
Accounting for Growth

**THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL VALUE OF AAT
QUALIFICATIONS, APPRENTICESHIPS AND
MEMBERSHIP**

APRIL 2026

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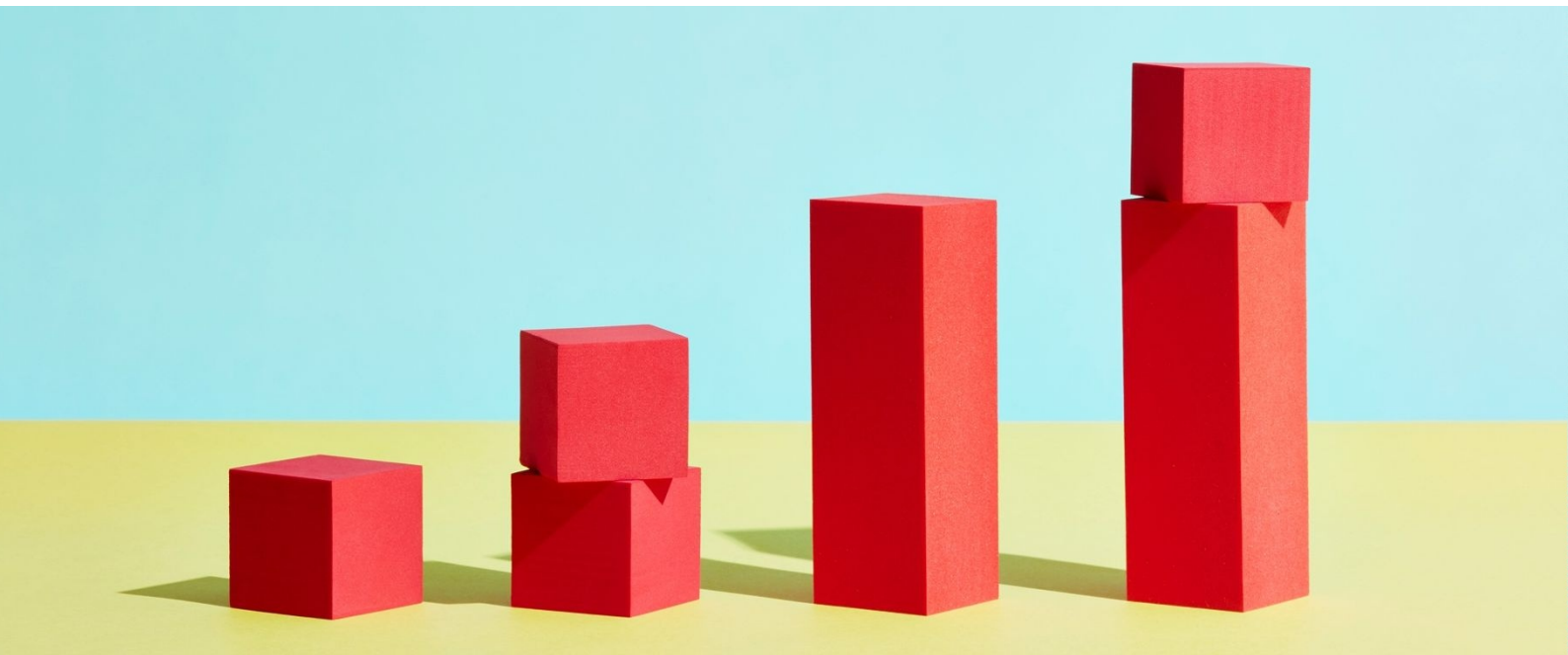
01 Foreword

Across the UK, employers are navigating rising costs, rapid technological change and persistent skills shortages. At the same time, the finance functions of businesses are being reshaped by artificial intelligence, automation and growing demand for broader digital and advisory capabilities. The need for a strong, adaptable and highly skilled accounting workforce has never been clearer.

For more than 40 years, **AAT** has helped open up access to careers in finance and supported people to build rewarding careers through courses, qualifications, apprenticeships and membership. This report, produced by **Public First** and commissioned by **AAT**, brings together new evidence on the economic and social value associated with those pathways. It shows how AAT qualifications and membership are associated with stronger earnings outcomes and progression for individuals, whilst also illustrating the wider contribution that accounting and bookkeeping professionals make to growth, productivity and opportunity across the UK.

The findings also point to an important challenge for the years ahead. If the accounting workforce is to meet rising demand and realise the opportunities created by new technologies and changing skills needs, it will need to continue widening participation and supporting career progression. Vocational and technical routes have a central role to play in that effort, particularly for those who may not see a traditional academic pathway as the right option for them.

AAT commissioned this work to help inform that conversation. We hope the report will provide a useful evidence base for policymakers, employers and others with a stake in the future of accounting and finance careers.



02 Executive Summary

This report presents new evidence on the economic and social value associated with **AAT** qualifications, apprenticeships and membership, drawing on modelling and analysis by **Public First** and data from the AAT Salary Survey 2025. These findings suggest that AAT's contribution should be understood in four key ways: through the direct economic activity generated by its members and learners; through the future earnings potential associated with qualifications, apprenticeships and membership; through the productivity gains that could come from stronger skills and AI adoption; and through the role vocational pathways can play in widening access to the profession.

The report also makes a **series of policy recommendations** to ensure the sector can fully realise these opportunities and help unlock further growth. These – along with **the full methodology** – can be found at the end of this report.

AAT'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECONOMY

£2.2 billion

The annual contribution of AAT members to the UK economy through salaries and client income.

28,000

The equivalent number of jobs that could be created in the UK annually.

£1.6 billion

The annual contribution of AAT students to the UK economy through salaries.

£78 million

The total economic benefit to the UK economy in additional household income as a result of AAT Full (MAAT) progressing to Fellow (FMAAT) membership status.

