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THE WORKFORCE BEHIND THE WORKFORCE

**Public perceptions of further education and skills
in the United Kingdom**

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FOREWORD



Further education (FE) and skills sits at the heart of the United Kingdom's (UK) social and economic future. Across the country, teachers, trainers and leaders working in colleges, independent training providers and adult education services equip millions of learners with the capabilities required for work, progression and lifelong development. From advanced manufacturing and green technologies to health, construction and digital innovation, the workforce that powers national growth is developed within the FE and skills system.

At a time when the UK faces persistent productivity challenges, skills shortages across key sectors and the need to support sustainable economic growth, the contribution of FE and skills has never been more important. The sector provides the technical knowledge, professional capability and vocational expertise that underpin industries across the economy. In doing so, it enables individuals to access opportunities, supports businesses to innovate and contributes to the resilience of regional economies.

Yet despite this central role, public understanding of FE and skills often lags behind the reality of its impact. Many people encounter the sector directly through their own learning journeys or those of family members, but awareness of its wider economic contribution, and of the professional workforce delivering that education and training, is often less visible in public debate.

This report provides new insights into how the public perceives FE and skills in the UK. Drawing on national polling, it explores how people understand the role of the sector, the value they place on technical education and retraining, and their perceptions of the professionals who deliver learning across colleges and training providers.

The findings reveal both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, public attitudes towards FE and skills are broadly positive, with strong recognition of its role in supporting employment, career development and opportunity. Many people recognise the importance of technical education pathways and the need for individuals to retrain and develop new skills throughout their working lives. However, awareness of the sector's wider contribution to economic productivity and workforce development remains limited, and the research highlights the need to strengthen public understanding of the sector's strategic importance and the expertise of the professionals who deliver it.

Behind every skilled worker is an educator. Teachers, trainers and leaders across FE and skills are building the workforce that powers the UK economy. Their professionalism, industry expertise and commitment to learners are essential to the success of the country's workforce development system. Many bring extensive experience from industry alongside their teaching expertise, enabling them to bridge education and employment in ways that are distinctive to the sector.

Recognising and supporting this workforce is therefore fundamental to the UK's economic future. Economic growth depends on workforce capability, and workforce capability depends on educators.

The Education Training Foundation (ETF) exists to support this workforce. As the professional body for the FE and skills sector, ETF works to strengthen professionalism through professional standards, workforce development, research and sector leadership. Our mission, then, is to ensure that educators across FE and skills are recognised, supported and able to deliver the highest-quality education and training for learners and employers. Strengthening public understanding of the sector is an important part of that mission. When the professionalism and impact of the FE and skills workforce is recognised, the value of technical education becomes clearer, and the contribution of the sector to national prosperity is better understood.

The findings in this report reinforce a simple but powerful message: FE and skills professionals are not only educators, they are the workforce developers powering the UK economy.

Dr Vikki Smith

Chief Professionalism Officer, Education Training Foundation (ETF)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FE and skills occupies a unique and strategically important position within the UK's education and economic systems. Through technical education, vocational training and adult education, the sector equips individuals with the capabilities required to enter employment, advance their careers and adapt to the labour market. In doing so, it supports economic productivity, social mobility and regional development.

Across the UK, colleges, independent training providers and adult education organisations collectively educate and train millions of learners each year. These learners include young people entering technical education pathways as well as adults seeking to retrain, upskill or progress within their careers. FE and skills therefore operates both as an initial education pathway and as a lifelong learning system supporting workforce development across the life course.

The sector's impact extends well beyond individual learners. FE and skills institutions form a vital part of the UK's workforce development infrastructure, supporting industries including construction, engineering, healthcare, hospitality, digital technologies and the emerging green economy. Through technical education, apprenticeships, adult learning and employer partnerships, the sector helps ensure that businesses have access to the skilled workforce required to grow and innovate.

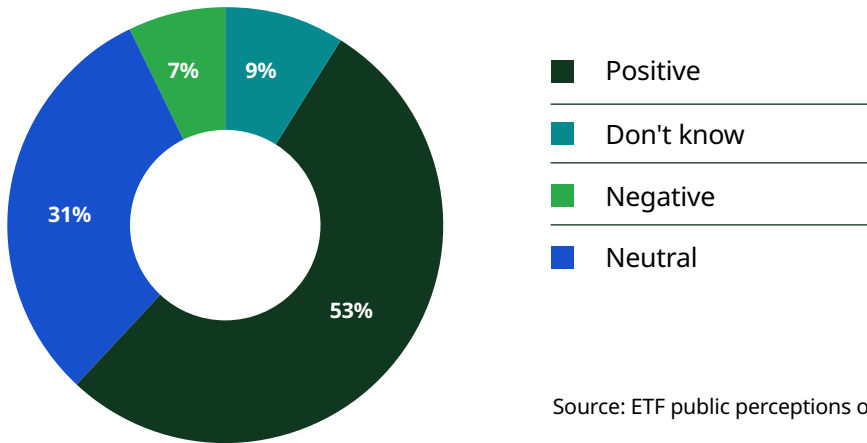
This report presents findings from nationally representative polling of 2,000 UK adults examining public perceptions of FE and skills.

The findings reveal that public attitudes toward FE and skills are broadly positive. More than half of respondents report favourable perceptions of the sector, while only a small minority express negative views. A significant proportion report neutral perceptions, suggesting that although the sector benefits from goodwill, many members of the public have limited familiarity with its full range of functions and contributions.



The results reveal broadly positive attitudes toward the sector:

Figure 1: How positively or negatively do you think people generally perceive students who go to college (e.g. to study vocational or technical courses) rather than sixth form or university?

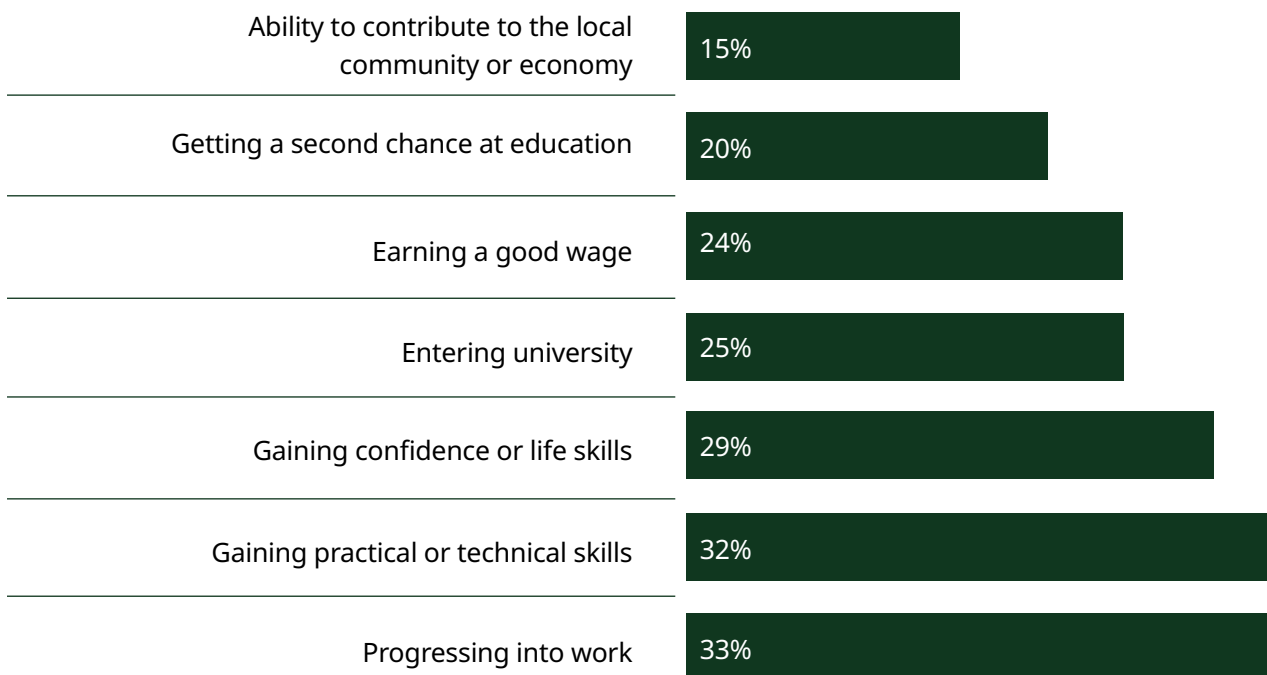


Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

The findings show that public attitudes towards FE and skills are broadly supportive, with a majority expressing favourable views and only a small minority expressing negative perceptions. However, a significant proportion of neutral responses suggests that while the sector benefits from public goodwill, many people have limited awareness of its full scope and contribution.

