Broken ladders

Why the ‘ladder of opportunity’ is broken for so many young people, and how to fix it

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Executive summary

The academic pathway from GCSEs to A-levels to an undergraduate degree at university is a well-trodden and well-understood route that attracts tens of thousands of young people in England every year. However, while this pathway receives considerable political and media interest, just 37 per cent of young people take three A-levels in their final years at school or college. In other words, over six in ten young people are not on a solely academic path. Even so, ever since then Prime Minister Tony Blair's infamous speech in 1999 that set a target of 50 per cent of young people entering Higher Education (HE), the academic pathway has been placed on a pedestal above all else.

The statistics lay bare the impact of so many young people being badly neglected. In 2022, 12.3 per cent of young people aged 16-24 in England were 'Not in Education, Employment and Training' (NEET) – the same proportion as when Tony Blair gave his aforementioned speech. Meanwhile, just 2.8 per cent of 16-year-olds were on an apprenticeship in 2022 – down from 7.9 per cent in 1999. Even if you include 19 to 24-year-olds, the volume of young people starting an apprenticeship has not increased in 20 years. To unearth the root causes of these concerning outcomes, this report investigates why the first few rungs on the 'ladder of opportunity' are missing for so many young people who do not follow the academic path.

Bringing young people closer to employers

Surveys of employers often report that they are hesitant to recruit 16 to 18-year-olds due to concerns that they may lack 'soft skills', motivation or the right attitudes. While this is understandable from an employer's perspective, it illustrates the importance of ensuring that young people who are not on an academic path can acquire and utilise these skills and attributes before they leave school or college. Two initiatives under the last Labour government proved remarkably successful in this regard.

The 'Young Apprenticeships' (YA) programme for 14 to 16-year-olds offered at least 50 days of workplace experience over two years (typically two days per week) alongside a Level 2 vocational qualification in the relevant industry sector. 95 per cent of YA participants progressed onto Further Education / training, with 19 per cent moving onto an apprenticeship. An evaluation by Ofsted found that pupils were "enthusiastic, well-motivated and well-behaved" and they "spoke highly of the provision which they enjoyed a great deal" and meant they were "treated more like adults". Teachers also noted that "young apprentices took more responsibility for their own learning than their peers in school". Employers were equally

impressed, and felt the programme helped pupils link "their school studies to the world of work" and "developed skills and attributes which made them more employable" while also gaining detailed insights into particular jobs and sectors.

It is not just spending time in the workplace that can help prepare young people to get onto the ladder of opportunity. The 'Increased Flexibility Programme' (IFP) in the 2000s, which offered vocational learning (often at local colleges) alongside academic subjects at school, was not only popular but also improved pupils' "attitudes, behaviour and social skills". Separate reviews from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and Ofsted reported that pupils progressed at least as well in their IFP qualifications as they did in their school subjects, if not better. Both teachers and pupils agreed that the IFP had led to "improved confidence" and "greater maturity" among participating pupils and helped them "engage (and in some cases re-engage) into learning."

The demise of these programmes means that the non-academic courses before the age of 16 are now severely restricted irrespective of a pupils' interests and abilities. The Department for Education (DfE) has approved 76 'Technical Awards' that provide 14 to 16-year-olds with "applied knowledge and practical skills", but this compares to 324 academic qualifications. The sparsity of Technical Awards helps explain why they attracted just over 400,000 exam entries in 2022 compared to 5.2 million GCSE entries. The way that the performance of schools is measured by the DfE also sends out a strong signal – most notably through the 'EBacc' and 'Progress 8' – that technical and vocational subjects are second class options relative to GCSEs.

For many years, the mantra in government has been that there should be no 'specialisation' before the age of 16, meaning that almost all young people are effectively pushed through the academic pathway. Even after age 16, technical and vocational education is in a worrying state. The DfE's new 'T-level' qualifications, launched in 2020, were supposed to bring about a renaissance in high-quality technical education but have fallen flat. Recent reports by Ofsted and the Education Select Committee in Parliament have delivered damning verdicts on the design and implementation of T-levels and described how many warning signs continue to be ignored by ministers. These include the lack of interest among employers to offer work placements (which are compulsory for all T-level students), the alarmingly high drop-out rates and the unmanageable volume of content in a single T-level course (equivalent to three A-levels). Worse still, many students have been misled about the prospect of attending university after completing their T-level, as some universities have refused to accept it as a valid entry qualification. To compound this, only 14 per cent of learners who were entered onto a 'transition year' as they were not initially ready to begin a T-level actually progressed onto the T-level afterwards. In short, T-levels have been badly mis-sold to young people.

While T-levels struggle, other programmes aimed at helping those aged 16 and over move into employment have been quietly culled. Traineeships were created in 2014 to offer 16 to 24-year-olds the chance to develop their skills and gain experience in the workplace. Although traineeships did not offer a wage or bursary, 92 per cent of trainees reported that they would recommend it to others. Moreover, a DfE evaluation showed that 75 per cent of trainees moved into further education, an apprenticeship or employment within 12 months of starting a traineeship. This figure is particularly laudable as almost half of trainees had no GCSE passes at A*-C (compared to 18 per cent among non-trainees) and trainees were also 22 percentage points more likely to have Special Educational Needs as well as having a poorer school attendance record and experiencing more exclusions. In other words, scrapping the traineeships programme has removed a vital early rung on the ladder of opportunity.

Another serious obstacle to climbing the ladder of opportunity is the English and maths requirements attached to many courses. Improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people is essential, but the practical realities of delivering this objective have too often been ignored. Forcing young people who fail their GCSE English and maths to resit these exams has been labelled as 'demotivating' and 'demoralising'. That the DfE only allows students to take alternatives to GCSEs such as 'Functional Skills' courses *after* they have already failed their GCSE exams highlights the incoherence of the current approach. Similarly, the English and maths expectations for many apprenticeships creates a strong disincentive for employers and training providers to recruit young people who do not already meet the minimum requirements – which disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged learners. The relevance of academic-style English and maths qualifications in the workplace is also questionable, as even apprentice chefs must demonstrate that they can use coordinates, interpret scatter diagrams, recognise correlations and draw 3-D shapes (including elevations).

Bringing employers closer to young people

Apprenticeships have traditionally been a crucial bridge between education and employment for many young people, yet recent government policy has led to a significant deterioration in the quality and quantity of apprenticeships suitable for those leaving school or college. The design of the apprenticeship levy – which began operating in 2017 – has actively encouraged employers to send existing and senior workers on costly management training and professional development courses (including MBAs) rather than recruiting younger workers. The Level 7 'Accountancy or Taxation Professional' apprenticeship (equivalent to a Masters degree) is the most expensive apprenticeship in England by some distance, having consumed almost £1 billion of apprenticeship levy funding since 2017 to train tax advisors, accountants, auditors and financial analysts, but such courses have little or nothing to do with helping

inexperienced young people who are trying to get onto the career ladder. Indeed, only 26 per cent of learners who started an apprenticeship in 2021/22 were on entry-level apprenticeships – down from 53 per cent in 2016/17 before the levy was introduced. What's more, over half of 'apprentices' are now aged 25 or over, thus undermining the importance of apprenticeships as a valuable route for school and college leavers.

As the apprenticeship system drifts away from supporting young people, the Government has occasionally used financial incentives to try to create more job opportunities. These incentives tend to work best when targeted at smaller employers and young people facing the most significant barriers to work. During the pandemic, 'Kickstart' offered employers a bursary equivalent to six months of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) for 25 hours a week if they recruited a young person who was claiming Universal Credit. 75 per cent of Kickstart participants were found to be in education, employment or training after 10 months, with the greatest impact being felt on young people's confidence (generally and professionally) and teamwork skills. In addition, 73 per cent of employers were satisfied with their experience of Kickstart, even though many were new to this sort of scheme.

Even so, reducing the cost of recruiting young people is only likely to be part of the answer. Building up employers' training capacity and capabilities can also help them recruit and develop younger workers. International evidence shows that collaborative activities including risk-pooling, information-sharing and economies of scale can help employers access training and development opportunities that they would not have otherwise been able to reach. Publicly-funded 'training networks' for SMEs can lower the cost of recruitment and training as well as helping smaller employers develop training plans and human resources programmes. Government-funded initiatives can play a role too. For example, 'Be the Business' provides free business mentors and online support to SMEs to help them identify opportunities for improvement and boosting their productivity. That said, employer collaborations appear to be best maintained at a local and regional level rather than relying on the whims of central government when seeking to develop human capital.

Conclusion

Young people who do not follow an academic pathway through and beyond secondary education deserve to be offered high-quality and respected courses and qualifications just as much as their academic counterparts. Regrettably, the instability and confusion created by government in recent years has been all too apparent, with apprenticeships drifting away from young people, various programmes coming and going, and research evidence frequently being ignored in favour of ideology. Not only has this instability been detrimental for young

people, but employers will inevitably be less likely to engage with (and recruit) younger and less experienced workers if the education and skills system is being constantly redesigned.

A high-performing and respected HE sector is essential in our modern economy, but too little attention has been paid by policymakers to those young people who, for whatever reason, feel that university and other forms of HE are not right for them. This report shows how and why the first rungs on the 'ladder of opportunity' are now broken for many young people who do not follow an academic path, but this cannot be addressed unless government takes an evidence-led approach that allows every young person to find a suitable pathway that matches their skills and talents. To deliver this, progress must be made on two fronts. First, there is an urgent need to build better pipelines into good-quality jobs for everyone who chooses to seek employment and training after leaving school or college. Second, government must de-risk recruiting young people to the point where it becomes a rational business decision for employers rather than relying on a handful of willing organisations. If these two objectives are met, it would open more doors for young people without closing off any existing options – thus ensuring that the ladder of opportunity becomes a reality for all young people, not just those who are following an academic route through our education system.

Recommendations

Bringing young people closer to employers

- **RECOMMENDATION 1:** To promote the supply of entry-level opportunities and clear progression routes into genuine high-quality apprenticeships, **a redesigned 'traineeships' programme should be offered to 16 to 24-year-olds**. A bursary of £100 a week should also be given for trainees to support them with expenses such as food and transport.

- **RECOMMENDATION 2:** To enhance the employability skills of younger learners before they leave school, **the Department for Education should create a new programme called 'Young Traineeships' for 14 to 16-year-olds**. This will provide an extended work placement of 50 days over two years with a local employer during Key Stage 4 (approximately one day a week), the completion of which would be equivalent to a 'pass' (Grade 4) in a GCSE subject.

- **RECOMMENDATION 3:** To ensure that young people who do not want to follow an academic pathway are recognised for their achievements at school, **the EBacc measure of secondary school performance should be withdrawn with immediate effect and the main 'Progress 8' measure should be reformed** so that pupils can choose any subjects (including technical courses) alongside English, maths and science.

- **RECOMMENDATION 4: To make T-levels a more viable proposition for learners and employers, an independent review should be urgently conducted into these qualifications**. The review should consider, among other options, reducing the size of T-levels, splitting the 45-day work placement into smaller placements and redesigning the 'foundation year'.

- **RECOMMENDATION 5:** The Government should allow exam boards to **create new English and maths qualifications that are specific to each of the 15 technical education routes that encompass both classroom-based courses and apprenticeships** (e.g. Construction; Care Services; Transport and Logistics). The new qualifications will teach the skills and knowledge required to succeed in each technical pathway rather than offering generic curricula.

Bringing employers closer to young people

- **RECOMMENDATION 6:** To ensure that apprenticeships remain focused on young people who have chosen not to follow an academic pathway, **learners who are already qualified at or above Level 6 (equivalent to a full undergraduate degree) should no longer be eligible to start a levy-funded apprenticeship**.

- **RECOMMENDATION 7**: To prioritise the interests of young people but without excluding older learners from starting an apprenticeship, consideration should be given to **preventing employers from accessing further levy funding if they have trained more apprentices aged 25+ than those aged 16-24**.

- **RECOMMENDATION 8:** To generate more job openings for young people from the least privileged backgrounds, **the Government should reinstate a more targeted version of the 'Kickstart' programme** that offered subsidies to employers for creating new jobs.

- **RECOMMENDATION 9:** To build capacity among employers to recruit and support young people, **financial incentives of up to £5,000 should be available to organisations offering apprenticeships, traineeships and T Level placements**.

- **RECOMMENDATION 10:** To ensure that new non-apprenticeship opportunities for young people are sustainable over time, **the Government should focus on funding and promoting local partnerships and collaborations between employers** through, for example, creating 'training networks'.