1,000

The equivalent number of full-time jobs that could be supported by this additional household income.

AAT'S IMPACT ON FUTURE EARNINGS POTENTIAL

£1,400

Average annual earnings boost from completing an AAT Level 4 qualification – 5% more pay than a Level 3 qualification.

74%

AAT apprentices report a salary increase in the year after completion.

14X

Return on investment for AATQB members

10X

Return on investment for MAAT members

11X

Return on investment for FMAAT members

THE AI AND SKILLS OPPORTUNITY

£1.2 billion = 15,000

Additional UK GVA that could be created by upskilling accounting professionals in sought-after “power skills” such as **digital literacy and leadership**, as well as **budgeting and forecasting**.

The equivalent number of **full-time employees** based on the combined impact of the potential reduction of the accounting skills gap across **digital (9%), budgeting and forecasting (3%) and leadership skills (1%)** as a result of investment in skills training.

£8 billion

Projected increase in Gross Value Added (GVA) driven by productivity gains from artificial intelligence in accounting and bookkeeping bringing the total value of the sector from **£34 billion** to an estimated **£42 billion**.

AAT'S ROLE IN WIDENING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

+ 21%

The **wage premium** of AAT non-licensed members and learners whose highest academic qualification is GCSE-level, compared with the national median for people whose highest qualification is GCSEs.

+ 11%

The wage premium of AAT non-licensed members and learners aged 19-24, compared with the national median average earnings across this age group.

83%

The share of AAT non-licensed members and learners from **lower socio-economic backgrounds** who agree with the statement that ‘being AAT qualified has opened doors for me’ in their career.



About AAT

AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians) is the UK's leading qualification and professional body for technical accountants and bookkeepers. It has around 51,000 members and approximately 75,000 students studying its qualifications. Over 840,000 small businesses are supported by more than 7,000 AAT licensed members to help build the businesses' financial capabilities, equating to around 15% of the UK's SMEs. AAT also helps businesses of all sizes upskill and train employees to be the business leaders of the future.

About Public First

Public First is a policy, research and strategy consultancy that works with governments, businesses and institutions to address major economic and public policy challenges. Its work combines economic modelling, data analysis and opinion research to quantify impact and inform decision-making. Public First has extensive experience in delivering economic impact studies across sectors, helping organisations understand and communicate their contribution to growth, productivity and wider societal outcomes.

03 Introduction

Finance, accounting and bookkeeping professionals play a foundational role in the UK economy. They support businesses to plan for the future, manage cash flow, meet regulatory obligations and make informed decisions. As the economy becomes more complex and more digital, that role is becoming even more important.

At the same time, the profession is facing a period of significant change. Skills England has identified finance and accounting technicians amongst the occupations facing acute demand, whilst new technologies are transforming the way routine tasks are completed and changing the mix of skills employers increasingly require. A growing emphasis on digital capability, financial planning, leadership and professional judgement is reshaping what progression in the profession looks like.

Against this backdrop, understanding how people enter, progress within and remain in the profession matters both for individuals, and for the wider economy. Strong pathways into accounting and finance can help widen access to skilled careers, address workforce shortages and improve how effectively the profession responds to technological and structural change.

This report examines AAT's contribution in that context. New modelling by Public First explores how AAT qualifications, apprenticeships and membership are associated with earnings progression and professional development for individuals, and how that contribution relates to wider economic activity, workforce capability and access to vocational pathways.

Taken together, the findings suggest that AAT's role extends beyond certification alone. Through qualifications, apprenticeships and membership, AAT forms part of the progression and skills infrastructure that supports entry into the profession, development within it, and adaptation as employer needs evolve.

The chapters that follow examine that contribution in four parts: **first, by looking at how AAT supports individuals and the economy to grow; second, by exploring how stronger workforce skills could support productivity and growth; third, by considering how AI could reshape the profession and what is needed to realise those gains; and fourth, by examining how vocational pathways can widen access to accounting and finance careers.**

04 Supporting Individuals and the Economy to Grow

Chapter summary

This chapter sets out new Public First modelling of AAT's economic contribution. It shows how AAT members and learners are contributing to economic activity across the UK, and how progression through AAT membership is associated with stronger earnings outcomes.

- **AAT members** contribute **£2.2 billion** to the UK economy each year through salaries and client income – equivalent to creating **28,000** jobs annually in the UK.
 - ♣ Achieving AAT Fellow membership (FMAAT) – the highest level of membership – is linked to an average earnings increase of **£11,812** per member per year, compared to Full membership (MAAT) status.ⁱ New analysis by Public First finds that this uplift – a **31%** increase – equates to **£78 million** in additional household income across all FMAAT members. This is equivalent to over **1,000** jobs in the UK.
- **AAT students** contribute **£1.6 billion** to the UK economy each year through salaries.

AAT's qualifications and membership offer

For over four decades, AAT has provided structured routes into accounting and bookkeeping careers, helping individuals build expertise through qualifications and training that reflect current industry standards and employer demand. Today, AAT supports a large and diverse base of around **137,000 members and learners** globally.ⁱⁱ

AAT's offer spans the full career lifecycle – from entry-level training to advanced qualifications and licensed status. Alongside qualifications and courses, AAT's membership framework ([Table 1](#)) provides professional

recognition, continuous professional development (CPD), guidance and resources, and connects members to a wider community to support career progression and earnings potential.

