

UK Commission for Employment and Skills

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Key Features of UKCES

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) played a central role in driving sustainable economic growth through strategic investment in skills and human capital. Responding to persistent productivity gaps and evolving labour market needs, UKCES focused on employer-led initiatives, enhancing workplace management practices, and aligning vocational education closely with industry demands. UKCES generated influential policy programmes, guiding employers, educational institutions, and policymakers in addressing skills shortages and fostering regional economic resilience.

Operation Date: 2008-2017

Target Population: UK employers (large and SMEs), training providers and colleges, professional bodies, awarding organisations, sector regulators, skills systems, alongside unions and learner groups across the four nations.

Purpose: Enhance employer engagement and ownership of skills strategies, improve productivity and workplace innovation, strengthen education-employer partnerships, promote high-quality vocational education pathways, and inform effective policymaking through rigorous labour market intelligence and analysis.

Introduction

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) was established as a direct response to the influential Leitch Review of Skills (2006). The Leitch Review highlighted serious gaps in vocational and intermediate-level skills, significantly impacting the nation's competitiveness relative to other advanced economies, and recommended substantial investment in employer-led vocational training as a key solution. UKCES also built on the groundwork of the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) which had established a network of Sector Skills Councils to engage employers with qualifications and standards. UKCES operated until its closure in March 2017, a decision primarily influenced by shifting governmental priorities and budgetary constraints.

UKCES strategically focused on enhancing national productivity, competitiveness, and social mobility by aligning the skills provided by the educational sector with the needs of employers. Staff reported that despite having a relatively small team of fewer than 100 people, UKCES managed a diverse range of influential projects coordinated through specialised research units (personal communication, 2025) which had a significant policy impact on developing a programme of demand-driven skills development (OECD, 2014a). UKCES was recognised by independent bodies, notably the OECD (2017b) as critical to skills policy, and the UK government's 2017 Industrial Strategy Green Paper (DfBEL, 2017) explicitly called for a 'single authoritative source' to inherit UKCES's co-ordinating role.

Work and areas of influence

UKCES played a pivotal role in shaping the UK's approach to workforce planning and skills development through its influential contributions to labour market intelligence (LMI), particularly through the Employer Skills Survey (ESS) and the Working Futures project. The biennial ESS was one of the UK's largest LMI research projects, capturing employer data on skill shortages, training needs, and recruitment challenges. Its findings were crucial in identifying specific areas of skill deficits, informing both policymakers and employers about immediate skills shortages and future needs. By clearly pinpointing sectors facing significant skills mismatches, the ESS enabled targeted interventions and resource allocations, thus improving the efficiency and responsiveness of the skills training ecosystem (UKCES, 2011c, 2013a, 2015). The Working Futures reports complemented the ESS by offering robust projections of future labour market conditions, employment opportunities, and emerging skills requirements. These forward-looking analyses were invaluable to educational institutions, employers, and policymakers, providing a strategic basis for long-term planning and skills policy development. Specifically, the Working Futures reports highlighted anticipated growth in sectors such as healthcare, technology, and advanced manufacturing, guiding the prioritisation of vocational training programmes and informing strategic investment decisions (UKCES, 2016d). Independent reviews point to influence with caveats: the OECD notes that ESS/Working Futures informed education policy (OECD, 2017b); the National Audit Office (2016) urged stronger value-for-money evidence for the employer-led apprenticeship reforms.

UKCES also provided evidence-based policy advice underpinned by large-scale LMI and structured employer leadership, such as proposing high-level, outcome-based occupational standards, co-investment via industrial partnerships, and clearer success measures to link qualifications to employment and wage progression. This advice explicitly positioned employers, awarding organisations and providers within a single end-to-end skills system, using UKCES's strengths in labour LMI and evaluation to target reforms.

Other UKCES programmes included:

- **Growth Through People**, launched in 2014, emphasised employer-led training, better management, and vocational alignment, influencing skills policy across sectors (UKCES, 2015b) and will be explored further later.
- **Ambition 2020** set targets to place the UK at the forefront of global skills and job markets through systematic improvements in education and workforce training (UKCES, 2010).
- **Employer Ownership of Skills** pilot, initiated in 2012, funded and supported innovative, employer-driven models of skills training and workforce development (UKCES, 2016c). By directly involving businesses in designing and delivering training programmes, this initiative significantly increased the relevance and responsiveness of skills training to actual business needs, ultimately boosting workplace productivity and innovation (UKCES, 2011b, 2016a).
- **UK Futures Programme**, which ran between 2014 and 2016, piloted collaborative solutions for skills challenges in specific sectors. Notably, Productivity Challenge 4: Skills for Innovation in Manufacturing specifically addressed skill gaps in innovation management within the manufacturing sector. This targeted project encouraged sector-wide collaboration, experimentation, and knowledge-sharing among employers, improving internal innovation processes and productivity (UKCES, 2016b, 2016c).

