

State of the Nations  
research series

# CREATIVE INDUSTRIES EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON SKILLS INITIATIVES: 2025

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15730438  
ISBN: 978-0-7017-0289-2

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July 2025

**Creative Industries  
Policy and  
Evidence Centre**

Led by



**Newcastle**  
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## About the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (**Creative PEC**) works to support the growth of the UK's creative industries through the production of independent and authoritative evidence and policy advice. Led by Newcastle University, with the Royal Society of Arts and funded by the UKRI's Arts and Humanities Research Council, Creative PEC comprises a core consortium of Newcastle University, Work Advance, the University of Sussex and the University of Sheffield.

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## About the State of the Nations reports

Creative PEC's '**State of the Nations**' series analyses the latest data across four thematic areas to inform the development of policies relating to the creative industries. Their scope is the whole of the United Kingdom, and wherever possible data is presented for all the nations and regions. Regular reports on each area will be published annually over the five years of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding. The themes and corresponding Research Partners are:

- R&D, Innovation and Clusters (University of Sussex)
- Internationalisation (Newcastle University)
- Arts, Culture and Heritage Sectors (University of Sheffield)
- Education, Skills and Talent (Work Advance).

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### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank, without implicating, the anonymous reviewer that provided helpful comments on a previous version of the report; the stakeholders who have been consulted at various stages of the process; and the Creative PEC Research Unit, Policy Unit and Comms Team.

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### Citation

If the information in this report is used in any subsequent research and/or publications, please cite as follows: Giles, L. and Carey, H. (2025) Creative industries employers' perspectives on skills initiatives: 2025. Creative PEC State of the Nations Research Series. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.15730438

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# Foreword

**In previous research, Creative PEC has documented a skills mismatch between the supply of creative talent and what employers in the UK's creative industries need. Policymakers attempting to reduce this mismatch through different skills initiatives need reliable information on their efficacy.**

As the UK embarks on implementing a new Sector Plan for the Creative Industries, the report uses data from the Employer Skills Survey to present employers' perspectives on which aspects of the skills system relating to work-based training are working and which areas need attention.

Importantly, the report also points to key gaps in the evidence base. The Employer Skills Survey, with its nationwide and whole economy coverage, permits robust inference at the level of the creative industries businesses

population, but inevitably sample size constraints preclude detailed sub-sectoral and sub-national analysis for many of the questions. The report flags Creative PEC's own data collection initiatives which are addressing some of these limitations.

We'd love to hear from creative industries employers about how the picture we paint aligns with their experiences.

**Professor Hasan Bakhshi,  
Director, Creative PEC**

# Executive summary

**This State of the Nations report updates a previous analysis of creative employer engagement in different skills programmes across the UK.<sup>1</sup> This research examined creative industries employers' experiences and perspectives of skills initiatives. These initiatives aim to strengthen the future talent pipeline and entry into the sector and to promote technical and work-based training. This will enable the skills of the creative workforce to remain relevant in the face of ongoing advances in technology and working practices.**

The report provides a vital companion to Creative PEC's examination of skills mismatches in the creative industries published in February 2025,<sup>2</sup> as well as forthcoming creative industries skills audits that will examine current and future skill needs across and within the creative sub-sectors.<sup>3</sup> Together these reports aim to inform skills policy reforms and planning and investment in each UK nation, including interventions set out in the Creative Industries Sector Plan, which is aligned to the UK-wide Industrial Strategy.<sup>4</sup>

The creative industries have experienced considerable growth over the last decade or so. This growth, combined with ongoing disruption from rapid technological advances and other sources of structural change, such as population ageing, highlights the importance of training. This is not only to attract a strong future talent pipeline into the sector but also to support lifelong learning that keeps creative workers' skills up to date as working practices evolve.

In such a context, the UK government and devolved governments are advancing extensive skills reforms to repurpose their respective skills systems. A common goal has been to ensure skills interventions are future-ready and sufficiently responsive to changes in labour-market needs, drawing on international best practice (OECD, 2019a). The recent launch of the UK government's ten-year Modern Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade, 2024) has reinforced the need to adopt a sector focus and customise interventions to meet sector needs, supporting economic growth. In particular, this has led to a focus on strengthening career pathways in critical roles in the creative industries and widening work-based learning activities to supply more industry-relevant skills.

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1. See Creative PEC's Creative Skills Monitor 2020 (Giles et al, 2020a).

2. See Giles et al, 2025.

3. The Creative Employers Skills Survey was announced in the Creative industries sector vision. The skills audit process, funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Creative Industries Council, and led by Work Advance and Creative PEC, began in January 2025. It is expected to complete in autumn 2025 and aims to provide more detailed insights into skills needs.

4. The Creative Industries Sector Plan is being developed by DCMS, working with the Creative Industries Taskforce as part of the Industrial Strategy.

In light of such developments, this report provides an up-to-date analysis of creative industries employer engagement in the different skills systems across the UK. The research deployed official data from the UK Employer Skills Survey 2022 (ESS22) (DfE, 2023) to review the most recent perceptions and experiences of creative industries employers concerning different skills initiatives designed to address skills deficiencies.

The research placed a particular focus on those reforms that are seeking more sector-focused, work-based activities in each national system, such as work experience programmes, apprenticeships and wider

technical qualifications, which aim to drive better employment and skills outcomes. With employer engagement being key to the effective design and delivery of industry-facing initiatives, the research deployed survey evidence to explore employers' experiences through an 'employer engagement journey', progressing from basic awareness of different programmes to deeper knowledge, interest and participation. It compared the picture for the creative industries against the whole economy (all industries), deploying Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) definitions for the sector.<sup>5</sup> The research has revealed five key findings.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Further information on the DCMS definition of the creative industries, which is used for national statistics, are available on the [Creative PEC website](#).

6. The sample size available from ESS22 enabled robust analysis of the data for the creative industries but precluded a more detailed analysis (e.g. for sub-sectors, nations or regions) for some variables, particularly those based on questions asked of a subset of the sample. This is an important gap for future research to address, as discussed in Section 4.3.

## Summary of findings

- 1. Despite intentions to widen pathways into the creative industries, employer practices are constraining entry points into the sector for different age groups.** While a significant share of creative industries employers who are recruiting do take on young people under 25 – that is 57% vs 64%), when hiring education leavers, they largely recruit university graduates and are significantly less likely to recruit school or college leavers. While this partly reflects the high-skilled nature of work in the sector, creative industries employers are also less likely to take on older workers aged 50 or above (24% compared to 33% across all industries). This means the majority of creative businesses have been reliant on recruiting workers aged between 25 and 49.
- 2. Creative industries employers identified differences in the work-readiness of education leavers, pointing to how industry relevance might be enhanced in future.** Just over one in five (21%) creative industries employers who had recruited higher education (HE) leavers suggested they were poorly prepared for work – a statistically significant higher share than across all industries (14%). Creative industries employers were more likely than all employers to suggest recruits were lacking: technical skills (cited by 8% of creative firms that had taken on HE leavers compared to 3% across all industries); transversal skills, such as problem-solving, communication or team working (7% and respectively); and the right attitude or motivation for work (10% vs 5%).
- 3. The breadth, depth and sustainability of work experience and work-based learning opportunities in the creative industries remains limited.** While a higher share of employers in the creative industries sector had offered work placements to enhance individuals' employability (37% vs 30% of all employers), this is a minority of creative industries employers overall. Furthermore, few employers in the sector connected placements to a permanent or long-term paid role after the placements had finished. And the provision of work-based learning opportunities in the form of apprenticeships remains limited, with only 8% of employers in the creative industries having offered apprenticeships in the past (vs 19% for all industries) and the vast majority reporting they were unlikely to offer apprenticeships in future (63% of creative industries employers compared to 57% for all industries).
- 4. The picture of creative industries employer engagement with the skills system is nuanced, with variation in where creative industries employers are in their engagement journey with different skills programmes.** For example, patterns of engagement can vary depending on the longevity and maturity of skills programmes. For relatively new programmes, like T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), the degree of awareness and knowledge among creative industries employers is relatively limited. Despite this, there are positive signs of interest among these employers to engage with these programmes in future. In contrast, for more established programmes, such as apprenticeships, although awareness is very high, appetite to engage remains very low. This reflects long-standing challenges associated with perceived value and practical barriers to getting the delivery model to work effectively in the creative industries.
- 5. Creative industries employers pointed to a range of factors that inhibit their ability to engage with skills programmes.** Whether for work placements or technical training, these barriers commonly include time constraints, costs and financial burdens, and initiatives being too complicated to respond to sector needs and/or to ensure relevance to specific roles and/or skills. These barriers are similar in all industries. Some creative industries employers suggested skills programmes were too expensive and difficult to customise and deliver, and that the limited tradition of engaging with technical programmes, like apprenticeships, point to deep-rooted cultures within the industry. On these points, there was some departure from other industries. Other creative industries employers reported they were content with existing workforce capability and, in turn, lower demands for training. In contrast, when these employers had engaged with skills programmes, they tended to integrate the use of different interventions within broader business practices. As a result, they reported a range of positive benefits in accessing skilled workers and strengthening talent pipelines.



## Research insights and policy considerations

The research highlighted the need to strengthen creative industries employer engagement in the skills system and pointed to some of the challenges to achieving this in practice. With the UK government progressing a new Industrial Strategy and associated Creative Industries Sector Plan, as well as sector-specific strategies and plans in each nation, sector-facing interventions are being developed. This provides an opportunity to think about skills interventions that better meet the distinct needs of priority sectors like the creative industries. Several high-level policy considerations have been identified from the research.

First, the research identified several areas where technical entry routes into creative employment might be enhanced to achieve the aspirations of policy makers to broaden routes into priority sectors and widen access. For instance, while our analysis revealed that many creative industries employers are reliant on relatively narrow, embedded recruitment channels, which better serve middle-aged workers, this is not the case for all employers in the sector. Indeed, with creative industries employers who recruit both younger and older workers reporting positive benefits to their businesses, there is room to widen entry routes and expand work experience, trials and placements in order to broaden the talent pipeline into the sector.

Second, with the breadth, depth and sustainability of employer engagement in skills programmes remaining constrained, there is clearly still more to do to turn this position around. By so doing, this will create more coherent, relevant and responsive skills pathways from early years through to further education (FE), HE and beyond in the future. This is especially important given the particular challenges reported by high numbers of smaller businesses across the creative industries. While employer engagement can happen at the level of individual firms, there is room to amplify the process through the official recognition of industry partners in each nation in the form of professional, trade and industry bodies (OECD, 2024). Experiences in

other countries (OECD, 2023) have highlighted the power of industry bodies, representing sectoral interests, to support capacity building, networking and partnership working across business communities, and between industry and skills providers. Not only has this been effective in overcoming capacity shortfalls, while customising initiatives to meet industry needs, but it also encourages UK employers to work together around shared skills goals (in the form of communities of practice). This provides the basis to: co-design skills programmes that are responsive to industry needs and produce individuals who are work-ready; create and grow recognisable, industry-endorsed training networks of industry-facing providers that are formally accredited and can deliver to consistently high standards; broaden and deepen employer investment and participation in technical and work-based learning activities, adapting delivery in ways that meet the needs of a broad range of creative workers and businesses; and/or work to drive improvements in management practices such as recruitment and training.





Finally, government-backed national surveys that help us understand variations in the employer engagement journey in relation to different types of interventions – summarised in the figure below – can provide rich information on where and how to drive improvements in the skills reform programme. Indeed, with creative industries employers reporting low levels of awareness of newer programmes, such as T Levels and HTQs, this suggests a need for targeted marketing and awareness raising campaigns and incentives. In contrast, wider insights highlighting more deep-rooted, structural problems around the design and delivery of longer-running programmes, such as apprenticeships, point to priorities that need to be addressed in customising the delivery model to meet industry requirements more effectively. With a significant minority of creative industries employers also reporting lower levels of work-readiness among some HE leavers, this raises questions about the need to ensure the continuing relevance of traditional academic programmes and industry connections.



The UK government is progressing the devolution agenda across the UK, which puts a renewed focus on the importance of place-based approaches aligned to the Industrial Strategy. This provides further opportunities to customise skills programmes to meet the distinct needs of the creative industries sector. There

is scope for national governments to work with cities and regions to better co-ordinate national, sector-orientated and place-based measures, as well as to test and trial skills innovations that enhance the range of work-based initiatives and technical pathways serving the sector overall.

### Creative industries employer engagement in technical skills programmes, 2022

	Awareness	Knowledge	Interest	Engagement
 <b>Developing the young workforce</b> Scotland only	Only 16%* of creative industries employers had heard of DYW Regional Groups (vs 27% of all employers)			1% had engaged with DYW Regional Groups over the past 12 months (vs 7% of all employers)
 <b>T-Levels</b> England only	Only 40%* of creative industries employers had heard of T Levels (vs 32% of all employers)	19%* aware and have at least some knowledge of T Levels (vs 15% of all employers)	35% were interested in providing placements (vs 33% of all employers)	64% anticipated difficulty in providing placements (vs 60% of all employers)
 <b>HTQs</b> England only	Only 19% of creative industries employers had heard of HTQs (vs 16% of all employers)	8% aware and have at least some knowledge of HTQs (vs 7% of all employers)		
 <b>Apprenticeships</b>	99% of creative industries had heard of apprenticeships (vs 99% of all employers)	82%* aware and have at least some knowledge of apprenticeships (vs 71% of all employers)	29%* plan to offer apprenticeships in the future (vs 38% of all employers)	5%* had any staff undertaking apprenticeships at the time of the survey (vs 11% of all employers)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Employer Skills Survey 2022

Notes: Data for Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) refers to Scotland only, and T Levels and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) to England only. The Employer Skills Survey does not ask questions about every stage of the engagement journey for every skills programme. Bases vary – please refer to the main body of the report for further information.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and context

Over the past decade, the creative industries have been expanding rapidly, with employment in the sector growing at four times the rate of the wider UK economy (Giles et al, 2025). At the same time, the economy has been increasingly disrupted by global megatrends, such as rapid technological advances, frequent innovation and climate change. This highlights the importance of training to support a ready supply of highly skilled talent to the sector, as well as lifelong learning to keep individuals' skills up to date as working practices evolve.

Yet our recent report (Giles et al, 2025) suggests that the creative industries have been experiencing significant skills challenges, which employers state are hampering innovation and growth. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of hard-to-fill vacancies in the creative industries are attributable to skills shortages, compared to just 41% of hard-to-fill vacancies across all sectors. There are also problems internally, with skills gaps among the existing creative workforce on the rise, often driven by new technology and innovation (Giles et al, 2025).

In this context, there are considerable pressures to ensure that skills remain relevant over time – not only pressures on the separate national skills systems across the UK to deliver a ready supply of talent in future but also on both employers and workers to adequately

invest in training and workforce development. Extensive skills reforms are being progressed in the different UK nations to ensure their respective systems are future-ready and sufficiently responsive to the changing needs of the economy,<sup>7</sup> drawing on international best practice (OECD, 2019a). At its simplest level, this requires enabling the different parts of the post-16 skills systems to work more effectively together to understand employer and individual skills needs in the labour market, and then to shape skills delivery to provide the best response and, in turn, outcomes. This is increasingly seen as vital to unlocking the contribution of skills in driving stronger economic growth in future, as well as supporting greater social inclusion and prosperity (OECD, 2019b).

