Young Lives, Young Futures

Image by Ketut Subiyanto via Pexels

Precarious transitions:

A summary report of key findings from the Young Lives, Young Futures study

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1. About the Young Lives, Young Futures Study

Young Lives, Young Futures is a six-year ESRC-funded longitudinal study, which is investigating how England's vocational education and training system can better support the school-to-work transitions of young people who don't go to university. The study has examined the availability and accessibility of employment and education opportunities for this group of young people and the resources available to them for making and enacting decisions about their futures. It has also explored how access to these opportunities and resources is shaped by combinations of factors including young people's social class backgrounds, their ethnicities, gender, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and where they live.

The study consists of a three-wave nationally representative survey of more than 10,000 young people called *Your Life, Your Future*, and three waves of qualitative interviews with 123 young people from across four local authority districts with contrasting labour market opportunities, social and economic geographies and education and training provision. These are complemented by interviews with over 75 local policymakers and practitioners from across the same four local authorities. The study is focused on the 15-20 age group and has a particular emphasis on engaging with the perspectives of young people themselves, including those who are more marginalised and whose voices are not often heard in policymaking. Further details of the methodology can be found on the project website here.

2. Summary of key findings

The study findings highlight an urgent need for a coordinated strategy across government and society to ensure more equitable education-to-work transitions for young people taking non-graduate routes. This group represents 50% of young people and 50% of the country's future, yet too many of them continue to be failed by:

- An education and careers advice system that values academic achievement and going to university over practical and creative learning and non-university routes into work.

- Limited opportunities for young people to access apprenticeships, good quality training and secure work with employers who care about their progression and wellbeing.
- Stark inequalities in the distribution of these opportunities along axes of gender, migrant status, ethnicity, SEND, social class, and place.
- Cultures of top-down decision-making in schools and workplaces in which the voices of students and young workers are rarely elicited or heard.

In this report we provide a summary of findings relating to these four areas and draw out their policy implications. Sampling weights have been applied throughout to ensure the representativeness of the results. We have used pseudonyms for all the people and organisations mentioned to preserve their anonymity.

2.1 An education and careers advice system that values academic achievement and going to university over practical and creative learning and non-university routes into work

While many young people do not enjoy school, this is particularly the case for those not intending to go to university. At age 15-16 only a third of young people participating in the *Your Life, Your Future* survey who said they were not at all likely to go to university reported that on the whole they liked being at school. This compared to more than two-thirds of young people who said they were very likely to go to university telling us that they enjoyed school.

Young people who said they were not at all likely to go to university were also less likely to say they worked as hard as they could at school, that doing well at school meant a lot to them or that they felt noticed and listened to by their teachers. For these young people, school was largely something to endure rather than enjoy. Where they did enjoy elements of schooling, these were often not the official school curriculum.

> I didn't enjoy the lessons, but I enjoyed like break and lunch and friends and stuff. *– Hafsa, 16*
>
> The only thing I enjoyed was, like, friends and PE… and the odd one or two teachers. — *Phil, 18*

However, young people's negative experiences of school typically outweighed the positive for most of those we interviewed, who, for various reasons, often felt that school was 'just not for them'.

Many experienced school as an alien and hostile environment, citing the narrow academic focus of the curriculum as a key factor. Their alienation was typically rooted in a mismatch between their preferred – more practical – approaches to learning and what they saw as the didactic, exam-oriented teaching approaches they encountered, which were dominated by rote learning. This mismatch often resulted in them feeling unfulfilled, bored and frustrated by having to engage with curriculum content that lacked meaning for them and over which they had little or no choice or control. Many described feeling overwhelmed in lessons and struggling with classroom learning.

> You feel like a robot. — *Maxine, 16*
>
> I'm not really a school person, to be honest. — *Chester, 17*
>
> I never really tried in school because I didn't understand what was going on half the time. — *Martin, 17*

Struggles with classroom learning were not confined to those who found school academically challenging. For example, Jared, 17, was an academically high-attaining student who struggled to stay focused in school because of the emphasis on classroom learning. He preferred practical learning and so was thriving doing a T Level course at college, which involved a lot of practical, applied work as well as a work experience component.

For those not intending to go to university the strong message they are being given through the hidden curriculum of the school is that their more creative, practical or vocational interests, contributions and aspirations are of less value than those of young people following more traditional academic routes.

Many of the young people participating in the study also reported feeling unsupported by their teachers. This was most common among young people with SEND and/or those with backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage. These are groups of young

people who often require more support. Yet pressure on teachers to get students through exams – a corollary of England's top-down results-based school accountability system - is limiting the pastoral and additional educational support young people can access (McPherson et al. 2023, Young Lives, Young Futures 2024a).[1]

2.1.1 Limited careers advice and guidance

Another common theme across our data is the limited and mostly inadequate nature of careers support at school for this group of young people. Some participants told us they hadn't received any careers advice while at school. Where it was available, it tended to be skewed to universities. Teachers typically did not know or tell them about apprenticeships or vocational courses in further education. This reinforced their sense of their interests and contributions not being valued.

In particular, the young people we spoke with felt they had not been presented with a full range of post-16 options by careers advisors and teachers, and that advice was overwhelmingly weighted towards promoting traditional academic routes through sixth forms and university. Some also mentioned that schools were selective in which students they supported and that some career choices and interests motivated teachers far more than others.

