

# **Comparing inequality and outcomes across post-16 education in the UK**

Summary report

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## About the Education Policy Institute

## About SKOPE

## Acknowledgements



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## About the authors

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# Executive summary

## Key findings

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market and maintaining market conditions through regulation with minimal centrally managed coordination, creating a more competitive environment between further education (FE) and higher education (HE).

- **Policy churn:** The policy context across all four UK nations has also been marked by policy churn and instability. Over the last two decades, each jurisdiction has sought to overhaul its post-16 E&T system in a variety of different ways, creating an unstable environment that may harm the aspirations of young people and their perceptions of different E&T pathways.
- **Strained resources:** Providers and employers alike across all four nations emphasised the constrained resources the sector has faced for decades, particularly around the recruitment and retention of staff. The FE sector also consistently highlighted inequalities in pay and conditions between teachers in colleges and teachers in schools.
- **Complex and confusing pathways:** All four nations now exhibit a vast range of vocational and technical qualifications, creating a post-16 E&T landscape that is challenging for

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## Recommendations

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education and training, particularly for pathways to Level 3 qualifications, to avoid further confusion for both young people and employers.

- Policymakers should aim to move from competition to coordination and the development of place-based, integrated tertiary education systems.
- Urgent action is needed in Wales to increase the share of young people attaining Level 3 qualifications, as well as broader action to improve post-16 outcomes and inequalities.
- Winter leaving rules should be abolished in Scotland.
- Policy should be more focused on post-16 inequalities, and informed by better, comparable data.
- Across the UK, policymakers must develop better mechanisms for supporting meaningful employer engagement in E&T.
- Employability skills should be explicitly built into post-16 curricula as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

# Introduction

qualifications. There are also vast differences in the way systems are organised and regulated. For example, Scotland and Wales have placed a high emphasis on coordination across the system. Policymakers in England, and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland, have tended to focus on competition, market logic, and provider autonomy as key mechanisms for improving quality of provision and meeting labour market skills needs.

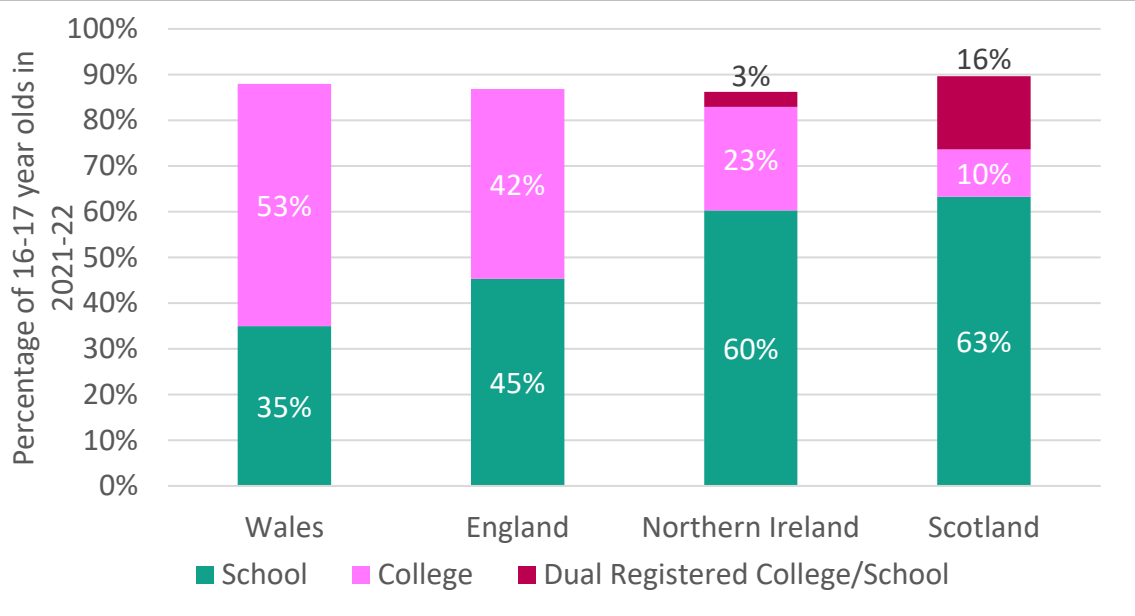
With such large differences in post-16 E&T across the UK, there are clear opportunities to learn lessons from different policy approaches, structures, pathways, and stakeholder experiences. This has the potential help policymakers shape their individual systems to meet increasingly complex and challenging goals. Unfortunately, there are often huge barriers to drawing such lessons. Differences in policy context and the language used to describe institutions make policymakers hesitant to draw lessons from others and often focus on the familiar approach within their jurisdiction. Data is often presented in ways particular to each system, with little attempt to draw lessons on the key features of each system or what can be learnt from trends over time.