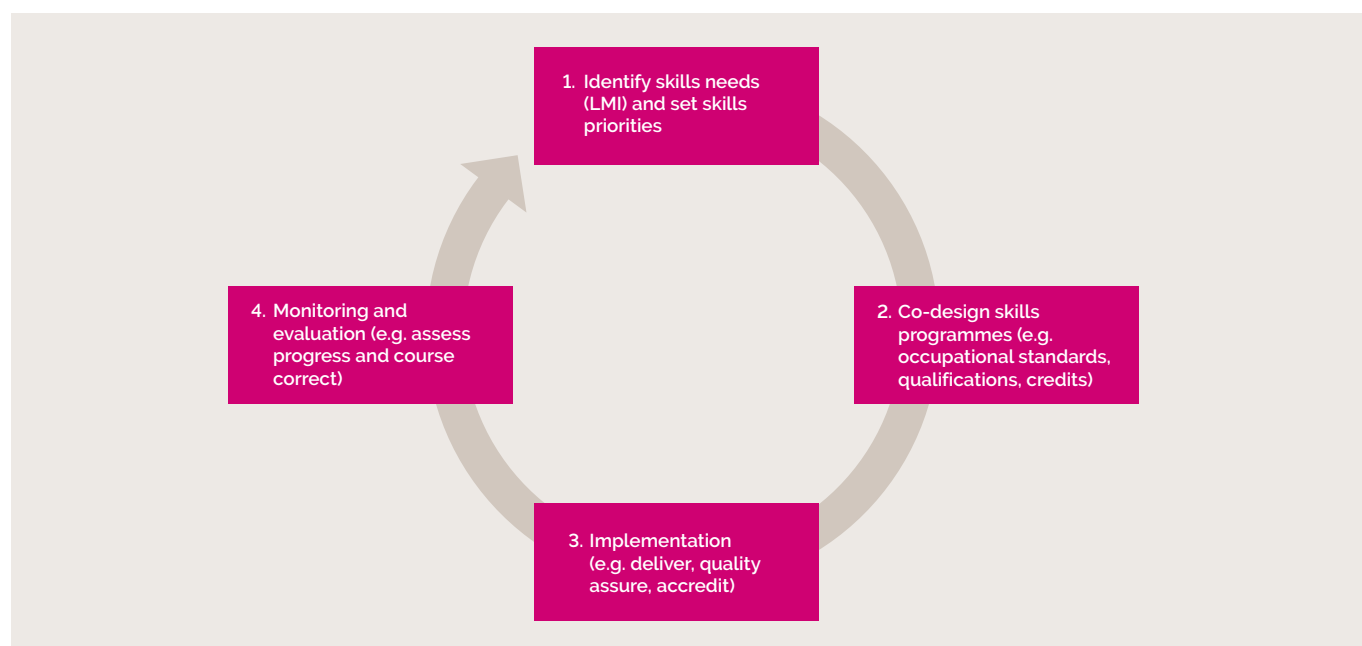
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7. In the Scottish skills system, reforms are being directed by the ten-year National Strategy for Economic Transformation (Scottish Government, 2022), which builds on Scotland's Future Skills Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2019). In Northern Ireland, the strategic skills priorities have been set by the recent Skills Strategy, Skills To Succeed for a 10x Economy (Department for the Economy, 2022). In Wales, strategic skills priorities are being progressed through the Welsh Government's Plan for Employability and Skills for a Stronger, Fairer and Greener Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). In England, current reforms have their roots in the dedicated Post-16 Skills Plan in 2016 for England (DfE, 2016).

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, each national government in the UK therefore seeks to make use of a series of policy levers and initiatives throughout the skills policy cycle. Thus, they ensure their skills systems are well-functioning and sufficiently responsive – that is, they are taking end-to-end action in the system in terms of: (1) anticipating and understanding skills needs; (2) designing and customising policy to meet sector needs; (3) implementing and delivering (including employing processes for quality assurance and accreditation); and (4) reviewing performance of programmes and assessing impact through monitoring and evaluation. This is placing an increasing focus on skills initiatives that are more industry-facing and linked to career pathways. Thus there are enhanced opportunities to improve work experience and employability skills (such as via placements, work inspiration activities and careers advice), as well as to develop stronger work-based learning activities for adults of all ages to update their skills and keep them relevant to the labour market.

Crucially, throughout the whole system, there is an increasing recognition of the need for strong mechanisms for engagement with industry and wider social partners. This is vital to secure relevance through greater connections to work and a deeper understanding of changes in working practices and their implications for jobs. This will help to ensure that employers, industry partners and trade unions can: support the design and updating of relevant skills programmes; incentivise deeper and broader take-up among employers and individuals alike; and review and accredit learning outcomes to ensure they remain valuable to industry.

Figure 1.1 Skills policy cycle



Governments worldwide, including in the UK, are putting in place structures and mechanisms that allow for:

**Regular assessments of the changing skills needs in the labour market** through the use of high-quality labour-market information and expert insights drawn from key stakeholders, such as industry and employer bodies, as well as professional bodies and trade unions. This will require not only the detailed exploration of specialist and technical employer skills requirements to keep the content of skills programmes current but also a focus on the economy-wide transversal skills needed to be adaptable in a future world of work.

**Continuous updates to the training offer and content of training** to ensure that skills programmes critical to meeting pressing skills needs are kept current and sufficiently funded and incentivised.

**A strong focus on the delivery methods for implementing programmes** not only of consistently high quality but also with more flexibility and relevance to the workplace. A key concern is that individuals optimise opportunities for work experience

and increasingly adopt blended on-and-off-the-job learning activities that support are 'earning whilst they are learning' (OECD, 2023). A core goal is also to make activities inclusive and accessible to all types of businesses (including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), sole-traders and freelancers) and learners from various backgrounds (including young people and older adults).

**Robust systems for tracking progress and evaluating learning programmes and their outcomes.** This is critical to maintain the quality of skills systems and to test the effectiveness of any moves towards the distinct customisation of delivery. In many countries, social partners have key roles in parts of the process, such as: monitoring delivery, assuring quality, supporting assessments of stakeholder satisfaction, recognising the skills and outcomes acquired from skills programmes, and promoting valued programmes.

Source: Authors' elaboration, adapted from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publications.

The launch of the UK government's ten-year Modern Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade, 2024) provides the basis for reinvigorating a sector focus in driving future economic growth and fully optimising the contribution that skills investment can make to that growth. Crucially, with specific reference to the creative industries, this highlights the important and continuing role of sector-specific strategies and future plans in each nation, which are dedicated to customising interventions to meet the distinct needs of the sector.<sup>8</sup> This includes incentivising training that will deliver the supply of skills required to support future success. This has a specific focus on strengthening career pathways in critical creative roles and widening work-based learning activities, such as providing apprenticeship places and/or work placements to enhance the specialisation and currency of training in the sector.

However, recent Creative PEC research has suggested that despite these common developments and shared policy aims in different parts of the UK to raise employer engagement in skills development, especially through work-based interventions, low levels of industry engagement with and take-up of such options have, in practice, been hard to shift (Carey, Giles and Hickman, 2024). Indeed, the share of creative industries stating they have funded or arranged training in the past 12 months has fallen over time, from 62% of creative

industries in 2017 to 55% in 2022 (Giles et al, 2025). In addition, wider research has suggested that the sector's propensity for freelance work poses a particular challenge to skills investment, with low rates of participation and significant barriers to training (Carey, Giles and O'Brien, 2023; Henry et al, 2021).

With this in mind, the research for this report has provided an updated analysis of employer engagement among creative businesses in the different national skills systems to understand this picture more fully. As with the second Work Advance State of the Nations report, the research sought to use the latest data from official government-backed, UK-wide surveys to provide an authoritative baseline and to update previous analyses conducted in this area, such as for the Creative Skills Monitor (Giles et al, 2020a). The previous report (Giles et al, 2025) and the forthcoming creative industries skills audits focus on the skills needs of creative industries employers (stage one of the policy cycle – Figure 1.1) across and within the creative industries. As a result, this research placed a particular emphasis on employers' perspectives and experiences of skills initiatives in each national system (stages two to four). The varying levels of engagement are captured and tracked through these surveys via an employer engagement journey, which progresses from basic awareness to deeper knowledge, interest and then engagement (Figure 1.2).

8. In Scotland, the creative industries are one of seven growth sectors and the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation and associated delivery plans outline its long-term vision and strategy for the sector (Scottish Government, 2022). Since 2016, the Welsh Government has progressed distinct actions to support the creative industries in Wales and established a dedicated agency in 2020 within government – Creative Wales – to harness the nation's potential to drive economic growth. In Northern Ireland, digital, information and communications technology (ICT) and creative industries has been identified as one of five key strategic clusters within the nation's long-term economic strategy, where there is perceived to be greater potential to enhance international competitiveness and for the national economy to be a global leader.

Figure 1.2 Skills policy cycle



Source: Authors' elaboration, adapted from survey instruments such as the Employer Skills Survey (ESS) 2022.

As such, this report serves as a vital companion to the previous report (Giles et al, 2025), outlining the extent to which different parts of the skills system are supporting creative businesses to address skills needs and deficiencies. Indeed, this extended analysis

provides robust data to objectively guide future skills planning and investment priorities for Skills England<sup>9</sup> and the devolved governments, as well as to inform the design and delivery of dedicated industry-facing programmes and enhance their future effectiveness.

## 1.2 Research aims and approach

The research aimed to deploy up-to-date evidence from the UK's national labour-market surveys to examine creative industries employer engagement in the skills systems in different parts of the UK. Consequently, the study considered the following questions:

### Entry opportunities to grow the talent pipeline:

What opportunities are creative industries employers providing to develop a strong talent pipeline to the sector? This includes: their approach to recruiting different age groups, their perceptions of how well-prepared education leavers are for the workplace, and their provision of work experience opportunities and placements that strengthen links to industry and enhance the potential for individuals to acquire more relevant skills and knowledge.

**Skills programmes to supply relevant, up-to-date skills:** How are creative industries employers engaging with key skills programmes to meet their skills needs,

particularly their use of apprenticeships and wider technical and vocational qualifications? A key objective of this part of the analysis was to explore creative industries employers' views on the nature of such programmes, including issues of responsiveness, accessibility and ongoing relevance to the sector.

**Perceptions of schemes or initiatives:** How do creative industries employers view specific named initiatives in different parts of the UK, and what reasons do they give for why they have or have not engaged? Again, this has a particular focus on work-based learning and programmes that aim to enhance individuals' technical skills and work experience.

9. Skills England was launched in a shadow form in 2024 and became fully operational in 2025. Its aim is to work with partners to form a coherent national picture of pressing skills priorities and how they can be addressed. Further information can be found on the [UK government website](#).

The research sought to review existing official sources to inform an objective understanding of engagement in the different skills systems among creative industries employers across the UK. The approach aimed to focus on the most up-to-date evidence from the UK's official sources to provide a robust, common baseline from which to review perceptions on how initiatives are working and where improvements might be made (where possible). This, in turn, provided a basis on which to regularly review, update and track the impact of any changes in policy initiatives over time. A core intention has been to ensure that the experiences of the creative industries can be consistently compared to other sectors of the economy.

A scoping phase identified the UK ESS as the primary data source.<sup>10, 11</sup> While researchers originally intended to utilise the Labour Force Survey to explore the experiences of freelancers, further testing found that sample sizes were too small. In addition, the scoping phase pointed to a gap in current data in the survey – that is, it identified a need to conduct a more bespoke analysis of employer engagement using DCMS definitions for the sector.<sup>12</sup> This was necessary because current Department for Education (DfE) publication of the data covers broad sectors of the economy only. Also, further analysis by DCMS, using ESS and Labour Force Survey data for DCMS sectors (e.g. through its [employment estimates](#) and for ESS22), has not yet focused on employer engagement with the system.

To provide a more detailed examination of the data for the creative industries, the research team commissioned a full set of customised tables from ESS22. This underpins the analysis throughout this report. The sample size available from ESS22 for the creative industries is 3,231 firms (and for all industries, 72,918 firms). This enabled a robust analysis of the data for the creative industries, but it precluded a more detailed analysis (e.g. of sub-sectors, nations or regions) for some variables, particularly those based on questions asked of a subset of the sample. The data presented was weighted to be representative of the business population. The unweighted base is noted under each figure in this report. Following the approach taken by the DfE when publishing ESS data (DfE, 2023), data based on an unweighted sample of fewer than 30 firms has been suppressed. The analysis sought to explore differences in the position of the creative industries compared to the whole economy – that is, all industries (including the creative industries). The data has also been subject to significance testing, with data for the creative industries being compared to that for other sectors of the UK economy to understand the strength of any differences identified. A z-test was applied to compare differences across the sample, so where an asterisk is reported in a figure, this indicates a statistically significant difference at a 95% confidence level. Wider research has been used to corroborate results.

10. The ESS is a national, UK-wide, firm-based survey commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) within the UK government. The 2022 survey (ESS22) is the sixth since 2011 to cover England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (the 2019 survey excludes Scotland). ESS includes questions about employers' engagement with the different skills systems across the UK.

11. A scoping phase for the project found that previous government-funded employers surveys, capturing employers' perspectives on different parts of the skills system have largely been disbanded. One of the most significant of these was the UK Employer Perspectives Survey (EPS). This was originally designed to be conducted alongside the UK ESS, with the two surveys running in alternate years. The focus of the EPS was primarily outward-looking, covering the provision of and engagement with the wider skills system, whereas the ESS had a more inward-looking focus, assessing the current skills position of employers and the influences of management practices within their organisations. The EPS was last conducted in 2016 and the content of the two surveys were merged by the DfE in the Employer Skills Survey 2019.

12. Further information on DCMS definitions for the creative industries are available on the [Creative PEC website](#).



## 1.3 Report structure

The remainder of this report sets out the research results and is structured as follows:

**Section 2** considers the opportunities provided by employers in the creative industries to strengthen entry into the sector and to nurture a stronger creative talent pipeline. This is important not only to enhance entry routes for young people leaving the education system but also to create multiple points of entry for adults to progress in their careers.

**Section 3** discusses how employers in the creative industries are engaging with key technical skills initiatives and training programmes within the UK skills systems to meet their employment requirements and supply a highly skilled creative workforce. A

key objective has been to explore creative industries employers' views on the nature of work-based learning programmes, such as apprenticeships, and wider technical and vocational qualifications, including issues of responsiveness, accessibility and ongoing relevance to the sector.

**Section 4** draws conclusions, discusses policy considerations and identifies areas for future research, including for Creative PEC's Education, Skills and Talent theme.

## 2 Exploring entry opportunities to grow the creative talent pipeline

### 2.1 Introduction

In this section, we examine the opportunities provided by employers in the creative industries to support a strong creative talent pipeline. This is important not only to enhance entry routes for young people leaving the education system but also to create multiple points of entry for older workers seeking to move into the sector and/or to progress within and advance their creative careers. The section considers:

**Approaches to recruiting young people:** including opportunities for education leavers, employer perceptions of how well-prepared education leavers are for work, and their provision of work experience opportunities to improve access and links to the industry, such as through work placements.

**Approaches to recruiting adults:** in particular, employer perceptions of how well-prepared older workers are for employment in the sector.

**Views on specific named initiatives to enhance entry opportunities in different parts of the UK:** employer knowledge of the programmes, levels of engagement and/or interest in future engagement.

## 2.2 Entry opportunities for education leavers within the creative industries

Previous Creative PEC research has drawn attention to persistently low levels of creative industries employer engagement with publicly funded providers in the skills system. For example, only 10% of creative businesses are accessing training through FE colleges compared to 20% of employers across all industries (Giles et al, 2025). Through this research, we have been able to take a closer look at the recruitment of different types of education leavers (i.e. those taken on in their first job on leaving school, college or university) and the nature of entry opportunities provided.

ESS22 explores whether employers who said they had recruited in the previous year had taken on a young person under the age of 25. The results revealed that young people are a significant source of talent for active creative industries recruiters, albeit at slightly lower levels compared to the economy as a whole. Indeed, 57% of creative industries recruiters said they had taken on young people compared to 64% in the overall economy – this was slightly down on 2017 figures of 61% for creative industries employers and 66% for all industries.

That said, when the number of recruiters within the creative industries is calculated as a proportion of all employers in the sector, the overall opportunities provided are much smaller. Indeed, fewer employers in the sector are recruiting as a whole. So, when employers were asked specifically about taking on education leavers in the last two to three years, around a quarter (28%) of all employers in the sector had done so. This means that the vast majority of all creative industries employers had not done so (i.e. 70% compared to around two-thirds of employers across the whole economy).