Operating across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland introduced considerable coordination complexity. National Occupational Standards (NOS) and National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQs) provided cross-national anchors, commissioned on a UK-wide basis. Developed by industry experts, the NOS offered clear benchmarks of occupational competence and substantially shaped the alignment of vocational education and training (UKCES, 2011a). However, qualification frameworks, funding mechanisms and database architectures diverged by nation, creating practical difficulties for employers who may not understand why systems function

differently (CIPD, 2023). The proliferation of unitised qualifications and parallel databases further compounded confusion, leading to recommendations for a single, integrated access point that presents qualification options by occupation for non-specialist users (Skills Funding Agency, 2023). In parallel, UKCES-led proposals advocated reducing over-prescription within the NOS, promoting a 'core-and-options' model designed to ensure that standards remain current, cost-effective and adaptable across diverse workplace contexts (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2017).

Review: Growth Through People

Given the breadth of UKCES's work across skills development and employment strategies, this review focuses on critically evaluating Growth Through People, one of the Commission's pivotal programmes and offering a clear lens on what UKCES could convene and deliver. This policy operationalised UKCES's organisation-wide theory of change across three pillars: LMI, employer co-investment and delivery, and skills utilisation. It set five cross-system priorities and provided the organising frame linking UKCES's core functions.

Introduced in November 2014, Growth Through People aimed to foster sustainable economic recovery and improve workplace productivity through investment in skills and human capital. It addressed critical productivity gaps in the UK labour market, including high youth unemployment and stagnant real wages (van Ark & O'Mahony, 2014). The policy recognised the immense economic value of human capital, estimated at £17.61 trillion in 2013, far surpassing physical assets (ONS, 2014). It responded to structural labour-market shifts characterised by the 'hourglass effect', where high- and low-skill jobs expanded at the expense of mid-skilled roles, driven by automation, globalisation, and technological change (Autor et al., 2003; Goos & Manning, 2007; OECD, 2013).

Its principal levers were co-investment through the £340m Employer Ownership Pilot, eight sector-based Industrial Partnerships (e.g. automotive, aerospace, construction, digital), and competitive UK Futures Programme pilots. Rather than acting as a forum, UKCES channelled funding and tested delivery models (DfBIS, 2015; UKCES, 2015e, 2016b). Broader metrics, such as employment rates, wage growth, and career progression, were prioritised to align training with evolving economic needs (OECD, 2014b; Richard, 2012). This emphasis reflected the UKCES adult vocational qualification reform narrative (UKCES, 2013b), which positioned employers as the 'golden thread' from oversight to delivery, advocated employer-led partnerships, and promoted outcome-based standards across Apprenticeships, T Levels, and adult qualifications. Concurrently, UKCES sought transparency and a single access point to fragmented databases (Ofqual Register, LARA, NOS, Apprenticeship frameworks). Evaluation methodologies emphasising employment outcomes aligned educational success with tangible labour-market benefits. Sector-Based Work Academies, for example, improved participant employment outcomes (OECD, 2017a; UKCES, 2016a).

Growth Through People achieved progress in employer-led skills strategies, vocational education, workplace productivity, and education-employer collaboration (OECD, 2017b). Yet, evaluations of Employer Ownership found under-delivery against apprenticeship profiles (DfE, 2017) and NAO (2019) questioned value for money, noting a post-levy decline in starts. Eight Industrial Partnerships were established and employer-designed 'Trailblazer' standards rolled out, but training incidence remained uneven (UKCES, 2015d; DfE, 2017). Improving workplace productivity centred on High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP), the skills-utilisation pillar of Growth Through People, promoting better management and work organisation and tracked via dedicated ESS analysis (IES, 2016; UKCES, 2015b). Uptake was stronger among larger firms, with SMEs constrained by limited awareness and perceived value (UKCES, 2014b; OECD, 2017). Broader reform reinforced this utilisation agenda by encouraging employer coalitions to take end-to-end responsibility for skills solutions, co-invest with government, and use outcome evidence to iterate qualifications and delivery (UKCES, 2013b). Collaboration was primarily operationalised through Industrial Partnerships and co-designed standards, with ESS providing feedback on sectoral participation (UKCES, 2015d). Youth-focused initiatives (UKCES, 2016a) complemented this. Trade unions promoted equitable training access and productivity, though coordination between employers, educators, and unions remained inconsistent (UKCES, 2015c). While large employers positively influenced apprenticeship standards (UKCES, 2016a), SMEs' engagement was limited by resource constraints, low awareness, and administrative burdens (OECD, 2017b). Reforms also raised the quality and uptake of vocational qualifications, aligning education with employer demand. Employer engagement in apprenticeships increased, particularly in STEM fields and higher-level qualifications (DfE, 2021). Nevertheless, low participation in advanced apprenticeships constrained impact on high-skilled employment (OECD, 2017a).

Persistent challenges included skills shortages in STEM, manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades, and pronounced regional disparities (DfE, 2018; UKCES, 2015b). Independent analysis (IFS, 2023) highlighted long-term declines in employer training intensity, underscoring the need for sustained engagement. UKCES also operated amid continual qualification reform between 1992 and 2014 (including NVQs, GNVQs, AVCEs, Applied A-levels), largely led by central departments (Skills Commission, 2015). While UKCES argued for stability and outcome measures, policy churn impeded the embedding of employer-led standards.

