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Youth trends

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YOUTH TRENDS

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Unprecedented change?

Background to this report

There is much discussion of 'the spirit of the times'. Assumptions about world conflict, economy, global pandemics, political sentiment - all have been adjusted and realigned as events of the last five years have unfolded. Generations are being buffeted by social and economic change, hopes raised for some and expectations dashed for others. Just as the world entered a recovery phase following the COVID-19 pandemic, the long anticipated impact of widely-available AI began to unfold. Unlike the calls by some pundits, none of this represents unprecedented levels of change – extreme pressures and shifts have been a feature of countries which experienced plague and pandemic, agricultural and industrial revolutions, who were or are global powers, and who have experienced high levels of migration and economic change. In the face of accelerating change it is easy to lapse into the discourse of 'unprecedented…' 'never before…' – and whilst cycles of change indeed bring novel features of human development and new historical challenges - we must not forget that we have experienced huge change in the past and have responded to it – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. This paper explores the nature of current changes and the pressures these place on young people and those seeking to support them – including the pressures on policy makers.

The approach in this paper

In order to fully understand the current context facing young people, and to reflect on next steps in policy, this paper will take both a historical perspective and a multi-dimensional look at data on youth in England. The question 'what are the youth trends in England in 2025?' is both important and easy to say. Answering it is far more complex. Deep social trends are difficult to apprehend, and research frequently lags behind the pace of consolidation and development of these trends. But some worrying trends are evident: literacy is a case in point. Around the world, even in the most developed nations, literacy is declining. This was detectable in data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We do not yet know exactly why this occurring. But having data to recognise that this is indeed the case, and looks like a sustained fall, rather than a temporary drop in performance, is vital for action. Even in the absence of complete explanation of causes, policy must be formed and swiftly to avoid inequalities and disadvantage becoming crystallised in arrangements and being a burden and constraint not only to individuals but society as a whole. Communities which are 'left behind' experience worse outcomes across the board – health, wealth, social mobility, anti-social behaviour. The challenge for policy formation is seeing today what is likely to become a serious problem tomorrow.

Timely response to accumulating problems – detecting the direction of trends

Data on trends allows us to see the direction of travel in key elements of youth culture, attainment, choices of 'route', transitions and progression. Data on context allows us to see the services available to young people and the state of society and economy. When we unify data from a wide range of studies – of different dimensions of education, society and economy - we begin to see what might be unfolding for our young people. This paper encourages a complex and sensitive approach to understanding the realities for young people – they exist in complex sets of relationships and pressures, and we need to retain that sense of complexity and interrelatedness in our thinking and in national policy formation (Tan 2024; Oates 2018).

The long view is interesting

The most fatal pandemic to date was the Black Death in the 14th Century – between 30 and 50% of the population of Europe died. Seven hundred years later, the 1918 influenza outbreak killed between 50 and 100 million people. From 2020 to 2023, global COVID-19 fatalities totalled around 7 million. COVID-19 was not unprecedented.

And what of economic and social change? The industrial revolution in England depopulated the rural areas at massive scale, with millions moving from country to towns in search of work, as industry scaled up and agriculture both mechanised and globalised. Heartland cities such as Leeds grew from nothing, at a startling rate. Yet in England, during this time literacy increased from around 40% to nearly universal by the end of the 19th Century (Clark 2003). Schooling responded in a time of huge societal transformation – and, contrary to some pundits' claims, educated individual young people in excess of the needs of production.

New aspects of change

Today, some estimates suggest AI may cause a loss of 300 million jobs worldwide, with 60% of jobs capable of automation or transformation by AI in the immediate future. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bressent sees retraining of existing workers as fundamental to both servicing growth and securing continuing employment for workers in affected roles (Kelly 2024). Things indeed are changing, but education has responded to change of this magnitude in the past, to the great benefit of young people and society.

When change is gathering pace, and a new pattern of economic relations begin to be palpably felt, thoughts rightly go not only to the unfolding pressures on industry and workers, but also to the prospects for youth.

The future for youth is also the future of our society and economy. What we do now regarding education and training for young people will impact profoundly on the availability of labour to the economy and on social aspirations and political sentiment.

The decade in which you are born makes a difference

The historical perspective allows us to explore whether the current context is unique, or has precedent. One vital source are the key longitudinal studies – the 1958 NCDS, the 1970 BCS and the 2000 Millennium Cohort Studies. The surveys follow a sample of individuals throughout their lives, allowing examination of relationships between health, social background, education and employment. The surveys show a strong relationship between attainment and opportunity – being well educated and entering the labour market at a time of economic buoyancy tends to lead to better life outcomes. By contrast, entering it with the same level of attainment at a time of economic decline or stress leads to worse outcomes (Wadsworth & Bynner 2011). The state we are in now seriously affects the life chances of current young people.

Social and economic background has a powerful influence on life outcomes, but it does not trump all other factors at play. Early development is heavily conditioned by activities within families, and those activities are changing significantly (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins 2010; Oppenheimer & Rehill 2020; Sina et al 2023). Educational attainment matters, with some evidence that the nature of a young person's engagement with education and their resulting attainment is more important than social background (O'Connell & Marks 2022). Economic cycles appear to have a profound effect on life chances; the decade in which you were born, or were young, really matters (Wadsworth &

Bynner op cit). COVID-19 marked a peak of disruption, accompanied by a sense of 'returning to normal' – but for England in particular there appears to be lasting impacts in respect of school participation as well as labour market shifts and macro-economic legacy (Oates 2024; Paxman 2024).

Emerging from the 'COVID years' – gaps and cliff edges in provision

Looking back from a standpoint in late 2025, 2022 and 2023 were particularly demanding years for 18 year olds transitioning into the next stage of education and training. These young people had not had the experience of taking high stakes examinations, since they had received Centre Assessment Grades (2020) and Teacher Assessed Grades (2021). Whilst 2022 A level grade distributions were elevated by comparison with pre-pandemic grades, standards in 2023 were tightened. A and A* grades stood at 27.2% on results day, compared with 44.8% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many universities responded with reduced entrance requirements. 79% receiving results gained a place at their first choice institution. Acceptances to university across the UK stood at 493,940 in 2023, rising to 498,340 in 2024 (mainly due to an increase in the cohort size) but from a peak of 515,650 in 2020. In the period 2006 to 2019 acceptances to HE had been rising steadily; by nearly 30% - with 464,335 acceptances in 2019. A long and consistent trend of steady increase in HE entries was disrupted by COVID (House of Commons Library Research Briefing Bolton P 2025).

An increasing number had been seeking higher education prior to COVID-19, and in 2020 a record number were admitted. Entries to first degrees increased by 8%. 2021 saw a slight decline by 2% after this 2020 peak. Together, these years represent a 10.9% increase over pre-COVID levels. These young people in the majority have now graduated from university. But for these cohorts, there was a dramatic increase in those failing to complete their degrees – by 28% over a five year period (BBC 2023). The primary reason cited for drop out was mental health (Lewis & Stiebahl 2025).

The figures show a disproportionate increase in drop out – while entries rose by 11% over pre-COVID levels, drop out rose by 28%. What is happening for these young people? A number of factors seem to be in play simultaneously. A large segment of the cohort obtained university places in 2020 who would not have obtained a place previously – grade inflation of Centre Assessment Grades combined with unadjusted offer processes, leading to increased admissions. With the rapid decline in overseas students, HE places were available for the increased domestic entry. For both 2020 and 2021 domestic cohorts, these students would have taken GCSEs – they would have had experience of high intensity study for high stakes examinations. In contrast, the 2022 cohort had taken A levels with no prior experience of national examinations at 16. This made the examination process demanding for them. The resumption of A Level examinations in 2022 saw a raft of modifications to regulations to increase accessibility, and careful management of standards to start a 'journey' back to 2019 examination standards. 2022 awarding was more stringent than the inflated levels of 2020 and 2021, but remained substantially eased over 2019. At the time, modelling the potential issues prior to results day suggested around 52,000 students might be unplaced (Bowett & Oates 2022). In the event, offers were lowered and places available through clearing increased substantially. The next year's A Level cohort in 2023 in turn also lacked the experience of taking national examinations at 16. In their GCSE year, Centre Assessment

HE entry took on a new pattern following 2020

The cliff edge at 18 – dealing with discontinuities in support

Grades had been awarded. As with the 2022 cohort, for them A Levels were challenging; added to this, standards were again tightened and access measures reduced. 2023 was a further year of risk of a large number of unplaced students – but as with 2022, offers were flexed and – in the continuing reduction of overseas student numbers – places became available through clearing. The story was good in general, but two things must be recognised. The cohort which was successful in gaining entry to HE subsequently experienced an elevated level of dropout. More insidiously, there is evidence of low engagement and serious declines in attendance, combined with strong pressures to reduce attendance in order to engage in part-time work to meet financial needs (BBC 2025).

Those 18 year-olds that applied and were unsuccessful or were uncertain about next steps in the face of depressed examination results typically faced a cliff edge in terms of support. If a child remains in approved education or training, an eligible parent can receive benefit until the young person is age 20. But the caveat here is 'remaining in approved education and training'. For those who are vulnerable the issue can be falling into a void at the point of transition. During the resumption of A Level examinations in 2022, with Lisa Bowett, I explored college support for those who had not obtained grades enabling their expected progression destinations. Support was available on results day and the days immediately after, but was at a level far below that available whilst the students were studying. This reduction of access to services occurred at a time of great stress for those whose results fell short of expectation. The advisory team in one college stated '…we can do no more than advise on applications and appeals…the students have now left us…'. This contrasted acutely with the levels of support typically offered during study. Throughout years 12 and 13, students were allocated personal tutors, had support from subject tutors, had access to student welfare services within colleges, and had support and referral advice in accessing statutory child services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and NGO child services such as Childline. This all changed at the point of receiving their results – as over-18s they now found themselves regarded as adults, with access principally to adult services – a further change to an already stressful situation, with added demands of navigating unfamiliar services. This 'cliff edge' situation does vary by location: age entitlement to CAMHS varies by area and region, and can extend to 25. Some providers do straddle the youth-adult boundary: YoungMinds offers services to young people and parents, to age 25.