1. Introduction

> *"Fail to develop the talents of any one person, we fail Britain. Talent is 21st century wealth. Every person liberated to fulfil their potential adds to our wealth. Every person denied opportunity takes our wealth away."* [1]

This simple yet powerful statement from then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999 could have provided the springboard for a commitment to create more good quality jobs and career opportunities for young people, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, or even launch a plan to end the scourge of youth unemployment. Instead, these sentiments were quickly forgotten because just a few minutes later his speech went down in political folklore for setting a new "target of 50 per cent of young adults going into higher education in the next century"[2] – up from 39 per cent at the time.[3]

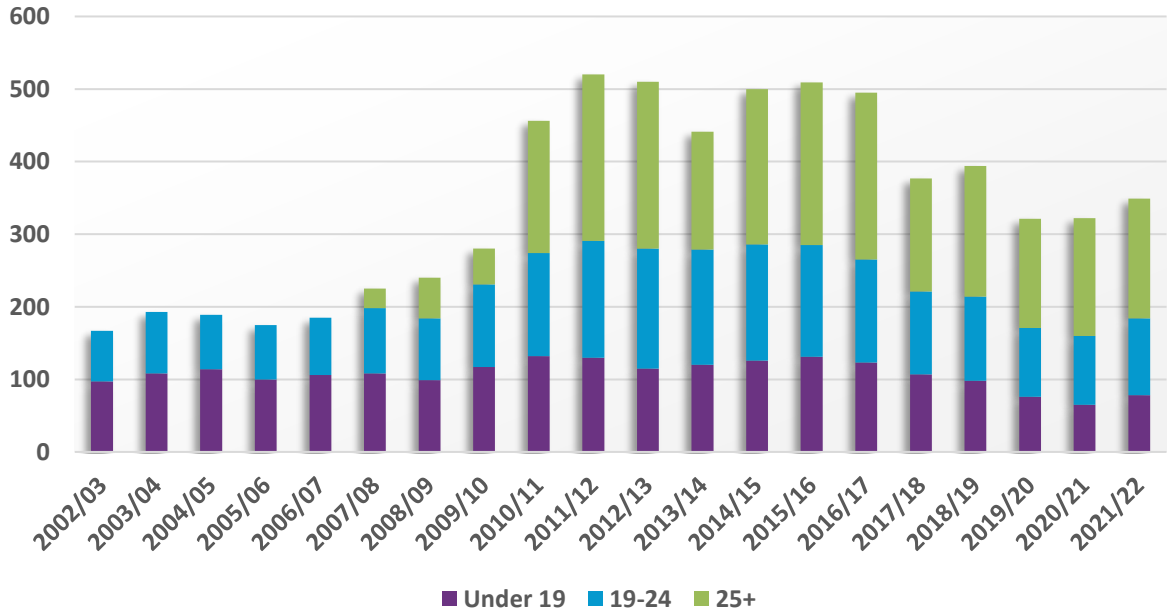
The target was formally met in the 2017/18 academic year,[4] but it remains controversial to this day. In 2020, then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson rejected it as "an absurd mantra" as it suggested that "if you are not part of the 50 per cent of the young people who go to university that you've somehow come up short [and] you have become one of the forgotten 50 per cent who choose another path."[5] Admittedly, this assumes that all Higher Education (HE) is delivered by universities, which is not the case, but the perceived lack of attention directed at those who do not attend university was palpable. Far from making a political point, Mr Williamson added that "Governments of all colours have failed to give the other 50 per cent of young people the support and investment that they deserve [because] all the energy and effort of our policy experts and media has been concentrated on the route that we took ourselves, driving more people into higher education."

In reality, the divide between those who pursue a traditional academic path and those who do not is evident well before prospective university students complete their UCAS form. Of the 589,478 students who finished their 16-18 studies in 2022, only 216,172 (37 per cent) were recorded as studying A-levels alone.[6] This means that rather than lamenting the 'forgotten 50 per cent' in relation to HE, policymakers should instead talk about the 'forgotten 60 per cent' who – for various reasons – take a different path at school or college to those young people on a direct academic pathway from GCSEs to A-levels to a university degree.

This is not merely a question of terminology. The paucity of attention given to over 60 per cent of every cohort of young people has had very real consequences. Contrast the political praise for (and subsequent expansion of) the HE sector with the fate of apprenticeships since

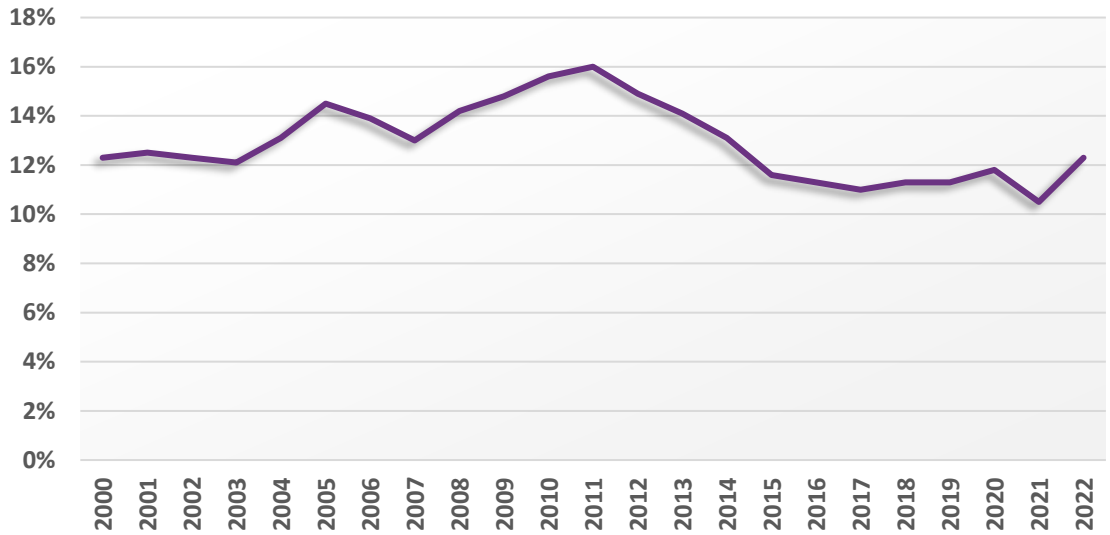
Tony Blair's infamous speech. The number of people starting an apprenticeship has expanded dramatically over this period (Figure 1), but this 'growth' was artificially driven by the creation of 'adult apprenticeships' (for those aged 25 and over) in the late 2000s plus the switching of many adult learners from the now-defunct 'Train To Gain' scheme into the apprenticeship system in the early 2010s. Throughout this entire period, the number of 16 to 18-year-old apprentices has remained largely unchanged and is now consistently lower than it was in 2002. Even if you include 19 to 24-year-olds, the volume of young people starting an apprenticeship has not increased in 20 years. Just 2.8 per cent of 16-year-olds were on an apprenticeship last year – down from 7.9 per cent when Tony Blair gave his speech. The proportions of 17-year-olds (4.7 per cent) and 18-year-olds (6.8 per cent) now enrolled on apprenticeships have also fallen sharply since 1999.

Figure 1: Learners starting an apprenticeship in England (thousands) [7]



It is not just apprenticeship numbers that have stagnated. At the end of 2022, 700,000 young people aged 16-24 in England were recorded as being 'Not in Education, Employment and Training' (NEET).[8] This is equivalent to 12.3 per cent of all young people – exactly the same proportion as in 2000 just after Tony Blair's speech on HE (Figure 2 overleaf). This stubbornly high level of young people who are NEET is known to store up problems for the future. An evidence review by Public Health England[9] described why being out of work at a young age makes someone significantly less likely to be employed in a good career later in life as well as having a direct effect on their health and wellbeing. For example, spending time unemployed under the age of 23 lowers life satisfaction, health status, job satisfaction and wages more than twenty years later – often known as 'scarring'.

Figure 2: The percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds in England not in education, employment or training [10]



The link between unemployment and health poses many short- and long-term challenges. At the end of 2022, only 40 per cent of young people classed as NEET were 'economically active' i.e. able and willing to work – a quarter of whom had already been out of work for more than six months. This means that around 60 per cent of young people classed as NEET are 'economically inactive' as a result of being 'long-term or temporarily sick' (26 per cent of those who were NEET), 'looking after family / home' (11 per cent) or 'other reasons' such as not wanting to work, not having started looking for a job yet or waiting for the results of a job application (24 per cent). What's more, tackling high levels of 'inactivity' among young people is made harder by the fact that 20 per cent of young people who are NEET have a mental health condition – more than double the rate in the overall 16-24 population.[11]

Inevitably, the disruption to the labour market caused by the pandemic had a tangible impact on many young people looking to start their careers. As a result, the Government's pandemic response measures focused almost exclusively on creating openings for those who had already left school or college and become unemployed or those trying to embark on a training programme. These measures included:

- The £2 billion 'Kickstart' scheme, which started in September 2020 and gave bursaries to employers who offered work placements for young people aged 16 to 24 who were on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment.
- Payments for employers who hired new apprentices from August 2020: £2,000 for each apprentice under 25 and £1,500 for each apprentice over 25.[12] These incentives were raised to £3,000 from April 2021 regardless of the apprentice's age.[13]

- A £1,000 bonus to employers for hosting a 'traineeship' work placement from September 2020 to July 2022, up to a maximum of 10 learners.[14]
- A £1,000 grant for employers for every T-Level student hosted on a high-quality industry placement between May 2021 and July 2022.[15]

Although such measures were well-intentioned and helped some young people find work, they have all subsequently been withdrawn – meaning that any momentum towards boosting employers' capacity to create additional opportunities has been lost. Such instability also makes it harder to convince employers of all sizes that engaging with the publicly funded education and training system is worthwhile, even if those same employers are keen to support young people as best they can.

Politicians frequently talk about the importance of creating a "ladder of opportunity"[16] for young people, particularly for those from the least privileged backgrounds, but the stagnation of apprenticeships for young people and the enduring failure to tackle entrenched youth unemployment suggests that many young people are finding it very difficult to get onto the ladder – let alone progress up the ladder. To begin reversing the decline in high-quality employment and training opportunities for young people who do not follow a traditional academic pathway in and beyond secondary education, progress must be made on two fronts:

1. There remains an urgent need to build better pipelines into good-quality jobs for young people who choose to seek employment and training after leaving school or college. There is no doubt that a high-performing and respected HE sector is essential in our modern economy. Even so, too little attention has been paid by policymakers to those young people who, for whatever reason, feel that university and other forms of HE are not the right option for them at the start of their career.

2. Too often, government policy has relied on the goodwill of some employers to support the education system, but this can only go so far. Skills in the workplace have often been described as a 'derived demand', meaning that employers' skills needs are derived from the decisions that they make about how to manage their operations as opposed to employers' skills needs simply fluctuating in response to the supply of workers in the labour market. On that basis, employers should be spoken to on their terms by making the recruitment of young people (especially those from less privileged backgrounds) a sensible business decision rather than a corporate and social responsibility activity.

To reflect the need to make progress on both these fronts, the first part of this report will analyse the evidence base on **how to bring young people closer to employers**, while the second part will analyse the evidence on **how to bring employers closer to young people**. The report will then conclude with a set of recommendations that aim to break down the barriers that prevent many young people from making a successful transition into sustainable and good-quality jobs after leaving school or college. It is therefore hoped that this report makes a useful contribution to discussions on how to unlock the talents of tens of thousands of young people in future.

2. How to bring young people closer to employers

There is some evidence to suggest that some employers are hesitant to hire young people because they lack certain workplace skills. The pre-pandemic 2019 Employer Skills Survey (ESS) showed that, of the organisations that had recruited 16-year-olds for their first job from school in the last 2-3 years, 38 per cent felt these young people were 'poorly prepared' or 'very poorly prepared' for work. 17 to 18-year-olds were viewed slightly more favourably by employers, with only 29 per cent reporting that they were 'poorly' or 'very poorly prepared'.[17] The skills most frequently absent among young employees were (in order of most cited):

- *'lack of working world / life experience or maturity (including general knowledge)';*
- *'poor attitude / personality or lack of motivation e.g. poor work ethic, punctuality, appearance;*
- *'lack required soft/personal skills or competencies e.g. problem solving, communication or team';*
- *'lack of common sense';*
- *'lack required technical skills or competencies e.g. technical or job specific skills'* [18]

The government-commissioned review of vocational education by Professor Alison Wolf in 2011 (the 'Wolf Review') had suggested that employers see 16 and 17-year-olds who are looking for employment as "likely to be low achieving, or below average in terms of personal qualities such as application and perseverance".[19] Professor Wolf argued that this perception is due to the growing number of young people who remain in full time education – meaning that those who choose not to stay in school or college are perceived as 'low quality'. This section of the report will therefore explore a range of options available to policymakers that could better prepare young people to enter the workplace or training after age 16 by making them more 'job ready' without closing down other options (e.g. attending university).

2.1 - 14 to 16-year-olds spending time in the workplace

Although the findings of the ESS and the Wolf Review may seem persuasive, one should not be surprised if young people lack the skills needed to succeed in the workplace when our education and training system gives them minimal exposure (if any) to the workplace before age 16. One scheme that tried to address this deficiency was the 'Young Apprenticeships' (YA) programme for 14 to 16-year-olds, which was set up in 2004 and offered at least 50 days of

workplace experience over two years (typically two days per week) alongside a Level 2 vocational qualification in the relevant industry sector.[20] The YA programme was intended to ease the transition to apprenticeships at age 16 as well as create an alternative to classroom qualifications that would engage young people uninterested in traditional learning. That said, the programme was only available to pupils who met minimum levels of attendance and academic attainment.

