

# REWIRING EDUCATION

Part 1: The state of technical learning in England

December 2025





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# About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century. Other CSJ policy initiatives include *Universal Credit*, *Universal Support*, and the *Into Work Guarantee*; *Family Hubs*; *Housing First*; *Severe Absence from School*; and *Prisoner Work Placements*.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners, and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of frontline charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations. These are curated by our CSJ Foundation and have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown in some of the UK's most challenging communities, far beyond Westminster.

The social issues facing Britain are chronic. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice and connect the back streets of Britain with the corridors of power, so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

# Acknowledgements

In particular, we would like to thank the charities who attended roundtables, focus groups, interviews, and hosted us at their charities, facilitated by the Centre for Social Justice, including:

- › Power 2
- › Leicestershire Cares
- › WeMindTheGap
- › Three13
- › Cumbria Youth Alliance
- › Football Beyond Borders

We would also like to thank the schools and education providers that contributed to this research, attending focus groups, hosting visits, providing case studies, and giving expert insight into recommendations, including:

- › Discovery Academy Stoke
- › Blackfen School for Girls
- › Kensington Aldridge Academy
- › Birmingham South and City College
- › Tees Valley Education Trust

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Above all, we would like to give special thanks to Andy and Millie Headley (The Generational Foundation) without whom this report would not have been possible.

# Foreword

We need an education system that works for all young people. An academic and technical parity that offers every young person a route, an opportunity for a successful future.

Manchester is growing. In the decade since devolution, we have enjoyed an average of 2.8 per cent a year of economic growth, compared to the UK average of 1.3 per cent. This is a success story built on the shoulders of a cross-party commitment to put power back into local areas, unleashing the potential of people across the city-region.

But to drive this growth even further, it must be fed with skills and the next generation of work-ready young people. Over the next decade, we must continue to foster an education system focused on the life chances of all young people. As the investment comes into our city, the biggest question is always: can we unlock the talent to realise it?

For too long, we've not had a good enough answer here or across the rest of the country.

The Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) can be that answer. Technical education is fundamental to our ambitions for our young people here in Greater Manchester – raising aspirations and improving life chances. It is also fundamental to our ambitions for our economy – continuing our growth over the last decade.

But nationally, as this timely report shows, we don't have the technical education system we want yet.

This is not a failure of one political party or another. The 1999 decision to target 50 per cent of young people going to university, without having anything to say to the other 50 per cent, was an error. I didn't support that then, and I am happy it has been abolished.

But this pledge was only one moment in decades of governments of both parties reinforcing this disparity of esteem between technical and university routes.

The result has been many of our young people losing their sense of belonging and purpose as they go through education. We track these young people on a survey called BeeWell, and this shows that, by the time they get to Year 10, a large number report that they don't feel that school is investing in them. These are the young people on the path to joining the nearly one million 16-to-24-year-olds not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

We want to create an education system in Greater Manchester that works back from the thousands of good jobs in growing sectors that are calling out for young people: digital and tech, life sciences, the green economy, creative media and culture – right across the board. We need young people to see these jobs and salaries. And we need them to be given a clear line of sight to achieve this.

Work experience – as in T Levels – is game changing. The 45-day work placement attached to a prestigious name in our city is enough to change young people's outlook on life. Long enough to lose the imposter syndrome so keenly felt when first walking through the door.

By the end of this decade, we want to see everyone growing up here having access to that 45-day work experience placement.

This could be the blueprint for the rest of this country, socially, educationally, and economically.

There are millions of voters who feel alienated from politics. Most parents feel politicians are always talking about someone else's kids. Almost half when polled say that they want more funding for apprenticeships, compared to fewer than one in four choosing university funding. Over half now identify apprenticeships as better value than degrees. Yet they see a political mainstream uninterested in them. Technical education can move this dial.

Educationally, our vision is not tied to a particular place – think of a BBacc in Birmingham, with an automotive component, an LBacc in Liverpool, with a ports component – the same picture, but with careful regional tailoring. This could be the template. All young people in school seeing a path from school to work, from the classroom to a career in the place they are proud to call home.

That is also an economic vision. Nearly half of vacancies in sectors such as construction and skilled trades are the result of skills shortages. Three in five of the almost one million NEET 16-to-24-year-olds have no qualifications beyond GCSEs. This is talent our economy desperately needs.

Technical education is a social and economic vision that we can all get behind.



**Andy Burnham**

Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester

# Foreword

Conservative reforms to education are an acknowledged achievement of the last 14 years. In 2009, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, England was 25th in the OECD for reading, 27th for maths and 16th for science. By 2022, these rankings had risen to 13th, 11th, and 13th, respectively.

The contrast with the drop in school performance in Scotland and Wales, who took different policy paths, is powerful evidence of the merit of our changes. The lion's share of credit for that achievement must go to our brilliant teachers and the minister who did so much to conceive and implement school reform, the Rt Hon Sir Nick Gibb.

The two most important vocational skills are English and Maths and here we have seen undoubted progress. English 9-to-10-year-olds have climbed in the Progress on International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings from 19th in 2006 to 4th in 2021. Similar progress has been shown in maths and science, climbing between 2019 to 2023 on the Trends in International Maths and Science survey (TIMSS).

Indeed, this rise has also not only benefitted the highest performers. The proportion reaching level 2 in English and Maths by 19 in England has risen from 52 per cent in 2007/08 to 76 per cent in 2023/24.

Greater school freedom and sharper accountability, a more rigorous curriculum, an emphasis on phonics in teaching reading and maths mastery, as well moving teacher training to the best school all contributed to raising standards. But while we made progress there is still unfinished business. Particularly in the realm of technical and vocational education. We did, of course, simplify vocational pathways and reduce the number of low-value qualifications that do not serve young people. But it remains the case that there is much more to do to give technical education the place in our system it deserves.

The challenge now is to elevate the value of technical learning, and of the real practical and technical skills that can help young people succeed. The dignity of work, the mastery of craft, and the satisfaction of accomplishment are as essential as scholarship.

We must be bold as we look to the future to improve our technical education system, and we must do so by looking at its unique value. I am excited that the CSJ is taking on this long-term mission to fix our technical education system in a way that builds on, instead of betraying, the advancement of the last fifteen years.



**The Rt Hon. the Lord Gove**

Former Conservative Education Secretary and Editor of the Spectator

# Foreword

An outstanding education is the surest route to opportunity and should be the right of every young person. Yet for too many, the path remains too narrow. Our system rewards one kind of success and neglects the many other talents that power our communities and economy. The route from GCSEs to A level to degree is presented as the default for anyone who can take it, whilst technical pathways are rarely offered as a genuine choice on equal terms. Despite the attention they have been given, apprenticeships have declined since 2014/15, particularly for under 19s. Just over one in six young men in England are in technical education, far behind countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where nearly a quarter are. This imbalance is holding back both people and productivity. Technical education is still too often treated as second-class, and the most academically able children almost always choose the academic route. Those who pass English and maths are six times more likely to attend a school sixth form. The challenges faced by the technical route stand in defiance of public opinion. More than half of parents believe an apprenticeship is better value than a degree, but just one per cent go into higher technical education after 16-18 education.

Employers, meanwhile, often find that technical routes available do not reflect their real needs. Qualifications are not a substitute for people who are confident, capable, and ready for work. This leaves us with an education system that is both unfair and ineffective. Children who fall behind early are not well nurtured: those who perform well aged 11 are four times as likely to take the EBacc as those who don't. They also have almost three times the Attainment 8 score and are over three times as likely to go to university. Two-thirds of 16-to-24-year-old NEETs have no qualifications beyond GCSEs. We have far too many young people who have fallen out of education, employment or training. In 2024, over 15 per cent of UK 18-to-24-year-olds were NEET, compared to less than 10 per cent for Germany and around five per cent for the Netherlands.

We are failing to connect the aspirations of our young people with the opportunities in our economy. 37 per cent of graduates are over-qualified for their jobs, the highest rate in the OECD. 41 per cent of graduates are in different work to their field of study, and graduates from universities outside the top 20 are twice as likely to be in low skilled work as those from inside the top 20. These figures tell a simple story: our country has talent and ambition in abundance, but we have failed to connect it to opportunity. Too many talented young people are in jobs where their brilliance is untapped, while employers in key sectors struggle to recruit. A coherent technical education system, designed in partnership with local industry, would allow young people to build the skills our economy urgently needs and the confidence to use them. We must rewire our education system, and finally create a genuine technical pathway, valued by young people, employers, and the public on its own terms.



**Munira Wilson MP**

Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Twickenham  
and spokesperson on Education, Children and Young People

# Foreword

We must fix our technical education system.

We have built an education system obsessed with the academic pathway into university and detached from the needs of our communities and country. Our system detaches talented young people from where they grew up, starves the economy of practical skill, and leaves those who fail to meet the academic standard with no place for them.

Academic schooling in this country has a rich inheritance. The roots of our greatest and most historic schools – arguably the greatest in the world – have grown over centuries and draw deeply from history’s most influential Christian thinkers. The Gove-Gibb reforms of the last fifteen years engaged thoughtfully with this inheritance and have restored the best of English academic schooling.

But we need to fundamentally rebalance the system. This must not mean dragging down the academic, nor trying to make the technical mimic it, but instead must mean understanding technical education’s own intrinsic value. The same seriousness, clarity, and moral purpose that revived our schools after 2010 must now be applied to technical training.

England’s apprenticeship system resourced the industrial revolution. Josiah Wedgwood, who led the industrialisation of pottery manufacture, was apprenticed by his elder brother. Matthew Murray, who designed *Salamanca*, the first steam locomotive, was an apprentice to a blacksmith in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. George Stephenson, the father of our railways, had little formal schooling and instead worked his way up maintaining Newcomen mine engines. Even Brunel – although university-educated – was mostly trained as an apprentice to his father and then Louis Breguet in France.

This inheritance has been all but lost. Today, after school, 39 per cent of young people head into degrees compared to just one per cent into higher technical qualifications. More broadly, while in Germany and the Netherlands nearly a quarter of young men are in technical education, just one in six are in England.

The result is an education system that resembles a capital city with a country attached, and thus an education system with no attachment to its community and no options for those who fall behind.

No region other than London has more than 28 per cent passing the English Baccalaureate, in London 36 per cent do so. No other region sees over 61 per cent progress into higher education, in London it is 72 per cent. Three-fifths of the best performers outside of London leave their hometown by age 32.

And educational pathways are determined early in life. Those who perform well at age 11 are four times as likely to take the EBacc as those who do not. They also have almost three times the Attainment 8 score and are over three times as likely to go to university. Two-thirds of 16-to-24-year-old NEETs have no qualifications beyond GCSEs.

The real-world effects of this are vast, as is borne out by international comparison. We lead the OECD in levels of graduate underemployment, with far too many entering low skilled work after university, having taken low-quality degrees with thousands in debt. Over 15 per cent of UK 18-to-24-year-olds are NEET, compared to less than 10 per cent in Germany and around five per cent in the Netherlands.

This is while knowing that we need to produce better skills to get Britain back on top. Migrants make up large proportions of workers in sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. Ensuring the sustainability of these sectors will need better training pathways for young Brits.

We must look to our history to the best technical education this country has produced over the centuries. We must look to success stories across Europe and the rest of the world today. And we must look within our country to regional solutions that understand local labour markets and employer needs.



**Danny Kruger MP**

Reform Member of Parliament for East Wiltshire

# Executive summary

The Centre for Social Justice is embarking on a major mission to improve technical education across this country. Academic schooling in this country has a deep and rich inheritance, with some of the greatest schools and universities in the world. The reforms of the last fifteen years have restored the best of this English academic schooling.

But we have been left with a profoundly unbalanced education system, where the academic pathway dominates and the technical pathway has been marginalised, misunderstood, and underappreciated.

We need to comprehensively rewire technical education, and doing so means understanding its purpose and value. The academic reforms of the last fifteen years succeeded by looking at the best over our history, and across the world today. We must do the same for technical education.

## The imbalance

The technical pathway offers nothing comparable to the GCSE → A level → Degree academic pipeline.

Despite the attention bestowed by recent governments and encouraging rise in the early 2010s. Apprenticeships have shrunk since 2014/15, especially for under 19s. The number of under 19s starting apprenticeships has **fallen by 40 per cent**. According to the OECD, there are three 25-34-year-olds in the UK who are university educated for each one who is vocationally trained. In the Netherlands, this is two-to-one and in Germany it is one-to-one.<sup>1</sup>

Applied General Qualifications, soon to be refashioned into V Levels, remain second class. Offering an alternative pathway for people with lower GCSE results (those with the worst GCSE performance are twenty times as likely to take them as those with the best GCSE performance),<sup>2</sup> AGQs are predominantly studied at further education college. However, these further education colleges not only produce far fewer university students but also produce **significantly fewer level 4 or 5 apprentices than mainstream sixth forms**.<sup>3</sup>

**Other alternatives have failed to take off.** Tech levels, intended as rigorous A Level alternatives, lasted less than a decade before abolition. T Levels, although promising, have grown agonisingly slowly, and the target has been revised down to 70,000 students by 2029, compared to 800,000 A Level entries. Those taken have struggled with low satisfaction, high drop-out rates, and limited industry placement opportunities.

Despite the warm words of multiple governments, technical education has remained the second-rate path in a hierarchical education system.

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1 OECD (2024) Education attainment – Data Explorer: Adults’ educational attainment distribution, by age group and gender. OECD Data Explorer. Available at: <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis/> (Available at: 2 December 2025)

2 Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

3 Department for Education. (2025) *Progression to higher education or training, Academic year 2023/24*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2023-24> (Accessed: 14 November 2025).

The most academically able children nearly always choose academic routes over technical routes: those who pass English and Maths are six times as likely to attend school sixth forms as those who don't. **Just four per cent** of those who don't achieve a grade 4 in Maths and English GCSE **take apprenticeships**, and most of these are rated GCSE-equivalent or below.<sup>4</sup> 52 per cent of parents believe an apprenticeship is better value than a degree,<sup>5</sup> but two fifths of young people view apprenticeships as second-rate.<sup>6</sup> **Employers are also often ambivalent about technical pathways** that misunderstand their needs. Qualifications are not a substitute for people ready for work, and the technical pathway doesn't produce this today.

## The consequences

This leaves us with a distorted education system.

**Those behind at age 11 fall further behind, especially boys.**<sup>7</sup> Those with high attainment aged 11 are four times as likely to take the EBacc as those who don't.<sup>8</sup> They also have almost three times the Attainment 8 score,<sup>9</sup> and are over three times as likely to go to university.<sup>10</sup> Two-thirds of 16-to-24-year-old NEETs have no qualifications beyond GCSEs.

**London dominates our academic education system.** No region other than London has a positive Progress 8 score – London's is 0.29. The East Midlands, the region with the second highest higher education progression, is nearer last than London.<sup>11</sup>

It also leaves us with a distorted labour market.

**We have a NEETs crisis** – almost one million 16-to-24-year-olds are NEET, and three in five of them have no qualifications beyond GCSEs. In 2024, over 15 per cent of UK 18-to-24-year-olds were NEET, compared to less than 10 per cent for Germany and around five per cent for the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup>

**We have too many graduates.** 37 per cent of graduates are over-qualified for their jobs, the highest rate in the OECD. 41 per cent of graduates are in different work to their field of study, and graduates from universities outside the top 20 are **twice as likely to be in low skilled work** as those from inside the top 20. CSJ analysis finds that, five years after qualifying, a higher level (L4) apprentice earns almost £12,500 more than a student graduating from a low-value university course. The bottom quartile of students earn £24,800 five years after completing their course, rising to £32,100 for the average graduate. By comparison, a higher level (L4) apprentice earns £37,300. Ten years after qualifying, lower quartile university graduates are still earning £11,700 less than a L4 apprentice five years after qualifying.<sup>13</sup>

4 Department for Education (2025) Key Stage 4 destination measures. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2022-23> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

5 Buddoo, N. (2023) 'Apprenticeships are better value than degrees, says YouGov poll', *Construction Management*, 6 April. Available at: <https://constructionmanagement.co.uk/apprenticeships-are-better-value-than-degrees-says-yougov-poll/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

6 Smith, M.-S. and Greaves, L. (2022) *Early Careers Survey 2022*. Manchester: Prospects Luminat. Available at: <https://luminat.prospects.ac.uk/early-careers-survey-2022> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

7 Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

8 Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025).

9 *Ibid*

10 Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

11 Department for Education. (2024) *Progression to higher education or training, Academic year 2022/23*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2022-23> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

12 OECD (2025) *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators – Transition from education to work: Where are today's youth?* Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/transition-from-education-to-work-where-are-today-s-youth\\_b90719d0.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/transition-from-education-to-work-where-are-today-s-youth_b90719d0.html) (Accessed 21 October 2025).

13 CSJ analysis of Department for Education LEO and FEO outcomes data. Methodology can be found on pages 78-79.

Yet **we also have serious skills shortages**. Over 1 million workers have insufficient skills for their work. Nearly half of vacancies in the construction sector and skilled trades are the result of skills shortages.<sup>14</sup> Three in five employers cite too few applicants with the required skills as the main challenge to recruitment. We must rebalance our education system and finally create a genuine technical pathway, valued by young people, employers, and the public on its own terms.

## Principles for change

Technical education does not and cannot succeed when deemed academic-lite. It must be understood through **its own unique value in providing a direct line of sight into fulfilling training and work**.

This report will be followed by subsequent research in this series early next year, carving out solutions that match the scale of the problem, anchored by the emerging Manchester Baccalaureate, to rewire this system. We will examine the best technical education across the world – from Germany to South Korea.

And the research will be grounded in five major principles, that technical training must be:

1. **Shaped by industry** – technical education must be effective for gaining employment. To do this, it needs to be shaped by industry and designed around labour market value, with an awareness that being reliable, conscientious, and trustworthy are invaluable in any labour market.
2. **Tailored regionally** – the most successful technical training over the centuries has been community-based, relational, and locally rooted. Technical training must be tailored to the strengths of regional labour markets across the country.
3. **Simple and clear** – this regional tailoring must not come at the expense of ensuring a national technical training system that can match the academic GCSE → A Level → University route for simplicity and clarity. It also must build on, not betray, the success of the last 15 years.
4. **Prioritised earlier** – technical training can only be seen as an equal complementary route if it is valued earlier; not simply chosen by those failing academic schooling. This means it must be integrated into 13-16 education.
5. **Built on what works** – the technical training system must be designed according to what works: what has historically worked here, what currently works internationally, and where the most encouraging signs are regionally.

Reform of this scale will take energy, focus and time. But a better future for millions of young people, and a more resilient British economy, is the prize for getting it right. Please get in touch if you would like to contribute to our mission to rewire education and restore the place of technical learning for good.

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<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

A young man and woman are sitting at a table, looking at papers. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They are both looking down at the papers. The image has a strong red overlay. The text "PART I: THE INHERITANCE" is written in white, bold, capital letters at the bottom of the image.

**PART I: THE  
INHERITANCE**

## Chapter 1:

# Technical education inferior in the design of English education

Technical education has been marginalised since the conception of formal education in England.

To understand how and why this has happened, we must understand where the purpose of schooling that we understand in England has come from.

In this chapter we identify three key points:

- › First, that at least since the founding of Winchester College in 1382, **English schooling has focused on the pursuit of abstract knowledge**, closely linked to Christian scripture.
- › Second, from at least the Victorian era, education in England has been seen as a **route to social mobility and moral development through academic study**, with technical education treated as less important.
- › Third, that technical education was developed outside the school system. Until the nineteenth century, **school was the place of academic education, and technical education was done at places of work**. It was only the rise of universal elementary education that led to the two coming together.

The evolution of English education into a formal school system was one of gradual superiority of education as an academic pursuit, based in schools.

## 1.1. Classical conceptions of the purpose of education

Our understanding of the purpose of education has its foundations in a philosophical clash from fourth century BC Athens, between Plato and Aristotle: the clash as to whether learning is done by developing abstract knowledge or through practice.

Plato's most famous work, *The Republic*, outlined a clear conception of the purpose of education.<sup>15</sup> Plato's theory of the Forms argued that everything we see in the physical world is a shadow of its perfect 'Form'. Of these Forms, the ultimate is the 'Form of the Good': the source of all goodness, and the way to

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<sup>15</sup> Plato (2007) *The Republic*. Translated by D. Lee. 2nd rev. edn. London: Penguin Classics.

knowing things that are good and true. To him, the purpose of education was understanding the Form of the Good.<sup>16</sup>

Plato explicitly viewed manual skills as inferior and insufficient for moral knowledge or leadership.<sup>17</sup> He also saw the best practice (*technê*) as coming from abstract knowledge, not separate from it.<sup>18</sup> He defined society according to a three-level hierarchy. At the top sat the 'rulers' – the philosophically educated. At the bottom sat those who worked manually, the 'producers' (farmers, craftsmen, etc.).<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle saw the practice of education differently. He had a shared sense of seeing the purpose of education as growing in wisdom (*eudaimonia*, 'flourishing') but saw this as tangible.<sup>20</sup>

Aristotle separated virtue into moral virtues, intellectual virtues and practical wisdom. He emphasised the importance of learning through practice:

*"Virtues on the other hand we acquire by first having actually practised them, just as we do the arts. We learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."*

**Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics II, p. 73<sup>21</sup>**

He saw the practice of education the other way around – that mastery of a craft is knowledge. Instead of seeing knowledge and goodness being found in the abstract 'Forms', away from practical activity, Aristotle argued moral development was achieved through habits, practice, and instruction.

This also led to a much broader conception of the social purpose of education, of preparing the next generation for virtuous lives.

Two things were clear, that remain pertinent today: they shared a single basic notion that education is preparation for a virtuous and fulfilling life, but Plato saw this as abstract and Aristotle as practical. Plato saw this as for 'rulers', Aristotle saw it more broadly.

### 1.1.1. The founding of British schooling

Nearly 1,000 years after *Nicomachean Ethics*, Britain's first school, the King's School, Canterbury, was founded in AD 597 as a cathedral school to educate Christian clergy in Kent.<sup>22</sup> Britain's oldest continually operating school, Winchester College, was founded, with the same vision of training clergymen, in response to the Black Death of the 1340s and 1350s.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, M. (2024) 'Episteme and Technê', in Zalta, E.N. (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 Edition). Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-technê/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Roochnik, D.L. (1981) *'Technê' and praxis in the Platonic dialogues*. PhD thesis. Pennsylvania State University. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/ROOTAP> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle (2009) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross, revised by L. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle (2009) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross, revised by L. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Turner, D. (2015) *The decline and rise of the British public school*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, D. (2015) *The decline and rise of the British public school*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

These schools displayed the same foundational tension as that of Plato and Aristotle, although due to their explicitly Christian nature, these are better understood through the figures of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas.

To Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the fourth and fifth century AD, the purpose of education was to know God better. This was conceptually similar to Plato, with the purpose of education being understanding that which provides all truth and knowledge – to Plato this was the Form of the Good and to Augustine this was God.<sup>24</sup> In both cases, enhanced understanding of ultimate, objective, and abstract truth was the purpose. Of course, Augustine’s thesis had the crucial difference of believing education to be for all children – a Christian addition.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar vein, Aquinas’ view of the purpose of education can be understood as a Christian development of Aristotle’s view. Aquinas defined the purpose of education as fulfilment in God, and, like Aristotle’s virtues, saw this fulfilment as achieved through habitual action, practice, and instruction.<sup>26</sup>

Winchester College also started to embed a social purpose into the education system – the first signs of a social contract in education. To use contemporary language, it was explicitly introduced to address a skills shortage in a key sector – clergy (after the Black Death). This pipeline was ensured as Winchester College was founded at the same time as New College, Oxford University, so that those who studied at Winchester would go onto Oxford and then to become clergymen.<sup>27</sup>

Winchester also demonstrated a clear imperative to further the universality of education and the need to care for the poor – the founding charter specified that the school should have 70 ‘poor scholars’ who could otherwise not afford schooling, subsidised by 10 fee-paying affluent children.<sup>28</sup>

Leach (1915) suggests that medieval schooling generally followed this mould – grammar and chantry schools, focused on producing clergy and civic elites, through an academic education.<sup>29</sup>

From the conception of English schooling, a social contract was forming. This contract was built on the primacy of academic knowledge, preparation for university, the universal imperative for all children to be educated, and the need to provide skilled workers in key industries. This of course begs the question of where technical education fitted in.

## 1.2. The origins of contemporary English education

Although today we see academic and technical schooling as two streams of the same system, their origins are separate.

Around the same time – and before – Winchester College was founded, technical education was, separately and informally, also growing in England. Instead of schools, masters within guilds would take on and train apprentices.

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24 Dyson, R. W. (ed. & trans.) (2005) *The City of God against the Pagans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

25 Dyson, R. W. (ed. & trans.) (2005) *The City of God against the Pagans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

26 Froula, J.C. (2015) *St. Thomas Aquinas on the nature and purpose of education: The importance of Aristotelian-Thomistic principles for educational leaders*. Doctor of Education thesis. Southern Connecticut State University. Available at: <https://philarchive.org/archive/FROSTA-4> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

27 Turner, D. (2015) *The decline and rise of the British public school*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

28 Turner, D. (2015) *The decline and rise of the British public school*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

29 Leach, A.F. (1915) *The Schools of Medieval England*. London: Methuen & Co.

## 1.2.1. Origins of English technical education

The origins of formal, regulated technical education can be charted back to the first national apprenticeship system, introduced by the Statute of Artificers in 1563.<sup>30</sup>

In this time, most trades (carpentry, baking, blacksmithing, and so on) were controlled and operated by guilds. Boys, often as young as ten, would be technically educated by becoming a master's apprentice, then a journeyman, before becoming a master in the trade.

This was their 'schooling' and would take them through the years we would now consider secondary school.

The Statute of Artificers provided the formal regulation for this process. Masters were limited to three apprentices, and apprenticeships needed to be seven years minimum – what we might now consider a fully technical schooling.<sup>31</sup> During these apprenticeships, the master would personally teach the apprentice, take 'responsibility for the latter's moral welfare; and [give] him board and lodgings'.<sup>32</sup> Often, apprentices wouldn't be paid – in fact, their family might pay the master – but they would be taken care of.

After apprentices had completed their seven years, they would become journeymen, able to sell their services in the marketplace, but still under the supervision of their master. Sometime after this, on the completion of a 'masterpiece', a journeyman would be granted the designation of master by the guild.<sup>33</sup>

This model thrived for centuries, but industrialisation and technological developments led to apprentice roles becoming ever-increasingly dangerous for children, and employers also found some elements of it unduly restrictive, and in 1814, Parliament repealed the Statute of Artificers.<sup>34</sup> This removed the compulsory seven-year term and reduced the power of guilds. It provided substantial additional protection against exploitation for young apprentices.

