

WORK SMART, LIVE WELL

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Knowledge Isn't Enough. It Never Was

*Skills, assessment reform and the pursuit of
vocational parity in professional education*

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Abstract

*Recent reforms to English education policy, including the introduction of technical pathways from age 14, the restructuring of apprenticeship funding, and the redesign of apprenticeship assessment, signal a decisive policy shift towards occupational competence as the organising principle of vocational education. This paper situates these reforms within a longer argument about the relationship between knowledge and professional capability. It contends that propositional knowledge has always been a necessary yet partial component of professional competence, and that the accelerating obsolescence of technical knowledge under conditions of technological change makes the skills dimension of professional formation newly visible rather than newly important. Drawing on current policy developments, labour market evidence concerning young people outside education, employment and training (NEET), and the author's practitioner perspective within accounting education, the paper argues that well-designed vocational qualifications have historically embodied precisely the integration of knowledge, application and judgement that contemporary reform now mandates, and considers the implications for professional bodies. It is offered as the second paper in the Work Smart, Live Well series, developing the educational and assessment consequences of the argument advanced in *The Age of the Human* (Aradia, 2026).*

Keywords: vocational education; apprenticeships; assessment reform; professional competence; skills policy; accounting education

1. Introduction

The question of how education systems should prepare people for work has acquired renewed urgency. Employers report persistent skills shortages; technological change, particularly the diffusion of artificial intelligence into routine cognitive work, is compressing the shelf life of technical knowledge; and successive governments have sought to rebalance the relationship between academic and technical routes. The announcement in July 2026 of technical education pathways for pupils from age 14, building on the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) and committed to parity between academic and technical education, represents the most visible expression of this rebalancing to date.

This paper advances a central claim: that the contemporary emphasis on skills represents the recovery of an older understanding rather than a departure from tradition. Professional formation has always required more than the acquisition of propositional knowledge. Knowledge becomes professionally valuable through application, judgement and continuous renewal: capacities that the strongest vocational programmes have always cultivated. The paper's title states the thesis directly: knowledge, on its own, isn't enough, and within serious traditions of professional education it never was.

The argument proceeds in four stages. Section 2 outlines the current policy context. Section 3 examines the population for whom the education-to-work transition has already failed. Section 4 develops the epistemological argument concerning knowledge, skill and technological change. Section 5 analyses the reformed apprenticeship assessment model as an institutional embodiment of the competence principle, before Section 6 considers implications for professional bodies and concludes.

A brief note on positionality: the author writes as a practitioner-educator who entered the profession at sixteen through an accountancy apprenticeship, and whose three adult children have between them pursued both apprenticeship and university routes to successful careers. This dual perspective informs the paper's

premise that academic and technical routes each hold enormous value, and that the productive question concerns the capabilities every route must develop.

2. Policy context: a system reorienting towards competence

Three concurrent reform strands define the current landscape.

First, pathway reform. From September 2028, pupils in England will be able to combine core GCSE subjects with technical education linked to employment in their local area, including employer-led projects and structured work experience. The reforms extend the MBacc model nationally and are explicitly framed in the language of parity of esteem between academic and technical routes.

Second, funding and structural reform of apprenticeships. The 2025–26 reform programme introduces foundation apprenticeships for young people, full funding of training for under-25s at small and medium-sized employers, reduced minimum durations, and modular "apprenticeship units" targeted at priority skills including artificial intelligence and digital capability. The Growth and Skills Levy redirects employer investment towards younger entrants and identified skills gaps.

Third, and least publicly discussed, assessment reform. The Department for Education's assessment principles (2025) and subsequent regulatory conditions replace the single end-point assessment model with "apprenticeship assessment" distributed across the programme, shared among employers, training providers and independent assessment organisations. In accountancy, assessment plans at Levels 2 to 4 are under sector-wide review at the time of writing.

Read together, the three strands express a consistent policy logic: occupational competence, the demonstrated capacity to perform an occupation, is displacing qualification completion as the system's organising objective. That logic converges with the founding rationale of vocational education itself.

3. The prior failure: the NEET cohort

Any assessment of these reforms must begin with the population the existing system has already failed. More than one million young people aged 16 to 24 in the United Kingdom are currently outside education, employment and training, approximately one in eight of the age group, following a rise of more than 200,000 since 2022. Estimates place the annual economic cost in the region of £125 billion, with individuals who experience prolonged disconnection facing lifetime earnings losses of up to £300,000.

The cohort composition is instructive. Disproportionately, these are young people whose secondary education coincided with pandemic disruption and who entered a labour market to which they had never been meaningfully connected. Their situation constitutes a systemic transition failure with a compounding personal cost in confidence, direction and attachment to institutions.