Economically, Growth Through People contributed to job creation and vocational training uptake, especially in advanced manufacturing and construction (UKCES, 2016a; OECD, 2017a). The Automotive Industrial Partnership mapped needs in the West Midlands and mobilised targeted training, while tunnelling/construction partnerships addressed shortages, though delivery varied (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2018). Delivery, however, occurred alongside concurrent reforms and devolution, complicating data comparability and confidence in multi-year commitments. Productivity improved moderately, particularly through HPWP adoption. Returns on vocational education investment were evident in programmes such as sector-based work academies and traineeships, which supported employment transitions (OECD, 2017b; UKCES, 2015a). Socially, the policy advanced social mobility and inclusion, particularly through traineeships for disadvantaged youth (UKCES, 2015a). Nonetheless, HPWP adoption and structured training remained concentrated among large employers, with SMEs constrained by capacity and bureaucracy (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2016; UKCES, 2016e).

The returns on vocational qualifications varied significantly, with minimal economic benefits noted for lower-level qualifications, especially in low-wage sectors (Patrignani et al., 2017). This is a system level finding rather than a verdict on UKCES or Growth Through People themselves: earnings premia tend to be larger for higher level vocational routes and apprenticeships, with modest or variable returns in low wage sectors, underscoring why this policy coupled supply side training with skills utilisation and employer leadership. Frequent policy changes and institutional instability created confusion and undermined employer confidence and sustained investment in training. Furthermore, persistent regional disparities in training opportunities exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, limiting equitable policy outcomes.

Taken together, Growth Through People clarified UKCES's theory of change, targeting action through LMI, co-investing with employers, and improving workplace practice via HPWP. It generated sector-based collaborations at scale and grew institutional employer leadership. However, quantitative outputs and productivity gains were uneven, revealing the limits of what a coordinating non-departmental public body could deliver amid wider policy churn. Persistent demographic inequalities, especially regarding gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status suggest further targeted measures are required to ensure the inclusive reach of policy interventions (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Youth Futures Foundation, 2025).

Lessons learned

The establishment and subsequent closure of UKCES provided critical insights into the development and governance of skills policy in the UK. A key lesson is the need to stabilise the policy framework, simplify the offer, embed transparent outcomes, and design interventions explicitly for SME usability. In devolved systems, interoperability on core elements should preserve local flexibility while reducing confusion for UK-wide employers. Regular, independent synthesis of evidence would sustain disciplined evaluation and prevent future reforms from relapsing into complexity or uneven impact.

Foremost, the UKCES experience demonstrates the importance of maintaining a strategically positioned institution capable of bridging policy, employer engagement, and research. UKCES uniquely convened employers, trade unions, and policymakers, promoting employer-led approaches to skills development through structured collaboration, strategic investment, and targeted pilots. Such an institution must also act as an independent, evidence-led adviser to ministers and agencies, translating labour-market intelligence into actionable reforms, stress-testing standards with employers, and publishing outcome metrics that inform funding and delivery.

The abrupt discontinuation of UKCES in 2017 due to changing political priorities significantly disrupted the coherence of the UK's skills system, causing the loss of institutional memory and policy momentum. Even if policies such as Growth Through People had uneven delivery and limited demonstrable productivity impact potential learnings were substantial, and subsequently the system has sought to retain the data infrastructure while re-creating a central convening function via Skills England. The closure fragmented the continuity of crucial policy functions and led to the dispersal of expertise: DfE assumed ESS (now an official series, with methodological changes including smaller 2024 samples vs 2022), and Working Futures resumed under DfE/IER (2017–2027). Without centralisation,

successor organisations, such as Skills England and Local Enterprise Partnerships, struggle to fully replicate UKCES capacities and institutional memory. Operating across the four nations of the UK continues to require clear interoperability on core elements, while allowing devolved flexibility, otherwise, employers struggle to navigate divergent frameworks, funding rules and databases.

Institutional continuity and insulation from political volatility must be prioritised to secure employer confidence and enable long-term investment. Cross-party consensus is vital to sustaining such stability. Current organisations, including Skills England and the Skills Federation, require clearly defined remits and strengthened capacities to fulfil the coordinating role once held by UKCES. This should include a published roles-and-accountabilities map, a named data-integration lead, and routine joint guidance to minimise duplication for providers and employers.

While sustained employer engagement and market responsiveness are crucial, future policies should increase attention to educational institutions, educators, and students as integral components within the skills ecosystem. Skills development cannot be approached in isolation; it must be understood as part of a dynamic interaction among learners, educational providers, employers, and broader labour market demands. Enhanced research and policy focus on how educational institutions adapt curricula, how educators continually update teaching practices, and how students engage with evolving skill requirements are essential to fostering a more responsive and resilient skills ecosystem.

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