The number of pupils enrolled on YAs quickly rose to 9,000 by 2007,[21] undermining the stereotype that only 'low achievers' are disinterested in classroom-based education. When Ofsted evaluated the YA programme in 2008, they were full of praise for what it had achieved:

- *"[It] continues to provide a successful alternative to traditional routes through Key Stage 4 for average and above average ability students."*
- *"From the beginning a strong characteristic of the programme has been the students' good personal development. In almost all the partnerships throughout the three years of inspection, students have been enthusiastic, well motivated and well behaved.*
- *"In all but two partnerships in 2006/07 there was no underachievement and all students were on track to achieve level 2 qualifications"*
- *"Attendance was good in all partnerships and behaviour never less than satisfactory"*
- *"Students spoke highly of the provision which they enjoyed a great deal…. Treated more like adults, took pride in their work and went on work placements"*
- *"Teachers noted that young apprentices took more responsibility for their own learning than their peers in school did"* [22]

Employers were equally impressed, and felt that the YA programme benefited the students because they:

- saw relevance in their school studies to the world of work
- sampled various aspects of the industry before committing themselves to it
- understood the progression routes post-16 leading to a career in the vocational area
- gained experience and training in real working environments
- developed an understanding of how the industry works
- gained a detailed insight into the technical skills required in some vocational areas
- developed skills and attributes which made them more employable, including a willingness to learn, interpersonal skills through working with adults, communication skills, teamworking, good timekeeping and attendance.[23]

Many of these benefits were seen by employers as beneficial to them as well as the students, with some YA participants receiving job offers after their placement. Inevitably, the YA programme had some weaknesses in its early stages. Not all of the YA partnerships were setting challenging targets for students, while some timetabling and recruitment procedures (e.g. offering visits to local colleges that provided the courses) had run into difficulties, but Ofsted said these problems were being resolved.

An official evaluation of YAs in 2010 found that 95 per cent of young people who completed it progressed into further education/training and 19 per cent had progressed into an apprenticeship. Those who completed the programme in hairdressing, motor industry and engineering were most likely to have chosen an apprenticeship. Interestingly, "those with lower levels of prior attainment among YA participants appeared to gain even more at [Key Stage 4] relative to those with similar levels of attainment who did not participate".[24]

Despite this positive picture, the Wolf Review dismissed the value of YAs on the basis that "there should be no substantial degree of specialisation before the end of KS4."[25] The Review also asserted that the YA programme "had a significant negative impact on the likelihood of a YA passing maths and English GCSE at A*-C."[26] Bizarrely, the footnote accompanying this finding accepted that:

> *"Several engineering employers submitted evidence to the Review noting their positive experiences with YA placements, and that they had selected a number of Advanced Apprentices from the previous year's YA cohort. While this was clearly very helpful to the companies and young people concerned, it does not, in my view, alter the balance of the evidence."* [27]

Such comments from employers are unsurprising given the benefits of the YA programme to young people and employers. The impact on English and maths attainment is also debatable. The official evaluation found that a 'typical' YA learner had a 28 per cent probability of achieving five GCSEs at A*- C including English and mathematics versus 32 per cent among similar learners nationally. However, this gap shrunk to just two percentage points when those participants who failed to complete the YA programme were excluded.[28] The evaluation also pointed out that some YA participants had difficulty coping with their workload as a result of spending two days a week out of school,[29] which may have affected their performance in English and maths. In addition, the gap in attainment between YA participants and non-participants had shrunk dramatically since the early days of the programme. This raises the possibility that these attainment gaps would have disappeared altogether if the Coalition Government had not closed the YA programme shortly after the 2010 election. Ironically, the

Conservative Party's 2010 manifesto had just committed them to "create 20,000 additional Young Apprenticeships"[30] in response to the powerful evidence of the programme's impact. Nevertheless, it was decided that in the context of the spending cuts enacted by the Coalition Government, "the high cost of the [YA] programme could not be maintained".[31]

The costs involved in the YA programme were indeed notable. That said, given the glowing reviews from pupils and employers, a YA-style scheme has enormous potential in generating future opportunities for young people, particularly when it can help so many learners into further education and apprenticeships. Furthermore, the substantial gains made by learners in relation to interpersonal skills, communication and teamwork are vital to understanding the value of YAs, seeing as employers frequently cite the lack of these skills as a reason not to offer jobs to young people. On that basis, reinvigorating the YA scheme in some form should be an urgent priority for policymakers.

2.2 - 14 to 16-year-olds spending time in college

Rather than spending time in the workplace, other schemes have given young people the chance to spend time at college from the ages of 14 to 16 (Key Stage 4) to create a smoother transition into the final phase of compulsory education after age 16.

In 2005, Ofsted published an evaluation of the 'Increased Flexibility Programme' (IFP), which was introduced in 2002 to support partnerships of schools, FE colleges and work-based learning providers in offering a more diverse curriculum. The goal was to extend participation in post-16 education and training by offering more opportunities to engage in vocational learning from 14 to 16. At the time of the evaluation, these partnerships involved half the secondary schools and three quarters of FE colleges in England.[32]

Ofsted's evaluation was broadly positive:

- *"The courses offered through these partnerships have proved so popular that the numbers of students taking IFPs have exceeded expectations"*
- *"…more students are staying on in post-16 education at colleges as a result of attending IFPs due to improved information and guidance that students receive at points of transition."*
- *"Students respond well to the broader learning opportunities available through the IFP, and this has resulted in improvements among a large number of students in their attitudes, behaviour and social skills at college and back at school"* [33]

Ofsted identified several challenges that had not yet been fully resolved, particularly around the need to build strong relationships between schools and colleges, synchronise timetables, improve the quality of assessments and expand quality assurance procedures.[34] Even so, these early signs were encouraging. The following year, the NFER published a separate evaluation of the third and fourth cohorts of students on the IFP, which echoed what Ofsted had found:

- *"Students themselves were generally very happy with their IFP courses. …Furthermore, the majority of students said they would be happy to recommend their respective courses to other students considering getting involved."*
- *"…the majority of young people who took GCSEs in vocational subjects and GNVQs attained their qualifications, and that the majority … who had undertaken NVQs and other vocational qualifications through the programme had achieved the qualification at the end of Year 11."*
- *"…cohort 3 and 4 students were progressing at least as well in their IFP qualifications as they were in their school subjects, and in some cases better on their IFP courses."*
- *"The majority of school staff agreed that the IFP had helped many students to become more confident and to engage (and in some cases re-engage) into learning"*
- *"…students identified ways in which participation in the IFP had helped them develop both socially and personally. The two most widely reported factors were: improved confidence [and] greater maturity. The majority of views expressed related to students becoming more confident and the knock-on effects this had had on their college work. …many were appreciative of the opportunities the IFP afforded them."*
- *"Many students agreed that experience on IFP had made them more prepared for working life. In addition to learning trade skills, young people pointed to the 'soft skills' such as confidence and self-esteem that they had developed while participating on the programme, as well as the experience of working under 'real world' conditions."* [35]

As Ofsted had observed, there were some logistical issues that needed attention, such as some pupils discontinuing and schools still trying to find the optimum 'selection procedures' for determining which pupils would benefit most from the IFP. Nonetheless, the impact of the programme was palpable. Despite two independent evaluations illustrating the potential of the IFP, the Wolf Review merely commented that "it was popular with participants but expensive, and participants' GCSE outcomes were poor."[36] Criticising the IFP for producing poor GCSE outcomes was a strange observation as the Wolf Review had acknowledged that the IFP was "aimed at lower achieving pupils" in the previous sentence.[37] What's more, the NFER evaluation found "there was a consensus amongst college staff that 'achievement outcomes have generally accurately reflected the abilities of the students'" and that there were "high numbers of students with Special Educational Needs participating in IFP courses."[38]

When Ofsted returned to the subject in 2010, they concluded that "the development of a richer and more flexible curriculum was a key factor in re-engaging young people in education, employment or training and also in preventing 14- to 16-year-olds from becoming disengaged."[39] A subsequent literature review by the NFER in 2012 reported that "many young people [find] academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A-levels 'uninspiring and irrelevant'". The review summarised previous research in this area:

> *"[Vocational qualifications] are regarded as important provision for young people at risk of becoming disengaged, with a range of outcomes for learners reported in the literature reviewed (for example, Burgess and Rodger, 2010; Gutherson et al., 2011, Ofsted, 2010). These include enhanced engagement with learning, improved personal and social skills (including confidence, self-esteem and motivation), and a greater understanding of the world of work. There is also evidence that studying vocational qualifications, particularly where some learning takes place out of school, at a college or training provider, helps to improve young people's progression to further learning by preparing them better for the transition at 16, and helping them make more informed decisions about their choices (for example, HMIE, 2010; Marson-Smith et al., 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2006). Birdwell et al. (2011) report evidence that the increase in choices of vocational qualifications for 14–16 year olds is encouraging young people, who would otherwise have disengaged from education, to continue into FE or training."* [40]

Other schemes that offered college-based experiences to younger learners have demonstrated equally encouraging results. In the early 2000's, 'Student Apprenticeships' gave structured work placements in Walsall, Birmingham and Bristol to introduce students to the world of employment. The aim was to help them gain vocational skills in the workplace on a weekly basis, with an expectation that they would progress into an apprenticeship.[41] Unlike Young Apprenticeships, which were aimed at middle- and higher-achievers, SAs for 14 to 16-year-olds sought to re-engage disaffected or under-motivated pupils, hence the focus on selecting pupils who were underachieving, truanting or at risk of exclusion. Typically, students spent two days a week in school, two days in college and one day in a work environment.[42] Yet again, the impact on learners was clearly apparent:

> *"The majority of Student Apprentices in the pre-16 cohort had low or no academic qualifications, and had largely disengaged with the school as a learning environment. The initiative prepared these young people for vocational learning in a work based context, through practical skills acquisition and training in employment issues such as health and safety. This approach was very successful both in re-engaging the young person with the learning process and in preparing them for successful study [as an apprentice]".*[43]

The same evaluation reported the following outcomes:

- *"The vast majority of training providers, schools and colleges, and young people involved in the initiative believed that there are real benefits to be derived from developing the initiative with the pre-16 group"*
- *"Young people …were positive about the experiences they had gained as an apprentice, commonly referring to it increasing their knowledge of the workplace and the type of careers available to them. …Many had previously low career aspirations and the initiative provided information on the level of qualifications they would require to enter their chosen career path. Employers and training providers referred to a marked improvement in the attitude of disapplied pupils"*
- *"A key benefit …was to help under-achieving pupils with low motivation, to develop a sense of direction to help steer their transition from school into a trade or a career they were interested in. …Teachers and young people frequently referred to the importance of the Student Apprenticeship in acting as a 'bridge' between school and the workplace."* [44]

The evaluation concluded that "the Student Apprenticeship can provide a seamless transition into a Modern Apprenticeship, particularly for vulnerable groups."[45]

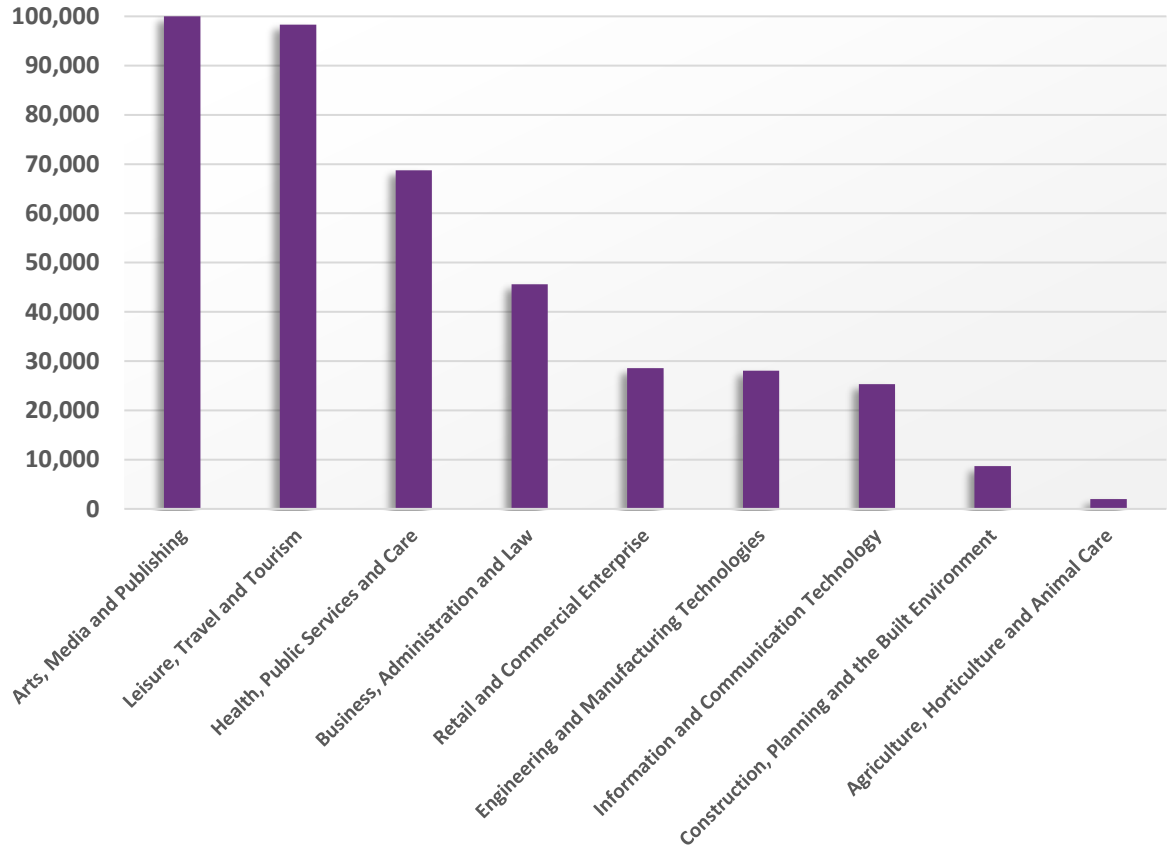
Given the compelling findings from numerous evaluations of different delivery models, there is good reason to think that giving young people the chance to spend time in a college or workplace while continuing to study academic subjects at school could improve both their attainment and self-esteem – putting them on a much stronger trajectory into whatever education or training option they eventually select at age 16.