> Everybody was kind of forced into A Levels and being told, well, after you've got your A Levels you need to go to uni and get a degree and then you can get a job. — *Miriam, 16*
>
> They're very much like, 'You're either going to university or we're not going to talk to you', basically. They're not very good at supporting apprenticeships or degree apprenticeships or anything like that. — *Cat, 16*

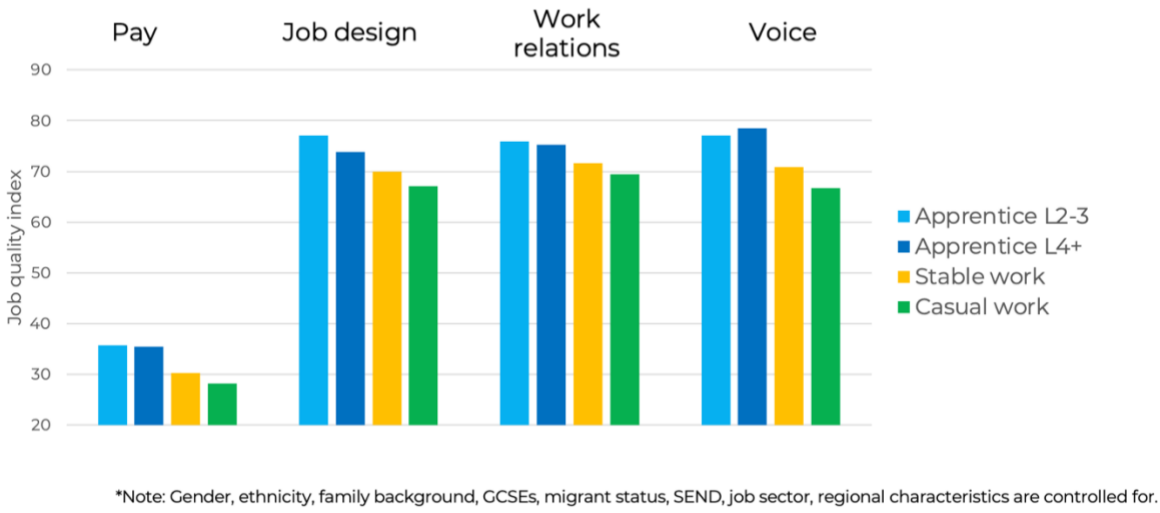
[1] In contrast, young people studying in FE colleges tended to be more positive about their relationships with teachers, describing them as less hierarchical and more substantial. This, combined with the less structured set-up of college compared to school, meant that college was experienced as a more adult, flexible way to engage with learning that felt less pressured and more supported.

Cat wanted to be a hairdresser but didn't feel she could share this aspiration with her teachers – because they would have told her, '*There is no point in you being here right now*'.

2.2 Limited opportunities for young people to access apprenticeships, good quality training and secure work with employers who care about their progression and wellbeing

Good apprenticeships make a significant difference to young people's employability and their quality of life. Analysis of job quality at age 19-20 based on our Wave 3 survey data (see Figure 1 below) indicates that, compared with both casual/temporary work and stable employment, apprenticeships were generally rated more highly in relation to pay (as measured by hourly pay and subjective pay satisfaction), job design, work relations, and employee voice. Quality of job design was measured by how far young people felt able to exercise autonomy in their work, their perceptions of the manageability of their workload and the extent to which they were able to derive a sense of achievement from their work.

Figure 1: Job quality of young workers

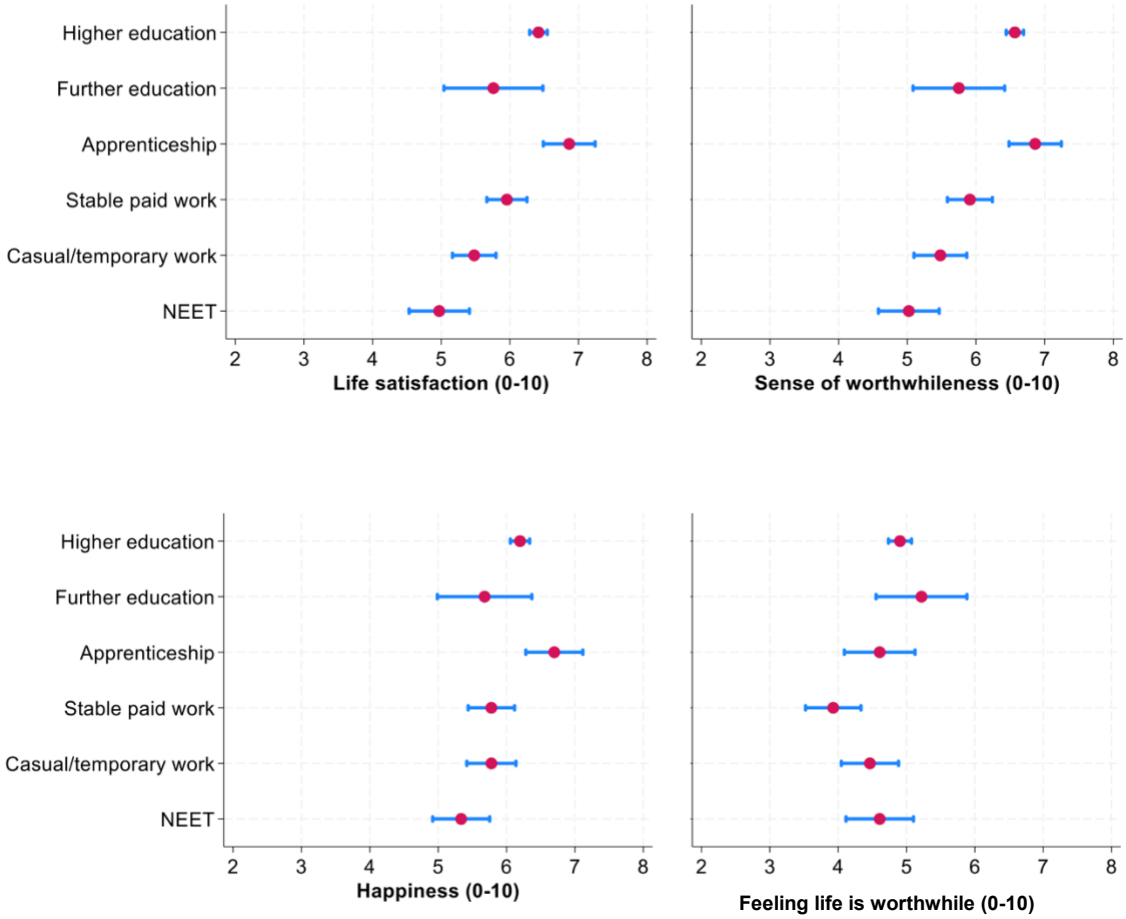


*Note: Gender, ethnicity, family background, GCSEs, migrant status, SEND, job sector, regional characteristics are controlled for.