The Factory Act 1833 – which restricted child labour laws, banning the employment of under nines and limiting hours and mandating schooling for those aged under 13 – further restricted the role of apprenticeships.<sup>35</sup> That said, although apprenticeships ceased to be as dominant as they had been in the late medieval period, they remained extremely popular for a long time. There were an estimated 340,000 apprentices in any year in the early 1900s.<sup>36</sup>

The status and flexibility of apprenticeship-style formation in Britain was central to early industrialisation, as discussed by Ben-Zeev et al. (2017).<sup>37</sup>

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30 Mirza-Davies, J. (2015) *A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century*. House of Commons Library Insight, 9 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/a-short-history-of-apprenticeships-in-england-from-medieval-craft-guilds-to-the-twenty-first-century/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

31 Mirza-Davies, J. (2015) *A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century*. House of Commons Library Insight, 9 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/a-short-history-of-apprenticeships-in-england-from-medieval-craft-guilds-to-the-twenty-first-century/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

32 More, C. (1980) *Skill and the English working class, 1870–1914*. London: Croom Helm, p. 41.

33 Perrin, C. (2017) 'The apprenticeship model: A journey toward mastery', *ClassicalU*, 12 January. Available at: <https://classicalu.com/the-apprenticeship-model/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

34 Webb, S. and Webb, B. (1920) *The history of trade unionism*. New edition, revised. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

35 UK Parliament (n.d.) *The 1833 Factory Act*. Living Heritage. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19th-century/overview/factoryact/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

36 Mirza-Davies, J. (2015) *A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century*. House of Commons Library Insight, 9 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/a-short-history-of-apprenticeships-in-england-from-medieval-craft-guilds-to-the-twenty-first-century/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

37 Ben Zeev, N., Mokyr, J., and van der Beek, K. (2017) *Flexible Supply of Apprenticeship in the British Industrial Revolution*. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/flexible-supply-of-apprenticeship-in-the-british-industrial-revolution/EA245AD6288C71B62806C371B0BD3BF0> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Josiah Wedgwood, who led the industrialisation of pottery manufacture, was apprenticed by his elder brother.<sup>38</sup> Matthew Murray, who designed *Salamanca*, the first successful steam locomotive in 1812, was an apprentice to a blacksmith in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.<sup>39</sup> George Stephenson, the father of our railways, had little formal schooling and instead worked his way up maintaining Newcomen-type mine engines.<sup>40</sup> Isambard Kingdom Brunel – although university-educated – was mostly trained as an apprentice to his father and then Louis Breguet in France.<sup>41</sup> Richard Arkwright, who built the first water-powered cotton spinning mill, was apprenticed, not schooled.<sup>42</sup>

The industrial revolution, one of the greatest surges of economic development ever known, was dependent on Britain’s apprenticeship system.<sup>43</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 1

Community-based, relational, locally rooted apprenticeships were successful in this country for centuries. Within this model, mastery through practice with the moral and educational oversight of a master was a legitimate education and preparation for life. It was distinct from the academic path but tremendously valued on its own terms – as having unique value in providing a direct line of sight into a fulfilling career.

### The rise, decline, and resilience of Mechanics’ institutes

The first half of the nineteenth century also saw the rise of Mechanics’ institutes. These evolved from the literary and philosophical societies of the eighteenth century to provide a technically focused equivalent where leading scientists, craftsmen, manufacturers and merchants could meet in towns for debate and education.<sup>44</sup> The first technical college ‘to provide scientific instruction with the opportunity for practical application of ideas’ was the Anderson’s Institute in 1796, named after its patron. It operated through evening classes for men and women in chemistry and mechanics.<sup>45</sup>

In 1823, breakaways from the Anderson’s Institute formed the first distinctive Mechanics’ institute – the Glasgow Mechanics’ Institute, of which Dr George Birkbeck, who had led the mechanics classes at Anderson’s Institute, was the patron. The institute enrolled over 1,000 students in its first year.<sup>46</sup> The year after the London Mechanics’ Institute followed.

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- 38 Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024) *Josiah Wedgwood: English Potter and Industrialist*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josiah-Wedgwood> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 39 European Route of Industrial Heritage (n.d.) *Matthew Murray (1765–1826)*. Available at: <https://www.erih.net/how-it-started/stories-about-people-biographies/biography/murray> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 40 Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024) *George Stephenson: British Engineer and Inventor*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Stephenson> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 41 Royal Museums Greenwich (n.d.) *Who was Isambard Kingdom Brunel?* Available at: <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/maritime-history/who-was-isambard-kingdom-brunel> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 42 Bibby, M. (2023) *Richard Arkwright*, Historic UK. Available at: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Richard-Arkwright/> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 43 Ben Zeev, N., Mokyr, J., and van der Beek, K. (2017) *Flexible Supply of Apprenticeship in the British Industrial Revolution*. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/flexible-supply-of-apprenticeship-in-the-british-industrial-revolution/EA245AD6288C71B62806C371B0BD3BF0> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).
- 44 Walker, M. (2012) ‘The origins and development of the mechanics’ institute movement 1824–1890 and the beginnings of further education’, *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, 4(1), pp. 32–39. doi:10.5920/till/2012.4132. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738\\_The\\_Origins\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Mechanics'\\_Institute\\_Movement\\_1824\\_-\\_1890\\_and\\_the\\_Beginnings\\_of\\_Further\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738_The_Origins_and_Development_of_the_Mechanics'_Institute_Movement_1824_-_1890_and_the_Beginnings_of_Further_Education) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).
- 45 Walker, M. (2012) ‘The origins and development of the mechanics’ institute movement 1824–1890 and the beginnings of further education’, *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, 4(1), pp. 32–39. doi:10.5920/till/2012.4132. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738\\_The\\_Origins\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Mechanics'\\_Institute\\_Movement\\_1824\\_-\\_1890\\_and\\_the\\_Beginnings\\_of\\_Further\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738_The_Origins_and_Development_of_the_Mechanics'_Institute_Movement_1824_-_1890_and_the_Beginnings_of_Further_Education) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).
- 46 Walker, M. (2012) ‘The origins and development of the mechanics’ institute movement 1824–1890 and the beginnings of further education’, *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, 4(1), pp. 32–39. doi:10.5920/till/2012.4132. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738\\_The\\_Origins\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Mechanics'\\_Institute\\_Movement\\_1824\\_-\\_1890\\_and\\_the\\_Beginnings\\_of\\_Further\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738_The_Origins_and_Development_of_the_Mechanics'_Institute_Movement_1824_-_1890_and_the_Beginnings_of_Further_Education)

Roderick and Stephens (1971) argued that the rise of these mechanics institutes came from industrialisation and large technological shifts substantially changing the level of mechanical and scientific knowledge required by skilled workers.<sup>47</sup> Kelly (1962) notes that this led to huge interest in the teaching and learning of practical science. Since grammar schools and Oxford and Cambridge were not interested in this movement, the mechanics' institutes were founded.<sup>48</sup>

Both the rise and decline of these institutes are instructive for technical education today.

They rose because of a fundamental gap in the education system: the right balance of proficiencies needed for economic development were not being trained by academic institutions, and these same institutions did not see technical education as part of their role.

The institutes declined because those in these trades did not have the elementary education needed to truly take advantage of the technical training.

Tylecote (1930) remarked that most of the workers attending lectures were 'ill-educated' and thus 'just could not absorb the long and systematic courses of lectures on chemistry, mechanics, hydrostatics and the like'.<sup>49</sup> Luckhurst (1957) found a similar conclusion, that 'mechanics' institutes ceased to deserve their distinctive name as so few artisans were sufficiently well educated to profit from the classes, lectures, libraries and other educational facilities'.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of these challenges, there were nearly 700 mechanics' institutes by the 1850s, with around a quarter in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>51</sup> Upskilling the working classes in manual occupations was passionately advocated for by contemporaries as vital to economic growth.<sup>52</sup>

The crucial moment for mechanics' institutes came in The Great Exhibition of 1851. This extraordinary international display of talent and economic development highlighted publicly and clearly that Europe was gaining ground on Britain's industrial supremacy, which had two primary consequences.<sup>53</sup>

First, examinations swiftly came into mechanics' institutes.<sup>54</sup> Second, a report was commissioned into the state of education in England (known as the Newcastle Report), which fired the starting gun for elementary education for all children in England from 1870.<sup>55</sup> From this point onwards, technical training came to gradually exist alongside schooling.

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47 Roderick, G. W., Stephens, M.D. (1971) 'Education in 19th Century England, Part III, The Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society', *The Vocational Aspect of Education* Vol. XXIII, No.54, Spring, pp. 49-54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057877180000061>

48 Kelly, T. (1962) *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain*. Liverpool: University Press.

49 Tylecote, M. (1930) 'The Mechanics' Institutes in Lancashire and Yorkshire, 1824 - 1850 with special reference to the Institutions at Manchester, Ashton-under-Lyne and Huddersfield'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, p62. Cited Walker, M. (2012)

50 Luckhurst, K. W. (1957) 'Some Aspects of the History of the Society of Arts'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, London University College. Cited Walker, M. (2012)

51 Tylecote, M. (1930) 'The Mechanics' Institutes in Lancashire and Yorkshire, 1824 - 1850 with special reference to the Institutions at Manchester, Ashton-under-Lyne and Huddersfield'. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, p62. Cited Walker, M. (2012)

52 Hole, J. (1851) *Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institutions*. London: Frank Cass, p51

53 Gammage, B.R. (1974) *Mechanics' institutes and the Great Exhibition of 1851*. PhD thesis. Australian National University. Available at: <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstreams/9b29f990-ea35-46a1-a4a6-baa698dbee89/download> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

54 Walker, M. (2012) 'The origins and development of the mechanics' institute movement 1824-1890 and the beginnings of further education', *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, 4(1), pp. 32-39. doi:10.5920/till/2012.4132. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738\\_The\\_Origins\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Mechanics'\\_Institute\\_Movement\\_1824\\_-1890\\_and\\_the\\_Beginnings\\_of\\_Further\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738_The_Origins_and_Development_of_the_Mechanics'_Institute_Movement_1824_-1890_and_the_Beginnings_of_Further_Education) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

55 Stephens, W. B. (1958) 'Development of Adult Education in Warrington'. Unpublished MA thesis, Exeter. Cited Walker, M. (2012).

## PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 2

Technical education thrives when it complements academic education - filling the skills gaps left by academic institutions. It does this by offering practical learning that fulfils industrial and economic need. Yet its success depends on firm foundations in basic literacy and numeracy from elementary education.

### 1.2.2. Victorian architects of British education

The evolution of academic schooling in England from the founding of Winchester College to what we understand today had, above all, three Victorian architects: Robert Raikes, Thomas Arnold, and Matthew Arnold.

Robert Raikes was an Anglican layman, newspaper publisher, and philanthropist who, in the 1780s – long before state schooling was introduced in the 1870s – started to organise Sunday schooling for poor children in order to teach them basic literacy and scripture. To Raikes, academic education was seen as necessary to moral development, and providing all children with education – especially disadvantaged children – was essential for their prospects and thus necessary for a fair and Christian society.<sup>56</sup> These convictions were not then self-evident but have since become hegemonic.

Thomas Arnold was a clergyman who was Headmaster of Rugby School from 1828 to 1842. When he started his headship, Rugby School was in state of crisis.<sup>57</sup> He introduced a new model of schooling, centred on forming moral Christian character in young men, with a philosophy anchored in Aquinas'.<sup>58</sup> During his time at Rugby he introduced prefects, houses, mottos, and a Christian ethic underlying the curriculum, with a clear focus on the formation of character through habitual action, rebuking, correction, and practice.<sup>59</sup>

Here, the Aristotelian conception of practical training came to exist *within* academic education, as opposed to being seen as its own separate technical stream.

These innovations from Thomas Arnold permeated through the public school system over subsequent decades, mostly through previous students of his becoming Headmasters of major schools themselves.<sup>60</sup> They remained the dominant model for independent schools until the late 20th century.

More famous than Thomas Arnold, however, was his son, Matthew. One line in his book *Culture and Anarchy* has become strongly associated with the Gove-Gibb education reforms:

*“Culture is a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”*

**Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*<sup>61</sup>**

56 Laqueur, T. W. (1976) *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

57 Turner, D. (2015) *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. Britannica. Thomas Arnold. Available at: <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Thomas-Arnold/6093355> (Accessed: 28 July 2025).

58 Gillard, D. (2018) *Education in the UK: a history*. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/history/chapter05.html> (Accessed: 8 April 2024).

59 Gillard, D. (2012) *The Fleming report (1944) The Public Schools and the General Educational System*. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/fleming/fleming.html> (Accessed 26 September 2023).

60 Turner, D. (2015) *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

61 Arnold, M. (1869) *Culture and Anarchy*, reprinted in Arnold, M. (2015) *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose*. London: Penguin Books. ISBN 9780141396248.

Matthew Arnold was a poet, and hugely influenced by the writings of Augustine, and, before him, Plato. Arnold described Victorian society as consisting of ‘Hellenism’ – a Platonist focus on knowledge, beauty and freedom – and ‘Hebraism’ – a Victorian emphasis on moral conduct, much like that introduced by Thomas Arnold and heavily influenced by the work of Aquinas.<sup>62</sup> His conception of the purpose of education looked to find a way to see these together, instead of in contrast.

Gove and Gibb’s fondness for Arnold shows how their conception of schooling is anchored in the academic intellectual tradition.

*Culture and Anarchy*’s publication in 1869 was not long after the Newcastle Report which saw the grand academic and technical historic traditions of training in England come together in elementary education, as they have done ever since.

## 1.3. The expansion of state schooling

### 1.3.1. Initial growth: 1870-1918

The beginning of the British state schooling system came with the Elementary Education Act 1870.<sup>63</sup>

This Act did not make schooling free or compulsory, but it did establish school boards to fill gaps in existing provision, as well as allow local authorities to build and manage primary schools.<sup>64</sup>

This started a few decades of expansion in state schooling provision. The 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts recommended compulsory education, particularly with a view to ending child labour.<sup>65</sup> This was followed by the 1880 Education Act that made school attendance compulsory from age five to ten, with school attendance for this age group up to 82 per cent by the 1890s.<sup>66</sup> A further act in 1891 removed fees for elementary schools.<sup>67</sup>

Alongside these came the Technical Instruction Act of 1889 which gave local authorities the power to levy taxes in order to fund technical education courses and provide grants to schools and mechanics’ institutes. This was the beginning of the gradual shifts towards the mechanics’ institutes of the nineteenth century beginning to merge into the further education colleges we see today.<sup>68</sup>

As well as a moral principle around child safety and exploitation, there were two other principles that guided these decisions.

First was the principle that an elementary academic education was essential for all children’s moral and personal development, above and beyond the skills that would be necessary for their eventual profession – whether academic or technical.

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62 Partridge, E. (2023) ‘All sweetness and light’, *The Critic*, December/January. Available at: <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/december-january-2023/all-sweetness-and-light/> (Accessed: 7 October 2025).

63 UK Parliament (n.d.) *The 1870 Education Act*. Living Heritage. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

64 *Ibid.*

65 Factory and Workshops Acts Commission (1876) *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire Into the Working of the Factory and Workshops Acts: With a View to Their Consolidation and Amendment: Together with Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index, Vol. 1*. London: G.E. Eyre & W. Spottiswoode. Available at: <https://books.google.com/books?id=7dkUAAAYAAJ> (Accessed: 7 October 2025)

66 Lawson, J. and Silver, H. (1973) *A Social History of Education in England*. London: Methuen, p. 312.

67 Education UK (n.d.) *Elementary Education Act 1891*. Available at: <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/acts/1891-elementary-education-act.html> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

68 Walker, M. (2012) ‘The origins and development of the mechanics’ institute movement 1824–1890 and the beginnings of further education’, *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*, 4(1), pp. 32–39. doi:10.5920/till/2012.4132. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738\\_The\\_Origins\\_and\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Mechanics\\_Institute\\_Movement\\_1824\\_-1890\\_and\\_the\\_Beginnings\\_of\\_Further\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272771738_The_Origins_and_Development_of_the_Mechanics_Institute_Movement_1824_-1890_and_the_Beginnings_of_Further_Education) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Second was the social justice conviction that all children should have access to the opportunities granted by the academic education enjoyed by the wealthiest children. These were explicitly furthered by voices such as Lord Shaftesbury – a major figure in this legislative development.<sup>69</sup>

After further reforms in 1902, 1907 and 1918, state schooling had reached a point where all children were expected to attend school until 14, and much of this provision was provided using public funds.

In this sense, technical and academic education had been partly joined, and the primacy of academic schooling was already embedded. It was deemed necessary for all children to attend school – and not work – until the age of 14, due to the fundamental importance of elementary academic training. Technical routes, or academic routes, could then be explored independently from that point onwards, with schools focusing on the academic route.

### 1.3.2. The tripartite system: Founding concept and Butler Act 1944

The key moment for state secondary schooling was the Butler Act 1944.<sup>70</sup>

The Butler Act 1944 introduced what was called the tripartite system of secondary education. It established three types of state-funded secondary schools: grammar, technical, and secondary modern.

This was the first and boldest attempt to bring technical education *within* the school system. Apprenticeships were still common at this point – indeed even into the 1960s a third of boys were leaving school to become apprentices<sup>71</sup> – but school-based technical secondary education was largely founded here.

The tripartite system unmistakably sought to settle the conflict outlined in the work of Plato and Aristotle, sustained in the nuances of Augustine and Aquinas, and agonised over in the work of Matthew Arnold. It looked to provide two things simultaneously.

The first was to give all children, irrespective of their financial context, a proper secondary education: necessary for individual development and for preserving the nation's culture, knowledge and religion through passing these onto the next generation.

The second was to provide a tailored schooling for children to prepare them for their working lives to follow.

This was to be provided through three types of school. An academic schooling at grammar schools, where children would be academically trained to be prepared for university and professional life. A practical schooling at secondary modern school, where versatile pupils would be given a broad education covering academic and practical content. And a technical schooling that focused on the development of specific competencies to prepare children for work in vocational settings.

Alongside preparing children for later life, the tripartite system had a clear social purpose: to generate the competencies the country's labour market would need.

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69 Larsen, T. (2001) *Friends of religious equality: Nonconformist politics in mid-Victorian England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

70 Education Act 1944, 7 & 8 Geo. 6 c. 31. London

71 Mirza-Davies, J. (2015) *A short history of apprenticeships in England: from medieval craft guilds to the twenty-first century*. House of Commons Library Insight, 9 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/a-short-history-of-apprenticeships-in-england-from-medieval-craft-guilds-to-the-twenty-first-century/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Pupils were expected to be sorted into these three types of school through an 11 plus exam. They were also expected to have a 'parity of esteem', indeed, this is where the term comes from.<sup>72</sup>

## The social contract for schooling in England

In the Butler Act, two millennia of inheritance culminated into a social contract for the purpose of education in England.

It had two purposes for the individual:

1. To develop moral character, and
2. To be prepared for their working lives.

It then had three purposes for society:

1. To pass culture and knowledge to the next generation,
2. To produce the competencies needed for the economy, and
3. To provide all children with the best possible education and life chances, irrespective of their social context

Herein lay a clear social contract: all children were to be given a fair chance at a good education, funded collectively by society, and, in return, they were to use that education to contribute to sustaining society's knowledge base and economy.

### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 3

A strong education system should renew this social contract: where technical and academic education provide complementary roles to ensure all children are developed in character and competence for their adult lives, and where the education system produces the knowledge and competencies our country needs – and that all children have a fair opportunity to contribute.

<sup>72</sup> Board of Education (1943) *Curriculum and examinations in secondary schools: Report of the committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council (The Norwood Report)*. London: HMSO.

## Chapter 2:

# Eighty years of technical failures

The social contract for education in England defined by the Butler Act 1944 sidelined work-based technical education somewhat, but looked to carve technical schooling a proper, esteemed home.

Up to the 1940s, academic schooling had evolved to become seen as the necessary educational route. All were to receive an elementary academic schooling, and then technical training would begin at secondary level. Technical training was also to sit within the school system at technical schools – separated from the trades themselves.

In this new model, technical schooling struggled to take hold. Since then, this guiding conception of the purpose of education has never quite been realised and has slowly deteriorated. In this chapter we see four evolutions over the last eighty years, converging towards an exceptional – but problematically one-dimensional – academic system.

- › First, in the tripartite system. Technical schools were not developed, meaning the school system failed to generate a spread of academic and vocational competencies. Consequently, the system became hierarchical – failing to give all children a top education.
- › Second, after comprehensivisation, specialisation was removed entirely. Top schools passing on knowledge from one generation to the next were disintegrated in an attempt to level the playing field, and technical education was pushed to post-school.
- › Third, the rise of higher education, especially through polytechnics, grew social mobility through expanding the proportion of young people that could access post-18 education. Polytechnics thrived for some time but were merged into the university sector in 1992. By the time of Blair's "50% to HE" pledge, the full education system from start to finish was academic.
- › Fourth, the rise in progressivist, child-centred teaching over the twentieth century led to the Gove-Gibb reforms responding by pulling schooling back more closely to its academic routes. This has driven up standards but pushed out the last gasps of technical education that remained.

Over eighty years, everything technical has been gradually purged from our education system.

## 2.1. The tripartite: difficulties and eventual replacement

The Butler Act's fatal flaw was that almost no technical schools were ever built, meaning that the system effectively became a pass/fail bipartite education system. The grammar schools were exceptional, but the alternatives were lacking.

The technical schools mostly failed due to being so much more expensive to fund and operate than academic schools, thus proving infeasible for most Local Education Authorities (LEAs). There were also some reservations about the ability to gauge a ten-and-a-half-year-old's technical aptitudes.<sup>73</sup>

In this sense, the system created hierarchy, not specialisation. Knowledge was passed on effectively through the elite schools, and those who attended them were well prepared for adult life, but many children fell through the bottom of the system.

More affluent or intellectual children, who were more likely to attend grammar schools,<sup>74</sup> were consistently provided a better education than other children, instead of a specialised education.

The appropriate spread of competencies for the economy was also not created, as technical training faltered, and an imbalance towards the academic started to slowly develop – which has grown ever since.

The Crowther Report stated that, in 1958, there were around 1.5 million pupils in secondary modern schools, around 683,000 pupils in grammar schools, and around 95,000 in technical schools – four per cent of the total.<sup>75</sup>

For these reasons – the lack of growth in technical schools, the harsh pass/fail 11 plus exam, and concerns around the quality of secondary modern schools – grammar schools were partially abolished in the 60s and 70s, in particular through the Circular 10/65 and the Education Act 1976, with the number of grammar schools falling from 1,298 in 1964 to 261 in 1979 – there are 163 today.<sup>76</sup> Replacing the tripartite system were comprehensive schools, and by the early 1980s, comprehensive schools were 'almost universal'.<sup>77</sup>

### 2.1.1. 'Comprehensivisation' and polytechnics

So-called 'comprehensivisation' was underpinned by a different approach. Universality was prioritised, but passing knowledge onto the next generation through exceptional academic schooling was sidelined, as was technical education.

The main juncture of selection of pupils into academic and technical pathways was moved from the 11 plus exam to higher/further education selection at 18 – to universities, polytechnics (founded in 1969 following a 1966 White Paper), or work. Until 18, all pupils were to undertake an education that was, as much as possible, identical. Technical education for children went into hibernation.

73 Kerckhoff, A. C., Fogelman, K., Crook, D., Reeder, D. (1996) *Going Comprehensive in England and Wales: A Study of Uneven Change*. London, Woburn Press, p. 136

74 Marten, C. (2015) 'The Case for Grammar Schools' in de Waal, A. (ed.) *The Ins and Outs of Selective Secondary Schools: A Debate*. London: Civitas, pp. 55-79

75 UK Parliament (1960) *House of Lords debate: The Crowther Report and further education, 23 March 1960, vol. 221, cc. 1060-1116*. Hansard. Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1960-03-23/debates/7c22907d-fdaf-4965-a761-ceebe57f8194/TheCrowtherReportAndFurtherEducation> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

76 Civitas (2025) *The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools*. London: Civitas, January. Available at: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/publications/commission-on-the-future-for-independent-schools/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

77 West, A. (2017) *The history of the development of comprehensive education in England*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE Research Online). Available at: [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89495/1/West\\_history-of-comprehensive-education.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89495/1/West_history-of-comprehensive-education.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Of course, schooling was not to become close to identical<sup>78</sup> – but the structures and systems in place would no longer contribute to this variation.

Universality was deemed more important than any sense of specialisation within schooling or of producing the appropriate spread of proficiencies for the labour market. Specialisation was to be a mantle taken on by polytechnics.

## 2.2. Academic domination

At this point, the complete domination of academic education we see today begins to come into focus.

Although this academic domination can be traced to the founding of Winchester College, it became markedly clearer after the rapid rise in higher education participation from the early 1960s, when around four per cent were going to university (eight per cent to higher education in general), to 50 years later, when around 45 per cent were.<sup>79</sup>

### 2.2.1. Robbins Report

Fundamental to this was the Robbins Report, formally the *report of the Committee on Higher Education*.<sup>80</sup> The context of the report's publication in 1963 is consequential: this year was arguably the height of the civil rights movement in the United States, with similar – if less – social tension in the UK. It was also the year Wilson promised the 'white heat' of technology.<sup>81</sup> The sense of excitement about technological progress and intense yearning for social progress present across the political landscape were palpable in the document itself. The key argument of the report was that higher education should be expanded, citing that the four per cent or so transitioning into university in the UK was half that of France or Sweden and several times below that of the United States. If including tertiary education more broadly, we were similarly behind the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>82</sup>

This was a growing view at the time (although controversial in conservative circles that were already worried that four per cent university progression would result in an excess of graduates), and much of what was recommended in the report was already being implemented, but its influence on the growth of higher education was nonetheless instrumental.<sup>83</sup>

Robbins' view was that higher education participation – including but not limited to university – should rise from its eight per cent level in 1963 to 17 per cent in 1980. Perhaps surprisingly, considering the levels we now see, it would only reach 12.5 per cent by 1980. It did then reach some 32 per cent by 1995 and 42 per cent by 2005.<sup>84</sup>

Much of the growth in the university sector initiated by Robbins was not in academic universities, but in polytechnics, which were introduced in 1965.

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78 Centre for Social Justice (2024) *Selective education and social mobility*. London: Centre for Social Justice. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/selective-education-and-social-mobility> (Accessed: 16 October 2025).

79 London School of Economics and Political Science (2013) *50 years after Robbins: Higher education in Britain*. London: LSE.

80 Committee on Higher Education (1963) *Higher education: Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–63 (The Robbins Report)*. Cmnd. 2154. London: HMSO.

81 Sandbrook, D. (2006) *White heat: A history of Britain in the swinging sixties, 1964–1970*. London: Little, Brown.

82 London School of Economics and Political Science (2013) *50 years after Robbins: Higher education in Britain*. London: LSE.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

## 2.2.2. The rise and assimilation of polytechnics

Anthony Crosland's 1965 Woolwich Speech outlined two traditions in English higher education – the academic and autonomous universities, and the maintained and vocational polytechnics. Crosland stressed that instead of a system where the vocational aspire to become the academic, they should chart their own path.<sup>85</sup>

This vision was initially highly successful. In the fifteen years from 1965 to 1980, polytechnics did grow immensely – indeed, most of the growth in the higher education sector from the Robbins report to 1990 was in polytechnics.<sup>86</sup> And these polytechnics were a worthy alternative to the country's globally elite university sector, with even better employment outcomes than the nation's universities throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>87</sup>

In 1987 a government White Paper on higher education proposed to remove polytechnics from local government control, making them instead corporate bodies, with the expressed intention that it would 'give scope for better management and permit greater responsiveness to economic needs'.<sup>88</sup>

This was implemented in the 1988 Education Act, as was a change in funding structure towards per pupil funding, where institutions could bid for additional funds to take on extra students. Polytechnics and colleges leapt on this opportunity for growth in numbers and teaching income.<sup>89</sup>

This substantial growth set the scene for the 1992 Education Act which marked the end of polytechnics by officially 'breaking down the increasingly artificial and unhelpful barriers between the universities, and the polytechnics and colleges.'<sup>90</sup> In one Act, our outstanding technical higher education alternative was slain at the altar of free market competition.

The UK higher education system was officially one unified system, anchored around competition and expansion. At this point, technical education had not just been stripped from schooling, but from higher education as well.

## 2.2.3. "50% to HE"

Once polytechnics were universities, the gloves were off in the fight for university becoming the sole superior pathway beyond school. The competition was not to be between sectors, but within one sector.

This was the context in which Tony Blair's famous "50% to HE" pledge came about at Labour Party conference in 1999.<sup>91</sup> This may have been the apotheosis of the role of the university sector, but the sector's dominance had been climbing for decades.

Somewhat ironically, the rapid rise of vocational higher education in the form of polytechnics in fact cemented the dominance of the academic pathway. Once rebadged as universities, they confirmed that academic recognition, not technical excellence, was the currency that mattered.

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85 Crosland, A. (1965) 'Speech at Woolwich Polytechnic, 22 September 1965', quoted in Simon, B. (1991) *Education and the Social Order, 1940–1990*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 224–226.