Where perceptions are formed, they tend to be associated with individuals’ economic and career outcomes.

Figure 2: Which, if any, of the following outcomes do you most associate with studying in the Further Education (FE) and skills sector?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

The findings also suggest that the public recognises FE and skills as contributing to wider personal development. Nearly a third of respondents associated the sector with building confidence and life skills, reinforcing the view that FE and skills delivers broader social value alongside technical training and labour market outcomes. This reflects the sector's distinctive role in supporting learners' resilience, wellbeing and readiness for work, particularly for those who may have faced barriers or disruption within earlier stages of education.

These associations demonstrate that the public recognises FE and skills primarily as a pathway to employment, career development and social mobility. However, awareness of the sector's wider role in national productivity, industrial capability and regional economic development is less developed. Teachers, trainers and leaders across the sector bring together industry expertise and pedagogical capability to deliver high-quality technical and vocational education. Many enter the profession following careers in industry, bringing valuable occupational experience into teaching and training.

This model of dual professionalism, combining subject expertise with teaching practice, is a defining feature of successful technical education systems internationally. It ensures that learning programmes remain aligned with workplace practices, technological change and employer needs. Supporting and developing this workforce is therefore essential to the effectiveness of the UK's workforce development system.

Economic growth depends on workforce capability.

Workforce capability depends on educators.

Recommendations

The polling reinforces ETF's core policy asks, which together provide a practical framework for strengthening the FE and skills workforce and improving public confidence in the system. Together, these priorities support a clear national objective: to build a sustainable, high-quality FE and skills workforce with the scale, professional infrastructure and recognition required to deliver workforce capability for economic growth.

1. Elevate the visibility of FE and skills professionals

Recognising and promoting the expertise of teachers, trainers and leaders across the sector will strengthen understanding of the professionalism underpinning technical education. Position FE and skills teaching as a credible second-career profession, supported by rigorous Initial Teacher Education and recognised professional standards.

2. Strengthen the narrative linking skills to economic growth

Public debate should more clearly reflect the role of FE and skills in developing the workforce capability required for economic prosperity.

3. Promote professional status within the FE and skills workforce

Supporting professional recognition frameworks can reinforce the status and attractiveness of teaching careers in the sector.

4. Improve public understanding of technical education pathways

Clearer communication about the routes available through FE and skills can help individuals navigate career and learning opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

FE and skills form a central component of the UK's education system and labour market infrastructure. The sector encompasses technical education, apprenticeships, vocational learning and adult education delivered through colleges, independent training providers, employer-led provision and community organisations. Together, these institutions provide learning opportunities for millions of people each year, supporting individuals at multiple stages of life and across a wide range of occupational pathways.

Unlike other parts of the education system, FE and skills sits directly at the intersection of education and employment. It provides the primary mechanism through which individuals develop the practical knowledge, occupational competence and technical capability required by employers. As such, the sector plays a critical role not only in individual opportunity and social mobility but also in enabling economic growth and productivity.

The UK faces a long-standing productivity challenge. Since the global financial crisis, productivity growth has slowed significantly compared with previous decades. At the same time, many sectors of the economy report persistent skills shortages. These shortages are particularly acute in sectors central to the UK's future economic development, including those identified in the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy (2025) and wider national workforce priorities such as advanced manufacturing, digital and technology industries, health and social care, green technologies and creative industries. In addition, enabling sectors such as construction and professional services will remain critical to the delivery of infrastructure, housing and net-zero ambitions.

Human capital development is therefore widely recognised as a critical policy priority. Investment in skills, training and workforce capability is consistently identified by economists as one of the most effective mechanisms through which governments can improve productivity and support long-term economic growth (Becker, 1993; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015).

Within this landscape, FE and skills institutions represent the primary infrastructure through which the UK develops technical workforce capability. However, despite its significance, the role of FE and skills is not always well understood by the wider public.

This report therefore examines how the public perceives the sector and explores the implications of these perceptions for policy, workforce development and economic growth.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this report draws on a nationally representative survey of 2,000 adults across the UK. The survey was designed to explore public perceptions of FE and skills, associations with sector outcomes, public understanding of who the sector serves and how it is viewed in relation to wider economic and social outcomes.

The survey was designed to explore public perceptions of FE and skills, including:

- awareness of the sector
- associations with different forms of education and training
- perceptions of outcomes delivered by the sector
- views on who benefits from FE and skills
- attitudes towards retraining and career change
- understanding of the role of skills development in economic growth.

The sample was weighted to reflect national demographic characteristics including age, gender and geographic distribution. The polling provides insight into the narratives that shape public understanding of technical and vocational education.

The findings provide insight not only into levels of awareness of FE and skills, but also into the narratives that shape public understanding of technical and vocational education. The methodology offers a snapshot of national sentiment and provides an evidence base for exploring the policy implications set out later in this report.



SKILLS, PRODUCTIVITY AND THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF FE AND SKILLS



The UK's productivity challenge has been widely documented. Since the global financial crisis, productivity growth has slowed significantly compared with previous decades. Output per hour has grown only modestly relative to other advanced economies, and the UK continues to experience a persistent productivity gap compared with countries such as Germany, the United States and France. According to analysis by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), weak productivity growth has been one of the defining features of the UK economy over the past fifteen years, limiting improvements in wages, living standards and economic competitiveness. At the same time, many sectors of the economy report persistent skills shortages, particularly in technical and professional occupations.

These shortages are particularly acute in technical and professional occupations that require specialised training and applied expertise. Employer surveys consistently identify gaps in areas such as advanced manufacturing, engineering, digital and technology industries, construction, health and social care, and the emerging green industries associated with the transition to net zero. These sectors are central to the UK's future economic development. They underpin infrastructure delivery, technological innovation and the transition to a more sustainable economy. Without a workforce equipped with the necessary technical and vocational capabilities, these sectors cannot expand at the pace required to support national economic growth or respond effectively to structural changes in the global economy.

Investment in workforce capability is therefore widely recognised as a central component of economic policy. Economists have long emphasised the importance of education and training in improving productivity, often drawing on the concept of human capital. Investment in knowledge and skills enhances the productive capacity of individuals and enables firms and economies to adopt new technologies, innovate and grow (Becker, 1993; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015).

However, contemporary research increasingly emphasises that skills alone do not automatically translate into economic growth. The productive use of human capital depends on the wider economic environment in which those skills are developed and deployed. Employer demand for skills, levels of technological investment and the organisation of labour markets all influence whether workforce capabilities are effectively utilised.

For this reason, recent policy research has increasingly focused on the concept of skills systems: the institutional arrangements that connect education providers, employers and regional economies in ways that allow skills to be developed, matched and deployed productively (Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