Table 1: AAT Membership Tiers

AAT Bookkeeping Member (AATQB)	Provides recognition for individuals specialising in bookkeeping, demonstrating professional competence to employers and clients, and offering a pathway towards full membership.
AAT Full Member (MAAT)	Indicates that an individual has completed AAT accounting qualifications and gained relevant work experience, signalling professional competence in accounting and finance roles.
AAT Fellow Member (FMAAT)	The highest level of AAT membership, awarded to experienced members who have held MAAT status for a minimum of five years, reflecting advanced expertise and professional standing.
AAT Licensed Member	Enables members to offer accountancy and bookkeeping services to clients. Licensed Bookkeepers and Accountants can provide a defined range of services, supporting individuals and businesses with financial management and compliance. Approximately 15% of UK SMEs are supported by AAT licensed members.

Together, these help members develop, progress and adapt in a changing profession. Indeed, new modelling from Public First suggests that this contribution delivers substantial economic benefits – both for individuals and for the wider economy.

AAT membership and the economy

AAT members contribute across bookkeeping, accounting and finance roles through both employed work and, for licensed members, services provided directly to clients. Public First’s modelling suggests that:

AAT members contribute £2.2 billion to the economy each year through salary and client income.



To illustrate the scale of this impact, this additional income is equivalent to the value of creating over 28,000 jobs in the UK annually.

This underlines the scale of the economic activity associated with AAT membership, and the role AAT members play in supporting businesses, households and economic growth across the UK.

AAT Salary Survey 2025 data shows that the benefits of membership are also felt at an individual level, particularly as members progress through AAT's membership pathway. Previous analysis found that achieving AAT Fellow membership (FMAAT) – the highest level of membership – is linked with a higher average salary of **£50,000** per member, which is a **31%** uplift compared to Full membership (MAAT) status.ⁱⁱⁱ

Public First's modelling shows that, in aggregate, this earnings uplift translates into wider economic impact; increased household earnings support economic activity through higher consumption and spending, contributing to growth beyond the accounting profession itself.

We also find that:

The economic benefit of progressing from AAT Full (MAAT) to Fellow (FMAAT) membership status, equates to **£78 million** to the UK economy in additional household income.



The additional household income generated by FMAAT members is equivalent to the value of **1,000 jobs** in the UK.

AAT qualifications and the economy

Across accounting, bookkeeping and related business skills, AAT offers practical qualifications designed to support entry into the profession, progression within it, and the development of skills that employers need. Public First's modelling suggests that:

AAT students contribute **£1.6 billion** to the economy each year, through salaries.

This highlights the contribution made by professionals whose qualifications with AAT support them to enter work, build skills and progress.

In that sense, AAT's contribution should be understood not only in terms of professional membership, but also through the role its qualifications play in supporting access to accounting and finance careers and progression within them.

05 Strengthening Workforce Skills

Chapter summary

This chapter explores how stronger workforce skills in accounting, bookkeeping and finance could support productivity, ease labour market pressure and contribute to wider economic growth. New Public First modelling suggests that targeted investment in skills training could generate substantial gains for the profession and the wider economy.

- Training to strengthen digital literacy skills in particular could help close the sector’s skills gap by as much as **9%** – whilst investment in budgeting and forecasting, and leadership skills training could reduce gaps by **3%** and **1%** respectively.
- Taken together, these gains would be equivalent to adding **15,000** full-time employees to the UK accounting workforce and could contribute **£1.2 billion** in additional UK GVA.

Powering up skills

Skills England projects employment in the Professional and Business Services sector to expand by **164,000 roles by 2030**.^{iv} Yet employers are already facing challenges finding accounting, bookkeeping and finance professionals. AAT’s *Filling the Gap* research found that **34%** of employers struggled to recruit for finance and accounting positions in the last year.^v

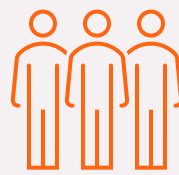
A narrow view of skills risks overlooking a broader workforce challenge. Advances in artificial intelligence, alongside evolving tax, reporting and compliance requirements, are reshaping the nature of skills that employers need. Employers are increasingly looking for a wider mix of “**power skills**” – such as digital literacy, budgeting and forecasting, and leadership – alongside strong technical accounting proficiency, reflecting the changing role of finance teams and accounting professionals within organisations.^{vi}

The economic case for action

Skills gaps in digital capability, budgeting and forecasting, and leadership are not only affecting employers' day-to-day capacity, but are also holding back productivity and growth. Conversely, investment in these areas could significantly ease labour market pressure in the sector and generate measurable economic gains. Public First's modelling suggests:

Targeted investment in digital literacy, budgeting and forecasting, and leadership skills training could reduce these skills gaps in accounting by 9%, 3% and 1% respectively.

In practice, upskilling and retraining can ease skills gaps even where recruitment remains difficult. If more professionals are equipped to use digital tools confidently, interpret financial information more effectively and take on broader leadership responsibilities, firms can make better use of the workforce they already have, whilst also improving longer-term resilience and productivity. These gains would extend beyond firms' immediate capacity. Public First's modelling indicates that:



This reduction in skills gaps would generate significant efficiency and productivity gains, equivalent to adding **15,000 full-time employees (FTE)** to the accounting workforce in the UK.

A stronger skills system that supports training in digital literacy, budgeting and forecasting, and leadership across the accounting workforce could contribute £1.2 billion in additional UK GVA.

Persistent skills gaps carry an economic cost. Where firms cannot access the skills they need, they are less able to improve productivity, expand capacity and realise the sector's wider growth potential. They are also more likely to rely on workarounds: the Migration Advisory Committee has found that employers use greater international outsourcing as one response to labour shortages, whilst AAT research confirms that **27%** of private sector accountancy firms are already outsourcing work overseas.^{vii} This strengthens the case for investing in domestic skills supply, not only to address immediate shortages in accounting and finance, but to build a UK workforce with capabilities that are valuable across the wider economy.