- [Comparing policies, participation and inequalities across UK post-16 Education and Training landscapes – March 2024](#)
- [Long-run changes in school leaving rules and outcomes across the UK – March 2025](#)
- [From Competition to Coordination: Rethinking Post-16 Education and Training in the UK – April 2025](#)



# **The shape of UK education and training**

# Participation



contrast, there are larger shares of young people in schools in Northern Ireland (60 per cent) and Scotland (63 per cent) and smaller numbers in colleges in Northern Ireland (23 per cent) and Scotland (10 per cent). In addition, there are students who are dual registered in schools and colleges in Scotland (16 per cent) and Northern Ireland (3 per cent).

It is not clear that one approach or mix is necessarily better or worse. However, this difference in provision will have implications for the types of qualifications young people are likely to gain, given that schools are much more likely to be focused on academic qualifications.

## Markets vs Systems: Competition vs Coordination

reform efforts. Similarly, in England, we found a number of regional examples where universities and FE colleges were working collaboratively with local employers to meet both place-based skills needs and the career aspirations of young people and adult learners.

### Policy Churn

The policy context across all four UK nations has also been marked by policy churn and instability. Over the last two decades, each jurisdiction has sought to overhaul its post-16 E&T system in a variety of different ways, attempting to engage with economic challenges, changing skills needs, and social necessities. This contrasts with more stable systems worldwide – Austria, for example, has maintained a relatively stable E&T policy approach for the last two decades. The level of policy churn experienced within UK E&T is enormous and potentially damaging for all the individuals and institutions involved. Constant policy churn emphasises the view that the E&T system is at best flawed and at worst failing. This has the potential to harm the morale of staff and stakeholders

[previous report](#)

**Recommendation 1: Policymakers across the UK should maintain a stable set of post-16 education and training institutions.**

**Recommendation 2: Move from competition to coordination and the development of place-based, integrated tertiary education systems.**

shift to coordination should involve the development of a regional framework that can be operationalised in a way that takes into account place-based needs, contextual factors, geographies, and existing relationships. This is likely to go beyond current approaches to devolution within the UK nations and will necessitate thinking through regional boundaries based on existing relationships between FE, HE and employers. The process must avoid arbitrary separations or combinations of partners.

## Strained resources

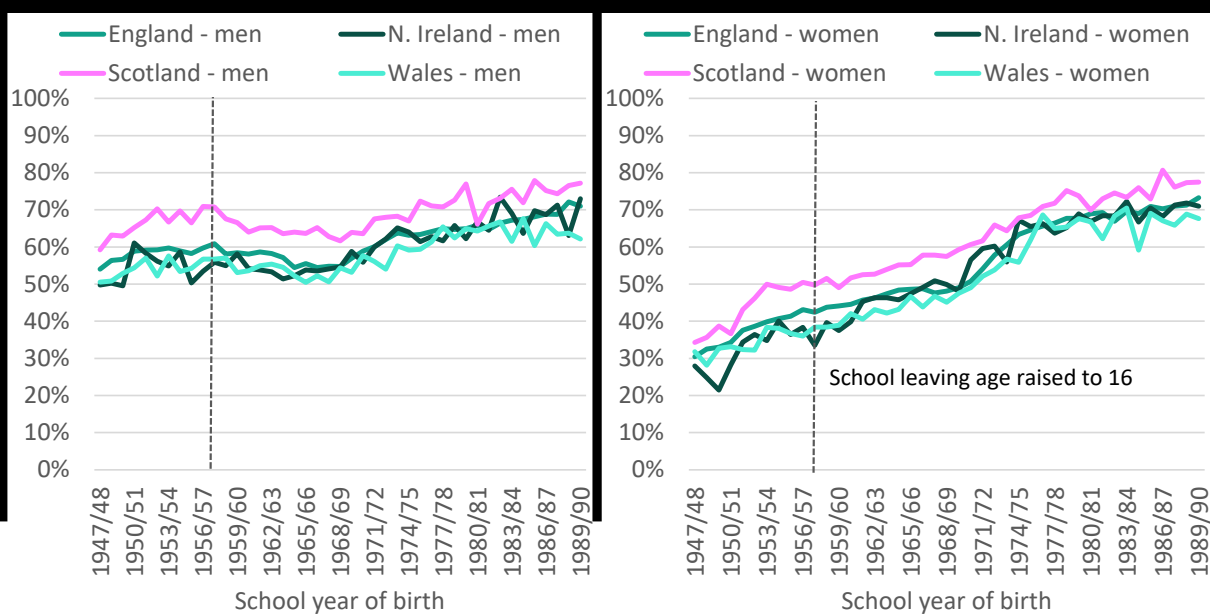
### Recommendation 3: Review of pay and conditions