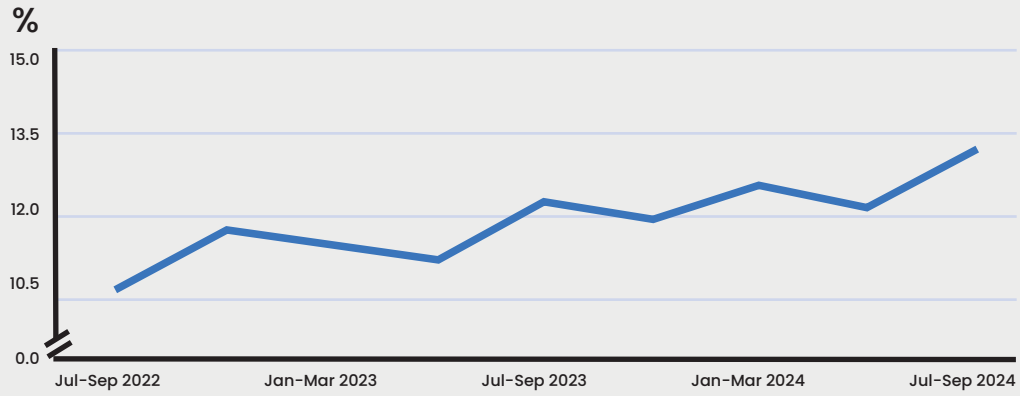
But for the majority, this notional handover from youth to adult services is experienced by many young people as a point of discontinuity and stress rather than one of smooth transition. The Select Committee report of September 2025 acknowledged the risks to young people who experience problems in 16+ and 18+ transition from state education – 'a patchwork of provision' with risks of young people 'falling through the gaps', and only one third of people aware that the careers service exists (House of Commons Education Committee 2025). While outlining the recent history of 'cliff edge; it commends the potential of a revised scheme developed jointly by the Department of Work and Pensions and the Department of Education. In allocating higher levels of funding for 18-24 NEET young people, the principles of the arrangements do recognise the scale and importance of need. However, substantial effort will need to be devoted to providing young people with seamless handover from institutions to the service and to ensure support for

those who have dropped out of contact: the committee itself states that the plans risk 'becoming little more than a rebranding exercise', needing a 'more ambitious and energetic approach to implementation'.

Looking back in time, both NEET and HE participation figures show an impact of the 2008 economic crisis – a reduction in available employment increased NEET and drove an increased propensity to apply for and enter HE (Gov UK 2023). The 2008 crisis was followed by a peak of NEET figures in 2011, numbers then dropping until the COVID-19 pandemic – at which point they rose sharply. This reinforces the relationship between life outcomes and economic cycle seen in the longitudinal survey data. Attainment matters – for competitive advantage – but economic context affects the extent to which that attainment can be utilised. For the COVID-affected groups 2020-23, 2024 NEET data for 16-24 year olds show an escalating figure of 987,000 (13.4% of the cohort or 1 in 7) – the highest figure for the past decade - which increased by 110,000 in a single year.

Figure 1: **The percentage of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) increased over the year (July to September 2023) [Note 1]**

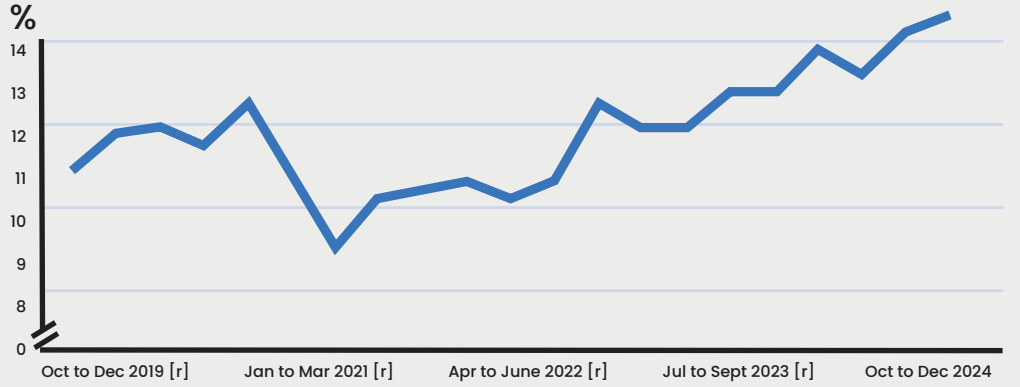
People aged 16 to 24 years NEET as a percentage of all people aged 16 to 24 by age, seasonally adjusted, UK, July to September 2022 to September 2024



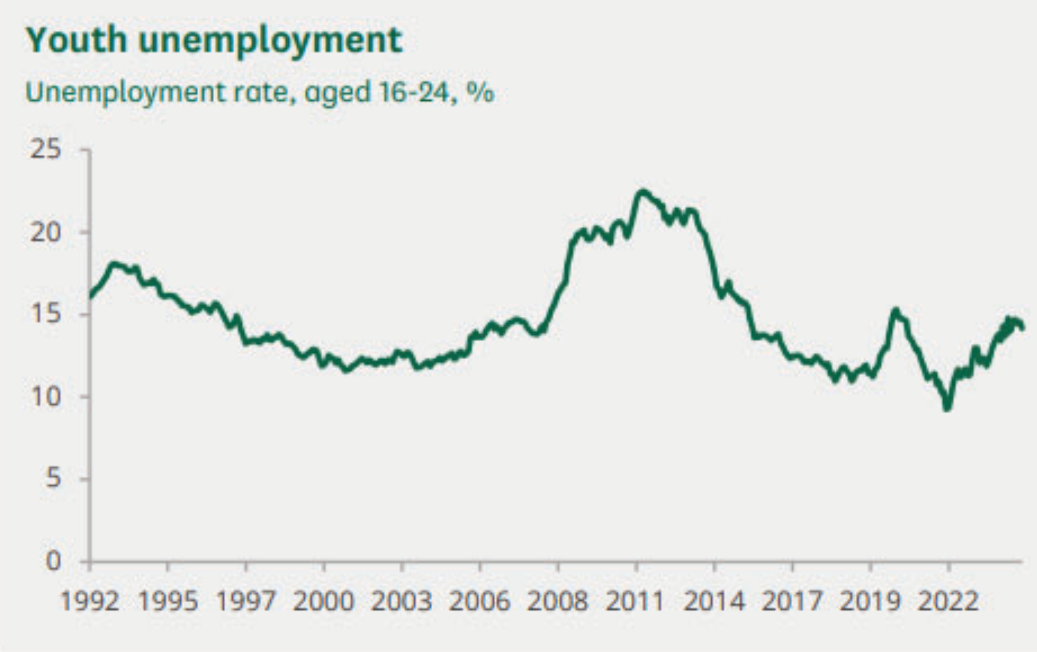
Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics
https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/the-rapid-rise-in-number-of-young-people-who-are-neet-is-a-warning-for-us-all/

Figure 1: **The percentage of young people who are not in education, employment or training increased over the year (October to December 2023) [Note 1]**

People aged 16 to 24 years not in education, employment or training (NEET) as a percentage of all people aged 16 to 24 years by age, seasonally adjusted, UK, October to December 2019 to October to December 2024



Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK - Office for National Statistics



Sources: ONS, A05 SA: Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity by age group (seasonally adjusted) and A06 SA: Educational status and labour market status for people aged from 16 to 24 (seasonally adjusted)

https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05871/SN05871.pdf

NEET trends are adverse

The NEET data join other data on attainment and progression in showing a marked split in the life trajectory of males and females – 14.4% of males and 12.3% of females. The majority are 'economically inactive' (595,000) as opposed to 'unemployed' (392,000). The data also show strong regional effects – low economic participation amongst youth is concentrating in certain communities. 30 local authorities at the end of 2024/start of 2025 had improved NEET figures (decreasing by at least 0.5 percentage points), 79 had stable levels, whilst 44 had higher proportions (increasing by at least 0.5 percentage points) – the Midlands and the North East having notably high levels, but data also shows specific towns as areas of concentration – Grimsby, Doncaster, Dudley – the 'urban Northern belt' has now exhibited an enduring history of high NEET figures (Lee & Wright 2011).

For a 'youth trends' perspective the gradient of the data lines is all-important: they are on the rise – with persistence and pressure, at a time of slow growth and adverse economic conditions (KPMG 2025; HM Treasury 2025). But taking an integrated approach to NEET risk is essential. It is not just that the overall trend is of concern; factors affecting young people present a compound effect for some young people. The 2023 Impetus study emphasises that '....for many young people, the combined effect of (socio-economic background, qualifications, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), ethnicity, gender and geography) is associated with being dramatically more likely to be out of work, education or training (NEET)...strong GCSE results can be a game changer: young people from low socio-economic backgrounds with high qualifications are 27% less likely to be NEET than average, demonstrating the importance of education in levelling the playing field...' (Baloch 2023). And, as this report emphasises, this is all unfolding in a period of adverse economic development.