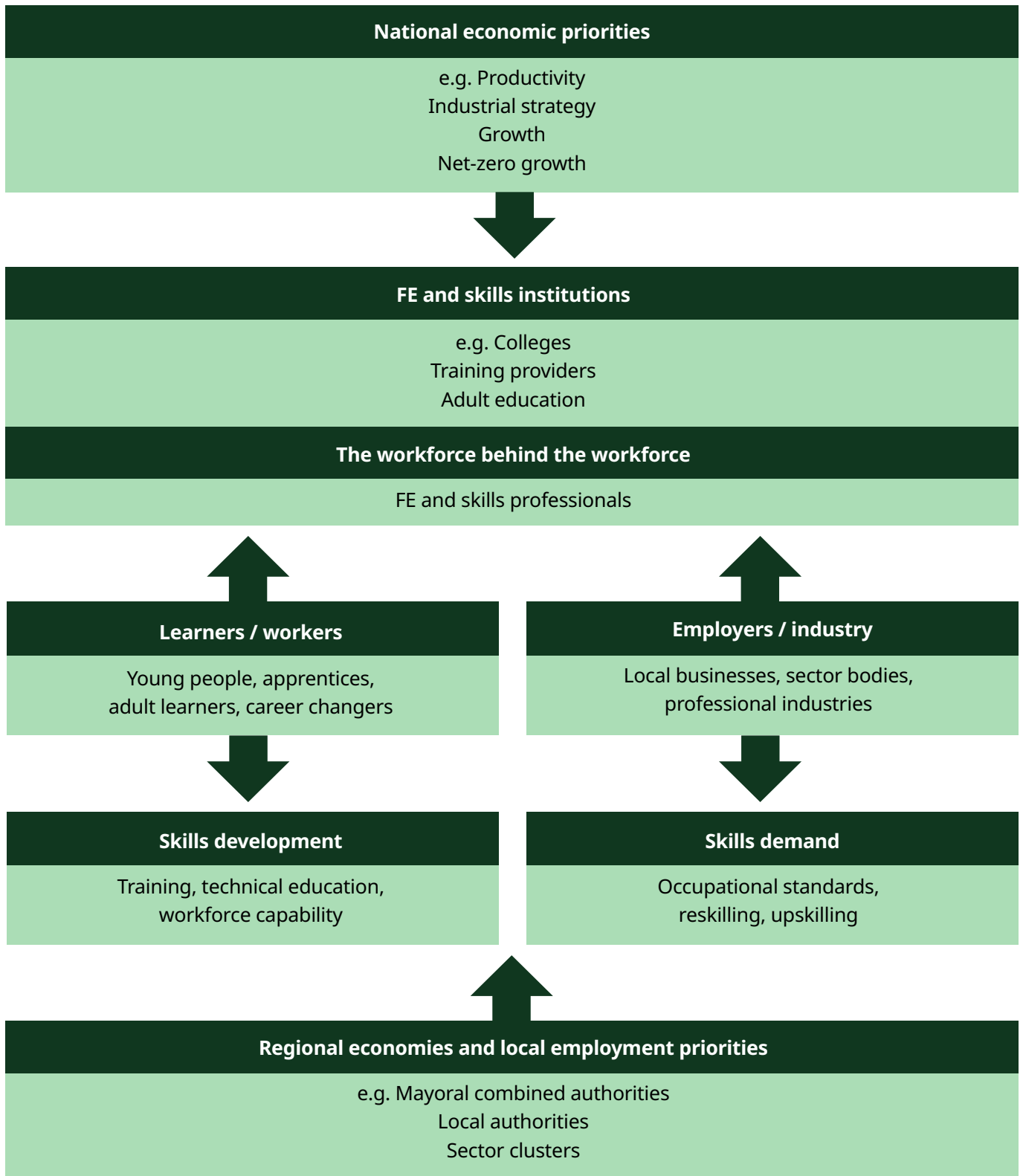
Within this system, the FE and skills sector plays a distinctive and critical role. Colleges, independent training providers and adult education institutions collectively represent the primary infrastructure through which the UK develops technical workforce capability. Each year, the sector supports millions of learners across a wide range of programmes, including technical education, apprenticeships and adult skills provision. These institutions provide routes into employment for young people, enable workers to progress within their careers and support adults to retrain as labour market demands evolve.

The scale of this contribution is substantial. Across England alone, FE colleges and training providers educate and train several million learners annually across technical qualifications, apprenticeships and adult education programmes. The sector employs tens of thousands of teachers, trainers and industry professionals who bring both pedagogical expertise and occupational knowledge to their roles. This workforce therefore represents a significant component of the UK's broader education and skills infrastructure.

A defining feature of the FE and skills sector is its close relationship with employers and industry. Institutions frequently work in partnership with local businesses, industry bodies and regional authorities to design training provision that reflects labour market demand. This collaboration enables FE and skills providers to translate occupational knowledge and emerging industry requirements into structured learning programmes that prepare individuals for employment and support workforce development across key sectors of the economy. This relationship also gives the sector an important place-based role. FE and skills institutions operate within local labour markets and often form a central part of regional economic development strategies. Colleges and training providers frequently collaborate with mayoral combined authorities, local enterprise partnerships and regional employers to address skills shortages and support sectoral growth. In doing so, they help align national skills policy with the specific economic priorities of local and regional economies.



Figure 3: The UK skills system



Source: ETF analysis

Figure 3 illustrates how FE and skills institutions sit at the centre of the UK’s skills system, connecting learners, employers and regional economies. The sector acts as an intermediary that translates labour market demand into education and training provision while supporting individuals to access employment and career progression.

Through these functions, the FE and skills workforce operates at the interface between education and the labour market. Teachers, trainers and industry professionals translate technical expertise into accessible learning experiences, enabling individuals to acquire the capabilities required in modern workplaces. At the same time, they support employers in developing the skilled workforce necessary to adopt new technologies, improve productivity and expand economic activity.

The importance of this role is likely to grow in the coming decades. Technological change, demographic shifts and the transition to a low-carbon economy will all require significant workforce adaptation. Workers will increasingly need opportunities to reskill and retrain throughout their careers as industries evolve and new occupations emerge. A well-functioning skills system capable of supporting lifelong learning will therefore be essential for maintaining economic competitiveness and social mobility.

In this context, the FE and skills workforce represents a critical component of the UK's wider productivity system. By enabling individuals to develop and update their skills throughout their careers, the sector supports labour market mobility, facilitates industrial transformation and strengthens the foundations of long-term economic growth. Investment in the professional workforce that delivers technical education is therefore not simply an educational priority, but a central element of national economic strategy.



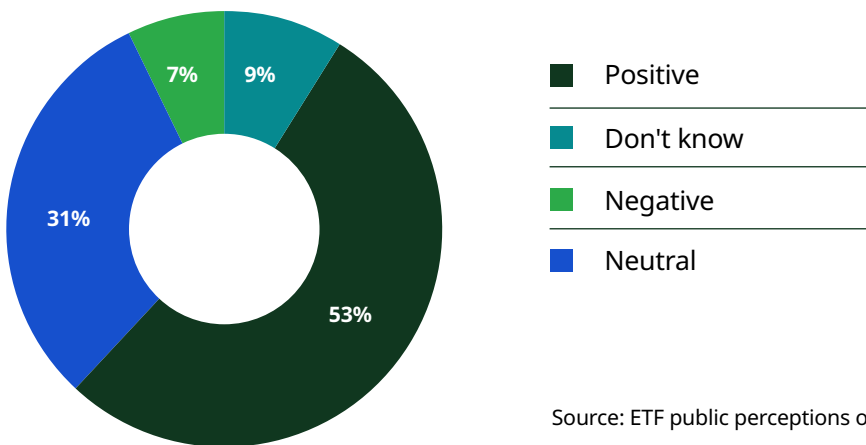
THE FINDINGS

Public perceptions of FE and skills

The findings indicate broadly positive perceptions of FE and skills among the UK public. Respondents consistently expressed supportive views about technical education pathways and recognised the importance of practical skills development for employment and economic prosperity: more than half of respondents report favourable views, while only a small minority express negative perceptions.

However, the results also reveal a significant proportion of neutral responses across several questions. This suggests that while attitudes towards the sector are generally favourable, many members of the public may have only a partial understanding of the full breadth of provision delivered by FE and skills institutions.

Figure 1: How positively or negatively do you think people generally perceive students who go to college (e.g. to study vocational or technical courses) rather than sixth form or university?