From sector analysis to strategic workforce planning

The Government has recognised Professional and Business Services as a priority growth sector, and Skills England has begun to map its skills needs. But there is still no clear workforce plan for accounting and finance

that sets out how the skills system will respond to rising demand and to the changing mix of capabilities employers need.

There is also a critical, practical question of how individuals evidence these capabilities once employers are looking for them. With digital literacy, budgeting and forecasting, leadership and related capabilities becoming more important in recruitment and progression within accounting and bookkeeping, people working in the sector need clearer and more portable ways of demonstrating what they can do.

Recommendation 1

The Government should work with employers, professional bodies and training providers to develop a clearer workforce plan for accounting and finance within the Professional and Business Services sector, building on existing sector analysis and strengthening the skills evidence that underpins it.

This should include more systematic use of skills-level evidence alongside occupational data, drawing on employer insight and professional body evidence to better capture the mix of technical, digital and transferable capabilities increasingly required across the workforce.

As Skills England develops sector-based skills passports for PBS, these should reflect the capabilities that matter most in accounting and finance – including not only qualifications and technical competence, but also the wider skills that increasingly shape progression, productivity and mobility within the labour market.



06 AI and the Future of Finance

Chapter summary

This chapter sets out how artificial intelligence and automation are set to transform the accounting and bookkeeping profession, creating significant opportunities for enhanced productivity and economic growth across the sector. Public First's modelling suggests:

- AI-induced productivity gains could **add £8 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA)** to the UK accounting and bookkeeping sector, increasing its total value to the UK economy to **an estimated £42 billion**.

Realising these benefits will depend on whether professionals and firms can access relevant training and use new tools in ways that strengthen rather than weaken professional judgement and trust.

AI productivity gains

Advances in artificial intelligence, automation and digital financial systems are already reshaping how organisations and individuals manage finance, compliance and decision-making. In a sector projected to be the most impacted by automation, these changes present a substantial opportunity for growth.^{viii} Public First's modelling for AAT quantifies this for the first time and estimates:

AI-induced productivity gains could add £8bn in GVA to the accounting and bookkeeping sector, increasing its total value to the UK economy to £42 billion.

This reflects the potential for AI-powered tools to improve efficiency – from automating bookkeeping processes to real-time reporting and forecasting. By reducing the time spent on routine administrative tasks, AI can improve efficiency, enhance data quality and enable professionals to focus on higher value activities.

This shift could ease some workforce pressures, explored by AAT in previous research. With **64%** of employers reporting workloads are rising, automation offers a way to reduce routine burdens and improve job quality.^{ix} It may also make the profession more attractive: **two in five** people say they would consider a career move to accountancy if AI could replace ‘mundane’ tasks.^x Realising these gains, however, will depend on whether the workforce is able to adopt and use these technologies effectively.

Realising the AI benefits

In practice, the size of the AI opportunity in accounting will be shaped – at least in part – by access to relevant training, confidence in using new tools, and the extent to which firms and individuals are able to adapt working practices.

There are signs that professionals are willing to adapt to these changes. AAT research finds

that **four-fifths** of the public are interested in developing new skills in response to the rise of AI at work, whilst **40%** of those aged 25-34 want to build capabilities in AI and machine learning.^{xi}

Enthusiasm and engagement can help shape real-world adoption of AI, as Public First’s AI Adoption Index 2026 has shown, but they are not enough on their own.^{xii} Training is needed that is high-quality, relevant and structured to the realities of accounting and bookkeeping work. This cannot take a one-size-fits-all form:

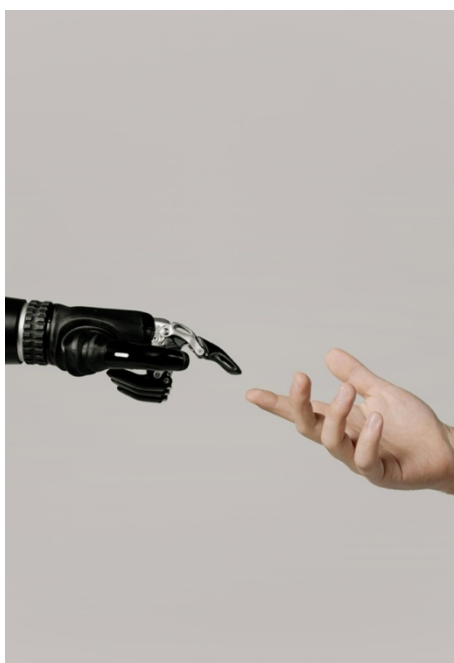
applications, risks and needs will differ across bookkeeping, tax, compliance, advisory work and practice management, and between large firms, small businesses and sole practitioners.

Professional bodies, training providers and employers all have a role to play in helping accounting professionals understand how new technologies apply in practice and access relevant training and guidance. AAT already offers members support and CPD on topics such as AI applications in accounting and AI ethics and governance, but wider coordination will be needed if access challenges are to be addressed across the profession.



Automation in Professional and Business Services (PBS) firms will create the opportunity for up to **584,000 new jobs to be created by 2040**. The increased use of automation technologies in businesses will change many roles and responsibilities: eliminating some heavily administrative or repetitive roles while also creating a net gain of new roles in areas like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotics.”