86 *Ibid.*

87 Pratt, J. (1997) *The Polytechnic Experiment: 1965–1992*. Buckingham: Open University Press, pp97–100.

88 Department of Education and Science (1987) *Higher education: Meeting the challenge*. Cm. 114. London: HMSO.

89 Jameson, D. (2024) 'The rise and assimilation of the United Kingdom's polytechnics', *Medium*, 3 June. Available at: <https://medium.com/@danielj2020/the-rise-and-assimilation-of-the-united-kingdoms-polytechnics-da12a694144c> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

90 *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, c. 13. London: HMSO. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

91 Weale, S. (2022) 'Tony Blair calls for drastic increase of young people in higher education', *The Guardian*, 18 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/apr/18/tony-blair-calls-for-drastic-increase-of-young-people-in-higher-education> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

## 2.3. Technical education since 2010

Another shift in this time was the rise in progressivist, 'child-centred' teaching methods. Rendered mainstream by the Plowden Report in 1967, 'progressivist' education ideology as to how children best learn became hugely influential in education policy at the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The Coalition reforms' intense emphasis on traditional academic teaching was certainly bolstered by this ideological conflict. These reforms were successful at raising academic standards, but largely at the expense of technical training. Rewiring technical training must try and build on the successes of this time.

### 2.3.1. Progressivist education

Progressivist education is defined in *Progressively Worse*, by Robert Peal, as having four core themes:<sup>92</sup>

1. Education should be child-centred – that teachers are facilitating children's process of discovery, not actively presenting information to them.
2. Knowledge is not central to education – to put this another way, that 'critical thinking skills' are far superior to 'rote-learning' of seemingly irrelevant content. That attaining knowledge for its own sake is not worth of focus.
3. Strict discipline and moral education are oppressive – founded in the notion that truth and goodness come from within, and as such that the root of bad behaviour is an unfavourable context or environment. That strictness is punitive and gratuitous, not morally formational.
4. Socio-economic background dictates success – in its most basic sense, this is the view that the school a child attends itself has little impact on how well the child does at school, that it is other socioeconomic or systemic factors that are the primary influences of success.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps ironically this position has mutated to have almost reversed in progressive and conservative thinking. The key metric of school success for many progressives today is reducing the 'disadvantage gap' – essentially reducing the extent to which socioeconomic background dictates success. Conversely, among conservatives, school is often demoted as much less relevant than innate ability, family context, or quality of parenting.

There are several ways progressivist education ideology has influenced the development of technical education. The most important, however, is how this ideology led to the Gove-Gibb reforms of the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, often defined by their opposition to this ideology.

### 2.3.2. The Gove-Gibb reforms

In August 2025, *Reforming Lessons*, co-authored by Nick Gibb and Robert Peal was published, musing on the successes of the education reforms of successive Conservative governments over 2010–2023, with a particular focus on the 2010–2012 period.<sup>94</sup>

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92 Peal, R. (2014) *Progressively Worse: the burden of bad ideas in British schools*. London: Civitas.

93 Peal, R. (2014) *Progressively worse: the burden of bad ideas in British schools*. London: Civitas.

94 Gibb, N., and Peal, R. *Reforming Lessons: Why English Schools Have Improved Since 2010 and How This Was Achieved*. Taylor & Francis, 2025.

*“Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it’s an essential preparation for adult life. Delivering on our commitment to social justice requires us to place these three objectives at the heart of our education system.”*

**The Rt Hon Nick Gibb, July 2015<sup>95</sup>**

Unmistakably clear in the story of these reforms is the centrality of the opposition to progressivist education ideology throughout. Much of school reform of the last 15 years can be explained through understanding its disagreements with the four tenets of progressive education ideology above. We will see that this left a blind spot in the otherwise highly successful reforms, around the right role of vocational education.

There are three tenets of the reforms to the education system in the last two decades of note to the place of technical education today: a knowledge-rich curriculum, school autonomy, and revised accountability measures. These overlap substantially as part of a broader movement towards traditional teaching methods.

## Knowledge-rich curriculum

The role of knowledge in the curriculum has been a topic of intense political debate since at least the beginning of the Coalition government.

Much of this debate drew directly from the work of E.D. Hirsch, an American educator and author of the book *The schools we need and why we don’t have them*.<sup>96</sup> The basic argument is that substantive knowledge accumulation is a necessary precursor to teaching of transferable skills and critical thinking.<sup>97</sup> Especially that a knowledge-rich education is most important for disadvantaged children, who would on average encounter less substantive material outside of school, and that information-rich teaching is thus the most effective way of ‘levelling the playing field’ and improving social mobility.<sup>98</sup>

As discussed, the Coalition government explicitly drew from Matthew Arnold’s “best that has been thought and said” when introducing this knowledge-rich curriculum.<sup>99</sup>

There were several key policy reforms within this knowledge-rich curriculum. A movement towards phonics in early reading was one key area.<sup>100</sup> Another was around how examinations were conducted, with a movement away from coursework and away from modules towards linear examinations.<sup>101</sup> Another was in curriculum design – with a movement towards chronological history, core scientific knowledge and canonical literature.<sup>102</sup>

95 Department for Education (2015) *The purpose of education: Speech by Nick Gibb at the Education Reform Summit, London, 9 July 2015*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-education> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

96 Hirsch, E. D. (1996) *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*. New York: Doubleday.

97 *Ibid.*

98 *Ibid.*

99 Department for Education (2011) *The Framework for the National Curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review*. London: Department for Education.

100 Gibb, N., and Peal, R. *Reforming Lessons: Why English Schools Have Improved Since 2010 and How This Was Achieved*. Taylor & Francis, 2025.

101 *Ibid.*

102 *Ibid.*

## School autonomy

Academisation started well before the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came into government in 2010 but was expanded substantially almost immediately and came to be a defining element of the Gove-Gibb reforms.

Academies were formally introduced by the New Labour government, who introduced ‘sponsored academies’ – this was a scheme where private sponsors (individuals, trusts, businesses) could sponsor under-performing schools and run them autonomously.<sup>103</sup> It was introduced as a targeted measure to drive standards in underperforming contexts.

In 2010, the Academies Act introduced a new type of academy – ‘converter academies’. This allowed any Ofsted-rated ‘Outstanding’ school and most ‘Good’ schools to convert from local authority control into an autonomous academy, without needing local authority approval or consent.

The proportion of schools that were academies exploded, and has continued to rise, albeit much more slowly. As of 2024/25, 46 per cent of primary schools and 83 per cent of secondary schools are academies or free schools.<sup>104</sup>

The purpose of increasing autonomy was threefold. First, increasing school choice, leading to greater competition and thus – hopefully – improvement. This crucially included direct accountability for those running schools – local authorities that ran schools were neither directly accountable to the Secretary of State for Education nor the parents who attended them, whilst academies leaders are.<sup>105</sup>

Second, moving leadership into the hands of teachers, school leaders, and governors, and away from local councillors – partly with a view to expert leadership, and partly to ensure those running each school were singly focused on its success.

Third, allowing financial autonomy over budgets and spending. This included autonomy over who to hire, and how much to pay them. It also covered broader financial autonomy such as sharing central costs across academy trusts for administrative simplicity and efficiency.

## Accountability measures

There were a range of accountability measures introduced in the Gove-Gibb reforms, but one that is of most interest to technical education: the English Baccalaureate. Closely related to this are Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced as a school accountability measure in 2010, designed to encourage better take up of the core academic subjects across the school system.

The EBacc includes five subjects: English (typically English Language and English Literature separately), Maths, and Science (either Combined Science or Physics, Chemistry and Biology), which were all already compulsory, alongside at least one Humanities subject (typically Geography or History) and at least one Language.

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<sup>103</sup> Brader, C. (2025) *Academy schools: Government plans for change*. House of Lords Library In Focus, 20 January. Available at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/academy-schools-government-plans-for-change/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>104</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Academic year 2024/25*. London: Department for Education, 5 June. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>105</sup> Brader, C. (2025) *Academy schools: Government plans for change*. House of Lords Library In Focus, 20 January. Available at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/academy-schools-government-plans-for-change/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

The share of pupils taking the EBacc has risen from 22 per cent in 2009/10 to 40 per cent in 2023/24.<sup>106</sup>

Attainment 8 scores sum a student’s maths (double weighted) and English (double weighted, if both English language and English literature are sat – taking the highest and doubling it, as below) scores, their best three EBacc GCSE scores, plus their best three results from their other GCSE or equivalent qualifications.

The EBacc scores don’t need to be in each of the ‘pillars’ of the EBacc, but if a student does not complete three EBacc qualifying subjects for this bucket, the space will receive a score of 0. If a student takes more than three ‘open’ or ‘EBacc’ subjects, only the top three results will be used in the measure.

Two quick examples are given below, looking at which subjects make it into the Attainment 8 calculation:

Student A: English Language (5), English Literature (4), Maths (6), Combined Science (4), Geography (7), French (3), Religious Education (4), Art (5), History (2)

Bucket	Best subject(s)	Grade	Attainment 8 score
English	English Language	5	10
Maths	Maths	6	12
EBacc	Geography	7	7
	Combined Science	4	4
	Religious Education	4	4
Open	Art	5	5
	English Literature	4	4
	French	3	3
<i>Not counted</i>	<i>History</i>	2	-
Total		38	49

Student B: English Language (5), English Literature (4), Maths (6), Combined Science (4), Engineering (8), Design & Technology (7), Business Studies (7), Art (7), Graphics (7)

Bucket	Best subject(s)	Grade	Attainment 8 score
English	English Language	5	10
Maths	Maths	6	12
EBacc	Combined Science	4	4
	<i>Empty</i>	-	-
	<i>Empty</i>	-	-
Open	Engineering	8	8
	Design & Technology	7	7
	Business Studies	7	7
<i>Not counted</i>	<i>Art</i>	7	-
	<i>Graphics</i>	7	-
Total		51	48

<sup>106</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Key stage 4 performance: Academic year 2023/24*. London: Department for Education, 27 February. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

We can see that student B's highest 8 grades summed to 51, with an average grade of 6.4, much higher than the sum of 38 at an average of 4.8 for student A.

However, due to student B performing poorly in EBacc subjects, and having two grades not eligible to be counted, their Attainment 8 score of 48 is actually lower than student A's attainment 8 score of 49.

This demonstrates how Attainment 8 strongly focuses on performance in EBacc subjects instead of general grades achieved.

Finally, Progress 8 scores take a student's expected Attainment 8 scores as measured by their performance in Key Stage 2 (Year 6) assessments and compare those predictions to their actual GCSE performance. This is designed to directly measure school's 'value add' in core subjects, instead of only measuring performance through direct results, which are swayed by the standard of students when they arrive at the school.

Although the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review did recommend removing the English Baccalaureate, it did not recommend removing either Attainment 8 or Progress 8 as performance measures, instead recommending the "EBacc" bucket is renamed "Academic breadth".<sup>107</sup>

### 2.3.3. Consequences: rising standards at a technical cost

This large-scale redirection of the education system has improved the standing of England's education system markedly but has also further reduced the status and role of technical education.

#### Rising standards

In 2009, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, England was 25th in the OECD for reading, 27th for maths and 16th for science. By 2022, these rankings had risen to 13th, 11th, and 13th, respectively.

These reforms were only introduced in England, while policies over the same time period in Scotland, Wales, and, to a lesser extent, Northern Ireland were very different. This means that these PISA results provide something of a natural experiment of the effectiveness of the Gove-Gibb reforms, as the histories, populations, and economic conditions of these nations are all very similar, and the main difference was the reforms outlined above.

Comparing these, we see clearly in Figure 1 the impressive performance of English education, rising markedly relative to the other three constituent nations in the United Kingdom according to all three measures.

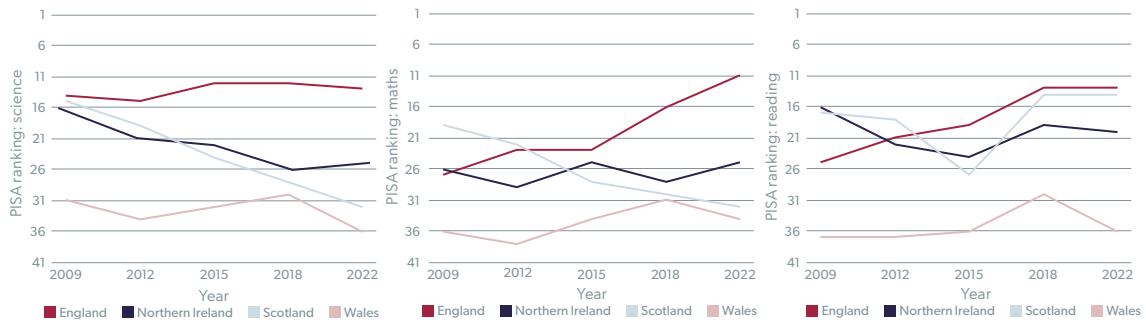
Similarly, English 9-to-10-year-olds have climbed in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings from 19th in 2006 to 4th in 2021.<sup>108</sup> On the Trends in International Maths and Science survey (TIMSS), which ranks countries in maths and science for Year 5 and Year 9 pupils, England has also climbed between 2019 and 2023.<sup>109</sup>

107 Department for Education. 2025. *Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report> (Accessed: 19 November 2025).

108 IEA (2023) *PIRLS 2021 international results in reading*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Available at: <https://pirls2021.org> (Accessed: 2 October 2025); IEA (2007) *PIRLS 2006 international report: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in primary schools in 40 countries*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

109 IEA (2024) *TIMSS 2023 international results in mathematics and science*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Available at: <https://timss2023.org> (Accessed: 2 October 2025); IEA (2020) *TIMSS 2019 international results in mathematics and science*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Available at: <https://timss2019.org> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Figure 1 – Schooling in England has risen in international rankings, while it hasn't in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland



Source: OECD (2023) *PISA 2022 results (Volume I): The state of learning and equity in education*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2022-results.htm> (Accessed: 2 October 2025); Department for Education (2023) *PISA 2022: National report for England*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pisa-2022-results> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Finally, we see that this rise in standards has not only benefitted the best. The rise has also been in the proportion of young people who pass English and Maths GCSE by age 16 and 19. Most educational pathways beyond level 2 require students to have achieved a grade 4/C in English and Maths GCSE, so ensuring as many students as possible reach this level is instrumental to an education system that is successful for all.

The proportion reaching level 2 in English and Maths by 19 in England has risen from 52 per cent in 2007/08 to 76 per cent in 2023/24. Similarly, although, less dramatically, the proportion achieving five GCSE passes or equivalent by age 19 has risen from 76 per cent in 2007/08 to 85 per cent in 2023/24.<sup>110</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 4

The major reform to technical education our country needs must look to build on, not destroy, important academic progress made in the last 15 years, avoiding reforms that undermine this and not raising technical education at the expense of academic education.

<sup>110</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Level 2 and 3 attainment by young people aged 19: Academic year 2023/24*. London: Department for Education, 24 April. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

## The technical cost

The other side of this coin has been the marginalisation of technical education. As we have seen, the marginalisation of technical education is not new, but it continued during these reforms. Most notably, there has been a fall in GCSE entries for subjects such as Design & Technology (D&T) and Drama, the failure of Tech Levels, and a marked reduction in under-19 apprenticeship starts.

Focusing on GCSE selection. D&T has seen the sharpest decline, from 40 per cent uptake in 2010 to 19 per cent in 2023. There have also been notable declines in Drama (13 per cent in 2010 to 7 per cent in 2023) and Media/Film/TV (nine per cent in 2010 to four per cent in 2023).<sup>111</sup> Broadly similar trends have been seen in A levels.<sup>112</sup>

Tech levels were announced in 2013 and introduced in 2014 as part of the Coalition government's education reforms. They were designed to be rigorous level 3 vocational qualifications of an equivalent standing to A levels, endorsed by employers and specialising in providing a direct path into skilled employment.<sup>113</sup> In practice, they failed to launch effectively, never received good credibility with employers, and were too confusing. As such, they were scaled out not long after they came in and have now been fully replaced by T Levels.<sup>114</sup>

The beginning of the end for Tech levels came within two years of their introduction after the *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education* concluded that technical education pathways were too complicated, too unstable over time, and insufficiently respected by employers. They recommended a long-term commitment to a simplified system focused entirely on T Levels. These were to be an A Level equivalent technical pathway, with core classroom content on an occupational specialisation, a major 45-day industry placement, and English and Maths provision.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, as is discussed in Chapter 4, the number of under-19-year-olds starting apprenticeships reduced by 37 per cent from 126,000 to 79,000 between 2014/15 and 2023/24.<sup>116</sup>

### PRINCIPLES FOR RECOMMENDATION 5

The collapse – or failure to launch – of technical educational initiatives over the 20th century had three consistent themes:

- Technical education cannot thrive if the institutions and structures around it are not built properly – as in the tripartite system.
- Competing aims that dilute the focus on technical education – such as furthering market competition in higher education – have undermined its value.
- Parity of esteem cannot succeed if technical education simply seeks to mimic the academic route – as in recent reforms. It must be valued on its own terms.

111 Department for Education (2019) *Curriculum subject trends over time*. London: Department for Education. Available at: [https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-evidence/supporting\\_documents/Curriculum%20subject%20trends%20over%20time.pdf](https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-evidence/supporting_documents/Curriculum%20subject%20trends%20over%20time.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

112 Department for Education (2019) *Curriculum subject trends over time*. London: Department for Education. Available at: [https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-evidence/supporting\\_documents/Curriculum%20subject%20trends%20over%20time.pdf](https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-evidence/supporting_documents/Curriculum%20subject%20trends%20over%20time.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

113 Department for Education (2013) *Government proposals to reform vocational qualifications for 16- to 19-year-olds: Consultation*. London: Department for Education, 7 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/government-proposals-to-reform-vocational-qualifications-for-16-to-19-year-olds> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

114 Lewis, J. (2024) *The reform of level 3 qualifications in England*. House of Commons Library Research Briefing, CBP-9858, 15 November. London: House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9858/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

115 Lewis, J. (2024) *The reform of level 3 qualifications in England*. House of Commons Library Research Briefing, CBP-9858, 15 November. London: House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9858/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

116 Department for Education (2025) *Apprenticeships: Academic year 2024/25*. London: Department for Education, 17 July (last updated 25 July). Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).



**PART II: THE  
IMBALANCE**

## Chapter 3:

# A hierarchical education system

Technical education's quality and growth have been crippled by a lack of status for decades. As Chapter 2 outlined, this has deep historical roots, with an education system that has formed around the primacy of the academic pathway.

This chapter explores 'parity of esteem', and how articulating technical education's value according to its ability to mimic academic routes has embedded a hierarchical education system.

- › First, 'parity of esteem' policies have consistently **tied the value of technical routes to their ability to mimic academic routes, instead of their unique value.**
- › Second, this has inevitably led to **the most academically able children unswervingly choosing academic routes over technical routes**, leaving a vast disparity in rigour of academic and technical routes.
- › Third, this has led to a **disconnect between the views of parents, employers, and young people.** Parents understand that technical education at its best should be the foremost vehicle for work-readiness. Employers find it awkward to offer places when too many young people that are not work ready. Many young people firmly view university as the superior option. Among those who value apprenticeships, many find **accessing them too high risk compared to the ease of accessing lower ranking universities.**

A genuine parity of esteem needs a technical system which young people want to enter, and an education system which employers respect and want to engage with. Currently, young people see the academic pathway as first-class and the technical pathway as second-class, voting clearly with their feet.

## 3.1. A hierarchical understanding of 'parity of esteem'

As noted in chapter one, the term 'parity of esteem' originates from the Norwood report in 1943 which led to the Butler Act 1944. It was emphasised in the design of the tripartite system that its success would depend on the respective status of the academic, technical and secondary modern routes being seen as equal in the public's eyes, achieved through a parity of quality.<sup>117</sup> This was not achieved in any meaningful way.

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117 Relly, S.J. (2021) 'The political rhetoric of parity of esteem', *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(4), pp. 435–453. doi:10.1080/03054985.2020.1866522.

Jumping forward, the Department for Education and Skills 2005 White paper *14-19 Education and Skills* articulated clearly, if unintentionally, why striving for parity of esteem had been so ineffective.<sup>118</sup> The paper called for ‘much stronger vocational routes to success, which are genuinely valued by employers, and as providing access to higher education’.<sup>119</sup> Here, as well as commending the vocational route, the government aligned it with the academic – tying its success to higher education progression.

Relly (2021) describes this as an inherent contradiction between aspiring for equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, where equality of opportunity is defined as giving all young people a fair chance at progressing into university, whilst equality of outcome is defined as ensuring that both the academic and vocational educational pathways return the same career prospects.<sup>120</sup>

In political discourse, the focus on meritocracy has been seen as the need to provide everyone with a fair chance at university. Simultaneously, parity of esteem has been viewed as vocational education returning the same prospects as academic education.<sup>121</sup>

Decades of policy have sought to reconcile this by ensuring that vocational education returns the same university prospects as academic education.

This was made clear in the 2007 Green Paper ‘Raising Expectations: Staying in Education until 18’ which focused on the impact of staying in education on employment, earnings, productivity, involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour, the likelihood of going to prison, and other outcomes.<sup>122</sup> Throughout the Coalition Government, the same position was consistently articulated: that parity of esteem would be sustained through improving the university prospects of vocational education.

**This premise is doomed**, because it leaves no domain for technical education to have unique purpose and value.

The vocational pathway can never be as good as the academic pathway at being the academic pathway. Disparity of esteem has been embedded through the assumption that it should try to be. The Wolf Review (2011) incisively articulates this:

*“In recent years, both academic and vocational education in England have been bedevilled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is the same as everything else. Students and families all know this is nonsense.”<sup>123</sup>*

Wolf has continued recently to be clear that the vocational pathway can and will only have a parity of esteem if it can provide something different, but of equal worth, to the academic pathway.<sup>124</sup> She argues this is best done through apprenticeships that have stronger and clearer links with stable employment than degrees are able, without the debt.

118 Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Department for Education and Skills departmental report 2005*. Cm. 6522. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-education-and-skills-departmental-report-2005> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

119 Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Department for Education and Skills departmental report 2005*. Cm. 6522. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-education-and-skills-departmental-report-2005> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p24

120 Relly, S.J. (2021) ‘The political rhetoric of parity of esteem’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(4), pp. 435–453. doi:10.1080/03054985.2020.1866522.

121 Edwards, R. (2008) ‘A sociology of our times? Critical reflections on the directions of lifelong learning policy in the UK’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(6), pp. 683–695. doi:10.1080/01425690802423340.

122 Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Raising expectations: Staying in education and training post-16*. London: The Stationery Office.

123 Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of vocational education: The Wolf Report*. London: Department for Education. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

124 Wolf, A. (2025) *Saving apprenticeships: A policy primer*. London: Social Market Foundation. Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Saving-apprenticeships-jan-2025.pdf> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

This is possible, and parental and public attitudes show that in some respects this is already the case, but it will need a wholesale restructuring of how the relationship between the two pathways is understood moving forwards.

The current situation is a blatantly hierarchical system. We see this unavoidably in the pathways chosen by the best performers.

## 3.2. Academic children do not choose technical

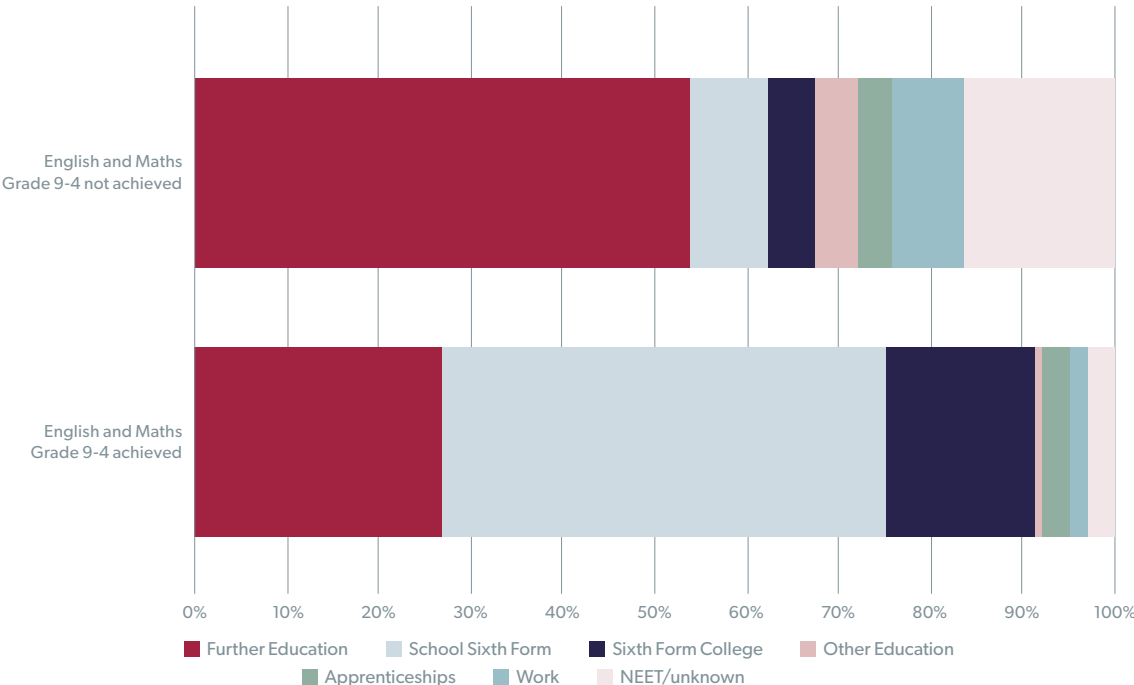
When technical education’s value is defined by its ability to mimic academic education, it loses, and its own intrinsic value is lost. It is undoubtable that the most academic young people choose the academic pathway over the technical. This is clearest when we evaluate the choices taken in post-16 education according to Key Stage 4 (GCSE and, to a lesser extent, BTEC performance).

### 3.2.1. Academic children choose academic institutions

Figure 2 shows what young people move into after completing their Key Stage 4 education, according to whether they achieved a Grade 4 (pass) in English and Maths GCSE. The difference is stark.

Young people who do not achieve grade 4s in both English and Maths at KS4 are twice as likely to enter Further Education, a sixth as likely to enter a School Sixth Form, and over six times as likely to be NEET/unknown compared with those who attain a grade 4 in both subjects.

Figure 2 – Key Stage 4 destinations are drastically different according to KS4 attainment



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 destination measures*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2022-23> (Accessed: 9 July 2025).

These institution-level decisions mirror the academic and technical extremely closely: further education is vocational; school sixth forms are academic. We also see that apprenticeships are extremely uncommon irrespective of a young person’s English and Maths GCSE performance. Those who do go into apprenticeships after Key Stage 4 (especially who failed to pass English and Maths) overwhelmingly go into level 2 Apprenticeships – the same level as GCSEs – or in fact level 1 Apprenticeships.

