Job security for young people leaving school is in rapid decline

Only four in ten young people who do not go onto higher education are in stable paid work or apprenticeships, according to research from King's College London and the Edge Foundation.

The study of young people in England, found that among those who did not progress to higher education, only 16% secured apprenticeships and just 23% had secured stable work by age 19-20. Of those in work, only half had a permanent contract, down from 81% in a similar study six years ago.[1]

The findings are from *Young Lives, Young Futures,* a major survey of post-school transitions in England, led by Sharon Gewirtz, a Professor of Education at King's College London. The survey followed 4,295 young people born in 2004/05 from ages 15-16 through to 19-20 and was carried out over three waves from May 2021 to January 2025.

The research highlights that temporary and casual work were associated with worse pay and poorer workplace relationships and job design than either apprenticeships or stable work. These findings suggest that this kind of work is not only insecure but also typically more isolating, offering fewer opportunities for mentoring and meaningful participation in workplace life.

Those experiencing mental health difficulties, unfair treatment and bullying at ages 15-16 were more likely to experience poorer relationships and more limited employee voice at work at ages 19-20, suggesting that vulnerabilities experienced at school continue into early labour market experiences.

The study also found that the proportion of young people classified as not being in education, employment or training (NEET) more than doubled between the ages of 17/18 (4%) and 19/20 (10%), and more than 40% of those who were NEET at ages 17-18 remained so two years later. Between the ages of 17-18 and 19-20 NEET status was far more persistent than any other education or employment status.

Despite common perceptions of disengagement and inactivity, the study found that around seven in ten NEET respondents were either actively seeking work or education or engaged in voluntary or unpaid caring work.

The research also found substantial inequalities in access to apprenticeships and secure work. For example, young people from Asian and Black backgrounds apply to apprenticeships at similar rates to their White peers but are significantly less likely to

secure a place - by approximately 15 and 12 percentage points respectively. And, while Black young people are more likely to stay on in education beyond compulsory leaving age, those not in education are approximately 24 percentage points less likely to be in stable employment than their White peers at age 19-20.

Ahead of the upcoming Milburn report, the result of an independent review into NEET status, the authors say these findings point to a post-school transition system that is failing a substantial proportion of young people.

Professor Sharon Gewitz, School of Education, Communication & Society, King's College London said: "One of the main messages of our research is the importance of listening to young people - for the sake of their own wellbeing and the wider economy. The vast majority want to work but are being let down by a system that is riven by inequalities and that is simply not delivering enough decent opportunities.

"This means we need to be wary about any proposed welfare reforms that could result in young people being forced into poor quality employment or work experience. Instead, the focus must be on increasing and equalising access to good work. This is not rocket science. It means tackling low pay and unfair recruitment practices, strengthening protections against oppressive work cultures, and providing more scope for young people to derive fulfilment from—and exercise their autonomy and voice at—work."

Olly Newton, Executive Director, Edge Foundation said: "As we eagerly anticipate the publication of Alan Milburn's second report, these latest results from the Young Lives, Young Futures project make for sobering reading. They reinforce many of the challenges set out in Milburn's first report, with high levels of sustained NEET status.

"They also point clearly to themes which we hope will be addressed directly in the second – more apprenticeships, more and earlier vocational pathways and a greater say for young people in decision making."

The researchers recommend a number of policy priorities for government, including:

- strengthening vocational pathways;
- preventive action that recognises the diversity of experience within NEET status;
- workplace policies that support young people with mental health needs and create supportive and inclusive environments where all workers can participate fully; and
- shifting focus from individual employability to structural reforms that: address the shrinking supply and quality of work opportunities; improve transport affordability and connectivity; and ensure that recruitment practices are transparent, fair and inclusive of young people from all backgrounds.

Notes to editors:



- For more information, a copy of the report or to speak to the authors about the report, please contact Rowan Walker, Senior PR and Communications Manager, King's College London at rowan.walker@kcl.ac.uk or on 07986 463767
- Approximately half of young people in England build their futures outside of higher education.
- The survey, which was carried out over three waves from May 2021 to January 2025, was conducted as part of the ESRC-funded Young Lives, Young Futures research project led by Sharon Gewirtz, Professor of Education at King's College London. The analysis presented is based on the responses of the 4,295 young people who participated in all three waves of the survey.
- Workplace relationships were measured by survey items on supportiveness of colleagues, respect for diversity and experiences of unfair treatment and bullying . Job design was measured by items on workload manageability, scope for exercising autonomy at work and sense of achievement derived from work.
- [1] Ross, A., Duckworth, K., & Harding, C. (2025). Post-16 Pathways:Analysis of Outcomes. Department for Education.
- The report will be uploaded to the Young Lives, Young Futures project page on Wednesday 11 November: https://www.ylyf.co.uk/

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King's has more than 42,000 students (including more than 12,800 postgraduates) from some 190 countries worldwide, and 8,500 staff.

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About the Edge Foundation

The Edge Foundation works to make education relevant to the lives and futures of young people across the UK. We connect research, policy and practice to shape practical solutions and bring new ideas to policymakers to influence change. We champion a broad and balanced education that brings together academic, creative, vocational and technical learning with real-world experiences and strong links to employers. To find out more visit www.edge.co.uk

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