Business West

Simplifying Skills Communication Report

Business West LSIPs

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Simplifying Skills: a guide to accessible language and inclusive communication

Contents

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Executive Summary

This report was developed by Bella Manara Santos, Business Engagement Executive, and Louise Holland, Marketing Executive, to accompany the work being done by the wider Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) team. Bella and Louise are the founders of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee at Business West, as well as chairing the internal Global Majority and LGBTQ+ staff groups.

The objective of the LSIP is to gather research on business needs and set actionable priorities. These priorities aim to enhance collaboration between employers, education and training providers, and stakeholders to better prepare employees for the workforce. This report addresses the critical issue of inaccessible language and communication barriers in the Education and Professional Services sectors. The primary goal of the research was to identify and simplify confusing terminology to ensure the LSIP and other business skills support is accessible to a wider audience, particularly employers and individuals not directly involved in the skills sector.

Key Findings and Barriers

The research, which included employer engagement via a survey, a focus group with skills professionals, and one-to-one interviews with the LSIP team, revealed significant communication challenges:

- Widespread Inaccessibility: 100% of surveyed employers believe that current messaging about skills and training opportunities fails to reach all people who could benefit. Furthermore, 100% of survey respondents were unaware of existing inclusive language resources.
- Confusing Terminology: A wide range of terms and acronyms, such as "green skills," "SME" (which has multiple meanings), "NEET," "ESOL," "Transformation," and "Upskilling," were consistently highlighted as vague or confusing without proper context. Educational jargon, like "Level 3," also acts as a significant barrier.
- Digital Communication Importance: 44% of respondents find information about skills via social media, underscoring the necessity of clear and accessible digital communications.
- Need for Inclusivity: The report stresses the importance of using plain English and inclusive language, noting that 23% of working-age adults in the UK have

a long-term illness, impairment, or disability, making accessible content crucial.[1]

Recommendations for Improvement

Respondents and focus group participants provided clear suggestions for improving communication:

- Simplify Language and Contextualise Jargon: Use simpler language, reduce the use of acronyms, and provide clear explanations or analogies for complex, sector-specific terms.
- Vary Communication Methods: To reach diverse audiences, the LSIP team is encouraged to use varied communication channels, including local press, and leaflets, in addition to digital platforms.
- Prioritise Accessibility: Incorporate inclusive practices such as using alternative text for images, moderating the use of emojis and hashtags, and ensuring the tone and format match the audience's understanding, while meeting the criteria and guidance set out by the government for this project.
- Meet the Audience "Where They Are": Communications should avoid assuming expert knowledge and should be tailored to the specific audience and context, sometimes requiring multiple versions of a message.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The LSIP team aims to continuously refine its work to ensure greater accessibility. Moving forward, the toolkits and checklists gathered during this research will support the team in moderating language, including image descriptions, and exploring more inclusive ways to connect with businesses. The ultimate goal is to ensure that business owners and employees of all abilities can easily understand the Local Skills Improvement Plan and access the support it offers. The report includes a list of accessibility guides and jargon busters in its appendices to support this ongoing effort.

[1] Disability facts and figures | Disability charity Scope UK. (n.d.). Scope. https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures

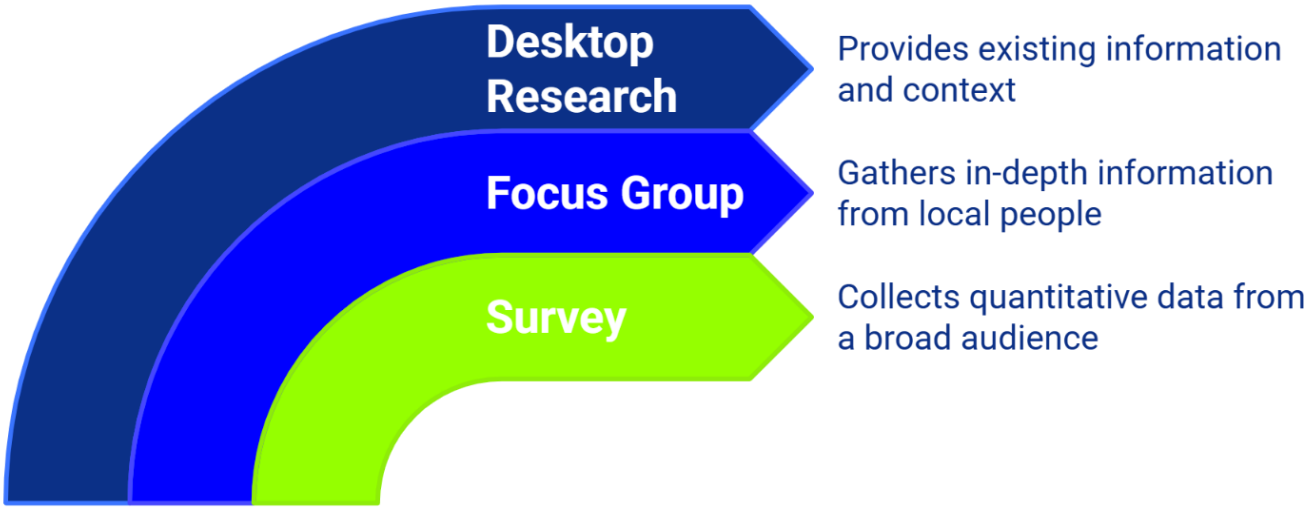
Introduction

Through our engagement with employers, the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) team often hears that finding and accessing learning opportunities can be difficult, especially for people who do not work in Skills and Education. Websites and advertisements about learning opportunities are sometimes full of complicated words and technical language, which can make it harder for many people to understand and access these options.

Along with input from local employers, the LSIP team wanted to identify potentially confusing language and communication styles that might stop some businesses and individuals from starting new learning opportunities or accessing business support. Our goal was to ensure our messaging is clear and easy for everyone to understand.

Methodology

The research was aimed at understanding how people find and use learning opportunities. Drawing on insights gained from three years of employer engagement through the LSIP, factors that contribute to clear and effective communication were researched. Terminology that may lead to misunderstandings were identified and useful accessibility tools that enhance communication clarity were discovered. There were three methods used to gather this information:

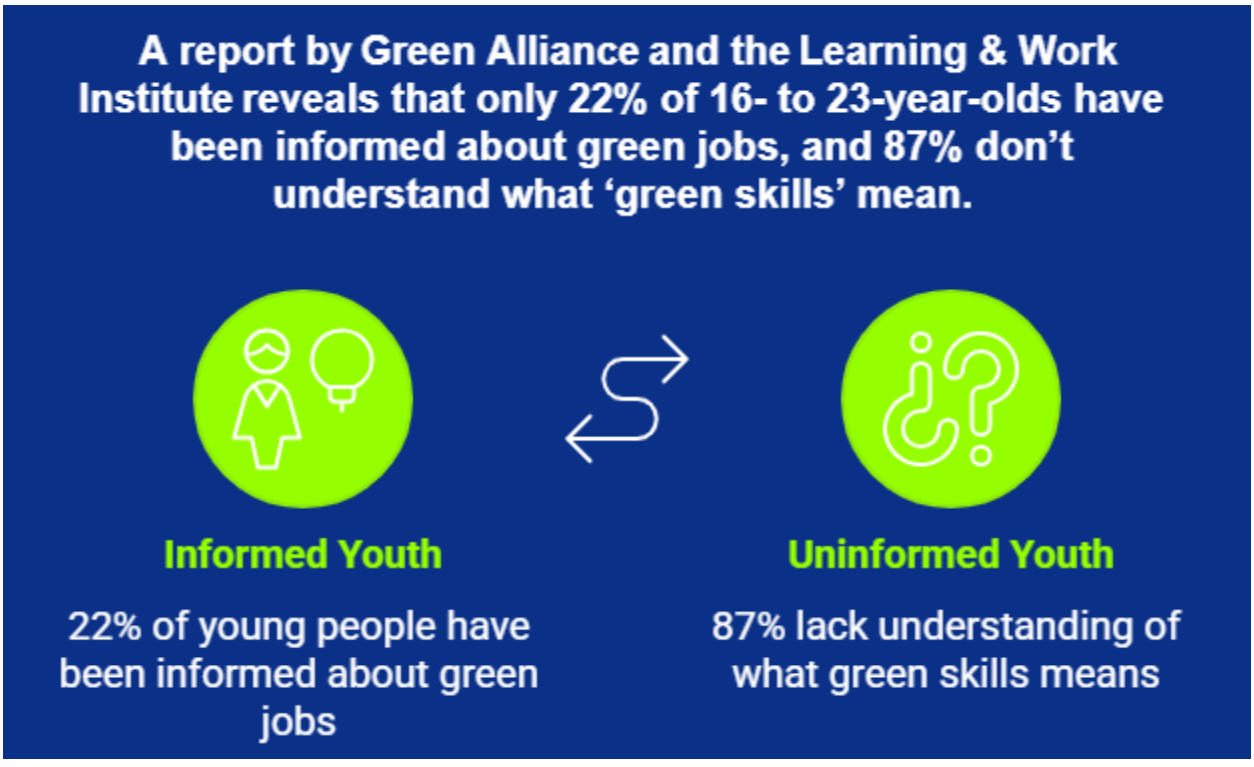


We held an in-person focus group, one-to-one interviews and offered the opportunity to our network to provide written responses for this research topic.