## Qualifications and pathways - clear and meaningful education participation

...and ... university course.

Since devolution, even more differences in qualifications and routes have occurred across the four nations of the UK. Differences in academic qualifications have expanded as policymakers have taken different approaches to exams, modularity and re-takes. In Wales, policymakers have also introduced the Welsh Bac alongside other qualifications.

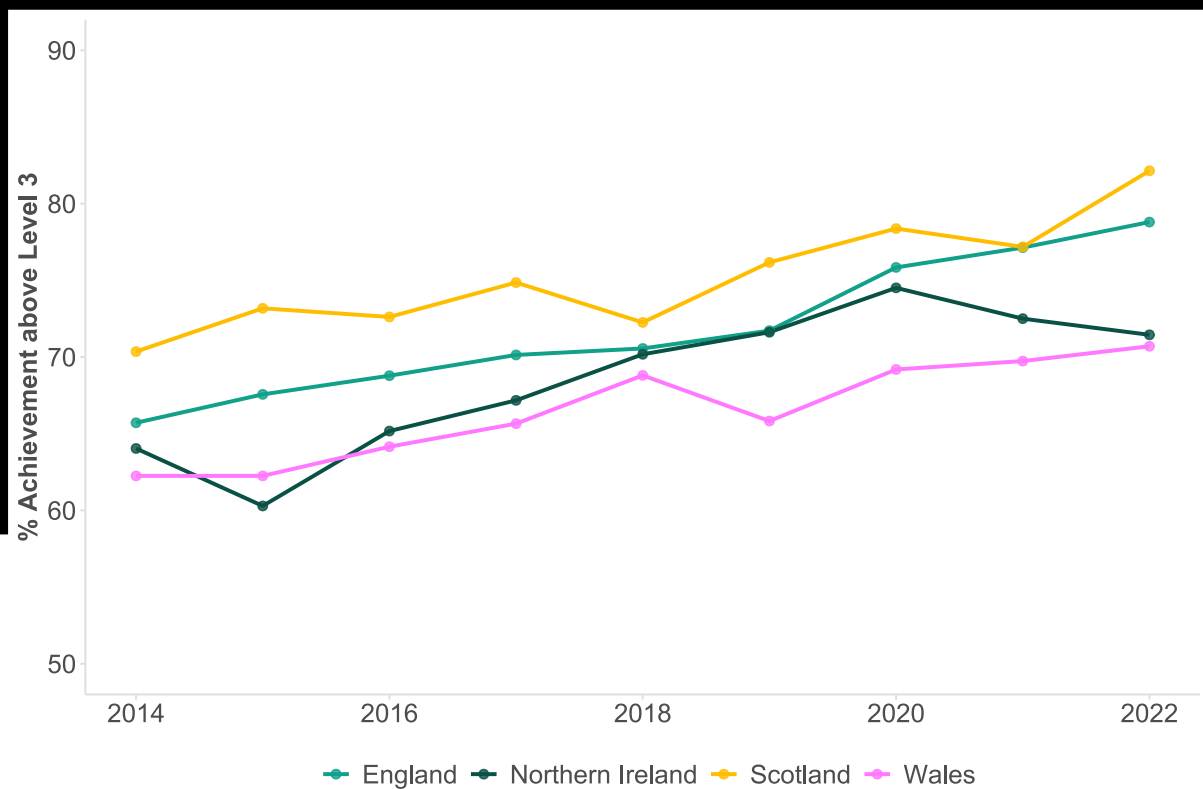
A vast range of vocational and technical qualifications also exist in each of the four nations. This has resulted in a complex array of post-16 qualifications across the whole of the UK that is challenging for employers to understand and for young people to navigate, particularly if they decide to seek opportunities in another nation. Given a growing interest across all the UK nations in promoting lifelong learning and the need for portable, stackable credentials, there is a real policy challenge to provide some sense of long term stability and coherence to post-16 qualifications through collaborative cross-jurisdictional approaches.