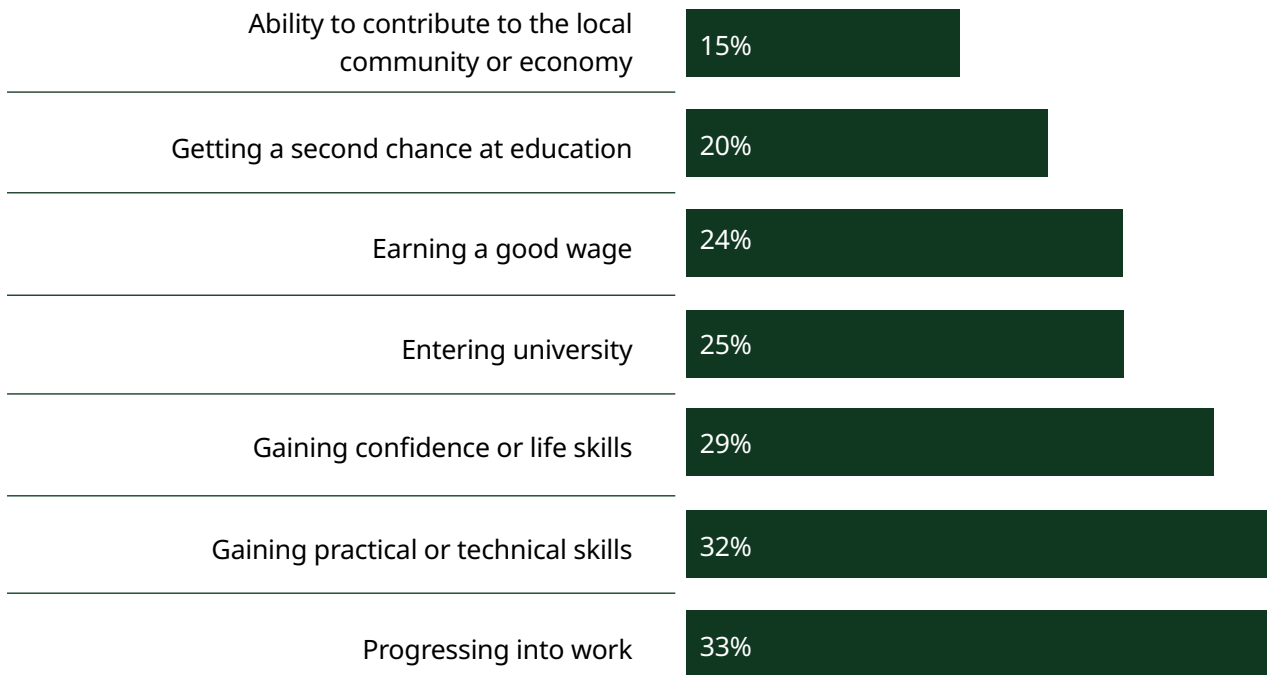


Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

This combination of broadly positive sentiment alongside limited awareness represents an important opportunity. It suggests that the sector benefits from underlying public goodwill but that there remains considerable scope to strengthen understanding of its economic and societal contribution.

Where perceptions are formed, they tend to be associated with individuals' economic and career outcomes.

Figure 2: Which, if any, of the following outcomes do you most associate with studying in the Further Education (FE) and skills sector?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

Improving public understanding of the sector’s contribution to national productivity, industrial capability and regional economic development could therefore play an important role in strengthening support for investment in FE and skills.

Polling also suggests that the credibility of retraining routes is critical to public confidence in the profession. Respondents indicated that when considering a career change, they seek assurance that professional entry routes are rigorous, consistent, and underpinned by recognised standards. In the context of FE and skills, Initial Teacher Education therefore plays a particularly important role, acting not only as the gateway to the profession but also as a mechanism for maintaining public trust in the expertise and readiness of teachers entering the workforce.



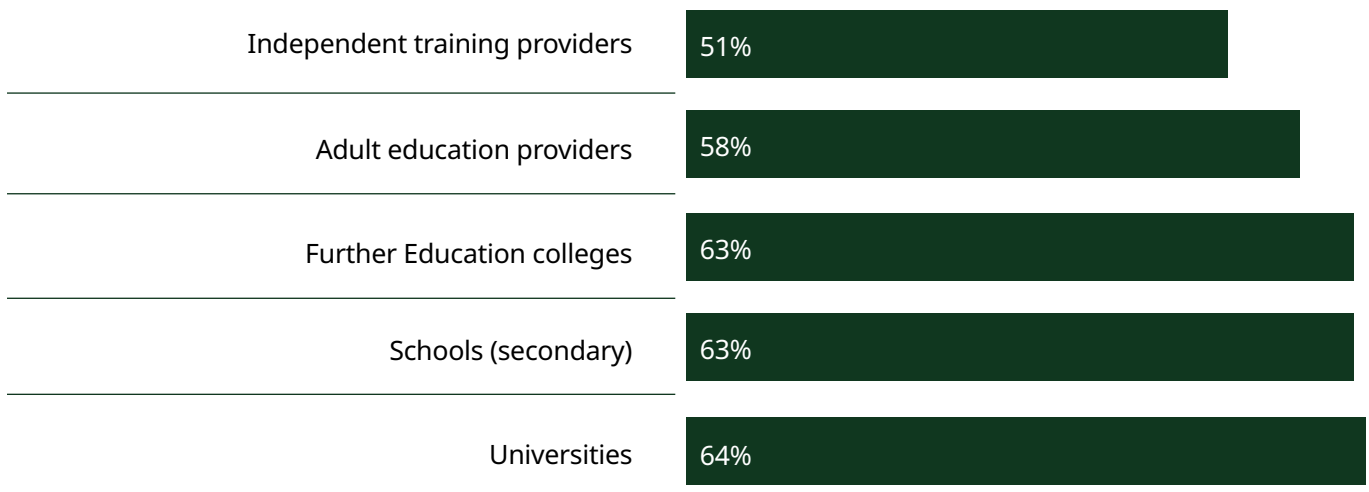
Strong support for technical education

The survey findings show broad public support for technical and vocational education pathways. Respondents widely agree that practical and technical routes should sit alongside academic pathways as valued and respected forms of education. This reflects a growing recognition that modern economies require a diverse range of skills and that academic routes alone cannot meet the full range of workforce needs.

Limited awareness of the FE and skills system

Although most respondents reported being familiar with further education colleges, awareness of the wider FE and skills system was more limited. Many respondents were less familiar with the breadth of provision delivered by independent training providers, adult education institutions and employer-led training programmes. This is reflected in survey responses that reveal lower levels of trust in the quality of education provided by independent training providers and adult education institutions compared with other education providers. This suggests that the sector's role in workforce development may be more extensive than public understanding currently reflects.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents that trust the quality of education provided by the following institutions



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

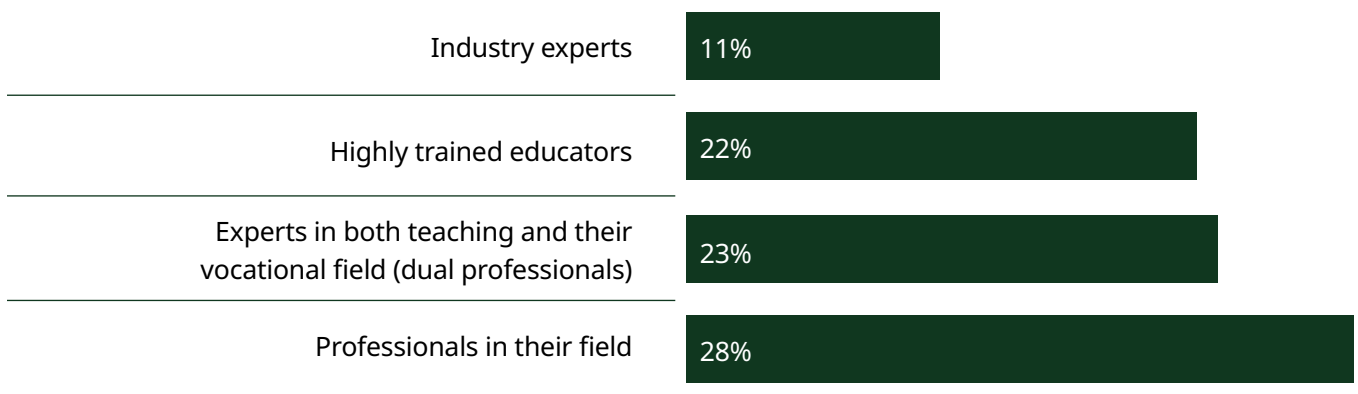
The recent polling commissioned also suggests that the FE and skills workforce represents a significant opportunity for career switchers. While 79% of respondents reported being broadly happy in their current roles, only 37% described themselves as very happy, indicating a sizeable proportion of the workforce may be open to change if credible alternatives are visible. Despite this potential mobility, teaching in FE and skills is not widely recognised by the public as a retraining pathway or as a destination career, despite the DfE's efforts to promote it as such¹. Increasing awareness of the profession and the routes into teaching could therefore unlock a significant new recruitment pool for the sector.