Context and Background

Through our engagements with businesses, we have encountered several instances where the language used to discuss skills has been reported as confusing. Across the range of in-person events the LSIP team has hosted, we have heard people highlight terms such as "green skills" (the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a society which reduces the impact of human activity on the environment), and the acronym "SME" (small-to-medium enterprise).

Our research has highlighted the need for an inclusive and accessible framework when talking about skills. The overuse of acronyms (especially without full explanations), vague terms without context and complicated, dense paragraphs create barriers for the end-users to access content which may be relevant to their skills needs. This sentiment is echoed by Green Alliance and the Learning & Work Institute, who found young people experienced barriers when attempting to engage with green skills.[2]



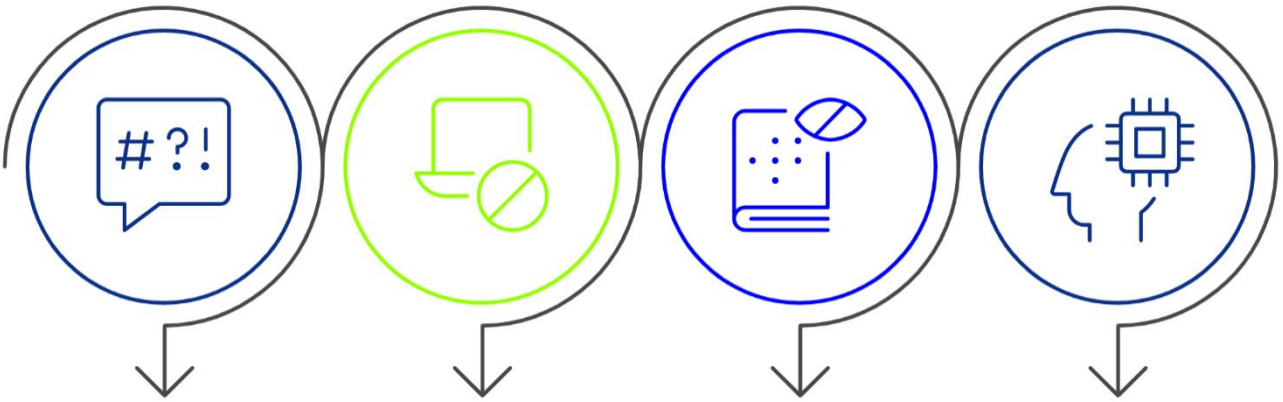
[2] Green Alliance. (2022). Closing the UK's green skills gap. In Green Alliance Policy Insight. https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Closing_the_UKs_green_skills_gap.pdf

This statistic highlights how understanding can become more complicated when vague terms are used. It's up to the person communicating to provide examples, analogies or methods, such as specific job titles related to "green skills" that can give the end-user clarity and remove complicated barriers to understanding what is on offer.

Where possible, it is recommended to consider end-user understanding in communications around skills and find out any accessibility barriers by working directly to improve experiences.

Considerations and barriers

When designing marketing materials, there are some key elements to consider. As there is a diverse audience in the skills sector, it's essential to write in a way that everyone can understand. We have listed some considerations with the images below:



Language Barriers

Acronyms, complex words and jargon can exclude and confuse people, causing them to lose trust

Digital Barriers

People might not have the necessary devices, or websites and apps may not work well with support tools for people with Disabilities.

Disability Barriers

Website and events may not be accessible to people with disabilities or their support equipment.

Technical language

Sometimes using jargon is necessary when writing for specialist audiences. It is best practice to provide a plain language description when it's first used.

It is important to use inclusive language and write clearly in plain English, as 23% of working-age adults in the UK have a long-term illness, impairment or disability.[3] The Department for Education's 'how many people?' tool can help visualise the types of disabilities and impairments your audience may live with. Using clear and inclusive language can help these individuals in accessing opportunities. It's also important to include alternative text and image descriptions for all non-decorative images, and to avoid overusing emojis and hashtags. This can improve the experience of those using screen-reading technology while reading your content.

In the appendices, you will find a selection of existing toolkits and guides which can provide further detail on creating inclusive and accessible content.