– Skills England, Sector skills needs assessments, July 2025



Sustaining the AI benefits

At the same time, the benefits of AI will only be sustained if its use in finance is trusted. In a profession built on precision, integrity and risk management, AI is most valuable when it supports skilled professionals to work more effectively, rather than encouraging an assumption that financial, tax or advisory processes can be automated end-to-end without meaningful human oversight. AAT's own AI-related CPD emphasises responsible and trustworthy AI use cases, covering accountability, transparency, privacy and the avoidance of harm or unfairness; whilst new Professional Conduct in Relation to Taxation (PCRT) guidance underlines the need for ethical safeguards when using AI in tax work.^{xiii}

Recommendation 2

As AI is more widely adopted in financial and accounting work, the Government, training providers, employers and professional bodies should ensure that AI training relevant to individuals working in accountancy and bookkeeping – whether publicly or privately funded – includes clear safeguards around responsible use, human oversight, professional judgement, accountability and data privacy. This should not only apply to CPD for existing professionals, but also to the wider pathways into the profession, so that all accountants and bookkeepers are trained to use AI as a tool to support better professional judgement. As qualifications are updated and rolled out, including the new V Level in Finance, they should reflect the ethical and professional standards expected in financial and accounting work.

07 Unlocking Opportunity

Chapter summary

This chapter explores how vocational pathways can expand access to the accounting and finance profession, support progression and help address growing skills shortages across the sector. New analysis of AAT's Salary Survey 2025 by Public First suggests that AAT qualifications, including apprenticeships, and membership are associated with stronger earnings and progression outcomes over time.

- Amongst those without qualifications beyond GCSE, AAT non-licensed members and learners earn **21%** more than median earnings for individuals whose highest qualification is at GCSE level.
- AAT non-licensed members and learners aged 19-24 earn **11% more** than their age peers across the wider economy.
- **Nearly three-quarters (74%)** of AAT apprentices report an increase in salary in the year after completion.
- **More than 4 in 5 (83%)** of AAT non-licensed members and learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds agreed that being AAT qualified had opened doors for them.
- Amongst people who recently joined AAT, median salary increases over 2024-2025 delivered an estimated return on the costs of AAT membership of **14x** for Bookkeeping members (AATQB), **10x** for Full members (MAAT) and **11x** for Fellow members (FMAAT).
- Achieving an AAT Level 4 qualification increases earnings by **£1,400** per annum. This represents a **5%** uplift in relative median earnings on a Level 3 qualification.

People will only benefit from the strong returns associated with Level 4 if they have the opportunity to move up through earlier parts of the skills pipeline. Progression from Level 2 and Level 3 remains critical to widening participation in higher-level accounting skills.

Opening access through vocational routes

If the UK is to meet growing demand for skilled finance professionals and support wider economic growth, the profession will need strong and visible routes in. But ensuring that opportunities in finance careers are spread evenly across society will be crucial. As previous AAT research shows, socio-economic background continues to shape access and progression: **49%** of the workforce come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and they progress in their careers **25%** slower even when performance and experience are similar.^{xiv}

Against this backdrop, vocational pathways have an essential role to play in widening participation at all stages of life, and are already the major route into the profession.^{xv} By combining technical training with practical, employer-relevant skills, vocational qualifications can provide a more flexible, often debt-free pathway into the profession and a mechanism for progression within it.

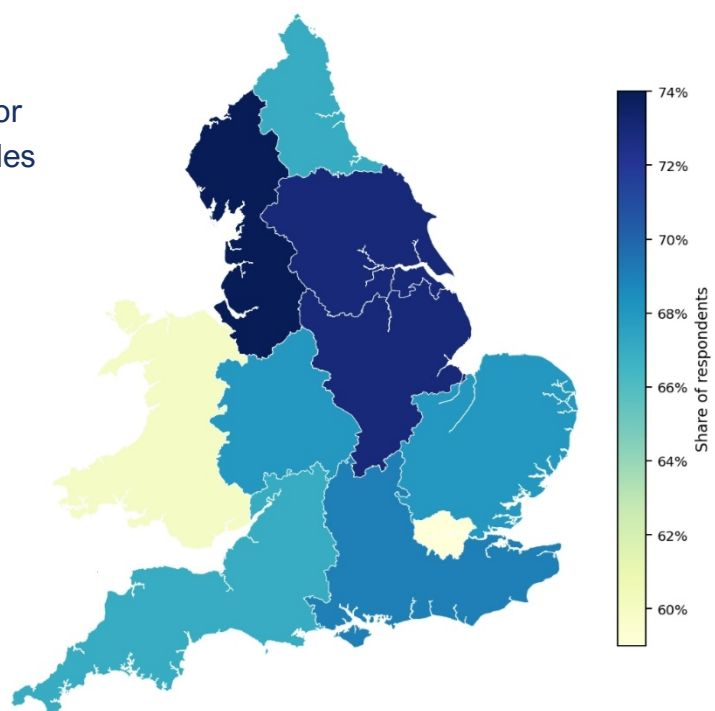
AAT is a key part of this wider vocational landscape, offering qualifications from Level 2 entry routes through to Level 4, alongside apprenticeships and professional membership. Previous AAT-commissioned research found that **one in three** accounting professionals gained their first accountancy qualification through AAT.^{xvi}

AAT's role is particularly important because most of its non-licensed members and learners do not have degree-level qualifications or above. Only **28%** have degree equivalent qualifications, compared to **40%** of the UK workforce.

Map 1, below, shows the geographic spread of AAT members and learners whose highest academic qualification is GCSEs or A Levels, or who hold no formal qualification. This suggests that AAT's routes are helping people enter and progress in accounting and finance without following a traditional graduate pathway.

Map 1: AAT respondents whose highest academic qualification is GCSE, A Level or no formal qualification – England and Wales

(Weighted AAT Salary Survey 2025)



Public First analysis finds that AAT members and learners enjoy positive wage premiums compared to people with similar levels of qualification:

Amongst those without qualifications beyond GCSE, AAT non-licensed members and learners earn **21%** more than median earnings for people whose highest qualification is at GCSE level.

The economic benefits of AAT pathways, felt at the individual-level, begin to emerge at an early stage:

AAT non-licensed members and learners aged 19-24 out-earn their age peers across the economy by 11%.