¹<https://www.teachinfurthereducation.education.gov.uk>

High respect for teachers but limited understanding of FE professionalism

Respondents consistently expressed high levels of respect for teachers and trainers working within the education system. However, awareness of the distinctive expertise required to teach in FE and skills was less widely understood. Teaching in FE and skills requires a form of dual professionalism, combining deep occupational knowledge with specialist pedagogical expertise. Many teachers and trainers enter the sector after significant industry careers and bring extensive professional experience into the classroom. The survey findings suggest that this distinctive professional expertise is not always widely recognised or understood by the public, with limited understanding of teachers’ prior experiences and the broader professional pathways that underpin their work.

Figure 5: Which, if any, of the following do you think best describes teachers and trainers in FE and skills?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

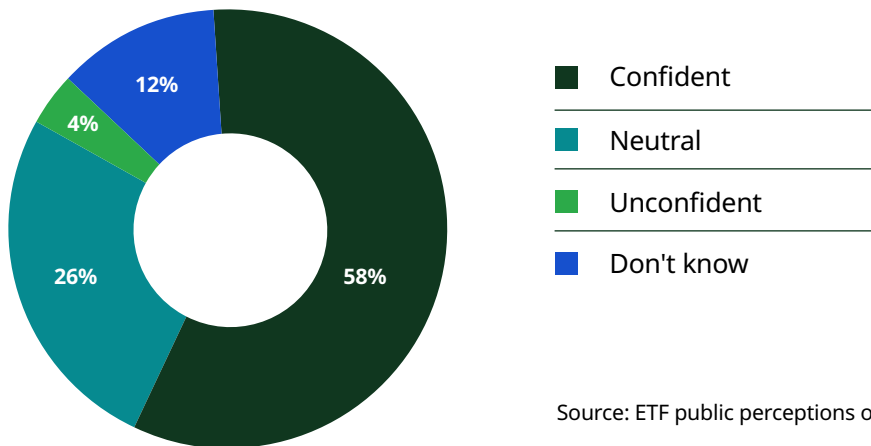


Clear recognition that skills drive economic growth

Perhaps most significantly, respondents consistently linked skills development with economic prosperity. Participants widely recognised that developing workforce capability is essential to supporting economic growth, innovation and employment opportunities. Many expressed confidence that local FE and skills providers can help people gain the skills needed for good jobs (Figure 6). Similarly, respondents generally viewed their local FE and skills providers as important to the future prosperity of their area (Figure 7).

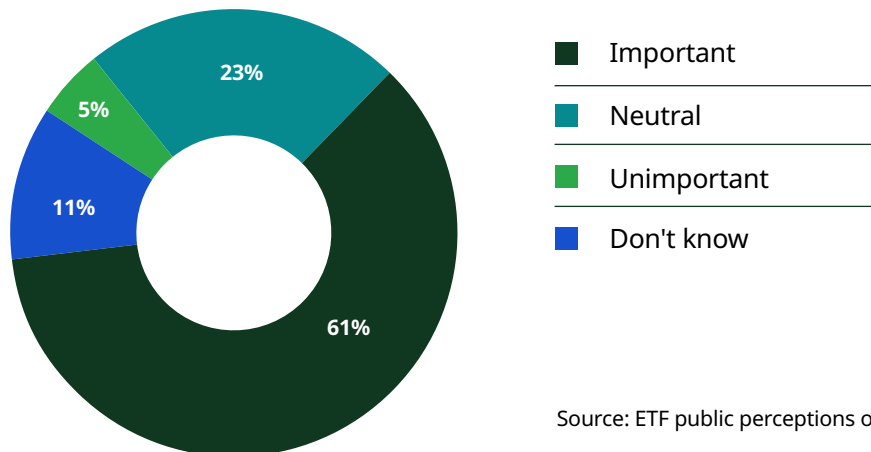
These findings indicate that the public already recognises the central role of skills in economic development, providing a strong foundation for policy discussions about investment in the FE and skills system.

Figure 6: How confident or unconfident are you that local colleges and training providers in Further Education (FE) and skills can help people in your area get the skills they need for good jobs?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

Figure 7: How important or unimportant do you think your local college or Further Education (FE) and skills training providers are to your area's future prosperity?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

Skills, mobility and the growth challenge

The UK economy is currently experiencing profound labour market change. Technological innovation, digital transformation and industrial restructuring are reshaping patterns of employment and creating new occupational pathways. As a result, individuals increasingly expect to move between roles, sectors and occupations throughout their working lives. Linear career trajectories are becoming less common, replaced by more dynamic patterns of career mobility.

Evidence from a separate ETF-commissioned poll² (Sept 2025) shows that more than half of respondents (52%) report currently considering changing careers, with the highest levels of mobility among those aged 16–34. This finding reflects the experiences of a generation entering the labour market during a period of rapid economic and technological transformation. Younger workers increasingly expect to have multiple careers over the course of their working lives and place strong value on opportunities for skills development, progression and meaningful work.

²Source: ETF-commissioned survey of 2,000 UK workers examining career mobility, skills development and barriers to progression (Sept 2025). Conducted separately from the ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey (Dec 2025)

However, the research also highlights an important paradox. While many individuals are open to career change, structural barriers frequently limit their ability to move into new roles or sectors. Respondents often described feeling stuck in positions that offered limited opportunities for progression or skills development. This phenomenon, sometimes described in labour market research as blocked mobility, reflects a combination of structural and informational barriers. These include:

- limited access to affordable retraining opportunities
- lack of awareness of alternative career pathways
- employer recruitment practices that prioritise prior experience over transferable skills
- regional labour market constraints.

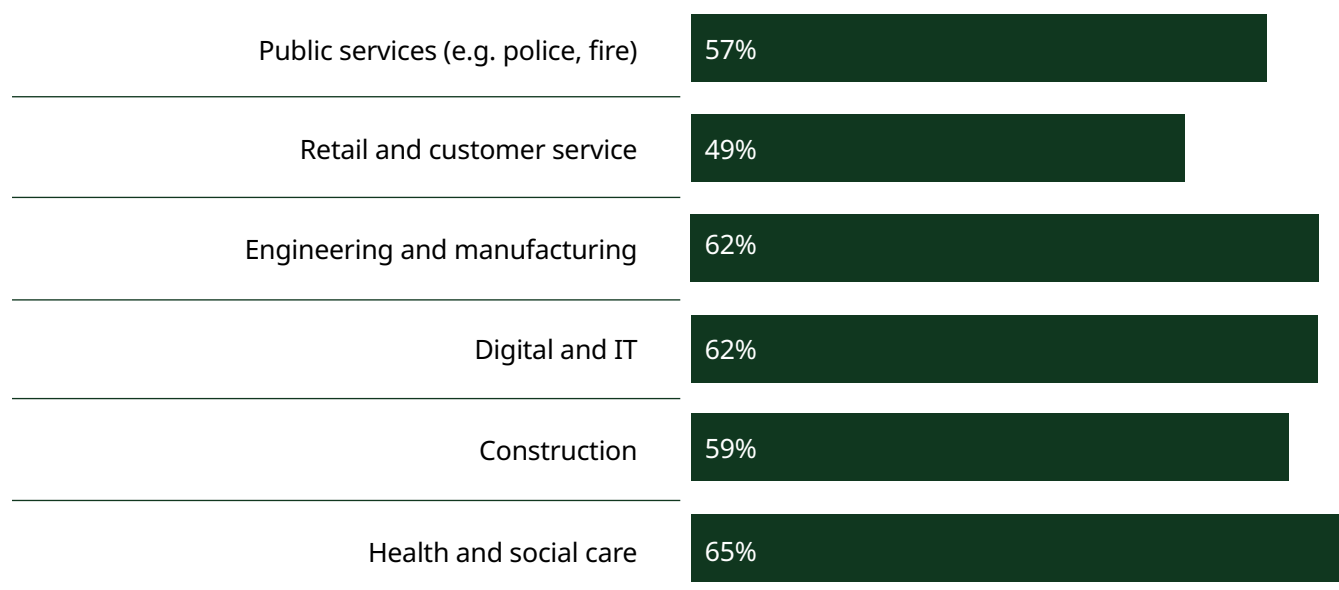
These barriers can prevent individuals from transitioning into emerging sectors even where labour shortages exist. As a result, the economy may experience the simultaneous presence of unfilled vacancies and under-utilised workforce potential.