Current Practices and Findings

We found that 80% of our survey participants actively search for and seek out information about skills, training and learning

Survey Findings

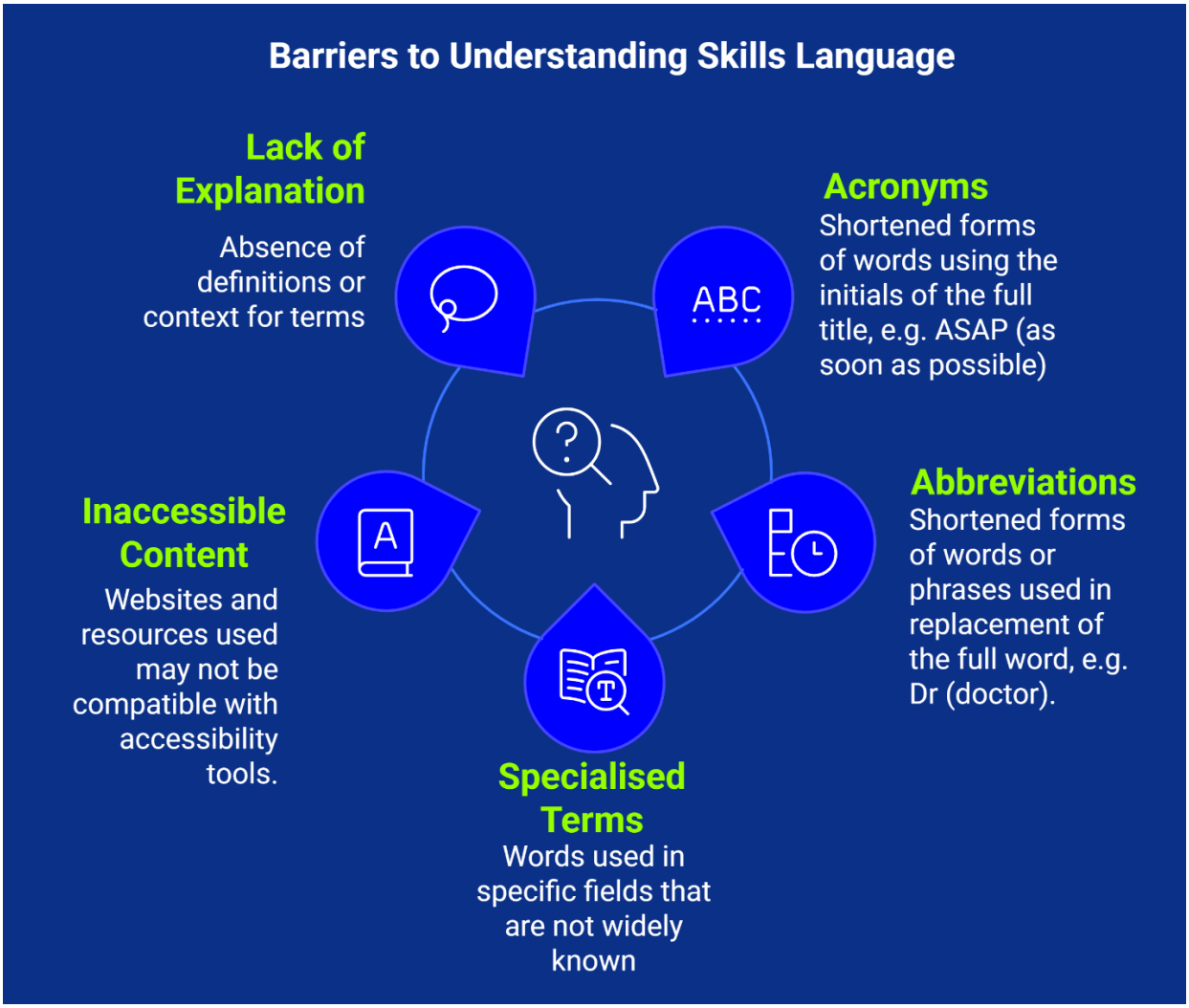
From our 10 survey responses, 44% of respondents stated that they find information about skills, training, or opportunities through Social Media, while the rest selected 'other', providing examples such as trade press and emails from training providers. However, almost 50% of respondents said Social Media highlights how important our digital communications are in discovering new learning opportunities.

We received a range of responses when asked about any words, acronyms, or phrases that were unclear or not widely understood. These included acronyms such as "Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)" and "English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)." Respondents highlighted vague phrases that lacked context or explanation, such as "Transformation" (the changing of skills or career) and "Upskilling" (learning new skills).

[3] Disability facts and figures | Disability charity Scope UK. (n.d.). Scope. https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures

One respondent pointed out that using specialist terms in education, such as “Level 3" (i.e. A Level or T Level[4]), isn’t always clear to those outside the sector.