2.3 - Technical Awards for 14 to 16-year-olds

The Wolf Review was rightly concerned about the quality and value of some vocational qualifications. In line with the Review's recommendations in 2011, thousands of qualifications were subsequently stripped out of performance ('league') tables to prevent schools from taking advantage of the fact that some of these courses counted for as much as four or even six GCSEs. The Review found that schools were "under enormous pressure to pile up league-table points", leading them to deliver qualifications that offered poor progression after age 16 or did not include any external assessment.[46]

In the present day, the only approved technical qualifications in Key Stage 4 are known as 'Technical Awards', which the DfE define as "high quality level 1 and 2 qualifications that provides [sic] 14 to 16-year-olds with applied knowledge and practical skills."[47] Only 76 Technical Awards are included in the 2023 school performance tables compared to 324 academic qualifications.[48] The sparseness of approved Technical Awards helps explain why they attracted just over 400,000 exam entries in 2022 (Figure 3) compared to 5.2 million GCSE entries.[49]

Figure 3: 2022 exam entries for Technical Awards [50]



Although they are dwarfed in number by GCSE entries, the impact of Technical Awards on pupils should not be underestimated. Analysis by the DfE has shown that although 35 per cent of pupils took at least one Technical Award, the majority of pupils took only one Technical Award and very few pupils took more than two Awards.[51] Even so, for pupils in state-funded mainstream schools, taking a Technical Award was associated with a 23 per cent reduction in unauthorised absences, a 10 per cent reduction in fixed period exclusions and a staggering 62 per cent reduction in permanent exclusions.[52] What's more, this pattern was repeated for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

These outcomes suggest that, far from being a distraction alongside academic courses, entry-level technical qualifications can have a positive influence on the pupils who complete them. Nevertheless, the popularity of Technical Awards is hindered by the emphasis placed on traditional academic subjects within the main accountability measures used to judge schools:

- **The English Baccalaureate (EBacc)**: introduced in 2010, this records the percentage of pupils who enter and pass their GCSEs in all the following subjects: English language and English literature; Mathematics; either history or geography; a language (modern or ancient); and at least two of the three single sciences (biology, chemistry, computer science and physics) or 'Combined Science'.
- **Progress 8**: introduced in 2016, this is calculated based on pupils' performance in three groups ('baskets') of qualifications: first, English and maths; second, any three remaining EBacc subjects (e.g. history, chemistry, French); and third, any three other subjects (either EBacc or non-EBacc, including Technical Awards).

As EDSK discovered in our 2019 report on the impact of the EBacc, Art & Design, Dance, Drama, Media/Film/TV Studies, Music and the six Design & Technology (D&T) subjects had all seen a decline in GCSE entries since 2010 and were falling year-on-year. Research by Ipsos Mori, commissioned by the DfE, found that many schools had changed their curriculum to accommodate more EBacc subjects and sometimes redeployed staff to deliver them, but this often resulted in schools withdrawing or restricting other subjects.[53] This echoed earlier research that found non-EBacc subjects being downgraded in the curriculum to the point where they were sometimes taught after school or as a replacement for other crucial activities such as pastoral support. [54] The same trend was identified by the NFER in 2016, which observed that almost all non-EBacc subjects had seen significant reductions in teaching hours.[55] More recently, a House of Lords Youth Unemployment Committee found in 2021 that the EBacc and Progress 8 were "limiting schools' and colleges' abilities to provide a broad and balanced curriculum".[56] In addition, the Committee received "overwhelming evidence that the expectation to teach eight basic academic subjects and to judge schools on this requirement has led to a significant decline in the teaching of creative and technical subjects."[57]

The gravity of this issue was perhaps best captured in a research paper by Dr Rebecca Allen and Dave Thomson, which noted that "in setting the EBacc as the 'gold standard' Key Stage 4 curriculum, we risk deprioritising the educational experiences of those for whom it is inappropriate [and] this group of pupils – whether 10% or 30% of cohort – deserve to receive a curriculum that will equip them with the right skills to progress to further study and onto work."[58] If the goal is to close the gap between young people and employers, this situation is at best untenable, and at worst, actively harmful to the prospects of many learners.

2.4 - T-levels for 16 to 19-year-olds

Even if students cannot get access to Technical Awards alongside their GCSEs, there is still the possibility that they could pursue technical education after age 16. However, to say that T-levels – the new technical qualifications introduced in 2020 for 16 to 19-year-olds – have got off to an inauspicious start would be an understatement. T-levels emerged from a 2016 report by an independent panel chaired by Lord Sainsbury (the 'Sainsbury Review'), which sought to bring about a "fundamental shift" that would "systematically reform technical education for the long term".[59] This included the creation of two distinct pathways from ages 16 to 19: 'academic' (e.g. A-levels and Applied General qualifications) and 'technical' (e.g. college-based courses and apprenticeships). The new technical courses in college – later named T-levels – would be a two-year employer-designed programme that included a mandatory work placement. In addition, a 'transition year' (later renamed a 'transition programme' and then a 'foundation year') should be offered to individuals who are not ready to access T-levels at age 16 to help them to prepare for further study or employment.[60]

The Education Select Committee in Parliament published a report in April 2023 on the state of the 16-19 qualification system. Their analysis highlighted numerous warning signs related to T-levels that continue to be ignored by ministers:

- The majority of young people still have not heard of T-levels;
- Employers' interest in providing work placements fell between 2019-2021, from 36 per cent to 30 per cent;
- Around one-fifth of the first T-levels cohort dropped out as they proved too challenging for students with lower academic attainment or who have SEND;
- Only 14 per cent of the first cohort of learners entered onto the 'transition year' progressed to a T-level;
- Many universities are not accepting T-levels alone for undergraduate degrees and are requiring relevant A-levels alongside T-levels instead.[61]

Ofsted's thematic review of T-levels in July 2023 was no less troubling. They found that "at their best, T-levels provide an opportunity to combine high-quality study of theory with excellent development of practical skills [but] at worst, courses are not at all what students expected, and many students reported being misled and ill informed about their content and structure." There were particular concerns around "the high volume of content" as T-levels are a single course spanning two years, whereas A-level students typically study three subjects over the same period. Ofsted also noted that around two-thirds of T-level students

felt well prepared for their next steps but "many leave before the end of the course, and the number of students who progress to the second year ….is low in many providers".[62]

The Education Select Committee's worries about the rejection of T-levels by some universities were reaffirmed by Ofsted, who reported that "in some cases, students who wanted to go to university are surprised and disappointed that T-level qualifications are not always accepted as a valid entry qualification." The quality of work placements was another issue, as the number of suitable placements was "often limited in any given area because of the specific employment sector … and the length of time students are required to attend". In addition, the activities that students completed on placements were often "not well aligned with the T-level course content." The better 'transition years / programmes' managed to combine a relevant technical qualification with a work placement, although many programmes did not include any work experience or useful activities to help learners move onto a T-level – hence the low progression rates. Worse still, "for some students, the [transition programme] results in no meaningful outcome after a year".[63]

In terms of bringing young people closer to employers, there are several reasons to be alarmed at the development and early experiences of T-levels:

- **The enormous size of T-levels**: with each T-level being equivalent to three A-levels in terms of content, this leaves little or no space for students to explore other subjects or pathways or opportunities (including part-time employment alongside their studies). This makes selecting a T-level an unnecessarily high-stakes decision for someone at age 15 / 16 and risks closing off doors to future progression instead of opening them, particularly if students cannot study a maths qualification alongside their T-level (maths is often an entry requirement for Engineering and Technology courses at university). In contrast, students can currently combine one or two A-levels with vocational qualifications such as BTECs.
- **The lack of work placements**: Ofsted's thematic review recognised that "the best industry placements do provide a very beneficial opportunity for students to develop relevant knowledge and skills." Nevertheless, with students selecting one T-level from ages 16 to 19, the ability to find a suitable placement in that subject / sector was always likely to be severely constrained, particularly in rural or remote locations. The DfE recently announced a new 'employer placement' fund to encourage organisations to offer more work placements, but past experiences with such schemes suggest this is unlikely to have a large-scale impact.[64]
- **The mis-selling of T-levels**: the Sainsbury Review in 2016 was clear that T-levels "must be designed to meet the needs of employers and thus prepare individuals to

enter skilled employment" whereas academic courses should "meet the entry requirements of university full-time undergraduate degree courses." As a result, "it would be disingenuous to pretend that any student choosing to start on one option at age 16 will be able to move seamlessly to the other option at any time of their choosing."[65] The purely political desire to recast T-levels as a route to university has now created uncertainty and confusion for learners, parents, teachers and employers.

- **The faltering 'transition year'**: given the demands associated with studying such a large qualification, it was inevitable that T-levels would prove too difficult for many learners. Many colleges and training providers have introduced strict entry requirements to stop learners accessing a T-level if they are not likely to reach the end of the course. Meanwhile, the 'transition year' has evidently failed to help many individuals transition onto a T-level and may not have provided any benefit to them.

The news in August 2023 that a third of T-level students failed to complete their course[66] only adds to concerns about the design, suitability and value of this new brand of technical qualifications. Unless these on-going issues are resolved soon, T-levels could become a disappointingly small part of the education offer for young people that succeeds only in pushing some learners down the wrong path instead of supporting the development of the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in future employment and training. Apparently undeterred, the Government has continued to defund alternative vocational and technical courses for 16 to 19-year-olds well before T-levels have become a widely recognised and respected qualification,[67] creating even more uncertainty and concern among students, teachers and employers.

2.5 - Traineeships

The Government-commissioned review of apprenticeships in 2012 led by entrepreneur Doug Richard (the 'Richard Review') accepted that, even though it is wrong to rebadge low-skill jobs as an 'apprenticeship', such roles still have an important place in our skills system. The Review argued that:

> *"We must recognise, going forward, that not all learners who want to do an apprenticeship will be ready to become an apprentice straightaway or will be attractive to a prospective employer – all the more so if apprentices are increasingly focussed on relatively higher skilled jobs… Some learners, particularly younger ones or the long term unemployed, may need to learn the softer skills that will make them employable before they are ready to start an apprenticeship."*[68]

To meet this need, the Richard Review recommended that "a significant new offer should be introduced, developing [learner's] employability skills, and where relevant, preparing them for a high skilled apprenticeship."[69] This new programme – branded as 'traineeships' – was intended to "replace existing apprenticeships where they are linked to lower skilled jobs."[70]

The Government introduced 'traineeships' in 2014/15, which were available to those aged 16 to 24 (or 25 with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)). They could last anywhere from six weeks to a maximum of one year, although most lasted less than six months. The content of a traineeship was tailored to a learner's needs, including:[71]

- A meaningful work experience placement of at least 70 hours with a local employer
- Work preparation training with a training provider to learn skills required in the workplace, build confidence and offer support with CVs and interviews
- English, maths and digital skills support

This offer was targeted towards young people who were unemployed, had little or no work experience, were motivated to work and were qualified up to Level 3 (e.g. A-levels or equivalents such as BTECs). Traineeships were free for young people, although they did not offer a wage as it was a 'skills development programme' rather than a form of employment.[72]