Our survey data suggests that the differences between young people's experiences in apprenticeships and in other kinds of work translate into notable differences in well-being. Doing apprenticeships is generally associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, happiness, and feeling that life is worthwhile comparable to, or higher than, for those in

higher education. The well-being scores of young people doing apprenticeships also exceed those of young people in both casual and stable work (see Figure 2, below).

Figure 2: Personal wellbeing of young people



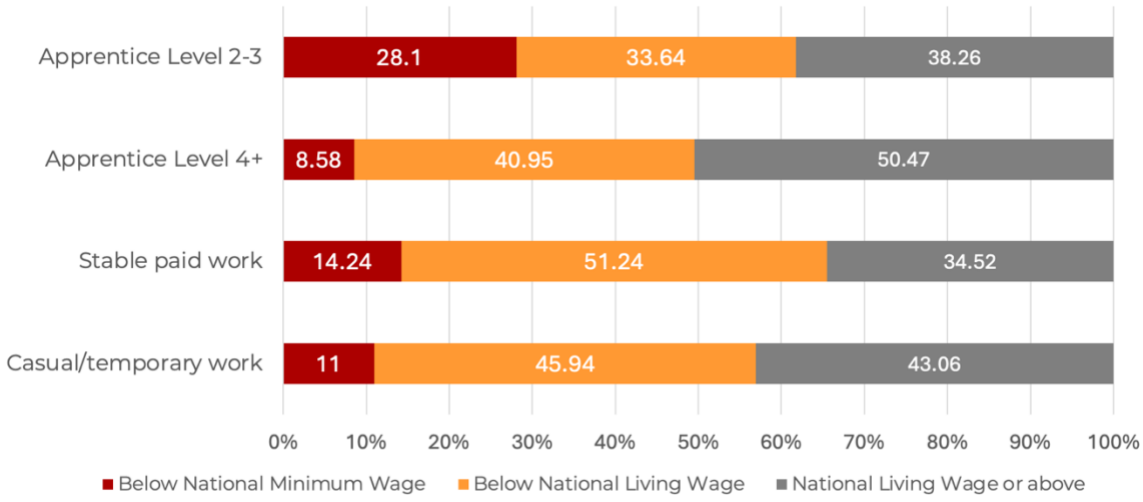
*Note: Gender, ethnicity, family background, GCSEs, migrant status, SEND, regional characteristics are controlled for.

All of this suggests that apprenticeships are a critical pathway for improving young workers' experiences in the labour market. However, some caveats are needed here:

- The demand for apprenticeships far exceeds the supply. Only 5% of young people obtained an apprenticeship in the two-year period after taking their GCSEs, and for every young person who obtained one, three tried to get one and failed. Many of those unable to obtain apprenticeships are trapped in low paid, precarious work or not in any kind of employment, education or training, while others take a higher education path that may not align with their interests or aspirations.

- More than one in every four Level 2 and 3 apprentices are paid below the national minimum wage (see Figure 3 below). This is primarily because first-year apprentices receive the statutory apprenticeship rate, which is well below the standard minimum wage. The apprentice wage is set at this lower rate in recognition of the fact that apprentices are considered students as well as employees and therefore not to be doing a 'full' job. However, for apprentices and for others on low wages, insufficient pay can have both immediate and longer-term consequences, limiting their financial independence, reducing their ability to save or invest in further training, and increasing vulnerability to poverty. In interviews, young people whose families could not afford to subsidise their living expenses talked about struggling to make ends meet on their apprenticeship wage. In some cases, they had to rely on partners or take on a second evening or weekend job to subsidise their income. Even among higher-level apprentices, about half still earn less than the national living wage.

Figure 3: Prevalence of low wages among young workers



- Although a large majority of apprentices responding to our survey reported very positively on their work experiences, a small minority did not, and in our interviews we spoke to a number of young people who had very bad experiences. For example, Eve was forced to leave her apprenticeship because of bullying.

> It was mainly the assistant manager, I mean she shouted at me a lot of the time. And I just said to her, "Holly, I am still learning, like this is part of the job." But she was shouting at me about not turning the lights off and having to go to the toilet, yeah, and like nitpicking things like that. And I just sort of said to Fred, my partner, "It's just me, like it's nobody else. Is it because of my title, like because I am an apprentice?" … I just think it was really, really horrible what they did, and just that was me done, I was just like, no, I'm not doing this anymore. — *Eve, 21*

See also Halima's story, on p.15 below.

- Among young people in apprenticeships at ages 17-18, more than one in five (22%) were in casual or temporary employment at age 19-20 and nearly one in 10 (9%) were not in any kind of employment, education or training (NEET). This means that for a substantial minority (almost a third) of young apprentices their apprenticeship hadn't secured access to more advanced education or training or the stable employment they are designed to prepare young people for.

Casual and temporary work is generally associated with irregular hours alongside lower pay satisfaction, weaker social support at work, and fewer opportunities for progression compared to apprenticeships (see Figure 1). In our interviews, it was common for young people in casual and temporary work to talk about the toll that having to work long, unsociable and unpredictable hours took on their wellbeing, even though they often enjoyed aspects of the work. Many also talked about having to take long, expensive and unsubsidised journeys to work, the difficulty of paying for these journeys out of their low wages and their deleterious impact on their work-life balance.