Public First's modelling also explored the role that AAT membership – offering recognition, support and development – can play specifically in delivering strong earnings potential. By estimating the median salary increase for those who became AAT members within the last 1-5 years, and deducting this from the average cost of AAT membership by membership type, Public First estimates the return on investment:

Professionals who join as an AAT Bookkeeping member (AATQB), Full member (MAAT) or Fellow member (FMAAT) in 2024 all enjoyed a median increase in their salaries in the following year, delivering a substantial return on investment on the cost of membership.

These salary increases are equivalent to estimated returns of **14x** for AATQB, **10x** for MAAT and **11x** for FMAAT members.



This should not be read as proof that AAT qualifications and membership alone overcome structural inequalities, but it does reinforce an important practical point: where progression is uneven, access to high-quality qualifications, professional recognition, CPD, guidance and networks can become more important. AAT plays an enabling role by widening access to the profession and helping people remain on a credible progression pathway once they are in it.

The power of apprenticeships

Apprenticeships allow individuals to earn, learn and build workplace experience at the same time, making them particularly valuable for those who may not see a full-time academic route as realistic or attractive.

They are also one of the clearest vocational routes *into* the accountancy profession. Progression rates into relevant occupations for finance and accounting apprentices are particularly strong at **87%** – second only to engineering apprenticeships at **88%**.^{xvii} This indicates that apprenticeships can help address an important challenge facing the

sector: **31%** of individuals holding accounting qualifications have never worked in an accounting-related role.^{xviii}

AAT's apprenticeship offer spans Levels 2 to 4 (**Table 2**). As well as entry to the profession, its apprenticeships deliver strong earnings returns, with Public First's analysis of AAT Salary Survey 2025 data finding that:

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of AAT apprentices report an increase in salary in the year after completion.

This reinforces the role apprenticeships can play in widening access to accountancy and helping more people enter and progress in the sector.

Table 2: AAT Apprenticeship Pathways

Level 2 Accounts/Finance Assistant apprenticeship	An entry-level route into accounting and finance, designed to build core skills in bookkeeping, finance administration and supporting day-to-day financial operations. The apprenticeship typically includes the AAT Level 2 Certificate in Accounting as part of on-programme learning and usually takes around 12 months to complete.
Level 3 Assistant Accountant apprenticeship v1.2	A progression route for learners developing more advanced technical accounting skills. The apprenticeship includes the AAT Level 3 Diploma in Accounting as a mandatory element of on-programme learning and supports progression into roles with greater responsibility across finance teams. It typically takes 15-18 months to complete.



That ambition to get 50% of kids to uni – I don't think that's right for our times. Because if you are a kid, or a parent of a kid, who chooses an apprenticeship, what does it say to you? Do we genuinely, as a country, afford them the same respect? Because we should. We will scrap that target and replace it with a new ambition that two-thirds of our children should go either to university or take a gold standard apprenticeship."

– **Prime Minister** Sir Keir Starmer, Labour Party Conference, September 2025



**Level 4 Professional
Accounting Technician
apprenticeship**

A higher-level technical pathway for those moving into more complex accounting work. The apprenticeship develops advanced occupational skills and can incorporate the **AAT Level 4 Diploma in Professional Accounting**, combining workplace experience with deeper technical knowledge. It typically takes 18-24 months to complete.

Improving visibility and meaningful careers advice

Despite the range of routes into the profession, not enough people see accounting, bookkeeping and finance as open to them or understand how to enter it. Misconceptions narrow the talent pipeline, including the belief (held by **57%** of young people) that university is the only credible route into accountancy.^{xix}

Public First's analysis of AAT Salary Survey 2025 data suggests that there is a stronger story to tell about vocational pathways:

More than 4 in 5 (83%) of AAT non-licensed members and learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds agree with the statement that 'being AAT qualified has opened doors for me'.

42%

of accounting professionals felt, growing up, that accounting was not a profession for people like them.

– AAT, Social Impact Research Insights, 2026

That points to the importance of more high-quality, meaningful careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG).

From 2027, the new V Level in Finance could help strengthen the visibility of vocational routes into finance and accounting in schools and colleges, but its impact will depend on whether young people, parents and advisers understand how this Level 3 qualification can support progression into the profession.

Careers guidance is needed for young people making early choices about education and work, but it is also required for adults who may be considering a career change. Given the scale of future demand in accountancy, widening access cannot rely on school-leavers alone.



Recommendation 3

The Government should support the strengthening of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) for finance and accounting careers, at every stage.

In schools and colleges, this should mean stronger expectations that delivery of CEIAG, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks, present vocational, technical, apprenticeship and Higher Education routes into accountancy with equal prominence. The Government should also provide additional funding to enable more structured employer and professional body engagement in high-demand sectors such as accountancy, so that learners hear directly about the full range of routes into the profession.

For adults, the roll-out of the integrated National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus from autumn 2026 represents an opportunity to create a broader jobs and careers service that moves beyond traditional unemployment support. Working with strategic authorities, employers and professional bodies, the service should provide structured support to help adults navigate routes into the profession, identify vacancies and training options, and understand how different qualifications connect to earnings, progression and employment.

Supporting progression into higher-level skills

The economic value of widening access to vocational pathways becomes especially clear at Level 4 and above. Based on AAT's Salary Survey 2025, Public First's analysis finds:

Achieving an AAT Level 4 qualification is associated with an average increase in earnings of £1,400 per year compared to holding an AAT Level 3 qualification.

This uplift (5%) matters particularly because future skills demand is expected to be concentrated increasingly at higher levels. Skills England projects that **more than 90%** of additional employment in priority occupations within Professional and Business Services between 2025 and 2030 – equivalent to **53,000** roles – will require qualifications at Level 4 or above.^{xx}

But this strengthens, rather than weakens, the case for entry-level and intermediate routes into the profession. If more learners are to benefit from higher-level qualifications, the progression ladder that starts at Levels 2 and 3 will remain critical.