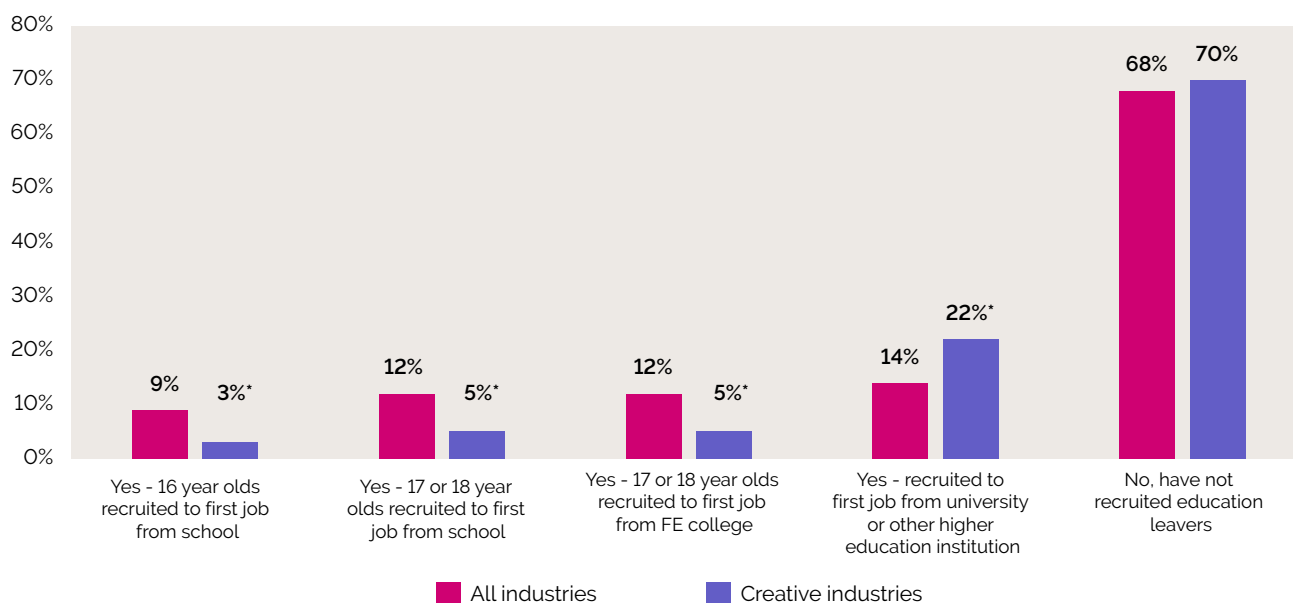
While this is not statistically significant, it appears to add some support to policy developments encouraging more creative industries employers to take on young people<sup>13</sup> and to encourage improvements in recruitment processes that rely less on informal practices (Carey et al, 2019).

Furthermore, there is a difference in the type of education leaver recruited in the creative industries compared to the whole economy. Employers in the creative industries are more likely to recruit a person from a university or other higher education institution (HEI) and less likely to recruit a young person (aged 16–18 from school or an FE college – all results were statistically significant for creative industries employers relative to other sectors. This is likely, in part, to reflect the emphasis on higher level skills within the sector seen in wider Creative PEC research (Giles et al, 2025). While the data over time is not directly comparable, it is of interest that all 2022 recruitment levels were slightly down on 2017 figures (Giles et al, 2020).

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13. This includes current commitments of the UK government to fund specific initiatives such as the Creative Careers Programme to broaden and diversify the talent pipeline in the creative industries, as announced in the [Autumn Budget 2024](#).

**Figure 2.1 Employers who said they had recruited an education leaver in the last two to three years**



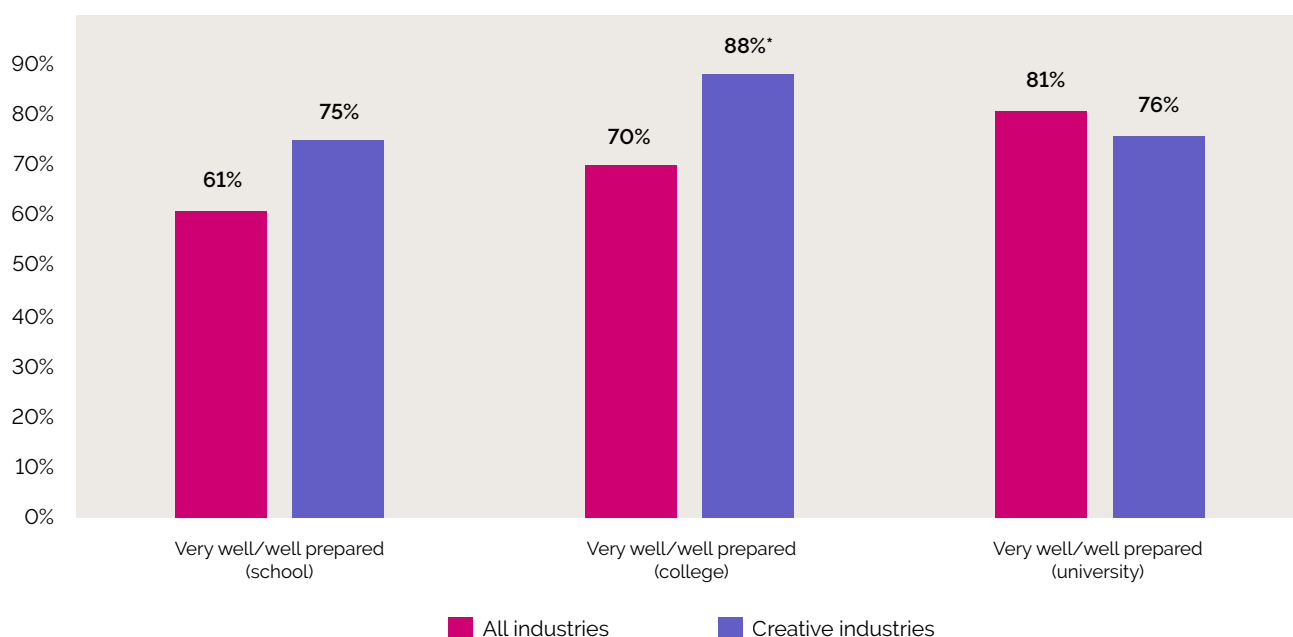
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer base – all firms (n = 528). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

The research also enabled an examination of employer perspectives on how ready education leavers were for the world of work. Interestingly, this revealed positive results, with the vast majority of employers who recruit young people feeling that individuals are very well- or well-prepared for their job. It should be noted that the number of respondents with recruitment experience of young people leaving school and/or college was quite low, so this result should be interpreted with caution. That said, the results for colleges were statistically significant.

In particular, over three-quarters (76%) of creative industries employers with experience of recruiting education leavers from university said they were well prepared for work. While this was a slightly lower share compared to employers across the economy, the difference is not statistically significant. However, given the level of the creative workforce with HE qualifications (Giles et al, 2025), there is a question as to whether more employers should be reporting higher levels of work-readiness for those leaving university. The challenges of meeting creative industries' needs have been highlighted in wider research (Lyons and Davies, 2022).

Figure 2.2 Work-readiness of different education leavers



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer base for each chart, respectively – all firms that have recruited 17-18 year olds to first job from school in last two to three years (England, Northern Ireland and Wales) (n = 41); all firms that have recruited 17-18 year olds to first job from college in last two to three years (England, Northern Ireland and Wales) (n = 45); all firms that have recruited university leavers to first job in last two to three years (UK) (n = 165). The distribution of responses stating leavers were poorly prepared have not been included due to the low numbers of responses for schools and colleges.

The research also gave some sense of the skills that are lacking among young people leaving the education system. As might be expected, one of the most common responses to this issue among creative industries employers related to university leavers' lack of life and work experiences (this was mentioned by 9% of creative industries employers and 7% of employers across all industries). Employers also expressed concerns about poor attitude or lack of motivation (e.g. poor work ethic, punctuality or appearance), which was highlighted by 10% of creative industries employers and 5%

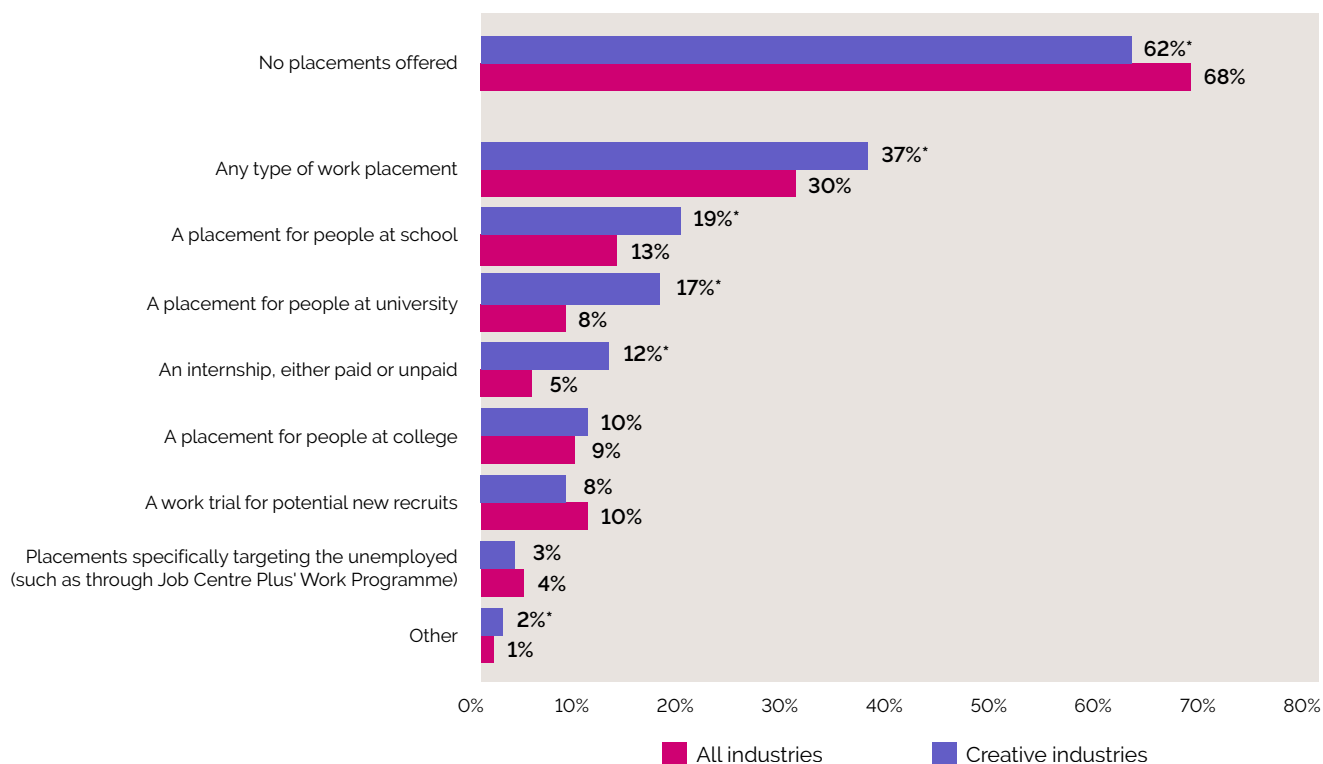
of employers across all industries. Creative industries employers were also more likely than all employers to suggest recruits were lacking technical skills (cited by 8% of creative industries employers that had taken on HE leavers compared to 3% across all industries) and transversal skills such as problem-solving, communication and team working (7% and 3% respectively). For all these areas, responses from employers from the creative industries were statistically significant compared to other sectors.

The research also explored the nature of entry-level, work experience activities provided to enhance individuals' employability through different types of work placement opportunity. These placements can strengthen work-based talent pipelines by directly exposing learners to industry-relevant work experiences that enhance their sector-specific skills, while increasing their motivation to pursue careers in the sector. They can also be a way for employers to proactively address labour shortages, respond to competition from other employers for skilled workers and grow entry points for a greater cross-section of people to move into the sector.

The analysis showed, however, that despite recent ongoing policy developments to encourage a fuller range of work placements among employers (discussed in Section 1.1), they have stubbornly remained at much the same level since these development activities started to be measured in 2014. Consequently, given the limited maturity of the work-based learning offer in the UK skills system, they tend not to be widespread, with the majority

of employers in the creative industries (62%) not providing placements – this is a position that has worsened since 2017 (when 56% of employers had not offered placements) and is statistically significant compared to other sectors. That said, a slightly higher share of creative industries employers (37%) offered work placements compared to all industries (at 30%). Furthermore, a slightly higher proportion of employers in the creative industries have provided placements compared to all industries: in schools (19% vs 13%), in universities (17% vs 8%) and for internships (12% vs 5%). In addition, the pattern of engagement in these placements in the creative industries sector is statistically significant when compared to other sectors. That said, given the current reliance on university provision to supply future creative talent, and in the context of a significant minority of creative industries employers reporting that HE leavers lack work-readiness, this raises further questions about the adequacy of placement opportunities for those studying at HEIs.

**Figure 2.3 Employees who stated they had someone on different types of placement in the last twelve months**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer bases – all firms (n = 582); all firms that recruited university leavers (n = 165). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

Although the provision of work placements is limited to a minority of creative industries employers, there is evidence that quality, as measured by the receipt of pay, has been secured for the majority of participants. This is important as there have been problems in the past with unpaid placements (Carey et al, 2021). Positively, most work placements offered by creative industries employers in the survey were paid, and this picture compares favourably to other sectors in the economy (66% compared to 49% across all industries, which is significant). That said, this still means that a significant minority of placements remain unpaid.

ESS22 explored employers' engagement journey more specifically by examining, for example, their knowledge of and involvement in specific programmes designed for young people. A core aim was to focus on particular initiatives to provide stronger links to employers and opportunities for work experience, combined with training. Two examples are the Developing the Young Workforce Programme (DYW) in Scotland and T Levels in England.



## Box 2.1 Developing the Young Workforce

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) is a core programme that has supported the Scottish Government's Youth Employment Strategy since 2014. Its core aim is to enhance connections between employers and education providers to better prepare young people for the world of work. It plays a key role in delivering the Young People's Guarantee – a commitment to connect every 16 to 24 year old in Scotland to an opportunity in education, training and/or employment. The Scottish Government funds the programme and reviews development and progress. The programme is

delivered in partnership with a regional network of DYW Regional Employer Groups across Scotland, supported by Skills Development Scotland's careers information, advice and guidance. The DYW Regional Employer Groups are run by employer networks such as the Chamber of Commerce. Employers offer a range of activities to the education sector, such as workplace site visits, talks and career insight sessions co-ordinated through a digital platform called Marketplace.

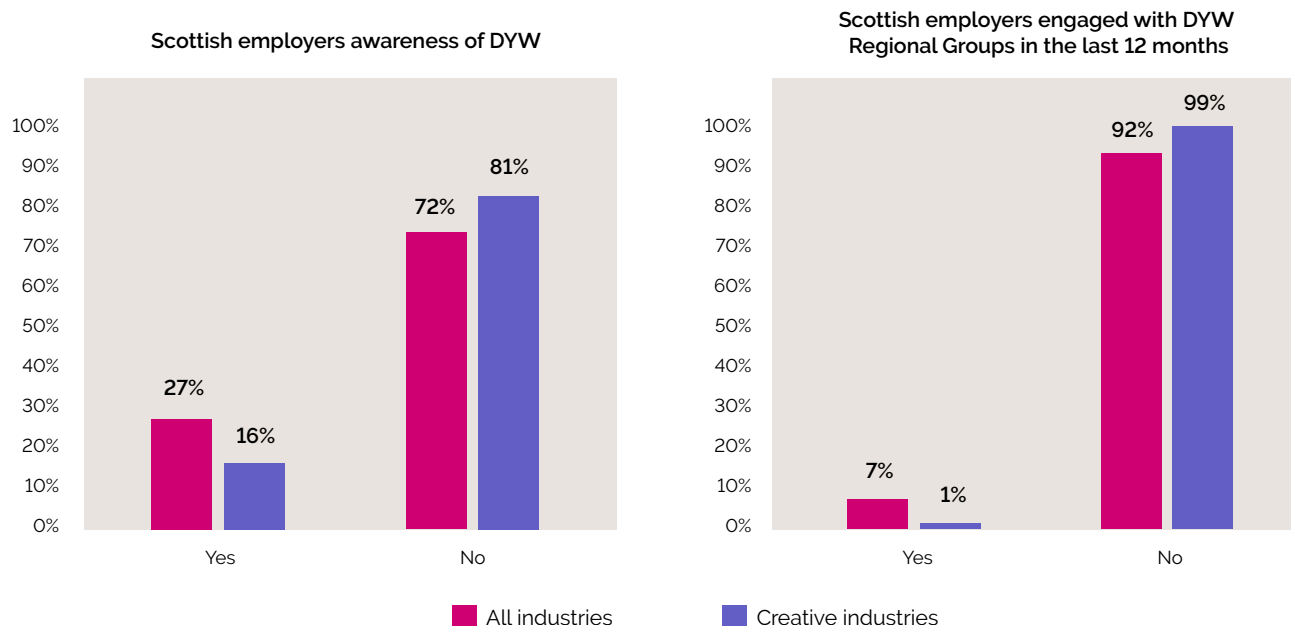
**Source:** DYW Scotland.

The analysis of the engagement journey for DYW considered Scottish employers' awareness of the programme and their levels of involvement in the previous twelve months. This found that awareness among employers was quite low despite the programme running for nearly ten years.

