

## **Perspectives on Short Courses – Cambridge Ahead Member & Stakeholder Community**

### **Introduction**

Short courses, or apprenticeship units, are a significant new intervention in the skills and talent toolkit. Widespread adoption of short courses by providers and employers could have significant impact: levy-funded short courses (including 2026 “apprenticeship units”) could prove a vital way to plug acute skills gaps in areas like digital, AI and engineering, by letting employers use the new Growth and Skills Levy more flexibly for bite-sized, modular training.

However design will be key: getting funding and eligibility right, zeroing in on the most productive durations for short courses, joining up the landscape of offers and ensuring employer-provider co-design will be key.

This short paper summarises input from Cambridge Ahead Members and stakeholders on the subject of short courses, from both provider and employer perspectives. This input reflects a small cross-section of potential sectoral perspectives; over the coming months, we would be pleased to work with Skills England to build out a more diverse set of views across our membership. This, when combined with learnings from the implementation of the first wave of short courses, could usefully inform the second phase of the rollout.

### **1. Provider Perspectives**

#### *1.1 Strategic Positioning and Readiness*

Providers in the Cambridge Ahead network are preparing actively for the introduction of new short courses linked to Skills England reforms, Apprenticeship Units (AUs), and also for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). Institutions such as Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) are building the systems, platforms and internal processes needed to deliver short, modular learning both to employers (B2B) and individual learners (B2C). Their approach is explicitly aligned with regional and national skills priorities, including digital, technical and professional skills, and with emerging Government strategies on priority skills and Levy reform.

Providers who responded to our consultation view short courses as a natural extension of their employer-facing work and as a mechanism to respond more dynamically to skills shortages, particularly in fast-moving sectors such as digital technologies, accountancy, and professional services. However, they also note that policy detail is still incomplete and that they are developing new provision in parallel to ongoing conversations with

Government, University Alliance, UVAC and other national networks to influence shaping of the policy environment.

### *1.2 Approaches to Evaluation and Measures of Success*

Providers consulted anticipate using a mix of quantitative and qualitative metrics to monitor the success of short courses. Expected measures include:

- Registration and completion numbers
- Module evaluations and learner feedback
- Employer feedback on impact and relevance
- Assessment outcomes for credit-bearing courses
- Over time - learner progression data into further study, apprenticeships or new roles

Providers emphasise that their evaluation frameworks will treat short courses as distinct from apprenticeships, in the sense that shorter, more targeted learning should not be burdened with the same intensity of documentation, reviews or compliance processes. They raised concerns that applying apprenticeship-style performance metrics—particularly rigid achievement rates or extensive audit burden—would suppress uptake and undermine the purpose of flexible short-course provision.

### *1.3 Engagement with Employers*

Providers are already in dialogue with employers to understand priority skills needs, especially as the skills landscape is evolving quickly and policy specifics around Apprenticeship Units (AUs) remain fluid. Provider respondents report strong employer interest in skills areas such as digital skills, AI, data, accountancy and finance basics, project management and technical competencies. These early conversations reinforce the message that short courses must be highly agile, co-designed with industry, and responsive to employer-identified areas of need.

A recurring theme from providers is that overly prescriptive national standards for short courses would undermine their purpose. Skills England has positioned levy reforms as a way for employers to respond more quickly to evolving skills requirements. Providers argue that if AUs become too rigid or standardised, they will replicate the limitations of the existing apprenticeship system and fail to deliver the promised agility.

#### 1.4 Design Principles and Delivery Preferences

Stakeholders highlight several key design considerations.

- Flexibility is essential:
  - Duration should vary from intensive short bursts to modular spread-out learning.
  - Guided Learning Hours (GLH) should not be fixed at levels based on “weaker learners,” as this risks disengaging more experienced learners.
- Accessibility for learners and providers:
  - Administrative processes must remain proportionate to the size and value of the courses.
  - Funding rules must be clear, consistent, and navigable for SMEs.
  - Short courses should avoid burdensome reporting and audit requirements.
- National consistency matters:
  - Stakeholders express concern about devolved policy divergence.
  - A consistent UK-wide framework would help multi-regional employers and providers operate efficiently.
- Purpose and distinction:
  - Short courses must be differentiated from apprenticeships:
    - Apprenticeships represent holistic, occupation-focused training across full Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs).
    - Short courses should be focused, flexible, rapid upskilling or exploratory learning.
- Qualification alignment:
  - Short courses may be qualification-bearing, non-qualification or hybrid.
  - Non-qualification learning should not be penalised if it clearly supports progression and skill development.
  - Alignment with apprenticeship KSBs can be helpful but should not be mandatory; providers warn that mandatory alignment would stifle innovation.