The role of FE and skills in enabling mobility

The findings point clearly to the critical role that the FE and skills system can play in addressing labour market mobility. Through technical education, apprenticeships and adult learning programmes, the sector provides the primary infrastructure through which individuals can retrain and transition into new careers. As evidenced in Figure 8, there is a strong perception that FE and skills training will be important to the future workforce across a wide range of sectors, reinforcing the sector's role in supporting economic transition and meeting evolving skills needs.

Figure 8: Percentage who think the following sectors rely on Further Education (FE) and skills training for their future workforce



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

This role is underpinned by the position of FE and skills institutions at the interface between education and employment. Colleges and training providers maintain close relationships with employers, enabling training programmes to respond rapidly to changing labour market demand. This responsiveness allows the sector to support individuals moving into emerging industries, including digital technology, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and health care.

Economic research consistently demonstrates that investment in technical education and adult retraining generates significant returns for both individuals and the wider economy. Participation in FE and skills programmes is associated with:

- improved employment outcomes
- increased earnings potential
- higher workforce participation
- improved productivity at firm level.

The impact of these outcomes is particularly significant in regional labour markets where skills shortages can constrain economic growth. By supporting individuals to retrain and transition into growth sectors, FE and skills institutions play a central role in strengthening local economies and supporting regional development.

The sector also plays an important role in supporting learners who may face barriers to participation elsewhere in the education system. This includes learners with special educational needs and disabilities, adults returning to education later in life and individuals seeking a second chance after disengagement from formal education. Through this work, FE and skills contributes not only to economic productivity but also to wider social inclusion and opportunity.

The polling³ also highlights persistent structural concerns that shape career decisions across sectors and professions. As Figure 9 shows, job security, perceived barriers linked to age, financial constraints associated with retraining, and limited access to flexible work or study options were consistently identified as barriers to career change. This helps to explain a wider pattern of 'blocked mobility', where individuals are open to moving into new roles but face systemic barriers that limit their ability to do so.

Figure 9: What, if anything, do you consider as the main barriers to you changing careers?



Source: ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

These findings suggest that addressing labour market mobility will require broader structural reform, alongside improved access to retraining and clearer pathways between sectors. In this context, the FE and skills system plays a critical role in enabling individuals to overcome these barriers and transition into new and emerging occupations.

A system the public values

One of the most striking findings from the research is that public support for investment in skills education appears to be stronger than is often assumed within policy debates. Respondents consistently expressed positive attitudes towards technical education pathways and recognised the importance of retraining in a rapidly changing economy. Around half of respondents reported that they would be more likely to support a political party if it committed to investing in further education and skills, highlighting the strong public backing for this agenda. In many cases, respondents saw FE and skills as playing a crucial role in helping individuals navigate labour market transitions and develop practical capabilities. This finding is particularly significant in the context of public spending debates. It suggests that investment in FE and skills is not only economically rational but also politically resonant, representing a rare area of alignment between public sentiment, labour market demand and national growth priorities.

³Source: ETF-commissioned survey of 2,000 UK workers examining career mobility, skills development and barriers to progression (2025). Conducted separately from the ETF public perceptions of FE and skills survey

This suggests that strengthening the FE and skills system represents not only a sound economic strategy but also one that aligns closely with public priorities. Rather than viewing FE and skills as a secondary or residual component of the education system, the public appears increasingly to recognise its central role in enabling opportunity, supporting career mobility and driving economic progress.

In this sense, investment in the FE and skills workforce represents a rare alignment between economic necessity, labour market demand and public support.

Respondents most commonly associate FE and skills with employment outcomes, practical capability development and improved earning potential. These associations reinforce the perception of the sector as closely connected to workforce development and labour market participation.

Participants frequently highlighted the value of hands-on learning and the opportunity to gain skills that can be applied directly within workplaces. This practical orientation is widely seen as one of the defining characteristics of FE and skills provision. The survey findings therefore suggest that the public recognises the sector as playing a central role in preparing individuals for employment and supporting career progression.

The survey findings indicate that the public views FE and skills as broadly accessible and relevant to people at multiple stages of life. Respondents commonly associated the sector with school leavers entering technical pathways, but also recognised its role in supporting adults seeking career development or retraining for new roles. This perception reflects the increasingly lifelong nature of learning in modern economies. As labour markets evolve, individuals must be able to update their skills and adapt to new occupational demands. The FE and skills system provides the primary mechanism through which this lifelong learning can occur.



THE PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE BEHIND THE SKILLS SYSTEM

At the heart of the FE and skills system is a highly skilled and specialised workforce of teachers, trainers and industry professionals. These educators possess a distinctive form of expertise that combines deep occupational knowledge with pedagogical practice. Many enter the sector after substantial careers in industry, bringing practical experience from sectors such as engineering, construction, healthcare, digital technology and manufacturing into educational settings. This combination of subject expertise and teaching capability is often described as dual professionalism. FE and Skills educators operate simultaneously as subject specialists and education professionals, translating occupational knowledge into structured learning experiences that prepare learners for modern workplaces..

Figure 10: The dual professionalism model in FE and skills

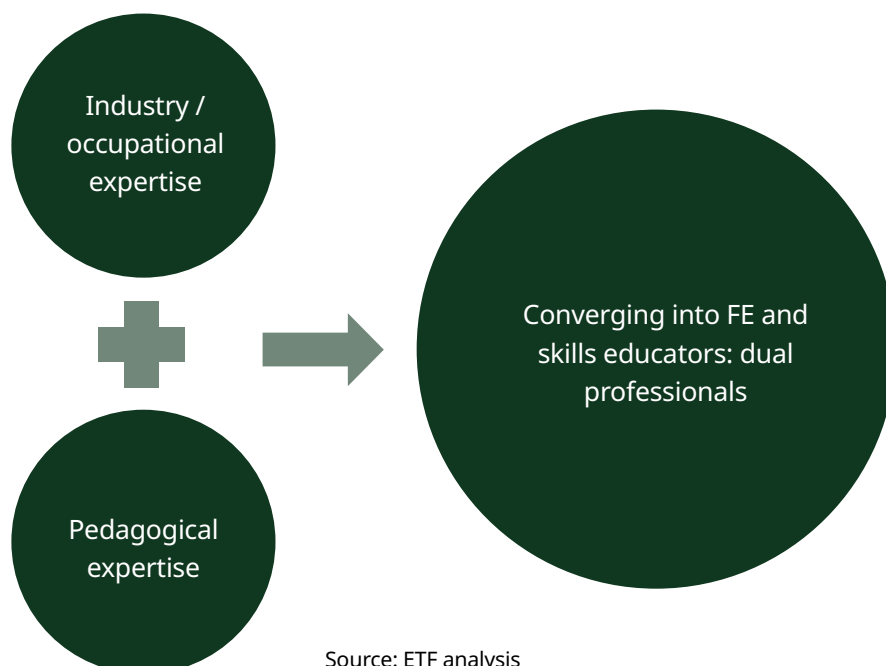


Figure 10 illustrates the intersection between occupational expertise and pedagogical practice that characterises the professional identity of FE and skills educators. Dual professionalism plays an important role in ensuring that learning programmes remain closely aligned with the realities of contemporary workplaces.