Furthermore, although differences with other sectors were not statistically significant, awareness was lower relative to all industries (16% vs 27%). As a consequence, it is perhaps not surprising that levels of engagement with the programme were also low – only 1% of

firms in the creative industries sector and 7% of employers across the economy as a whole. While not directly related to the creative industries, the latest evaluation suggests that to grow and sustain employer engagement, employers need to be supported (Scottish Government, 2023). These results place DYW in the lower rankings of the placement programmes for young people presented earlier (Figure 2.3). That said, the number of responses was quite low and not statistically significant, so the results should be viewed with caution.

**Figure 2.4 Awareness and engagement with the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Programme**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023)..

Notes: Employer base – all firms in Scotland (n = 44). Results are not statistically significant relative to other sectors and the numbers of responses were low, so the results should be interpreted with caution.

## Box 2.2 T Levels explained

T Levels were introduced in England in September 2020 for younger people who want to pursue a more technical education as an alternative option to A levels, but who do not want to take an apprenticeship. They are two-year technical courses that enable individuals to progress their education at a college or other provider. They combine classroom learning with on-the-job experience, including an industry placement that constitutes about 20% of the course. They are designed for students aged 16–19 and are equivalent to three A levels. They are not available to adults over twenty. The different subject areas delivered through T Levels have been introduced in stages and

now cover: Design, surveying and planning for construction; Digital production, design and development; Education and early years; Building services; Engineering for construction; Digital business services; Health; Healthcare science; Onsite construction; and Science.

T Levels in creative industries were introduced in September 2023 and include a Creative and Design pathway that encompasses subjects like Media, broadcast and production, and Craft and design, allowing students to gain qualifications relevant to careers in media, design and other creative fields.

Source: (Department for Education, 2023).

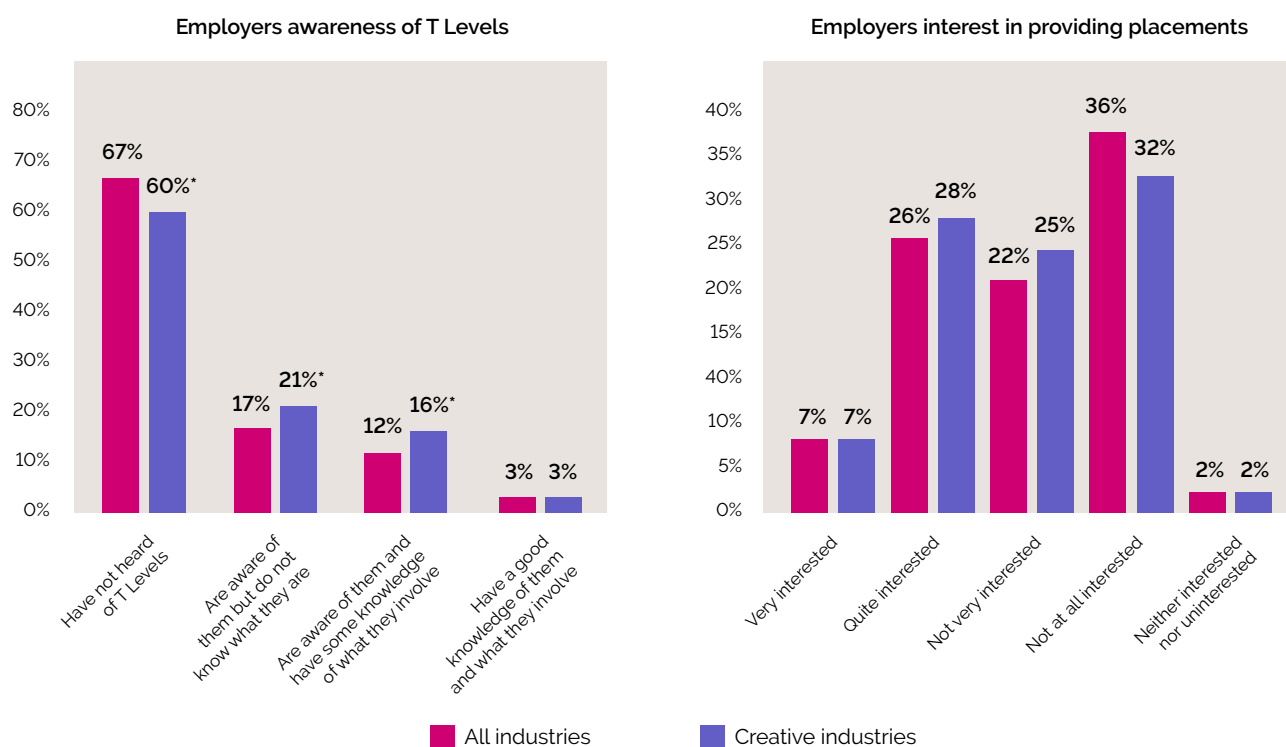
ESS22 also provided information on the engagement journey around the introduction of T Levels in England and measured awareness of the programme, as well as knowledge and interest in providing placements in future. The survey stopped short of asking about engagement experiences, given the infancy of the programme.

The analysis suggested that employers' awareness of T Levels was generally low, with a minority being aware of the programme (i.e. 40% of creative industries employers compared to 32% for all industries – this was statistically significant relative to other sectors). This is especially low compared to the level of awareness of more

mature programmes and skills products (as seen later in section 3.3 with apprenticeships and national occupational standards (NOS), for example). This result means 60% of firms in the creative industries are unaware of T Levels.

A slightly, but statistically significant, higher share of creative industries employers are both aware of T Levels and have some knowledge of what they involve: 16% of creative industries employers compared to 12% of employers economy-wide. Given that the qualification is still relatively young, with broader options for the creative industries having existed since only 2023, this provides a positive foundation on which to build.

**Figure 2.5 Employer awareness of and interest in T Levels**



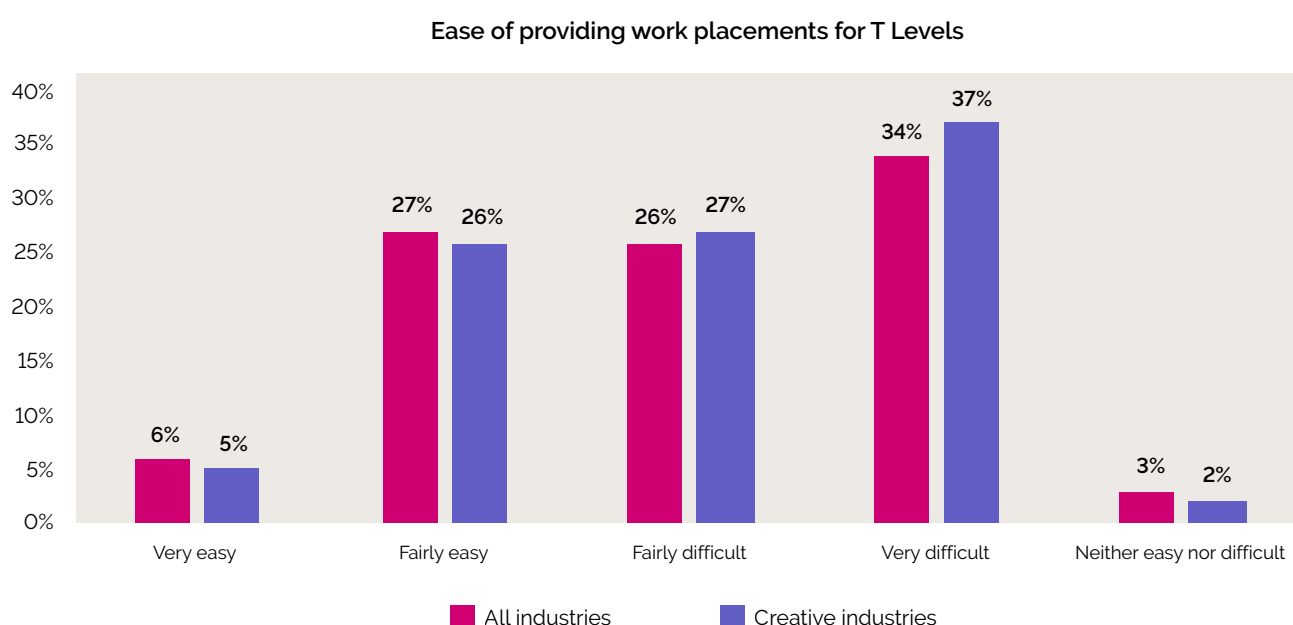
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms in England (n = 469). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

As DfE seeks to increase the take-up of T Levels in future and to broaden employer engagement in the programme, the survey sought to investigate the level of interest among employers in providing placements in future. This research revealed that there is still some way to go, with most employers not being interested – 57% of creative industries

employers and 58% of employers across all industries. That said, more positively, only a third of firms in the creative industries sector were not at all interested, which suggests that, over time, it may be possible to encourage participation among a significant majority of employers across the sector.

**Figure 2.6 Ease of employers providing work placements for T Levels**



**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer base – all firms in England (n = 469). Results were not statistically significant relative to other sectors.

ESS22 also explored employers' expectations of the levels of difficulty in providing work placements for students undertaking T Levels. The results showed that most creative industries employers reported that their involvement in such activities is difficult, with 64% of firms highlighting varying degrees of

difficulty compared to 60% of employers across all industries. This appears to reflect broader assessments of the programme that have generally highlighted significant implementation issues around costs, timing and quality (National Audit Office, 2025).

That said, slightly more employers in the creative industries sector (37%) said that providing placements for T Levels was very difficult compared to employers economy-wide (34%). Interestingly, these results align with wider research highlighting the challenges that the creative industries' distinct structural and spatial features pose in meeting the requirements to deliver T Level placements (Carey et al, 2024). In particular, this research has pointed to the problems of a sector being easily able to offer placements when it is dominated by SMEs, with a high propensity for project-based work, spatially concentrated in urban areas and with additional issues around safeguarding and commercial confidentiality in some production environments. Building on these insights, it was possible to examine more generally the drivers of different approaches to the provision of work placement activities and where improvements might be made in future.

The research first considered reasons for engagement and then explored factors that might inhibit the provision of industry placements. Starting with reasons to engage, we found that the majority of employers in the creative industries (51%) reported offering work placements to give individuals relevant work experience, while 27% cited moral reasons for helping young people. A slight, but statistically significant greater share of employers in the creative industries sector were motivated by these factors than employers across all

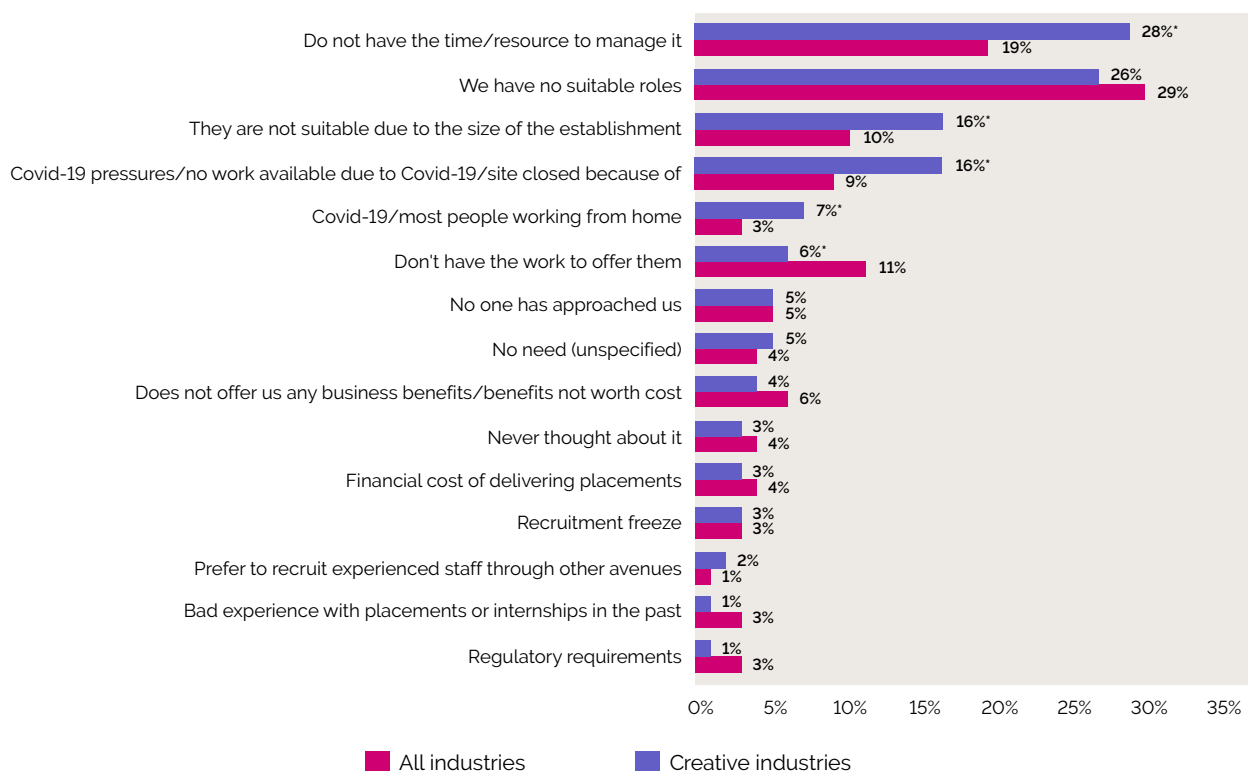
industries. In addition, around one-quarter of creative industries employers viewed placements as a core part of their recruitment process, through offering trial periods, which was a slightly lower share compared to employers across all industries. This, therefore, appears to be integral to business practices in the creative industries sector (although this result was not statistically significant compared to other sectors).

In contrast, the most common reasons for not providing placements appeared to reflect structural features of the industry, which heighten delivery difficulties for employers in the creative industries sector. Indeed, the analysis revealed significant shares of creative industries employers stating: they do not have the time or resource to manage such a process (28% versus 19% all industries); that placements are not suitable due to the size of the business (16% compared to 10%); and that no work was available due to changing working patterns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, with more people working from home, for example (16% vs 19%). Not only did each of these factors involve a considerably greater share of firms in the creative industries sector than across the economy as a whole, but they were also statistically significant. In addition, around one-quarter (26%) said placements were limited because they had no suitable roles, which was slightly less than for employers across the economy although not statistically significant.

Figure 2.7a Main reasons for offering placements or internships



Figure 2.7b Main reasons for not offering placement/internship programmes



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

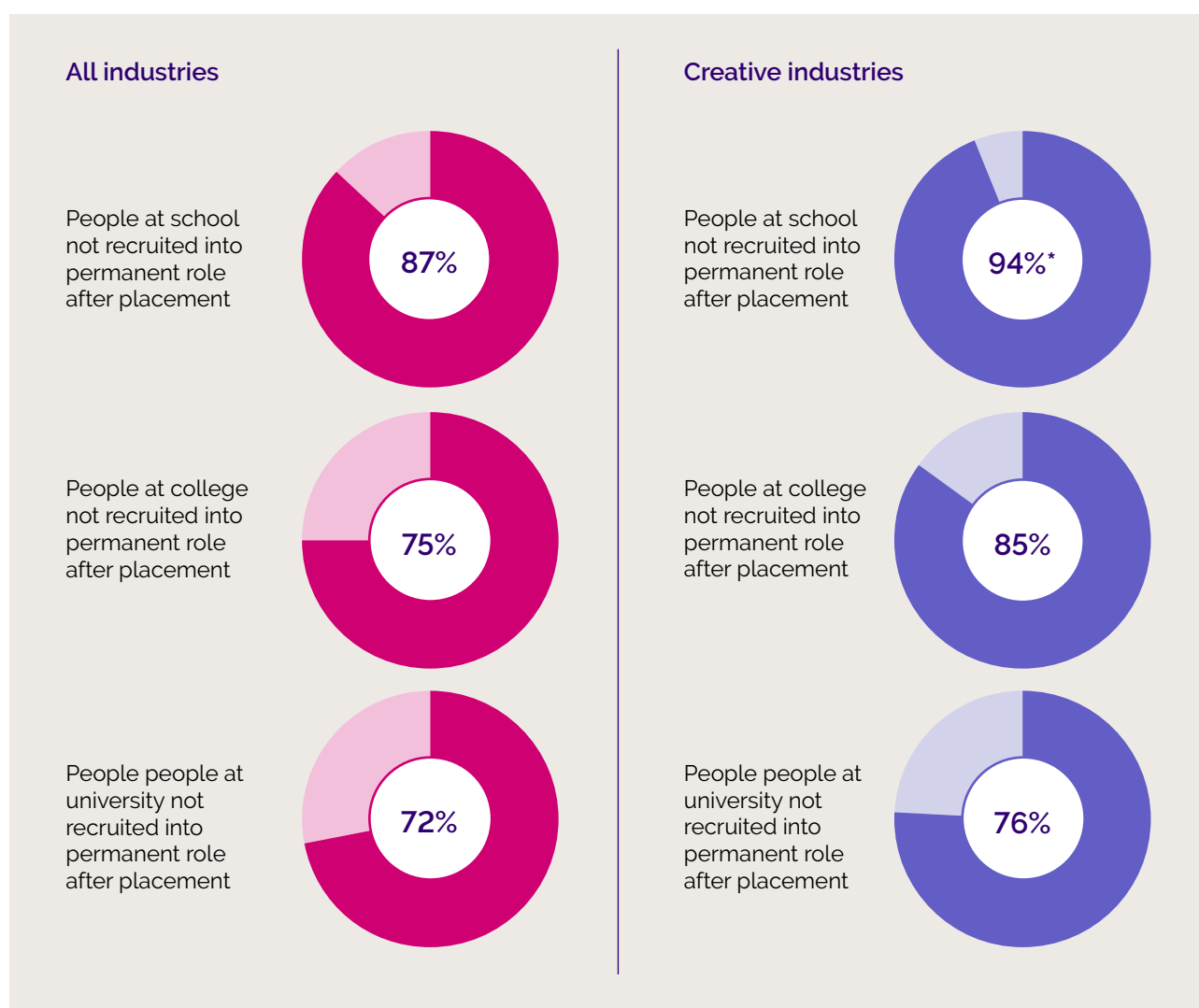
Notes: Employer bases – all firms that have offered placements in the last twelve months (n = 255) and all firms that have not had anyone on work placement nor engaged with educational institutions to offer other work-related experiences to students in the last twelve months (n = 296). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

The analysis for this project has also provided a sense of the concrete employment opportunities created by placements for individuals at different stages of their education – giving a further signal of the depth of employer engagement.