> It's just the whole not being able to plan your week around it; sometimes you'd get your shifts on the Sunday morning for the Monday following. So, it was a bit unpredictable. And doing night shifts as well … and not doing them regularly, … it kind of threw off the balance of your week because you'd be sleeping when your friends are awake, and it just wasn't a good environment. And obviously, as you've not got a set time or salary, your money is a bit all over the place so it's a bit hard to work out what you can and can't afford. — *Brian,* 17
>
> If I work for 12 hours I finish at night, I come home and there's nothing I can do, I can't really, as an example, cook for myself, go shopping, be able to rest, have a bath, etcetera. — *Halima, 18*

Others provided accounts of practices that seemed to amount to health and safety breaches on the part of their employers. For example, Matt works in his uncle's construction business:

> **Matt**: Like the place I'm working at now … it was a farmhouse and, yeah, it's proper old farmer stuff, so you've got asbestos under the floorboards.
> **Interviewer**: Oh no, that's not good. … I guess you've got to get all the protective gear on there?
> **Matt**: Oh God, no. … Well, the majority of it, you just have a pair of gloves. … Like we were digging out the floor in one of the rooms with a mini digger, … you're breaking up the floors. … and I see a pipe under it and I'm like, "That's asbestos." So, you put masks on, gloves and just wiggle about and don't break it. That's all you can do. — *Matt, 17*

Young women, in particular, talked about experiences of being bullied and/or sexually harassed at work, adjustments not being made for their health or disability needs and generally feeling undervalued at work.

> **Mariam's story**
>
> At age 20 Mariam was working full time as a trainee NHS dental nurse while studying for a dental nursing diploma. The job was physically demanding and stressful, involving long periods of standing and work tasks having to be completed within unrealistic timeframes. Mariam also had responsibilities at home caring for younger siblings. Juggling a demanding full-time job, study and caring responsibilities at home would be challenging for someone in good health, but Mariam suffers from a chronic autoimmune condition. During the whole year Mariam was studying for her diploma she didn't take a day's leave and rarely saw her friends.
> Towards the end of her training she suffered from burn out ending up in hospital having lost all feeling in one side of her body. Mariam is someone who doesn't like to complain, but when she did reach out for help, she said she didn't receive the understanding or support she had hoped for:
>
> *Because … there's always staffing issues in the NHS, there's always no staff, always people calling in sick, like they won't even hire any more staff so there's so much strain and burden on the people that are actually there, they're having to do the job*

of four people, or even five people sometimes, because there's not enough staff. So, they don't support you at all. … [Y]ou might get a few pity words, like, "Oh, bless you," or "Take it easy," or "Have some rest," but … they don't really care, they just say that because they have to say it.

Mariam also describes feeling generally undervalued and disrespected at work:

I thought in the beginning that I would be shown some kind of appreciation for the things that we do, … even if it's just, "Oh, well done Mariam," or "Thank you for doing this." But in such a fast-paced job … you do feel … extremely undervalued … I'm working with consultants and people who have been in the industry [since] before I was born, … so it's … difficult because … they act how they want, they say what they want, and sometimes you just have to, you know, bite the bullet and take it … because … if you do answer back then it just … opens up a whole new can of worms for you.

Finally, she talks about experiences of sexual harassment in a way that suggests it was routine:

Sometimes I've found like there was creepy like male consultants that would prey on the younger like staff … And it would make you feel like quite uncomfortable because you want, like, you want to do your job, and you don't want to disappoint anyone, but you also feel uncomfortable working in that environment.

2.3 Stark inequalities in the distribution of opportunities along axes of gender, migrant status, ethnicity, SEND, social class, and place

Findings from the survey show that young women who don't go to university are more likely than young men to be in casual or temporary work at the age of 19-20 but less likely to be NEET. These statistics reflect gendered patterns of labour market engagement: while young women may be more successful at avoiding complete labour market exclusion, they are more often in insecure, lower quality employment. Our interview data suggests that gendered expectations, occupational segregation and caring responsibilities may be contributing to these patterns.

Among applicants for apprenticeships at ages 17-18, those not born in the UK are less likely to be successful in securing one. At ages 19-20, in addition to migration background, ethnicity and SEND status become significant predictors of success in accessing an apprenticeship: White young people are more likely to secure apprenticeships than Asian and Black applicants, and those without SEND are more likely to secure apprenticeships than those with two or more SEND conditions. Area-based deprivation also plays a key role

in determining access to apprenticeships: young people in the most deprived areas (as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation) are about 9 percentage points less likely to take up Level 4+ apprenticeships than those in the least deprived areas.

Young people with SEND are substantially disadvantaged across multiple outcomes. As well as being less likely to undertake apprenticeships or secure stable work, they are much more likely to become NEET.

Access to work is also ethnically patterned. Young people who identify as White are significantly more likely than those who identify as Black, Asian or Mixed to be in stable paid work, while young people identifying as being from a Mixed or Other ethnicity face a higher risk of being NEET than their White peers.

Strong social class gradients in apprenticeship participation (especially at higher levels) highlight persistent class-based inequalities in access to high-quality training. Young people from middle-class backgrounds are better positioned to access Level 4+ apprenticeships, which are often linked to more lucrative and secure careers. Meanwhile, those from working-class backgrounds are more likely to struggle with accessing even lower level apprenticeships, reinforcing existing intergenerational class stratification.

Analysis of the interview data revealed some of the mechanisms underlying these inequalities. While all young people seeking non-university routes are to some degree disadvantaged by education and career support systems that are weighted towards the interests and needs of young people who wish to go to university, we found stark inequalities in their experiences — inequalities which accumulated over the course of their transitions from school into life beyond school (Khazbak et al. 2026, in press).