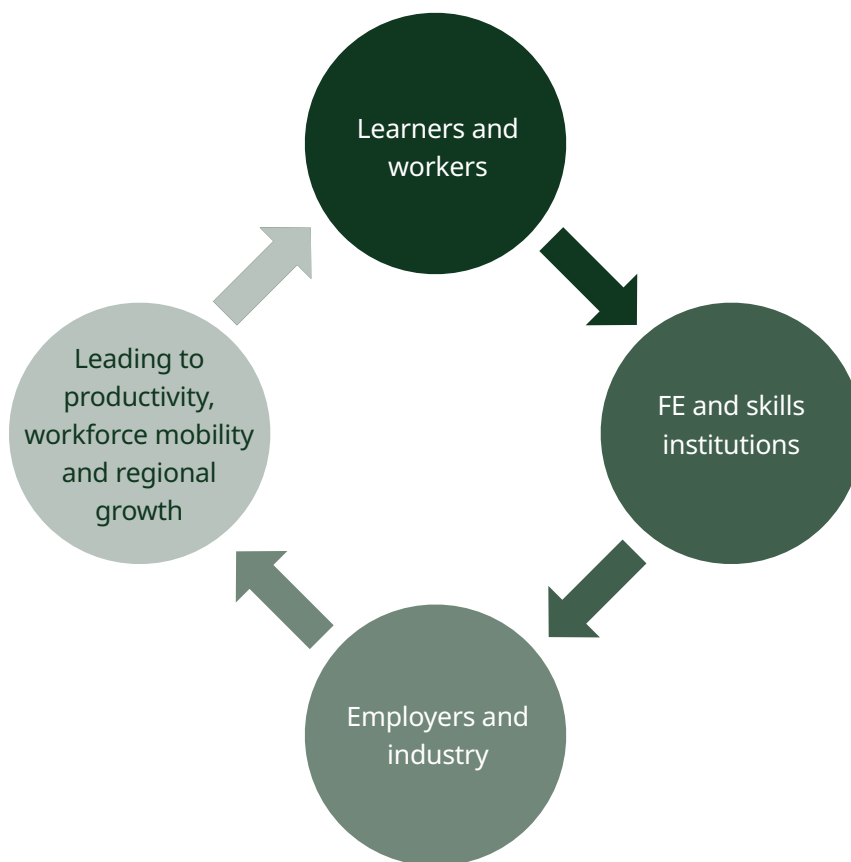
Educators draw on their industry knowledge to design teaching that reflects current professional standards, technologies and working practices. In doing so, they enable learners to develop not only technical competence but also the professional behaviours, problem-solving abilities and practical skills required for employment.

Through this work, FE and skills professionals translate occupational knowledge into high-quality learning experiences that support workforce development across the economy. Their work prepares young people entering the labour market, supports apprentices developing occupational expertise and enables adults to retrain or progress within their careers. Despite this central role in workforce development, the contribution of this professional workforce often remains less visible in public debate than the economic outcomes it supports.

The importance of this workforce becomes clearer when considered within the context of the UK’s broader economic strategy. Skills shortages remain evident across multiple sectors, including construction, engineering, healthcare and digital technologies. These shortages have implications not only for individual employers but also for the wider economy, constraining productivity growth, infrastructure delivery and the adoption of new technologies.

FE and skills institutions play a critical role in addressing these challenges by providing technical education, apprenticeships and adult learning opportunities aligned with employer demand. Through close collaboration with industry partners, training providers design programmes that reflect current occupational requirements and emerging skills needs.

Figure 11: How FE and skills contribute to economic growth



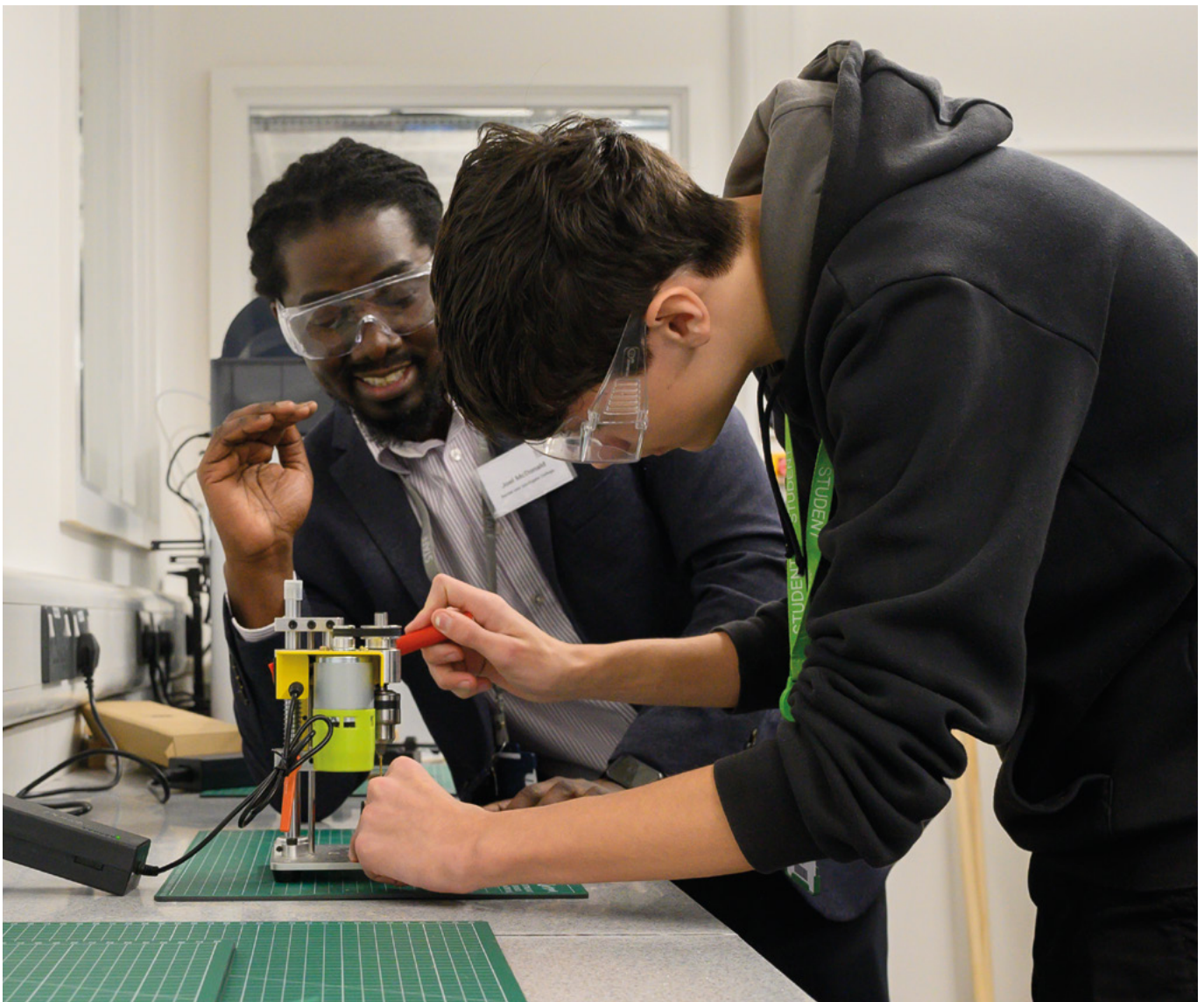
Source: ETF analysis

Figure 11 illustrates how FE and skills institutions connect workforce development, employer demand and regional economic growth through technical education, apprenticeships and lifelong learning. Through partnerships with employers, industry bodies and regional economic organisations, FE and skills providers contribute directly to workforce development within local labour markets.

This place-based role allows the sector to respond to regional economic priorities while supporting national growth objectives. Colleges and training providers frequently work with local authorities, mayoral combined authorities and employers to address skills shortages, support sectoral clusters and strengthen regional economic resilience.

Despite the centrality of this workforce to national productivity and workforce development, the sector has historically faced challenges relating to recruitment, retention and workforce development. Competition with industry salaries, alongside the growing demand for technical teaching expertise, can make it difficult to attract and retain experienced professionals in certain subject areas.

Strengthening the FE and skills workforce will therefore be essential if the sector is to meet the growing demand for technical education and retraining in the coming decades. As technological change, industrial transformation and demographic shifts reshape the labour market, workers will increasingly require opportunities to update their skills throughout their careers. In this context, the professional workforce within FE and skills institutions represents a critical national asset. Through their close relationships with industry, responsiveness to labour market demand and commitment to widening participation in education, these professionals provide the infrastructure through which workforce capability can be developed at scale. In this sense, FE and skills is not simply an educational sector. It is a central component of the UK's economic growth strategy, supporting productivity, enabling labour market mobility and helping to ensure that individuals and employers alike can adapt to the changing demands of the modern economy.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND WORKFORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this report highlight an important alignment between public attitudes, labour market dynamics and the UK's economic priorities. Respondents recognise the importance of skills development for economic growth, demonstrate strong support for technical education pathways and show significant interest in opportunities for retraining and career mobility. At the same time, the research identifies structural barriers that prevent individuals from moving into new careers or developing the skills required by a changing economy. Many respondents report feeling constrained by limited access to retraining opportunities, insufficient awareness of alternative pathways and labour market structures that restrict mobility.

These findings reinforce the critical role of the FE and skills system in enabling individuals to navigate labour market change and supporting the development of workforce capability across the economy. However, the ability of the sector to fulfil this role depends fundamentally on the strength and sustainability of the workforce that delivers it. Teachers, trainers and leaders across FE and skills are responsible for developing the technical capability that underpins economic growth. Their expertise enables individuals to acquire the skills required by modern industries and supports employers in building the workforce necessary for expansion and innovation.