This suggests that, in general, the majority of employers do not provide a permanent or long-

term paid role after placements, and that this is particularly the case in the creative industries. The likelihood of this also varied for students at different stages of their education, with employment opportunities greater for those completing placements while at university, with 24% of creative industries firms offering roles for these education leavers.

**Figure 2.8 Employment outcomes after placements during different stages of education**



**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer base for the three charts, respectively – all firms who have had placements for people at school in the last twelve months (n = 123); all firms who have had placements for people at college in the last twelve months (n = 68); all firms who have had placements for people at university in the last twelve months (n = 106). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.



A closer examination of the length of placement provided further insights into the duration of work experience offered and how this might affect the likelihood of securing employment on completion.

This showed that individuals at university are more likely to experience longer placements. Indeed, 69% of creative industries employers have provided placements lasting for a month or longer. This is similar to employers across all industries.

In contrast, more creative industries employers provide shorter placements for individuals at college and school. Indeed, 55% of placements provided to those at college and 86% of placements provided to those at school lasted three weeks or less. This was higher than the results for employers across all industries (35% and 77% respectively). Results for college-student placements were statistically significant compared to other sectors. Furthermore, 60% of college placements lasted only a week or less.

The survey also explored the degree to which work experience placements are actively used by employers to determine whether an individual is suitable for a specific type of technical training programme, such as an apprenticeship.

Interestingly, the findings showed that just over a quarter of creative industries employers (27%) had consciously recruited apprentices through work experience placements. While the share was lower when compared to employers across the economy as a whole (36%), it slightly exceeded the share of employers from the creative industries sector offering permanent employment opportunities. (As outlined above, the highest share of creative industries employers who provided permanent employment following placement (24%) involved individuals who had completed the placement while at university.) On this evidence, it therefore appears that work-based learning options, such as apprenticeships, are a slightly more viable route into employment following a placement and enable employers to build a talent pipeline, albeit from a very low base. With that in mind we consider the nature of engagement in apprenticeships more closely in section 3. However, it is worth noting that, in practice, apprenticeships are not only deployed as options for young people but also provide work-based learning activities for older workers. In that context, it is useful to explore the entry opportunities provided by employers to adults more widely to strengthen the talent pipeline, including through work placements for the unemployed.

**Figure 2.9 Duration of placements at different stages of education**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer bases for the three charts, respectively – all firms that have had placements for people at school in the last twelve months (n = 123); all firms that have had placements for people at college in the last twelve months (n = 68); all firms that have had placements for people at university in the last twelve months (n = 106). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

## 2.3 Recruitment of older workers within the creative industries

Having investigated the experiences of young people and their entry routes into the creative industries sector, it is also interesting to look at the wider experiences of older workers in the talent pipeline. In a context of continuing disruption – due to the effects of ongoing megatrends such as technological advances, demographic transitions, reverse migration, an increasing risk of labour shortages and skills deficiencies – there is a case for employers to think more flexibly about routes to accessing more diverse talent. .

ESS22 explored with employers the age distribution of new recruits they had taken on during the previous twelve months. This revealed that the majority of firms (72%) within the creative industries had recruited workers aged between 25 and 49 years of age. This pattern broadly mirrored the recruitment behaviour of employers more generally across the economy (74%). That said, employers from the creative industries sector were far more likely to recruit individuals aged 25 and over (42% vs 35% of employers across all industries, and at a level that is statistically significant compared to other sectors). In addition, they were less likely to take on older workers aged 50 or above (24% of creative industries employers compared to 33% of employers across all industries – and this is at a level that is statistically significant compared to other sectors). This result was perhaps not unexpected given previous research conducted by Creative PEC which found that the creative workforce primarily consists of middle-aged workers (Carey et al, 2020).

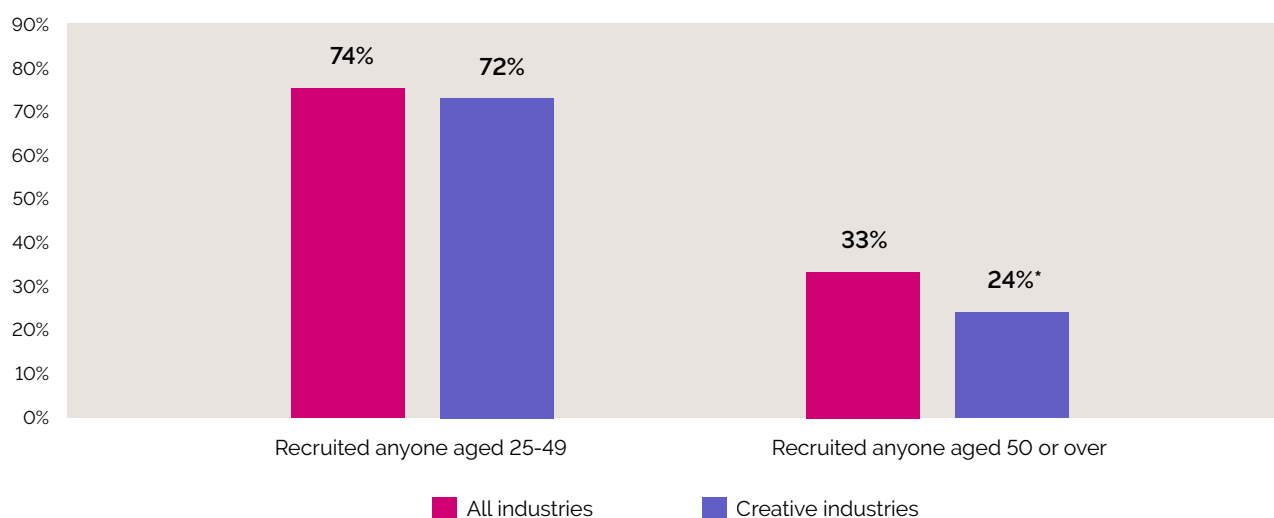
Although fewer creative industries employers are recruiting workers aged over 50, the majority of those that do (93%) report that they are very well- and/or well-prepared for the work they are appointed to do. This is similar to the results for employers across all industries (94%). So, in the context of falling international migration, an ageing and diminishing workforce, and increasing labour shortages, this suggests

that, in future, there could be more room for employers to proactively seek opportunities for older workers in their talent pipeline and to secure a more mixed age distribution across the creative workforce.<sup>14</sup>

In light of steps to broaden entry routes into the creative industries sector, the survey also examined employers' engagement with wider employment programmes. This research considered initiatives specifically targeted at the unemployed such as Jobcentre Plus's Work Programme and the Work Trials scheme, which offer support to help people return to work and find permanent employment opportunities. Figure 2.3 shows that employer engagement with these programmes is generally at low levels not only within the creative industries sector but also the wider economy (i.e. 8% of creative industries employers vs 10% for all industries). It is, however, interesting to examine the nature of this engagement and its impacts where the data allows – that is, by taking a closer look at the Work Trials scheme. Such insights can provide useful lessons for future policy development. This is particularly relevant when, at the time of writing, the UK government is considering how to enable the local delivery of more customised and integrated services through devolution, combining support for employment with skills and health (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024) and repurposing Jobcentre Plus (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024).

14. That said, these results for the creative industries were not statistically significant compared to other sectors.

Figure 2.10 Age of new recruits



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Notes: Employer base – all firms that have recruited in the past year (n = 268). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

### Box 2.3 Work Trials explained

Work trials are co-ordinated and managed by Jobcentre Plus. They provide opportunities for unemployed jobseekers to undertake a short period of work and explore their suitability for a specific job. The jobseeker volunteers for the trial and continues to receive their benefits (such as Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support or Incapacity Benefit). Therefore, the

employer does not have to pay a wage while assessing an individual's capability. The duration of the trials are closely managed, but they are intended to be short-term, allowing just enough time for the jobseeker and employer to make an assessment of the match to the role. Most trials are expected to last between 5 and 30 days.

Source: DWP Guidance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the size distribution of firms across the creative industries sector and the relatively high share of small and micro-businesses, the average number of people taken on per business was low (at around three per site) compared to employers across all industries (around five per site).

Furthermore, as might be expected given the conditions of the programme, most employers reported offering Work Trial placements of short duration – 56% of creative industries firms provided work experience placements

lasting three weeks or less compared to 55% of employers for the whole economy. In contrast, around a third of creative industries employers offered placements for a month or more (slightly lower than for all industries).

Compared with the outcomes for education leavers (see section 2.2), a higher share of employers offered employment in a permanent or long-term role after completion of the Work Trial. That said, creative industries employers were less likely to offer employment (51%) than employers across all industries (60%).<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 2.11 Nature of engagement and employment outcomes**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer bases for the two charts – all firms who have had Work Trials for potential new recruits in the last twelve months (n = 52).

15. These results were only statistically significant for creative industries employers compared to those from other sectors when firms were recruiting people into paid work directly after completion of the placement or work experience activity, but not for the Work Trial experience as a whole.

# 3 Employer perspectives on technical and work-based learning programmes

## 3.1 Introduction

In this section, we examine how employers in the creative industries are engaging with key technical skills initiatives and training programmes within the UK skills systems. The research has paid particular attention to work-based learning and technical areas of training, as they are areas of focus for skills reforms in the UK nations and have the potential to support the development of industry-relevant skills (OECD, 2023). A key objective of the analysis has been to explore the views of creative industries employers about the nature of such programmes, including issues of responsiveness, accessibility and ongoing relevance to the sector. More specifically, this section considers the experiences and perceptions of creative industries employers to understand:

**Their approach to technical and work-based training.** In particular, this focuses on their pursuit and use of technical qualifications.

**Their engagement with formal programmes in technical education.** The main focus has been on exploring various dimensions of their involvement in apprenticeships, such as: their awareness and knowledge of the programme, the nature and length of their current

engagement, their reasons for engaging or not engaging, and their future plans.

**Views on specific named initiatives in different parts of the UK to enhance opportunities for engagement in technical training and work-based learning activities.** This included their knowledge of the initiatives, levels of engagement and/or interest in future engagement.

## 3.2 Engagement in technical and work-based training

Our analysis started with a focus on employers' perceptions and experiences of technical training and qualifications. This is especially relevant in light of recent Creative PEC research (Giles et al, 2025) that has raised questions about the adequacy of levels of investment by creative industries employers, given the pace of innovation and economic developments affecting the sector.

Through this analysis, it has been useful to take a closer look at the technical aspects of the training and industry-facing skills products used by creative firms to understand how future investment for the sector could be improved. A core intention has been to obtain insights that may help to increase levels of engagement in future, and, by so doing, enhance the contribution that a skilled workforce can make to future business performance. International evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has suggested that when employers are encouraged to pursue external, off-the-job provision, this can lead to better outcomes for learners and drive better business performance (OECD, 2019b). This is especially the case when this is provided through formal education programmes linked to respected, externally accredited and industry-facing qualifications.

The first area of analysis has focused on the awareness of employers and their use of NOS, which are skills products that are developed within the skills systems to influence the design and content of industry-relevant, technical training programmes and qualifications. These are developed with the use of labour-market information and through consultation with employers and sector experts to more effectively capture the skills, knowledge and understanding required to perform a job – that is, the specialist, transversal skills and capabilities crucial to a job. NOS have been deployed within the UK skills systems for many years. As a result, a range of technical vocational qualifications are linked to them with the aim of ensuring consistency in standards (see Box 3.1).



### Box 3.1 National occupational standards

National occupational standards (NOS) are documents that specify the skills, knowledge and understanding required to perform a job at a nationally recognised level. They are used in many ways, including:

- **Creating qualifications:** Awarding bodies can use NOS to create industry-facing qualifications focused on training individuals for a job. One such example is apprenticeships.
- **Creating job descriptions:** NOS can be used by employers as job descriptions to recruit new staff.
- **Creating training plans:** Employers can use NOS to create individual performance objectives for employees and shape training plans to develop their skills.
- **Looking for work:** Individuals can use NOS to research different types of jobs and match their skills and experience to those that are needed.

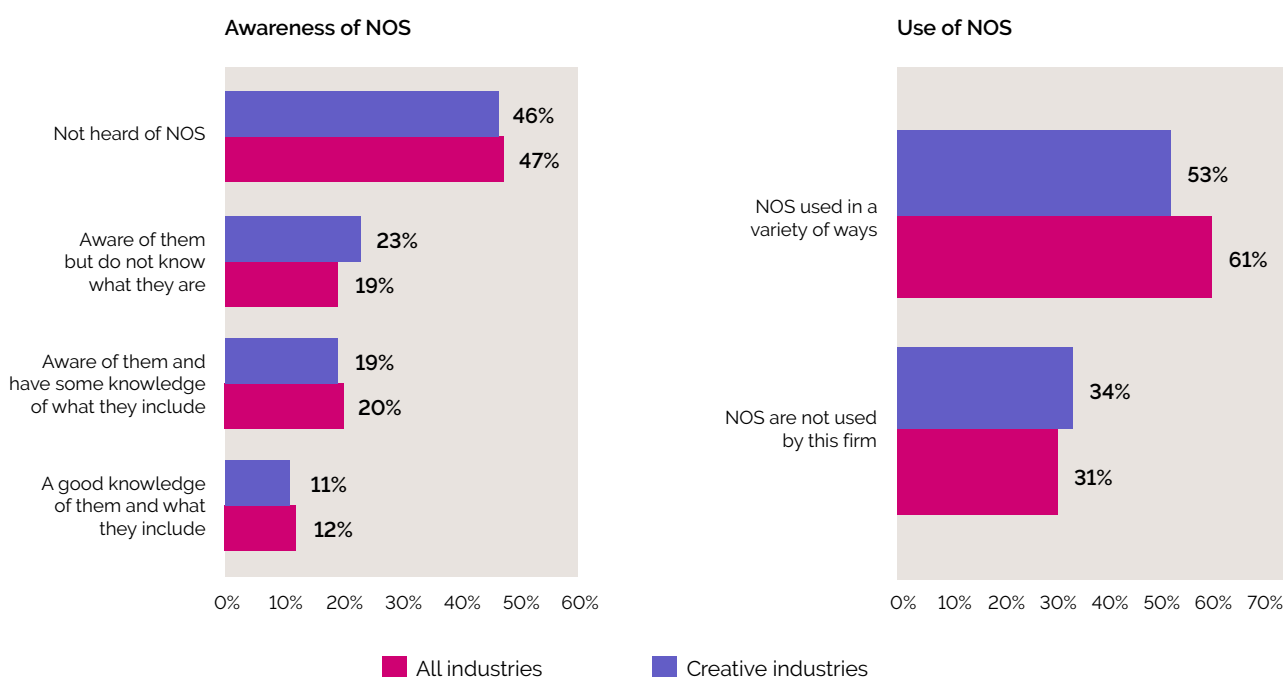
Since 2017, the management and oversight of NOS has been led by the National Occupational Standards Governance Group (NOSGG), with representatives from the three devolved governments (i.e. in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. England has developed its own standards for technical education). Through the NOSGG, the standards are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain labour-market relevant and reflect the needs of new and changing industries. This work is commissioned to sector suppliers (industry bodies) recognised for standard setting. A key part of the process of updating and creating NOS is consultation with employers and stakeholders across the UK. The standards, which are set out in a common format adhering to NOS Quality Criteria, are approved on a four-nation basis and content is scrutinised through Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) Accreditation. All completed and approved NOS are kept on a database of [UK Standards](#). The [NOS Strategy](#) sets out the overall policy for NOS.