Transition into VET and work

Comparing Germany and England is revealing. In the late 40's and early 50's, both nations were reeling from the effects of global conflict. Post-war reconstruction in the 1950s took very different paths. For industrial training in Germany, a complete overhaul and modernisation of post-16 vocational training resulted in the Dual System of apprenticeship – stable and long-lived arrangements for long-duration youth training which cemented a productive state-enterprise-social partners relationship. The system guaranteed a supply of highly flexible, highly trained young workers. In Britain, trammelled with conflict-related debt, training policy staggered through decades of refinements of existing arrangements, exhibiting oscillation between different mixes of voluntarism and compulsion, through Training Boards and short duration training schemes of the 90s, back to voluntarism and then swinging to the levy arrangements of 2010.

The enduring legacy of training policy of the 1980s

A decisive moment occurred in industrial training policy in England in the 1980s. It was significantly and suddenly shaped by the Toxteth riots and the nation-wide disturbances of 1981 (Frost & Philips 2011). The riots occurred after protracted and extensive industrial closures and rapidly rising youth unemployment (Vathi & Burrell 2022). Whilst analyses suggest a racial component within the gamut of causes, economic privations and unemployed youth were primary elements. Sociological studies include accounts of a profound sense of marginalisation, and lack of hope and prospect amongst young people. The Toxteth riots, combined with the Brixton riots which shortly preceded them, drove an urgency in national public policy relating to youth education and training. The New Training Initiative white paper published in December 1981 (HMSO 1981) included three principal objectives: reform of apprenticeship (NTI1); creation of new youth training programmes (NTI2); and reform of adult training (NTI3). Toxteth encouraged immediate rather than long term focus to policy action. Of the three objectives, NTI2 Youth Training was prioritised, giving rise to a sequence of short-duration youth training programmes, the first being YTS (Youth Training Scheme), which followed the previous YOP (Youth Opportunities Programme). The assumption in 1981 was that a high volume of training was vital to engage youth and should be brought immediately on stream; programmes capable of being delivered swiftly within existing capacity in state training centres and FE colleges. Programmes were delivered within enterprises as well as state or voluntary sector providers, but the need for high volume - and swiftly - placed a strong emphasis on the latter. This urgency was palpable within the policy community, and both long-duration training in NTI1 – apprenticeship – and adult training – NTI3 – were treated as far lower priority. The state focussed on provision of short duration (6-12 months) aimed to swiftly train to minimum competence for labour market entry in specific occupations. This was in stark contrast to continental models of long-duration training (3+ years) focussed on occupational and wide competence. Such continental policy emphasises the importance to society, economy and the individual of broad based occupational skills through broad, long duration training rather than rapid training in narrow competence for specific jobs. This continental approach allows high levels of competence and high levels of adaptability within the labour market (Brockmann et al 2011) – something which was highlighted by German employers as a substantial asset following the financial crisis of 2008 (Smith 2023).

The possibilities of long duration VET

Only in the mid 90s' did Government begin to gear up apprenticeship policy (NTI1). Apprenticeship starts were essentially static from 2000 to 2007 (around 175,000 starts pa), but then more than doubled in the period 2007-2012 (to a high of 521,000) (Murray 2025). The Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 attempted to further increase numbers, by moving from a policy accepting employer voluntarism in initial vocational education and training, and a focus on qualifications reform as principal policy. However, its introduction disrupted numbers. Places declined dramatically over the period 2017-18, dropping from 495,000 in 16/17 to 375,000 in 17/18. Numbers were fairly resilient during COVID, but did drop by around 70,000, and as of 2024 had not quite recovered to pre-pandemic levels (Cavaglia et al 2022).

One persistent problem of apprenticeship provision is that it has continued to grow principally at the higher levels of apprenticeship, with two problematic features: substitution (funding for training which would have occurred anyway), and concentration of training in those with higher levels of initial qualification – one in six apprenticeship courses were provided to graduates. In 2015 apprenticeship was more likely to be taken up by those in deprived communities – this is no longer the case, with a 2% reduction in participation at all levels of apprenticeship by those from less well-off backgrounds.

This continues to leave those who are in areas of deprivation with far fewer opportunities, in areas with low economic activity, and who have low levels of initial qualification. At the time of writing, Government is examining a raft of measures to direct provision away from higher levels of apprenticeship and towards younger participants (BBC 2025). However, it also includes proposals to shorten the duration of apprenticeship – already at a duration lower than continental equivalents in Germany and Switzerland (GOV.UK 2025a).

In 2023/4, only 24% of apprenticeship starts in the UK were in the 16-18 category (79,000) while in Germany (pop 83.5M, UK pop 69.2M) starts for this age range were more than 400,000. In Germany too there is pressure from industry to shorten apprenticeship and make programmes more enterprise specific. Yet youth culture is causing shifts in the system and forcing policy changes. The decline in starts in apprenticeship in Germany is not a reflection of a shortage of places as a whole – there are vacant places. In 2024, with 350,000 apprentices in craft occupations there were 20,000 unfilled places (ReferNet Germany & CEDEFOP 2024). Young people have expressed preference for graduate level full time VET provision:

> '...But with little fanfare outside Germany, the country's vaunted apprenticeships have become less popular. Instead of bypassing college for apprenticeships, **growing numbers of young people are enrolling in a new kind of college: career-focused institutions known as universities of applied sciences.** These relatively new universities attract a broad range of students who want to pursue postsecondary studies but with clear practical applications. And they are giving traditional research-oriented universities a run for their money, now enrolling nearly half of new undergraduates: 48% compared to 51% at classical universities....' (Wildavsky 2024)

This has strong resonance of the policy move to the formation of Polytechnics in UK during the late 1960's and early 1970's. With this current change in direction, Germany - flag bearer of apprenticeship – is experiencing intense pressures to increase purely state-based VET, with a policy direction very

Higher participation in long durations full time VET

different to the established Dual System apprenticeship model based on partnership between state, enterprise and social partners. Researchers and policy makers in Germany recognise the direction of travel, and are well aware of needing to manage state-based full time VET as a key and growing route in the system (Rozer & van de Werfhorst 2020).

The proposition which this report poses is not 'the Toxteth riots are on the cards again' – rather, it is arguing that public policy should be formed in full knowledge of the trends across key aspects of young lives – and the trends are challenging. It is right to reflect on the communities which felt such powerful alienation in 1981, since current data show a continuing concentration of disadvantage. Geographical concentration of disadvantage is compounded by other effects, such as teacher shortages (French 2025) and disruption to learning being more frequent in disadvantaged schools. But a far more significant compounding effect is the continuing tendency of those with high levels of initial qualification to be more likely to participate in subsequent learning (HEPI 2021; Learning and Work Foundation 2024) The great skills divide: how learning inequalities risk holding the UK back. – and the trend is towards this situation is increasing. Apprenticeship policy has shown this starkly, with increased open access to apprenticeship giving rise to greater participation at the higher levels of provision. With current trends, data show that 30% of 16-64 year olds will by 2035 be qualified only a GCSE or equivalent level (Learning and Work Institute 2025).

The persistence of low levels of qualification

With life chances and prosperity showing such strong cyclical effects, this report is designed to help us understand where we are now and where we are headed – and thus what action should be taken. The data suggest that we are in a period where the sum of the trends amongst youth is adverse. With economic pressures on employers, their propensity to provide initial vocational education and training is reducing. Young people face considerable challenge at points of qualification (age 16 and 18) and especially in respect of transitions at 18. Rising mental health issues amongst youth – unusually high in UK – are affecting qualification levels and youth participation in the labour market. Concentration effects regarding disadvantage are increasing. For any Government concerned about productivity and growth, these trends signal that policy should:

- continue to focus on high levels of qualification at 16 and 18
- continue to focus on apprenticeship growth at the lower levels of apprenticeship
- significantly enhance long term education and training in the FE sector
- provide improved transition support, particularly at age 18
- increase local responsiveness within a national framework of aims and monitoring

Understanding young lives

In the UK, while we have extraordinarily comprehensive data on educational attainment through the annual school census and resulting National Pupil Database, we can only construct a view of youth through partial surveys of other dimensions of their lives. Regular international surveys such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS provide insight, and there is important regular surveying of mental health by UK government (NHS 2024). In the USA, the Understanding America

Transition into adulthood as a crucial, stress-laden threshold

Study (Sutin et al 2022) has detected serious movements in key elements of human behaviour and values. Providing trends 2014-2024, the data show conscientiousness in 16-39 group to be in continual decline, neuroticism constantly increasing, agreeableness and extroversion in constant decline. And in key categories these declines are more accentuated in the 16-39 group compared to 40-59 year olds and 60+. Conscientiousness is closely linked to academic attainment (O'Connell & Marks 2022); when attainment drops yet aspirations remain high, frustration can increase neuroticism in individuals (Sherman & Jost 1941; Quick 2023). We do not have precisely matching data for the UK, but we do have insights through the Mental Health Survey of Young People (MHCYP) in England – the first survey using common methods was in 2017 (Wave 1) has been continued, with the latest in 2023 (Wave 4). Usefully, this spans COVID-19 period, and allows trend analysis of the mental health of 8-25 year olds. Overall, the findings show a rise in 'probable mental disorder' during 2017-2020, and stability 2022-23.

The data reinforce the challenge of the youth-adult transition: while 1 in 5 in the 5-25 group had a probable mental disorder, the level varied across age groups: 20.3% of 8-16 year olds, 23.3% of 17-19 year olds and 21.7% of 20-25 year olds. Transition into adulthood appears as a key threshold: rates did not differ substantially for boys and girls aged 8-16. However, difference escalates for the 17-25 group, with rates being twice as high amongst young women.