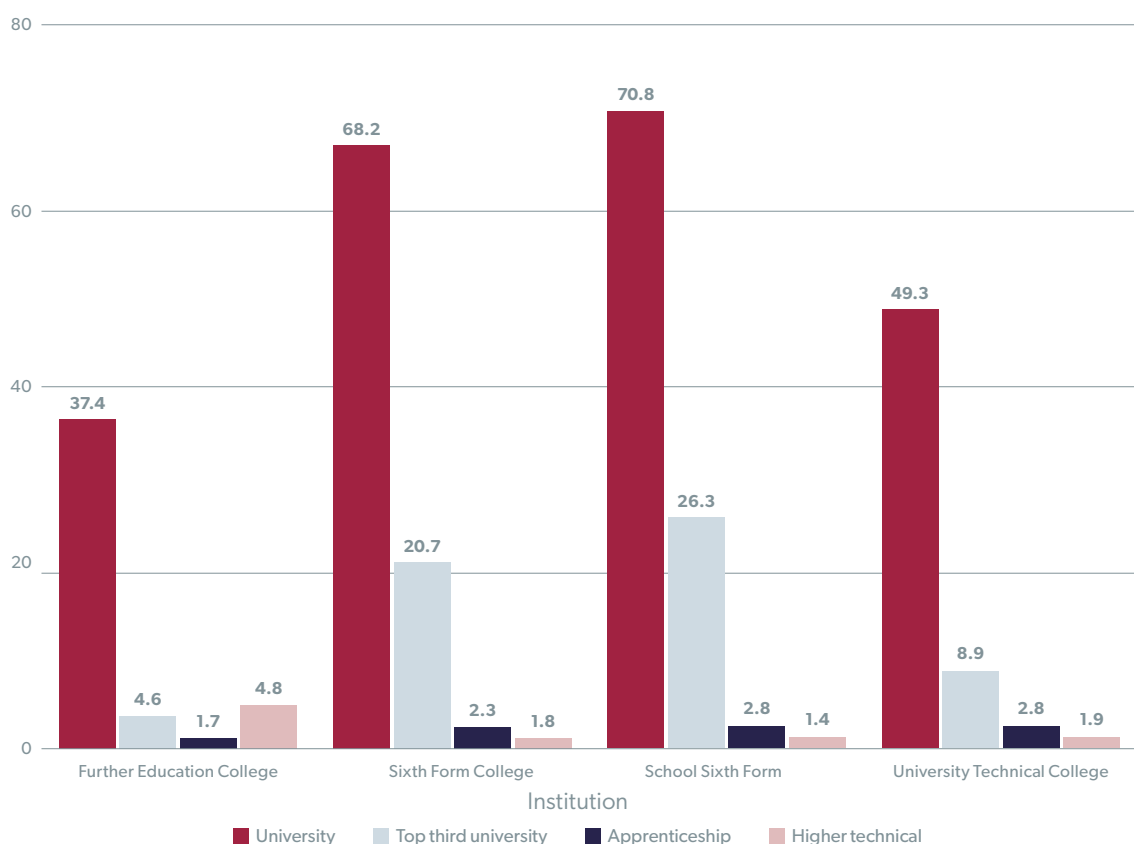
Figure 3 indicates clearly the distinction between these pathways, focusing on the higher education progression of those in 16-18 education according to institution type. This figure focuses on destinations at level 4 or above, so excludes level 2 or 3 Further Education or Apprenticeships.

We see a stark contrast in pupils’ likelihood of progressing into university, which gets even starker when focusing on top third university destinations (those with the highest UCAS score by those attending). Further Education institutions see 37.4 per cent progress into university, and just 4.6 per cent into top third universities. School sixth forms, on the other hand, see 70.8 per cent progress into university and over a quarter (26.3 per cent) progress into top third universities.

Clearly, vocational pathways do not effectively mimic academic pathways in terms of preparation for university.

Much more concerning, is that Further Education is also not currently more effective preparation for vocational pathways - its key function. A smaller proportion of Further Education pupils (1.7 per cent) than School sixth form pupils (2.8 per cent) progress into level 4 or 5 apprenticeships. Just 4.8 per cent progress into higher technical courses.

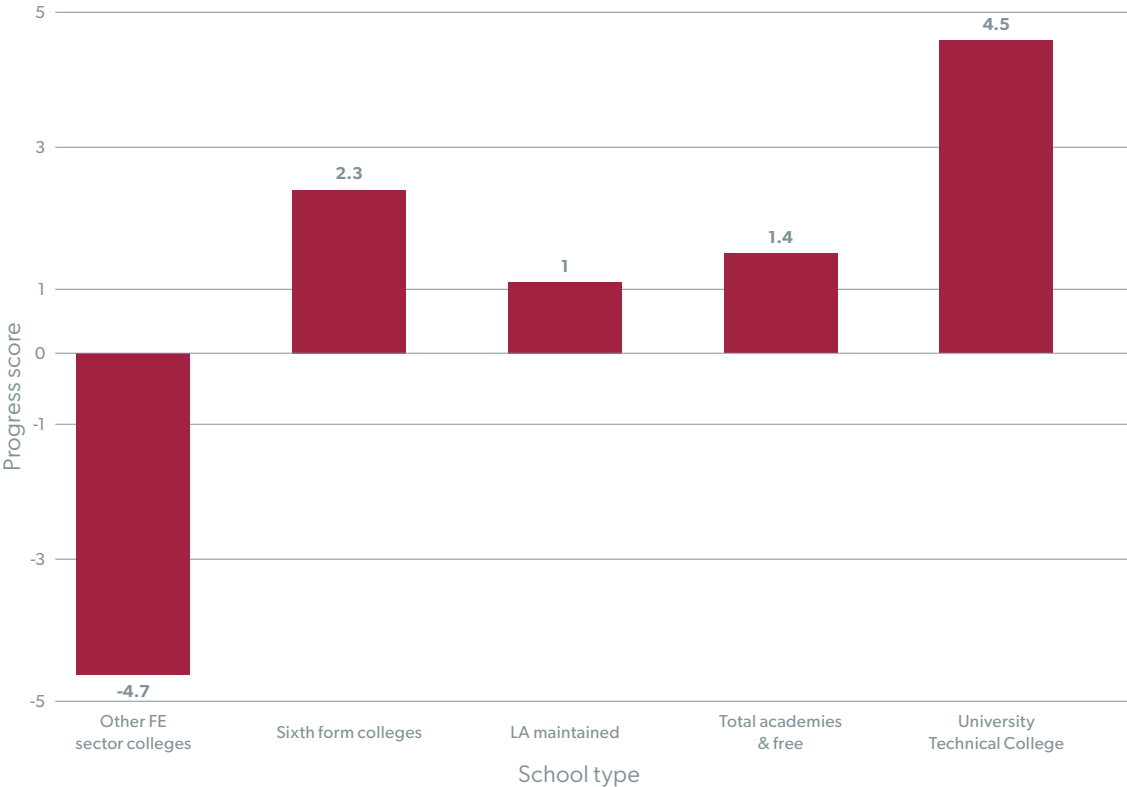
Figure 3 – Progression into level 4 or above by institution type



Source: Department for Education. (2025) *Progression to higher education or training, Academic year 2023/24*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2023-24> (Accessed: 14 November 2025).

We also see, as in Figure 4, that as well as having much better outcomes, schools have generally much better progress scores than Further Education colleges – although not as high as Sixth form colleges nor UTCs. Progress scores measure, as a proportion of young people, how many more progress into higher education than would be expected according to prior attainment. It does not distinguish by pathway and instead focuses on overall progression.

Figure 4 – Progress scores by institution



Source: Department for Education. (2024) *Progression to higher education or training, Academic year 2022/23*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2022-23> (Accessed: 2 October 2025). Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

### 3.2.2. Academic children take academic qualifications

*“I think there’s a brain drain from vocational subjects that’s set in some local authorities at 11.”*

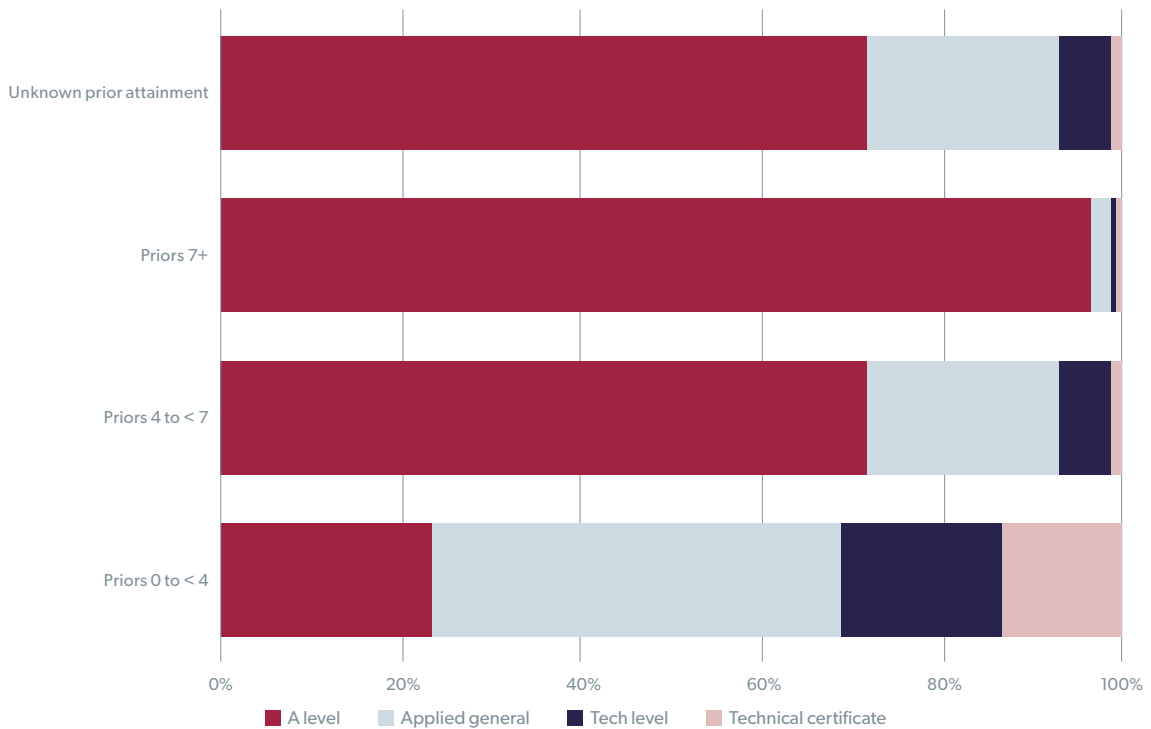
**School leader contribution**

As well as seeing clearly by institution that the academic prepares young people better than the vocational does for the academic pathways, this is also true at a qualification level. Young people who perform well in GCSEs are more likely to progress into A levels whilst those who performed poorly are much more likely to progress into vocational pathways.

Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) are vocational level 2 and 3 qualifications, most notably including BTECs and Cambridge Technical courses. Tech levels are a legacy qualification that has since been replaced with T Levels but had not been by Autumn 2023 when the most recent cohort of data started their Key Stage 5 study. Technical certificates are a subset of level 2 (GCSE-level) vocational qualifications, worth at least two GCSEs.<sup>125</sup>

Figure 5 shows that top GCSE performers almost exclusively take A levels in Key Stage 5 (97.3 per cent), with a small fraction taking AGQs (2.3 per cent) and a negligible number taking tech levels or technical certificates. For the lowest performers, however, this is not the case at all – fewer than a quarter take A levels, almost half take AGQs and both tech levels and technical certificates get a decent showing.

Figure 5 – Better GCSE performers are far more likely to take A levels



Source: Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

**PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 6**

Technical does not and cannot succeed if it is deemed ‘academic-lite’.

<sup>125</sup> Department for Education (2025) *16 to 18 accountability headline measures: Technical guide*. London: Department for Education, 13 February. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-accountability-headline-measures-technical-guide> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

## 3.3. The parent-employer-child disconnect

Considering these challenges, parity of esteem seems a pipe dream: a warm, cosy sentiment but one separate from reality. However, this is too simplistic a view. Instead, we see a three-way disconnect, as brought out by our call for evidence.

Parents love apprenticeships because they understand their unique value in providing good work, and are less concerned by academic credentialism. Employers have some warmth in principle but often find the costs outweigh the benefits, and instead often find that only appointing graduates simpler. Many young people are not interested – either needing to get on and work without having the time for training or wanting to go to university. Many who are interested find apprenticeships too hard to access.

### 3.3.1. Parents love apprenticeships

A YouGov survey of British adults in 2022 found that 45 per cent of the general population consider apprenticeships better at preparing young people for the future than university degrees – with just 4 per cent considering university degrees better.<sup>126</sup> Strikingly, just 7 per cent of graduates considered university degrees better, whilst 57 per cent considered them equally good preparation.<sup>127</sup> This survey also found that 44 per cent of parents would rather their own children studied an apprenticeship at 18, compared to 35 per cent for a university degree.<sup>128</sup>

A further YouGov poll in 2023 focused on parents cemented this, with 52 per cent of parents believing an apprenticeship was better value than a degree and 28 per cent considering them equal value.<sup>129</sup> Tech startup Multiverse conducted similar research and found even stronger preferences for apprenticeships over degrees.<sup>130</sup>

Polling from Public First in 2025 furthered this, finding that 48 per cent of British adults (and 46 per cent of parents) wanted the Government to prioritise apprenticeships funding, compared to just 23 per cent for universities.<sup>131</sup>

In fact, much of the public are not just fond of apprenticeships, but highly cynical of university.

Research in 2024 by King’s College London explored this topic further and found that whilst parents and the general public increasingly hold apprenticeships in higher regard than university, this is much less true for graduates.

They found that 31 per cent of the public said a university education isn’t worth the time and money, up from 18 per cent in 2018. Also, that 35 per cent of parents with children aged 11 to 17 consider university education overrated (less than the 40 per cent that disagreed) and 37 per cent felt degrees are not good

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126 Kirk, I. (2022) 'Are apprenticeships better than university degrees for young people?', *YouGov*, 17 June. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/42819-are-apprenticeships-better-university-degrees-youn> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

127 Kirk, I. (2022) 'Are apprenticeships better than university degrees for young people?', *YouGov*, 17 June. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/42819-are-apprenticeships-better-university-degrees-youn> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

128 Kirk, I. (2022) 'Are apprenticeships better than university degrees for young people?', *YouGov*, 17 June. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/42819-are-apprenticeships-better-university-degrees-youn> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

129 Buddoo, N. (2023) 'Apprenticeships are better value than degrees, says YouGov poll', *Construction Management*, 6 April. Available at: <https://constructionmanagement.co.uk/apprenticeships-are-better-value-than-degrees-says-yougov-poll/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

130 QA Education (2022) 'Public four times more likely to think apprenticeships offer young people better job prospects than university', *QA Education*, 7 February. Available at: <https://www.qaeducation.co.uk/feature/apprenticeships-job/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

131 Patel, A. (2025) 'Make apprenticeship funding top priority, poll suggests', *FE Week*, 14 February. Available at: <https://feweek.co.uk/make-apprenticeship-funding-top-priority-poll-suggests/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

value for money compared to 10 years ago (compared to 29 per cent considering them just as good).<sup>132</sup> Over three quarters (76 per cent) of the public wanted more opportunities for apprenticeships compared with just 39 per cent wanting more opportunities for university.<sup>133</sup>

*“We’ve got this massive amount of houses going to be built, and this shortfall of skills, and we’re still keeping kids in geography and history [...] they could be out there learning bricklaying or something that might make them useful in a few years’ time.”*

**College leader contribution**

Importantly, however, eight in ten graduates said university was worth it for the academic knowledge (84 per cent) and the overall experience and benefits (81 per cent), and 87 per cent said they would choose university again if they could.<sup>134</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 7

There is substantial public appetite for improved technical education – especially apprenticeships or similar work-placement-based training.

### 3.3.2. Employer ambivalence

To employers, these questions are straightforward. Those running a business that needs to make a profit are much less interested in the political principles and want workers who are cost-effective, conscientious, competent, and reliable. If apprenticeships can provide this, they are very fond of them. If they cannot, they are not.

*“I’m also concerned about the, say, the work ethic. My children are 14 and 16, and I am drumming it into them as much as possible [...] the amount of kids who do not have the manners and respect for society is concerning.”*

**SME leader contribution**

<sup>132</sup> King’s College London, Policy Institute (2024) *Graduates overwhelmingly positive about universities – but public favour more vocational options, study finds*. King’s College London News, 31 July. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/graduates-overwhelmingly-positive-about-universities-but-public-favour-more-vocational-options-study-finds> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>133</sup> King’s College London, Policy Institute (2024) *Graduates overwhelmingly positive about universities – but public favour more vocational options, study finds*. King’s College London News, 31 July. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/graduates-overwhelmingly-positive-about-universities-but-public-favour-more-vocational-options-study-finds> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>134</sup> King’s College London, Policy Institute (2024) *Graduates overwhelmingly positive about universities – but public favour more vocational options, study finds*. King’s College London News, 31 July. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/graduates-overwhelmingly-positive-about-universities-but-public-favour-more-vocational-options-study-finds> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Government research shows that vocational and technical providers are much more likely to value technical education (88 per cent) than employers (48 per cent).<sup>135</sup> More strikingly, while 63 per cent of those on them agree that the availability of technical courses is sufficiently flexible, just 27 per cent of employers do.<sup>136</sup> This theme is crucial: employers find offering apprenticeships and similar technical courses to be bureaucratic and awkward, with far too much red tape.

*“From an employer’s point of view, the age of some of these kids from school at 16 and 17, they are restricted on what they can do on site, we can’t accommodate some 16 and 17-year-olds [...] We only take 18 plus now because of the red tape on site. It’s a travesty. We say we want these kids in industry [...] How are they going to learn, how are we going to light the kindling, so they get excited?”*

**SME leader contribution**

Second, employers clearly find basic work readiness much more important than young people’s qualifications and skills, and that those who are technically trained often have neither. While two thirds (65 per cent) of technical education providers agree that technical education gives young people the skills needed by employers, just a third (36 per cent) of employers do – technical education providers and employers are on different wavelengths.

*“We just let about six apprentices go at the end of their apprenticeships, and it was a combination of the workforce was too big for the pipeline that we’ve got and that most of them were horribly gormless. There’s no one home.”*

**SME leader contribution**

As a result, over half of employers still mainly screen for graduates when hiring, as it is a simple cost-effective signal of the likely work readiness of young people.<sup>137</sup> This is concerning. Technical education is failing to provide simpler routes for young people to attain employment and employers to find staff in a way that is simpler and more cost effective than the academically orientated university. The fundamental challenge for parity of esteem is technical education being able to consistently provide this.

*The success rate on apprentices right now is crap, because the work ethic is just not there in the younger generation as a norm as it was. It really was much more so when I was starting out.*

**SME leader contribution**

135 Department for Education (2023) *Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications in England: Wave 7*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-wave-7/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-in-england-wave-7> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

136 Department for Education (2023) *Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications in England: Wave 7*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-wave-7/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-in-england-wave-7> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

137 People Management (2018) ‘Half of employers use degrees to screen job applicants, research finds’, *People Management*, 14 August. Available at: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1794877/half-employers-use-degrees-screen-job-applicants-research-finds> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

One of the main barriers to this highlighted was the subcontracting within the construction sector. The offer of immediate returns through sub-contracting in less skilled roles causes some apprentices to drop out of their apprenticeship. This self-employment model means that young people are likely to drop out of apprenticeships or not participate in training as the reward of immediate earnings from low-skill agency work is more attractive than the potential long-term returns of investing in training.

*“I’m often struggling to get me even finish an apprenticeship I’ve given someone. When I started, it was a contract, and when you signed it, you had to see it through. You know, it was almost a jailable offense if you didn’t see it through. But now we’ll probably get about halfway through, and this is getting stolen by a subcontract middleman that’s operating for a larger contractor.”*

**SME leader contribution**

A technical pipeline that works for employers and earns their buy-in is paramount to a successful technical education system, much more than the academic rigour of whatever courses are offered; the heart of the offering is the vocation.

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 8

Technical education cannot succeed in its unique value – providing a direct line of sight to a fulfilling career – if it does not make young people employable. It must work with employers if it is to succeed.

### 3.3.3. Student disinterest and disorientation

Young people see technical education as second rate. A Prospects survey of over 5,000 young people in 2022 found that just 15 per cent of college/sixth form students and eight per cent of school pupils were hoping to do an apprenticeship.<sup>138</sup> Looking at reasons for this, 40 per cent of young people said an apprenticeship was not an option for their chosen career path, and 39 per cent said that degrees had a better reputation.<sup>139</sup>

Research sponsored by Amazon found the same, that whilst parents preferred apprenticeships to university on aggregate, young people themselves considered university a pathway with better prospects.<sup>140</sup>

138 Prospects (2022) ‘Half of A-level students see apprenticeships as second-rate’, *Prospects Press Office*, August. Available at: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/prospects-press-office/half-of-a-level-students-see-apprenticeships-as-second-rate> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

139 Smith, M.-S. and Greaves, L. (2022) *Early Careers Survey 2022*. Manchester: Prospects Luminare. Available at: <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/early-careers-survey-2022> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

140 Amazon UK (2022) *Apprenticeships or university? Amazon-sponsored research reveals a generational split*. About Amazon UK News, 5 July. Available at: <https://www.aboutamazon.co.uk/news/apprentices/apprenticeship-gcse-a-level-report-amazon> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

*“School makes it very known that there are, like, multiple options. You don’t have to go to university, you don’t necessarily have to do A levels, you don’t necessarily have to come to sixth form.*

...

*But then I feel like, on a personal level, like I had to do A levels, and I have to go to sixth form, and then I have to go to university. And I feel like my subjects, I didn’t pick them for enjoyment, I just picked them like, this is what’s going to get me a career. This is what like, this is what’s going to make me the most money. I guess.”*

**Sixth form student contribution**

Even more concerningly for the technical route, those young people who do want to get on and work immediately after school are not interested in apprenticeships – they want immediate salaries that don’t demand training. This is often in sectors with very poor long-term job prospects.

*“They’re not interested in a good pension that’s too far away [...] The modern youngster is just all about ‘I want high pay now, and I want it all now’, and that the subcontract system is just too enticing for them in terms of what money they might be able to make immediately without investing in their future, and what taxes they may not have to pay as a result of that, you know, would be deducted if they were employed in the traditional sense.”*

**SME leader contribution**

There is, however, some nuance to add to this. A growing proportion of young people are being put off university by the extortionate cost. Notably, by 2025, a quarter of sixth form/college students and 14 per cent of school pupils wanted to do an apprenticeship – a slight improvement over the three years.<sup>141</sup>

*“I wish that, there was a greater emphasis on the people who, that’s not for them, you know, that’s not necessarily, like a heavily academic environment, like going to college or doing BTEC or something like, I feel like that was never an option.”*

**Sixth form student contribution**

Although often young people felt apprenticeships were too difficult to get into.

<sup>141</sup> Smith, M.-S., Greaves, L. and Mason, D. (2025) *Early Careers Survey 2025*. Manchester: Prospects Luminare, May. Available at: <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/early-careers-survey> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

*“Also, the fact that degree apprenticeships, and apprenticeships themselves are so competitive that it feels like uni is sort of the safe option, like there will be a uni you’ll be able to get into.”*

**Sixth form student contribution**

Qualitative research from interviews with headteachers has also found that in contexts where they are accessible and trustworthy, apprenticeships are extremely common and popular among young people.

*“We have a significantly higher uptake of apprenticeships [...] it is about 50-60%. That, actually, I think, is a direct consequence of the fact that children will get, will get paid for those years, rather than having to accrue lots of debt and then pay it back.”*

**School leader contribution**

Overall, we see a clear disconnect in attitudes to the technical offering.

There is a place for technical education: it provides a more direct and less costly route into work than university but provides much better long term employment prospects than heading straight into low-skilled work.

However, at the current time, this value is not being found for two reasons: first, its value is being measured on academic terms, where it will always – necessarily – be second-rate to genuine academic training. Second, its unique role in linking with employers is patchy – not least because it currently sits squarely at the bottom of the reputational hierarchy.

## PRINCIPLES FOR RECOMMENDATION 9

Young people are not necessarily opposed to technical education, but two things stop them more than anything:

1. They deem the technical pathway to be too risky – apprenticeships are difficult to get and there are insufficient technical alternatives that are worthwhile.
2. They deem many technical options, such as further education, to be second-rate, ‘academic-lite’ pathways and would prefer to remain on the well-trodden academic route.

## Chapter 4:

# A confusing technical pathway

Compared to the simplicity of the GCSE → A level → university academic route, the technical pathways available are a minefield: a confusing set of options, too many of which are hard to access, and too many of which are dead ends. Young people do not trust it.

*“If they’re saying, ‘I don’t know what I want to do, I don’t know whether university is right for me’, you are left with a minefield of ideas.”*

**School leader contribution**

Decades of policy churn and a series of attempts to simplify the incomprehensible patchwork of qualifications has left a confusing and volatile system that does not offer a clear pathway akin to the one offered through UCAS into higher education.<sup>142</sup>

This chapter gives an overview of the two main types of secondary and post-16 technical education institutions – Further Education colleges and University Technical Colleges – and then looks at the technical and vocational qualifications studied at these institutions. These principally fit into Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) – evolving into V Levels – the emerging T Levels, and National Vocational Qualifications, although the lines between academic, vocational, and technical are often blurred.

Finally, it looks at apprenticeships, which mostly sit slightly separately from the rest of the education system, albeit with some overlap.

Three observations are made:

- › Further education colleges offer a confusing mixture of academic and vocational routes, often with very low success rates.
- › Apprenticeships can be extremely effective, but the system suffers from counter-productive design and a chronic shortage of supply. Levels are poorly defined, dropout rates are too high, and the Apprenticeship Levy has stifled supply.
- › T Levels are promising, but have struggled to take off, and serious barriers remain before T Levels become a legitimate A level alternative.

<sup>142</sup> Field, S. (2022) *Inequality in English post-16 education*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Inequality-in-English-post-16-education.pdf> (Accessed: 2 October 2025); House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Further education and skills: Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, HC 666*. London: House of Commons, 23 September. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49615/documents/264337/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 32.

## 4.1. Technical and vocational institutions

### 4.1.1. Further Education Colleges

Further education (FE) refers to any study after secondary school that is not part of higher education. It covers a wide range of courses and qualifications, providing a mixture of both academic and technical education. FE includes a plethora of types and levels of technical and applied qualifications, but most commonly Level 3 (to specialise in a specific technical job), Level 2 and Applied General Qualifications.<sup>143</sup> There are 217 colleges in England, with 1.6 million students attending college per year.<sup>144</sup>

Whilst not exhaustive, FE providers can be categorised into four broad types:

- › **General FE Colleges, including tertiary (FE colleges)** are institutions providing a range of academic, technical, and vocational courses for people aged 16+.
- › **Sixth Form Colleges** focus almost entirely on academic education for 16–19-year-olds generally through the provision of A-Levels – these are often treated as a different category to FE college.
- › **Private Sector Public Funded providers** are Independent Training Providers (ITPs) that are privately owned organisations that deliver training including the majority of apprenticeship starts in England (66.7 per cent of starts in 2023/24).<sup>145</sup>
- › **Other Public Funded Providers**

Whilst ITPs deliver the majority of apprenticeship training in England, FE colleges are by far the largest institutions in England by total workforce size. Data from the Department of Education (DfE) shows that over half (60.2 per cent) of the FE workforce are employed by General FE colleges with just under a quarter employed by ITPs (24.6 per cent).<sup>146</sup>

Colleges also form partnerships with local employers to deliver apprenticeships and training while also being a major employer in local communities as they employ 120,000 employees.<sup>147</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, Further Education institutions see only 37.4 per cent progress into university and just 4.6 per cent into top third universities, compared to 70.8 per cent progressing into university and over a quarter (26.3 per cent) into top third universities for school sixth forms. Even more concerningly, a smaller proportion of Further Education pupils (1.7 per cent) than School sixth form pupils (2.8 per cent) progress into level 4 or 5 apprenticeships, and just 4.8 per cent progress into higher technical courses.