Notes: These figures relate to all individuals with valid data aged between 25 and 59 for each cohort. All figures are weighted by standard non-response weights. All underlying cell sizes are above 30.

There is also persistent evidence of a higher share of men and women possessing Level 3 qualifications in Scotland over time. For the most recent cohorts born in the late 1980s, about 75-

<sup>1</sup> Robbie Maris, Shruti Khandekar, and David Robinson, 'A Quantitative Analysis of T Level Access and Progression' (Education Policy Institute, November 2024; Sam Tuckett, 'Post 16 Study Programmes – Understanding Student Choices and Aspirations', *Education Policy Institute* (blog), June 2025.



Finally, there is persistent interest in where the school or education leaving age should be set. This led policymakers across the UK to raise the school leaving age to 15 in 1948 and 16 in 1973. In our report on school leaving ages, we review the evidence on these two historical changes. This shows that the increase in the school leaving age to 16 had a larger effect, particularly when it encouraged young people to take additional educational qualifications in the labour market.

**Recommendation 4: Policymakers should provide a stable and clear set of pathways to Level 3 qualifications across all four nations.**

Our research highlights that young people and employers alike face a confusing ‘qualifications jungle’ with limited understanding or portability across devolved nations. However, qualifications reform has been marked by a wide range of challenges, both in terms of design and operationalisation. Careful development of pathways across the four nations is required in a way that draws lessons from past approaches to qualifications reform.

**Recommendation 5: Urgent action is needed in Wales to increase the share of young people attaining Level 3 qualifications.**

One unfortunate recurring theme of our analysis is the lower levels of education participation and outcomes amongst young people in Wales. This is visible in the lower share of adults and young people with Level 3 qualifications, as well as higher levels of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). This remains true when focusing on those from poorer backgrounds, suggesting this is not just about higher levels of poverty in Wales. This concerning picture can also be seen in the recent PISA results, showing relatively low levels of reading and