Our research helped us create a picture of the various obstacles to understanding skills language that we uncovered. (See graph below)



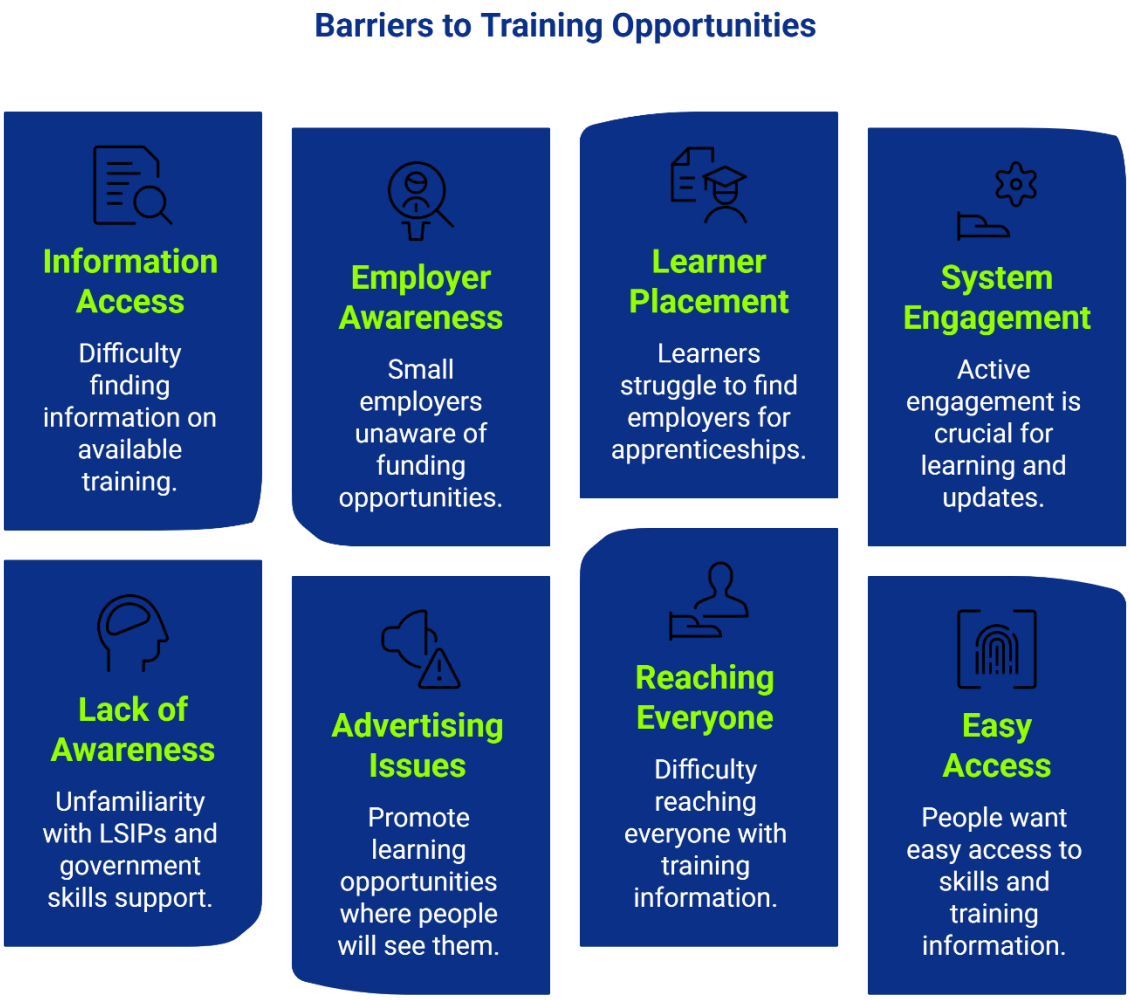
100% of employers answered ‘no’ when asked, “Do you think the current messaging about skills and training opportunities reaches all people who could benefit?”

When asked if there were changes they would make, respondents highlighted better engagement with SMEs (as the LSIP is working on), simpler language, fewer acronyms, and varying methods of communication (e.g., radio or leaflets). .