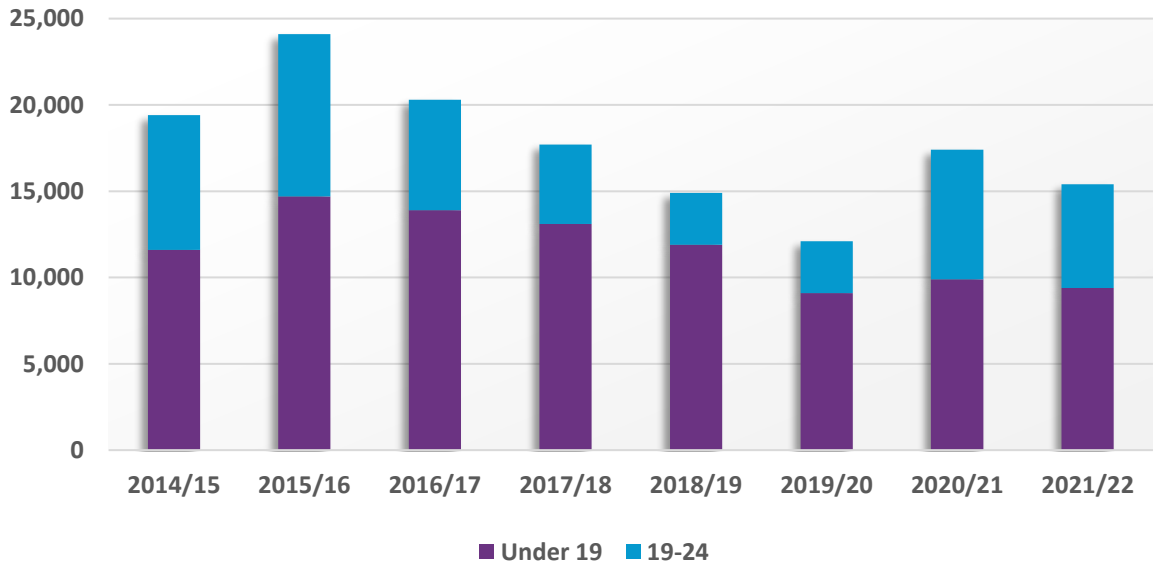
Traineeships appeared to deliver impressive results. An official evaluation in 2019 found that around 75 per cent of trainees had moved to a positive destination (further education, apprenticeship or employment) within 12 months of starting a traineeship.[73] These figures are all the more laudable when one considers that, compared to other learners, trainees were 22 percentage points more likely to have SEND, had a poorer school attendance record and had experienced more exclusions.[74] Almost half of trainees also had no GCSE passes at A*-C and they were about twice as likely to have been below the expected level of attainment in English and maths at age 11 and 14.[75] Moreover, an earlier survey had found that 82 per cent of trainees were satisfied with their traineeship, 92 per cent would recommend traineeships to other people and 83 per cent felt it had improved their chances in future job applications.[76]

Following these positive findings, the Government recently introduced 'occupational traineeships' that aimed to support progression into a specific apprenticeship or occupation by aligning the content of the traineeship with the relevant training standard.[77] Examples of occupational traineeships included rail engineering, adult care and bricklaying, all of which were linked to their respective entry-level apprenticeships. For example, the rail and construction traineeships were developed as a collaboration between providers, sector bodies, intermediary organisations, employers and the DfE[78] to ensure they were matched to the

needs of the stakeholders involved in delivering them, as opposed to a generic traineeship programme that can lack sector-specific content. An evaluation of the early pilots of occupational traineeships indicated that they had a higher overall completion rate than traineeships as a whole and led to higher levels of progression into employment.[79]

Despite these strong outcomes, traineeships suffered from a lack of visibility. A survey of young people in 2021 found that 66 per cent had never had traineeships discussed with them.[80] Before the pandemic there had been a steady decline in the number of learners starting a traineeship (Figure 4), but in response to the disruption caused by COVID-19 the Government began offering a £1,000 bonus for employers hosting a traineeship work placement[81] and the then Chancellor Rishi Sunak also committed £111 million of new funding to support an additional 40,000 traineeships in 2021/22.[82] However, the DfE had to hand back £65 million of this funding to the Treasury "due to several delays in running a procurement".[83]

Figure 4: The number of learners starting a traineeship in England [84]



After years of struggling to grow the programme, the DfE announced in December 2022 that they would no longer fund traineeships as a standalone programme - a move described by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) as "an unmitigated disaster for social mobility."[85] In truth, the Government never acknowledged that the unpaid nature of traineeships had always hampered its attractiveness. The AELP argued that limiting access to those willing to take on an unpaid placement risked traineeships being a "last resort" for young people.[86] They proposed that a "government-funded subsidy – perhaps similar to the apprenticeship rate" would be a "godsend", as well as giving out a "strong signal" that traineeships were a viable route to move into a job, further study or an apprenticeship.[87] In

contrast, young people on traineeships in Wales receive a weekly allowance of £35-55 that does not affect their Universal Credit entitlement.[88] In other words, if the Government wants to deliver a mechanism for preparing younger learners, especially those with few (or no) formal qualifications, to find and secure a sustainable good-quality job then the traineeships model remains an excellent candidate.

2.6 - English and maths requirements

Improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people should be a shared goal across the education and skills system, but the practical realities of delivering this objective have too often been ignored. As a result, many learners find themselves deterred from acquiring these crucial life skills rather than seeing them as part of their journey through, and beyond, school or college.

The most glaring example of how this shared goal can go awry is the GCSE resits policy. Since 2015, students who did not pass their GCSE in either subject must continue studying them post-16.[89] This has proved controversial from the outset, with Ofsted observing in 2018 that "the impact of repeated 'failure' on students should not be underestimated"[90] – especially in relation to their confidence and self-esteem. Analysis by Cambridge Assessment also flagged the potential for the policy to create resentment and demotivate students, finding that they tend to be disaffected by prior learning experiences, more likely to see this compulsory study as a result of their 'failure', hold negative beliefs about their ability and demonstrate an unwillingness to engage.[91] The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) has also warned that "too many young people are no nearer to the coveted grade 4 at the end of this demoralising process."[92]

The funding rules for learners aged 16 to 19 state that if a student got a Grade 3 in their GCSE English or maths (one grade below a 'pass' at Grade 4) and they are on a full-time course then they must retake their GCSE in the relevant subject(s).[93] The DfE has previously stated that the resits policy had "resulted in a significant increase in the number of students successfully taking their GCSEs".[94] However, the pass rates in 2022 were not encouraging, with only 28.4 per cent of resit students achieving at least a Grade 4 in English and just 20.1 per cent achieving Grade 4 in maths – both lower than before the pandemic.[95] This indicates that a considerable amount of time and money is going into a policy that is not delivering substantial gains in English and maths capabilities among young people.

If a student aged 16 to 19 is on a short programme, a part-time course or got a Grade 2 or below in their GCSEs then they can take a 'Functional Skills' qualification in English or maths instead of retaking the GCSE exam. Functional Skills are designed to help learners develop the practical skills needed in real life situations – including at levels below a GCSE 'pass' ('Entry Level' and Level 1).[96] In effect, this means that the DfE is content for students at the very end of secondary education to take a Functional Skills qualification instead of a GCSE, yet before the age of 16 students are effectively banned from doing so despite the risk of 'repeated failure' highlighted by Ofsted. This approach is even harder to fathom when the DfE allows students to study English and maths at lower levels *after* failing their GCSEs but not beforehand. Ofsted has previously found that encouraging students at risk of dropping out of school to take GCSE English and maths at Level 1 in Year 10 had "motivated them and made it more likely that they would not leave school without qualifications."[97]

Professor Alison Wolf was the architect of the GCSE resits policy, but even she thinks a new approach may be needed. In 2019 Professor Wolf told the Education Select Committee that she believed English and maths should be compulsory up to age 18, but that England should follow the example of Sweden and Germany and have a set of alternative curricula that went up to 18. This approach of offering different curricula to students on different pathways is found in several countries. For example, college-based courses in Denmark look similar to school-based courses such as English, mathematics and Danish. However, the content of these subjects is adapted to the particular programme so that, for example, mathematics for carpenters will concentrate on areas relevant to working as a carpenter and will be quite different to mathematics for veterinary nurses.[98]

The announcement in early 2023 by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak that he wants all school pupils in England to study maths until age 18[99] raised further doubts about the usefulness of the present approach to resits and restricted qualification choices, particularly when only around half of pupils currently take some form of maths between ages 16 and 19.[100] It was unclear whether the Prime Minister's ambition would be an expectation or requirement, or whether it would apply to pupils on non-academic routes such as technical qualifications or apprenticeships. Awkwardly, this new ambition for 'maths to 18' came just a few months after the DfE scrapped the requirement for T-level students to pass English and maths at Level 2 (either a GCSE or equivalent qualification) before the end of their course. This change, which was widely regarded as a brazen attempt by the Government to prop up the number of pupils starting a T-level, was criticised by policy experts who feared it "sends the wrong message" and risks "devaluing" the qualification.[101] What's more, this change has made it harder for current or future government ministers to create a coherent approach to improving literacy and numeracy skills for students across all pathways and courses.

T-levels are not the only form of technical education that has become entangled in English and maths requirements. In addition to the GCSE resits policy for 16 to 19-year-olds, it has been a requirement that all apprentices must continue studying English and maths if they have not gained a Level 2 qualification in each subject. If an apprentice does not yet have a Level 1 qualification in English and maths (either Functional Skills Level 1 or a Grade 2 / E in a GCSE) then they must reach Level 1 by the end of their apprenticeship. If an apprentice already holds approved Level 1 qualifications in English and / or maths then they must start, continue to study and take the assessments for the Level 2 qualification (either Functional Skills Level 2 or a GCSE).[102]

This approach has two unintended consequences. First, it creates a strong disincentive for employers and training providers to take on apprentices who do not already meet the minimum English and maths requirements, encouraging them to filter out such candidates as they are less likely to pass the end-point assessment and thus complete their apprenticeship. To illustrate the point, a recent analysis of apprenticeship job adverts found that 80 per cent of all vacancies mentioned English or maths as qualifications required from applicants.[103] This rational behaviour is particularly concerning because only about half of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (as measured by eligibility for free school meals) achieve a Grade 4 in English and maths.[104]

Second, the value of Functional Skills and GCSEs in the workplace is questionable. Training providers have long complained about the generic curriculum offered by Functional Skills courses. A CEO of a training provider recently highlighted how "employers regularly comment that functional skills, as structured, are too in-depth for their current needs" and questioned whether it was sensible and appropriate to expect, for example, apprentice chefs to be able to demonstrate that they can use coordinates, interpret scatter diagrams, recognise positive and negative correlations and draw 3-D shapes (including elevations). Consequently, apprentices can end up "struggling to get through functional skills; they are failing and leaving, which is disheartening, frustrating and damaging for learners, providers and businesses."[105] Unless action is taken to make English and maths more useful for young people in the context of apprenticeships and other technical pathways, many learners, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, may be left unable to access the available training and apprenticeship opportunities.

3. How to bring employers closer to young people

Successive governments have failed to understand the realities of why and how businesses invest in training. Some centralised schemes have essentially tried to 'force' employers to train staff (e.g. the apprenticeship levy – see below) whereas other schemes have simply provided subsidies or other financial incentives without any appreciation of the barriers to training that different employers may face. Government should recognise that providing high-quality training is far from straightforward for many employers, and it is therefore sensible to work with employers rather than against them if ministers wish to generate a sustainable range of opportunities for young people leaving school or college. After all, employers will be keen to pursue greater productivity and economic gains if there is a rational case for doing so.

As the introduction to this report explained, enhancing the opportunities for young people to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in employment is only part of the story. Having set out a range of measures to achieve this goal in the first section of this report, the next section will concentrate on how employers could be encouraged to create and maintain more employment and training opportunities suitable for young people.

3.1 - Apprenticeships

In the Summer 2015 Budget, the Conservative Government confirmed that it would "introduce a levy on large UK employers" to fund post-16 apprenticeships in England. In addition, this new levy funding would be "directly controlled by employers".[106] The 2015 Autumn Statement explained how the levy would operate:

> *"The Apprenticeship levy on larger employers announced in the Summer Budget will be introduced in April 2017. It will be set at a rate of 0.5% of an employer's paybill. Each employer will receive an allowance of £15,000 to offset against their levy payment. This means that the levy will only be paid on any paybill in excess of £3 million and that less than 2% of UK employers will pay it. The levy will be paid through Pay As You Earn. By 2019-20, the levy will raise £3 billion in the UK."* [107]

The notion of 'employer control' – previously championed by the Richard Review and Professor Alison Wolf – was evident in these plans. In essence, employers would fund the apprenticeship system and then be allowed to direct the funding towards their chosen employees, courses and training providers. Although this approach may seem sensible, the impact of the levy since 2017, especially on young people, has been extremely concerning.

A major report by EDSK in 2022 unearthed serious issues with the quality of many apprenticeships. Creating more entry-level apprenticeships is vital in the context of helping young people transition from education to employment, yet the apprenticeship system remains littered with poor-quality training courses posing as 'apprenticeships'. In the hospitality sector, learners can end up doing nothing more than heating and serving precooked meals and pushing around a drinks and snacks trolley as a 'Food and Drink Apprentice', or washing, drying and ironing clothes as an 'Apprentice Housekeeper'. Other low-quality 'apprenticeships' can be found in offices that hire apprentices to simply answer phone calls and take messages for colleagues as well as leisure venues that recruit apprentices to greet customers, take bookings and serve soft drinks. None of these roles represent 'skilled occupations' (a mandatory part of the Government's definition of an apprenticeship) and they typically offer just £4.81 an hour - the apprentice minimum wage.