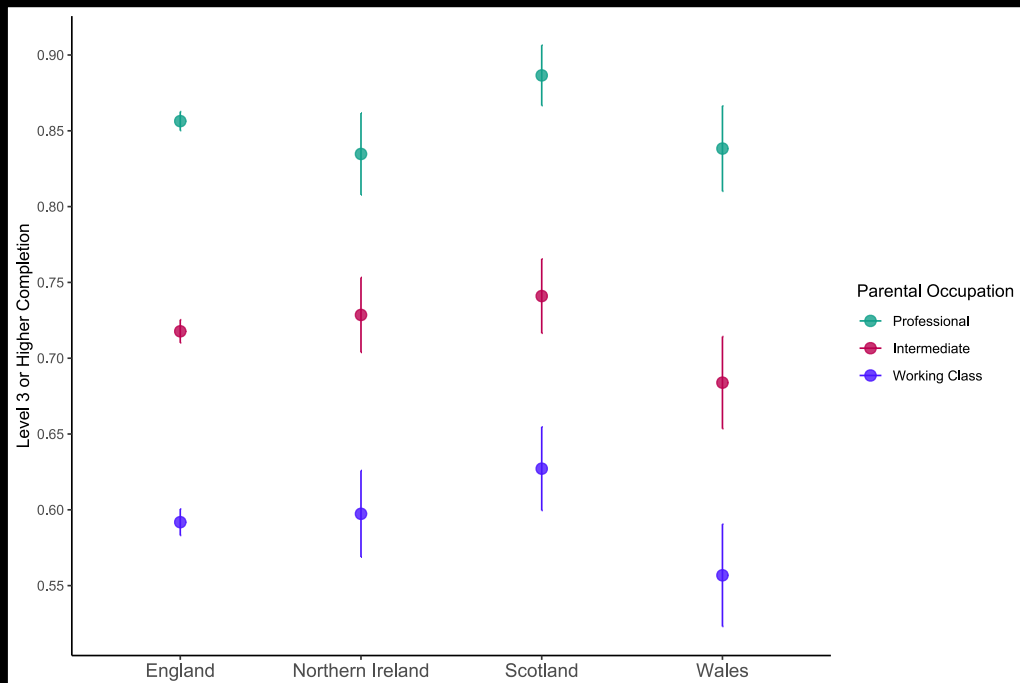


**Recommendation 6: Winter leaving rules should be abolished in Scotland.**

## **Greater focus on inequalities and their causes**

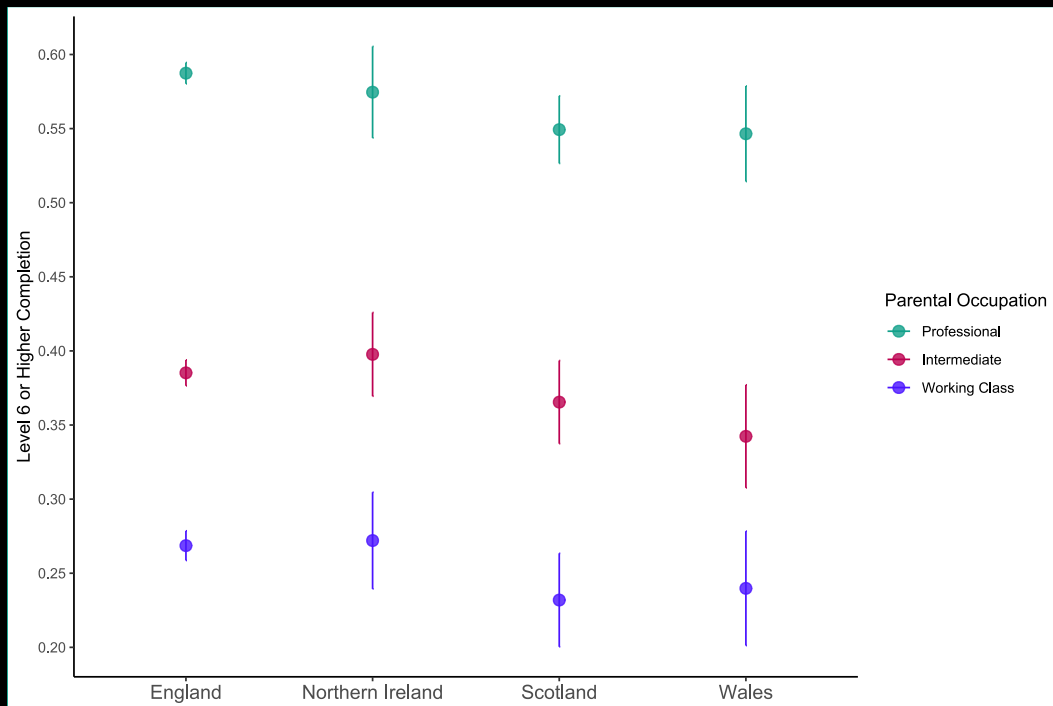
the high levels of participation in education in Scotland.

Looking across nations, the gap in Level 3 qualifications between those from professional and working-class backgrounds is about 25-30 percentage points. The largest gaps are in Wales (29 percentage points), driven by lower shares of Level 3 qualifications amongst those from working-class backgrounds.



in Wales. Welsh boys have the lowest levels of higher education participation across all nations. Remarkably, this has barely grown at all in the last 25 years according to our research and is now lower than it was six years ago.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Via the [Welsh Higher Education Initial Participation Measure \(2025\)](https://www.medr.cymru/en/News/sta-medr-05-2025-welsh-higher-education-initial-participation-measure-2016-17-to-2022-23/), Medr.  
<https://www.medr.cymru/en/News/sta-medr-05-2025-welsh-higher-education-initial-participation-measure-2016-17-to-2022-23/>



In principle, the four nations could be used for policy learning across the UK. In reality, a lack of comparable data severely limits these opportunities. Table 1 shows socio-economic inequalities in Level 3 entry / attainment across the four nations, though these are clearly calculated and shown in very different ways.