The CSJ in their report *Skills to Build*, found that, focusing on the construction sector, only a third (33 per cent) of construction FE trainees enter the industry quickly after completing their course, whilst 14 per cent move into unemployment.<sup>148</sup>

143 GOV.UK (n.d.) *Further Education Courses and Funding*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/further-education-courses> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

144 Higginbotham, D. (2025) *Overview of the UK's Further Education Sector*. Prospects. Available at: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/further-education/overview-of-the-uks-further-education-sector/#what-is-further-education> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

145 Department for Education (2024) *Apprenticeships: 2024–25 Academic Year Statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2024-25> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

146 Department for Education (2024) *Further Education Workforce: 2023–24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce/2023-24> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

147 Association of Colleges. *About Us*. Available at: <https://www.aoc.co.uk/about-us> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

148 Centre for Social Justice (2025) *Skills to Build*. Available at: link. (Accessed: 19 November 2025).

## 4.1.2. University Technical Colleges

University Technical Colleges (UTCs) are academic technical schools for young people aged 14-19 years old, taking students from the beginning of Year 10. There are currently 44 UTCs across England, which were attended by a combined 20,325 students in 2024/25, a doubling over eight years.<sup>149</sup> They have an average of a third of empty places, three times that of the secondary school average nationally.<sup>150</sup>

In 2019, 45 per cent of UTCs were rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, this figure was up to 82 per cent by 2024.<sup>151</sup>

In *From School To The Skilled Workforce*, Policy Exchange describes the four characteristics of UTCs identified by the Baker Dearing Educational Trust:

1. A technical curriculum: UTCs must reserve 40 per cent of KS4 and 60 per cent of KS5 time for technical learning, delivered through specialist pathways. They also use industry-standard equipment to mirror real workplaces.
2. The development of work-readiness: UTCs model workplaces through longer days, smaller size, and professional conduct expectations.
3. Employer partnerships: employers help shape the curriculum, sit on governing boards, and offer placements.
4. Destinations focus: UTCs encourage early specialisation and prioritise apprenticeships.

Analysis from Policy Exchange suggests that, when making matched comparisons, UTCs perform slightly better than the national average in getting young people into apprenticeships or work, but that they perform worse on academic measures such as Progress 8 and Attainment 8.<sup>152</sup> Baker Dearing's annual student survey also suggests high student satisfaction.

## 4.1.3. Scale: international comparison

Comparisons with other countries reveal the disappointing scale of technical education in the UK.

As shown in Figure 6, the United Kingdom has relatively low proportions of young people in technical education. **In 2022, only 17 per cent of young males were in technical education, whereas Germany and the Netherlands observed 22 and 23 per cent respectively.**<sup>153</sup> A similar pattern is found for females, with 15 per cent in technical education compared to 17 and 21 per cent in Germany and the Netherlands.

Looking at the education levels of adults aged 25-34, the numbers are even more striking. OECD data shows that in the UK, 53.7 per cent are university educated (BA or more) and just 18.4 per cent are technically trained, at a ratio of almost five to one. In Germany, 39.3 per cent are university educated while 37.3 per cent are technically trained at a ratio of around one to one. In the Netherlands, 54.2 per cent are university educated whilst 29.0 per cent are technically trained, at a ratio of two to one.<sup>154</sup>

149 Marsh, Z. (2025) *From School To The Skilled Workforce*. Policy Exchange. Available at: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/From-School-To-The-Skilled-Workforce.pdf> (Accessed: 18 November 2025)

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

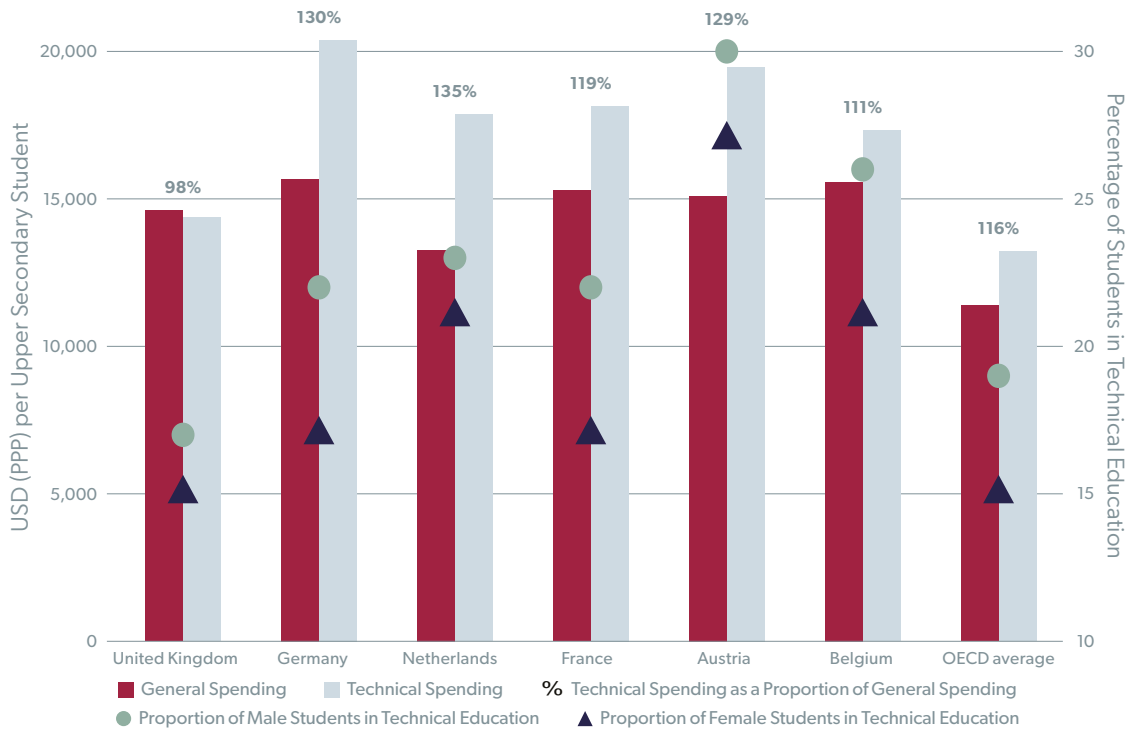
153 OECD (2024), *Education at a Glance 2024*, 10 September 2024, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024\\_5ea68448/c00cad36-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024_5ea68448/c00cad36-en.pdf). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

154 OECD (2024) Education attainment – Data Explorer: Adults' educational attainment distribution, by age group and gender. OECD Data Explorer. Available at: <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis> (Available at: 2 December 2025)

Figure 6 also highlights that the United Kingdom spends relatively little on Upper Secondary technical education compared to its peers.<sup>155</sup> In 2020, it spent 6,000 USD less than Germany per student, and nearly 3,500 USD less than the Netherlands.<sup>156</sup>

Our lack of investment in technical is starkest when comparing the ratio between general education and technical education spending. Spending on technical education is expected to exceed general education due to the need for specialised equipment and infrastructure,<sup>157</sup> as seen in ratios of 130 per cent in Germany and 135 per cent in the Netherlands in 2020. **This relationship is reversed for the United Kingdom, with a ratio of 98 per cent.**

Figure 6 – Spending per upper secondary student by education type and participation in technical education by gender, 2020–2022



Source: OECD (2023) *The design of upper secondary education across OECD countries*, 5 April 2023, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-design-of-upper-secondary-education-across-oecd-countries\\_158101f0-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-design-of-upper-secondary-education-across-oecd-countries_158101f0-en.html). (Accessed: 2 October 2025). OECD (2023) *Education at a Glance 2023*, 12 September 2023, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023\\_e13bef63-en/full-report/how-much-is-spent-per-student-on-educational-institutions\\_7bd34293.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report/how-much-is-spent-per-student-on-educational-institutions_7bd34293.html). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

155 Upper secondary education includes those aged 15 to 18 years old. OECD (2023) *The design of upper secondary education across OECD countries*, 5 April 2023, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-design-of-upper-secondary-education-across-oecd-countries\\_158101f0-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-design-of-upper-secondary-education-across-oecd-countries_158101f0-en.html). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

156 Spending is adjusted for purchasing power parity. OECD (2023) *Education at a Glance 2023*, 12 September 2023, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023\\_e13bef63-en/full-report/how-much-is-spent-per-student-on-educational-institutions\\_7bd34293.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report/how-much-is-spent-per-student-on-educational-institutions_7bd34293.html). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

157 OECD (2023) *Spotlight on Vocational Education and Training*, 12 September 2023, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/09/spotlight-on-vocational-education-and-training\\_9a3571d6.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/09/spotlight-on-vocational-education-and-training_9a3571d6.html). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

## 4.2. Technical and vocational qualifications

### 4.2.1. Applied General Qualifications and V Levels

AGQs are Level 3 vocational qualifications typically taken at KS5, i.e., post-16, and include BTECs and Cambridge Technicals.<sup>158</sup> They are popular qualifications, with 108,000 16- to 17-year-olds studying solely AGQs and 136,000 studying AGQs alongside AS/A Levels in 2024.<sup>159</sup>

AGQs are studied at a range of institutions, including school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, and FE colleges.

Most fundamentally challenging to AGQs as vocational qualifications is the fact that they are non-competence qualifications – they provide foundational knowledge for working in a skilled trade like carpentry or bricklaying but do not provide anything recognised that meets industry standards.

Criticisms of the large number of AGQs and the quality of many of the qualifications led to planned reforms to cut back on AGQs deemed to overlap with T Levels.<sup>160</sup> However, after a review of the planned reforms, the Education Committee acknowledged the need to reform some Level 3 qualifications but emphasised the necessity of maintaining AGQs as an alternative to A Levels and T Levels to provide students with routes to higher education, in particular those with special education needs and/or disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>161</sup> Consequently, the Government decided to maintain funding for 157 AGQs previously scheduled to be cut, but did proceed in dropping 200 AGQs with low or no enrolment.<sup>162</sup> The review serves as a reminder of the need for alternatives available to students unable to choose A Levels or T Levels to continue their education or training.

In line with this, the Government recently announced plans to replace the complicated system of approximately 900 post-16 qualifications outside of A Levels and T Levels with a new vocational course, called V Levels.<sup>163</sup> The intention is to satisfy the needs and aspirations of students not accommodated by A Levels and T Levels but to also simplify and enhance the system by offering fewer, better courses to young people.<sup>164</sup> V Levels will be designed to be explicitly vocational in a way that AGQs often failed to be, ensuring focus remains on acquiring practical experience and the pipeline into employment.<sup>165</sup>

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158 Cambridge Assessment OCR (2017) *Know your AGQs from your T Levels?*. OCR Policy and Public Affairs, 17 November. Available at: <https://ocr-live-prd95.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/about/policy-and-public-affairs/articles/know-your-agqs-from-your-t-levels/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025); House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Further education and skills: Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, HC 666*. London: House of Commons, 23 September. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49615/documents/264337/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 40.

159 Department for Education (2025) *Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18: Calendar year 2024*. London: Department for Education, 26 June. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

160 Department for Education (2019) *Review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below in England: The current system and the case for change*. London: Department for Education, 19 March. Available at: [https://consult.education.gov.uk/post-16-qualifications-review-team/post-16-level-3-and-below-qualifications-review/supporting\\_documents/Post%2016%20level%203%20and%20below%20qualifications%20review%20Case%20for%20Change.pdf](https://consult.education.gov.uk/post-16-qualifications-review-team/post-16-level-3-and-below-qualifications-review/supporting_documents/Post%2016%20level%203%20and%20below%20qualifications%20review%20Case%20for%20Change.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

161 Hayes, H. (2024) *Correspondence to the Secretary of State and Minister for Skills on review of post-16 qualification reforms at level 3 and below*. House of Commons Education Committee, 4 December. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/45876/documents/227654/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

162 House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Further education and skills: Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, HC 666*. London: House of Commons, 23 September. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49615/documents/264337/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 41.

163 Department for Education (2025) *Post-16 Level 3 and Below Pathways*. London: Department for Education, 20 October. Available at: <https://consult.education.gov.uk/technical-education-and-qualifications-reform/post-16-level-3-and-below-pathways/> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

164 *Ibid.*

165 *Ibid.*

*“We are now offering the NCFE qualification in food and nutrition, because the traditional GCSE actually isn’t preparing our [students] for the workplace and catering [...] they’re now far more prepared for a career in catering and hospitality, rather than a career in food science, which is ultimately what the GCSE seems to prepare them for – or doesn’t prepare them for.”*

**School leader contribution**

## 4.2.2. T Levels

T Levels are 2-year courses broadly equivalent to three A Levels that require students to undertake both a technical qualification at school or college and an industry placement. They were launched in September 2020 as the main technical education option for 16- to 19-year-olds.<sup>166</sup> Their introduction aims to improve technical education to better meet employers’ needs and improve students’ labour market outcomes and education progress.<sup>167</sup>

Despite a slow start, the number of students starting T Levels has shown encouraging uplift, reaching 25,508 in September 2024, a 59 per cent increase compared to September 2023.<sup>168</sup> One particular area of encouragement in this growth has been Manchester, where T Levels have formed an important part of the emerging Manchester Baccalaureate.<sup>169</sup> This is partly due to progress in overcoming initial difficulties with low awareness. Between 2023 and 2025 the proportion of learners reported a good understanding of T Levels increased from 27 per cent to 51 per cent.<sup>170</sup> Continued growth will depend on this increasing further.

However, other barriers to scaling up T Levels remain. The Department for Education has recognised industry placements as a potential constraint on the number of T Level students,<sup>171</sup> and school leaders have warned of difficulties in finding placements if the number of T Level students increased.<sup>172</sup> This could partially be alleviated by addressing information gaps. Only a third of employers are aware of T Levels,<sup>173</sup> nearly half report limited or not very good understanding of T Levels,<sup>174</sup> and difficulties understanding T Levels’ equivalence and comparability with A Levels persist.<sup>175</sup>

166 Department for Education (2025) *Introduction of T Levels*. London: Department for Education, 13 August. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-t-levels/introduction-of-t-levels> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

167 National Audit Office (2025) *Investigation into introducing T Levels*. London: NAO, 28 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7951/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p6.

168 Department for Education (2025) *T Level and T Level foundation year entrant data: 2024 to 2025*. London: Department for Education, 21 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-and-t-level-foundation-year-entrant-data-2024-to-2025/t-level-and-t-level-foundation-year-entrant-data-2024-to-2025> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

169 Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025) *Green Shoots from Year 1: Highlights, impact and legacy from the MBacc’s first year (2024/25)*. Manchester: GMCA. Available at: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/work-and-skills/technical-education-city-region/the-greater-manchester-baccalaureate-mbacc/green-shoots-from-year-1/green-shoots-report/>. (Accessed: 5 November 2025).

170 Ofqual (2025) *Perceptions of Vocational and Technical Qualifications in England - wave 7*. Coventry: Ofqual, June. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-wave-7/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-in-england-wave-7> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

171 National Audit Office (2025) *Investigation into introducing T Levels*. London: NAO, 28 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7951/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p 9.

172 House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Further education and skills: Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, HC 666*. London: House of Commons, 23 September. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49615/documents/264337/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 41.

173 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2025) *Introducing T Levels*. London: House of Commons, 27 June. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48505/documents/254059/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 1.

174 Ofqual (2025) *Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications in England: Wave 7*. London: Ofqual, 5 June. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-wave-7/perceptions-of-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-in-england-wave-7> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

175 UK Parliament (2025) *Written evidence submitted by NCFE (FES0108)*. House of Commons Education Committee, 8 April. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/138827/pdf/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

*“T Levels were an impossible thing for us to get going because it was so complicated, so many people needed to be involved in writing an entire curriculum, connecting with businesses, networking with the London hub, learning the whole thing in and out, only for it to not even be sure if we’d get enough students.”*

**School leader contribution**

Colleges have also faced challenges providing T Levels. There have been issues regarding the hiring and retaining of teachers with the correct expertise, the provision of appropriate facilities and equipment, and expensive fees charged by organisations awarding qualifications.<sup>176</sup>

*“The reality is that there has been a degree of uncertainty in the last three or four years in terms of T Levels. What are these qualifications going to look like, and would you have enough funding to cover them? And would you get enough funding to build the rooms that you needed to build in order for children to experience the practicalities of working in those spaces? That process was quite difficult to manage.”*

**School leader contribution**

*“We don’t have the links with the local hospitals to say ‘okay, off you go for 90 days of work experience”*

**School leader contribution**

Even if the Department for Education’s estimate of 66,100 students starting a T Level in September 2029 is realised,<sup>177</sup> this would amount to less than 10 per cent of the number of KS4 leavers in 2022/23.<sup>178</sup> This is a disappointing development, especially considering the Department for Education’s original target of 100,000 students starting T Levels by September 2025.<sup>179</sup> It is therefore clear that steps must be taken to alleviate the current constraints to reach more ambitious targets and establish T Levels as a commonly used alternative to the academic route.

A final major concern identified since the rollout of T Levels is low student satisfaction and high drop-out rates. In 2023, only 57 per cent of students were satisfied with their course, compared to 72 per cent for comparison A Level students and 76 per cent for comparison Level 3 Technical students.<sup>180</sup>

176 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2025) *Introducing T Levels*. London: House of Commons, 27 June. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48505/documents/254059/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025)

177 National Audit Office (2025) *Investigation into introducing T Levels*. London: NAO, 28 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7951/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 7.

178 The number of students at the end of KS4 in 2023/24 was 697,794. See Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

179 National Audit Office (2025) *Investigation into introducing T Levels*. London: NAO, 28 March. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7951/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 7.

180 Department for Education (2025) *Technical education learner survey 2023: End-of-course surveys*. London: Department for Education, January. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6788fcd5d0561c11b91d04de/Technical\\_Education\\_Learner\\_Survey\\_2023\\_end-of-course\\_surveys\\_updated\\_january\\_2025\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6788fcd5d0561c11b91d04de/Technical_Education_Learner_Survey_2023_end-of-course_surveys_updated_january_2025_.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025), pp. 25–26.

Satisfaction was strongly associated with T Level route. Education and Early Years, a T Level route with a successful and established predecessor,<sup>181</sup> had the highest satisfaction rate of 79 per cent, whereas the new Health and Science route had the lowest satisfaction rate with 39 per cent.<sup>182</sup> It is therefore possible that satisfaction will broadly improve over time as new routes gain greater recognition. However, delays in creating established and satisfactory courses are costly, since low satisfaction is likely to have contributed to the high T Level drop-out rates observed so far.<sup>183</sup> Only 71 per cent of students who started their T Levels in 2023/24 were retained and assessed, compared to 90 per cent of students studying 3 or more A Levels.<sup>184</sup> Accordingly, it is essential improvements are made as soon as possible to prevent a reputation of high drop-out rates and ensure students are not left without qualifications.

### 4.2.3. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

Occupational competence qualifications, often known as NVQs, are designed to validate theoretical knowledge through assessment in a real on-site working environment. They are mostly taken by adults but can be taken by those aged 16-18. They demonstrate that a worker meets industry standards for a specific skilled occupation. A level 2 NVQ is often a minimum requirement for many construction employers or agencies to work in a skilled trades role.

Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) state that not a single occupation-related non-competence qualification at level two (such as Level 2 BTECs) or above meets industry NVQ standards. The result of this is that thousands of FE leavers cannot find skilled work in the construction industry after completing a construction course. A level 2 NVQ is often a minimum requirement for many construction employers or agencies to work in a skilled trades role. To obtain a CSCS Blue Skilled Worker card, an individual must have completed a recognised apprenticeship, or level two NVQ.

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 10

Stability and clarity have been sorely lacking in the technical pathway. Technical routes should be simple, stable, and comprehensible to students, employers, and educators. Making what is available comprehensible and effective is preferable to continual recreation.

181 House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Further education and skills: Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, HC 666*. London: House of Commons, 23 September. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49615/documents/264337/default/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 36.

182 Department for Education (2025) *Technical education learner survey 2023: End-of-course surveys*. London: Department for Education, January. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6788fcd5d0561c11b91d04de/Technical\\_Education\\_Learner\\_Survey\\_2023\\_end-of-course\\_surveys\\_updated\\_January\\_2025\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6788fcd5d0561c11b91d04de/Technical_Education_Learner_Survey_2023_end-of-course_surveys_updated_January_2025_.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 26.

183 Maris, G., Kettlewell, K., Runge, J. and Robb, M. (2024) *A quantitative analysis of T Level access and progression*. London: Education Policy Institute, November. Available at: [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/T-Level-Report-final\\_1.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/T-Level-Report-final_1.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 17.

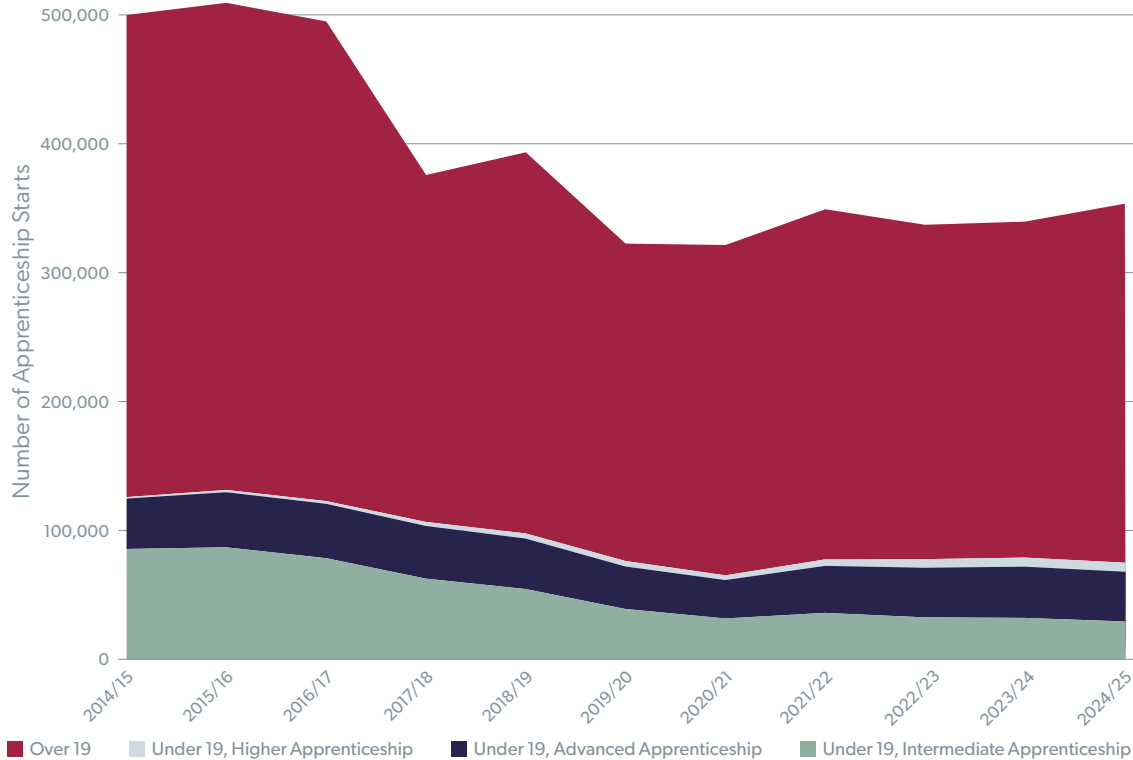
184 Department for Education (2025) *Provisional T Level results: Academic year 2024/25*. London: Department for Education, 15 August. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/provisional-t-level-results/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

### 4.3. Apprenticeships

An area where the slow progress in uptake of vocational and technical education and training is most evident is apprenticeships.

As shown in Figure 7, between 2014/15 and 2024/25, the total number of apprenticeships starts reduced by 29 per cent from 500,000 to 354,000, and the number of under-19-year-olds starting apprenticeships reduced by 40 per cent from 126,000 to 75,000.<sup>185</sup> These falls are consistent with the proportion of Key Stage 4 leavers sustaining apprenticeships reducing from 4.7 per cent to 3.2 per cent between 2014/15 and 2023/24.<sup>186</sup>

Figure 7 – Number of Apprenticeship Starts, 2014/15-2023/24



Department for Education (2025) Apprenticeships: Academic year 2024/25. London: Department for Education, 17 July (updated 25 July). Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

For under-19s, the entirety of the dramatic reduction in apprenticeship starts is accounted for by a 59.6 per cent fall in the number of Intermediate Apprenticeship Starts, i.e. qualification level 2,<sup>187</sup> from 86,000 to 29,000. The decline has not been offset by increases in Advanced Apprenticeships, i.e. level 3, which declined by 500, or Higher Apprenticeships, i.e. levels 4, 5, 6, and 7, which rose by just 5,900, but by other qualifications. Given the benefits of completing an apprenticeship and their fundamental role within technical education,<sup>188</sup> this reduction is concerning.

<sup>185</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Apprenticeships: Academic year 2024/25*. London: Department for Education, 27 November. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

<sup>186</sup> Department for Education (2025) *Key stage 4 destination measures: Academic year 2023/24*. London: Department for Education, 16 October. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

<sup>187</sup> UK Government (n.d.) *Become an apprentice*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/become-apprentice> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

<sup>188</sup> Frayman, D., Krekel, C., Layard, R., MacLennan, S. and Parkes, I. (2025) *Value for money: How to improve wellbeing and reduce misery*. Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford. Available at: <https://wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/publications/value-for-money-how-to-improve-wellbeing-and-reduce-misery/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 24.

Such a reduction in the Intermediate Apprenticeships without gains elsewhere could deny access to students aiming to continue their studies post-16 through an apprenticeship but that do not meet the minimum requirement for the Advanced Apprenticeships.<sup>189</sup>

Apprenticeships levels themselves are, in many ways, confusingly designed. The 2015 Apprenticeship Reform Programme did a huge amount to simplify an inconsistent and bureaucratic set of frameworks to classify apprenticeships more simply according to levels 2-7: Intermediate being level 2 (GCSE equivalent), Advanced being level 3 (A level equivalent), Higher being level 4 and 5 and Degree Apprenticeship being levels 6 and 7.<sup>190</sup>

However, this simplification has led to apprenticeships value being charted according to difficulty – often in the form of academic rigour – instead of by labour market value. This is a key misunderstanding of the purpose of apprenticeships, which are directly employer focused. It also leads to high levels of academic competition within the technical apprenticeship system. A move towards occupation-based classification could improve this.

The increased difficulty in accessing a higher-level apprenticeships is also compounded by a lack of expansion in Advanced Apprenticeships. Candidates who would have started Intermediate Apprenticeships are forced to compete with students who performed better in their GCSEs. Consequently, their chances of success are reduced given employers have control over who they employ in their apprenticeship programmes and tend to use exam results as a signal of quality.<sup>191</sup>

This is likely to have contributed to the reduction in the proportion of pupils who did not attain a grade between 9 and 4 in England and Maths sustaining education, employment, or an apprenticeship from 85.6 per cent in 2017/18 to 80.6 per cent in 2022/23.<sup>192</sup>

*“What if I can’t get that apprenticeship? Like there’s no sort of, I guess, like there’s less of a safety net. Whereas University, if I don’t get into the university, my top choice, I can get into a lower University. So it’s just because of that competitiveness, like, there’s so many different universities, but there’s such a limited amount of apprenticeships.”*

**Sixth form student contribution**

There has also only been a modest improvement in use of Advanced and Higher Apprenticeships to extend education and training post-18. The total number of starts of all ages increased by 42.8 per cent from 202,000 in 2014/15 to 288,000 in 2024/25. Although this is a welcome improvement, the expansion of these apprenticeships has not provided students leaving school with a viable alternative to the academic route if they aim to continue their education and training.

Instead, individuals over the age of 25 account for the large majority of the increase in Advanced and Higher Apprenticeship starts, rising by almost 75,000 from 95,000 to 164,000. Starts in the under-19 and 19 to 24 age categories increased by less 5,400 and 12,000 respectively to a combined total of 124,000, which is only 27.5 per cent of the 451,000 entrant students that enrolled in a first degree in 2023/24.<sup>193</sup>

189 Department for Education (n.d.) *Apprenticeships. Skills for Careers*. Available at: <https://www.skillsforcareers.education.gov.uk/pages/training-choice/apprenticeships> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

190 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) *English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision*.