For example, Tim — who comes from a mixed middle- and working-class White background with access to networks and knowledge relevant to the world of elite apprenticeships — belonged to a group experiencing **relatively privileged transitions.** Members of this group managed to secure high quality apprenticeships or work with training.

In contrast, the experience of Halima was typical of a second group of young people who had **precarious transitions**. These young people could not find good quality apprenticeships or work with training in the sectors that interested them despite strenuous efforts. They typically ended up churning between college courses, unemployment and low-paid, casualised, precarious employment. Halima is a second-generation working-class

Bangladeshi young woman from an inner-London borough whose family, while very supportive, did not have access to the knowledge or networks that would have helped her to access the training she was looking for.

For a third group of young people, like Chester who grew up in care and had SEND, their transitions were completed stalled. These young people — who were most vulnerable to the effects of the systematic neglect of young people taking non-university routes — are all from historically marginalised groups. This includes young people with SEND, those with care or criminal justice experience, and those from the most economically disadvantaged regions and households. Young people in this **high-needs stalled transitions** group are more likely to spend time in isolation and experience bullying and discrimination while at school *and* to experience being out of education, training or employment after leaving school.

Tim's story

Tim is a White British young man from a post-industrial area in the Northeast of England. He comes from a mixed working- and middle-class background and he has a good supportive relationship with his family. He told us that he went to a good school where he received helpful advice on how to write a CV, but he was frustrated that his school allocated far more resources and guidance towards academic subjects and university routes, and not enough towards vocational pathways and apprenticeships. Tim was aged 17 and five months into a highly competitive four-year engineering apprenticeship with a major multinational corporation when we first met him.

At work, Tim was bolstered by feeling respected and valued by his colleagues. The company has structures for apprentices to participate in decision-making, feed in criticisms and identify issues for the company to work on. Other benefits included competitive pay, an opportunity to buy subsidised shares in the company and generous pension and discount schemes.

Tim was living at home until the age of 20 and didn't need to pay for rent. This meant that by the age of 19 he'd managed to buy a car and save money for a deposit on a house. By 20 Tim had enjoyed expensive holidays in Asia and Europe, successfully completed his apprenticeship and gained a permanent position at the company, which he sees as a job for life. 'If I can work there for 40 years, I'd be happy', he said.

Tim is part of a group of young people who enjoyed relatively privileged non-university transitions. These were enabled by their parents' knowledge of suitable training and employment opportunities and how to access them and social networks linked to the industries they wanted to enter. It is highly unlikely that Tim would have secured a prestigious and highly competitive apprenticeship at his top-choice company without the support he'd received from his family. His father,

who had completed an apprenticeship and been a construction worker before becoming a vocational education teacher, was exceptionally well networked in the world of elite apprenticeships. Drawing on his rich mix of middle- and skilled working-class cultural capital, he was able to support his son to weigh options, make informed decisions, provide rigorous interview coaching and ultimately secure his apprenticeship. Tim's success was also enabled by help from his parents with writing his application, and advice from a family friend who had previously worked for the company. Tim told us:

I do think I've had it lucky, you know, I've got a dad who understood, who had the manual labouring background […] and it does weigh on us a little bit, I can't lie. You know, when I see some people and they're not necessarily doing as well and I know how good of a person they are and, like you do feel it in a way because I know in this region especially, there's not as much opportunities as some parts of the country.

Halima's story

Halima is a working-class second-generation Bangladeshi young women living in an inner London borough with her parents and three sisters. Her father is a chef, and her mother isn't in paid work. Like Tim, she told us she didn't receive any help or information about applying for jobs or apprenticeships from the careers advisor at school.

In year 11 Halima – who was passionate about working with children – told us that her dream is to become a primary school teacher. After passing all her GCSEs, she left school at 16 and went to work as a nursery assistant — a role which was advertised as a Level 2 Early Years Professional apprenticeship. She got the idea of doing an apprenticeship from her older sister but found it herself through the recruitment website Indeed after having applied to several others and received no response. She said it was difficult to find apprenticeships in or near her area and that she was limited in apprenticeships to apply for because of travel constraints.

Unfortunately, Halima's 'apprenticeship' at the nursery didn't work out well. She worked 12-hour shifts, received no off-the-job training (which is a requirement of apprenticeships) and her employer abruptly cancelled the 'apprenticeship' after six months, citing 'funding issues', having not yet even processed her apprenticeship paperwork. Halima was not fully paid what was already a minimum apprenticeship wage and felt taken advantage of due to her young age.

Unable to find another childcare or teaching apprenticeship and inspired by having cared for her sick grandfather, she found an hourly paid domestic healthcare assistant (HCA) job with a view to finding a nursing apprenticeship. She loved the job, but the training was inadequate. At the age of 16, she was sent to a client's home on her first day with no induction or training where she was expected to change the feeding tube of a young child. Things got better after the first day, but only because the mother of the child she was looking after trained her to change

the feeding tube and administer medication. While Halima did receive some 'training' from the company, this was restricted to watching training videos:

I had to learn online, through the videos, it wasn't like physical training where they were showing me how to insert it into the tube, how to clean all the tubes and everything, … it was just watching a video and it was just written, like in the video it was just written, it wasn't even showing you examples.

Halima also had to pay for some of her own training - £50 for a Prevention and Management of Violence and Aggression (PMVA) course.
After a year into the home HCA job, she got a job as an agency HCA at a hospital on a zero-hours contract working 12-hour shifts on the days when work was available. She said she learned a lot at the hospital job and made friends. However, she didn't see it as a viable or secure career for the future.
Aged 19, fed up with the long hours and lack of security in her HCA job, which she felt were having a negative effect on her wellbeing, and unable to find an apprenticeship in nursing, again despite having submitted multiple applications, never with any response, she started a minimum wage full-time apprenticeship in Business Administration where she was spending half her wages on travel and only participating in 3-4 hours online training per week (rather than the 7 hours she was meant to be training).
Throughout the time Halima was looking for work she had received no professional help with her CV and, like many of our participants, she engaged in 'DIY careers support' with assistance from Google and her sisters who introduced her to apprenticeships. However, her sisters attended college and did not have access to relevant networks; and her parents, who were also supportive, also lacked access to knowledge and networks relevant to her chosen career.