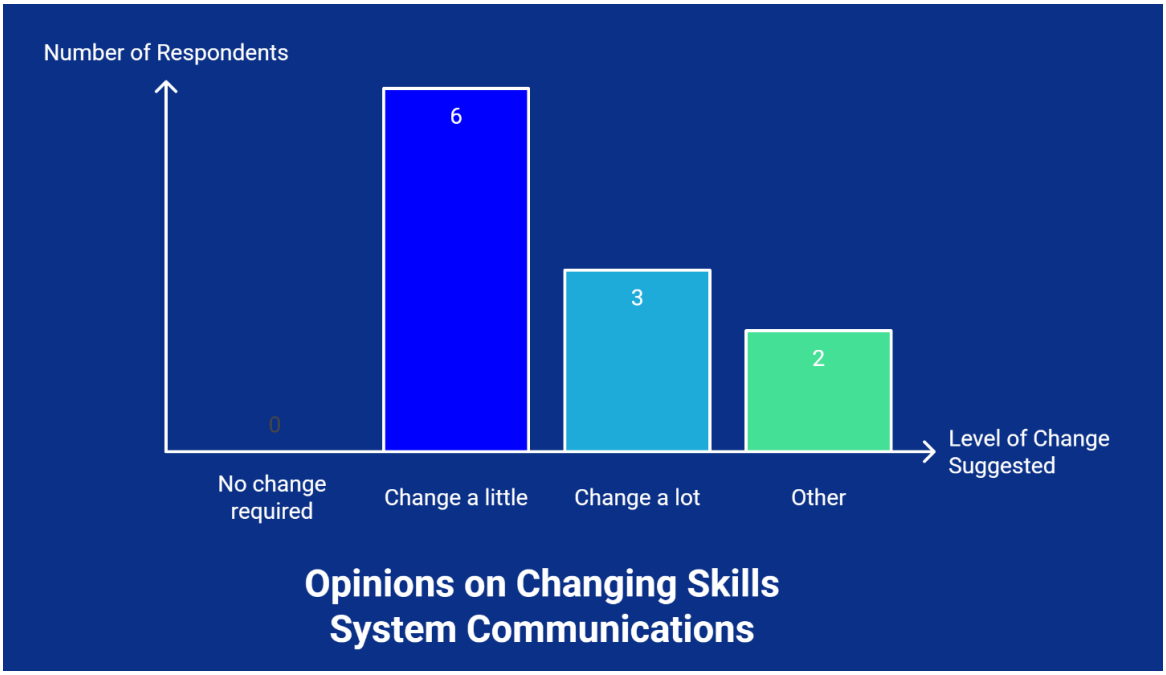
[4] Government Digital Service. (2024, November 12). What qualification levels mean. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels

None of our respondents think that employers, learners, or workforce are fully aware of the available skills support. This highlights the importance for those working in skills development to share information more effectively about these initiatives and opportunities, so we can make a bigger difference.

The image below highlights the responses given when asked to give additional information:

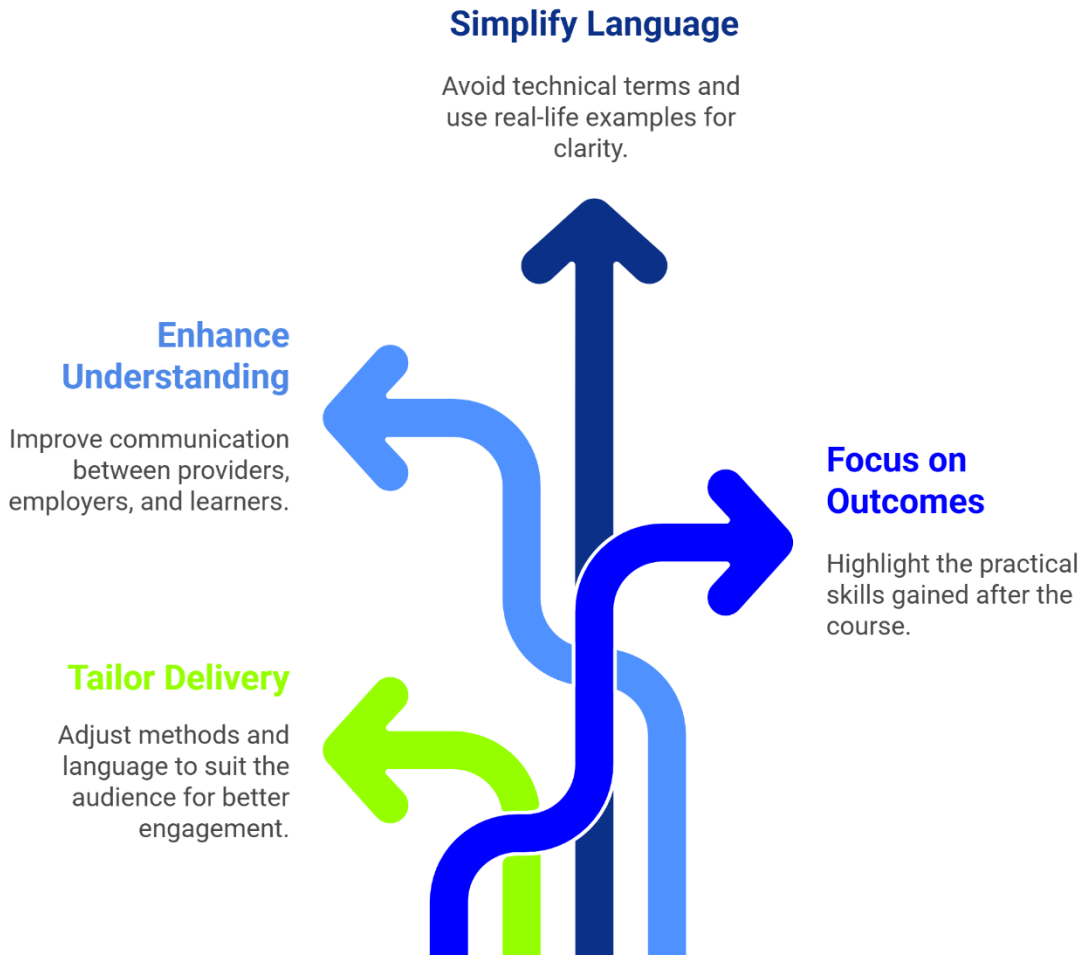


Our next question was, “Do you think communications about the skills system could be changed to reach different audiences?” See the respondents' answers presented in the graph below.



All respondents agreed that improvements are necessary for better communication about skills, with most indicating only small changes are required.

The image below highlights the changes suggested by respondents.



To assess whether our respondents were aware of existing resources, we asked, "Have you come across a toolkit or resources for inclusive language with a focus on the skills and education system?"

100% of survey respondents were not aware of available inclusive language resources

In response to this, we gathered a selection of available inclusive language resources (see appendices). The responses highlight the need for better awareness and promotion of existing resources to improve communication about skills, making them more accessible and simple.

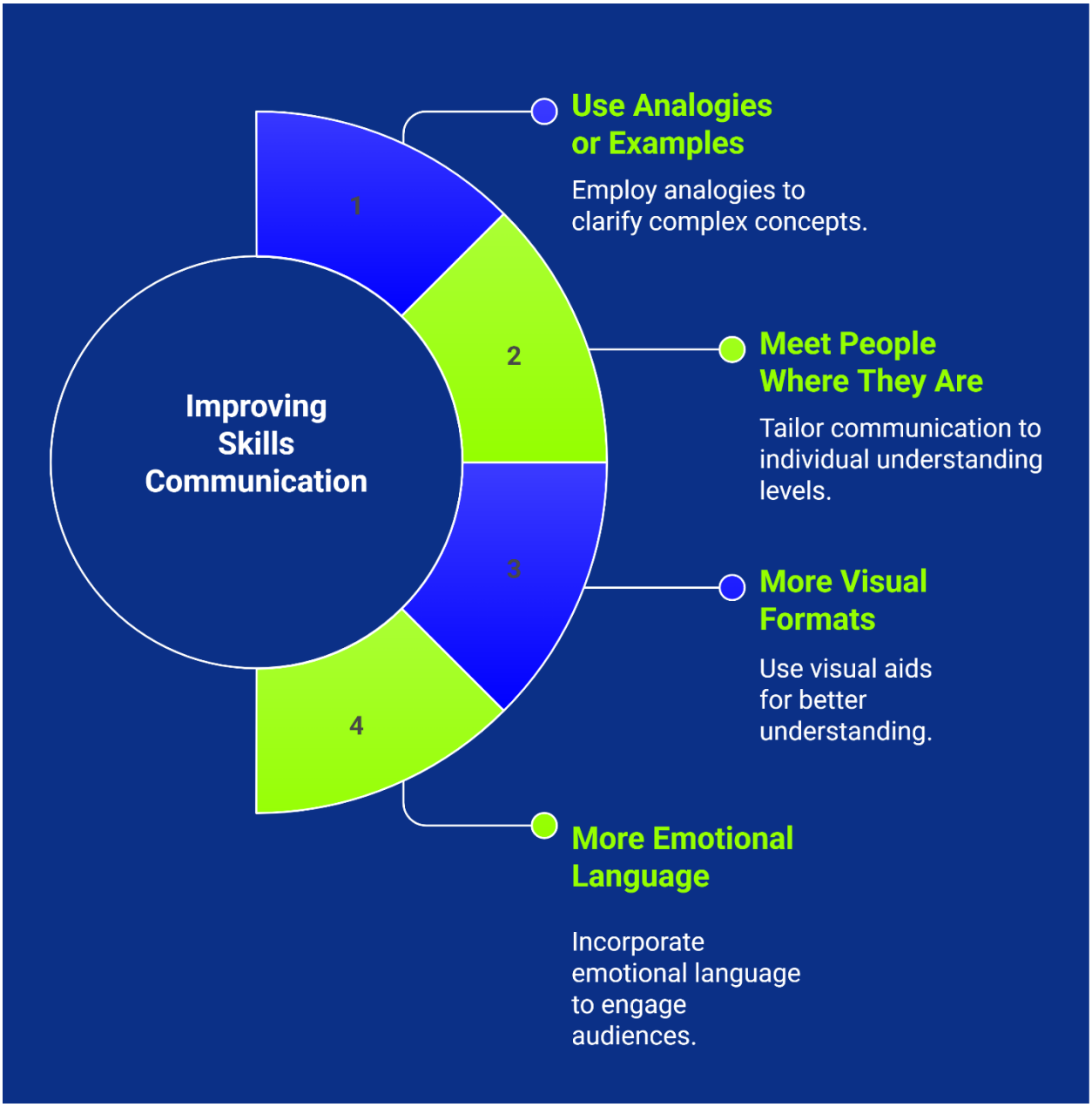
Focus group findings

In our research, we engaged with

we engaged with professionals working in/with knowledge of the skills landscape such as a Marketing Manager and a Director, to identify terms they found confusing. Some of the words highlighted include Sustainability, Clean Energy, Upskilling, Skills System and SME.