Source: Adapted from the [NOS repository](#).

Given policy changes in the use of NOS in the four nations since 2017 (Box 3.1), the latest survey collected data for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland only. The survey results suggested that most employers have some level of awareness of NOS (53% of creative industries employers compared to 51% of employers in the whole economy), which is a higher level of awareness than that for other initiatives and probably reflects the longer history of NOS. However, that does not necessarily translate into a working knowledge of what they are. Indeed, only 11% of employers from the creative industries and 12% of all employers said they have a good knowledge of them and what they include.

That said, a significant share (around half) of creative industries employers who were aware of NOS appeared to be using them, with only around a third saying they did not use them at all. Although the results need to be interpreted with caution, as numbers are small, this suggests NOS are used in a number of business activities. This includes: as a job description tool in recruitment (which was the most common use), to develop training plans, and for staff appraisals and performance management. None of these results were statistically significant for the creative industries relative to other sectors.

**Figure 3.1 Awareness and use of national occupational standards (NOS) among employers**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

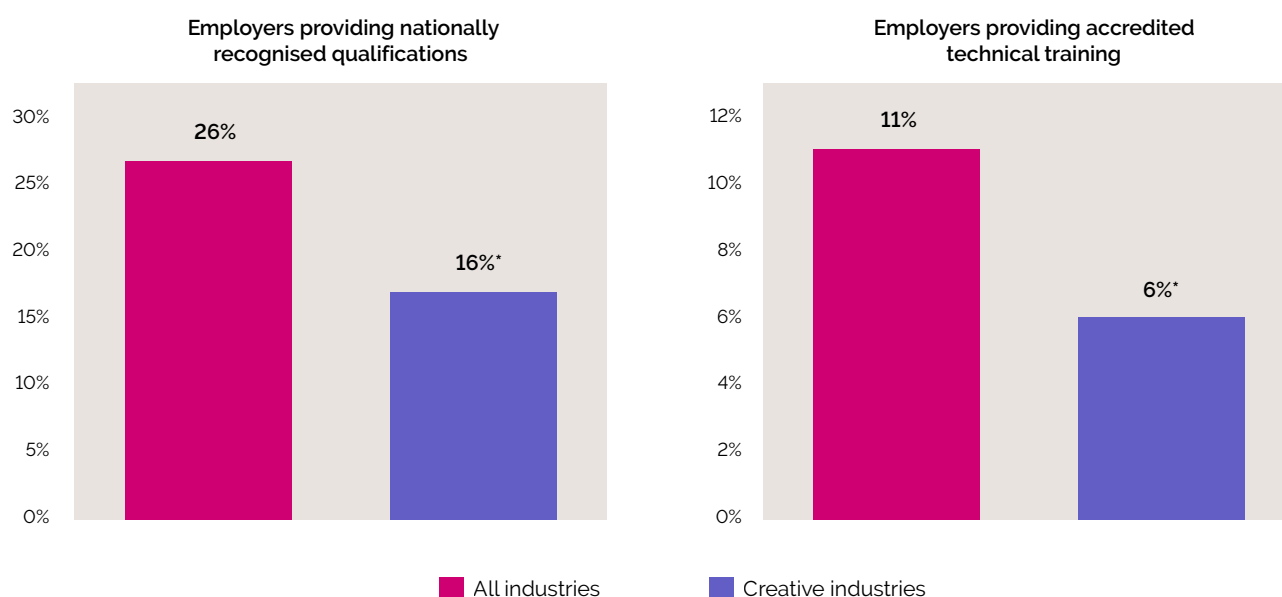
Notes: Employer base for the two charts, respectively – all firms in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Module D) (n = 110); all firms in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales aware of / with knowledge of NOS (n = 33)

Having considered the awareness and use of NOS, the analysis explored some of their possible applications – that is, whether creative industries employers were providing accredited training recognised through more specialised technical qualifications which are key by-products of NOS. Previous Creative PEC research demonstrated that training in the creative industries is mostly 'on the job' (Giles et al, 2025) and of low intensity.<sup>16</sup> So, perhaps unsurprisingly, the analysis revealed the share of employers from the creative industries sector providing training that is externally accredited and involves working toward recognised qualifications – whether nationally

recognised and/or industry-facing vocational qualifications – was low. Indeed, only 16% of creative industries employers had provided training towards a nationally recognised qualification (vs 26% of all employers). This was even lower for creative industries employers pursuing technical qualifications, with 6% providing accredited training in vocational areas compared to 11% of employers for the whole economy (both results were statistically significant). In addition, despite policy intentions, the share of employers providing training toward nationally recognised qualifications has significantly reduced since 2017, when the proportion was 28% (Giles et al, 2025).

16. Low-intensity training was inferred by creative industries trainees receiving marginally fewer days of training compared to their counterparts in other industries (i.e. 5.5 days compared to 6.0 days).

Figure 3.2 Share of creative industries employers providing accredited training



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms (n = 3,231). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

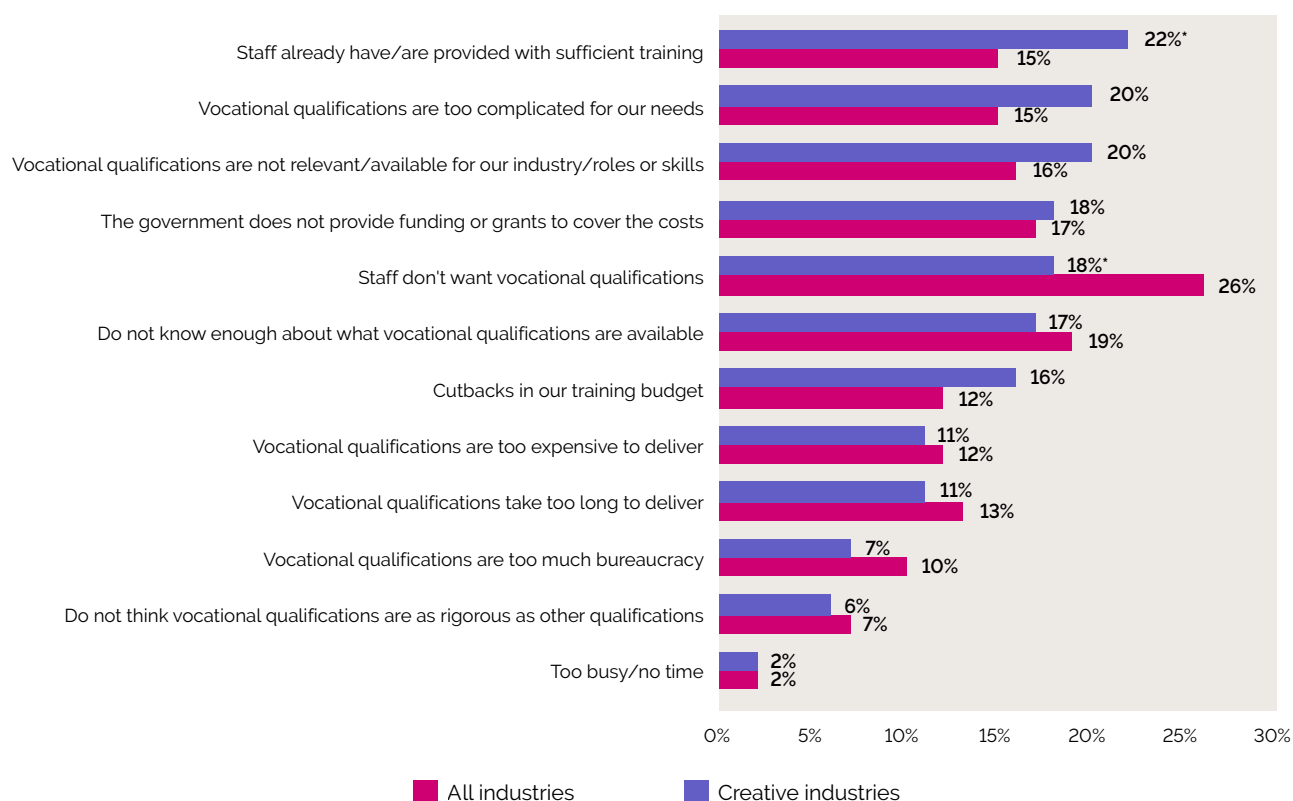
The research explored why creative industries employers who train and use external training providers have not pursued accredited training. The most common reasons given were:

**Perception of no demand.** This was evident from creative industries employers who reported that staff already have/are provided with sufficient training (22%) and staff do not want vocational qualifications (18%).

**Concerns that the options for accredited technical training do not meet their needs.** As such, creative industries employers reported that vocational qualifications are too complicated for their sector needs (20% and are not relevant/available for their sector, roles and/or skills needs (20%).

**Perceived delivery challenges, especially in terms of costs and financial burdens.** Thus, creative industries employers reported: government does not provide funding or grants to cover the costs (18%), there have been cutbacks in training budgets (16%) and vocational qualifications are too expensive to deliver (11%).

Figure 3.3 Reasons for not training towards a vocational qualification



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms that use external training providers and have not arranged training in the last twelve months that leads to vocational qualifications (n = 180). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

Building on the general employer perceptions provided by the survey around the use of technical qualifications, the survey also asked employers about specific technical qualifications. In particular, this focused on HTQs in England, which were introduced in 2020.

### Box 3.2 Higher Technical Qualifications

Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) focus on HE provision, securing qualifications at levels 4 and 5, and are intended to extend the technical education pathways. They include qualifications such as foundation degrees, Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas. They were overseen by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE) but responsibilities have since transferred to Skills England in June 2025. The HTQs are approved against employer developed standards for specialist roles to ensure learners gain the skills employers need. These qualifications were introduced in July 2020 to meet growing demands in the labour market for skilled workers at levels 4 and 5, thus addressing gaps in skills provision. The number of learners obtaining qualifications at these levels is low in the UK compared to other countries.

HTQs are not only an option for young people starting their careers but also for adults looking to transition in their careers and to upskill or

retrain. They involve one to two years full-time study, and with part-time, module and distance learning options. HTQs are available across the following sectors: digital; health and science; construction and the built environment; business and administration; education and early years; engineering and manufacturing; legal, finance and accounting; agriculture, environmental and animal care; care services; catering and hospitality; creative and design; sales, marketing and procurement; and protective services. HTQs for the creative industries have been available since 2025 only. Current examples include qualifications for audiovisual technicians (level 5), post-production technical operators (level 5) and junior animators (level 5). They are also available in digital areas such as those catering for: software developers (levels 4 and 5); cyber security technologists and engineers (level 5); data analysts (levels 4 and 5); business analysts (level 5); and network engineers (levels 4 and 5).

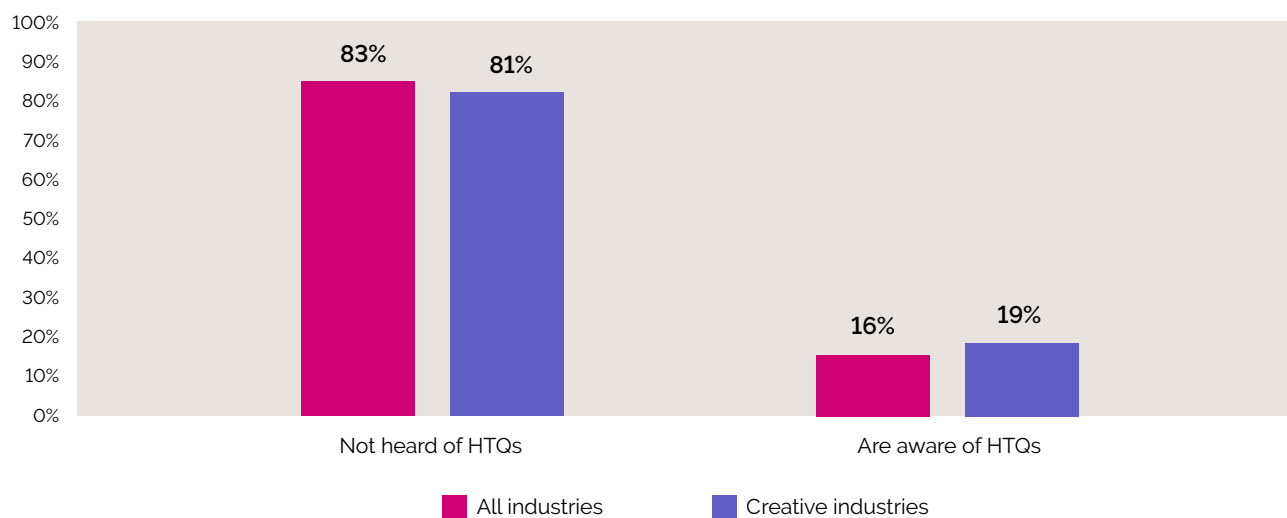
**Source:** Adapted from IFATE.

This revealed a very low level of awareness among employers, both in the creative industries and across the economy as a whole, with more than 80% employers saying they had not heard of HTQs.

While these qualifications have been developed to directly respond to growing skills demands

at higher levels (such as qualifications at levels 4 and 5), they are still in their infancy as a policy intervention. As such, at this stage, the results are probably more indicative of their relatively recent introduction rather than a sign of their value.

**Figure 3.4 Awareness of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms in England (n = 469).

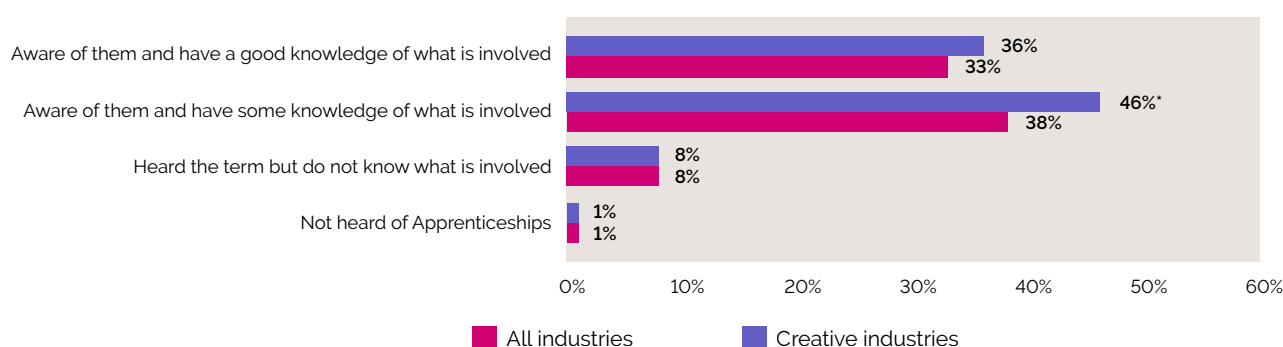
### 3.3 Engagement with technical programmes – apprenticeships

For many years, one core aspect of the work-based learning offer across the UK has been the apprenticeship programme. Indeed, this is a core element of many strong international vocational education systems. As a consequence, there is high awareness among employers about the programme, with 99% of creative industries employers having heard of apprenticeships.

That said, this does not necessarily translate into a detailed understanding, with only 46% of creative industries employers reporting that they have some knowledge of what apprenticeships

involve. This is at a higher level compared to employers across the whole economy (33%) and is a statistically significant difference compared to other sectors.