The bullying stats in the survey are important. School connectedness – the feeling of connection to peers, teachers and school – is strongly predictive of educational outcomes, and associated with conscientiousness (Konishi et al 2010; McNeely 2002). The survey's results on bullying can be related to this vital sense of connection: 11-16 year olds with a probable mental disorder were 5 times more likely to have been bullied in person - 36.9% compared with 7.6%. This included the new reality for youth of on-line bullying – 10.8% compared with 2.6%.

It is vital not to forget the lived reality of learning for individual young people. The day to day reality of learning and the culture within the rooms of an educational institution is fundamental for an individual's motivation to attend, participate and achieve. That alienation and both overt and 'quiet' non-participation occurs is clear from data and from descriptive accounts of experience (McPherson et al 2023). 'School connectedness' surfaces time and time again as a key aspect of both high quality learning settings and high attainment. Yet it remains compromised in some young people's lives. Pedagogic models of the past five decades have emphasised 'self-directed learning' and 'taking responsibility for one's own learning' at all stages of schooling (Carpenter & Pease 2013; Robinson & Persky 2020). While practical implementation of this takes many forms (Kuiper & Volman 2020), as part of this approach to learning, literature on 'the autonomous learner' emphasises 'responsibility-taking' in all young people whether vulnerable or disadvantaged. In some forms it can de-emphasise the communication, social connection and interaction which is emphasised in powerful research on 'learning communities', 'school connectedness' and on high quality formative assessment processes (Kilpatrick et al undated; Kirschner op cit; Wiliam 2013). It certainly is the case that study outside contact time – associated with conscientiousness – is associated with high attainment (Sharp et al 2001; EEF 2021) but this sits alongside strong evidence that social learning and school connectedness are fundamental to success. This has become a highly

School connectedness really matters for better outcomes

The link between local action and targeting national support may not be sufficiently strong

contested area of educational theory (Asadinik & Suzani 2015); with ideas of 'the autonomous learner' and 'self-directed learning' being heavily criticised on the basis of evidence from cognitive science (Kirschner op cit) and evidence from transnational surveys of educational performance (OECD 2018). But the most important criticism relates to the extent to which a switch from institutional and collective responsibility for learning to 'responsibility for own learning' for younger children benefits those from households with high social capital and strong traditions and practices of learning – in other words, it may concentrate the effects of social background, and compound disadvantage (Morris 2019; Kirschner op cit).

Different nations had very different approaches to school closures during COVID-19. In Sweden, primary schools remained open throughout. In France closures were highly controversial and government focussed on minimising the duration and number of closures. In England the pattern and management of closures, combined with specific family and youth culture, appears to have left us with the long-standing issues of school attendance and elevated mental health issues which are highlighted earlier in this paper – these are coupled with enduring problems of work participation and attendance in the adult labour force (CIPD 2025).

For public policy formation is it vital to understand the relationship between these data on mental health amongst youth and other factors such as deprivation and disadvantage. While child poverty and disadvantage create the conditions for reduced mental welfare, an important 2021 paper using data from the longitudinal surveys in England suggests that conscientiousness and cognitive ability are more closely linked with educational attainment than social and economic background (O'Connell & Marks op cit) – conscientiousness and cognitive ability being aspects of human development particularly at risk from the kind of social isolation and disruption imposed by COVID restrictions. COVID-19 showed an unusual distribution of impact, affecting disadvantaged communities more, but being highly individualised in its impact. Both cognitive ability and conscientiousness are amenable to improvement through education, particularly early phase focus on reading and maths as well as school connectedness (Sylva et al 2004). For policy, this highlights the importance of school attendance, curriculum focus, and mental health strategy. Government has recognised the need, and pledged substantial support and action. But given the distribution of the need, action must use individual data carefully, and be swiftly available. On both these counts, Government action has not been sufficiently fine-tuned: local response and national steering using highly quality individual data do not appear well-linked at present, and whilst at time of publication 600 school mental health teams were commissioned and running in some localities, the full system is aiming for national coverage only in 2030 (Schools week 2025). The link between national policy aspiration and impact is crucial. Government was prudent in funding the Education for Wellbeing research evaluation of universal approaches, which included two gold standard randomised control trials (153 and 213 schools), conducted between 2018 and 2024. The results show an extraordinary mix of positive and negative impacts of actions implemented in schools. Consistent implementation was an issue, but while short-term gains were present, no long term increase in emotional difficulties and reduced life satisfaction emerged. Analysis of actions such as mindfulness exercises and relaxation techniques showed no overall impact on emotional difficulties, with

highly variable impact at secondary and primary for the different interventions – some benefitting secondary and worsening primary mental health outcomes and vice versa (Deighton et al 2025a and 2025b). With the latest school focussed-mental health initiative having a national drive but with local focus, the calls for '...ethically based practice...based on rigorous assessment of both effectiveness and potential harms...' does appear well-grounded (Anderson 2025). The evaluations detected a tendency for universal provision to show greater benefit to pupils without SEN and not eligible for free school meals. Targetting of provision using a sensitive and effective approaches to using data on vulnerability and risk is again strongly highlighted by these studies.

Change in family structures and activities

Family structure, and day-to-day activities in childhood has been consistently shifting since the 1970s. Children increasingly are experiencing childhood in single-parent and 'blended' contexts. The changes are complex, and they are not without impact on educational attainment. The fact that the changes are systemic and entrenched has implications for policymakers: policy needs to acknowledge the changes and their impact despite political sensitivities; mobilise shifts in educational and related social provision where this will prove effective – eg in early years; and precisely target support supplied through fiscal and other mechanisms. Wide ranging integration of policy appears to have been done effectively in youth justice (GOV.UK 2025b; Cattell 2017), with profound reduction of children in custody (340 in 2025 from over 1200 in 2014) and of reoffending young people. For education, attainment figures show improvement, but other wider vital measures such as school readiness, progression, return and well-being are not heading in the right direction – the focus of this report.

So what are the changes? Cohabitation increased steadily from 1991 to 2010, increasing by 10%. However, despite a short-lived upturns in 2004 and 2014, numbers continued to decline, dropping sharply during COVID-19 and returned to pre-pandemic levels – with the overall trend continuing downwards – to a predicted 28% decline between 2019 and 2050.

Lone parent family figures have been relatively stable between 2012 and n 2023: 15% of families in the UK were lone parent families, 84% headed by a lone mother and 16% by a lone father. But this also is characterised by high social differences: 10% of families in the highest social-economic group are single-parent families whilst in the lowest the figure is 28%. The higher financial hardship and mental health challenges faced by lone parent families has an impact on the quality of early learning (McLanahan 2006; Klett-Davies 2016; Borgonvovi & Montt 2012; Evennett H 2023).

Women are having children later and – in line with trends in many European nations – the birth rate has reached a record low since comparable data collection started in 1938, declining consistently since a small uptick in 2010 (Guardian 2025a). The decline in birth rates and increase in later-life child bearing are leading to fewer children in each family. Successive analyses of family structures and life outcomes, particularly the cohort studies in England, show a relationship between poorer outcomes and lone-parent families. The findings highlight the importance of the negative impact of early experience of instability and stress – family breakup after the age of seven has less effect. The effects do continue however, teenage girls seem to be most affected, 27%

Trends in change of family structure are entrenched and progressing

experiencing depressive symptoms compared with 22% in two parent stable families. Depressive symptoms occur in both settings – they just occur to a greater extent in lone-parent settings. It is vital to try to understand cause; with the early years proving so important, the EPPE study examined the features of early years settings which resulted in better outcomes: high levels of cognitive stimulation, high levels of communication, stable and supportive relationships. It also is important for policy that the difference in outcomes occurs right through the income range. This should not be interpreted as economic resources available to the family being unimportant. Poverty matters, and this is shown in all analyses of educational outcomes, and is reflected in regional differences in educational outcomes for young people. What combined research insights suggest is that more economically stressed families find it difficult to provide the features of early development that result in better life outcomes. These pressures combine with shifts in the actuality of children's day-to-day experience. Since the 1980s, children have had more restricted experiences (McCrorie et al 2025; Haidt 2024) - due to urbanisation and sense of risk - less social interaction as a result, a more sedentary life, and in the last decade, a dramatic increase in use of digital devices for online rather than personal interaction – tendencies amplified by COVID-19.

The characteristics of early settings strongly affect learning

Why is this important for youth trends? Early start in life really matters; a poor early experience translates into upward pressure in the school system. Poor starts are distributed across groups, but concentrated in some groups in some settings, principally due to the objective stresses operating in those settings. Parental employment research shows interesting patterns: the 2011 McMunn study found no detrimental effect on child behaviour of children whose mothers were working when they were nine months old, and highest outcomes were displayed by children with two parents in paid work – conversely, when broken down by gender, daughters of non-working mothers had higher adverse outcomes, as did boys in two-parent households whose fathers were not in work for a period during their first five years (McMunn et al 2011). And quality of early years provision matters, alongside what is happening in family settings. The 2023 Sutton Trust analysis (Melhuish and Gardiner 2023) again usefully emphasised not general assumptions about specific groups but the importance of the specific characteristics of early years settings including family settings – '...a high quality home environment is beneficial...with higher family learning environment (HLE) scores associated with better verbal ability at age 5 for both disadvantaged and better-off children...For disadvantaged children, a better home learning environment is associated with better behavioural self-regulation at age 5 and can also help to prevent the poorer socio-emotional outcomes which are otherwise associated with high use of lower quality early years provision...' (Melhuish & Gardiner 2023 p4).