Strengthening the FE and skills workforce is therefore not only an educational priority but also an economic one. To fully realise the potential of the sector, policy must recognise the central role of the workforce in delivering skills development at scale. This requires coordinated action to strengthen recruitment, retention and professional development across the sector. The good news is that ETF's polling also demonstrates that strengthening the FE and skills system represents not only a sound economic strategy but also one that aligns closely with public priorities.



The following recommendations set out a framework through which government can support the long-term development of the FE and skills workforce and maximise the sector's contribution to economic growth.

Recommendations

1. Deliver a national FE and skills workforce strategy

The research presented in this report highlights the growing demand for technical education and workforce retraining. As labour markets evolve and individuals increasingly seek opportunities to change careers or develop new skills, demand for FE and skills provision is likely to continue increasing. Meeting this demand will require a workforce of sufficient scale, expertise and stability. However, the sector has historically faced challenges relating to workforce recruitment and retention. Pay disparities with industry, competition for specialist professionals and limited awareness of careers within the sector have all contributed to workforce pressures in key subject areas.

A coordinated national workforce strategy would provide a framework for addressing these challenges. Such a strategy should focus on:

- attracting industry professionals into teaching careers
- supporting early-career teachers entering the sector
- improving retention through professional development and career pathways
- strengthening leadership capability across colleges and training providers.

By establishing a long-term approach to workforce development, government can ensure that the sector has the capacity required to deliver high-quality skills provision across the economy.

2. Strengthen the professional infrastructure

The distinctive nature of FE and skills teaching requires a professional infrastructure that supports continuous development and the sharing of expertise. Teachers and trainers within the sector often work in rapidly evolving occupational areas where technologies, professional practices and industry standards are continually changing. Maintaining high-quality provision therefore requires ongoing professional learning and strong links with industry.

Investment in professional standards, workforce development programmes and sector-wide collaboration can support this process. By strengthening the professional infrastructure that supports FE and skills practitioners, government can help ensure that teaching remains aligned with the needs of modern workplaces. Such investment would also contribute to raising awareness of the sector as a respected professional career pathway. Professional recognition frameworks such as ETF's Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) and Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) provide visible assurance that FE and skills teachers meet nationally recognised standards, strengthening parity of esteem with other parts of the education system.

3. Improve access to retraining

The survey findings highlight strong public interest in retraining and career change. More than half of respondents report considering a career transition, reflecting the increasingly dynamic nature of modern labour markets. However, many respondents also report experiencing barriers to mobility, including limited access to affordable retraining opportunities and uncertainty about available pathways.

Expanding access to adult learning and flexible retraining programmes would help address these challenges. Policies that support modular learning, part-time study and employer-supported training could enable individuals to develop new skills while remaining active in the workforce. By strengthening the infrastructure for lifelong learning, government can support individuals to adapt to labour market change while helping employers access the skills they require.

4. Provide targeted, devolved funding

The research highlights the importance of regional labour markets in shaping skills demand. Different areas of the country face distinct workforce challenges depending on their economic composition, industrial base and demographic characteristics. Local institutions are often best placed to understand these dynamics and develop solutions that reflect regional labour market needs. Providing targeted, devolved funding for workforce development would enable local partnerships between colleges, training providers, employers and regional authorities to design evidence-led solutions to skills challenges. Such an approach would support innovation within the sector while ensuring that workforce development strategies reflect the specific needs of local economies.

Taken together, these recommendations highlight a significant opportunity for policy development. Public attitudes towards FE and skills are broadly positive. Individuals recognise the importance of technical education and express strong interest in opportunities for retraining and career development. At the same time, the UK economy faces persistent skills shortages and productivity challenges that require sustained investment in workforce capability. Strengthening the FE and skills workforce represents one of the most effective ways to address these challenges. By investing in the professionals who deliver technical education and workforce training, government can support economic growth, improve labour market mobility and expand opportunities for individuals across the country. In this sense, strengthening the FE and skills workforce represents a rare alignment between economic necessity, labour market demand and public support. The findings presented in this report:

- suggest that the public already recognises the importance of skills development. With the right policy framework, the FE and skills system can play an even greater role in supporting economic growth and enabling individuals to thrive in a rapidly changing economy.
- highlight the importance of strengthening public understanding of FE and skills, elevating recognition of the professional workforce delivering it and ensuring sustained investment in educator development.
- highlight an important opportunity for policymakers.

If the UK is to unlock labour market mobility and support economic growth, the FE and skills system must be equipped to support large-scale retraining and workforce development. This requires sustained investment in the professionals who deliver technical education and training across the country.



CONCLUSIONS



FE and skills occupy a central yet often under-recognised position within the United Kingdom's education and economic systems. Through technical education, vocational training and adult learning, the sector equips millions of individuals with the capabilities required to enter employment, progress within their careers and adapt to a rapidly changing labour market. In doing so, it provides the infrastructure through which workforce capability is developed across the economy.

The research presented in this report demonstrates that the public already recognises many aspects of this contribution. Respondents widely associate FE and skills with employment, practical capability development and opportunities for career progression. Technical education pathways are broadly respected, and there is strong public recognition that skills development is essential to economic prosperity.

These findings indicate that FE and skills benefit from a foundation of public goodwill. At a time when the UK faces persistent productivity challenges, labour shortages across key sectors and growing demand for retraining, this recognition represents an important opportunity. Public attitudes towards skills development align closely with the country's economic priorities. However, the research also highlights an important gap in public understanding.

While the outcomes delivered by the sector are widely recognised, the institutions and professionals responsible for delivering them remain less visible in public discourse. Many respondents were familiar with colleges as educational institutions but were less aware of the wider FE and skills system that includes independent training providers, adult learning organisations and employer-led provision.

Similarly, while teachers and educators are widely respected, the distinctive professionalism of the FE and skills workforce is not always well understood. Teaching in the sector requires a combination of pedagogical expertise and occupational knowledge. Many teachers and trainers enter the profession following significant careers in industry, bringing valuable professional experience into educational settings.

This model of dual professionalism enables the sector to translate workplace expertise into high-quality learning experiences that prepare individuals for employment. It is also one of the defining characteristics of effective technical education systems internationally.

Recognising and supporting this workforce is therefore fundamental to the success of the UK's workforce development system. Behind every skilled worker is an educator. Teachers, trainers and leaders across FE and skills are responsible for equipping individuals with the technical knowledge, professional behaviours and practical capabilities required in modern workplaces. In this sense, the FE and skills workforce can be understood as the workforce behind the workforce.

Strengthening the visibility, recognition and support of these professionals will be essential if the sector is to meet the growing demand for technical education, retraining and workforce development. As labour markets continue to evolve, individuals will increasingly need opportunities to update their skills, change careers and respond to new economic opportunities. The FE and skills system provides the primary mechanism through which this lifelong learning can occur.

At the same time, the sector plays a critical role in supporting national economic priorities. From advanced manufacturing and digital technologies to construction, healthcare and the green economy, many of the industries central to the UK's future growth depend on the workforce capability developed within FE and skills institutions.

Positioning the sector more clearly within national conversations about economic growth, productivity and industrial strategy is therefore essential.

The findings of this report suggest that doing so would resonate with public attitudes. Respondents consistently recognised the importance of skills development in supporting economic prosperity and expressed positive views about the role of technical education in enabling individuals to progress into employment.

Building on this foundation requires a stronger national narrative about the role of FE and skills in the UK's economic future, alongside policies that support the development of the professional workforce delivering this education.

The evidence presented in this report points to a clear policy and communications challenge. While the public broadly supports FE and skills and recognises its contribution to employment and opportunity, the sector's wider economic function and professional workforce remain less visible. Strengthening public understanding of FE and skills therefore requires not only clearer communication about technical pathways, but also a stronger narrative about the professionalism of the educators who deliver them.

ETF's role as the professional body for FE and skills places it at the centre of this agenda. By strengthening professional standards, recognition, workforce development and public visibility, ETF can help ensure that the workforce behind the workforce is recognised as a strategic national asset. If the UK is to deliver growth, improve productivity and enable workforce mobility, investment in FE and skills professionals must be treated as an investment in economic infrastructure.



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