Chester's story

We first met Chester when he was 16 and living in semi-independent accommodation in a city in the north of England. Chester comes from a working-class Mixed-ethnicity background. He'd left school with three GSCEs and was looking for work or an apprenticeship while making music in his spare time. Chester has had a difficult childhood, having spent much of his young life in care moving between multiple placements in different parts of the country. He also has a criminal conviction.
Like many of our participants, Chester was negative about his school experiences. In particular, he believed his teachers had low expectations of him and he found it difficult to cope with the passivity of classroom learning. He told us:

Do you know what, school was absolutely terrible for me. I had teachers telling me I was going to fail, the whole enchilada. … Like I can do working hours, because I'm doing stuff, do you know what I mean, but like just for school, we were just sat in a classroom listening to someone go on for hours and hours and hours.

At 16 Chester was undecided about what he wanted to do but had a positive attitude and expressed confidence about the future. He told us '*There's loads of things I'd love to do*' including painting and decorating or being a chef or a successful music artist. But whatever he ended up doing, he knew it wouldn't involve sitting at a desk, which, he said, would be '*just basically like going back to school'.*

By the time Chester was 20, he had participated in numerous work experience placements, courses and employability programmes and put in multiple job applications. But none of these had led anywhere and, during the four years we have been in touch with him, he's had only one job. This was as an extra in a film for which he'd been paid £100 for three days work.

Chester was part of a group of young people for whom challenges and barriers experienced during their school years persisted after Year 11, manifesting in markedly unequal post-16 transitions. The support Chester received fluctuated in the four years after he left school. At 16 he was receiving intensive support from Future Us, a local organisation that provides education, training and employability support services for young offenders. But by the age of 18, he was largely relying on his own resources to find work, and by 20 he told us he was no longer receiving social work support even though, as a care leaver, he is entitled to support until the age of 21.

The stories of Tim, Halima and Chester illustrate both how inequalities accumulate over time and the importance of the cultural knowledge and social connections of family members for securing access to high quality training and work. These and the stories of our other participants suggest that, just as an invisible glass/class ceiling operates to limit access to elite professions for those from working-class backgrounds —especially when this intersects with being female and/or from particular racially minoritised groups (Friedman and Laurison 2019) — so an equivalent glass/class ceiling operates at the 'lower' to 'middle' end of the labour market. This acts as a significant barrier, preventing young people from the most socio-economically disadvantaged households and neighborhoods — whose socio-economic disadvantage often intersects with other kinds of disadvantage such as having unmet or undiagnosed SEN or care experience — from accessing high quality manual or technical employment, apprenticeships and/or training aligned with their interests and passions (Khazbak et al. 2026, in press).

2.4 Cultures of top-down decision-making in schools and workplaces in which the voices of students and young workers are rarely elicited or heard

While many young people do not feel listened to at school and most leave school without any experience of participatory decision-making or any expectation that they should play a part in the decision-making of the institutions they work in, this is particularly the case for young people who don't go to university.

Many of the young people we spoke with conveyed a strong sense of feeling unheard and unseen at school – lacking not only opportunities to express how they felt but also any meaningful say in shaping their own learning experiences.

> When Matt was asked whether at school or college there had been opportunities for young people to get involved in decision-making, he responded:
> *Not at all, because everything…well, from primary school to high school, you got told what you did.*
>
> Eion said that when he was at school:
> *The teachers wouldn't really talk to me.*
>
> And Halima, asked what she would like her teachers to do more of, or better, responded:
> *Maybe, like, listen to what the students want to do and maybe help them.*

Our survey data tells a similar story. Young people who said they were not at all likely to go to university were much less likely than those who said they were very likely to go to university to say that they were noticed and listened to by their teachers (49% vs 74%). Those from low-income backgrounds, Black Caribbean and Mixed ethnicities, LGBT students and those with SEND were also much less likely to say that they felt noticed or listened to by their teachers or received encouragement from them.

In our interviews, participants whose wellbeing and behaviour were affected by adverse childhood experiences reported experiencing a lack of understanding and empathy from teachers. They were often perceived as 'bad', disruptive and failures with little hope for the future, leading to their placement in isolation units or exclusion from mainstream education. In some schools, these issues were exacerbated by high teacher turnover and reliance on supply teachers, hindering stable student-teacher relationships. Some young

people did, however, talk fondly about particular teachers who were crucial in transforming their educational experiences. The research highlights how such relationships can flourish in Pupil Referral Units and alternative education settings where teachers have more freedom to build caring and supportive learning environments for their students.

For many young people, their experiences of feeling unheard at school are carried into the workplace. This is especially the case for young people with mental health conditions or histories of bullying who were more likely to experience poor workplace relationships and more limited employee voice than those without mental health conditions or histories of bullying. In addition, casual and temporary employment is associated with more limited employee voice than apprenticeships and stable work (see Figure 1, above). This highlights the precarious and isolating nature of casual and temporary work, where opportunities for mentoring, teamwork, and meaningful participation are typically limited.

Halima and Mariam's stories (above) give a sense of how much young workers could benefit from being able to participate in decision-making about working practices and relationships, shift patterns and training at work. They have clear ideas about what would help to improve their working conditions, but hierarchical cultures and the top-down way in which decisions are made in their workplaces don't allow space for them to communicate with their managers about these things in meaningful ways. Indeed, in Halima's case it is possible that her complaining to her employer about her treatment led to her first apprenticeship being cut short.