Overall, data from the Early Years Foundation Stage assessments in England show an improvement over the period 2021-2024; from 65.2% of children showing a 'good level of development' to 67.7% in 2024. But these figures must be interpreted carefully. The increase is a sign of recovery from the pandemic period – a good thing – but still leaves over 30% of children below expectations. In addition, the Department for Education itself warns that increasing familiarity with the new 2021 assessment framework may affect the figures (Haves 2025). Narratives from primary schools and school surveys suggest a different picture, of long term and significant declines in school readiness (Guardian 2025b; Savanta 2025).

It is challenging to develop policy responses in a shifting context

By taking a long view on the evidence on changes in family structure and culture, it is clear that these are exerting very significant upwards pressure on the school system. They are joined by the continuing impact of the COVID-19 period. The implications for educational policy are profound. Policy is aiming to improve outcomes and equity – but it does this in context which is not static. The trends evident in the data are adverse; these externalities make effective policy more and more exercising. We are seeing this in the seriously declining literacy figures around the world, including across highly developed top performing nations (Myers 2023). In addition, the problems deriving from changes in family structure and culture are widely spread across society. As emphasised above, they may be concentrated in low income groups, they are not limited to those groups (Cattan S et al 2022). This problem of scattered distribution is particularly evident in the COVID-19 impact data (Oates 2024). Escalating pressures that are highly distributed present real challenges regarding targeting of support.

Data flows to support targeting have recently been enhanced, building on the National Pupil Database, and the link between this and individual labour market data (the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) database). The Post-16 Pathways Outcomes Analysis, (tracking 3,600 young people) has identified nine distinct pathways:

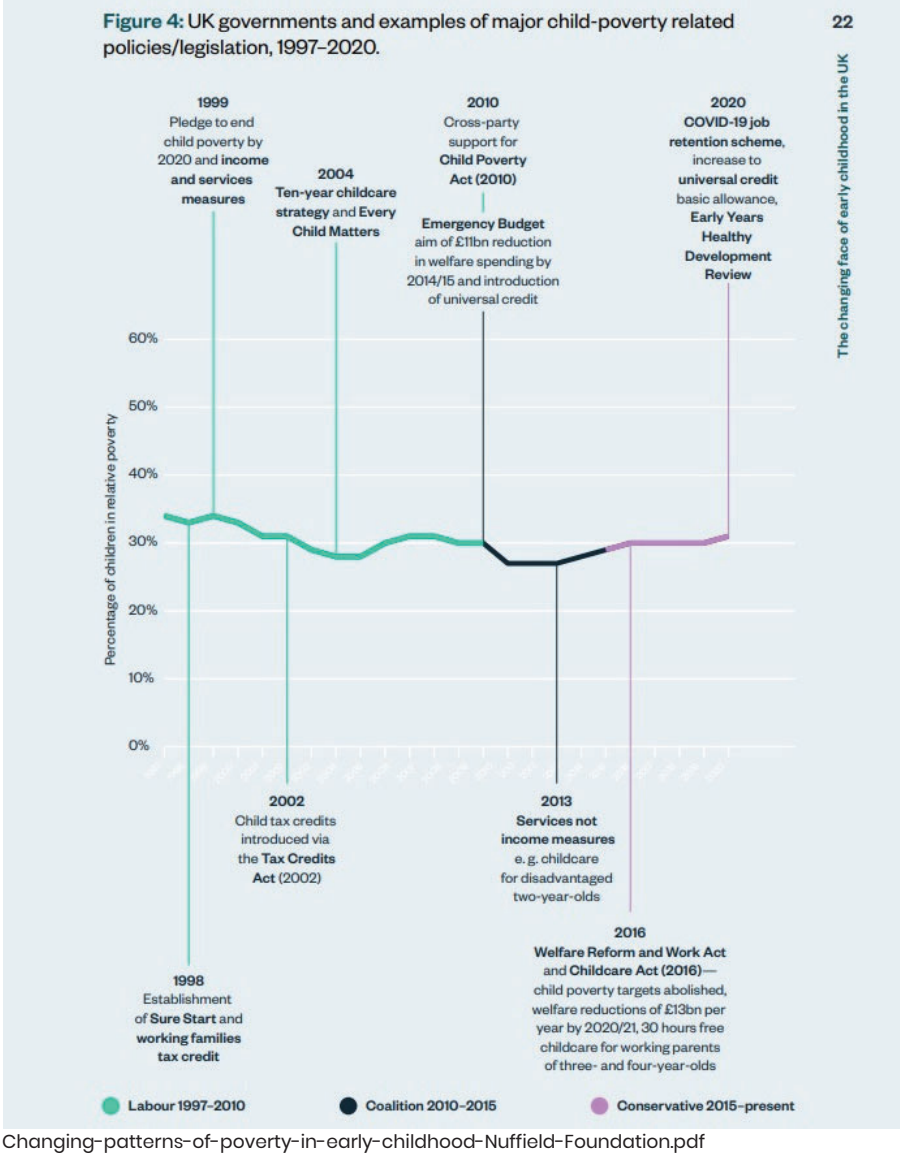
Fulltime Education into employment (28% of non-university students)
Apprenticeship & Training (19%)
Delayed University Entrants (18%)
Extended Full Time Education (16%)
FTED into NEET (8%)
University non-completion (8%)
Returners (2%) (returning to education after periods in employment or training
At home (2%)
Other NEET (1%)

These data highlight 19% on 'vulnerable pathways' – experiencing unemployment or predominantly staying at home (DfE 2025a). In the shifting pressures and trends, these bodies of data are essential for devising support. The current government's £500 billion Better Futures Fund follows from the previous government's 'Life Chances Fund' and uses an interesting model: the trust's duration of 10 years with an aim to raise matched funding from councils, benefactors and investors; funding released to specific projects and activities only when positive impact is demonstrated. This increases the proximity of support design to specific needs in communities, a format which was used positively in London Challenge and in related initiatives in other cities. However, the model holds potential for adverse disparities in action in different contexts, contributing to rather than reducing inequalities. To mitigate this, the role of central government should not be only distribute funds based on impact, but to (i) continuously monitor closely the depth and distribution of problems and (ii) identify and disseminate good practice. The nation's high quality of individualised attainment data from early years through to employment allows local agencies and providers to focus provision and central government to not only recognise at a general level the scale of the problems and allocate adequate funding, but to ensure that resource genuinely is reaching the right places and individuals. The Trust therefore needs to operate not as a massive grant-aid initiative, but as a sophisticated local-state strategic partnership.

National response through local action

Child poverty

With socioeconomic status having a large impact on educational attainment (Tan 2024) concerted efforts to reduce child poverty can represent sound government action through macro-economic policy – eg policy on child benefit, energy price control, etc. Policy design and implementation can thus be accomplished swiftly. Concerted effort to reduced child poverty proved effective in the period 1999 to 2005. The rate fell from 33% at the start of the Labour government in 1997 and by the mid 2000s had reduced to 27%. (Henry 2025). But we have not seen a consistent downwards trajectory. The trend line shows numbers increasing from 2005 and peaking in 2008, back above 30%. Reducing sharply after the emergency budget in 2010 in the first year of the Coalition Government it rose back above 30% during the succeeding Conservative governments. In the year to April 2024, the rate was rising – an increase of 100,000 over 2023 – taking the rate to 31%. Child poverty is more prevalent in larger families and almost all the rise was in this group (Henry & Wernham 2004); 72% of poor children are in working families; regional inequalities are growing, with the North West the worst affected (Loughborough University 2024); there are significant differences according to ethnicity; and 44% are living in a household which includes a disabled person (CPAG 2025). The trends show two important features – relative child poverty should be seen as complex and linked to wider prosperity and economic factors, but also is responsive to central policy actions.



Changing-patterns-of-poverty-in-early-childhood-Nuffield-Foundation.pdf

Child poverty is responsive to national policy actions

Lack of school readiness is a rising problem and a big challenge for schools

School readiness

Early years development is critical in children's learning; delays in social, emotional and cognitive development are particularly serious, not only affecting individual children but also the learning community in which they are located – group learning is affected, teachers are disproportionately consumed by poor behaviour and lack of engagement (Savanta 2025).

School readiness exists within complex social and state assumptions regarding the role of parents in early cognitive, social and emotional development – there is a long history of different expectations in different nations at different times (Tviet 1991). These differences suggest its mutability – it is prone to change. It is also difficult to measure. Potential key data comes from the Baseline Test (a 20 minute test of early literacy, communication, language and mathematics skills) and teacher surveys. The baseline test was piloted in 2019 and has proved controversial (TES 2020). Heavily disrupted by COVID-19, a renewed fully-digital test is planned for 2025. Dependable trend data are not currently available. This leaves survey data from teachers – and the trend data are worrying. In Teacher Tapp's September 2025 survey 9 in 10 of the 1,132 primary teachers surveyed stated that they had seen a decline decrease in speech and language abilities amongst arriving children. The decline in early development is not limited to communication skills. The September survey highlighted: 33% of respondents having at least five children needing specific help; 8% having at least 10.
85% of respondents have at least one reception child not toilet-trained.