191 UK Government (n.d.) *Employing an apprentice*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/employing-an-apprentice> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

192 Department for Education (2025) *Key stage 4 destination measures: Academic year 2023/24*. London: Department for Education, 16 October. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

193 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2025) *Higher education student statistics: UK, 2023/24 – Student numbers and characteristics*. Cheltenham: HESA, 20 March. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/20-03-2025/sb271-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

The most likely cause of the overall decline in apprenticeships is a lack of spaces due to the Apprenticeship Levy and other regulations introduced in 2017 incentivising employers to take on fewer higher apprentices, who tended to be older and already in work, instead of a large number of younger Level 2 apprentices.<sup>194</sup>

Between 2018/19 and 2024/25, the total number of vacancies for apprenticeships at all levels reduced by 35.6 per cent from 151,720 to 97,720.<sup>195</sup> Demand for apprenticeships from students remains strong. On the Find an Apprenticeship matching service, three times as many people are registered as there are places,<sup>196</sup> and in 2023, 59 per cent of students in years 9 to 12 were considering an apprenticeship.<sup>197</sup> It is of utmost importance that access to education and training is not the main barrier preventing students, in particular those who are behind their peers in terms of academic achievement at the age of 16, from gaining the foundational and meaningful skills that further development and labour market opportunities.

*“But I find apprenticeships a great thing, really difficult to get them into, and it’s not timely, because they are on a rolling basis throughout the year. What you find is that it pushes the gap year forward, because there you go, ‘Well, I can’t apply for anything right now. I’ve got to wait till January or February,’ and then by that point, the support is waning because you’re not in close contact.”*

**School leader contribution**

The recent Growth and Skills Levy aims to refocus investment towards young people, i.e. those between the ages of 16 and 21. The reforms include Foundation apprenticeships launched in August 2025, which offer shorter Level 2 courses in entry level occupations.<sup>198</sup> In the 2025 Budget, the Government allocating £725 million to support apprenticeships for young people and funding SME apprenticeships for under 25s. This is expected to increase apprentice numbers by 50,000, encouraging, but very small compared with more than half a million young people starting university each year.<sup>199</sup> These reforms are a welcome attempt to address a serious problem in apprenticeship uptake, especially among under-19s, but evidence is yet to emerge if these latest reforms will be effective. Given a large proportion of the expected labour demand growth will require workers with Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships, it is additionally important they are.<sup>200</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 11

Positive reforms will need to arrest the decline in apprenticeships and facilitate their growth. This will require aligning programmes with labour-market value rather than academic difficulty and ensuring sufficient employer capacity to meet strong student demand.

194 IFF Research (2020) *Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships: A qualitative investigation*. London: Department for Education, October. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f901896e90e072c997e0de4/Level\\_2\\_and\\_3\\_apprenticeships\\_a\\_qualitative\\_investigation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f901896e90e072c997e0de4/Level_2_and_3_apprenticeships_a_qualitative_investigation.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

195 Department for Education (2025) *Key stage 4 destination measures: Academic year 2023/24*. London: Department for Education, 16 October. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

196 Layard, R., McNally, S. and Bahl, A. (2025) *Written evidence from Richard Layard, Sandra McNally and Aadya Bahl (SMP0002)*. UK Parliament, 15 April. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/140404/pdf/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

197 UCAS (2023) *UCAS launches new apprenticeships service as demand hits all-time high*. UCAS News, 18 October. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-launches-new-apprenticeships-service-demand-hits-all-time-high> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

198 Department for Education (n.d.) *The Growth and Skills Levy*. Available at: <https://find-employer-schemes.education.gov.uk/interim/growth-and-skills-levy> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

199 HM Treasury (2025) *Budget 2025*. London: HM Treasury. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2025-document/budget-2025-html> (Accessed: 10 December 2025).

200 Skills England (2025) *Assessment of priority skills to 2030*. London: Department for Education, 12 August. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

A photograph of two men, one younger and one older, looking at a computer screen. The younger man is in the foreground, wearing a plaid shirt, and the older man is behind him, smiling. The image has a red tint. The text 'PART III: THE CONSEQUENCE' is overlaid in white at the bottom.

**PART III: THE  
CONSEQUENCE**

## Chapter 5:

# A distorted education system

There are several consequences of our hierarchical system, with an esteemed, clear academic pipeline through from GCSEs to A levels to university, versus a disregarded and incomprehensible technical pipeline through a labyrinth of level 2 and 3 technical and vocational qualifications.

- › The most concerning is that **those who fall behind, even by age 11, are left behind over the subsequent years**, and leave education with much less than their contemporaries – often straight into becoming NEET.
- › Similarly concerning is that the current academically orientated system leads to **a nation where London dominates**: the best performers at 16, 18 and beyond are in London, and the best performers from outside of London go to London.

## 5.1. Educational failure from age 11

*“If they look like they’re not going to be your real academic kids that are just going to drop off that cliff when they leave that school and they’re not going to do anything, why are we keeping them in schools to drop off?”*

**College leader contribution**

We can see the huge extent to which attainment at age 11 is a predictor of future outcomes by looking through GCSE subject selection, attainment, progress from ages 11 to 16, destinations post GCSEs and post-16 performance.

## GCSE grading

*Pupils tend to make their GCSE choices in Year 9 at the end of Key Stage 3, when they are 13-to-14-years-old. They then study these GCSEs for two years – Years 10 and 11, known as Key Stage 4 – before sitting the exams at the end of Year 11 at age 16.*

*GCSEs are graded 9–1. Grades 1–3 are Level 1 qualifications and grades 4 and above are Level 2 qualifications. Grades 9–1 replaced the A\*–G grading in 2017, with the grading structure as shown below. A and A\* were spread across 7–9, as were C and B to 4–6, and G–D were compressed to 1–3.*

9–1 grading	1 2 3	4 5 6	7 8 9
A*–G grading	G F E D	C B	A A*

*There are over 60 GCSE subjects offered in England and Wales, with students generally studying 8–10 subjects each.*

### 5.1.1. GCSE selection

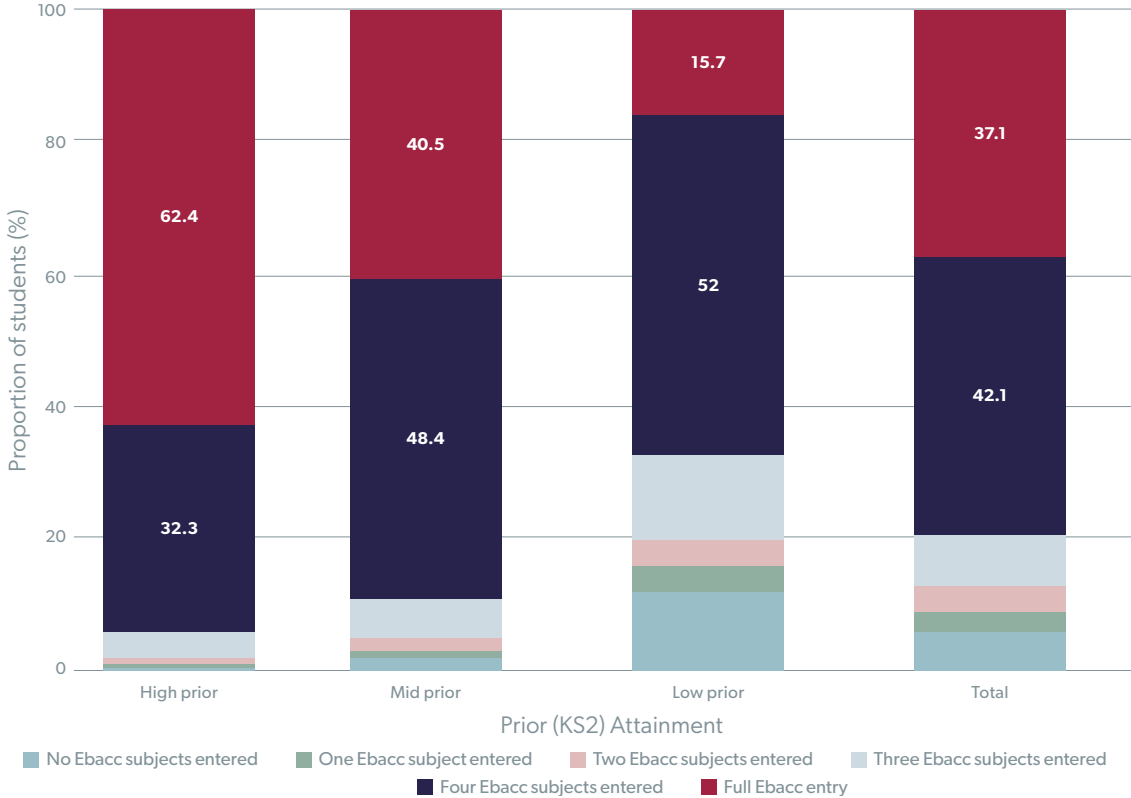
#### English Baccalaureate (EBacc)

Most pupils do not complete the EBacc. Figure 8 shows that just 37 per cent of all students in 2023/24 entered the full EBacc, with 42 per cent entering four of the five EBacc subjects, and over a fifth taking three or fewer of the EBacc subjects.

Pupils with high attainment at KS2 – the end of primary school – are **four times as likely to enter the full EBacc as those who achieved low attainment at KS2.**

This is academic selection at age 11 by stealth: the highest performers in assessments towards the end of Key Stage 2 take an academically rigorous GCSE curriculum, while poor performers do not, with no technical alternative.

Figure 8 – EBacc subjects are disproportionately selected by pupils that performed well in Key Stage 2



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: these statistics are for all schools, the full EBacc take-up for all **state** schools for high, mid, and low prior attainment are 62.7, 41.1 and 16.3 per cent, respectively, with 40.4 per cent overall. Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

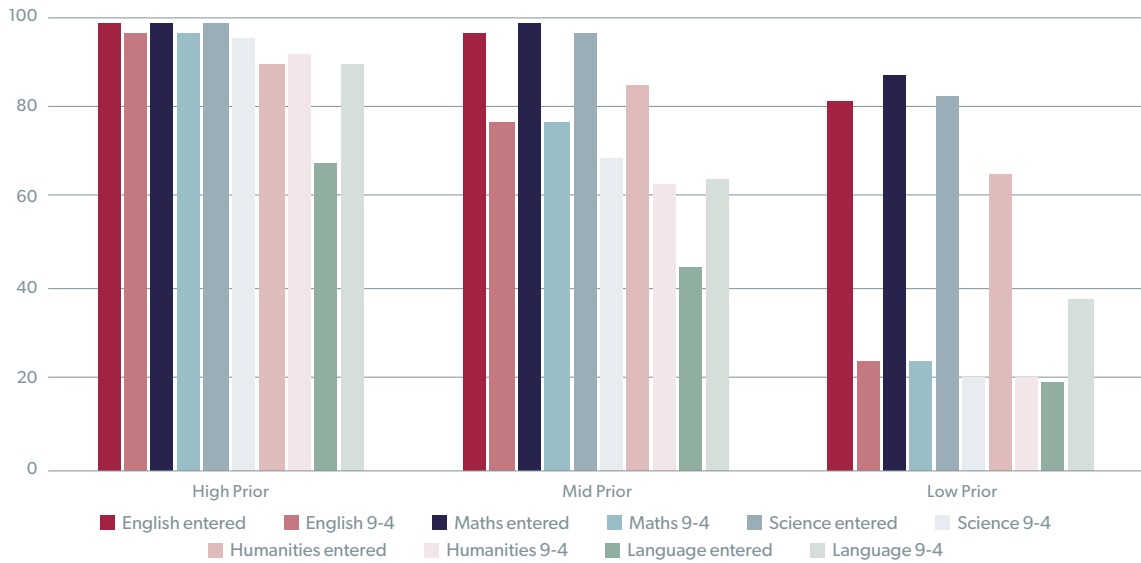
Those who do not take the full EBacc generally drop either the Language or Humanities subject. Figure 9 shows the take-up rate of each element of the EBacc according to prior attainment at KS2 and then the proportion of those taking each subject that achieved a Grade 9–5 in the subject.

Take up in the compulsory subjects (English, Maths, Science) is high irrespective of prior attainment, although those with low KS2 attainment are about **12 times as likely not to take English and Science and 18 times as likely not to take Maths** than those with high KS2 attainment.

The pass rate (achieving grade 9–4) varies substantially across KS2 attainment. Over 95 per cent of those with high KS2 attainment pass each of English, Maths and Science, compared to less than a quarter of those with low KS2 attainment. Even more alarming is this discrepancy when restricting to grade 9–5 rates across the compulsory subjects. For Science, **whilst 86.5 per cent of entrants with high attainment age 11 achieve grade 9–5, just 7.4 per cent of entrants with low attainment age 11 do.**

Interestingly, this discrepancy in GCSE attainment according to KS2 attainment is least severe for languages, with almost two in five Languages entrants with low KS2 attainment passing, compared to nine in ten with high KS2 attainment – a severe discrepancy, but much less so than other subjects. The low take-up rate of Languages among those with low KS2 attainment is likely a key explanation for this, with fewer than a fifth of the group entering a language GCSE – those who take a Language then probably enjoy it.

Figure 9 – Entry rates of EBacc subjects and pass rates for those entering, 2023/24

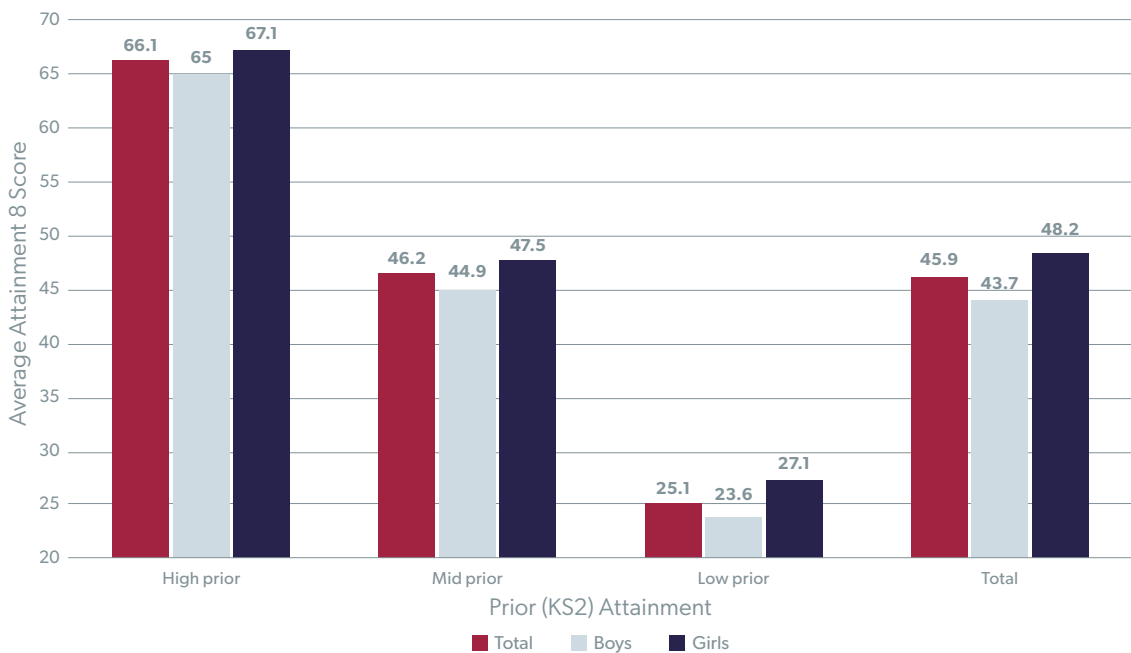


Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: these statistics are for all schools. Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

### 5.1.2. GCSE Attainment

Analysing attainment using Attainment 8 scores, we see that attainment aged 10-11 is a huge predictor of GCSE performance. Girls perform better than boys at GCSE, with an average attainment 8 score five points above the average for boys. This disparity, however, is miniscule compared to the gap of **41.4 points** between the average attainment 8 score of those with high KS2 attainment (65.8) and low KS2 attainment (24.4).

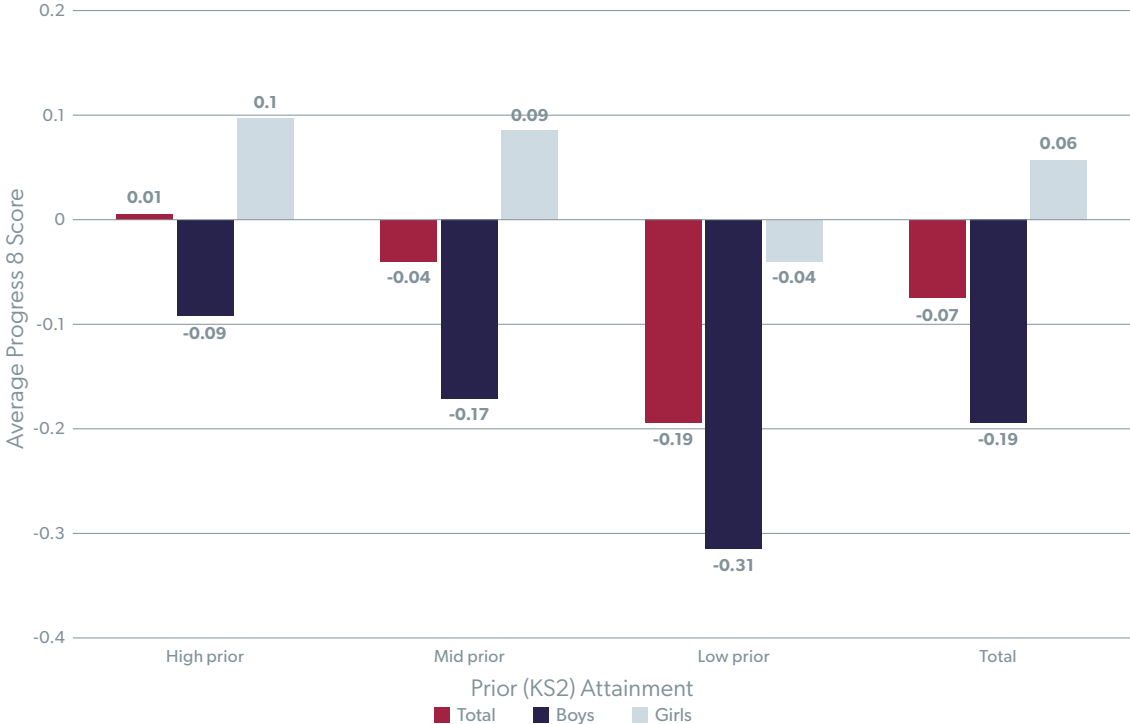
Figure 10 – Attainment 8 scores vary drastically according to KS2 attainment



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: these statistics are for all schools. Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

As in Figure 11, as well as performing worse than girls in KS4, boys also progress much worse than girls from KS2 to KS4, with an average Progress 8 score of -0.19 compared to +0.06 for girls. Especially boys with low attainment age 11, with an average Progress 8 score of -0.31.

Figure 11 – Boys and those with low prior attainment progress poorly between Key Stages 2 and 4



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: these statistics are for all schools. Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

### 5.1.3. Post GCSE destinations

Age 11 attainment, before starting secondary schooling, continues to dictate pathways when entering post-16 destinations as well.

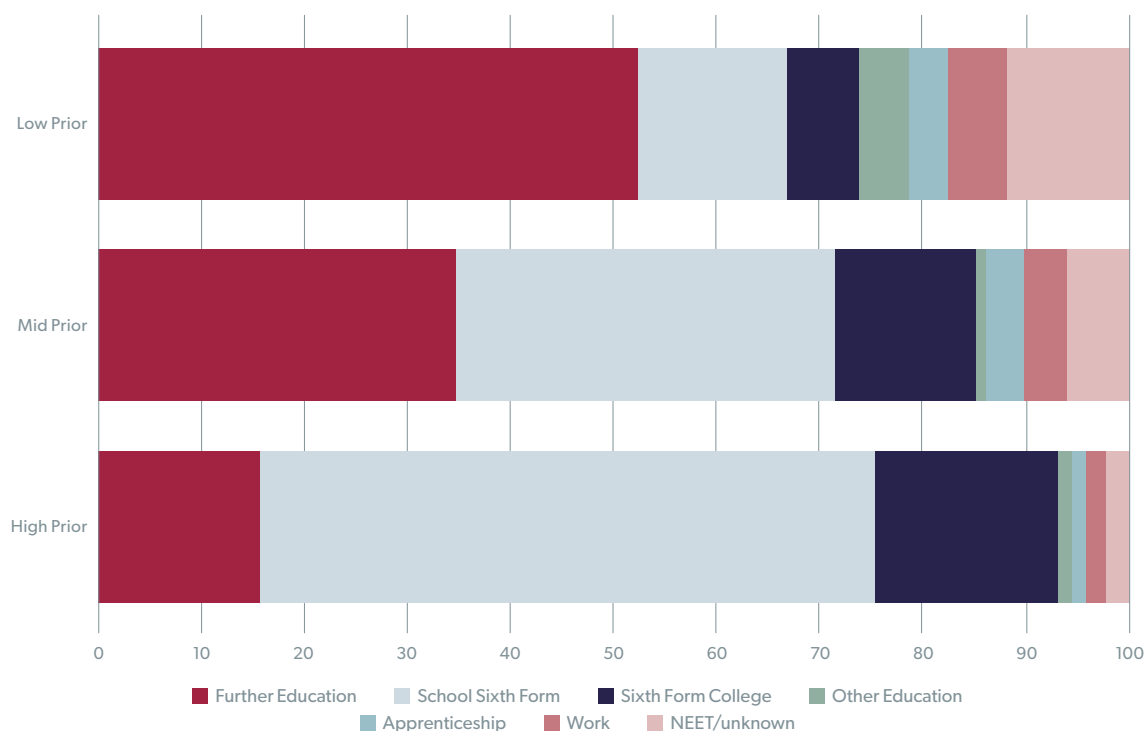
Over half of those with low attainment aged 11 enter a Further Education (FE) destination after Key Stage 4, almost three and a half times that of those with high attainment aged 11. **Those with high attainment aged 11 are over four times as likely as those with low attainment aged 11 to enter School Sixth Forms**, which are the post KS4 destination for three in five of those with high KS2 attainment.

Apprenticeships in Key Stage 5 are scarce, accounting just three per cent of all destinations.

Apprenticeships entered also vary according to prior attainment. Over two thirds of those entering apprenticeships with high attainment aged 11 enter Level 3 (A level equivalent) apprenticeships, whilst **over two thirds of those entering apprenticeships who had low attainment aged 11 enter GCSE equivalent apprenticeships in their A level years.**

Perhaps most alarmingly, those with low attainment at KS2 are over five times as likely to be NEET/ unknown after KS4 than those with high attainment at KS2.

Figure 12 – Key Stage 4 destinations are drastically different according to KS2 attainment



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Key Stage 4 destination measures*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures/2022-23> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

### Attainment aged 11 has a stronger relationship with post-16 destinations than disadvantage status.

This is clearest when evaluating the proportions entering FE, School Sixth Forms and Sixth Form Colleges. Almost half (47.6 per cent) of disadvantaged pupils with high KS2 attainment enter School Sixth Forms, almost three times the rate of 17.1 per cent for non-disadvantaged pupils with low KS2 attainment. Just 24.1 per cent of disadvantaged, high KS2 attainment pupils enter FE, while 53.0 per cent – more than twice as many – non-disadvantaged pupils with low KS2 attainment enter FE.

## 5.1.4. Post-18 destinations

Following through to the end of young people’s education, even post-18 destinations are starkly different according to young people’s attainment at age 11.

Figure 13 follows the destinations in the 2022/23 academic year for those who finished 16 to 18 study in the 2021/22 academic year. This has lower outcomes for progression into education, employment or training than the higher education progression data, as it captures a much narrower timeframe, focusing on the outcome in the year immediately following instead of the next two years.

Over a third (35.3 per cent) of low KS2 attainers leave 16 to 18 education with either no or an unknown destination, with 27.7 per cent being known to have not sustained a destination. This same figure is just 21.7 per cent for mid KS2 attainers and 13.3 per cent for high KS2 attainers.

Across those who do find a sustained destination, both work and apprenticeships are most common among mid KS2 attainers, although low KS2 attainers are the only group more likely to enter work than continue in education. Apprenticeships are remarkably uncommon across the board.

Comfortably over half of high KS2 attainers continue in education the autumn term after finishing 16-18 education, compared to fewer than three in ten low KS2 attainers.

Figure 13 – Post-18 destinations by KS2 attainment



Source: Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025). Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

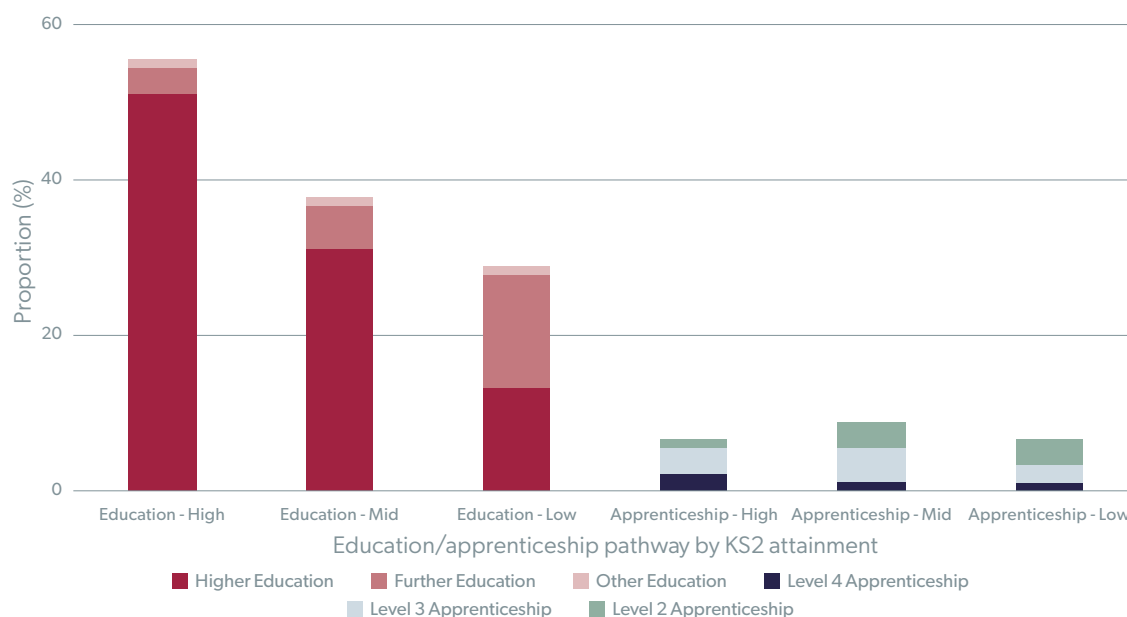
As Figure 14 shows, however, even this stark contrast undersells the extent of the disparity. While 52.0 per cent of high KS2 attainers progress into higher education, 13.4 per cent of low KS2 attainers progress into Higher Education – less than half of the 29.0 per cent continuing education. Instead, more continue into Further Education, which is level 1 to 3 (the same as GCSEs and A levels). Indeed, over two thirds of low KS2 attainers continuing into education beyond 18 are studying at GCSE level (level 2) or below.

Low KS2 attainers staying in education post-16 are generally not progressing forwards. Instead, they are resitting, and normally resitting Key Stage 4 education for a second or third time.

The same story is true for apprenticeships.

**Of the 5.4 per cent of low KS2 attainers that continue into apprenticeships after finishing 16-18 education, almost none (0.1 per cent) head into apprenticeships that are level 4 or above.** The majority (2.9 per cent) head into level 2 (GCSE equivalent) apprenticeships, with the rest heading into level 3 (A level equivalent) apprenticeships. This is a stark contrast to high KS2 attainers – a higher but similar 6.8 per cent head into apprenticeships, but nearly a third are level 4 and less than a fifth are level 2.

Figure 14 – Post-18 education and apprenticeship destinations by KS2 attainment



Source: Department for Education (2025) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2023-24> (Accessed: 9 July 2025)

### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 12

Our current, distorted system leaves those who fall behind, even by age 11, stranded. This shows the necessity of reform, it also shows how technical pathways cannot only exist from the age of 16 or 18 onwards.

## 5.2. Geographic disparities – a London-centric system

### 5.2.1. Disparities in school attainment

Our education system is also profoundly geographically imbalanced: London dominates.