Furthermore, more than half (54 per cent) of apprentices do not receive their minimum entitlement to one-day-a-week of off-the-job training, and 30 per cent report receiving no training at all from their training provider during the entire working week. One in five (19 per cent) apprentices also report receiving no on-the-job training at all from their employer, rising to one in four (26 per cent) for those on entry-level apprenticeships. These uncomfortable truths help explain why almost half (47 per cent) of all apprentices drop out before completing their course, and a staggering 70 per cent of those who drop out report concerns about the quality of their apprenticeship – equivalent to around 115,000 apprentices a year. These concerns include, among others, their apprenticeship being low quality, badly organised, unhelpful or lacking the rigorous training that they rightly expected. That is not to say the goal should be zero per cent turnover of apprentices, as both young people and adults will sometimes move jobs for entirely sensible reasons. Even so, if A-level or university students were dropping out in such large numbers or reporting similar complaints about quality then it would be a national scandal.

The way that the levy is designed has exacerbated these quality problems. As EDSK's recent research on the impact of the levy highlighted, employers that pay the levy only have two years to use up their levy contributions. This has incentivised them to take on 'apprentices' at higher levels because these courses are more expensive to deliver and thus consume more of their contributions. For example, sending existing staff on costly management training and professional development courses that have been relabelled as an 'apprenticeship' is a more effective strategy for using up levy contributions than offering more (cheaper) lower-level apprenticeships usually aimed at younger recruits. Moreover, management training courses can be three times more expensive to deliver as 'apprenticeships' than as a standalone programme[108] – depriving young people of yet more funded training positions. At the same

time, non-levy-paying employers are pitted against each other in a 'zero sum' contest to access the funding made available to them as quickly as possible, giving them an equally strong incentive to use the 95 per cent subsidy provided by the Government to focus on the most expensive 'apprenticeships' at higher levels.

Because of these unwelcome incentives, only 26 per cent of learners who started an apprenticeship in 2021/22 were on entry-level apprenticeships (Level 2 - equivalent to GCSEs) – down from 53 per cent in 2016/17 before the levy was introduced.[109] The Government has appeared relaxed about this development, merely noting that "higher-level apprenticeships give employers the opportunity to strengthen and expand their training in a way they may not have done previously."[110] However, sector leaders are often less inclined to ignore this shift. In 2022, the London Progression Collaboration – an initiative to boost apprenticeship starts in the capital – stated that because of the dramatic fall in entry-level opportunities in recent years, there is "a serious concern that this leaves those out of work, on zero-hour contracts, in in-work poverty or on the bottom rung of their career ladder less able to access apprenticeships."[111] The Social Mobility Commission – a government-funded agency – has also warned that this decline in lower-level apprenticeships "reduces opportunities for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds". The Commission added that COVID-19 compounded this because younger apprentices from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have been in sectors that saw apprenticeship numbers decline.[112]

Such is the popularity of some expensive higher-level 'apprenticeships', they have consumed vast amounts of precious levy funding. The Level 7 (Masters-level) 'Accountancy or Taxation Professional' apprenticeship[113] states that it is aimed at "providing financial information and advice to different organisations"[114] and claims to cover a number of highly-paid roles as diverse as Management accountants, Tax advisers, External Auditors, Financial analysts, Forensic accountants and Business advisors.[115] These are self-evidently different occupations that require employees to learn distinct skills and knowledge to perform each role correctly. What's more, the notion of an 'Accountancy or Taxation Professional' does not exist outside of the apprenticeship system and no job advert refers to the existence of such a role. Even so, the Masters-level 'Accountancy or Taxation Professional' apprenticeship has consumed more funding than *any other apprenticeship in England*. At the time of writing, 43,690 'apprentices' had started this £21,000 course since the levy became operational[116] – creating a maximum spend of £917 million. This is around 25 per cent more than any other 'apprenticeship'.

Another example of a Level 7 course that has absorbed huge quantities of levy funding is the 'Senior Leader' apprenticeship. Just like the 'Accountancy or Taxation Professional', the description of this course opens with a nebulous claim that it is aimed at any "leader who has

senior management responsibility".[117] Indeed, it claims to be suitable for Chief Operating Officers, Chief Financial Officers, Chief Executive Officers, senior military officers and Heads of Department / Faculty among others.[118] Again, job adverts for generic 'Senior Leaders' do not exist and employers do not recognise it as an occupation, which is why this 'Senior Leader' apprenticeship should never have been approved, yet it has attracted 26,490 learners since 2017.[119] With the course costing up to £14,000, this 'apprenticeship' has absorbed £371 million of levy funding (the true figure may be higher because this apprenticeship previously had a funding rate of £18,000 before 2021[120]). This apparent popularity is underpinned by the 'flexibility' offered by such ambiguous 'apprenticeships' that bear no relation to any genuine occupation, which is helpful for an employer trying to use up their sizeable levy contributions.

That the 'Senior Leader' apprenticeship continues to be used by many companies to fund MBAs for senior executives earning over £100,000 a year has only added to the controversy. Funnelling MBAs through the apprenticeship system was supposedly banned in 2021 after former Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said he was "unconvinced it was in the spirit of the programme" or that it provided "value for money". Regardless, many of the UK's top business schools – including Henley and Cranfield School of Management – still tout for 'Executive MBA' candidates on their websites with the message that prospective candidates can use the apprenticeship levy to fund up to two-thirds of their course[121] - thus circumventing the Government's 'ban' and drawing down tens of millions of pounds in levy funding each year that could have been used to create new opportunities for young people.

Indeed, the shift towards higher-level expensive courses has resulted in a greater focus of 'apprenticeships' on more experienced and older employees. Over half of apprentices are now aged 25 or over, and 55 per cent have been working for their employer for at least three months before their 'apprenticeship' began.[122] This is a rational response from levy-paying employers to the two-year timeframe for using up their levy contributions. Even so, Kathleen Henehan, then an analyst at the Resolution Foundation, said that apprenticeships are traditionally an alternative route into work for young people yet the system "has really failed to offer that for quite some time… we're now almost moving in a different direction… young people are still kind of left nowhere."[123] Similarly, the NFER has warned that the notion of apprenticeships as a high-value route for young people is "at-risk of being crowded out" because the levy "is trading-off apprenticeships for young people against higher apprenticeships".[124]

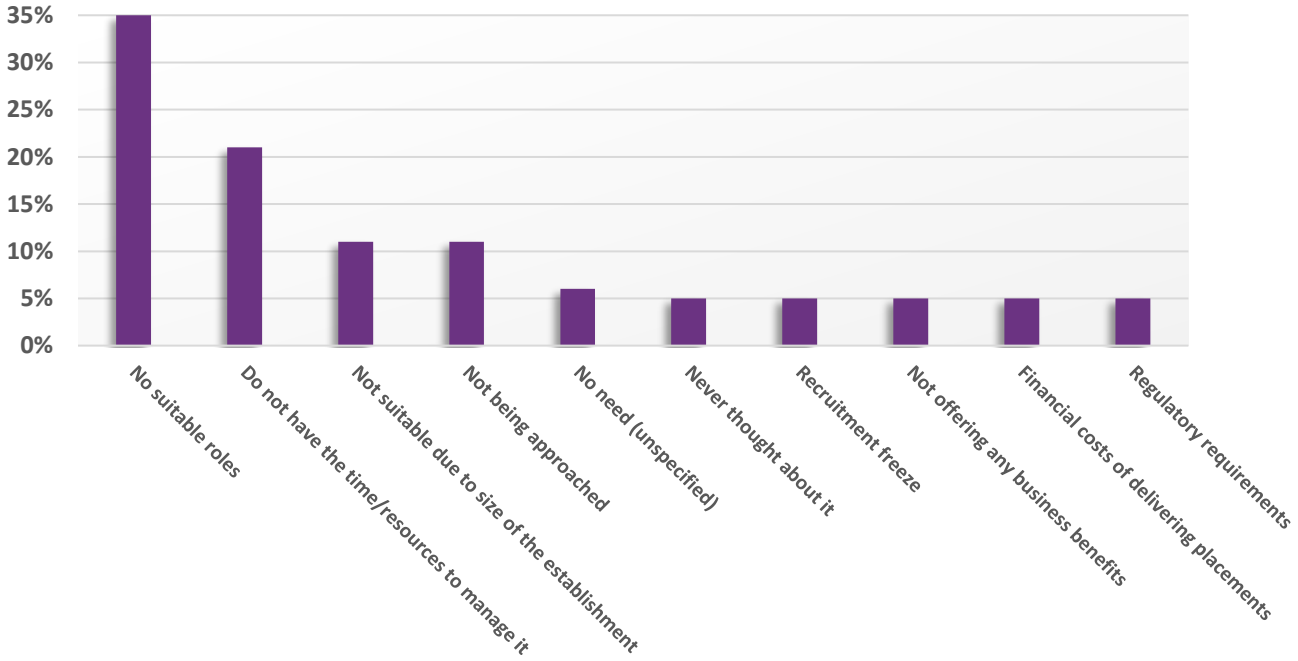
A handful of small-scale incentives are available to employers for recruiting younger learners. Employers with fewer than 50 staff who train apprentices aged 16-18 (or aged 19-24 with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) or who had previously been in care) are not required to contribute the 5 per cent 'co-investment' towards their training costs, as the Government

pays 100 per cent of the costs.[125] In terms of direct financial incentives, employers receive £1,000 for recruiting 16 to 18-year-old apprentices or those aged 19-24 with an EHCP or who had previously been in care, while training providers also receive the same £1,000 payment.[126] In reality, though, these payments do little to overcome the strong incentives created by the levy to ignore these potential recruits. Consequently, a future government should aim to reform the levy so that young people at the start of their careers, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, receive a greater share of apprenticeship levy funding.

3.2 - Financial incentives for employers

The incentives offered to employers for apprentices are an example of how government can seek to stimulate demand for younger recruits through subsidising jobs or reducing the cost of recruitment and training. Figure 5 shows the top ten reasons that employers did not offer placements, internships and work experience to younger learners according to the 2019 Employer Skills Survey. The most frequently cited reason was a lack of suitable roles (35 per cent of employers). While 'financial costs' was only cited by 5 per cent of employers, more than 20 per cent reported concerns about 'a lack of time / resources' – presumably in relation to staffing and management. This suggests that more financial support could encourage some employers to increase the volume of opportunities that they offer to young people.

Figure 5: Reasons that employers do not offer placements, internships and work experience [127]



As noted in the Introduction to this report, the Government rapidly expanded its use of financial incentives during the pandemic, but several large-scale subsidy programmes had been developed by previous governments too. For example, 'wage incentive payments' of up to £2,275 were available from 2012 to 2015 when employers recruited an unemployed 18 to 24-year-old from the Government's 'Work Programme'.[128] An evaluation, based on a survey of 376 employers, found that the majority of claimants were small employers (76 per cent) and a large proportion were in service industries (63 per cent) such as retail.[129] The main reasons employers gave for taking up the incentives were to get financial support (40 per cent) and to give young people a chance (24 per cent).[130] 55 per cent of employers reported that the incentive had influenced their behaviour in some way (slightly more so among small employers). 60 per cent said they would still have taken up the incentive if the amount was lower, while 32 per cent said they would not have done so.[131] Overall, the wage incentive appears to have been a moderate success, with smaller employers appearing to benefit more than larger employers.

Another example is the 'Apprenticeship Grant for Employers' (AGE) programme that had a budget of £60 million. Introduced in 2012, it provided a grant of £1,500 for hiring up to three young apprentices (later increased to ten).[132] An evaluation in 2013 found that the government officials responsible for the AGE believed it was 'a valuable contribution' to tackling youth unemployment.[133] Officials also thought £1,500 was "about right: sufficient to trigger employer engagement but not so high as to incentivise employers who have only low intrinsic interest in Apprenticeship".[134] Meanwhile, the employers who took on apprentices were generally positive about taking on further apprentices in future.[135] Only 22 per cent of employers said the grant had made no difference to their decision to recruit an apprentice.[136] It was concluded that "the benefits arising from AGE 16 to 24-supported Apprenticeships substantially surpass the costs."[137] That said, a later analysis suggested that "more effort should have been made to make the system more generous for [very small] firms, rather than expanding subsidies to larger firms where take up had been poor".[138]

Other wage subsidy schemes have also produced encouraging evaluations. A meta-analysis of four studies that examined the 'New Deal for Young People' (UK), 'Future Jobs Fund' (UK), subsidised employment programmes in the Netherlands and 'Youth Practice' (Sweden) "revealed a significant positive impact on participants' likelihood of entering non-subsidised employment".[139] Based on these results, it was noted that "in general the benefits of wage subsidy programmes tend to outweigh the costs",[140] although the number of high-quality research studies is limited. The evidence also showed that one of the most important benefits of wage subsidies is that they can be utilised by employers "as a relatively risk-free way to 'try out' young people in the workplace." In addition, "young people who are more 'work-

ready' can gain greater benefits" and "candidates [can] benefit from preparation activities before they apply to and enter subsidised jobs"[141] – illustrating yet again why it is essential that young people are given opportunities to acquire workplace skills before they enter the labour market rather than waiting for problems to develop later.