The social contract with parents does seem to be shifting: surveyed in late 2024 (Savanta op cit) 49% of parents do not consider it their role to get their children to a state of readiness for school, and 45% of teachers state that inadequate school readiness is due to lack of parental sense of responsibility for school readiness. In addition, with escalating challenges in reception and the first years of primary, there is a significant issue of collateral impact from that increasing small number of young children – impacting the whole learner group. 49% of teachers surveyed in late 2024 (Savanta op cit) stated that problems from lack of school readiness have increased; 33% state that they have remained the same. But the stark figure is the extent to which such increasing issues are consuming teacher time and causing collateral impact: on average teachers state that 2.4 hours of teaching time is lost each day. Schools are responding with new approaches to behaviour management and support (TES 2023), and policy focus on early years has returned after the decline in funding support in 2010-5 (DfE 2025).

The individual and collateral impact from decreases in school readiness affects not only attainment but pupils' school connectedness and social integration – and thus social learning - in schools. This is causing primary schools to 'run faster' to maintain attainment, with high risk of later lower attainment attached to early shortfalls in learning (Sylva op cit). While social isolation during the pandemic is widely cited as being a key factor (Oates 2024; Larsen et al 2021) there are signs of serious structural change – witness the figures cited earlier regarding parents' sense of responsibility for school readiness, and the fact that literacy is now falling in PISA assessments at 15 across a wide range of nations - this trend starting before COVID. The 2018 PISA scores revealed a decline in both mathematics and literacy in many countries, particularly in the EU, compared to 2009. Scores across maths, reading and science have fallen in OECD countries since 2006 – less in science (12 points).

The nature of COVID impact remains poorly recognised – waves of affected children moving up through education until the 2030s

Maths scores have shown a sustained decline but then fell dramatically during COVID, while reading was declining sharply after 2012 and also fell substantially during COVID. Reading scores have fallen by the equivalent of half a year of learning (OECD 2023). Foundational elements of maths and reading are vital for accessing the whole curriculum (GL Assessment 2020) and any decline in the quality of early educational experience can have a compound effect on later learning and life outcomes (Sylva op cit). This unfolding scenario confirms the importance of policy focused on early years, but suggests that upwards pressure on primary schools from societal changes is increasing, and early years policy to date is not offsetting these pressures.

COVID-19 impact is still with us

The messaging around the understandable desire to 'return to normal' after the end of COVID restrictions, to resume social and economic activity, conveys a sense of returning to a pre-COVID status quo. But COVID left its mark not only on 16 to 19 year olds directly affected by cessation of exams, but also on all other year groups affected by periods of interrupted learning, and those who were born or young during the pandemic. And it affected these different groups differently (Oates 2024). This does not present the system with a clear and contained problem which will naturally correct itself as the crisis passes. Rather, there are a series of waves – waves of cohorts travelling through the education system, each with different challenges and needs. This combines with the very unusual and distinctive character of the nature of the impact of COVID: highly individualised, variable in its effect, and widely distributed. It is not clear that governments have recognised this highly distinctive challenge (TES 2022).

Research immediately after the acute period of restrictions showed that primary age children were in general a month behind expectations and maths attainment was affected more than reading (Howard, Khan & Lockyer 2021). COVID-19 amplified long term persistent education gaps across a range of nations including the UK (Twist et al 2022).

In Spring 2023, Year 3 and 4 pupils eligible for school meals were estimated to be around seven months behind their more well-off peers in reading. This gap did not decrease after Spring 2021 and by late 2023 remained wider than gaps reported before the pandemic (Rose et al 2023). Despite some recent reduction of the attainment gap which opened up during the pandemic, there remains a notably larger proportion of very low attaining pupils than seen before the pandemic.

But the deep challenge to policy designed to respond to the clearly substantial need is its unusual distribution. During pandemic, some young people were presented with high quality on-line learning, others were not. But the response to this unusual switch from school attendance was unprecedented in its form: one analysis shows that one in three young people reported an improvement in mental health and well-being during lockdown – citing reduced feelings of loneliness, securing more sleep and exercise, and experiencing reduced bullying (Soneson et al 2023). It is this variability in impact and the challenge to re-establishing high levels of school connectedness in all pupils which stands out. The majority of children felt their mental health was worsened by pandemic; some reported that it had improved. The 2021 Mental Health of Children and Young People survey (MHCYP) highlighted that 40 per cent of 6-16 year olds experienced deterioration in mental health, while 22 per cent

experienced improvement. These young people have not 'passed through COVID and back to normality' – they were impacted by COVID during key developmental periods of their lives and remain only partway through their progression through the education system. Schools are having to respond to these waves of needs flowing upwards through the system, each wave affected differently, responding to the unusual pattern of needs and the unusual presentation of challenge (Oates 2024).

Trends in SEND

SEND arrangements remain unsettled and displaying signs of systemic failure – particularly in respect of incentive structures within arrangements. Sibieta and Snape's 2024 IFS report states:

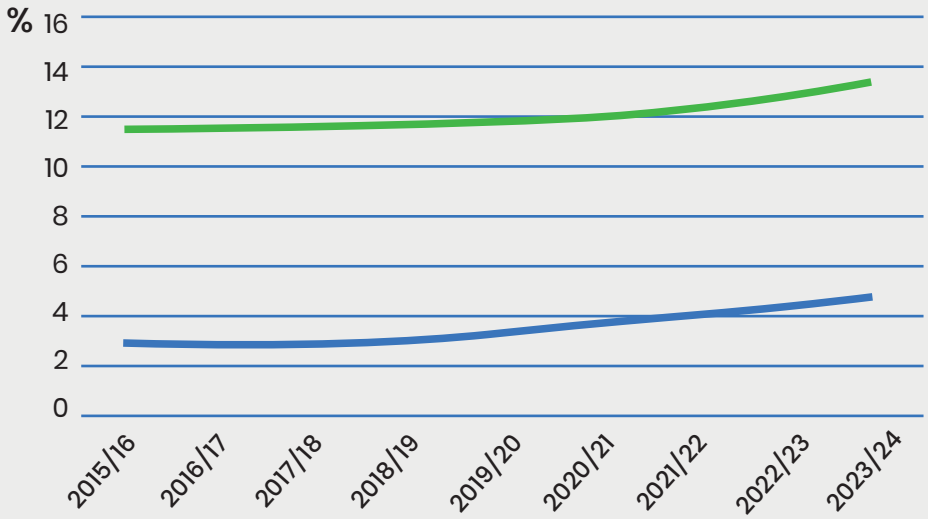
> **'...The number of school pupils with EHCPs has risen by 180,000 or 71% between 2018 and 2024.** As a result, nearly 5% of pupils now have EHCPs. This rise in pupils with EHCPs has been driven by three specific types of needs: autistic spectrum disorder (ASD); social, emotional and mental health needs (including ADHD); and speech, language and communication needs. The rises in ASD, ADHD and mental health needs appear to be global phenomena across high-income countries...' (Sibieta op cit p1).

What is clear is that the trend line on this is consistently upward, accelerating and substantial, with a lack of clarity in the balance of precise causes - but which include severity of needs, increased recognition and diagnosis, and stronger incentives. A key issue is whether the level of acute need is being driven by lack of early diagnosis, which otherwise may allow higher levels of re-integration of young people into standard pathways and educational trajectories (NASEN 2020; EPI 2021). Lack of early diagnosis and support may be driving pressures for educational and training providers later in the system, reduced life chances through lower formal attainment, and collateral impacts in institutions.

The financial and practical implications are substantial. Review of SEND has been protracted. The review of 2023 was met by significant concerns that provision of SEND facilities in Further Education falls short of needs but without commitment to resourcing improvement, and lack of support for those who do not qualify for high-needs support (FE Week 2023). New tariffs were announced to confront substantial geographical and socio-economic inconsistencies in provision, alongside relaxation of maths and English requirements in apprenticeship frameworks. But major changes such as statutory partnerships to reduce provision variation were deferred until 2025. Currently, in respect of primary and secondary education, 20 local authorities report potential insolvency caused by the structure and scale of SEND requirements (Guardian 2025c), with accumulated deficits of 5.2billion embedded in accounting through the provision of the little-known 'statutory override' in SEND budgets (Sibieta op cit). The structural problems in the model, regional variation and accelerating demand means that SEND remains under protracted government review (Education Committee House of Commons 2025).

SEND remains an escalating crisis

In terms of youth trends in the system, the increase in SEND requirements do not show any signs of abating.



(Department for Education, 'Special educational needs in England: Academic year 2023/24', 20 June 2024.)
Special educational needs and disabilities: Government support - House of Lords Library

It is important to note that EHCP plan provision is in place for individuals until age 25, potentially bridging the difficult youth-adult transition highlighted earlier in this report regarding transition. However, actualities on the ground remain problematic: the issue of 'cliff edge' transition and its prevalence in the system was highlighted by OFSTED in 2021 and by SEND-focussed organisations (OFSTED 2021a; NASEN op cit). It remains a feature of arrangements.

The contradictions of digital literacy

It is most peculiar that one of the most digitally-enabled school systems in the world – Estonia – suffered a comparatively high setback in attainment as a result of COVID (OECD 2025a; Oates 2024). With schoolwork, homework and school-parent links almost universally enabled, an immediate assumption would be that it would have been one of the least affected. By contrast, Singapore – not as digitally-enabled but with high levels of student engagement (ACER 2023) – maintained its long trend of improvement throughout the COVID years. Current research shows that it is not solely having the facility for digital learning in place which supports attainment; the relationship with tutors and the learning behaviours of pupils are key to attainment (Kok et al 2025). Benefits of digital in education exist in a complex relation of access and patterns of use (Livingstone 2024; Hollis C et al 2020; Gorjon & Oses 2023).