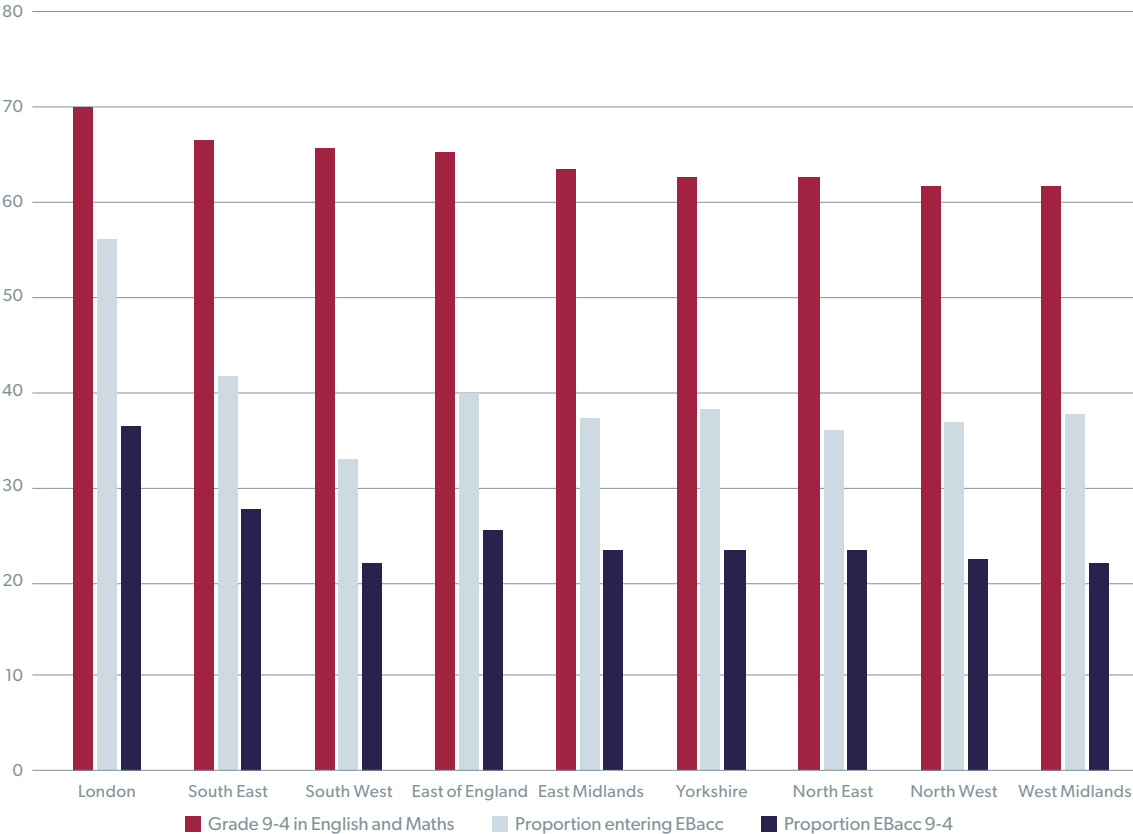
Figure 15 shows the proportion of pupils passing English and Maths GCSE, entering the EBacc, and passing the EBacc in each of the nine regions in England.

The uniquely high performance of London is striking. For rates passing both English and Maths, the other eight regions range from 61.6 per cent (West Midlands) to 66.6 per cent (South East). In London, the rate passing both is 70.2 per cent.

Similarly, outside of London the rate passing the EBacc ranges from 22.0 per cent passing (South West) to 27.8 per cent passing (South East). In London, 36.3 per cent pass.

There is consistently as much or more variation between London and the second highest performing region than between the second and ninth highest scoring regions.

Figure 15 – English and Maths and EBacc take up and pass rates by region, England



Source: Department for Education. (2025) *Key stage 4 performance, academic year 2024/25*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2024-25> (Accessed: 19 November 2025).

The same story is true for Progress 8 – the average progress made between age 11 and 16. Every region other than London has, on average, negative progress in those five years, ranging from -0.01 in the East of England to -0.25 in the North East. London has positive progress of 0.29. The gap between London and second is 25 per cent bigger than the gap between second and last.

Figure 16 – Progress 8 scores by region, England



Source: Department for Education. (2025) *Key stage 4 performance, academic year 2023/24*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24> (Accessed: 2 October 2025). Note: the most recent iteration of this data did not publish progress scores due to disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this figure uses the 2024 publication.

### 5.2.2. 16-to-17-year-old NEET rates

London’s supremacy across the school system is also apparent in the trends of 16-to-17-year-olds becoming NEET – falling out of education or training before completing it – as shown in Figure 17.

The North East and North West record NEET rates far above the national rate of 3.4 per cent.<sup>201</sup> In London, the rate is just 1.9 per cent. Zooming in further, 25 local authorities observe NEET rates exceeding 5 per cent and in 3 local authorities over 7 per cent of 16- to 17-year-olds are NEET (Derby, Blackpool, and Stockton-on-Tees). None of these crisis pockets are in the capital.

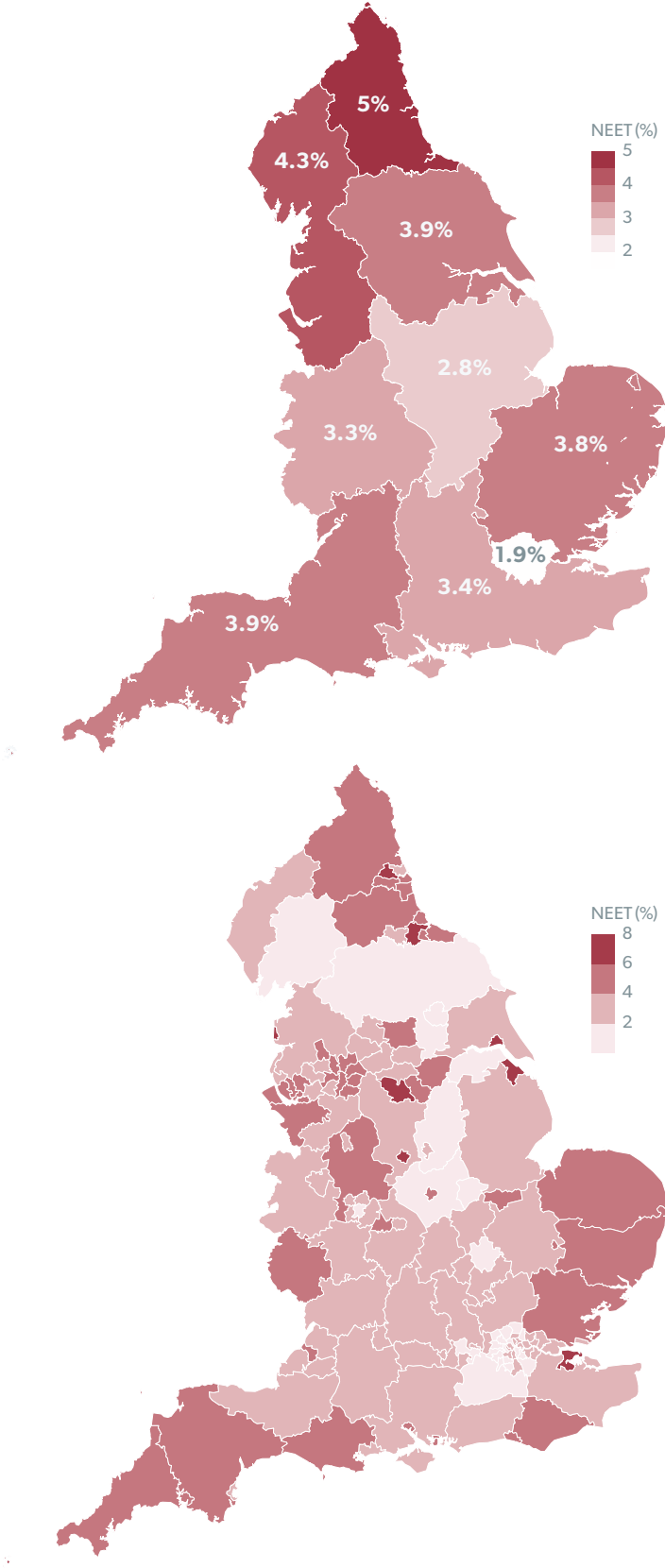
Young people becoming NEET before 18 is concerning. Disengagement from education or training before the age of 18 adversely affects students’ earning potential. According to the OECD, in 2023, 25- to 34-year-old full-time workers in the United Kingdom with educational attainment below upper secondary education earned 57 per cent of that of workers with upper secondary educational attainment. This is in stark comparison to the 128 per cent earned by workers with a bachelor’s or equivalent.<sup>202</sup>

The regional imbalance in academic attainment has a profound impact on life chances. Regional parity of educational opportunity is of utmost importance.

201 Department for Education (2025) *Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority: Academic year 2024/25*. London: Department for Education, 17 July. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-neet-age-16-to-17-by-local-authority/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

202 OECD (2025) *Earnings of workers relative to the earnings of workers with upper secondary educational attainment, by age group, gender and educational attainment level*. OECD Data Explorer. Available at: [https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?c=en&df\[ds\]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df\[id\]=DSD\\_EAG\\_LSO\\_EA%40DF\\_LSO\\_EARN\\_REL\\_UPPER&df\[ag\]=OECD.EDU.IMEP&df\[vs\]=1.0&dq=GBR..TY25T34.ISCED11A\\_35\\_45%2BISCED11A\\_OT2%2BISCED11A\\_6.....EMP..OBS.FT..A&Iom=LASTNOBSERVATIONS&Iom=1&pd=2021%2C2023&to\[TIME\\_PERIOD\]=true&vw=tb](https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?c=en&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_EAG_LSO_EA%40DF_LSO_EARN_REL_UPPER&df[ag]=OECD.EDU.IMEP&df[vs]=1.0&dq=GBR..TY25T34.ISCED11A_35_45%2BISCED11A_OT2%2BISCED11A_6.....EMP..OBS.FT..A&Iom=LASTNOBSERVATIONS&Iom=1&pd=2021%2C2023&to[TIME_PERIOD]=true&vw=tb) (Accessed: 12 September 2025).

Figure 17 – Percentage of 16- to 17-year-olds NEET, 2024/25

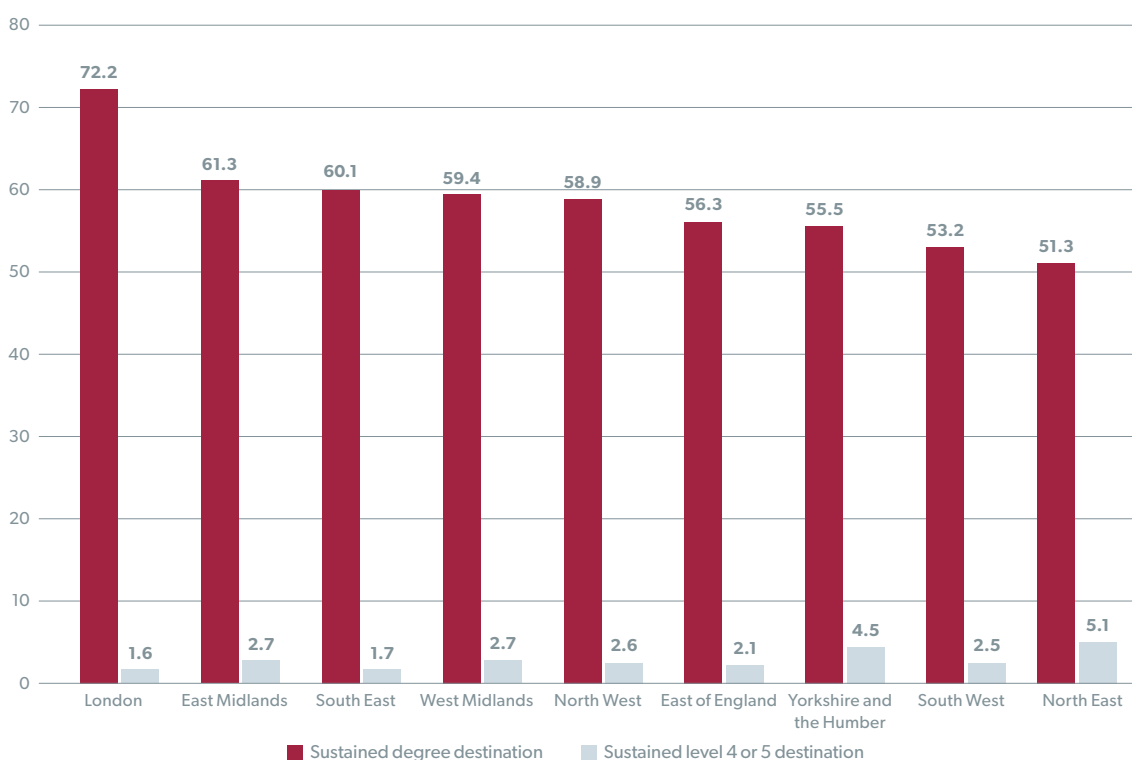


Source: Department for Education (2025) Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority: Academic year 2024/25. London: Department for Education, 17 July. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-neet-age-16-to-17-by-local-authority/2024-25> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

### 5.2.3. Disparities in Higher Education

This attainment disparity substantially outlives school. Figure 18 shows how London also stands out in higher education progression. The region with the second highest university progression rate is the East Midlands with 61.3 per cent; the lowest being the North East with 51.3 per cent progressing. In London, 72.2 per cent progress. Notably, however, London performs worst of all regions for the proportion sustaining level 4 or 5 destinations – technical education beyond A levels. London is, by all accounts, an academic city.

Figure 18 – University and level 4 and 5 progression by region, England



Source: Department for Education. (2025) *Progression to higher education or training, Academic year 2023/24*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training/2023-24> (Accessed: 19 November 2025).

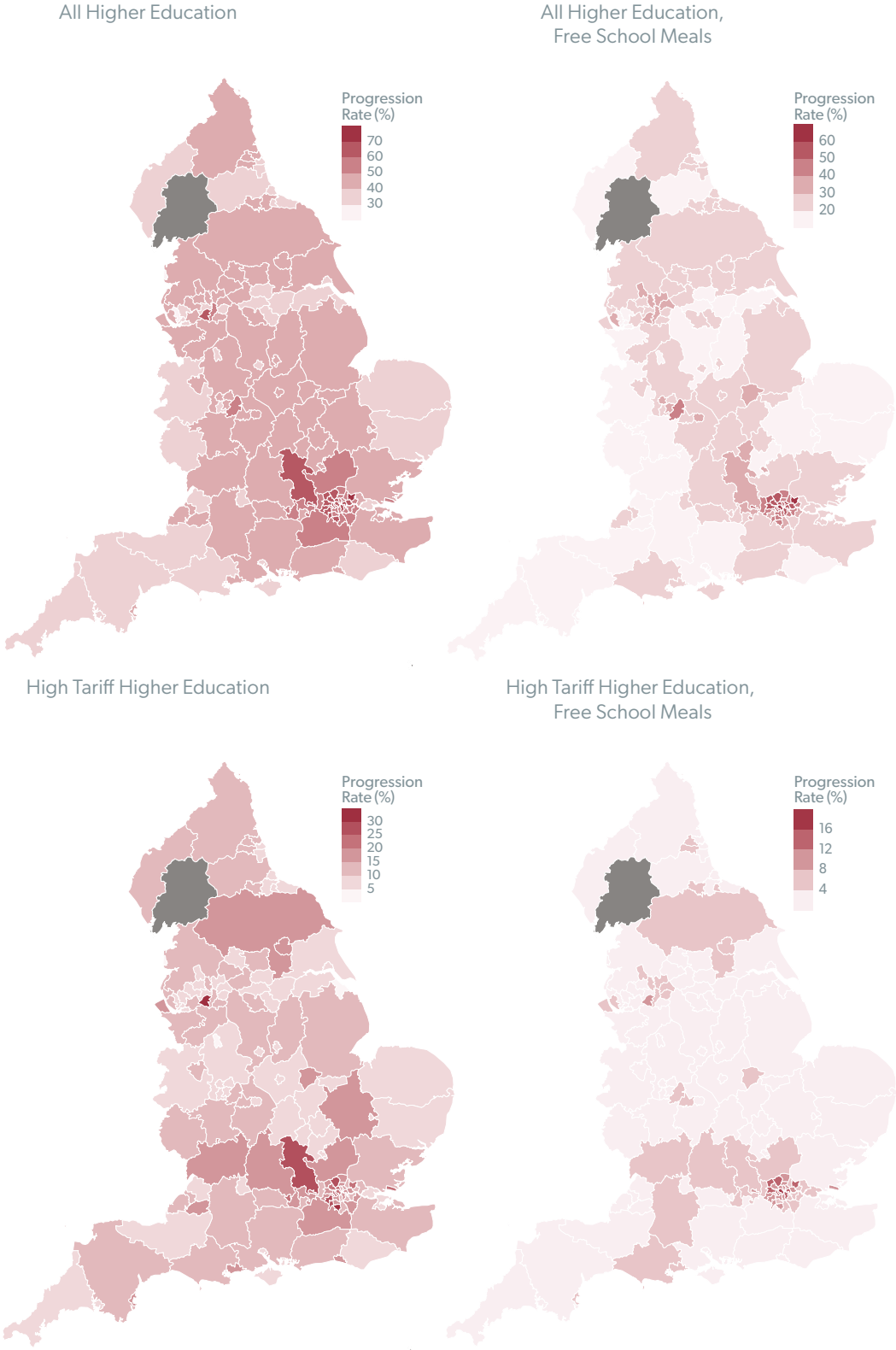
Strikingly, the London effect withstands disadvantage.

Focusing on the progression rate into HE for pupils on free school meals (FSM) at age 15, which can be used as an imperfect measure of students' relative disadvantage. **84 per cent of local authorities in London recorded FSM progression rates above 40 per cent, compared to just two local authorities outside of London (Slough and Birmingham)** – 85 per cent recorded a rate below 30 per cent.

This imbalance is clearer yet focusing on FSM progression rates into *high tariff* HE providers.<sup>203</sup> **Only 3 out of the 25 local authorities recording a FSM high tariff progression rate above 8 per cent were outside of London (Trafford, Southend-on-Sea, and Slough) and 69 per cent of local authorities outside of London recorded rates below 4 per cent.** Such low progression rates imply that disadvantaged students are unlikely to attend the top HE providers, and that the chances for those living outside of London are rather bleak.

203 HE providers are grouped into low, medium, and high tariff providers based on the mean UCAS points score of their English-domiciled full-time first year entrants. Each tariff group forms a third of the student cohort. See, Department for Education (2025) *Widening participation in higher education: Methodology*. London: Department for Education, 31 July. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/widening-participation-in-higher-education> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Figure 19 – Entry into Higher Education by age 19, 2023/24



Source: Department for Education (2025) Widening participation in higher education: Methodology. London: Department for Education, 31 July. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/widening-participation-in-higher-education> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Beyond university the capital's supremacy continues. Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that 59 per cent of workers from outside of London who were in the top five per cent of GCSE scores have moved away from their home town by age 32, with 30 per cent of those moving to London.<sup>204</sup> The number of graduates living in London at age 27 is 46 per cent higher than the number of people who grow up in London and get a degree.<sup>205</sup>

This extraordinary absorption of academic talent is not the same for other major cities – most of those who move to Manchester grew up locally, and most return to their hometowns and neighbouring areas in their early 30s.<sup>206</sup>

In many ways, this should be no surprise. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest that professional, technical, and scientific sectors make up 70 per cent more of the labour market in London than elsewhere in England.<sup>207</sup>

A balanced education system is only realistic if technical education is a high-quality and viable alternative to the academic route. This alternative technical education route must be taken seriously by students, parents, schools, and employers as providing unique value that university cannot.

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England's education system has become dangerously London-centric, with regional talent drawn away from local economies. We must build a balanced education system where each region thrives. Every region should have the tools and capacity to cultivate and retain its own skilled workforce, while the system remains coherent and comprehensible at a national scale.

204 Xu, X. (2025) 'Six in ten top achievers outside of London leave their home town by their early 30s', *Institute for Fiscal Studies News*, 23 June. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/news/six-ten-top-achievers-outside-london-leave-their-home-town-their-early-30s> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

205 *Ibid.*

206 Xu, X. (2025) 'Six in ten top achievers outside of London leave their home town by their early 30s', *Institute for Fiscal Studies News*, 23 June. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/news/six-ten-top-achievers-outside-london-leave-their-home-town-their-early-30s> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

207 Office for National Statistics (2025) *Workforce jobs by region and industry (JBS05)*. Newport: ONS, 16 September. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/workforcejobsbyregionandindustryjobs05> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

## Chapter 6:

# A distorted labour market

Such an egregiously distorted education system is a social justice emergency. However, this is not the end of the problem. The consequences of the academic-technical hierarchy are insidious and similarly distort the labour market.

Many are left adrift, and the skills and knowledge of the workforce are poorly aligned with those sought after by employers.

We see three things most clearly.

- › These distortions inevitably **have left us vulnerable to a NEETs crisis**. There are almost a million 16-to-24-year-old NEETs, and two thirds of these have fallen out of the education and training system before getting any qualifications beyond GCSEs.
- › We have an **excessive number of graduates with qualifications that don't match the skills needed**.
- › We have **widespread skills shortages** that are particularly acute in specific sectors and occupations, such as construction and skilled trades, that will persist without change.
- › Technical education reform is necessary to address these and overcome an **unsustainable dependency on migrant workers to fill skill gaps and shortages**.

## 6.1. Talent waste: NEETs crisis

England's London-centric education system that entrenches low attainment at age 11, is a system that has become vulnerable to a NEETs crisis in which too many young people fail to progress into training or employment. Since the pandemic, the number of 16-24-year-old NEETs has surged to nearly one million.

One in eight 16- to 24-year-olds are NEET today,<sup>208</sup> with profound implications for long-term life chances. Male NEETs are 10 times likelier to remain economically inactive 20 years later, by one estimate, leaving them poorer, sicker, lonelier, and more likely to die early.<sup>209</sup>

We also perform poorly compared to similar nations. In 2024, over 15 per cent of UK 18-to-24-year-olds were NEET, compared to less than 10 per cent for Germany and around five per cent for the Netherlands.<sup>210</sup>

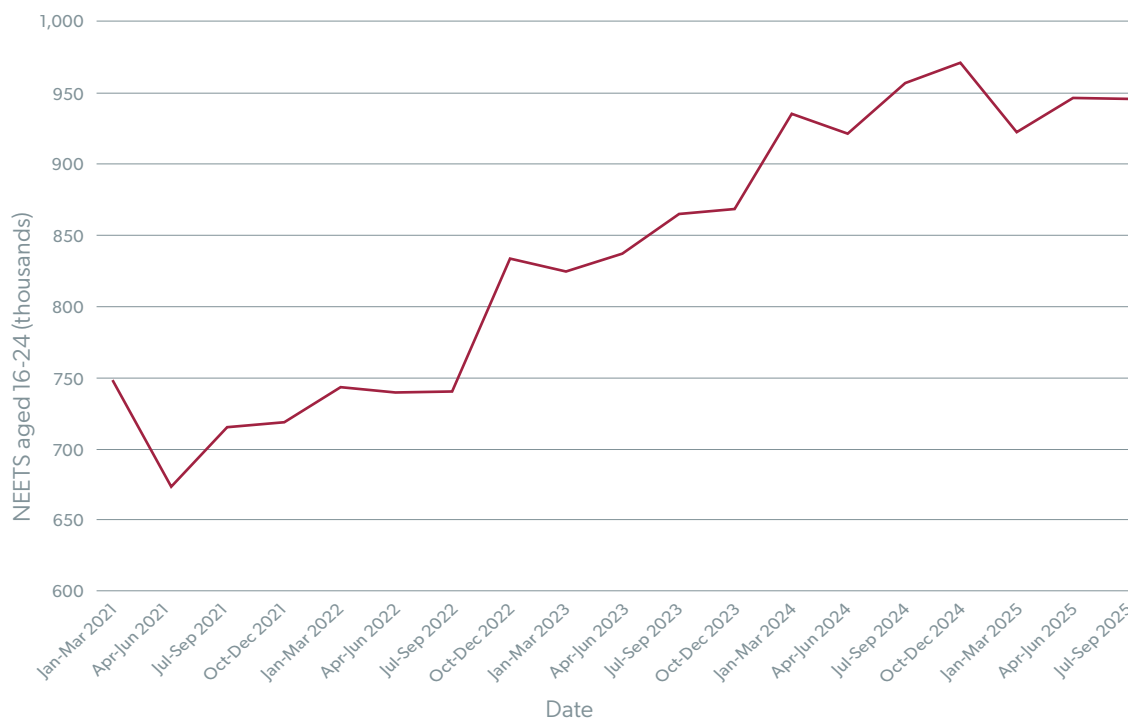
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208 Centre for Social Justice (2025) *Wasted Youth*. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/wasted-youth> (Accessed: 9 October 2025).

209 Ibid.

210 OECD (2025) *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators – Transition from education to work: Where are today's youth?* Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025\\_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/transition-from-education-to-work-where-are-today-s-youth\\_b90719d0.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2025_1c0d9c79-en/full-report/transition-from-education-to-work-where-are-today-s-youth_b90719d0.html) (Accessed 21 October 2025).

Figure 20 – Change in LFS estimates of employment and inactivity since Q4 2019 by age group



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneetable1> (Accessed: 4 December 2025)

Most of this rise in NEET 16-to-24s has been among those who achieved very few or no qualifications in their education.

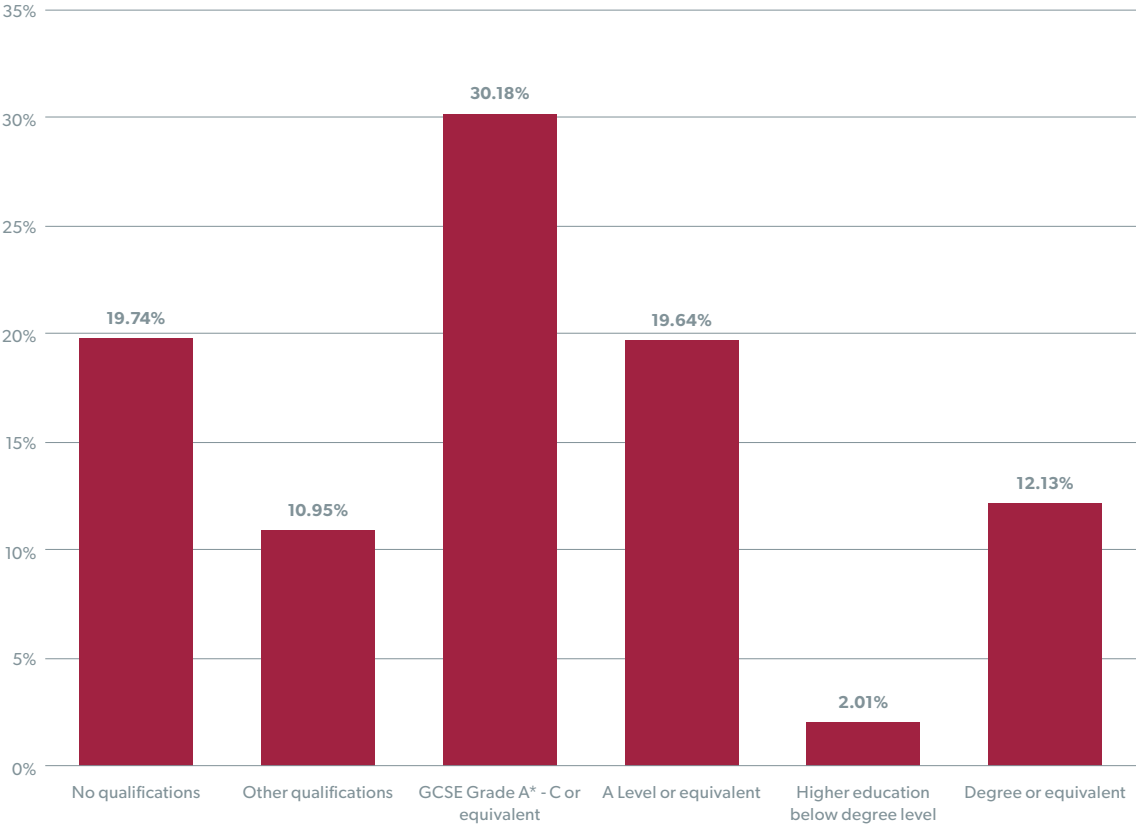
Just 34 per cent of NEET 16-to-24-year-olds have qualifications at A level or higher. A similar proportion have GCSE-level qualifications (30 per cent) and a similar proportion have a highest education level that is either unknown or below GCSE (36 per cent).

