

Skills 2050

Call for evidence

TUC Skills 2050 Project: call for evidence

Introduction

Skills and lifelong learning should be at the heart of a fair and prosperous economy that works for both people and business. Workers and employers have shared interests in a skill system that ensures workers can access training and skills needed to secure good jobs, while businesses secure the talent they grow.

As the economy undergoes profound change driven by new technologies, the transition to net zero, and shifting labour markets, working people must not be left to navigate these challenges alone. A fair transition and a sustainable economy require a skills system that supports workers at every stage of their working lives, from entry into work through to mid-career change and later life.

Yet for too many workers, access to training and opportunity is uneven, insecure, and dependent on employer discretion. For many employers, particularly SMEs, they are overwhelmed by the complexity of the skills system. And years of underfunding have left the post-16 training and education workforce underpaid, undervalued and stretched beyond capacity.

We believe that the skills system must be rooted in fairness, collective voice, and shared responsibility to meet the needs of workers, the public and private sector and drive growth and sustainability across local, regional and national economies. The government must support strong institutions to deliver skills training through sustained funding and policy that recognises the importance of place, the relationships between providers, employers and workers/learners, and the needs of local and regional economies in shaping the skills system. Employers must invest in their workforces and, crucially, workers themselves must have a right to access high-quality training and have a meaningful say in shaping the skills system they rely on.

The Skills 2050 Project is an opportunity to rethink how this can be delivered in practice, building a system that supports secure good jobs, progression, and shared prosperity for the workforce of today and tomorrow.

This Call for Evidence will help ensure that the next phase of the Skills 2050 project is grounded in the real experiences of working people, the needs of business and informed by those delivering and shaping skills provision on the ground.

We encourage all those with an interest in the future of skills to contribute.

To submit to this call for evidence please send your submissions to Skills2050@tuc.org.uk by Friday 14th August 2026.

About this call for evidence

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) is undertaking the Skills 2050 Project to explore how the UK's skills system can better support workers, employers, Further Education institutions and workforce, to strengthen fair transitions and contribute to inclusive economic growth over the long term.

Evidence to date highlights significant gaps in how the system operates - particularly in relation to mid-career transitions, employer investment, inequalities in access, and the role of institutions and collective voice.

We are seeking evidence to help address these gaps and inform the development of a coherent, long-term, worker-centred vision for the skills system, and are particularly interested in understanding what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

The findings will inform the next phase of the Skills 2050 Project and support the development of policy recommendations.

This call for evidence is structured around four key themes:

- **Future skills needs** – how the system responds to immediate, medium- and long-term changes including automation, artificial intelligence, and the transition to a net zero economy
- **Access and qualifications** – who can access learning and training opportunities, and how access varies across different groups of workers
- **Worker voice and collective bargaining** – the role of trade unions, worker influence, and employment rights in shaping access to skills and progression
- **Systems and infrastructure** – how the skills system is funded, delivered, and governed, including employer investment, public funding, and the capacity of further education

Who should respond

The TUC welcomes submissions from:

- Trade unions and union representatives
- Workers and learners
- Employers and employer bodies
- Further Education providers and training organisations
- Researchers, think tanks, and sector bodies
- Local, regional, and devolved institutions

What to include

We welcome:

- Evidence, data, or research
- Case studies (including local, regional, workplace or sector examples)
- Worker-centred accounts and lived experience
- Identification of gaps where further evidence is needed

To submit to this call for evidence please send your submissions to Skills2050@tuc.org.uk by Friday 14th August 2026.

You do not need to respond to every section or every question, only the ones that are relevant to you, your organisation and the evidence you want to submit.

Questions

1. Looking ahead to 2050: future skills needs

The skills system must anticipate and respond to both rapid and long-term change. We want to understand how the current system is anticipating and responding to rapid technological change and the climate transition.

- What impact are automation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation having on jobs and skills needs in your sector?
- How is the transition to a net-zero economy affecting employment, job design, and training requirements?
- Are workers being supported to retrain and reskill ahead of displacement, redundancy, or restructuring?
- What would a “just transition” look like in practice for workers in affected sectors?
- How can the skills system move from reacting to change towards long-term anticipation, and what role should workers and trade unions play in shaping future skills strategies?
- Do current education and training institutions have the staffing, infrastructure, and equipment needed to deliver future skills at scale?