Case study: A new route to higher-level accounting roles

AAT's partnership with the University of Exeter illustrates what a more connected skills ladder can look like in practice.^{xxi} Launched in 2025, the **Accounting Finance Manager Degree Apprenticeship** offers a debt-free pathway for school leavers and adult learners to progress into higher-level accounting roles. The programme is the first to combine the AAT Level 4 Diploma in Professional Accounting – completed during the first year – with a bachelor's degree, blending practical, employer-focused training with academic study.

This partnership shows how technical and academic pathways can be joined up more clearly to support progression into higher-level roles. That matters in the context of future demand: Level 6 and above chartered and certified accountancy roles are projected to increase by 6,000 by the end of this decade.^{xxii}

It also gives access to Level 4 and above qualifications a dual importance. For some learners, Level 4 is a valuable destination in its own right, offering strong earnings returns and access to skilled roles. For others, it is a stepping stone to further progression, including degree-level learning and chartered status.

The policy ambition, therefore, is not simply to increase starts at Level 4; it should be that more people are able to *reach* Level 4, if we are to avoid widening skills gaps beyond 2030. Strong earnings returns at higher levels make the case for expanding access to Level 4 and above qualifications – and the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement from 2027 could support that – but that goal will only be achieved if progression routes from Level 2 and Level 3 remain open, affordable and visible. Otherwise, the learners who stand to benefit most from higher-level vocational study risk losing out.

This is especially important for adult learners, career changers and those balancing study with work or caring responsibilities. For many, progression is not linear and cannot begin at Level 4. Over **one in five** of those whose first accountancy qualification is through AAT are later career entrants into the profession.^{xxiii} Lower-level qualifications are often the point of entry, confidence-building and re-engagement that makes later progression possible. In that sense, Level 2-3 provision should not be seen as competing with the Government's ambition to see more people taking part in education and training at Level 4 and above, but as a key part of making it work.

Recommendation 4

The Government should ensure that the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and wider post-16 funding reforms support flexible progression in accountancy across the life course, whatever the starting point. In particular, it should assess whether lower-level qualifications that lead directly to employment or provide a clear pathway to higher technical learning should, in future, be eligible for more support. This should sit alongside modular and flexible delivery models, including remote learning where appropriate, so that adult learners, career changers and those with work or caring responsibilities are not locked out of accessing accounting qualifications.

08 Conclusion

This report shows that AAT qualifications and membership deliver substantial value to individuals, employers and the wider UK economy.

At an individual level, the evidence points to strong returns from progression through AAT pathways, both in terms of earnings and professional development. At a sector level, the findings highlight the importance of a well-supported accounting workforce in driving productivity, supporting business performance and helping the economy adapt to technological and structural change. At a national level, they reinforce the case for seeing accounting and bookkeeping not simply as occupational functions, but as part of the skills and productivity infrastructure on which growth depends.

The report also makes clear that **future success is not guaranteed**. The opportunities presented by artificial intelligence, automation and rising demand for higher-level skills will only be realised if the profession has the capacity to adapt. That means ensuring access to relevant training, strengthening wider workforce capability, and ensuring that progression routes remain open to people at different stages of life and from different backgrounds.

Vocational and technical pathways will be central to that effort. They already provide an important route into accountancy for many learners, career changers and working professionals. But if the profession is to widen participation and meet future workforce needs, those pathways must be visible, credible and connected to further progression. Strong returns at Level 4 and above make that especially important, but those returns will only translate into broader opportunity if learners are supported to move through the pipeline from earlier stages as well.

Taken together, these findings point to a practical agenda for action. **Government, employers, training providers and professional bodies all have a key role** in strengthening the profession's skills base, widening access and ensuring that new technologies are adopted in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, professional judgement and trust.

In that context, AAT's qualifications, apprenticeships and membership form part of the infrastructure through which a more productive, resilient and inclusive profession can be built.

09 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Government should work with employers, professional bodies and training providers to develop a clearer workforce plan for accounting and finance within the Professional and Business Services sector, building on existing sector analysis and strengthening the skills evidence that underpins it.

This should include more systematic use of skills-level evidence alongside occupational data, drawing on employer insight and professional body evidence to better capture the mix of technical, digital and transferable capabilities increasingly required across the workforce.

As Skills England develops sector-based skills passports for PBS, these should reflect the capabilities that matter most in accounting and finance – including not only qualifications and technical competence, but also the wider skills that increasingly shape progression, productivity and mobility within the labour market.

Recommendation 2

As AI is more widely adopted in financial and accounting work, the Government, training providers, employers and professional bodies should ensure that AI training relevant to individuals working in accountancy and bookkeeping – whether publicly or privately funded – includes clear safeguards around responsible use, human oversight, professional judgement, accountability and data privacy. This should not only apply to CPD for existing professionals, but also to the wider pathways into the profession, so that all accountants and bookkeepers are trained to use AI as a tool to support better professional judgement. As qualifications are updated and rolled out, including the new V Level in Finance, they should reflect the ethical and professional standards expected in financial and accounting work.

Recommendation 3

The Government should support the strengthening of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) for finance and accounting careers at every stage.

In schools and colleges, this should mean stronger expectations that delivery of CEIAG, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks, present vocational, technical, apprenticeship and Higher Education routes into accountancy with equal prominence. The Government should also provide additional funding to enable more structured employer and professional body engagement in high-demand sectors such as accountancy, so that learners hear directly about the full range of routes into the profession.