Those who are aged 16 to 21 in these figures have, by virtue of being NEET, not entered A levels or degrees and so this data does not skew those educational outcomes. It also makes provision to exclude those on gap years.

This data is a striking cautionary tale. Our distorted education system risks wasting a generation’s talent.<sup>211</sup>

211 Lilley, D. (2025) ‘The welfare state risks writing off a generation’, *CapX*, 8 October. Available at: <https://capx.co/the-welfare-state-risks-writing-off-a-generation> (Accessed: 9 October 2025).

Figure 21 – Highest education qualification achieved of 16-to-24-year-old NEETs



Source: CSJ analysis of Labour Force Survey

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The NEETs crisis shows the alarming human cost of a distorted education system and shows the necessity of technical pathways before these young people have fallen out of education – reengaging them younger.

## 6.2. Graduate excess

*“I think about 10 years ago, the answer would be: you should probably go to university, your life chances will be better, you’ll be paid more money [...] but now with some universities, their pressure [is] simply to make enough money for their headway and offering courses which, you know, do attract people that may not get into a top course somewhere else, but they’ll come to them, and the course isn’t really that attractive to employers afterwards.”*

**School leader contribution**

Since Brexit, migration from outside the EU has been an imperfect substitute for the EU migration that previously filled many of the gaps and shortages pre-Brexit and is unlikely to be a long-term solution.<sup>212</sup> Consequently, the development of skilled workers well matched to the demands of the labour market is not only vital for the opportunities of young people but also for the economy. Reports by the OECD, the IMF, and the Department for Education emphasise improving and increasing the uptake of technical education as a potential solution.<sup>213</sup>

A considerable body of evidence points to the prevalence of mismatches between the skills and qualifications held by workers and those required in their current employment. The 2024 Employer Skills Survey found that 4 per cent of employees, equivalent to 1,078,000 workers, were not fully proficient and 12 per cent of sites had at least one employee with missing skills.<sup>214</sup> A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research estimated that in 2023 13 per cent of workers lacked the skills needed for their job.<sup>215</sup>

*“So what we want in our industry is multi-skilled people that you know can set out work, supervise themselves, understand a much wider, broad level of skills.”*

**SME leader contribution**

There is also misalignment between the qualifications of workers and their jobs, in three main forms: workers being over-qualified, under-qualified, or qualified in fields unrelated to their job.

As shown in Figure 22, England performs poorly in comparison to other countries. In 2022/23, **43.7 per cent of non-self-employed employed adults aged 25 to 65 were either over- or under-qualified for their job**, higher than comparable countries, such as 35.9 per cent in Germany, 33.7 per cent in the Netherlands, and an OECD average of 32.8 per cent.<sup>216</sup> England’s markedly high rate of over-qualification is the main cause of this difference. **With 37.1 per cent, we have the highest rate of over-qualification in the OECD.** This is consistent with findings of an excess of university graduates above the number of graduate level jobs. In 2022, over a third of employees with an undergraduate degree reported being over-qualified for their job.<sup>217</sup> Almost 400,000 university graduates in total are now claiming out-of-work benefits, including 80,000 16-30-year-olds, while the number of 16 to 34-year-olds off work reporting a mental health condition rose by 76 per cent between 2019 and 2024.<sup>218</sup>

**The rate of mismatch between the workers’ field-of-study and their job is also high in England**, with a rate of 40.8 per cent compared to Germany and the Netherlands with 33.2 per cent and 30.9 per cent respectively.<sup>219</sup> Again, this is likely a reflection of university graduates not moving into work aligned with their studies.

212 IMF (2024) *Upskilling the UK Workforce*. 24 July 2024, Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/selected-issues-papers/Issues/2024/07/24/Upskilling-the-UK-Workforce-United-Kingdom-552424> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 12.

213 OECD (2024), *Higher Technical Education in England*, 19 December 2024, Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/higher-technical-education-in-england-united-kingdom\\_187bc99e/7c00dff7-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/higher-technical-education-in-england-united-kingdom_187bc99e/7c00dff7-en.pdf). (Accessed: 2 October 2025), p. 30; IMF (2024), *Upskilling the UK Workforce*, 24 July 2024, Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/selected-issues-papers/Issues/2024/07/24/Upskilling-the-UK-Workforce-United-Kingdom-552424> (Accessed: 2 October 2025), pp. 7-8.

214 Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

215 National Foundation for Educational Research (2024) *Rethinking skills gaps and solutions*. Slough: NFER, June. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/the-skills-imperative-2035-rethinking-skills-gaps-and-solutions/> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

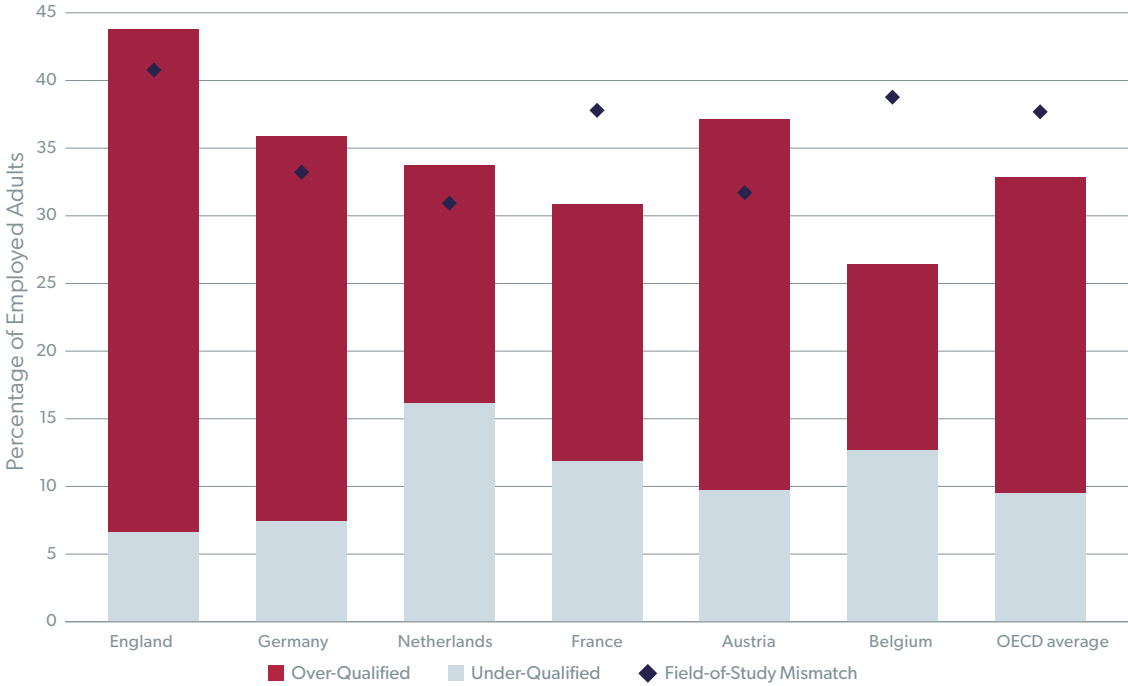
216 OECD (2024) *Survey of adult skills 2023: England (United Kingdom) – Country note*. Paris: OECD, 10 December. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes\\_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom\\_02bc78e4-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom_02bc78e4-en.html) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

217 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2022) *What is the scale and impact of graduate overqualification in the UK?* London: CIPD, November. Available at: [https://www.cipd.org/contentassets/3b163ee99bd746f5abe87e5dcd49fd6d/graduate-overqualification-uk\\_tcm18-112169.pdf](https://www.cipd.org/contentassets/3b163ee99bd746f5abe87e5dcd49fd6d/graduate-overqualification-uk_tcm18-112169.pdf) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

218 CSJ analysis of quarterly Labour Force Survey for July-September 2025

219 OECD (2024) *Survey of adult skills 2023: England (United Kingdom) – Country note*. Paris: OECD, 10 December. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes\\_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom\\_02bc78e4-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom_02bc78e4-en.html) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

Figure 22 – Mismatches in Qualifications and Fields-of-Study, 2022/23



Source: OECD (2024) Survey of adult skills 2023: England (United Kingdom) – Country note. Paris: OECD, 10 December. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes\\_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom\\_02bc78e4-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_ab4f6b8c-en/united-kingdom_02bc78e4-en.html) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

The prevalence of graduate overqualification is unevenly distributed, as shown in Figure 23, which shows the level of employment entered by graduates according to the UK University Rankings 2026 by the Times.<sup>220</sup>

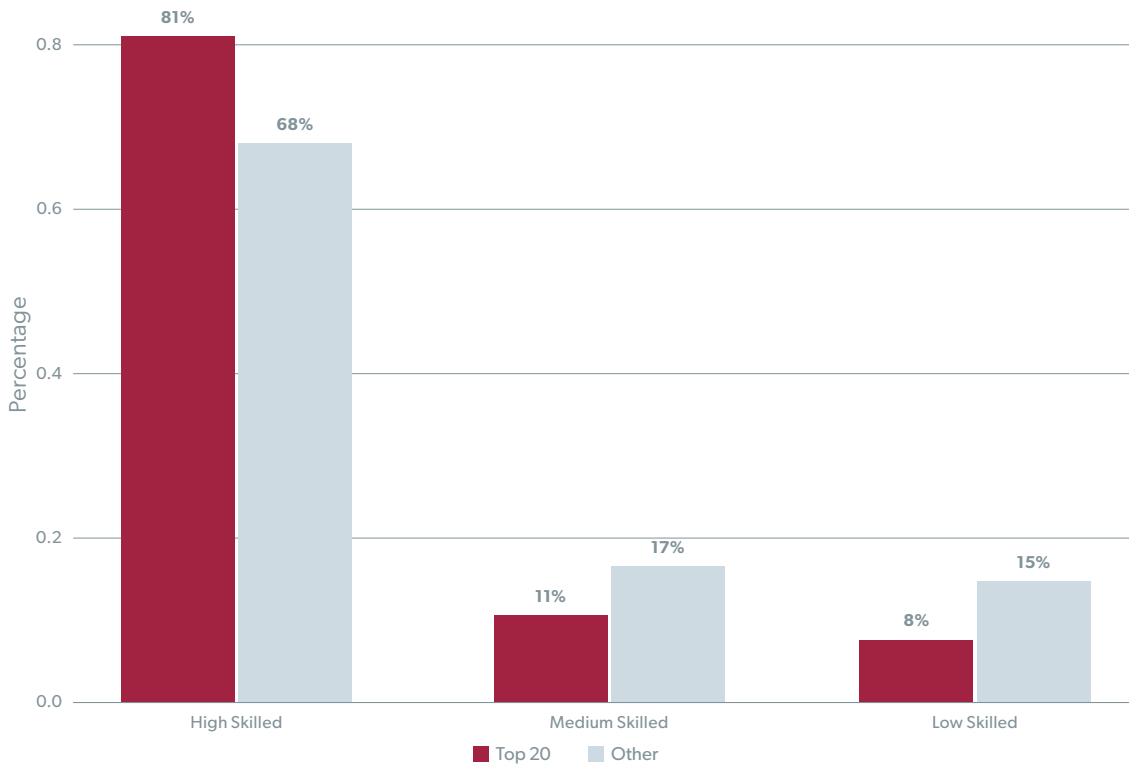
For graduates from top 20 universities in England, 81 per cent of those entering employment enter high skilled work (Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 1-3), for graduates from other universities in England, just 68 per cent enter highly skilled work.<sup>221</sup> Even more striking is that graduates from outside the top 20 are **twice as likely to enter low skilled employment**. University degrees from top universities have much more value than those from the rest of the sector.

Salaries one year after qualification also reflect this. In 2022/23, average salaries one year after qualification for individuals completing their apprenticeship between the ages of 19 to 24 were £24,760 for level 3 apprenticeships, £28,080 for level 4 apprenticeships, and £28,000 for level 5 apprenticeships.<sup>222</sup> These exceeded the average salary one year after graduation of £24,500 for UK-domiciled graduates, who started their degree aged under 21.<sup>223</sup> Five years after qualifying, a higher level (L4) apprentice earns almost £12,500 more than a student graduating from a low-value university course. The bottom quartile of students earn £24,800 five years after completing their course, rising to £32,100 for the average graduate. By comparison, a higher level (L4) apprentice earns £37,300.<sup>224</sup>

220 The Times (2025) *UK University Rankings 2026*. London. Available at <https://www.thetimes.com/uk-university-rankings> (Accessed: 13 October 2025).  
 221 HESA (2025) *Table 19 - Standard industrial classification of graduates entering work in the UK by provider*. Cheltenham: HESA, 17 July. Available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/table-22> (Accessed: 13 October 2025).  
 222 Department for Education (2025) *Further education outcomes*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-outcomes/2021-22> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).  
 223 Department for Education (2025) *LEO Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/leo-graduate-and-postgraduate-outcomes/2022-23> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).  
 224 The CSJ used data from the Department for Education to compare the earnings of graduates (DfE, 2025) with the earnings of apprentices (DfE, 2025) five years after qualifying. The earnings of graduates in tax year 2022/23 are drawn from UK-domiciled first degree graduates who started their degree before the age of 21, five years after graduation. The earnings of apprentices in tax year 2022/23 are drawn from apprentices who qualified between the ages of 19 and 24, five years after obtaining their qualification. Ten years after qualifying, lower quartile university graduates were still found to be earning £11,700 less than a L4 apprentice five years after qualifying (£25,600 compared to £37,300) although a direct ten year comparison is not possible without further data.

This means that half of all graduates – or 240,000 university freshers this year – could be better off taking higher level apprenticeships while avoiding tens of thousands in debt.<sup>225</sup>

Figure 23 – Skills Level of Employed Graduates, 2025



Source: HESA (2025) Table 19 - Standard industrial classification of graduates entering work in the UK by provider. Cheltenham: HESA, 17 July. Available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/table-22> (Accessed: 13 October 2025). The Times (2025) UK University Rankings 2026. London. Available at <https://www.thetimes.com/uk-university-rankings> (Accessed: 13 October 2025).

The combination of under-skilled workers and mismatched qualifications shows how our distorted education system seeps through into a distorted labour market: failing to produce workers that are appropriately matched to the jobs available in the labour market, even when they obtain these jobs. This is harmful to workers, businesses, and the economy. Workers with the incorrect set of skills will produce lower quality output, thus creating a drag on productivity and business growth. They also add additional costs to businesses, who are required to spend greater time and money on training to fill in skills and knowledge gaps.<sup>226</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 15

England’s skills mismatches reflect a system built around academic credentialism rather than labour market alignment. Too many young people are channelled into degrees that neither match their talents nor meet economic demand. While preserving its innate value, education must also fulfil its role in the social contract of generating the competencies our nation needs, where technical mastery is as essential as academic qualification.

225 The estimate that half of university graduates could be better off taking a higher level apprenticeship is derived from the median earnings of earners five years after obtaining their L4 apprenticeship, which is £5,000 higher than the median earnings of graduates five years after graduation. To estimate the earning outcomes of students on lower-value courses, we adopt the bottom quartile of graduate earners. To estimate the total number of university starters in 2025/26 who could be better off taking a higher level apprenticeship, we estimate the total number of students enrolling (around 480,000 based on recent data: HESA, 2025), and then reduce this to those earning below the median graduate salary, which translates into 240,000.

226 Grant Thornton (2024) *The skills gap and its impact on productivity*. Available at: <https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/insights/the-skills-gap-and-its-impact-on-productivity> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

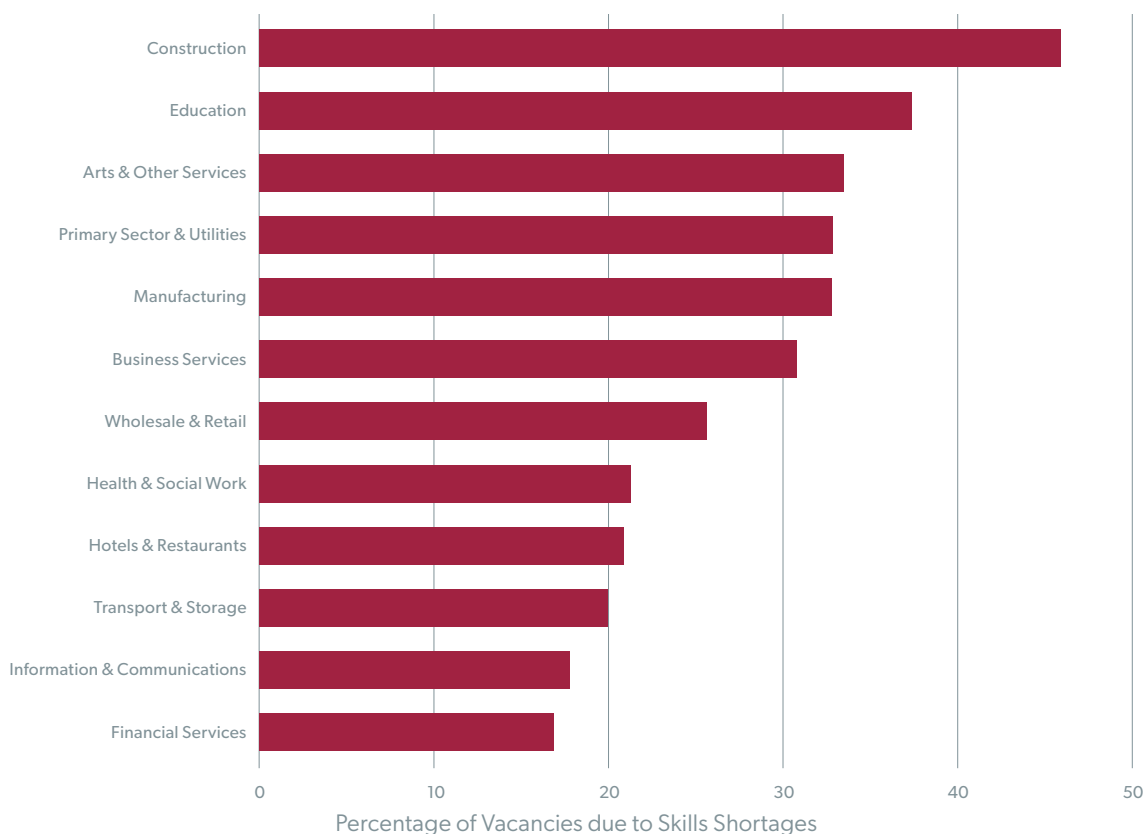
## 6.3. Skills shortages

A further challenge arising from skill deficits is the difficulty employers encounter in hiring appropriately skilled workers.<sup>227</sup>

The Employer Skills Survey shows a large growth in job vacancies attributed to missing skills. In 2011, there were 77,000 skill-shortage vacancies, accounting for 15.3 per cent of all vacancies. By 2024, this had increased to 213,000, accounting for 26.7 per cent of vacancies.<sup>228</sup> In a 2022 survey, the Federation of Small Businesses found that 52 per cent of small businesses attributed recruitment difficulties to a lack of individuals with the relevant qualifications,<sup>229</sup> and in a 2024 DWP survey **58 per cent of employers cited a low number of applicants with the required skills as the main challenge to recruitment.**<sup>230</sup>

Figure 24 highlights that this is a widespread issue across industries, despite some suffering worse than others. In 2024, every industry attributed at least 15 per cent of vacancies to skills shortages, but the construction and education industries stand out with 45.9 and 37.4 per cent respectively.<sup>231</sup>

Figure 24 – Skills Shortage Vacancies as a Share of Vacancies by Industry, 2024



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

227 There are other further consequences of this in terms of dependence on immigration. Under 25s on payrolls from outside the EU increased by 315 per cent between 2020 and 2025, while the number of young British nationals in work fell. Source: CSJ (2025) *Wasted Youth*. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/wasted-youth> (Accessed: 10 December 2025).

228 Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

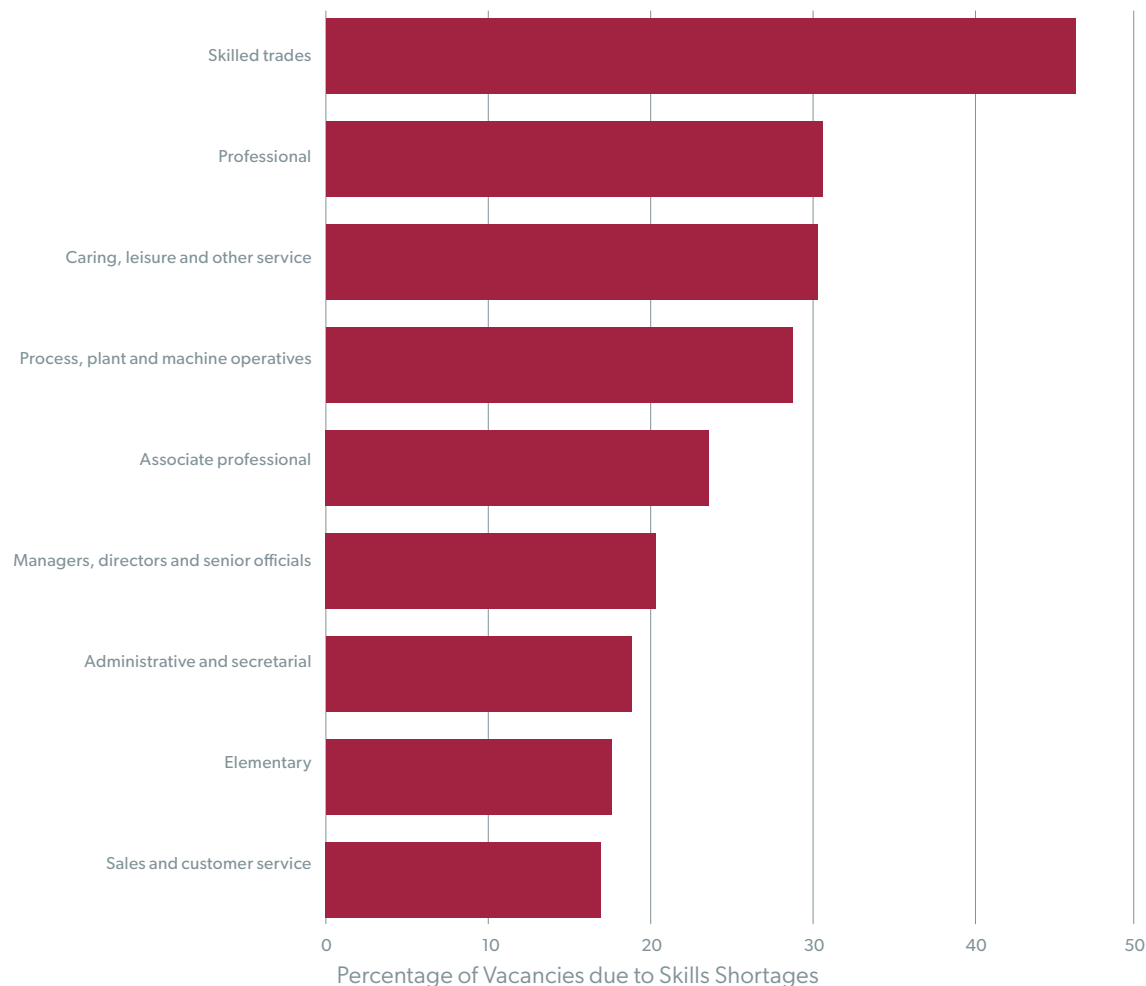
229 Federation of Small Businesses (2022) *Scaling up skills: Developing education and training to help small businesses and the economy*. London: FSB, August. Available at: [https://issuu.com/federationofsmallbusinesses/docs/scaling-up-skills?fr=xKAE9\\_15JNQ](https://issuu.com/federationofsmallbusinesses/docs/scaling-up-skills?fr=xKAE9_15JNQ) (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

230 Department for Work and Pensions (2025) *DWP employer survey 2024*. London: Department for Work and Pensions, 16 May. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dwp-employer-survey-2024/dwp-employer-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

231 Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

In terms of occupation, skilled trades have distinctly high rates of skills shortage vacancies. **As presented in Figure 25, in 2024, 46.2 per cent of vacancies in skilled trades were attributed to skills shortages.**<sup>232</sup> This far exceeds the 30.6 per cent observed in professional occupations, the second worst-off industry.

Figure 25 – Skills Shortage Vacancies as a Share of Vacancies by Occupation, 2024



Source: Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

It is important to note that the shortages in these specific areas are consistent with the sectors and occupations forecasted to experience substantial growth in employment demand between 2025 and 2030.<sup>233</sup> Therefore, if the necessary steps to improve the skills of young people entering the labour force are not taken, skills shortages will persist. Recent CSJ report *Skills to Build* shows that the proportion of workers aged 65 and over in construction has tripled since 2008, with over one in three workers now over the age of 50, compared to just over one in four at the time of the 2008 financial crisis. On the other end, there are two fifths fewer 16–24-year-olds working in construction than there were in 2008, a fall of over 150,000.<sup>234</sup>

232 Department for Education (2025) *Employer skills survey: 2024*. London: Department for Education, 24 July. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

233 Skills England (2025) *Assessment of priority skills to 2030*. London: Department for Education, 12 August. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

234 CSJ (2025) *Skills to Build*. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/skills-to-build> (Accessed: 27 November 2025)

*"I started out 22 years ago, and [we were] in the mix with the same subbies as we have now. We hardly have any newer, younger blood."*

**SME leader contribution**

The high incidence of vacancies caused by a lack of skills corroborates the view that the education system is inadequately preparing the workforce to meet the needs of the labour market.

The resulting skills shortage is especially painful. Businesses unable to fill vacancies are forced to operate at a reduced capacity, which lowers output and profits and restricts growth opportunities.<sup>235</sup> They also suffer from higher cost per skilled worker hired, both in terms of recruitment costs and wages, since there is greater competition for a smaller pool of skilled workers.<sup>236</sup> Existing workers are burdened with a greater workload, which can lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and higher employee turnover.<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, shortages of skilled workers in key sectors, such as those shown in education, health, and social work in Figure 23, could harm living standards.<sup>238</sup>

#### PRINCIPLE FOR RECOMMENDATION 16

England's skills shortages are another symptom of a system built without due consideration for labour market alignment. Too few young people are trained into highly skilled trades that are crucial to the future of our economy.

235 European Commission (2023), *Skills shortages are a serious problem for majority of EU SMEs, Eurobarometer shows*, 14 November 2023, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_5732](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5732). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

236 The Open University (2019) *OU report calculates the cost of the skills shortage to UK business*. July 2019, Available at: [https://business-school.open.ac.uk/sites/business-school.open.ac.uk/files/files/The\\_Open\\_University\\_Business\\_Barometer\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://business-school.open.ac.uk/sites/business-school.open.ac.uk/files/files/The_Open_University_Business_Barometer_report_2019.pdf). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

237 CHAS (2023) *The Ultimate CHAS Guide To Managing The UK's Skills Shortage Problem*, 1 June 2023, Available at: <https://www.chas.co.uk/blog/guide-managing-uk-skills-shortage>. (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

238 Klein, C. and Smith, J. (2024) *Addressing labour and skills shortages in a fast-changing economy*. OECD. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/addressing-labour-and-skills-shortages-in-a-fast-changing-economy\\_0b6482dd/757311cb-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/07/addressing-labour-and-skills-shortages-in-a-fast-changing-economy_0b6482dd/757311cb-en.pdf). (Accessed: 2 October 2025).