3. Conclusions and policy implications

The Young Lives, Young Futures research shows that there is a large group of young people who are being systematically disadvantaged at school by being subject to a curriculum they have no control over and which they experience as narrow and unrelated to their interests and aspirations, which are often more creative and practical. These young people also have more limited access to relevant careers advice compared to those who want to go to university. The strong message they are being given through the hidden curriculum of the school is that their interests, contributions and choices are of less value than those of young people following more traditional academic routes. This devaluing has a direct impact on

the quality of their school experiences, the support invested in them, and their sense of being recognised as making legitimate choices. The strong emphasis on equating worth with academic test results is part of wider school cultures that leave many young people feeling unsupported, misrecognised and disrespected.

We also found that young people's transitions were differentially shaped by cumulative inequalities. On leaving school, some young people – those who enjoyed relatively privileged transitions — were able to leverage family cultural, social and economic capital, enabling them to access good quality apprenticeship and work opportunities that were aligned with their interests and passions. This, in turn, enabled them to enjoy experiences of feeling recognised, valued and listened to in their workplaces — experiences that were mostly denied to their less advantaged counterparts.

Those young people whose needs and interests are least well served come from low-income households and high deprivation areas. While their parents or carers are typically supportive and encouraging of their training and employment aspirations, many are either not in paid work themselves or are in jobs that do not give them access to the kinds of cultural knowledge and social connections most relevant to their children's work and career interests. These parents are also less well placed to provide the financial resources their children need for their living, travel and other training or work-related expenses. Our findings also show how access to apprenticeships and stable work is patterned by gender, migration status and ethnicity. For example, young men are more likely to be NEET than young women, while young women are more likely to be in casual or temporary work than young men. Young people from Black, Asian or Mixed backgrounds are less likely to be in stable paid work than their White peers, while those from Mixed or Other ethnicities are at a higher risk of being NEET. Young people with SEND are disadvantaged in relation to multiple outcomes.

Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's (2019) research shows how an invisible glass/class ceiling operates which limits access to the elite professions for people from working-class backgrounds, especially where these intersect with being female or from particular racialised groups. The findings from the Young Futures, Young Lives study suggest that an equivalent glass/class ceiling operates at the 'lower' to 'middle' end of the labour market leaving many young people trapped in low wage, low quality jobs or being

unemployed or churning between unemployment, low quality apprenticeships and low quality casual or temporary work.

Finally, we found that cultures of decision making at school and at work provide limited opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making about the conditions within which they learn and work.

3.1 So what can be done?

Several recommendations have already been made by others that would, if taken on board, go some way to addressing the narrowed opportunities and injustices highlighted in this report. This includes the recommendations in the recently published Curriculum and Assessment Review for a broader and more flexible 11-16 curriculum. It is as yet unclear how much room for flexibility there will be in the new curriculum and much will depend on how it is implemented. But what is clear from the Young Lives, Young Futures research is that the curriculum needs to be sufficiently slimmed down and flexible to give teachers the space to properly listen to and respond to the interests and needs of their students and to devote thought and time to establishing caring, respectful and inclusive school cultures in which all young people can fully participate and thrive and in which sufficient time can be devoted to their pastoral care.

Other important recommendations that we would suggest need to be taken seriously are calls by the House of Lords 11-16 Education Committee (2023), amongst others, for policies to tackle disparities in the funding of academic and technical routes for 16-19 year olds and in the diminished status given to vocational and technical routes in careers advice. The recent Post-16 Education and Skills white paper (HM Government 2025) goes some way towards addressing these issues but not far enough, with funding still weighted towards higher education and Level 4+ qualifications.

Also to be welcomed is the UK Social Mobility Commission's redefinition of the 'social mobility problem' in a way that seeks to promote access to good, well-paid local jobs in place of its previous exclusive focus on equalising access to professional and managerial occupations (Francis 2021).

We will conclude by outlining three sets of additional suggestions.

3.1.1 Transforming organisational cultures in schools and workplaces

First, we suggest that fundamental changes to organisational cultures and institutional contexts, lives and relationships – both in schools and workplaces — are needed. In relation to schools this means stepping back from important discussions around qualifications and curricula and thinking more broadly about the institutional contexts within which those qualifications and curricula land. Successive governments have tended to look at some of the problems affecting young people – including, high rates of mental ill health, absenteeism, and being NEET – in isolation. The findings reported here suggest that there is an urgent need to take a more holistic view that pays attention to the school and workplace cultures that contribute to the emergence of these problems.

In schools this means paying attention to who gets noticed, whose interests get taken seriously, what kinds of occupations and future lives are valued and placing young people's wellbeing centre-stage. We have seen that currently English schools are profoundly alienating for many young people, in large part because they operate with very narrow conceptions of success. If alienating school cultures are not dismantled, many young people will continue to be let down and potentially harmed by schools.

For this to happen a lot needs to change. Not least, we suggest, young people's agency needs to be harnessed to enable them to participate meaningfully in institutional life. Ideally this would involve both providing opportunities for them to participate in decisions about the conditions which shape their learning and instilling in them the expectation that they should be involved in helping to shape all the institutions they live inside, including their workplaces.

Currently many schools are places where not even teachers have a meaningful say in determining the conditions of their work, and most young people leave school without any experience of participatory decision-making or any expectation that they should play a part in the decision-making of the institutions they work in.

Within this, a particular issue in need of attention is the experiences and voices of young people with SEND who are overrepresented in the population excluded from school and not in education, employment or training.