As highlighted above, some acronyms like SME can have multiple meanings, e.g. Small to Medium Enterprises and Subject Matter Expert. Both could be relevant to skills depending on the context in which they are used. Phrases like 'Skills System' (i.e. schools, colleges, apprenticeships, etc.) and 'Upskilling' (gaining further skills) are vague and don't clarify their meaning. Terms such as 'Clean Energy' and 'Sustainability' provide awareness of the topic but could cause confusion due to their varied definitions.

Our focus group attendees also shared their thoughts on how to improve skills communications and make them more accessible. The graph below summarises their suggestions.



The main points highlighted include incorporating more visual formats and using analogies to explain complex terminology or sector-specific jargon. “Meeting people where they are” involves things like not assuming someone has expert knowledge on topics unless specialist knowledge is expected from the audience, and explaining any technical terms the first time they’re used.

Another point raised was the lack of emotional language when marketing learning opportunities. While not always appropriate depending on your audience, using emotional language can be a hook and a way to engage audiences, providing

warmth, excitement, or happiness in tone to get the audience excited about the subject matter.

Internal Interviews

Communications

We spoke with the Head of Corporate Communications at Business West to understand their perspective on skills, complicated language, and jargon.

When asked how to define clear communication, they responded, “Clear communication avoids jargon and has no ambiguity.” This highlights the same barriers as our other respondents, who mentioned jargon/acronyms and vague terms without any explanation as barriers to fully understanding learning opportunities.

It was also noted that educational jargon, like the different Levels (1 to 8) of learning and qualifications, can often be confusing. To address this, where possible include an explanation when this information is needed, for example in job advertisements. Without the context or background from working in education, these phrases may be meaningless to the reader without explanation.

Phrases that were also mentioned were “levy,” when referencing the “apprenticeship levy,” and “tertiary.”

One key takeaway from our internal research was the importance of considering the context and your audience. An interviewee noted, “Sometimes using technical terms can convey a message in one word that would take a few words to get across.” For instance, when writing for the government, you must use the language they understand and expect. This often involves acronyms and jargon due to the complex topics being addressed.

In summary, it’s essential to recognise the audience and context before selecting words, tone, and format. Use complex language only when necessary; typically, our communication should match the audience’s understanding. Sometimes this requires multiple versions of a message to address different audiences. This can be achieved by using shorter words where possible, such as ‘help’ instead of ‘facilitate’, or by adapting the format to suit a different audience, for example, posting on Instagram instead of LinkedIn.

Conclusion

In the LSIP team, we are regularly refining our work to ensure continuous improvement in our accessibility. We aim to develop valuable and easy-to-use resources for everyone, and to ensure that business owners and employees of all abilities can understand the Local Skills Improvement Plan and how it could support their growth.

We will aim to do this by using the toolkits and checklists we've found during our research to ensure we check the language we use, include image descriptions, and moderate our use of emojis and hashtags. We will also explore alternative, more inclusive ways to connect with businesses and ensure that we consider the language and method of communication used in any promotion of our events. This could include advertising through press, handing out flyers or reaching out to local representative organisations. We will continue to gather feedback from our LSIP audience to ensure that everyone has a great experience using the LSIP services.

Appendices

Resources

Here are some resources gathered throughout our research which may support your accessibility journey.

Accessibility guides:

Department for Education's guidance to meet the Plain Language standard
CharityComms Accessible Communications Resources Library
Empower Agency's Social Media Accessibility Tips
Accessible Social's resources and guidebook for social media
BBC's How to Write Alt Text Descriptions
Department for Education's 'How many people' tool

Jargon busters:

Green Careers Hub's Jargon Buster
Skills for Care Jargon Buster
Manchester University's Higher Education Jargon Buster
The Future Focus' Jargon Buster for Students
Get Career Confident's Jargon Buster
Bristol Climate Nature's Climate and Disability Jargon Buster
South Bristol Youth's Careers Jargon Buster
Disability Rights UK's Jargon Buster

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3. Government Digital Service. (2024, November 12). What qualification levels mean. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels