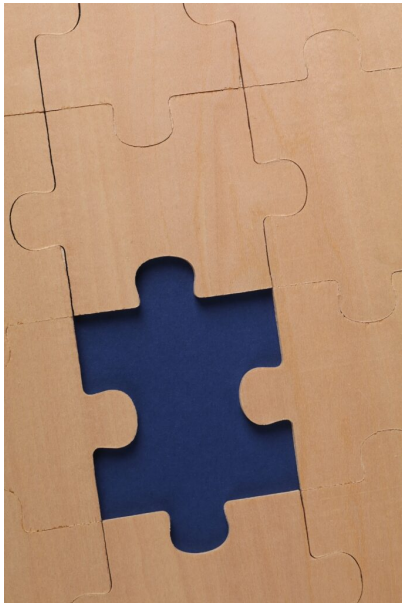


TUC Launches Major New Initiative with Employers and Unions to Tackle Britain's Skills Crisis

3 hours ago



The TUC has launched a new skills initiative bringing together unions, employers, and education providers to tackle Britain's deepening skills crisis.

The TUC says the skills crisis has been caused by years of underinvestment by government, falling investment by employers, a failure to listen to workers, and a skills system that is struggling to keep pace with the speed of technological change.

The new initiative - the 2050 Skills Project - will co-design a long-term, worker-centred skills strategy to equip the workforce for the jobs of the future and to support sustainable economic growth.

The TUC will convene a wide range of stakeholders from across the skills system including unions, employer bodies Make UK and the British Chambers of Commerce, and the Association of Colleges.

To support the project, the TUC is also launching a call for evidence to ensure that the project is grounded in the real experiences of working people, the needs of business, and informed by those delivering and shaping skills on the ground.

The TUC said Britain is at a "pivotal moment" and must urgently prepare the UK workforce for a rapidly changing labour market.

Skills challenge

The TUC warns that years of underinvestment in adult education and training have left millions without the skills needed to succeed at work:

- Under investment: Public spending on adult skills in England is still around 30% below its early-2000s peak, while funding for classroom-based adult learning has fallen by around two-thirds. Nearly 3 in 10 further education colleges are in deficit.
- Regional divides: Regional inequalities are also widening with 27% of adults in the West Midlands having below GCSE-level qualifications, compared with just 9% in West London.
- Basic skills: Basic skills gaps remain widespread with nearly 9 million adults lacking essential literacy, numeracy and digital skills – just as demand for skills is rising rapidly. Jobs key to delivering the Industrial Strategy are projected to grow by almost 25%, equivalent to 1.8 million additional roles over the next decade.

The challenge is being intensified by technological change. As AI is rolled out across the economy, two-thirds (67%) of employers say workforce technical skills are now a major barrier.

The TUC warns these gaps are holding back both workforce participation and economic growth.

Further action needed

The TUC says the government has taken important steps to respond to Britain's skills crisis.

These include its Industrial Strategy, the creation of Skills England, apprenticeship reforms, the Millburn Review on youth inactivity and the AI Skills Boost pledge.

But the TUC warned that despite the renewed focus on skills:

- 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Apprenticeship starts among 16–24-year-olds have fallen by 40% over the past decade – a drop of more than 113,000 compared with 2015/16.
- More than half of apprenticeships now go to over-25s and many are taken by existing employees.

At the same time workers already in the labour market are being left behind.

As AI, net zero and wider technological change reshape jobs, access to lifelong learning is becoming essential.

Yet UK employers invest around half the EU average in training, and graduates are three times more likely to receive in-work training than non-graduates.

Huge support for right to train

New TUC polling – of more than 4,000 people in May 2026 local election areas – published alongside the initiative launch, shows strong backing for action.

Seven in ten people (70%) support a legal right to lifelong training, with support cutting across age groups and political parties.

The TUC says the 2050 Skills Project will develop a comprehensive strategy that:

- empowers workers to access training throughout their lives
- helps businesses adapt to economic and technological change
- supports long-term productivity and growth
- lays the foundations for a new tripartite-led skills system.

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak said: “Britain is being held back by a persistent skills crisis. The problem isn’t a lack of talent – it’s years of underinvestment in the skills people need to succeed.

“The government has begun to turn the page through the Youth Guarantee, the creation of Skills England and increased investment in further education.

“But this is a pivotal moment. We need to go further and faster to equip workers with the skills they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

“Too many people risk being shut out of a rapidly changing labour market because they haven’t been given the opportunity to retrain and adapt.

“That’s why unions, employers and skills experts are coming together through Skills 2050 to build a shared vision for a UK workforce that can adapt, thrive and drive growth.”

Kate Shoemith, Director of Policy and Insights at the British Chambers of Commerce, said: “BCC research shows that more than half of businesses are facing skills shortages. This is a serious drag on productivity and growth. We need a coherent skills system which enables firms to respond to the compounding challenges of AI, an aging workforce, higher employment costs and record numbers of young people out of work.”

Rt Hon. Robert Halfon, Executive Director for Policy, Membership & External Affairs at Make UK said: “Manufacturing has 51,000 vacancies it cannot fill, and skills shortages are costing the sector billions in lost output and growth. The Industrial Strategy and its eight sector plans set the right direction, but they will only deliver if every rung of the ladder of opportunity is in place: quality apprenticeships to bring people in, and genuine lifelong learning to keep them climbing.

“Too many firms are still struggling to find the people they need to invest, innovate and compete. Make UK welcomes this initiative, which brings unions, employers, colleges and government together to build the skilled, adaptable workforce manufacturing needs for the long term.”

David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges, said: “I am so pleased that the Association of Colleges is part of the TUC’s new taskforce on skills. The data tells us, time and time again, that the UK is facing a critical skills crisis. We know that this is a consequence of underfunded and underappreciated adult education and training, with government and employer investment far lower now than 20 years ago. It is a situation that the new prime minister must set right because adults are missing out on opportunities

to learn the new skills they will need in a changing world, and as a result, employers are struggling to find the people they need with the skills needed to be productive.

“We need a shift to a lifelong learning culture, backed up by actions from government, employers, colleges, unions and others. I’d like to see a long-term government strategy which builds interest and investment for adults of all ages. Colleges are vital places where adults will access the skills they need, and I know they will want to engage with the Taskforce over the coming months.”