Ensuring that any incentives or subsidies are targeted at the most marginalised or vulnerable young people is another crucial element of their design. Previous research by the Institute for Employment Studies showed that 76 per cent of employers did not target their training and apprenticeship opportunities at disadvantaged young people, with micro enterprises and sole traders the least likely to do so, although 42 per cent of employers showed enthusiasm to work more with disadvantaged groups. Moreover, 15 per cent reported that financial costs made it difficult to employ a disadvantaged young person, with these costs being the single biggest barrier to offering more apprenticeships to disadvantaged young people among small businesses.[142] Training providers added that even where disadvantaged young people can access training opportunities, their continued engagement is not guaranteed as it is harder and more resource intensive to prepare them for work (including getting the appropriate support in place).[143]

The 'Kickstart' programme showed how a government could seek to focus its resources on young people most in need of support – in this case, 16 to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit at risk of long-term unemployment. Kickstart offered employers a bursary equivalent to six months of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) for 25 hours a week, which would essentially allow them to hire a young person for free. Employers also received £1,500 per Kickstart employee at the start of each job placement to cover set-up costs and employability training.[144] The Department for Work and Pensions recognised that schemes such as Kickstart "should be targeted at people who would otherwise face significant disadvantage in the labour market",[145] although they did not set formal eligibility criteria to target particular groups of young people.

An evaluation of Kickstart published in July 2023[146] found that 10 months after their placements began, the proportion of participants in education, employment or training was 75 per cent (including 63 per cent in employment). Of those who were in work, 66 per cent said that the skills and experiences they gained through Kickstart had been important in helping them find work. In line with the evidence on school-based work experience discussed earlier in this report, both young people and employers felt that Kickstart jobs had the greatest influence on young people's confidence (generally and professionally) and teamwork skills. That said, there was a higher level of dissatisfaction among Kickstart participants who had at

least 12 months' prior work experience or had degree-level qualifications, emphasising how important it is to target such schemes at the young people who could benefit the most.

Overall, 73 per cent of employers were satisfied with their experience of Kickstart, even though many were new to this sort of scheme. Some employers struggled with young people with poor workplace etiquette and low motivation, initiative, and confidence, but the employers often felt able to overcome these issues through open discussions and coaching. Crucially, 75 per cent of employers that had a young person complete the full six months of Kickstart made at least one job offer to them. This suggests that wage subsidies that are simple to access and understand and are directed at specific groups of disadvantaged young people could have a substantial impact on some employers' willingness to help young people move into secure employment.

3.3 - Helping employers develop their own training capabilities

At the start of this report, it was noted how skills and training can be seen as a 'derived demand', meaning that employers' skills needs are a function of how they organise and run themselves rather than necessarily responding to the availability of recruits in the labour market. In the same way that well-targeted subsidies can increase employers' willingness to recruit young people, a government that wishes to bring employers closer to young people should also consider how best to support employers in identifying and addressing their skills and training requirements.

The OECD has highlighted the benefits of employers working collaboratively to solve current and future skills shortages such as risk-pooling, information-sharing and economies of scale that "should not only encourage more training by employers, but also make that training more labour market relevant."[147] Moreover, the OECD emphasises that collaboration between employers can be particularly beneficial for smaller firms, with the potential to help them access training they would otherwise not have access to while also promoting higher-quality training that can be tailored to their needs.[148] One such approach to collaboration is to make access to government subsidies for training conditional on joint action.[149] For example, a government could offer to cover a percentage of training costs to deliver skills that a large number of employers have said are needed (e.g. Portugal)[150] or covering training costs so long as a minimum number of firms are involved (e.g. Flanders, Belgium).[151]

Another approach to collaboration is through a government setting up specific bodies that provide a range of training solutions and related services to a group of employers organised by sector or industry. This includes funding 'training networks', particularly for SMEs, that

allow for economies of scale and for the creation of a critical mass in the demand for education and training (including the analysis of skill gaps), thus lowering the per-worker cost of training. These networks, which can help employers with training, exchanging information and developing new ideas, often come with criteria for accessing their support.[152] For example, 'Impulse Training Networks' in Austria promote co-operation by providing cost-efficient and work-relevant training as well as helping employers develop training plans and their human resources programmes. Although the networks are publicly funded, they must be made up of at least three companies – half of which must be SMEs – and each company is entitled to ten days of consultancy services a year.[153] Another example is 'Skillnet' - the business support agency funded by the government in Ireland. Skillnet trained more than 56,000 individuals in 2018 and has close to 16,500 member companies – 95 per cent of which are SMEs and 56 per cent are micro-enterprises with less than 10 employees.[154]

Supporting SMEs to make the best use of the available talent, especially young people, is a valuable component of any meaningful skills strategy. SMEs inevitably have less spare time and capacity to assess their skills needs, identify training opportunities, find the right staff and utilise their existing staff's skills. They may also lack the "long-term business perspective which is needed to invest in human capital and innovation", something which is even more pertinent when deciding to recruit younger workers and apprentices. On that basis, "measures that promote innovative management practices and workplace innovation, build management and leadership skills, and promote a culture of learning are instrumental to enhance investment in and the effective utilisation of skills within SMEs."[155]

During the pandemic, the Government rolled out various measures aimed at enhancing SMEs' access to advice and support. The 'Small Business Leadership Programme' was a fully funded 10-week management training programme targeted at SMEs and delivered by a consortium of business schools, while the 'Peer Networks' programme brought together cohorts of business leaders to discuss their challenges and receive feedback on their plans. In addition, 'Be the Business' is a charity that uses government funding to provide free business mentors and free online support to SMEs to help them identify opportunities for improvement and develop approaches to boost their productivity.[156] All these initiatives recognise the benefits of supporting SMEs to improve their management and leadership skills so that they can increase productivity through various means, including better training for new and existing staff.

Although such initiatives are welcome, central government continues to tightly grip this policy agenda to the point where local areas, communities and economies often have little say over how the available funding should be used to promote collaboration between employers

and generate new opportunities for young people. There are tentative signs that ministers may now recognise the deficiencies of their current approach. For example, the recent expansions of some of the larger 'devolution deals' for areas such as the West Midlands Combined Authority will lead to "greater local responsibility for developing and delivering careers advice and a partnership with Department for Work and Pensions to target employment support".[157] Even so, other initiatives such as 'Local Skills Improvement Plans', which are supposed to "place employers at the heart of local skills systems" and "facilitate direct and dynamic working arrangements between employers and providers",[158] remain accountable to central government. This suggests that a more nuanced approach to developing the human capital of young people has yet to emerge despite the evidence demonstrating the benefits of strong local networks of employers and other stakeholders.

4. Recommendations

Throughout the analysis in this report, a clear pattern has emerged of numerous missed opportunities by successive governments to bring young people and employers closer together. The following recommendations are therefore designed to overcome these persistent problems with our education and training system, with the aim of giving more young people the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in employment while also giving employers a good reason to create more openings for young people.

Part 1: Bringing young people closer to employers

RECOMMENDATION 1

To promote the supply of entry-level opportunities and clear progression routes into genuine high-quality apprenticeships, **a redesigned 'traineeships' programme should be offered to 16 to 24-year-olds**. A bursary of £100 a week should also be given for trainees to support them with expenses such as food and transport.

Although the Richard Review was rightly concerned about 'diluting' the apprenticeship brand, entry-level roles remain important routes into high-quality apprenticeships and employment. This report has shown that traineeships delivered encouraging outcomes as well as high rates of satisfaction, although their greatest impact was evident when they were used as a targeted programme in relation to industry sectors and progression into apprenticeships. As a result, this report proposes that occupational traineeships linked to high-quality apprenticeships or specific sectors should be reintroduced. It would be logical to follow the previous model used for the pilots of occupational traineeships, as this should ensure that the new traineeships offer a high-quality employer-focused programme.

What's more, to make traineeships more accessible and increase their perceived value as a career opportunity, a bursary of £100 per week should be provided for all trainees. This bursary would make traineeships more attractive to learners and increase their popularity as a 'stepping stone' to a high-quality apprenticeship or moving into employment elsewhere. Framing this £100-a-week as a bursary rather than a wage would mean that participation in a traineeship will not affect a learner's entitlement to Universal Credit or other financial support from government. When combined with the expanded role for traineeships as an entry-level opportunity for young people, this new bursary should act as a catalyst for traineeships to create a smooth journey between education and employment for many young people.

RECOMMENDATION 2

To enhance the employability skills of younger learners before they leave school, **the Department for Education should create a new programme called 'Young Traineeships' for 14 to 16-year-olds**. This will provide an extended work placement of 50 days over two years with a local employer during Key Stage 4 (approximately one day a week), the completion of which would be equivalent to a 'pass' (Grade 4) in a GCSE subject.

The evidence in this report has shown that giving younger learners the opportunity to sample life in the workplace has numerous benefits for both learners and employers. While it is important that young people progress in their classroom-based subjects, allowing them to build their confidence, self-esteem and workplace readiness alongside their academic qualifications is likely to appeal to many learners who are disinterested and demotivated by the limited choices available to them at present – including both higher and lower achievers.

Based on 'Young Apprenticeships', 'Student Apprenticeships' and the 'Increased Flexibility Programme', this report proposes a new scheme called 'Young Traineeships' that offers pupils one day a week in the workplace – up to a maximum of 50 days over two years. Schools would work with local employers to generate placements that are appropriate for this age group, as was done successfully on the schemes cited above. Rather than aiming to achieve low-level vocational qualifications through each placement, this report suggests that the Young Traineeship is a qualification itself that includes a range of personal development objectives (e.g. improving communication skills) alongside developing pupils' knowledge of the working environment as well as particular careers and occupations – in line with the approach previously trialled with 'occupational traineeships'. This would mean that learners are not restricted to remaining in a specific industry or sector after age 16 following their Young Traineeship placement, although they would be well placed to progress into that industry or sector through, for example, a 16-18 apprenticeship if they so wished.

On successful completion of their placement (as judged by their school and the employer), a pupil will receive a qualification that is equivalent to one GCSE 'standard pass' at grade 4. This will allow pupils who are interested in work-based learning to receive credit for their placement without diluting the focus on attainment in classroom subjects, particularly English and maths. Young Traineeships would not be restricted to lower-achieving pupils, but only giving a credit equivalent to a grade 4 at GCSE means that higher-achieving pupils are likely to be better off continuing to study other subjects rather than pursuing a work placement.

RECOMMENDATION 3

To ensure that young people who do not want to follow an academic pathway are recognised for their achievements at school, **the EBacc measure of secondary school performance should be withdrawn with immediate effect and the main 'Progress 8' measure should be reformed** so that pupils can choose any subjects (including technical courses) alongside English, maths and science.

The emphasis that the EBacc places on traditional academic subjects leaves no room for technical courses and programmes. Since the EBacc was introduced, there have been significant reductions in exam entries and teaching hours for non-EBacc subjects, yet there is no evidence that this has been beneficial to disadvantaged young people. On the contrary, the EBacc marginalises the very courses and qualifications that many young people frequently express a preference for over classroom-based learning. In light of these findings (and in line with EDSK's previous report on the EBacc in 2019), this report concludes that the EBacc does not serve any useful purpose and may even be contributing to more young people becoming NEET than if it were not in place. The EBacc should therefore be immediately withdrawn.

Meanwhile, the Progress 8 measure is well intentioned, especially its double weighting of English and maths to reflect their importance in the curriculum, yet this measure compounds the bias towards academic subjects by prioritising EBacc subjects over other courses. Consequently, the Government should remove the distinction between EBacc and non-EBacc subjects and allow young people to select the subjects that best suit their interests and career goals without a school being penalised for their choices. As science is a 'core subject' alongside English and maths, this would take up at least two Progress 8 subject choices (for GCSE Double Science), but this should still leave up to four slots for other subjects. This tailored approach would give greater recognition to pupils' attainment in non-academic subjects, and hopefully boost their chances of progressing into a positive outcome after age 16.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To make T-levels a more viable proposition for learners and employers, an independent review should be urgently conducted into these qualifications. The review should consider, among other options, reducing the size of T-levels, splitting the 45-day work placement into smaller placements and redesigning the 'foundation year'.