2. Access and qualifications

An estimated 8 million adults lack essential literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and over half the UK workforce cannot complete the 20 essential digital skills government and business agree are critical for the modern workplace. Furthermore, graduates remain three times more likely to receive workplace training than those with lower qualifications. We want to understand stakeholder views on what challenges and barriers are driving this.

2.1 Access to skills, training and qualifications

- Who has access to training and development opportunities in your workplace, sector, or region, and how does this vary by occupational group?
- What distinct barriers do workers face in accessing training (e.g., cost, lack of time, careers advice, caring responsibilities, disability, language, or digital access)?
- What barriers do employers face in supporting workers to access training?
- How accessible are training opportunities for low-paid workers, those without formal qualifications, and workers in insecure or non-traditional employment?
- Are particular groups of workers excluded or underserved, including women, disabled workers, migrant workers, ethnic minority workers, younger or older workers?
- How well does the current system support adult learners at different stages of their working lives, particularly across sectors not identified as primary growth sectors but heavily impacted by automation and AI?
- To what extent does the current qualification architecture support workers to engage in training and support employers to invest in their workforce?

2.2 Young people, apprentices and entry routes to work

Around 1 million young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Apprenticeship starts among 16–24 year-olds have fallen by 40 per cent over the past decade—a drop of more than 113,000 compared with 2015/16. More than half of apprenticeships now go to over-25s, often taken by existing employees. We want to understand stakeholder views on how accessible high-quality training and apprenticeships are for young people.

- Do apprentices and young workers receive adequate pay, support, protected learning time, and clear progression routes into secure employment?
- How do contract types, probationary periods, or zero-hours arrangements affect apprentices and young workers?

- Are pre-apprenticeship pathways and other entry routes effective for disadvantaged young people?
- What are the main barriers, funding arrangements, administrative requirements, or levy rules your organisation faces in offering or expanding apprenticeships for young people?
- What specific support, incentives, or structural changes would enable your organisation to take on more apprentices or better align provision with your skills needs?

3. Worker voice and collective bargaining

Internationally, there are successful examples of social partnership and collective bargaining delivering better outcomes for skills training. The TUC, through its historical Union Learning Fund, previously enabled access to training that benefited hundreds of thousands of workers and their employers. We want to understand to what extent workers, training providers, and employers can meaningfully engage with each other on training, skills development, and progression.

3.1 Worker voice and collective bargaining

- How does trade union presence affect access to training, the quality of training provision, and opportunities for progression?
- What are the primary barriers in your workplace/sector to engaging workers and unions on training, and do you have examples of where this has worked effectively?
- Should skills, training, progression, and workforce planning be core issues for collective bargaining at the workplace or sectoral level?

3.2 Job design, planning and progression

We want to understand to what extent workers have access to individual or collective job plans setting out skills development, pay pathways, and progression opportunities.

- How consistent, meaningful, and enforceable is access to job/progression plans across different grades and contract types, including apprentices and insecure workers?
- How effectively do job plans link training to progression, redeployment, lifelong learning, or job security during periods of organisational or sectoral change?
- Should workers have a statutory right to a jointly agreed job or progression plan?

- What role should trade unions and Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) play in developing, overseeing, and enforcing these plans?

3.3 Skills governance and social partnership

We want to understand what models of social partnership or sectoral skills governance work best from a worker, employer, and provider perspective.

- What successful models of social partnership or sectoral skills governance exist (UK or international) that effectively balance stakeholder needs, and what barriers prevent them from being scaled up?
- How can worker voice be strengthened in skills policy design, funding decisions, and governance at workplace, sectoral, regional, and national levels?
- What role should unions, employers, and providers play in shaping long-term strategies, and what workplace-level partnerships (such as joint learning committees) should be replicated?

4. Systems and infrastructure

The UK skills system has often been characterised by underfunding, policy churn, and a top-down, fragmented approach to reform. We are interested in understanding stakeholders' views on the current systems and infrastructure, and the challenges and opportunities presented by them.

4.1 Funding, coordination and the role of Government

We are interested in how the skills system is funded and coordinated.

- Is public funding for skills sufficient, stable, and well-targeted?
- How effective are dual funding models in supporting workers, employers, and providers to meet skills demand?
- How effectively are current funding models supporting both young people to access post-16 skills and qualifications and the wider workforce to adapt, upskill, and retrain throughout their working lives?
- What impact does the separate funding of adult and community education have on access to lifelong learning?
- How should responsibility for funding and delivering skills be shared between employers, workers, training/education providers, and the state?