The policy implication is twofold. Prospective reform, in the form of pathways for future cohorts of 14-year-olds, addresses the mechanism that produced disconnection. Retrospective provision remains equally necessary: foundation-level re-entry routes, employer incentives, and locally brokered connections between young people and genuine vacancies, resourced at comparable levels. Parity of esteem, if it is to function as a system principle, must extend to those currently outside the system. A skills system demonstrates its adequacy by how effectively it reaches the people who fell out of it.

4. Knowledge, skill and the shortening half-life of expertise

The first paper in this series (Aradia, 2026) established the economic frame on which the present argument builds: as artificial intelligence commodifies competent cognitive output, professional value migrates to the structurally scarce human capacities that must be combined with machine output to make it trustworthy, identified there as judgement, accountability and attention. This paper takes that conclusion as its starting point and asks what follows for the institutions that form professionals: qualifications, apprenticeships and, above all, assessment.

The epistemological core of the question concerns the relationship between propositional knowledge ("knowing that") and professional capability ("knowing how", exercised with judgement). Professional work has always required both; credentialing systems, however, have historically found knowledge far easier to measure, producing an institutional bias towards examinable recall.

Two developments render this bias untenable. The first is the accelerating obsolescence of technical knowledge. In accounting and payroll, annual legislative change, the digitalisation of tax administration, and the automation of routine processing mean that the currency of any specific body of technical knowledge depreciates continuously. A qualification gained today functions as the foundation for a career of renewal; continuing professional development becomes, above all, the maintenance of professional relevance.

The second development follows directly from the commodification argument. Machine output is fluent regardless of its reliability, so the examinable scarcity shifts from recall to the capacity to evaluate machine output, interpret it for those it affects, and stand accountably behind the result. A corollary warrants emphasis: where technology mediates work while genuine understanding remains unbuilt, professional capability is hollowed out even as surface performance improves, a phenomenon this series terms epistemic drift. The distinction between appearing competent and being competent thereby becomes the central quality problem of professional education in the AI era.

It follows that "future skills" are substantially human skills: critical thinking, communication, ethical judgement, problem-solving, digital confidence, curiosity and commercial awareness. These constitute the durable layer of professional formation, the capacities that compound across a career; the perishable layer of current rules and tools remains essential and must be taught as current, in the explicit expectation of replacement (Aradia, 2026).

5. Assessment reform: the honest measure of capability

The Age of the Human closed by naming assessment as the honest measure of capability, and the reformed apprenticeship assessment model merits close analysis on precisely these grounds, because assessment is where an education system operationalises its definition of success.

The model distributes assessment across three complementary functions. Workplace supervision assigns to employers the verification of behaviours demonstrated in authentic work: professionalism, reliability, ethical conduct and collaborative practice, judged by those who observe them daily. Educational assessment permits training providers, where assessment plans allow, to deliver and mark structured components such as knowledge tests, observations and work-based projects, integrating assessment with learning across the programme. Independent assurance locates the design of assessment instruments and the validation of outcomes with assessment organisations, whose role shifts from delivering every assessment event to guaranteeing the soundness and consistency of every judgement, supported by requirements for separation of teaching and assessing functions, moderation, and strengthened regulatory conditions in force from 2026.

The design directly addresses the validity problem identified in Section 4. Sustained workplace performance, verified at source and assured independently, measures being competent; a terminal examination event primarily measures performing competence under examination conditions. For occupations characterised by daily judgement, continuous legislative change and client trust, bookkeeping and payroll among the clearest examples, the reformed model aligns the measure with the construct.

The same analysis illuminates a claim currently circulating in professional commentary: that qualifications are insufficient preparation for practice. The observation contains a genuine insight, and one that serious vocational education institutionalised long ago. A qualification is, at root, a promise that what learners study will still matter when they use it, and a well-designed professional qualification keeps that promise through a structured route to occupational competence: knowledge applied in realistic scenarios, judgement developed through practice, standards independently assessed, and a professional community with continuing development sustained across a career. Where such design conditions hold, the claimed gap between qualification and practice closes by construction. Rigour and relevance belong together, and the reform programme now embeds that principle in regulation.

6. Implications and conclusion

For professional bodies, the analysis yields a clear mandate: to treat qualifications as the launchpad for career-long capability development, wrapping technical formation in structured opportunities for peer connection, emerging-skills learning, ethical and commercial development, and community. This reasoning underpins the ICB Future Skills Challenge, which addresses the knowledge, behaviours and capabilities projected to define finance professionals over the coming decade.

The broader conclusion returns to the paper's thesis. The reforms of 2025–26 do their most important work at the level of first principles: they commit the system, institutionally and regulatorily, to the proposition that professional worth is demonstrated in competent practice. Whatever route an individual takes, whether apprenticeship, vocational qualification or university degree, the capabilities that carry them furthest are the capacity to apply, to judge, and to keep learning as the ground shifts.

Knowledge isn't enough. It never was. The significance of the present moment is that the education system, at last, is being redesigned accordingly.

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