**Figure 3.5 Employers' level of awareness and knowledge of apprenticeships**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms (n = 547). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

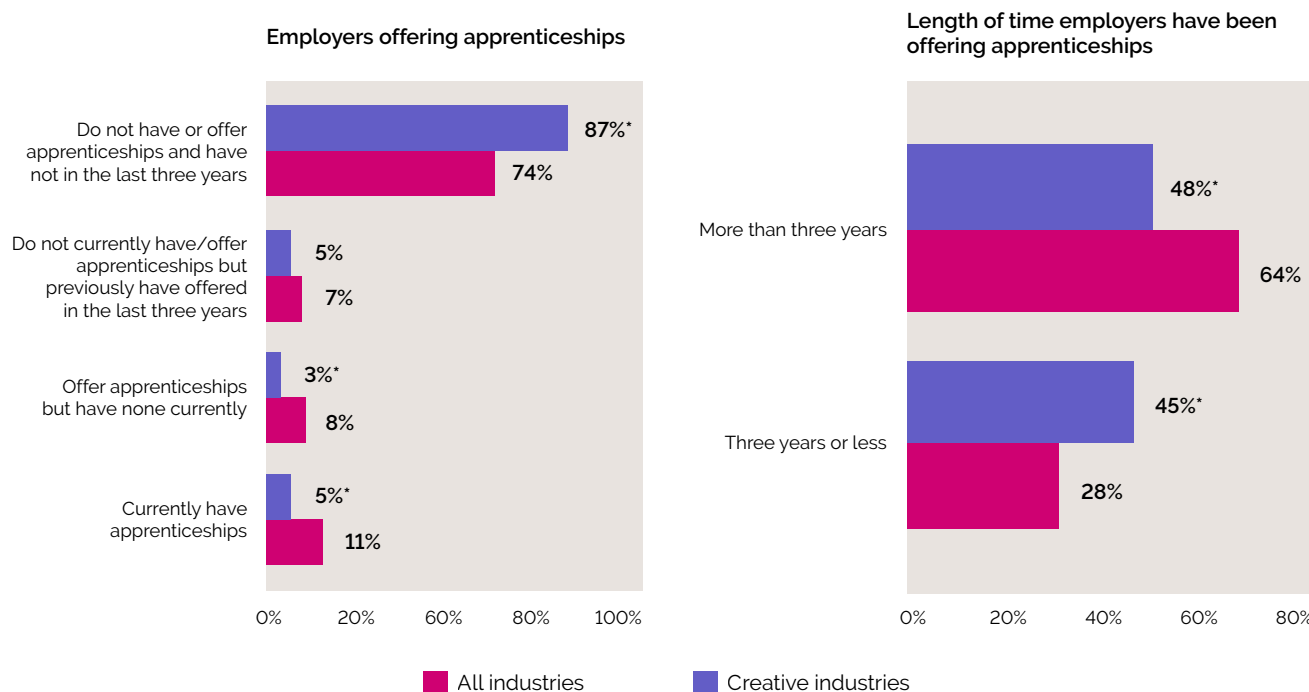
Despite policy intentions to raise employer engagement in apprenticeships, only 5% of employers in the creative industries employed at least one apprentice at the time of the survey (see Figure 3.6). A further 3% had offered apprenticeships in the past, but did not currently employ any apprentices. The level of engagement with apprenticeships in the creative industries is therefore low and slightly below the level across the whole economy

(11% of all employers said they had at least one apprentice and 8% had offered apprenticeships in the past). The levels of engagement among creative industries employers are statistically significant compared to other sectors. This aligns with wider research conducted by Creative PEC, which showed that the number of apprenticeships in disciplines aligned to the creative industries remains extremely low across all UK nations (Carey et al, 2024). Furthermore,

a higher share of creative industries employers reported a limited length of involvement with apprenticeships over time and hence a more recent experience of apprenticeships than employers across the economy as a whole (that is, 45% of creative industries employers have been offering apprenticeships for 3 years or less compared to 28% for all industries, while 48% of creative industries employers have

been offering apprenticeships for more than 3 years vs 64% for all industries). Thus, the levels for the creative industries are significantly different to other sectors. Although the number of respondents was low and the results should be viewed with caution, the lower length of engagement chimes with low levels of engagement reported earlier in section 2.

**Figure 3.6 Employer engagement with apprenticeships**



**Source:** Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

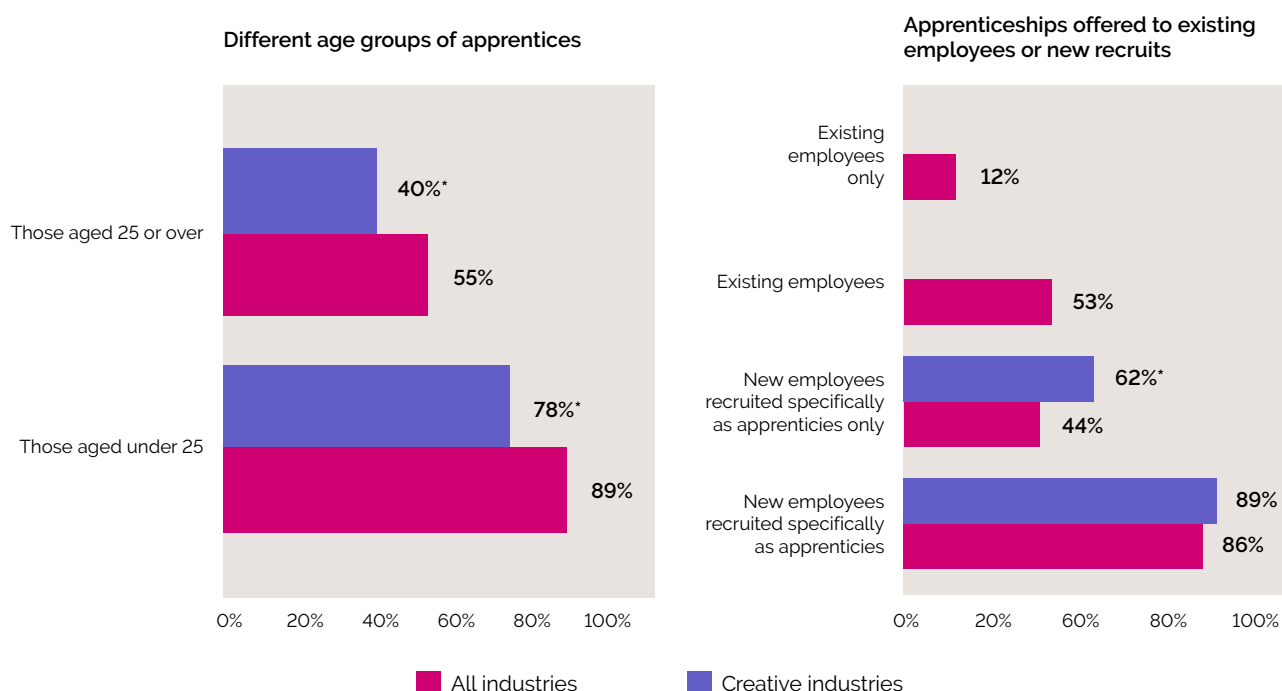
Note: Employer base for the two charts, respectively: all firms (n = 547) and all firms that currently have or have offered apprenticeships (n = 64). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

A core policy intention of apprenticeships is to offer a vital training route to support younger people into employment. In line with employers from other industries, most creative industries employers reported offering apprenticeships to younger age groups albeit at a slightly lower level – that is, 78% of creative industries employers said they were employing apprentices aged 25 or younger compared to

89% for employers across the economy as a whole. Similarly, only 40% of creative industries employers reported offering apprenticeships to those aged over 25. Both these results were statistically significant in the creative industries compared to other sectors. That said, while the numbers of respondents was low, it appears that a higher share of creative industries employers are taking on younger adults aged 19 to 24.



**Figure 3.7 The types of people offered apprenticeships**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base for the two charts, respectively – all firms that currently have or have offered apprenticeships (n = 64).

\*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy. Responses for the creative industries have been suppressed when the number of responses were low.

Furthermore, most creative industries employers use apprenticeships to recruit new employees rather than offering them to existing employees (that is, 89% of creative industries employers, which is similar to 86% all industries). Of particular interest is that 62% of creative industries employers recruit new employees as apprentices only compared to 44% for all industries. This result is statistically significant for creative industries employers relative to other sectors. This picture has not changed over time and is in line with previous results (Giles et al, 2020). In contrast, a higher share of employers across all industries offer apprenticeships to

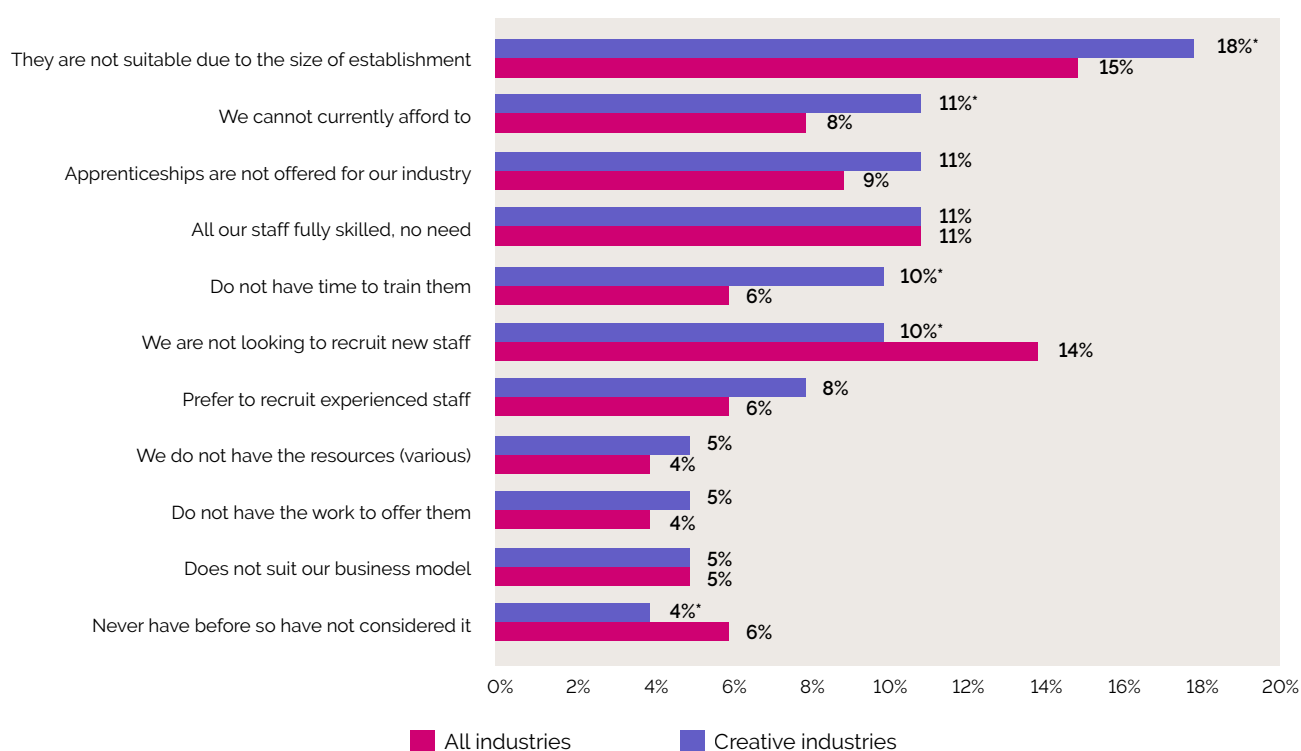
existing employees (53%) which appears to be at higher levels than for the creative industries, but these results should be viewed with caution due to a low response rate from the creative industries sector.

Despite recent reforms to apprenticeship programmes in all the UK nations to improve industry relevance (Carey et al, 2024), most employers within the creative industries (63%) reported that they were unlikely to offer apprenticeships in future, with a slightly higher level stating this than employers across the economy as a whole (57%). This result was significantly different relative to other sectors.

When employers were asked why they are not involved in apprenticeships, responses were varied. For some, there were concerns about inflexibility in the design and delivery of the programmes, which do not allow adjustments to meet the distinct structural features and operating demands of their sector. For example, 18% of creative industries respondents stated that apprenticeships are not suitable due to the size of the firm, 11% said they could not currently afford to offer apprenticeships and 10% said they do not have time to train apprentices. It seems, therefore, that there are considerable constraints around timing and/or funding and the high concentration of small businesses in this sector. Indeed, all these responses were statistically significant compared to other sectors.

For some employers, their business operating conditions do not support engagement in apprenticeships and future engagement is hindered by the absence of an established track record in using the programme. Thus, 11% of creative industries respondents stated that all their staff are fully skilled, so there was no need for apprenticeships; 10% said they are not looking to recruit new staff; and 11% reported that apprenticeships are not offered for their industry (no change since 2017). It therefore appears that there are limits to current apprenticeship reforms aimed at persuading employers to change their behaviour, and a significant proportion of creative industries employers do not see the programme as a viable training option to grow talent in the future.

**Figure 3.8 Reasons for not currently offering apprenticeships**



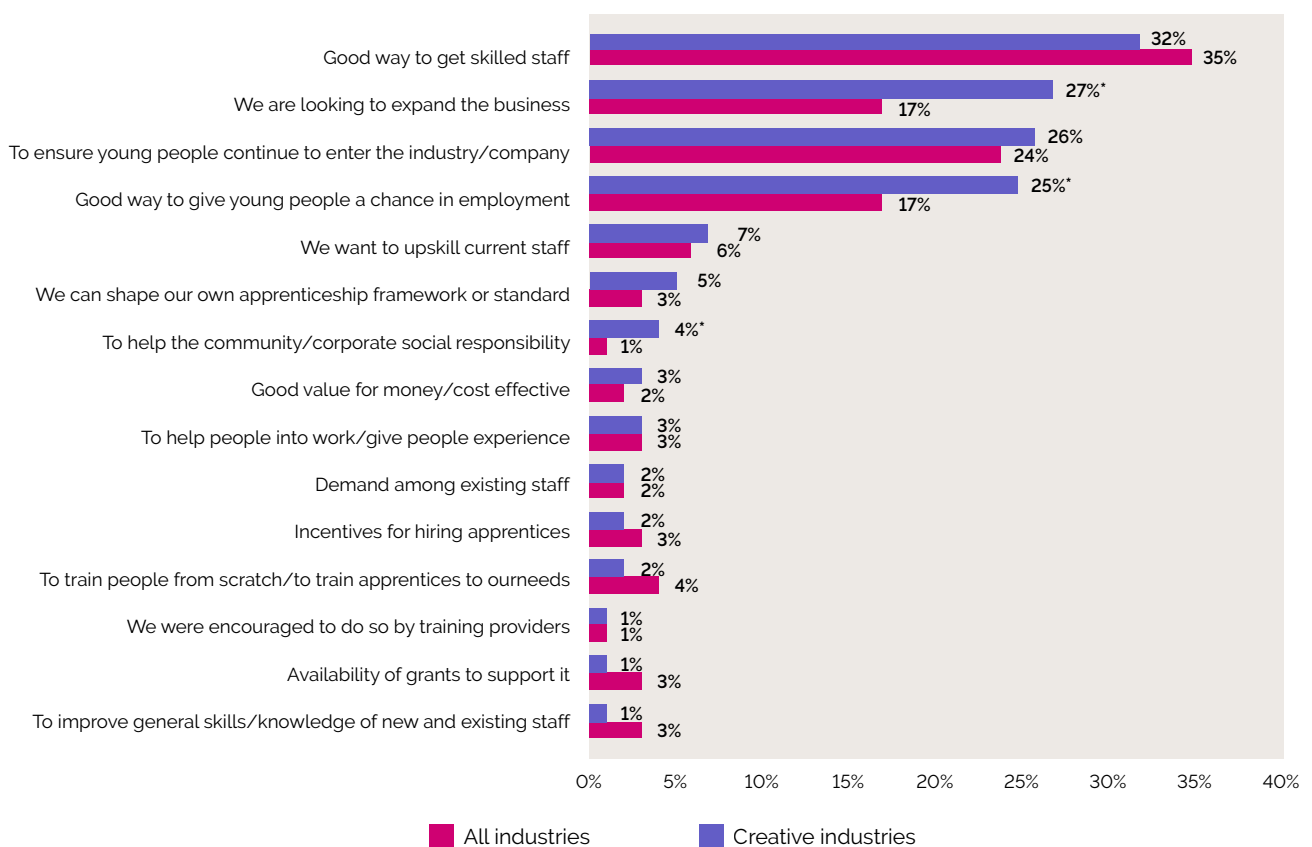
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms that do not offer formal apprenticeships (n = 483). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

These results align with findings from wider Creative PEC research. For example, the lack of flexibility in the delivery of the apprenticeship model has been identified as a persistent problem in the sector for some time, particularly in England. This is not helped by the structural features of the industry, which not only limit participation but also intensify costs and timing challenges (Carey, Florison and Giles, 2019; Carey, Giles and Hickman, 2024; Carey, Giles and O'Brien, 2023). In particular, the rigidity of apprenticeship standards in England, twelve-month minimum terms, salary costs, supervisory requirements and focus on end-point assessments have presented increasing complexity in a sector with a high incidence of freelancers, micro-businesses, SMEs and fluctuating working patterns (Carey et al, 2019).