For teachers, oversupply of ed tech applications continues to foul market pressures for high quality in those applications (Oates et al 2021). For young people, the prevalence of digital technology in home and school brings different balances of benefit and deficit to different individuals, in differing settings, at different times (Hollis op cit; OECD 2025b). Aino Saarinen's research caused shockwaves in Finland when first published in 2021, based on analysis of the 2015 PISA results (Saarinen et al 2021). It showed that, in Finland, more frequent use of ICT at school predicted students' weaker performance in all cognitive learning outcomes, when adjusted for age, gender, parental socioeconomic status, students' ICT competence, and ICT availability at school. Note that this is not solely an issue of use of personal smartphones – the research engages with the educational use of ICT of all forms in school settings.

The research is highly relevant outside the specific setting of Finland, since its explanation of the negative impacts relates to fundamentals of young people's cognition and behaviour: '...working memory overload and task-switching during the use of digital technologies...suggests that even though students with ICT skills are good at mechanical use of digital devices, they may not have abilities for a goal-oriented and self-directed use of digital technologies that could promote their learning...' (Saarinen op cit p1).

There are UK schools which have confronted these psychological and pedagogical fundamentals, implementing wide use of technology within tight policies and supported professional practice of teachers. One such example is Chesterton Community College in Cambridge. It has had a sustained trajectory of improvement after implementing highly digitally-supported teaching and learning well over a decade ago: mixed intake (16.5% FSM); top quintile for outcomes; 31st in the Fairer Schools Index making it the only Cambridgeshire school in the top 50 of 3,400 secondary schools; Progress 8 score of 1.05 (2023).

England has moved swiftly to an almost universal ban on smartphones in schools – an important policy area in its own right (Schools Week 2025a) - but switches attention from the vital importance of school approaches to ICT within learning, and the quality of specific digital learning resources (Oates et al 2021). The evidence on bans and partial bans is extremely mixed. While individual heads point to a dramatic improvement in behaviour and engagement (Schoolsweek 2025b), the latest research suggests that the act of implementing schools bans is not enough to improve mental well-being anxiety and depression, physical activity and sleep, and educational outcomes (Goodyear et al 2025).

For youth trends, the mixed accounts of impact to date again suggests affect is highly context-dependent – varying by location, individual and setting. But there are distinct underlying trends relating to human development and behaviour. The key 2020 study 'Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media' (Orben et al 2022) suggests distinct phases of sensitivity, with age and sex-based differences – and at key times of youth development. In a study of nearly 84,000 participants aged 10-80 years of age, the relationship between self-reported social media use and life satisfaction rating is at its most negative in young adolescents. Higher use predicts a decrease in life satisfaction a year later, while lower estimated use predicts an increase. Of additional importance for youth trends to 25, decreases in life satisfaction also predict an increase in social media use. And the window of peak adverse impact is different for males and females – 14-15 and 19 years old for males and 11-13 and 19 for females.

Pathway choices – a big issue in youth trends and life outcomes

Trends in subject attainment and pathway choice really matters for life outcomes. Subject attainment from 11-14 heavily determines subject pathways in 16+ assessments (GCSE and level 2 VQs). Attainment at 16 affects post16 subject and pathway choices. Attainment at 18 affects decisions regarding HE participation and pathway choice.

Differences can readily be detected through returns analysis:

> '...A one-grade improvement in overall GCSE attainment is associated with an average increase in the present value of lifetime earnings of

£8,500. This implies that a one-standard deviation (1½ grades) improvement in overall GCSE performance is associated with an increase in discounted lifetime earnings of approximately £96,000. This is nearly 20% of average discounted lifetime earnings, and 46% of the standard deviation of discounted lifetime earnings.

The value of an additional grade in undiscounted earnings is £23,000, which represents about three quarters of the average full-time annual salary in the UK in 2019.3 The estimate for female (male) students is £20,000 (£24,000).

'...There is wide variation in the marginal grade returns by individual GCSE subjects. A one-grade improvement in Maths is associated with a discounted return of £14,500, whereas in English the return is £7,300 and in Music it is £5,500.

On average, men are found to have 18% larger marginal returns than women; those not eligible for Free School Meals have 9% larger marginal returns than those that are eligible...'

Hodge et al 2021 p6

The effects are persistent and long term – both in terms of being present in national data over time and present in individuals' life trajectories. The issue of subject choice is stark, and shown clearly in both school qualifications data and data from higher education participation. Science is an important example:

Subject choices at level 2 & 3 really have consequence

Holding other variables constant, including attainment, those students that took Triple rather than Double Science are significantly more likely to pursue A Level Science (post 16/age 16–18), and to study Science at degree level. Hence Triple Science is significantly associated with an increase in undergraduate participation in science; however, for Double Science (the majority route), the likelihood of future participation is significantly diminished...'

Francis et al 2023

In terms of trends, the situation is improving, in line with policy intentions of the last decade, but not yet meeting the policy aspirations:

'...In 2019, 26.6% of pupils were entered for triple science and just over 95% of pupils were entered for English Baccalaureate (EBacc) science. This is an increase of over 30 percentage points since the EBacc science measure was first introduced in 2010. This has coincided with a large decrease in the number of pupils being entered for BTEC applied science at key stage 4. The number of pupils studying A Levels in biology, chemistry and physics is also encouraging, being at its highest level for 10 years in 2019.

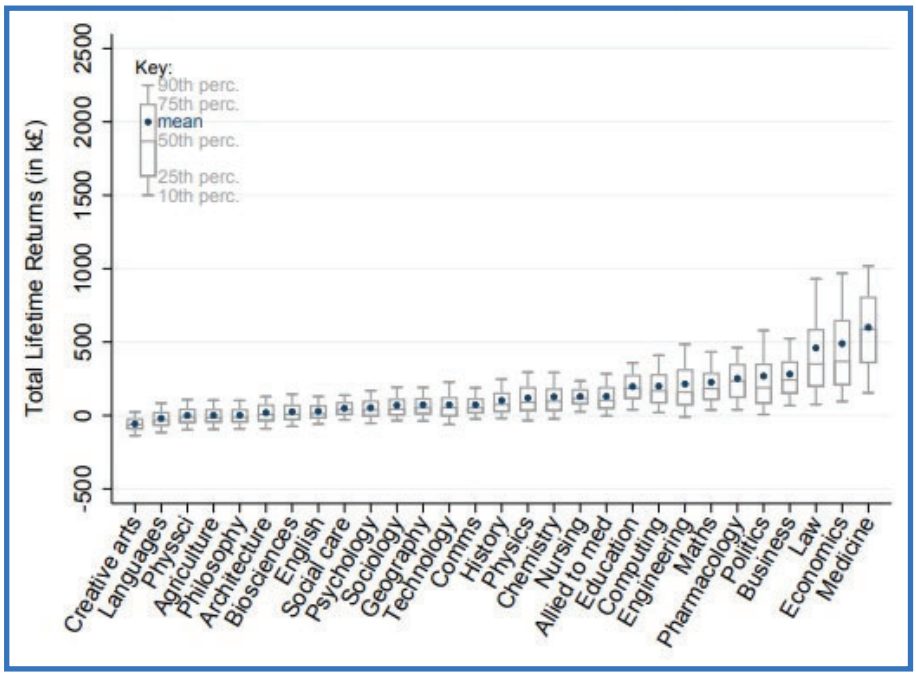
Despite the increase in the number of pupils wanting to study the sciences beyond age 16, it is important to remember that these pupils are the exception. Indeed, research shows that many pupils leave school without a basic knowledge or appreciation of science and that their interest declines with time spent at school. Often, this decrease in interest and motivation occurs when pupils have to make so-called 'choices' about science pathways. For example, many pupils wrongly assume that science is not for them when they are prevented from choosing triple science at GCSE. This is particularly problematic when the decision to study triple science comes too early...'

OFSTED 2021b p4

Low attainment at 16 and 18 was confronted in the Wolf Review of Vocational Education in 2011 which found NEGATIVE return on a range of low level VQs (Wolf 2011).

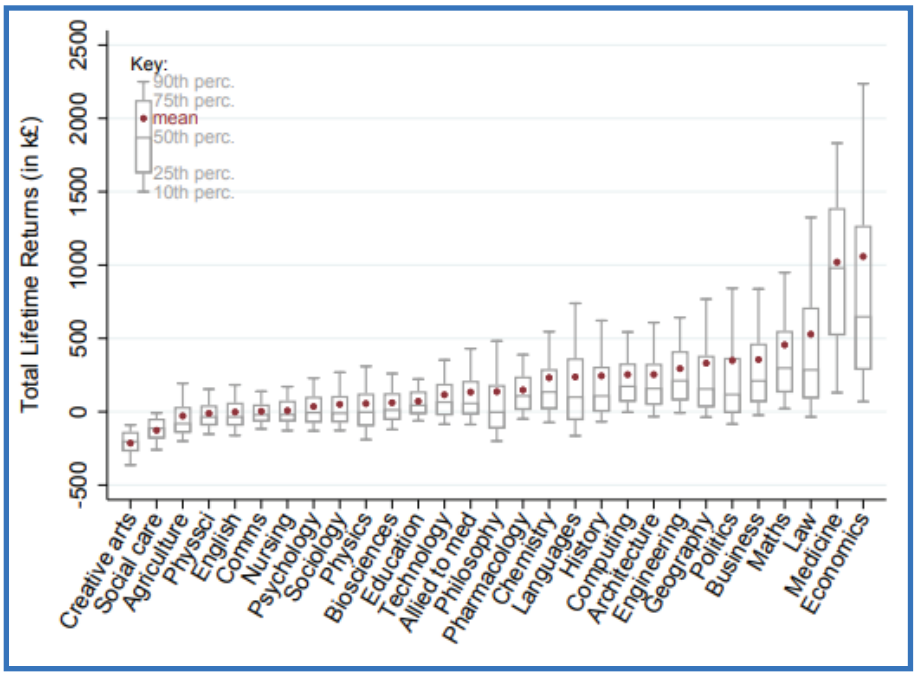
Early low attainment heavily determines later life chances whilst also impacting on productivity and national economic performance. Subject differences are clear in HE data, with a premium attached to mathematics and subjects with high maths content, and negative return on a small 'tail' of subjects:

Figure 32: **DPV total returns to HE for women by subject**



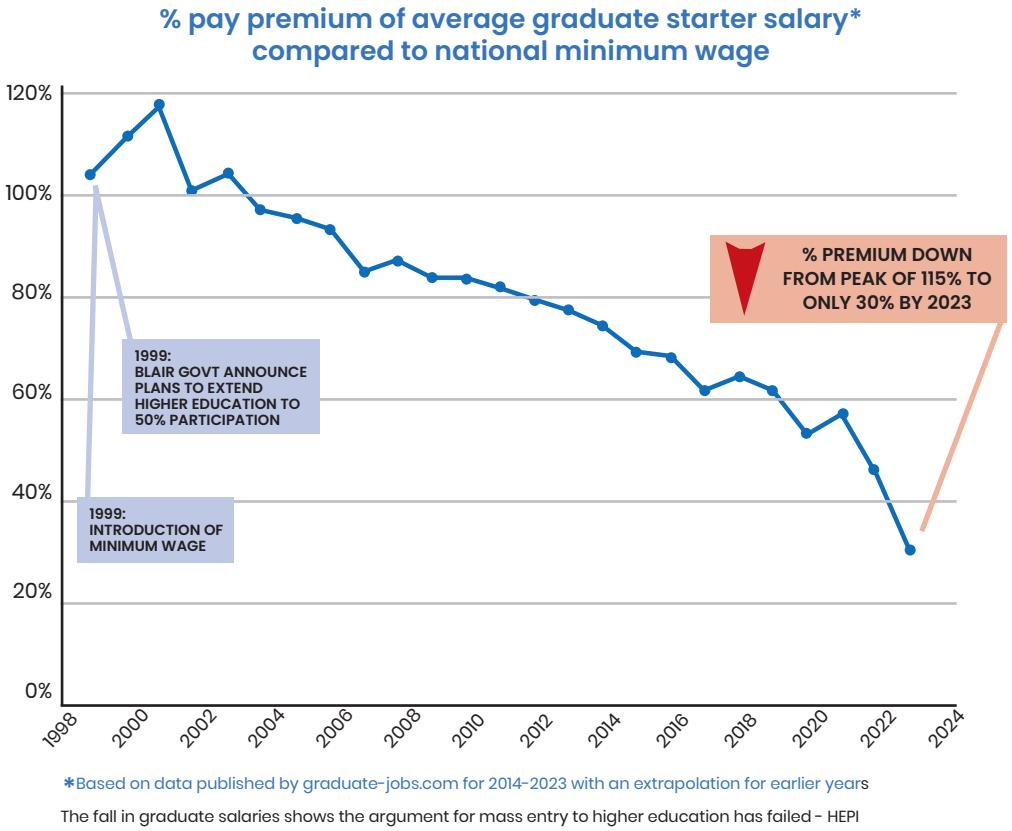
R167-The-impact-of-undergraduate-degrees-on-lifetime-earnings.pdf

Figure 33: **DPV total returns to HE for men by subject**



R167-The-impact-of-undergraduate-degrees-on-lifetime-earnings.pdf

But under the figures lies a stark and worrying overall trend for youth. The 1998-2024 figures for graduate starting wages compared to the national minimum wage shows a profound drop. This contributes to a reduction in overt incentives for participation in HE, contrary to national policy:



*Based on data published by graduate-jobs.com for 2014-2023 with an extrapolation for earlier years

The fall in graduate salaries shows the argument for mass entry to higher education has failed - HEPI

Youth voices

No analysis of youth trends would be complete without considering the voices and perspectives of young people. In each and every key trend area analysed above there are embedded choices and views of young people. The data are one thing. Causes, sentiment, culture, identity and personal responses are yet others. Martin Bloomer's 1997 seminal analysis in 'Moving into FE' (Bloomer & Hodkinson 1997) showed that in making transitions from school to further education, young people engaged in a form of 'localised rationality' – rational choices, but based on very limited factors proximal to their lived experience: ease of travel, maintaining existing social relationships etc. In some instances these were contrary to longer term goals regarding employment and progression. The views and beliefs of young people matter, and their logic can be different to the pre-supposed logic assumed in policy and institutional practices.

Youth sentiment and action does not line up with assumptions in policy

The Jack Petchey Foundation's 2020 report on COVID-19 experiences was exemplary in rapid, authentic collection of student voice (Jack Petchy Foundation 2020). And the statements did not align with educationalists' and politicians' views: '...it is important to reduce the curriculum and content of what we will be examined next year as we have missed out on an extraordinary amount of time at school...' (Sarina, Barking and Dagenham) – 1 in 3 of 6000 London students argued that reducing the curriculum and only examining certain subjects would help most. 42% wanted increased support with mental health. Far more of a surprise was the fact that the same percentage wanted

more textbooks and revision resources – something seldom heard amongst educationalists but entirely in line with recent research on the importance of high quality learning materials (Oates et al op cit). Equally surprising was a figure of one in five wanting the opportunity to repeat the year. Young people had clear and explicit desires – but ones not entirely congruent with national policy or its assumptions,

Student voices reinforce the key issues raised in this paper regarding points of transition: 'I feel the age bracket from 16-25 is very under-supported in many communities, and yet there are some of the strongest societal pressures and expectations laid upon this age group…' (YoungMinds). The Children's Commissioner for England has made strides in surveying young people and building their voice into reporting around key issues in their lives and in educational arrangements.

Summary

This report has focussed on two things: looking at different dimensions of educational arrangements and youth experiences, and looking at long term movement in those dimensions. Some of the lines in those trends – such as overall school attainment and science participation – are moving in a positive direction. Regrettably, the majority of other lines are not. On school readiness, NEETs, mental health, SEND, COVID impact, inequalities and labour market prospects the trends are concerning.

There's some good news but most of the key trend lines are moving in the wrong direction

The current adverse macro-economic indicators for the UK – low growth, low productivity, high regional variation in prosperity – suggest opportunities and circumstances for youth which are not dissimilar to those of the 1980s, which gave rise to unrest and deprivation. However, the mix of key macro trends is distinctly different in 2025 – an aging workforce presents opportunity for well-qualified youth, AI is removing or unevenly transforming roles at different employment levels in the economy, climate challenge is pervasive, international capital and enterprise is far more mobile. And youth as a phase of life is not experienced in the same way as 45 years ago. While highly active on digital media, direct social contact has reduced. Meanwhile, COVID-19 lockdowns created a unique distribution of disadvantage to which there has been poor policy response – the challenge is not a simple one of disadvantage being located exclusively in specific social groups and specific locations (Oates op cit).

If the research on economic cycles says **when** you are born really matters, then it is essential that the State sees its role as supporting equity in life outcomes through policy action tuned to those economic cycles, for example, expanding state VET when pressures cause a lack of places in employer-based training.

And the research suggests that **where** you are born really matters – regional differences in outcomes was amplified by the pandemic and remain evident in regional data in England, and certainly in data from the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom. It's clear that the State is trying to carefully balance localism – which can be sensitive to the reality of needs in specific places – with national funding allocation and monitoring of impact. There are examples of this balance being attained to good effect: London Challenge 2003-2011 (Kidson & Norris undated) and more recently in Liverpool – where the Young Person's Guarantee uses flexibilities in local authority funding

to tightly focus a response to the rising youth unemployment rate in the city (Liverpool City Region 2024). These initiatives demonstrate the assets of policy which increases local responsiveness within a national framework of well-framed aims and sensitive monitoring.

The overall picture is of a system facing pressures coming upwards – from changes in family structures, shifts in infant lives – and pressures coming downwards – from less buoyancy and opportunity for employment and progression in the labour market in particular. The decade in which you are born makes a genuine impact on your life prospects. The current and coming decade look challenging.

A changing system squeezed from both ends

In this decade, new and acute needs have arisen throughout the system – for example from COVID – which are distributed in unusual ways, posing genuine challenge to effective public policy. Policy makers committed to improving education are faced not with a static system which benefits from fine tuning or familiar approaches to improving quality. Rather, it is A squeezed from both ends, and requires new approaches to mitigating this – accurately identifying and effectively meeting needs, getting resources to where they genuinely are needed. Recognising this allows effective policy formation and the facility for government to obtain strong consent for that policy.

FE is all-important in the coming decade

This paper has tried to drill into data to detect deep trends and general tendencies. This helps with identifying specific targets of policy, such as addressing cliff-edge issues in provision for those leaving full time education and training - improved transition support seems essential, particularly at age 18. In the face of the youth trends identified in this report, the evidence does endorse the increased focus on early years education and early identification of specific needs. Likewise, with reduced opportunity in the labour market, increasing attention on Further Education as a place of extended, high quality vocationally-focussed learning rather than short-term, minimum duration learning is all-important. Scrutiny of COVID legacy Government should continue to focus on high levels of qualification at 16 and 18, continue to focus on apprenticeship growth at the lower levels of apprenticeship, and significantly enhance long term education and training in the FE sector.

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October 2025

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