### *1.5 Sector-Specific Input: Accountancy, Audit and Tax*

Providers in the accountancy sector (a major part of the Professional and Business Services sector) see significant potential for levy-funded short courses to widen access and accelerate development across the profession. They highlight two broad categories of provision:

Early-career and entry-level priorities:

- Basic bookkeeping (L2–L3)
- Digital finance skills
- Pre-apprenticeship “booster” programmes
- T Level top-up programmes
- Soft skills and employability modules
- Introductory business and ethics content

Mid-career or upskilling priorities:

- Digital finance technologies, AI, analytics
- Sustainability reporting and green finance
- Data storytelling and systems training (Excel, Xero, etc.)
- Leadership, communication and EDI skills
- Finance for non-finance managers

Providers note that the accountancy sector’s training model is already highly modular, making it well suited to short-course formats.

## **2. Employer Perspectives**

### *2.1 Immediate and Emerging Training Needs*

Employers who engaged identify a broad set of near-term skills needs that short courses could help address. These include:

- Digital and IT capability – from everyday tools (Teams, SharePoint, OneDrive) to AI assistants like Copilot.
- Data and AI literacy – data analysis, automation, introductory AI skills, data storytelling.

- Project and contract management – especially NEC3/NEC4, JCT frameworks, change control and early warnings.
- Core project management skills – planning, risk, stakeholder communication.
- Finance and accountancy basics – particularly for non-qualified staff or early-career recruits.
- Communication, hybrid working, and leadership skills – especially across multi-generational teams.
- For life sciences – short, technical courses, training new lab techniques, and compliance; twinned with ‘softer’ subject courses, such as commercial skills and introduction to drug development.

Employers describe their internal workforces as diverse in baseline skills, meaning short courses need to cater to mixed starting points and allow for targeted, role-specific learning.

## *2.2 What Employers Want Short Courses to Look Like*

Across sectors, employers express a consistent set of preferences:

- Short, focused formats (1–2 hour micro-modules, half-day courses, or 1-day targeted upskilling).
- Role-specific and scenario-based content, ideally using real examples from their sector or projects.
- Clear, practical learning materials – handouts, quick guides, “cheat sheets”.
- Flexible delivery modes – virtual, eLearning, blended, in-office or on-site options.

Employers emphasise that short courses should not replicate full apprenticeship programmes. Instead, they want:

- Rapid, targeted skills acquisition
- Options to “try out” a topic before committing to a larger qualification
- Bridge courses between qualification levels
- Upskilling pathways for workers who won’t pursue Level 6/7 apprenticeships

Several employers stress that mid-career professionals, returners and non-qualified employees represent major beneficiaries of short-course provision.

### 2.3 What Employers Want from Providers

Employers we consulted are clear about the attributes they expect in provider partners:

- Sector-aware trainers with contextual understanding (e.g., construction-aware trainers for NEC/JCT modules; accountants training accountants).
- Pre-training diagnostics to assess baseline digital skills or contract knowledge so that training is targeted and cost-efficient.
- Streamlined logistics – easy booking, predictable scheduling, digital certification, and standardised delivery.
- Provider credibility – they want recognised, reputable institutions delivering this provision.
- Assessment that is proportionate – certificates of completion, mock tests or micro-assessments are desired, but employers do *not* want burdensome assessment regimes that absorb staff time.

Employers also highlight the importance of flexibility, noting that if short courses are too rigid or prescriptive, they will not meet real operational needs.

### 2.4 Reflections on Funding and Levy Reform

Employers see strong potential in levy-funded short courses, particularly where these can:

- Support early-career workers without requiring a full apprenticeship
- Provide structured upskilling outside long programmes
- Offer foundational technical skills (e.g. bookkeeping) that are otherwise expensive for employers to self-fund

They emphasise, however, that funding rules must be simple, predictable and accessible. Complex eligibility requirements or heavy audit burdens will prevent SMEs or mid-sized employers from engaging.

## Summary

Across the members, stakeholders and partners who responded, both providers and employers see significant promise in the UK's 2026 short course reforms. Providers view them as a strategic opportunity to respond to fast-changing employer demand and widen access to modular learning. Employers see them as a way to upskill staff efficiently, flexibly and at lower cost. However, both groups emphasise the same risks: overly



prescriptive rules, inconsistent funding frameworks, administrative burdens, and rigid structures that undermine the goal of agility.

Together, these perspectives suggest that the success of the 2026 short-course landscape will depend not only on the courses themselves, but on ensuring flexible, low-friction system design that allows employers and providers to build meaningful, responsive training pathways.

### **About Cambridge Ahead**

[Cambridge Ahead](#) is an employer and academic member organisation with over 50 employer members from across the Cambridge city region. We are a deeply committed, long term voice for the Cambridge economy, dedicated to sustainable and inclusive growth that supports quality of life. On behalf of our members we produce data-driven insight, collaborate with policymakers, and champion the contribution Cambridge city region makes nationally and locally.