In addition, employers throughout the UK may experience substantial difficulties in recruiting suitable apprentices due to low apprenticeship salaries, especially among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Carey, Giles, Wilks and Collins, 2023). Although the current UK government is looking at enhancing the flexibility of apprenticeships in England, such as introducing shorter apprenticeships, at the time of writing, these changes have yet to be fully implemented. The analysis therefore showed that, while reforms to the programme across the UK are important, there is still more to do to optimise the potential of apprenticeships within the creative industries, including convincing employers to invest in them (Carey et al, 2024) and (Comunian et al, 2023).

**Figure 3.9 Reasons for intending to start offering apprenticeships in future**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the Employer Skills Survey 2022 (DfE, 2023).

Note: Employer base – all firms that plan to offer apprenticeships in the future but that do not currently have/offer them (n = 130). \*Asterisks are used to denote where data for the creative industries is statistically significantly different to that for other sectors of the economy.

In such a context, the research also provided a helpful steer about future development areas within the programme in each nation, albeit some responses were more indicative than others as they were based on lower numbers of respondents. The survey asked employers who were not yet offering apprenticeships to highlight ways in which they felt the programme could be of value in future and might enhance future engagement and take-up. Positively, the most common reasons provided, with particular statistical significance relative to other sectors, pointed to the potential of

the programme as an important means of finding and accessing talent, assuming some of the current delivery challenges could be overcome. For instance, creative industries employers said the programme was helpful in expanding the business (27%) and a good way to give young people a chance in employment (25%). Furthermore, 32% of creative industries employers said apprenticeships represent a good way to get skilled staff and 26% felt they helped ensure that young people continue to enter the industry/company.

# 4 Conclusions

## 4.1 Summary

Over the last decade the creative industries have experienced considerable growth. This growth, combined with an economy that is increasingly disrupted by global megatrends, such as rapid technological advances, highlights the importance of training. Such training will not only attract a strong future pipeline of talent into the sector but will also support lifelong learning that updates creative workers' skills as working practices evolve. In light of such developments, extensive skills reform programmes are being progressed in each of the UK nations to re-engineer their respective skills systems. A common aim of these programmes is to ensure they are future-ready and sufficiently responsive to changes in the economy and labour-market needs, drawing on international best practice (OECD, 2019a).

The recent launch of the UK government's ten-year Modern Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade, 2024) has reinforced the need to adopt a sector focus and customise interventions to meet sector needs, thus fully optimising the contribution of skills to economic growth. In particular, this has led to a focus on strengthening career pathways in critical roles in the creative industries and widening work-based learning activities, like apprenticeships and/or work-placements, to supply more industry-relevant skills to priority sectors.

With this in mind, this latest State of the Nations report updates the analysis of employer engagement among creative businesses in the different skills systems across the UK. The research placed a particular focus on reforms that are seeking more sector-focused, work-based activities in each national system, such as work placement programmes, apprenticeships and wider technical qualifications, which will drive better

employment and skills outcomes (contributing to stages two to four in the skills policy cycle – Figure 2.1). Employer engagement is clearly key to the effective design and delivery of industry-facing initiatives. As such, this research deployed the latest official labour-market surveys that track employers' experiences through an employer engagement journey, progressing from basic awareness to deeper knowledge and interest in different programmes and then to fuller participation. The analysis has explored issues around two key policy areas with employers in the creative industries: what opportunities they are providing to strengthen entry into the sector and a develop a stronger pipeline of talent; and their experiences and perspectives of technical skills initiatives and work-based training programmes to keep the skills of the workforce relevant. As such, this third State of the Nations report serves as a vital companion to the second report, which identified sector-skills challenges that needed to be addressed. The research analysis highlighted five high-level findings.

First, the nature of recruitment in the creative industries is limiting the scale of entry opportunities for different age groups and hence the diversity of the talent pipeline. While a significant share of creative industries employers who are recruiting do take on young people (57%), this equates to a minority of employers in the sector overall (28%). Fewer creative industries employers (24%) said they were taking on workers aged 50 years or above. Consequently, the majority of firms within the sector had recruited workers aged between 25 and 49 years of age, potentially constraining steps to move towards a more mixed age distribution across the creative workforce. Furthermore, although fewer creative industries employers are providing opportunities to younger and older age groups, this does not seem to reflect poor employment experiences with individuals in these age groups. Hence, there is room to encourage more creative industries employers to modify their practices in future. Indeed, most employers in the sector reported that the younger and older individuals they had taken on were very well- and/or well-prepared for the work they were appointed to do. As such, there is an opportunity to increase engagement based on these positive experiences.

Second, while most creative industries employers report that the individuals they take on are well-prepared for work, they noted variations among leavers from different parts of the education system. For example, over one-fifth of creative industries employers reported that the education leavers they recruited from universities were poorly prepared for work. While this is a minority, it is a higher share than

for employers across all industries and is a statistically significant share compared to other sectors. In addition, given the creative industries sector's current reliance on HE to supply talent in the creative workforce, this perhaps signals potential areas for strengthening industry engagement – that is, in relation to traditional HE routes, as well as broader technical pathways. This is especially important given employers reported the existence of some skills deficiencies (e.g. technical and transversal) among some recruits.

Third, despite attempts by the different governments across the UK to enhance entry and work experience opportunities and/or technical education pathways, there are still significant limits to the intensity of engagement – that is, in breadth, depth and sustainability. For instance, the share of employers in the sector (37%) who have offered any type of work placement to improve individuals' employability, although higher than for all industries, still reaches a minority of creative industries employers. In addition, very few employers in the creative industries sector said they connected placements to providing a permanent or long-term paid role after the placements had finished. Furthermore, there have been limits to growth in apprenticeships with only 8% of employers in the creative industries currently employing at least one apprentice or having offered apprenticeships in the past. Moreover, most employers within the creative industries reported that they were unlikely to offer apprenticeships in future following their last experience.

Fourth, the research found that the picture of creative employer engagement with the skills system is nuanced, with variation in where creative industries' employers are in their engagement journey with different skills programmes. Indeed, with closer examination, the research found differences in engagement patterns relative to the age of skills programmes and maturity in their development and reform cycle (highlighted in figures 1.1 and 1.2), which need to be taken into account in prioritising future reforms and improvements. For instance, for relatively new programmes, like T Levels and HTQs, while employers' levels of awareness and knowledge were relatively limited, these programmes are quite early in their development journey. As such, there may still be time for the programmes to become established. Certainly, in the case of T Levels, the analysis identified some positive signs of interest in the programme in future, albeit with some potential obstacles to overcome around practically delivering placements in the sector. In contrast, for more established programmes, such as apprenticeships, although awareness is very high, the survey identified problems encouraging employers to offer places over the long term. This underlines long-standing challenges of getting the delivery model to work effectively for the industry and addressing deep-rooted perceptions that have inhibited changes in behaviour to date.

Finally, and more generally, the analysis provided an indication of the motivations and barriers to enhancing engagement among creative industries employers in future, drawing on their experiences and perceptions. One key area of concern raised by employers relates to delivery problems, whether for work placements or technical training, and included references to time constraints, costs and financial burdens, and initiatives being too complicated to respond to sector needs and/or ensure relevance to specific roles and/or skills. This was often not helped by limits to flexibility in government policy requirements, grants and funding support. This also affected perceptions that interventions are too expensive and difficult to customise and deliver. In the context of apprenticeships, some employers also noted that apprenticeships were not used in the industry and hence pointed to the limited tradition of deploying the programme. For some, this appeared to reinforce contentment with existing workforce capability and, in turn, lowered demand for training. In contrast, when engagement was working, creative industries were integrating their role in different interventions into broader business practices and, as a result, reported a range of positive benefits. These included: strengthening talent pipelines and expanding routes into the industry; getting good skilled staff; and giving young people, in particular, a greater opportunity for employment in the sector.

## 4.2 Policy considerations

The research highlighted several policy insights for future consideration. This is pertinent in a context in which the UK government is progressing the Modern Industrial Strategy for the UK. This strategy endorses a sector approach moving forward, and efforts continue to advance UK-wide skills reforms that are more responsive to the needs of the creative industries, as a key priority sector. As a result, there is an opportunity to use the research to shape policy developments within each nation, targeting end-to-end improvements in the skills system.

**First**, as we have seen, expanding technical entry routes into employment is often promoted as a key mechanism for policy makers to broaden pathways into priority sectors, such as the creative industries, and to support greater inclusion among diverse groups in the workplace. However, our analysis showed there are currently limits to widening access and entry within the creative industries for different age groups. Indeed, the majority of firms in the sector are recruiting middle-aged workers and, as such, it appears that some traditional recruitment practices are persistent and embedded. There is much that can be learnt from creative industries employers already engaging with a greater diversity of workers and providing work experience, trials and placements. We can learn from those employers who report the benefits of taking on broader groups of individuals who are well-prepared for work, and who have enhanced their access to a stronger talent pipeline. And, with policy developments to enhance skills initiatives across the UK, there is potential to extend their reach to more creative industries firms and workers. This may be through developments such as: the reformed employment support and careers services in Jobcentres; the introduction of the Youth Guarantee in England, similar to existing programmes in Wales and Scotland; the evolving network of Young Futures Hubs; and specific industry-led programmes like Discover Creative Careers, currently supported by sector bodies and DCMS.

**Second**, with the breadth, depth and sustainability of employer engagement in skills programmes remaining constrained, there is clearly still more to do to turn this position around. As each nation works to create more coherent, relevant and responsive pathways from early years through to FE, HE and beyond, stronger partnerships with industry will be essential to deepen sector expertise within the education ecosystem, enhance the reach of programmes and ensure success, as seen in other countries (OECD, 2023). While employer engagement can happen at the level of individual firms, there is room to amplify the process through the official recognition of industry partners in the form of professional, trade and industry bodies, drawing lessons from international practice (OECD, 2024). This may include bodies such as the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB) and TechSkills. Experiences in other countries have highlighted the power of industry bodies, representing sectoral interests, in supporting capacity building, networking and partnership working across business communities, and between industry and skills providers. Not only has this been effective in overcoming capacity shortfalls, while customising initiatives to meet industry needs, but it also encourages UK employers to work together around shared skills goals (in the form of communities of practice).



As this study points to issues that matter to creative industries employers in providing technical and work-based programmes, it offers valuable insights for industry partners to consider. This includes supporting the basis to work with industry to: co-design skills programmes that are more responsive to industry needs and provide individuals who are more work-ready; create and grow recognisable, industry-endorsed training networks of more industry-facing providers that are formally accredited and can deliver to consistently high standards; broaden and deepen employer investment and participation in technical and work-based learning activities, adapting delivery in ways that can meet the needs of a broad range of creative workers and businesses; and/or work to drive improvements in business and management practices. With greater industry recognition and partnership working in the skills systems in different parts of the UK, this can present opportunities to better co-ordinate publicly regulated training – such as apprenticeships – with wider industry-regulated programmes deployed in the sector – such as occupational licensing and professional accreditation schemes used in journalism – thus also enhancing overall levels of engagement.

Finally, government-backed national surveys that help us understand variations in the employer engagement journey in different parts of the system, and in relation to different types of interventions, can provide rich information on where and how to drive improvements in the reform programme. Indeed, differences in creative industries employers' awareness of newer programmes, such as T Levels and HTQs, compared to more established initiatives, such as apprenticeships, can help target marketing and awareness-raising campaigns and promotional work. In turn, wider insights highlighting deep-rooted, structural problems around design and delivery for longer-running programmes, such as apprenticeships, point

to priorities that need to be addressed in customising the delivery model to more effectively meet industry requirements.

The UK government progressing the devolution agenda across the UK puts a renewed focus on the importance of place-based approaches, aligned to the Industrial Strategy. This provides further opportunities to customise skills programmes to meet the distinct needs of the sector. There is scope for national governments to work with cities and regions to better co-ordinate national, sector-orientated and place-based measures, and to test and trial skills innovations that enhance the range of work-based initiatives and technical pathways serving the sector overall. For example, nationally driven reforms to the Growth and Skills Levy present opportunities to revisit mechanisms for employer investment in different parts of the UK and to examine whether employer funding can be used more flexibly to stimulate stronger employer engagement in future. However, there are also opportunities for wider employer and individual incentives that can be targeted towards different business communities and parts of the workforce sub-nationally and sectorally to better leverage firm and individual investment (OECD, 2017). Recognised industry bodies can play a key role, with partners, to take forward future industry-facing instruments appropriately customised to the different employer networks they serve through pilots and trials testing local variations. As local ecosystems evolve, they can provide the basis to continue to innovate and develop industry-facing skills programmes and networks of skills providers in specific locations important to the creative industries. For example, the next phase of Local Skills Improvement Plans in England, and the new funding arrangements attached to them, provides an opportunity to build on local creative strengths, such as extensions to the British Film Institute's (BFI's) Skills Clusters (Carey, Giles, Wilks and Collins, 2023).

## 4.3 Future research

In interrogating data from the UK Employer Skills Survey, the research findings offer robust and comparable evidence for policy makers and industry stakeholder, founded on official sources. A key strength is the ability to examine employer perspectives of different skills programmes being run in different parts of the UK, to start to develop an understanding of where employers are in their engagement journey and to track changes over time. Yet, there remains scope to extend the research in a range of areas and to combine it with more detailed research, such as the creative industries skills audits (highlighted in section 1.1), alongside future assessments of changing skills demand and what is driving this demand (e.g. different types of megatrends).

With the loss of the dedicated Employer Perspectives Survey, some questions are no longer asked of employers and, as a result, the information provided from official sources is less comprehensive than it once was. While the extent of questions asked around apprenticeships have been broadly maintained over time, other skills programmes have less coverage, especially across FE and HE, and those that support lifelong learning and professional development. In addition to changes in the survey instrument and questionnaire, there have also been modifications in the specific initiatives that employers are asked about over time, reflecting ongoing developments in policies. For example, although traineeships were included in ESS22, they have since been withdrawn. This raises questions about the purpose of such official surveys in future and how they can complement broader evaluation evidence for specific programmes.

While the national surveys capture different aspects of the engagement journey and explore reasons behind disengagement, there are limits to the depth of understanding survey information can provide. The design of the survey sample also precludes more detailed analysis (e.g. for sub-sectors, nations or

regions). Consequently, there could be value in undertaking more targeted research, including qualitative research, with employers across different parts of the creative industries sub-sectors and in different parts of the UK. This could enable a more in-depth investigation into the experiences of creative industries employers with distinct interventions, exploring their motivations and challenges, and, in particular, their perspectives on what factors would help them overcome the barriers they face. One example is understanding employers varying perceptions of the work-readiness of candidates from different parts of the system, e.g. apprentices versus leavers from FE and HE.

While the research aimed to explore the experiences of freelancers and sole-traders, and to understand the barriers and enablers to better supporting their engagement with the skills system and industry-facing initiatives, there remains a research gap in this area. Current government-backed surveys do not capture the smallest creative-businesses-based, and wider individual-based surveys, such as the Labour Force Survey, lack sufficient sample size, not least because so few freelancers are pursuing training. This points to the need for dedicated research, building on the current evidence base (Creative UK, 2024).

# Appendices

## List of acronyms

AHRC: Arts and Humanities Research Council

Creative PEC: Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

DCMS: Department for Culture, Media and Sports

DfE: Department for Education

DYW: Developing the Young Workforce

ESS: Employer Skills Survey

FE: Further education

IFATE: Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education

HE: Higher education

HEI: Higher education institution

HTQs: Higher Technical Qualifications

NOS: National occupational standards

NOSGG: National Occupational Standards Governance Group

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SME: Small and medium-sized enterprise

SQA: Scottish Qualification Authority

## Data reference list

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Department for Education	Employer Skills Survey 2017
Department for Education	Employer Skills Survey 2019
Department for Education	Employer Skills Survey 2022

## Data statement

All the data used for this report is freely available from the original sources provided in the data reference list.

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ISBN: 978-0-7017-0289-2



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