For England, we see that 38 per cent of children who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) in school achieved Level 3 by the age of 19, about 25 percentage points less than other pupils. In Northern Ireland, 35 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM achieved 2 or more A Levels (or equivalent) when they left school, as compared with 63 per cent of other pupils. This is naturally a slightly different metric to England, but is suggestive of slightly lower Level 3 attainment amongst disadvantaged pupils in Northern Ireland.

Less data has been available for Wales, though Medr has recently published analysis of patterns of entry. This shows that 39 per cent of pupils eligible for FSM in Year 11 were entered into Level 3 qualifications, which compares with 72 per cent of other Year 11 pupils. However, about 10 per

Nation / Outcome	Less deprived group	More deprived group
<b>England (2022-23)</b>	<b>Not eligible for free school meals</b>	<b>Eligible for free school meals</b>
Achieved Level 3 or above by age 19	63%	38%
<b>Northern Ireland (2022-23)</b>	<b>Not eligible for free school meals</b>	<b>Eligible for free school meals</b>
Achieved 2 or more A-levels or equivalent	63%	35%
<b>Scotland (2021-22)</b>	<b>Scottish IMD Top Quintile</b>	<b>Scottish IMD Bottom Quintile</b>
Achieved SCQF Level 6 when they left school	81%	44%
<b>Wales</b>	<b>Not eligible for free school meals</b>	<b>Eligible for free school meals</b>
<i>Taking Level 3 qualifications after Year 11</i>	72%	39%

[Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25.](#)

[Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

[School Leavers - 2022/23 | Department of Education](#)

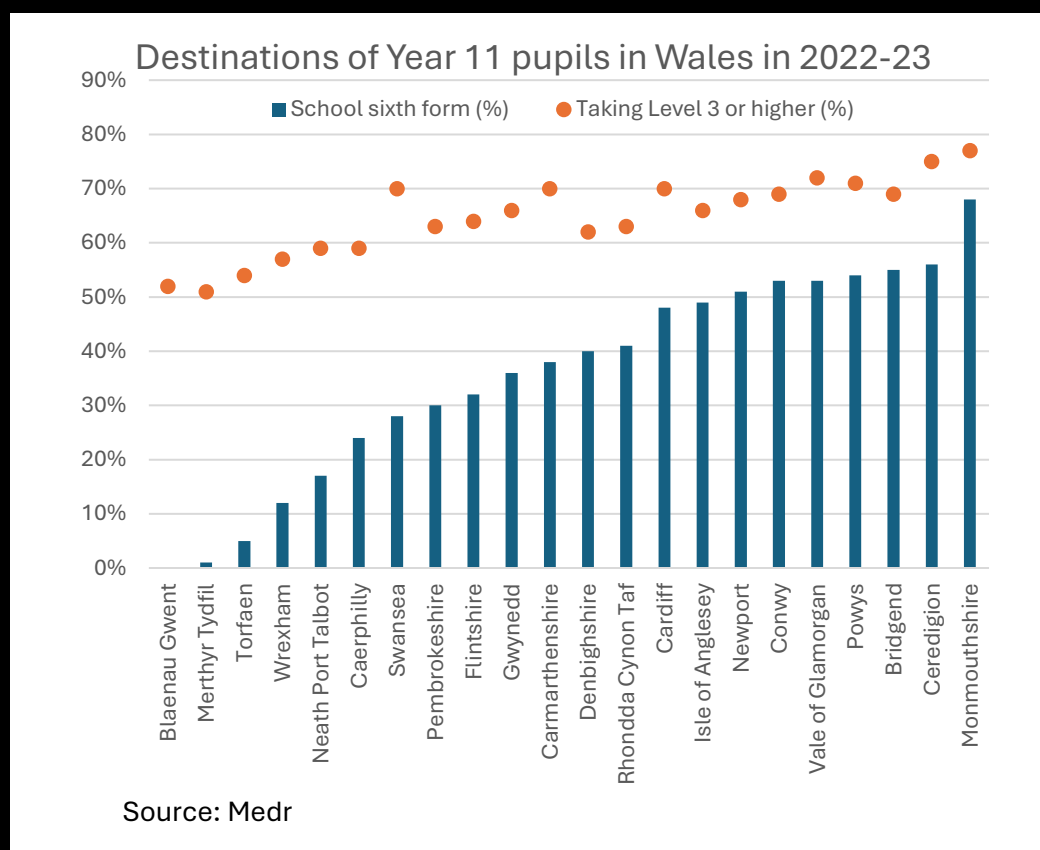
[Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, no. 6:](#)

[2024 edition - gov.scot](#)

[Sta/Medr/04/2025: Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025 - Medr](#)

differences in qualification choices, observed in those with middle to low GCSE attainment<sup>3</sup>. This suggests fundamental roles for schools. Local availability matters too; we can see this most clearly in Wales where the share of school sixth forms is highly correlated with the share of young people taking Level 3 qualifications.

<sup>3</sup> Tuckett, 'Post 16 Study Programmes – Understanding Student Choices and Aspirations'.



**Recommendation 7: Policy should be more focused on post-16 inequalities, and informed by better, comparable data.**

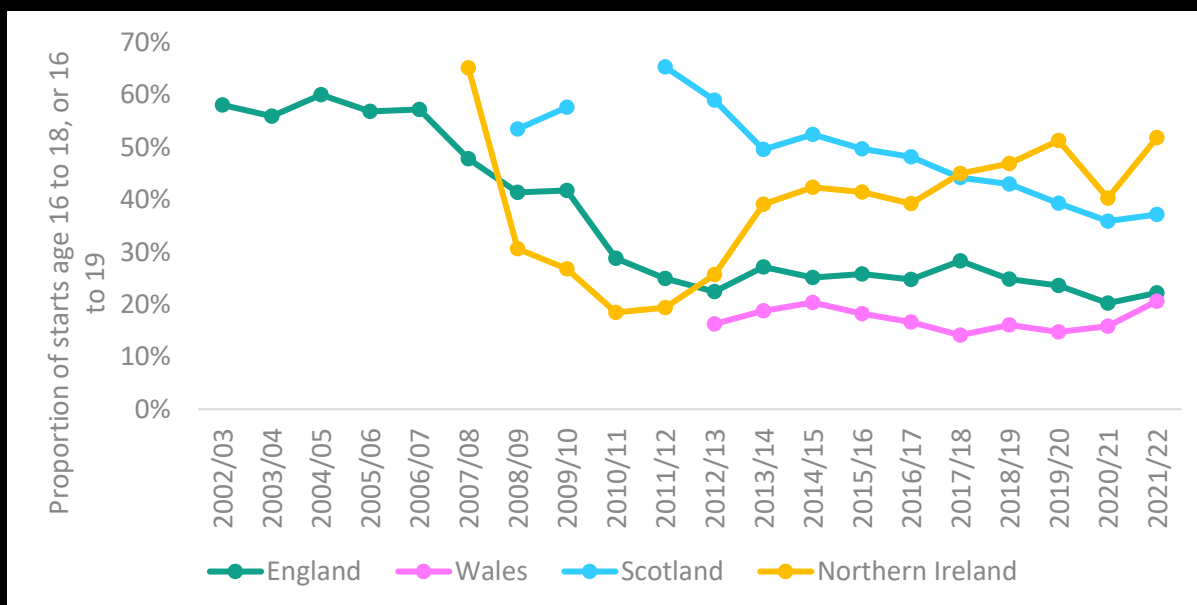
E&T, but also earlier in the system.

**Recommendation 8: More active and urgent action is required in Wales.**

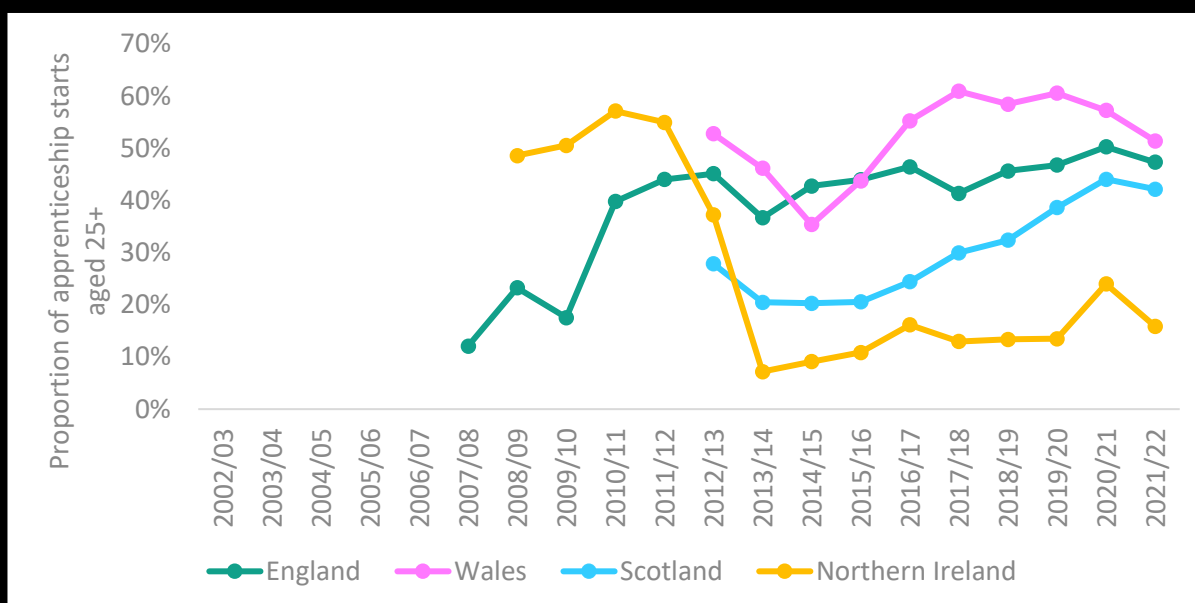
Policymakers in Wales should be taking more urgent and active steps to improve post-16 educational outcomes and inequalities. The low and declining participation of Welsh boys in higher education is particularly concerning. Expanding apprenticeship opportunities to young people

There is widespread public support for expanding apprenticeship opportunities to young people. There is also now good evidence on the relatively high returns to apprenticeships, particularly at Level 3 and above.

Despite this, the share of apprenticeships taken up by young people is relatively small across all four nations of the UK. In each nation, only about 3-7 per cent of 16-17-year-olds go into apprenticeships or work-based learning.



priority economic areas.



These trends in the data were also reflected in the discussions we had with young people as part of our [industry case studies report](#). Participating young people, particularly from England, expressed deep frustration and a view that the best apprenticeships were being ‘stolen’ by older generations and existing members of the workforce and that opportunities also played out along socio-economic lines. There was a sense of deep inequalities at the heart of apprenticeships, particularly in England. The challenge in finding and accessing apprenticeships was repeatedly highlighted by the young people in our research who called for better systems to find opportunities and better support structures for the application process.

**Recommendation 9: All four nations should conduct an urgent review of apprenticeship participation, introduce mechanisms to ensure more young people take apprenticeships, and develop regulatory frameworks to ensure more equitable access.**

## Improving the role of employers

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- Representation – all participants raised concerns about SMEs all too frequently being excluded from E&T discussions and activities, leading to unequal employer voice and representation within E&T.

This all points to a need for fresh thinking around employer engagement. Policy structures should be introduced to drive deeper engagement that shifts the focus from simply skills to demands to real engagement in the process of supply. At the same time, proper investment must be directed to support structures within E&T, including more dedicated employer engagement roles.

At the same time, employers, E&T providers and young people in our industry case studies raised concerns about the quality of work and particularly the long-term nature of careers. Employers and providers in particular discussed the shifting skills needs in relation to technological advancements (AI and automation) and highlighted that not enough analysis had been done on what these changing skills needs mean for the long-term careers of individuals. They acknowledged that despite demanding specific kinds of technical skills and green skills, these



## Recommendation 10: Develop better mechanisms for supporting meaningful employer engagement in E&T.

This recommendation has three key parts:

- **Drive discursive shifts:** change the expectations placed upon employers to move them from consumers of the skills system to engaged stakeholders with rights and responsibilities through funding levers and incentives.
- **Reform local structures:** reform LSIPs and local mechanisms to encourage collaboration between employers and E&T ensuring both stakeholders can engage in a meaningful way.
- **Invest in capacity:** provide funding to support dedicated staff, particularly in FE colleges, to build local and sustained relationships with employers, cutting across multiple sectors, building on existing best practice in some parts of the sector.

**Recommendation 11: Explicitly build employability skills into post-16 curricula as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review.**