- How effective are devolved, regional, and local skills systems in anticipating, responding to, and coordinating workers' needs and the needs of local economies?
- How can better coordination be achieved between industrial strategy, labour market policy, and skills provision at local, regional, and national levels?

4.2 Further education, technical colleges and the skills workforce

A high-quality skills system depends on a well-resourced further education (FE) sector and workforce, essential for upskilling and training working-age adults. We want to understand stakeholder views on the challenges facing FE.

- Does the Further Education sector have the capacity to meet demand, and where are the biggest gaps in capacity?
- What are the key recruitment, retention, pay, contract security, and workload challenges facing FE staff, and how do these compare with other parts of the education system?
- How effectively do FE providers collaborate with local employers to co-design and deliver training that meets immediate and future business needs?
- To what extent do FE staff have a meaningful voice in shaping skills priorities and curriculum design?
- Is capital funding sufficient to provide modern equipment, digital infrastructure, and specialist facilities?
- What mechanisms or incentives are needed to encourage businesses to share knowledge, equipment, or personnel with FE colleges (e.g., industry-seconded teachers)?
- How well equipped are providers to deliver the skills needed for net zero, AI, and digital transformation?
- How do funding and accountability arrangements affect long-term planning and investment?
- How is the introduction of Technical Excellence Colleges impacting Further Education provision locally and regionally?
- What role should trade unions play in supporting and developing the FE workforce?
- What are the main barriers preventing employers—particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)—from engaging with the FE sector to upskill their existing workforce?

4.3 Employer investment and responsibility for skills

Employer behaviour plays a central role in shaping access to skills and workforce development. Employer investment has plummeted by 29.5 per cent since 2011 (real terms per employee) and the UK is currently spending half the EU average on training. We want to understand what is driving this and how it might be addressed.

- What are the current trends, levels, and barriers regarding employer investment in training and skills development across your specific workplace, business, or sector?
- What prevents employers from engaging in long-term workforce and skills planning, and how does a reliance on short-term hiring needs impact overall training investment?
- What institutional or sectoral mechanisms (such as social partnership bodies or mandatory training levies) are needed to ensure employers actively plan for future skills needs rather than responding to immediate crises?
- To what extent has the growth of insecure work, outsourcing, and high staff turnover disincentivised employers from investing in long-term staff development?
- How do structural inequalities affect access to training, particularly regarding the disparities in employer investment between higher-paid and lower-paid workers, or permanent and insecure staff?
- What incentives, requirements, or regulatory approaches would encourage greater and more equitable employer investment, and how can this be better aligned with long-term workforce planning?
- Are there examples of effective practice, including learning agreements or training provisions negotiated with trade unions?

4.4 Employment rights, job quality and lifelong learning

We want to understand stakeholder views on how working conditions and employment rights shape whether workers can access training.

- How do insecure contracts, unpredictable hours, low pay, or excessive workloads affect workers' ability to access training?
- To what extent are workers expected to train in their own time or at their own expense?
- How effectively do current employment rights and legislation support access to training (for example, through paid time off for training, job security, or predictable hours)?

- Should access to training, progression, and lifelong learning be treated as enforceable employment rights?
- How could stronger rights at work encourage both workers and employers to invest in skills?
- To what extent is the current skills system enabling improved job quality for workers and productivity gains for employers? Where it is or is not working, what is driving this?
- To what extent will the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) support meaningful access to learning for workers at different stages of their working lives?
- What impact is the LLE expected to have on employer behaviour, including investment in workforce training and development?
- How will cost, debt, confidence, access to advice, and employment conditions affect take-up?

5. Training quality, progression and outcomes

Training should lead to meaningful improvements in workers' lives. We want to understand from stakeholders to what extent the current system is delivering quality training that leads to good quality jobs, progression, and positive economic outcomes.

- What evidence demonstrates that access to high-quality training leads to improved pay, job security, career progression, or job satisfaction?
- How would you assess the quality, relevance, and consistency of training provision in your sector?
- Are there acute issues with underemployment, skills utilisation, or skills mismatch?
- Are qualifications and skills portable and easily recognised across different employers, sectors, and regions?

Closing questions

We welcome views on long-term ambition and system change:

- What would a fair, inclusive, and worker-centred skills system look like by 2050?
- Should lifelong learning be treated as a universal social and employment right?

- Are there international examples of good practice applicable to the UK that we can learn from?
- What structural changes are needed right now to deliver this vision over the coming decades?