

Half of young people leave school unprepared for work, new research finds

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New research from the think tank – [Institute for Public Policy Research \(IPPR\)](#) – shows that only 47 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds felt ready for work when they left education, compared with 60 per cent of over-26s. Despite more schools reporting that they offer high-quality work experience, two in five 18- to 24-year-olds have never completed any work experience. By contrast, earlier generations – those in their late 20s, 30s, and 40s – are significantly more likely to have done so.

The number of young people missing out on these opportunities could have implications for social mobility, with 60 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds agreeing that work experience opportunities usually rely on who you know, not what you know.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are already twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than their better-off peers and there is a risk of deepening this inequality.

With nearly one million young people aged 16–24 now NEET, an 11-year high, these findings point to a widening opportunity gap, where background plays an ever-growing role in shaping outcomes.

IPPR analysis suggests that delivering on the government’s opportunity mission – to break the link between a parent’s income and a child’s future prospects – will require a more ambitious and coordinated national effort.

To tackle the crisis, the report calls for a renewed social contract to include the principle that every generation should be better off than the last. It sets out a roadmap to achieve better outcomes for young people, with a real youth guarantee at its core: a national mission to ensure every young person has a fair chance to thrive.

The key recommendations include:

- Boost readiness and opportunities for work: Bolster the careers education system, increasing access to work experience for those most at risk of becoming NEET via a short-term wage subsidy programme
- Introduce an 80-hour enrichment entitlement and access to trusted adult relationships: Mirror the commitment to breakfast clubs in primary schools with after school clubs in secondary schools serving high-deprivation areas and roll out Young Futures Hubs to provide safe spaces for young people
- Unlock access to apprenticeships: Set a national target for new apprenticeship starts, ringfence the Growth and Skills Levy for under-25s, and establish a new apprenticeship maintenance loan to remove financial barriers

Avnee Morjaria, associate director for public services at IPPR, said: “The prime minister’s ambition to level the playing field for young people is absolutely right, but our data shows we are moving too slowly, and too many are being left behind.

“With almost a million young people now NEET, we need a serious plan to rebuild opportunity. That means support that doesn’t stop at the school gates – and a national effort to ensure every young person can thrive.”

Efua Poku-Amanfo, research fellow at IPPR, said: “Young people’s futures shouldn’t be shaped by their background or postcode – but for too many, they still are. The public backs fair access to opportunities like apprenticeships and enrichment, but current policy isn’t delivering at the scale or speed needed. A real youth guarantee would help turn that around and show young people that we’re serious about their future.”

Farzana Begum, Youth Futures Foundation’s Future Voices group ambassador, said: “We are taught that we can do anything and be anything when we grow up, but the reality is that there are systematic barriers that limit many young people from accessing opportunities to thrive in education and employment. I want to see a future where young people are better supported throughout their journey into adulthood and are equipped with the skills necessary to navigate this pivotal transition. The recommendations made in this report provide policy makers with the building blocks towards a brighter future for all young people.”