The same principles apply to workplaces. Oppressive workplace cultures and a lack of opportunities for young workers to have their voices heard are especially prevalent in casual and temporary work, with detrimental effects on young people's wellbeing and

mental health (see Figure 2). The task here is to design jobs around the needs and capacities of individual people in ways that are aligned with what we already know about the principles of good job design. There is a lot of emphasis on the design of goods and services and user interfaces to make them more satisfying, while the jobs which young people like Halima and Mariam spend many long hours doing are often designed without any of those things in mind, even though a lot is known about the principles of good job design (see, for example, Grote & Guest 2016, University of Cambridge 2025). We know there are exceptions to this rule, as the example of Tim illustrates. It is a reasonable aspiration to ask all employers to give meaningful voice to their young workers, as his company does.
But ultimately, these changes alone will not be sufficient without a substantial erosion of the hierarchies of status and pay associated with different occupational roles and without reforms to the policy drivers that contribute to and sustain alienating school and workplace cultures.

3.1.2 Eroding job-status hierarchies, tackling low pay for young workers and improving access to good quality apprenticeships and work

Much lip service is paid to valuing the work done by those in low-paid, frontline occupations who were celebrated during the Covid pandemic as 'key workers'. But to go beyond mere lip service, we suggest that more holistic system-wide work needs to be done to ensure these jobs are properly valued both within schools and more widely in society. This should include taking steps to tackle the prevalence of low wages for apprenticeships and entry level jobs which mean that many young people, like Cat, who cannot rely on their parents to subsidise their living costs, are working more than one job to make ends meet. Some employers - those who have signed up to the Apprenticeship Decent Wage pledge - are already taking that step by committing to 'providing decent and fair pay for all apprentices employed in the UK' (Back the Future, n.d). Proponents of the pledge recognize that not all employers are in a position to pay above the standard apprenticeship wage. Indeed, for many smaller employers the cost of apprenticeships acts as a disincentive to offering them (Dickinson and Hogarth 2021). So there is a tradeoff to be made between securing a sufficient supply of apprenticeships and higher wages. However, by signing up to the pledge employers are committing themselves to working towards paying higher wages to their

apprentices even if they can't currently afford to pay more than the standard apprenticeship wage. This is a pledge that would benefit from being amplified.

Thought also needs to be given to how best to tackle the unfair recruitment practices that contribute to the glass/class-ceiling which makes it very difficult for young people without connections to access good apprenticeships and employment opportunities. This can partly be solved by increasing the supply of good quality apprenticeships and entry level jobs, but there is also a need to reform recruitment practices, so they are much less dependent on people's personal and social connections.

The Employment Rights Bill will help to address some of the poor employment practices experienced by our participants in apprenticeships and work including by ending zero-hour contracts and assuming flexible working as the default. However, in addition we suggest there is a need to explore ways of enhancing opportunities for accessing good quality apprenticeships and work. This might involve a combination of policy interventions. For example:

- One of our interviewees has suggested establishing an anonymous reporting system for apprentices to raise red flags when they are concerned about the quality of their training.
- A job guarantee for all apprentices once they have qualified, as has been recommended by the RMT for the rail industry (RMT 2025).
- The ringfencing of apprenticeship levy allocations for the under 25s to increase the level of funding currently available for this group (Young Lives, Young Futures 2025a).
- The provision of more funding to strengthen local and regional support for mentoring and advice to SMEs offering apprenticeships for young people, to improve retention, ensure quality and encourage their continuing the offer in the future (Young Lives, Young Futures 2025a).
- Establishing a locally administered, national, independent careers service operating outside the school framework to give all young people – including those who are not in school or college – access to professional, independent and non-judgemental careers information, advice and guidance based on national and local labour market intelligence (Young Lives, Young Futures 2025b).

- The inclusion of employment rights education in the PSHE curriculum, in order to raise awareness among young people about what to do if they are not experiencing the work conditions or quality of training they are entitled to.
- Piloting free bus travel for under 22s, as recommended by the House of Commons Transport Committee (2025).

3.1.3 Moving towards a whole-systems approach

All these suggestions amount to an imperative to connect thinking on VET policy with other policy areas including schools, employment, industrial and transport policy and looking at the interfaces between these areas. One of the key lessons of the Young Lives, Young Futures project is that VET is a hostage to these. Just to take one example, the transformation of school cultures we are calling for above is unrealistic unless it is connected with a rethinking of the policy drivers that shape what counts as school success, particularly the narrow, top-down results-driven school accountability mechanisms in place in England. The decision to dispense with the EBacc (DfE and Phillipson 2025) is a welcome step in the right direction. However, we would urge the Government to go further by commissioning a pilot of alternative, more developmental and participatory approaches to school accountability. Elsewhere we have suggested that this could be done in a volunteer sample of groups of schools in local authorities and multi-academy trusts, building on insights from existing models and based on intelligent accountability principles (Young Lives, Young Futures 2024b). In the longer term we are recommending that front-line responsibility for school accountability is devolved to local authorities and trusts, and the role of Ofsted is reconfigured as an assessor of the quality of the accountability processes managed by local authorities and trusts. This would help to re-professionalise teaching and create more space, time and resources for:

- Teachers to build relationships with their students and develop curricula and teaching methods that are more fully responsive to the full range of young people in the classroom, including those with more creative and practical interests.
- Ensuring the inclusivity of school cultures and systems of care and their responsiveness to students' individual needs including those with SEND, those previously placed in isolation or excluded and those from low-income backgrounds.

- Developing opportunities for students, especially those from historically marginalised groups, to participate in decision making about the conditions that shape their learning, gain confidence in doing so and develop the expectation that they should be involved in helping to shape and create all the institutions they live inside, including the workplace.

We suggest that progress towards advancing the three sets of changes presented here is required not only for the sake of social justice and young people's individual and collective wellbeing. It is also an economic imperative, given what we know from Young Lives, Young Futures and other research about how alienation from school and being in poor quality work can cause mental ill health resulting in young people being NEET for very extended periods of time or in churning between casual work and unemployment, thereby substantially exacerbating national productivity challenges.

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