For adults, the roll-out of the integrated National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus from autumn 2026 represents an opportunity to create a broader jobs and careers service that moves beyond traditional unemployment support. Working with strategic authorities, employers and professional bodies, the service should be bolstered to provide structured support to help adults navigate routes into the profession, identify vacancies and training options, and understand how different qualifications connect to earnings, progression and employment.

Recommendation 4

The Government should ensure that the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and wider post-16 funding reforms support flexible progression in accountancy across the life course, whatever the starting point. In particular, it should assess whether lower-level qualifications that lead directly to employment or provide a clear pathway to higher technical learning should, in future, be eligible for more support. This should sit alongside modular and flexible delivery models, including remote learning where appropriate, so that adult learners, career changers and those with work or caring responsibilities are not locked out of accessing accounting qualifications.

10 Methodology

We used a range of different methods to quantify the economic impact and wider value of AAT membership, participation and achievement of AAT qualifications.

Whilst AAT commissioned this report, all information in this report is derived or estimated by Public First analysis using both AAT proprietary and publicly available information. AAT supplied additional data from the AAT Salary Survey 2025 of licensed and student and non-licensed members, carried out by a third party. Where information has been obtained from third party sources and proprietary research, this is clearly referenced in the footnotes.

Economic value of AAT member income

AAT members are grouped into five categories: FMAAT, MAAT, licensed, AATQB and AATQB + student members. The median salary and private client income for AAT members is determined from the 2025 AAT Salary Survey. These median salary values are multiplied by the current number of AAT members, to achieve an aggregate income value.

The aggregate income value is divided by ONS's latest (2024) estimates for GVA per worker in the UK to achieve an interpretable final figure in terms of FTE jobs.

Economic value of AAT student salary income

AAT students are grouped into three categories: Level 2, Level 3, Level 4. The median salary for AAT students is determined from the 2025 AAT Salary Survey. These median salary values are multiplied by the current number of AAT members, to achieve an aggregate income value.

The aggregate income value is compared to the ONS's regional account data to establish the local authority with the most comparable GVA to the collective of AAT students.

AI-induced productivity gains for the accounting and bookkeeping sector

The AI impact has been calculated using an internal Public First AI labour productivity model, broken down into SIC classifications. We estimate AI's potential economic impact by mapping generative AI-exposed tasks from the US O*Net database across around 800 occupations, then aggregating those exposure rates into sectors and ISCO-08 occupations weighted by ONS data on employment numbers and wages in the UK. The

analysis is task-based rather than job-based, therefore the gains from AI adoption are on improving the productivity of specific tasks rather than entire jobs. We translate the resulting labour-productivity uplift into a GVA increase, assuming capital intensity stays constant. The AI-augmented labour productivity measure is then used on GVA values for the sector classification “Accounting, bookkeeping and auditing activities; tax consultancy”. This means that the sector’s current GVA value is multiplied by the AI labour augmenting uplift.

Value of AAT Fellow membership and increase in median earnings

This analysis estimates the association between AAT Fellow status and members’ earnings amongst unlicensed members only. Median salaries for FMAAT and MAAT members who work full time are taken from the 2025 AAT Salary Survey. The difference between these two median salaries is determined as the salary increase between membership groups.

Additional context is added by assuming all 6,600 FMAAT members have experienced this increase through a simple summation, leading to the equivalent jobs estimate. We divide the total value of FMAAT median salaries by the ONS's latest (2024) estimates for GVA per worker in the UK to express this in terms of FTE jobs.

Difference in salary for AAT Level 4 students

Median salaries for Level 3 and Level 4 students who work full time are taken from the 2025 AAT Salary Survey. The difference between these two median salaries is determined as the salary increase between groups.

Accounting skills gap and FTE equivalence

This model estimates the potential economic benefit of reducing selected skills gaps in the UK accounting workforce. It focuses on three capabilities: digital literacy, budgeting and forecasting, and leadership. The analysis combines a baseline estimate of the accounting population using NOMIS data with assumptions about the scale of current skills shortages, the extent to which retraining could reduce those shortages, and the productivity value of increased effective labour capacity.

- Accounting population is estimated using results from the NOMIS database on accounting professionals in the UK
- Skills gap is estimated using survey data from AAT or secondary literature on the skills gaps in accounting
- The productivity impact of reducing these shortages uses sources from academic literature on the direct impact of digital literacy skills, or - in the case of financial literacy - of the productive impact through increases in wellbeing due to limitations in the literature.

- An additional assumption is added on the utilisation rate of this additional training or investment, as not every worker who gains new skills will use them in their work, in effect making the skills gap persist.
- The productive impact of this change on the population is determined to be the FTE equivalence in jobs.

Economic impact of reducing accounting skills gap

This analysis builds on the model used in the previous assessment of the reduction in the skills gap. The model uses the FTE jobs figure to estimate the economic value of that increased labour capacity by applying a productivity or GVA-per-worker assumption. This produces an estimated gross value-added impact for each skill category and for the intervention as a whole.

Return on investment of AAT membership

The analysis is based on the survey responses for AAT unlicensed members and students from the 2025 AAT salary survey. Only those who became AATQB, MAAT or FMAAT members in the last 1-5 years are included in the sample, which totals 1,103 observations. Median salaries and median increase in salary over the last year is calculated across these three groups. Since the survey data only asks for the value of salary increases, the medians are necessarily positive. Any salary decreases are not included in this estimation.

The ROI is estimated using 2024 AAT membership fees. Due to the restrictiveness of the salary data for membership tenure, i.e. responses are either less than 1 year or 1-5 years, not in single years, the 1-5 years data is used. It is assumed that all respondents in this group became members a year ago, and their return on investment is estimated for the previous year.

The ROI is estimated by dividing the change in salary increase and fees over the cost of fees. This approach is intended to describe the association between recent AAT membership and reported salary increases, rather than to attribute the full observed gain causally to AAT membership alone.

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