotland can get it right*, the RSE has emphasised the need for an agile, and outcomes-based assessment and qualifications system, including the use of micro-credentials, short and modular courses, and flexible pathways that allow learners, at whatever age or stage, to dip in and out of learning as their needs change. To enable this outcome then, it is recommended that the changes proposed for the apprenticeship systems also seek to address the perception gap for both educational institutions and the wider society, which privileges academic routes over vocational, technical, and apprenticeship pathways.

Moreover, RSE's analyses of the current education and skills policy landscape have emphasised a lack of coherence between its approach and the envisaged requirements of Scotland's national policies, notably the focus on addressing the climate emergency, economic growth, and social cohesion and opportunity. Our report *Gaps, overlaps and challenges* noted that the education and skills reform is not aligned with societal and industry developments and associated skills requirements. No-one can predict future requirements but a flexible education and skills system, including the overall approach to apprenticeships, that is considered alongside key national priority areas would help ensure a thriving future for Scotland. National, regional, and local level engagement is needed, and this can only be achieved in partnership and close communication with employers from different sectors.

Revisions of current apprenticeship frameworks

While it is beyond the scope of our recent work to make detailed recommendations for the revision of current schemes, we do want to make a few comments. In our contribution to the Tertiary Education and Training Bill consultation we welcomed the efforts to simplify and streamline the funding landscape. As there was limited detail available on the mechanisms that will be implemented for funding at that time, we cautioned that new funding frameworks should consider the different types of providers of apprenticeships (not only colleges and universities for instance) and the

administrative burdens smaller providers can bear.

The RSE's report *Gaps, overlaps and challenges* acknowledges the success of the Modern Apprenticeship scheme. Drawing on available evaluations, it concludes that both Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships show improved talent retention compared to university talent, emphasising their importance in CESAP[1] sectors and role in supporting Scotland's ambitions to achieve net zero. The key recommendation is that Graduate apprenticeships, in particular, could be made more inclusive by removing age-related funding restrictions and reviewing eligibility criteria to ensure other potential barriers to participation are eliminated. This would align with the above-mentioned consideration that apprenticeships could serve different segments of our population.

In line with the recommendations provided by the Withers' review, the RSE's report recommends greater transparency in the management of the Apprenticeship Levy, which could enhance employers' participation. Working in closer partnership with industry was outlined as a key driver to ensure apprenticeship frameworks deliver training that is up to date and responsive to industry needs, that feed into the wider national skills planning efforts and ensure that existing offers address skills (especially "green skills") shortages.

Finally, our analysis of the current education system noted gaps in the measurement and availability of data for apprenticeships. Indeed, in the past we have pointed out the importance of using data across the education system[2] and ideally, the opportunity to track a person's journey through the education system and in the world of work. The availability of such data is key to ensure skills planning as set out in the current Programme for Government is informed by large-scale, cross-institutional datasets that robustly measure the full breath of learning and attainment.

Yours sincerely,

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RSE Education Committee Convener

[1] The Climate Emergency Scotland Action Plan 2020-25 (CESAP) identifies these sectors as energy and waste treatment; construction; transport; manufacturing (including engineering); and agriculture (including forestry and fishing).
[2] See for instance: Education and skills 2050: Future proofing Scotland https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/education-and-skills-2050-future-proofing-scotland/