Regrettably, the verdicts passed by Ofsted and the Education Select Committee paint a bleak picture of the initial years of T-level delivery. A combination of rushed policymaking, poor implementation and a mis-selling of this new qualification has left T-levels in a weak position

that is unlikely to ever appeal beyond a narrow segment of learners – and even if it did have a broader appeal, many learners are still likely to be excluded by colleges and training providers. Continuing down the current path of simply rolling out more T-levels without any consideration of the existing problems would therefore be a serious error. This report proposes that an urgent independent review takes place of what has happened with T-levels. This review should involve all the main stakeholders – colleges, awarding bodies, employer representatives and others – to understand how the potential of T-levels could be realised in future if certain changes are made. An obvious candidate for reform would be reducing the size of T-levels (e.g. from being equivalent to 3 A-levels to 2 A-levels) without making the content less rigorous, as this would allow students to study other subjects alongside a T-level – making it more attractive for young people who do not wish to close off so many options.

If T-levels were recast as smaller qualifications then it would also allow for more pragmatic thinking regarding the provision of work placements. As it stands, the ability to secure 45-day work placements for every single T-level student in the country is likely to prove the biggest obstacle for colleges and other providers. However, if T-levels were smaller and students were studying two T-levels rather than one then this would open more possibilities in terms of placements. For example, students could complete a 45-day placement in either one of their two T-level sectors - effectively doubling the opportunities for providers to secure a good quality placement. Alternatively, students could complete two 3-week placements to cover both sectors rather than one single longer placement, which could significantly reduce the burden on some employers, particularly smaller ones. In both cases, the attractiveness and viability of T-levels would be improved without reducing their rigour or value.

Another important area for discussion would be the existing foundation / transition year, which has evidently failed to provide a route into T-levels for almost all the young people placed on this scheme. One possibility would be to recast it as a more flexible pathway to apprenticeships or employment. For example, the 'traineeships' model could be used to deliver a work placement with a focus on a particular sector as well as including a technical qualification and work preparation training. This would essentially combine the 'occupational traineeships' approach with Level 1/2 Technical Awards, giving learners a stronger platform to choose between education, employment or training at the end of the 12-month programme.

This report does not wish to prejudge the outcome of such an independent review, suffice to say that the continued existence of T-levels is by no means assured given their existing weaknesses. On that basis, it would be wise to take this opportunity to hold open and honest discussions about what could be done to prevent this relatively new qualification from joining the long list of vocational courses that have come and gone over the past 30 years.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Government should allow exam boards to **create new English and maths qualifications that are specific to each of the 15 technical education routes that encompass both classroom-based courses and apprenticeships** (e.g. Construction; Care Services; Transport and Logistics). The new qualifications will teach the skills and knowledge required to succeed in each technical pathway rather than offering generic curricula.

While it would be wrong to scrap all requirements around improving English and maths skills after age 16, this report has described the adverse impact of GCSE resits and generic 'Functional Skills' qualifications on students' progression and confidence. On that basis, it is proposed that the Government should open up the existing funding rules to permit exam boards to create (and training providers to deliver) new English and maths qualifications that focus specifically on the subject content that is relevant to each of the 15 technical education routes available after age 16.

The new English and maths courses should be offered at Level 2 and possibly Level 1 to begin with so that they can draw on the content from existing Functional Skills qualifications. As a starting point for consultation with employers, exam boards and training providers, the Government could specify that these new technical English and maths qualifications must cover at least 50 per cent of the existing Functional Skills courses, meaning that the least relevant 50 per cent of the curriculum could be discarded depending on the needs of each technical pathway. For example, the ability to calculate perimeters, use coordinates and draw 3D shapes with elevations may be deemed essential for students on the Engineering and Manufacturing pathway but irrelevant for students on the Care Services or Hair and Beauty pathway. This approach would allow the Government to continue with their current level-based approach to setting English and maths requirements but would ideally mean that fewer students are prevented from pursuing their chosen occupation or apprenticeship due to inappropriate curricula or unnecessary learning goals.

Part 2: Bringing employers closer to young people

RECOMMENDATION 6

To ensure that apprenticeships remain focused on young people who have chosen not to follow an academic pathway, **learners who are already qualified at or above Level 6 (equivalent to a full undergraduate degree) should no longer be eligible to start a levy-funded apprenticeship**.

Given that the HE system already provides young people on an academic pathway with tens of thousands of pounds in financial support from government, it is only right that the same kind of commitment is shown to young people on an apprenticeship. However, this report has explained how 'apprenticeships' are increasingly being used to train existing older workers, including highly qualified senior executives completing MBAs and other management training courses, which is consuming an increasingly large share of the finite funding pot generated by the apprenticeship levy.

There are several options available to policymakers to unwind this concerning situation. For example, a government could restrict apprenticeships to those aged 16 to 24 (as seen in other countries) or restrict apprenticeships to lower-level courses. However, it would seem harsh to prevent an unemployed adult from accessing apprenticeships to start their career, while the advent of 'degree apprenticeships' (Level 6) has become an attractive scheme for young people. On that basis, the simplest way to prevent apprenticeship funding being used on highly qualified existing workers is to ban anyone who holds a university degree or equivalent qualification from starting an apprenticeship. This would protect apprenticeships as a route for those who do not want to follow an academic pathway after age 16 but without unduly stifling the breadth of opportunities available across the apprenticeship system and without disrupting the wider operation of the employer-led levy funds.

RECOMMENDATION 7

To prioritise the interests of young people but without excluding older learners from starting an apprenticeship, consideration should be given to **preventing employers from accessing further levy funding if they have trained more apprentices aged 25+ than those aged 16-24**.

As noted in the previous recommendation, apprenticeships are an all-age programme in England and it is not obvious why adults should be excluded from apprenticeships altogether. That said, it is not easy at present for policymakers to prioritise the interests of young people

when employers are supposedly in charge of where the apprenticeship levy money is spent. On that basis, policymakers could introduce a new rule that prevents employers from recruiting more apprentices aged 25 and over relative to apprentices aged 16 to 24. This would mean that employers would still have some flexibility in terms of who they recruit while also ensuring that young people remain the primary focus of apprenticeships in England. Such a measure would be simple to explain to employers and training providers and could operate on a rolling basis throughout an academic year based on the number of young apprentices and adult apprentices recruited up to that point.

RECOMMENDATION 8

To generate more job openings for young people from the least privileged backgrounds, **the Government should reinstate a more targeted version of the 'Kickstart' programme** that offered subsidies to employers for creating new jobs.

Although Kickstart was originally conceived as a response to the pandemic, its value as a programme to create new job openings for young people facing difficult circumstances quickly became apparent. Given the positive messages emerging from the early evaluations of Kickstart, the model of subsidising jobs for young people who are finding it hard to get onto the career ladder holds considerable potential. Crucially, Kickstart also offered a support package to employers to help them deliver a good quality placement, including financial resources to offer some pastoral support to young people who may be struggling with a lack of workplace skills, confidence or motivation.

Admittedly, Kickstart was an expensive version of this type of programme at around £7,000 per young person. In addition, the focus on young people claiming Universal Credit meant that those who were not claiming benefits but nevertheless faced numerous barriers to securing a job may have been inadvertently excluded from Kickstart. On that basis, there is a strong case for relaunching a more targeted version of Kickstart that concentrates on providing jobs for specific groups of young people. These may include:

- Those aged under 21 (rather than the original 16-24 approach)
- Those without a university degree
- Care leavers
- Young people with a history of contact with the justice system

The Government could also consider reducing the bursary for employers from six months of the full NMW to, say, three months of the full NMW and another three months of half the

NMW to enable them to fund more job opportunities. It may also be possible to reduce the £1,500 given to an employer for every Kickstart employee to cover set-up costs and employability training, as this sum could potentially be lowered for larger employers or those employers who have previously taken on Kickstart employees. In short, by restricting the cost and breadth of the scheme, this new version of Kickstart would offer greater value for money as well as providing thousands of new roles for young people who may struggle more than their peers to find a good quality job.

RECOMMENDATION 9

To build capacity among employers to recruit and support young people, **financial incentives of up to £5,000 should be available to organisations offering apprenticeships, traineeships and T Level placements**.

Not all past incentives for employers have been successful and surveys have shown that some employers face barriers (e.g. health and safety considerations) that make it hard for them to offer suitable roles for young people. Nonetheless, the evidence shows that well-designed and well-targeted financial incentives – with a focus on smaller employers and those employers who take on the youngest recruits – are likely to have the lowest deadweight costs and the largest impact on employer behaviour.

Previous research by EDSK proposed that the DfE could introduce a set of financial incentives for employers on a sliding scale to reflect variables such as the age of the learner, the size of the employer and the amount of training required. Alternatively, the DfE could opt for a simpler approach of a single flat-rate incentive that applies to all employers who recruit specific groups of young people (e.g. those with low or no qualifications). A flat-rate incentive would reduce administrative complexity, although it would require a careful consideration of which groups of young people would attract this additional payment depending on the DfE's chosen policy objectives.

New financial incentives are unlikely to transform the behaviour of all employers overnight, not least because – as this report documented – few employers currently focus their recruitment on disadvantaged young people and may therefore need further advice and support to reach these potential recruits. Even so, properly targeted financial incentives will help willing employers grow their internal capacity in terms of the expertise, staffing and management needed to support young people by providing clarity over what funding is available.

RECOMMENDATION 10

To ensure that new non-apprenticeship opportunities for young people are sustainable over time, **the Government should focus on funding and promoting local partnerships and collaborations between employers** through, for example, creating 'training networks'.

As this report has noted on several occasions, the support that employers need often goes beyond financial incentives. To ensure that local employers can share information, risks, training costs and innovative practices, the Government should seek to promote local partnerships between employers and other key stakeholders so that employers can access the advice, support and funding that they need to access non-apprenticeship training to meet their particular needs. Devolution offers a potential channel to build on existing good practice in areas such as the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, who are already showing that innovative forms of collaboration between employers are possible.

Based on the evidence presented in this report, there are several ways in which this new 'partnership' model could be achieved:

- Devolving the National Skills Fund to local areas so that they can identify the most promising collaborative projects, including management skills programmes and 'training networks' in which employers in the same area or sector come together to highlight and subsequently address the skills shortages or related training issues that they are collectively facing.
- Allowing Combined Authorities to take the lead in designing and delivering strategic skills plans such as local 'Industrial Strategies' as well as Local Skills Improvement Plans so that they can address specific local and sub-regional training needs.
- Converting the revived 'Traineeship' programme for 16 to 24-year-olds into a devolved scheme that can be overseen by Combined Authorities to meet the needs of employers in particular sectors rather than relying solely on a generic national offer. Similarly, the Kickstart programme could be flexible around the needs of the most disadvantaged young people in particular parts of the country.
- Continuing the recent drive to pass control of careers funding to local / devolved areas to help boost the awareness and supply of programmes designed to create more training opportunities for young people (e.g. creating more T-level placements, rolling out the new 'Young Traineeships' initiative).
- Boosting the availability and visibility of 'career coaches', who can help employers rethink and redesign their recruitment strategies in relation to young people as well as help prepare young people for job applications and interviews.

By passing control of significant elements of non-apprenticeship funding (e.g. the National Skills Fund) to Combined Authorities, the short-term approach taken by the Treasury that often results in funding for particular programmes being withdrawn before they are embedded would be largely avoided. As a result, the partnerships created at a local and sub-regional level between employers, local authorities, Combined Authorities, jobcentres and other crucial local stakeholders will be more effective and more sustainable – thus ensuring that the new partnerships and networks will benefit young people both now and in future. By promoting non-apprenticeship training in this manner, it would also open up important conversations about how the current levy system may evolve in future to cover a wider range of activities to drive economic growth and productivity.

Conclusion

> *"We owe it to every child to unleash their potential. They are of equal worth. They deserve an equal chance."* [159]

There is little doubt that Tony Blair's commitment to 50 per cent of young people going into HE reshaped the political narrative regarding what counts as 'success' in our education system. That said, as the above quote from his speech in 1999 showed, he also recognised it was crucial that no-one is left behind by the desire to expand the HE sector. Regrettably, the evidence presented throughout this report shows that young people who do not follow an academic path have been neglected by successive governments over the last two decades as they were not – and are still not – given an 'equal' chance.

There is now an urgent need to ensure that the first few rungs on the ladder of opportunity are repaired and made just as robust and stable as the higher rungs that relate to high-skill jobs and careers. This report has set out a range of recommendations that seek to bring young people closer to employers through better pipelines from education and employment while also bringing employers closer to young people through better incentives and better support. Needless to say, a wide range of other factors can affect a young person's journey towards a sustainable job such as the quality and availability of mental health services, careers advice and access to transport links. Even so, this report has focused on opening doors for young people by building stronger foundations in terms of the qualifications and programmes that can help them acquire relevant skills, knowledge and understanding, but doing this in a way that does not close any doors in terms of future progression – be that into HE, apprenticeships, further training or employment.

If the goal is to increase economic growth, skills and productivity, it is hard to see how this can achieved when so many young people cannot progress through our education and skills system in a way that recognises their individual abilities and aptitudes. It cannot be right that a government explicitly signals that some pathways, qualifications and courses are simply worth more than others. The recommendations in this report seek to address this inequality between academic and non-academic pathways, with the aim of helping more young people into good apprenticeships, good jobs and ultimately good careers – an aspiration that all political parties should support.

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