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

Summary report

James Robson, Luke Sibieta, David Robinson, Susan James Relly and Robbie Cruikshanks

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Executive summary

Since the formal introduction of devolution in the late 1990s, post-16 education and training (E&T) has looked increasingly different across the four nations of the UK, particularly as policy approaches have diverged. With such 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 report is a summary of a programme of work that sets out how post-16 E&T should change to meet increasingly complex challenges and what we can learn from differences in policy approaches across the four nations of the UK. The following sections summarise the key lessons, conclusions and recommendations we have reached across the project.

Key findings

We find several key areas in which policy contexts have either converged or diverged across the four nations of the UK since the introduction of devolution:

- **Participation and organisation:** Across the four nations, the proportion of young people in school or college is very similar, at about 86-90 per cent of 16-17 year olds. However, the split between schools and colleges is very different. There are large shares of young people in colleges in Wales (53 per cent) and England (42 per cent), with smaller numbers in schools in Wales (35 per cent) and England (45 per cent). By 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).
- **Competition and coordination:** In Scotland and Wales, there is an explicit emphasis on taking a 'systems-based approach' with the state playing a much greater role in coordinating the system. In England, and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland, there has been an explicit emphasis on market logic. The government's role is seen as managing the 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

employers to understand and for young people to make informed choices, particularly if they decide to seek opportunities in another nation.

- **Persistent socio-economic inequalities:** Across all nations, young people from working-class backgrounds are far less likely to achieve Level 3 or degree-level qualifications than their peers from professional backgrounds. Such inequalities are widest in Wales — driven by particularly low attainment and stagnating higher education participation, especially among boys — and smallest in Scotland, where overall attainment is higher across all groups.
- **Outcomes falling behind in Wales:** Educational outcomes in Wales are a major concern, with lower participation, attainment (including Level 3 qualifications), and higher NEET rates, particularly among disadvantaged young people, pointing to systemic issues beyond poverty, likely contributing to lower skills and weaker economic growth.
- **Under-utilisation of apprenticeships:** Despite strong public support and evidence of high returns, especially at Level 3, apprenticeship uptake among 16–17-year-olds remains low across the UK, with only 3–7 per cent entering apprenticeships or work-based learning in any nation.
- **Strained relationships with employers:** Effective employer engagement is crucial to successful skills systems, yet both education providers and employers across the UK—especially in England—are dissatisfied with current arrangements, citing both structural limitations and a lack of effective employer representation.

Recommendations

From this work, we make the following recommendations for post-16 E&T policymakers:

- There is an urgent need to conduct a full review of pay and conditions for FE staff.
- 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.
- Policymakers should prioritise stability and clarity in the development of post-16 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

Historically, only a small number of young people continued in education after the age of 16 in the UK. Some stayed to complete academic qualifications in order to gain entry to university. Most, however, left education at age 14/15 and moved into full-time work, where they often gained skills on the job, either formally or informally through on-the-job training. Following the increase to the school leaving age to 15 in 1948 and to 16 in 1973, increasing numbers of young people stayed in education after age 16. This trend of increasing participation continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, post-16 education and training (E&T) is now a critical feature of wider E&T systems in the UK and across other countries.

Alongside this expansion, post-16 E&T has been given increasingly wide-ranging goals over time. This includes preparing young people for university and other later studies, preparing individuals for the world of work, and improving individual well-being. At a societal level, goals include meeting skill needs and driving economic growth, supporting social mobility and social justice, contributing to citizen formation, and meeting wider challenges from Brexit and trade shocks to net zero and the climate crisis. In recent years, the widening and diversification of these goals have coincided with increasing resource constraints, making it harder for the sector to deliver improvements and further expansions.

Partly reflecting having multiple goals, post-16 E&T has become increasingly complex and different across the UK. Post-16 E&T includes academic study in school sixth forms, academic and vocational studies in colleges, partnerships between schools and colleges, apprenticeships, jobs with training, traineeships, independent training providers, employer partnerships and many other complexities.

Since the formal introduction of devolution in the late 1990s, post-16 E&T has also begun to look increasingly different across the four nations of the UK, particularly as policy approaches have diverged. For example, there are differences in the balance between sixth forms and colleges, different ways to involve employers, different funding models and huge differences in 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.

Our programme of work sets out how post-16 E&T should change to meet increasingly complex challenges and what we can learn from differences in policy approaches across the four nations of the UK. In what follows, we summarise the key lessons, conclusions and recommendations we have reached across the project. The individual reports these are based on are as follows:

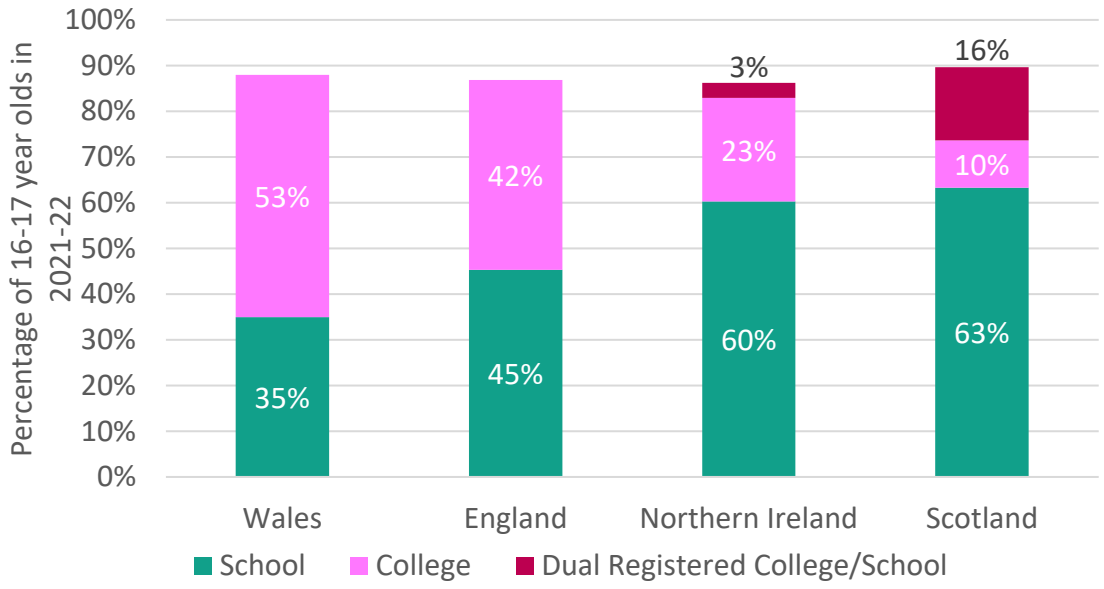
- Comparing policies, participation and inequalities across UK post-16 Education and Training landscapes – March 2024
- Long-run changes in school leaving rules and outcomes across the UK – March 2025
- From Competition to Coordination: Rethinking Post-16 Education and Training in the UK – April 2025

The shape of UK education and training

Participation

Policymakers across the four nations have made different choices on how to organise post-16 E&T, particularly since devolution in 1999. A much larger share of young people are in school in Scotland and Northern Ireland after age 16 than in England and Wales, where there is a greater reliance on colleges. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the share of 16–17-year-olds in schools, colleges and those who are jointly registered (in the case of Scotland and Northern Ireland) in 2021-22.

Figure 1. Comparing the share of 16-17-year-olds in schools and colleges



The share of young people in schools or colleges is very similar across the four nations, at about 86-90 per cent of 16–17-year-olds. However, the split between schools and colleges is very different. There are large shares of young people in colleges in Wales (53 per cent) and England (42 per cent), with smaller numbers in schools in Wales (35 per cent) and England (45 per cent). By 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

Education and training systems are coordinated differently across the four nations, with different roles for government and the market in each context. In Scotland and Wales, there is an explicit emphasis on taking a 'systems-based approach' with the state playing a much greater role in coordinating the system. This is reflected in efforts to link further education (FE) and higher education (HE), as well as research and innovation, within a holistic tertiary sector in a way that emphasises the distinctive and complementary nature of both academic and vocational pathways. In Wales, the move to a systems-based model of coordination is epitomised by the newly created Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, now Medr, with the goal of taking a more coordinated and cooperative approach.

In England, and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland, there has been an explicit emphasis on market logic. The government's role is seen as managing the market and maintaining market conditions through regulation with minimal centrally managed coordination. This positions FE and HE (and the constituent organisations) in competition with each other as a way of responding to both consumer (students) and economic needs (particularly in the form of employer skills demands). Our findings have shown increasing criticism of this market-based approach from a wide range of E&T stakeholders, including E&T providers (in both FE and HE) and employers. Employer representatives across a wide range of industries emphasised a sense that their skills needs were not being met by current provision and their ability to engage effectively in E&T was curtailed by policy structures that positioned them as customers rather than stakeholders with active responsibilities.

However, our analysis suggests these kinds of policy structures across all four nations are often more complex and shaped more by local/regional dynamics than top-level policy suggests. For example, expert commentators and key stakeholders highlighted that even where central efforts were being made to develop a more coordinated and collaborative system (Scotland and Wales), pockets of intense competition prevailed and were seen as potentially undermining broader 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

involved in the system as well as negatively shaping the aspirations of young people and their families and their perceptions of different E&T pathways. Importantly, if parity of esteem between FE and HE is to be achieved, FE needs to be built up as a stable and valid institution in society. It is arguable that the levels of policy churn experienced over the last three decades have had a detrimental impact on that process – our previous report detailed the large volume of legal changes in FE policy since devolution in 1999, including six education acts, nine reviews, and eight government strategy papers.

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

This ultimately requires political consensus within each nation on the goals and ambitions that can be realised. This may sound fanciful within the UK's adversarial political system, but the main political parties are not actually that far apart on their aims and policies for post-16 E&T. Instability has been occurring within governing parties over time and as a result of short attention spans. Despite its faults, the Butler Act of 1944 was a clear example of political consensus across parties that enabled policymakers to achieve ambitious goals for schools, and it created a system that remained in place for decades. The same is needed now for post-16 E&T.

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

There is a clear trajectory towards holistic, tertiary education based policy making in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as signals of interest for England from the UK Government in a tertiary framing. This should involve an overt shift from market logic to systems thinking and a move from competition to coordination as the mechanism for driving quality, ensuring economic needs are met, and supporting individual career aspirations. This positions devolved governments as playing a coordinating role in the process of skills supply and demand in a way that links supply side initiatives and E&T strategy, with demand side interventions and industrial strategy. However, our research suggests that post-16 E&T is most effective when it is rooted in regional economic and social needs and fosters local collaborations between employers and providers. Therefore, a 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

A recurrent theme, particularly highlighted by post-16 E&T providers across all four nations, was the constrained resources the sector has faced for decades. This was particularly relevant in issues related to the recruitment and retention of E&T staff. A major issue emphasised was the challenge of competing with pay and conditions in industry, and as a result, ensuring staff were high quality, adequately skilled, and understand industry need. This was acknowledged by employers as well, who highlighted that recruitment and retention issues undermined efforts to build meaningful relationships between employers and E&T and sat behind the skills gaps and shortages that beset a wide range of industries. However, the FE sector also consistently highlighted inequalities between teachers in colleges and teachers in schools. There is clearly critical work to be done on reviewing pay and conditions for staff, particularly in FE to develop a more stable post-16 E&T workforce.

Recommendation 3: Review of pay and conditions

There is a clear and now urgent need to conduct a full review of pay and conditions for FE staff and ensure there is greater equity at the heart of the sector's workforce.

Qualifications and pathways - clear and meaningful education participation

Even before devolution, there were differences in post-16 qualifications and education pathways across the four nations of the UK. The Scottish system in particular has long been different from the rest of the UK. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the main academic Level 3 qualification has been A Levels, with young people usually taking three subjects over 2 years and then often going on to do 3-year university courses. In Scotland, by contrast, the main equivalent qualifications are Highers, which are taken over one year and young people normally take 4 or 5 subjects. After Highers, the next step is for young people to take advanced Highers or start a 4-year university course.

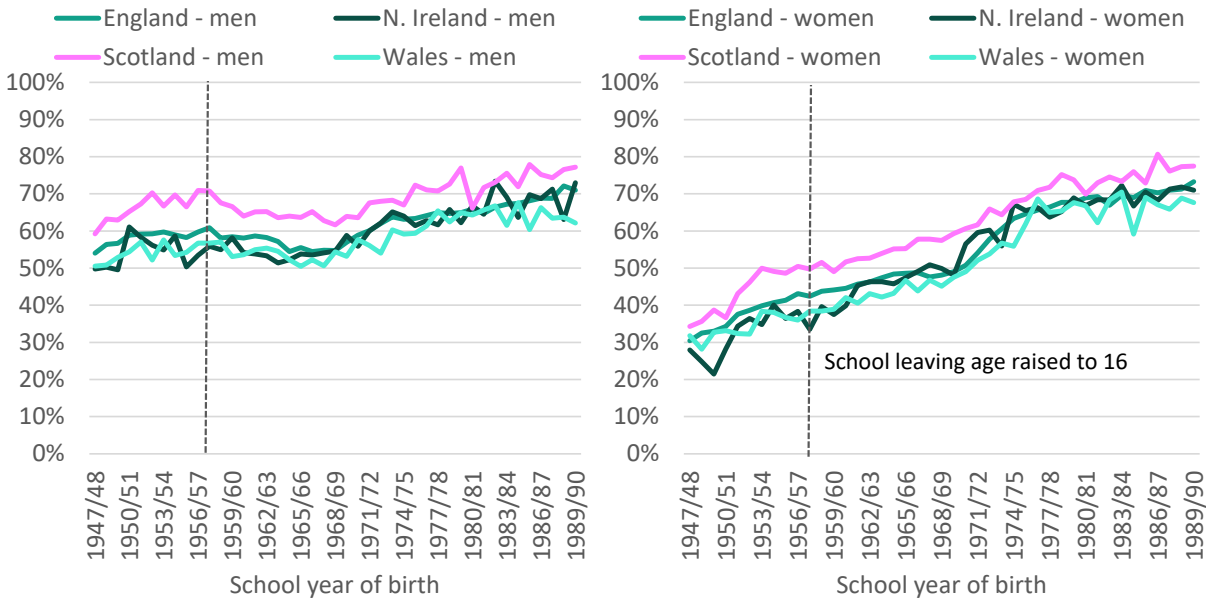
Since devolution, even more differences in qualifications and routes have occurred across the four nations of the UK. Differences in academic qualifications have expanded as policymakers have taken different approaches to exams, modularity and re-takes. In Wales, policymakers have also introduced the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

There are, however, clear challenges in simplifying qualification offers that have become more complicated over time. This is clear from the ongoing reviews of Level 3 qualifications taking place in England. Replacing most Level 3 qualifications with T Levels would make for a simpler and clearer set of education pathways. However, it is understandable that young people and providers are somewhat unwilling to move away from a set of familiar qualifications (like BTECs) towards a new and untested set of qualifications (T Levels). Moreover, T levels are more selective than the more longstanding alternatives, and the large size of them means students are unable to mix them with A levels, an increasingly popular option for many students taking existing applied or technical qualifications[1].

Perhaps the best way to judge and compare qualification outcomes across the four nations is the share of adults achieving Level 3 qualifications over time. With this in mind, Figure 2 shows the share of men and women with Level 3 qualifications or higher across the four nations by school year of birth. This shows rising shares of men and women possessing Level 3 qualifications over time across all nations, with faster rises over time for women.

Figure 2. Share of working age-adults born in the UK with Level 3 qualifications or higher, by nation and gender



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-

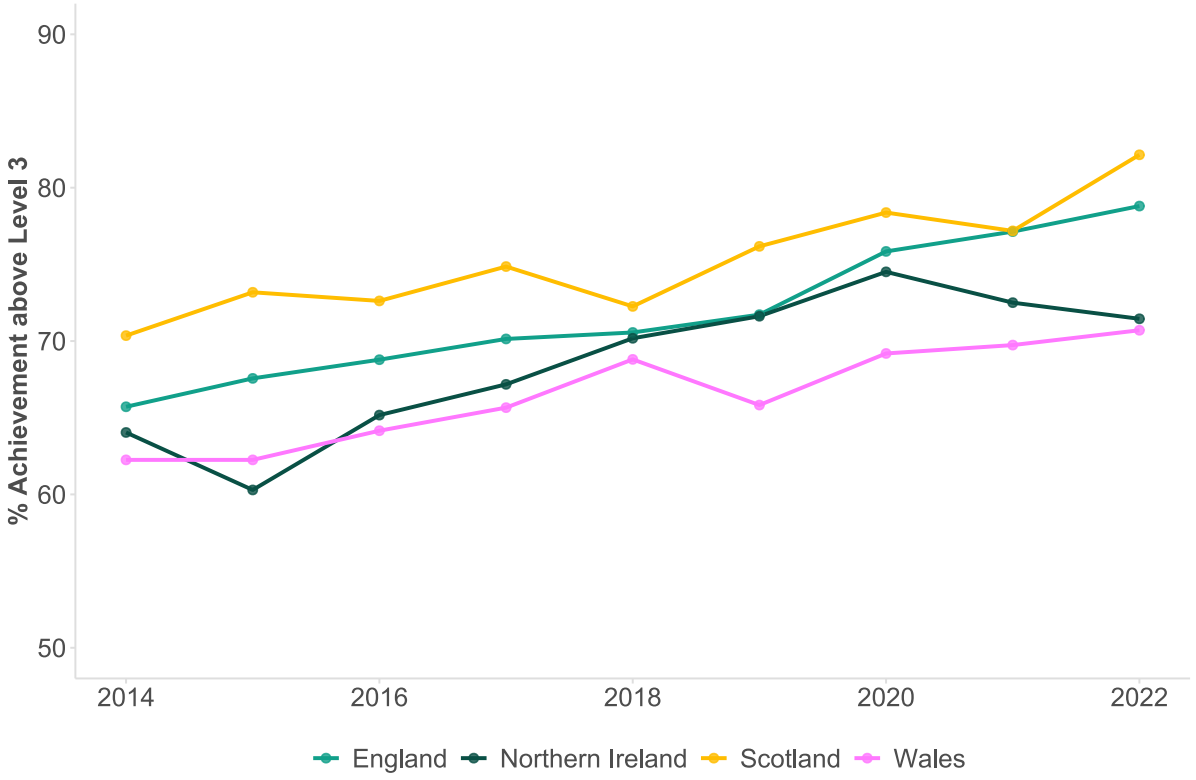
[1] Robbie Maris, Shruti Khandekar, and David Robinson, 'A Quantitative Analysis of T Level Access and Progression' (Education Policy Institute, November 2024; Sam Tuckett, 'Post 16 Study Programmes – Understanding Student Choices and Aspirations', *Education Policy Institute* (blog), June 2025.

80 per cent of men and women in Scotland possessed Level 3 qualifications as compared with 70 per cent or lower in England and Northern Ireland. Perhaps more worryingly, the share of men with Level 3 qualifications or higher in Wales has remained around 60-65 per cent across those born in the late 1970s through to at least those born in the late 1980s.

Focusing on the higher share of Level 3 qualifications in Scotland, Paterson (2023) emphasises the role of curriculum reforms in Scotland over the long-run. He describes how a focus on a broad academic curriculum enabled more young people to progress through the education system. This may partly explain the higher share of Level 3 qualifications in Scotland over time. It should also be noted that Highers (the main level 3 qualification in Scotland) are often taught over one year, rather than two, which may also contribute to the higher share in Scotland.

Figure 3 focuses on more recent trends in the share of young adults (aged 22-30) with Level 3 qualifications or higher across the four nations between 2014 and 2022. We see an increasing share of young adults with Level 3 qualifications across all four nations, with the highest levels in Scotland and persistently lower shares in Wales.

Figure 3. Level 3 or higher in the four UK nations (%), ages 22 to 30



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.

More recently, differences have emerged within the UK after devolution. In England, the leaving age was increased from 16 to 18 from 2013 onwards, with young people expected to remain in full-time or part-education education or training up to age 18. Other research undertaken for the Nuffield Foundation has found that this change in the school leaving age had relatively limited impact on education and labour market outcomes.

Elsewhere in the UK, the school leaving age has remained at age 16. There are, however, small differences in how these rules are applied across the UK, which link to differences in the precise age at which children must start school. There are an additional set of rules in Scotland called 'Winter Leaving Rules.' Under these rules, children born between March and September of an academic cohort can leave school in the summer after they have done their exams in year S4 (the equivalent of year 11 in England and Wales). However, those born between October and February must stay in school until Christmas and complete a large part of their S5 year.

Our analysis shows that young people affected by these rules stay in school longer, but see no benefits in terms of higher educational qualifications. Scottish government statistics further show that winter leavers actually have some of the worst outcomes in terms of further employment and education, as they leave school mid-way through an academic year after many courses have already started. Partly for this reason, policy has been focused on enabling mid-year entry into colleges to partially correct for some of this disadvantage. However, the general case for winter leaving rules seems weak. It would be better for all children in Scotland to have the same leaving age, no matter when they are born in the school year, so that all children could leave at the end of S4 or all children are obligated to stay on into S5.

This evidence suggests a relatively weak impact of school leaving rules on education and labour market outcomes. The main exception being where they induce young people to take further valuable education qualifications, as happened with the increase in the leaving age to 16.

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

numeracy scores in Wales. To put it bluntly, educational outcomes are a source of major concern in Wales. This is likely to lead to lower skills levels and lower productivity, which could hold back economic growth. It is not possible to isolate exactly which policies or institutions are driving these concerning trends in outcomes. However, it is worth saying that it is unlikely to be having a school leaving age of 16, compared with an education leaving age of 18 in England. The poor set of outcomes in Wales appear to be longstanding. More research is required to drive targeted interventions in this area.

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

There seems to be little value in maintaining these Winter Leaving Rules. It would be preferable for all young people in Scotland in the same school cohort to be able to leave school at the same time. This would either be the summer after the end of S4 (the equivalent of Y11 in England), as is currently the case, or the end of S5, which would represent a higher leaving age than currently exists in Scotland.

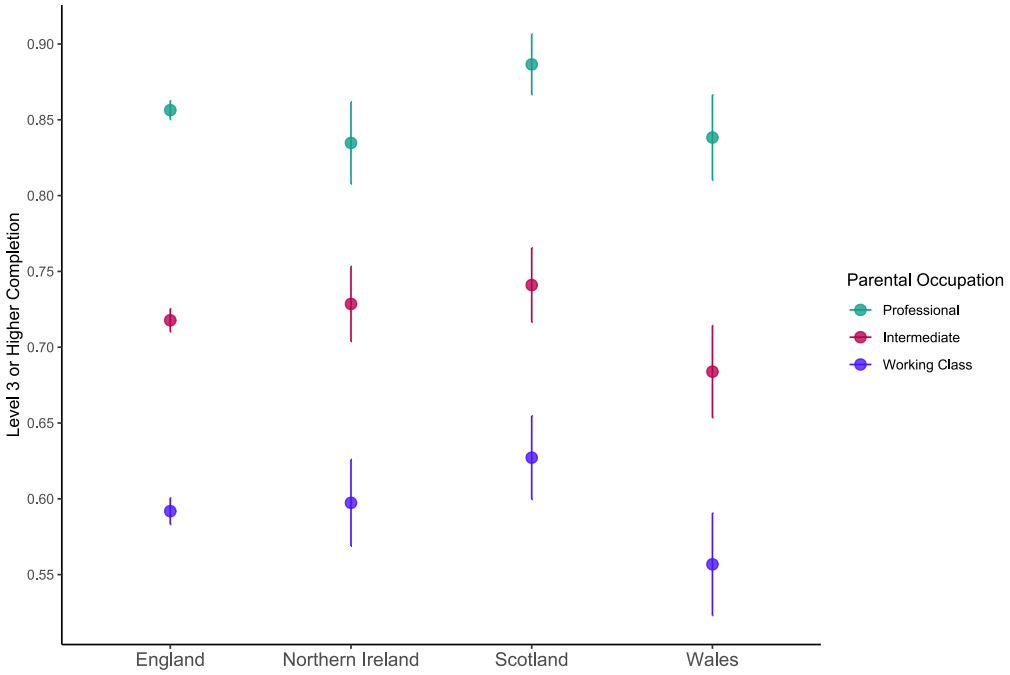
Greater focus on inequalities and their causes

Whenever we were able to look at socio-economic inequalities in post-16 E&T, we observed gaping differences across all four nations.

To give a clear example, Figure 4 shows the share of young adults with Level 3 qualifications for each nation, given their parent's occupational background. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, about 85 per cent of young adults from a professional background achieve Level 3 qualifications or higher. This compares with about 72 per cent for those from intermediate backgrounds in England and Northern Ireland, and about 60 per cent for those from working class backgrounds. These figures were lowest in Wales for those from intermediate backgrounds (68 per cent) and working-class backgrounds (56 per cent). Similar gaps were evident in Scotland, except that children from all backgrounds were 7-9 percentage points more likely to achieve Level 3 qualifications or higher for all parental occupational backgrounds. This again reflects the generally 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.

Figure 4. Level 3 completion or higher by nation and parental background



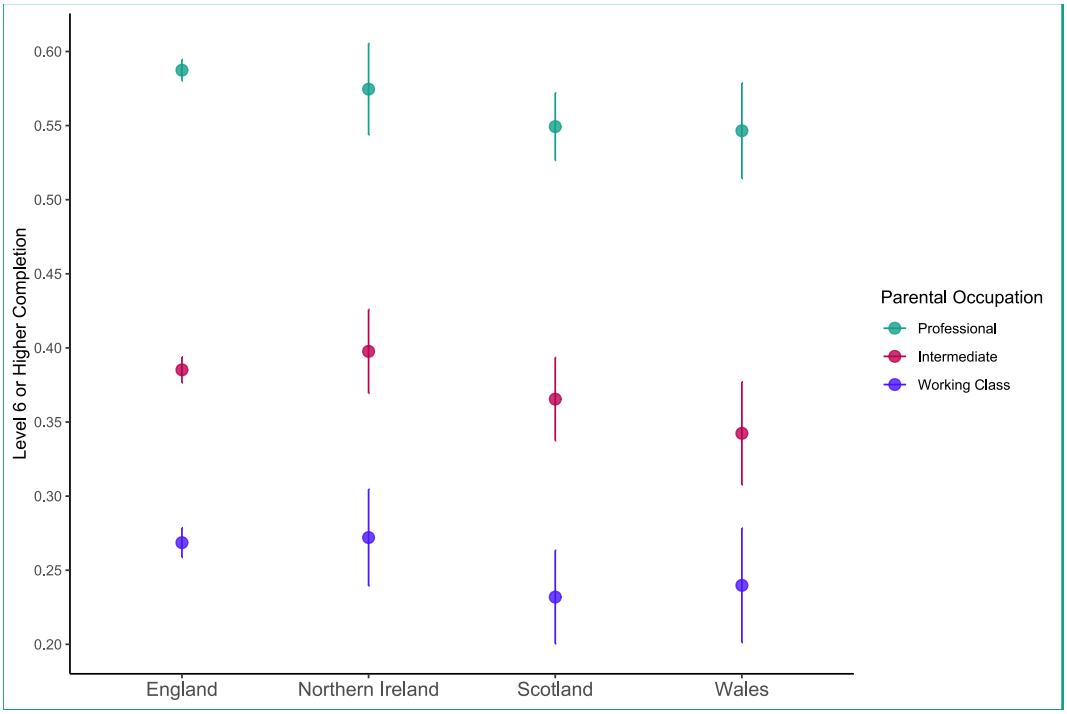
Note: Vertical lines indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Such inequalities continue through the education system and through to the labour market. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go to university and less likely to achieve degree-level qualifications. Young adults from professional backgrounds were about 30 percentage points more likely to hold degree-level qualifications or higher than those from working-class backgrounds. Conditional on socio-economic background, young people from Wales and Scotland were the least likely to hold degree-level qualifications, with less than 25 per cent of young people from working-class backgrounds from these two nations holding degree-level qualifications.

There are further specific concerns with regards to the low level of higher education participation 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.[2].

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

Figure 5. Level 6 completion or higher by nation and parental background



These inequalities continue into the labour market, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to be in employment, have lower earnings, and less likely to be in professional occupations when they do enter the labour market.

This translates into large levels of social immobility across all four nations. Amongst those from professional backgrounds, young adults were much more likely to be in professional jobs (53 per cent in England, 47-49 per cent in the rest of the UK) than those from working-class backgrounds (28 per cent in England, 25-26 per cent in the rest of the UK). Those from working-class backgrounds were much more likely to be in working-class jobs themselves (38 per cent in England, 42-43 per cent in the rest of the UK) than those from professional backgrounds (18-25 per cent across the four nations).

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

cent or more of pupils will drop out of qualifications or fail to achieve them. If we allow for such effects, then Level 3 attainment amongst disadvantaged pupils is at or below the level seen in Northern Ireland.

Qualifications and measures of deprivation differ in Scotland. The most relevant statistics suggest that 44 per cent of pupils in the most deprived areas of Scotland achieved SCQF Level 6 when they left school (broadly equivalent to Level 3 across the rest of the UK). This fits with other statistics showing higher levels of attainment in Scotland across the board.

Such analysis is helpful in highlighting differences, but the metrics used are clearly different and not fully comparable. More consistent comparisons could help reveal the extent of differences across the UK, and where policymakers could best direction their actions.

Table 1. Post-16 outcomes by deprivation level across the four nations

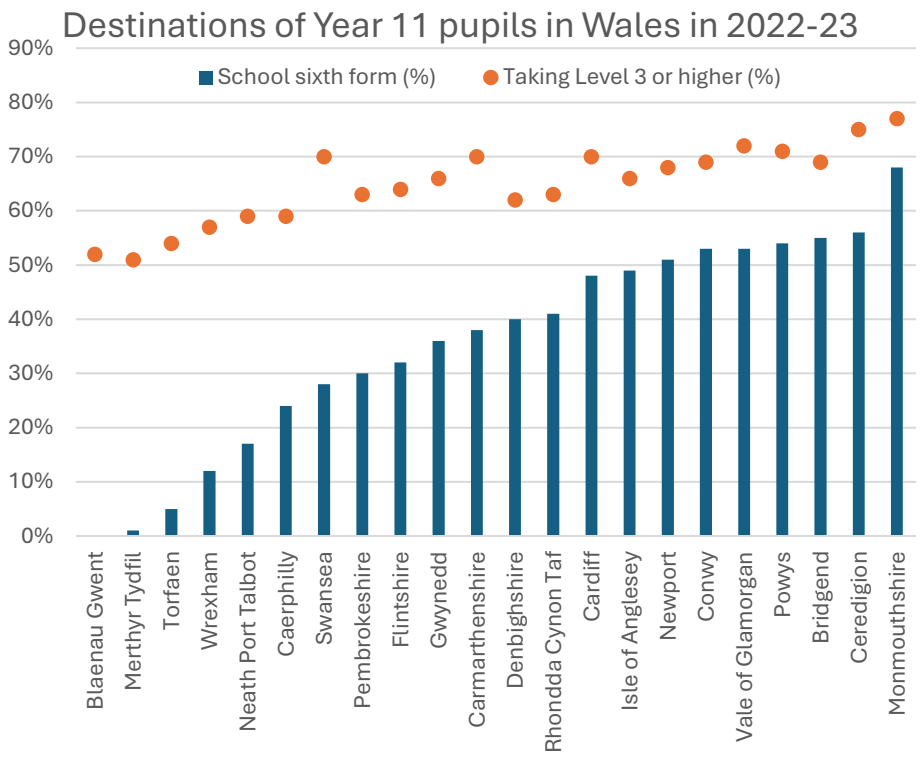
Nation / Outcome	Less deprived group	More deprived group
England (2022-23)	**Not eligible for free school meals**	**Eligible for free school meals**
Achieved Level 3 or above by age 19	63%	38%
Northern Ireland (2022-23)	**Not eligible for free school meals**	**Eligible for free school meals**
Achieved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

Sources: Department for Education, Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25, Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK; Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2022/23, School Leavers - 2022/23 | Department of Education; Scottish Government, Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, no. 6: 2024 edition - gov.scot; Medr, Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025, Sta/Medr/04/2025: Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025 - Medr

Pre-16 education is clearly pivotal for post-16 outcomes, but there are also socio-economic differences in qualification choices, observed in those with middle to low GCSE attainment[3]. 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.

[3] Tuckett, 'Post 16 Study Programmes – Understanding Student Choices and Aspirations'.

Figure 6. Destinations of year 11 pupils in Wales, 2022-2023



Source: Medr

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

The UK government and devolved administrations should aim to produce data in ways that allow for comparisons, particularly in terms of inequalities. New linked administrative data represents a clear way in which data, statistics and our understanding of inequalities could be improved. Equipped with better data, policymakers across the four nations should be better placed to address the inequalities in post-16 access and outcomes. This may require policy action in post-16 E&T, but also earlier in the system.

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

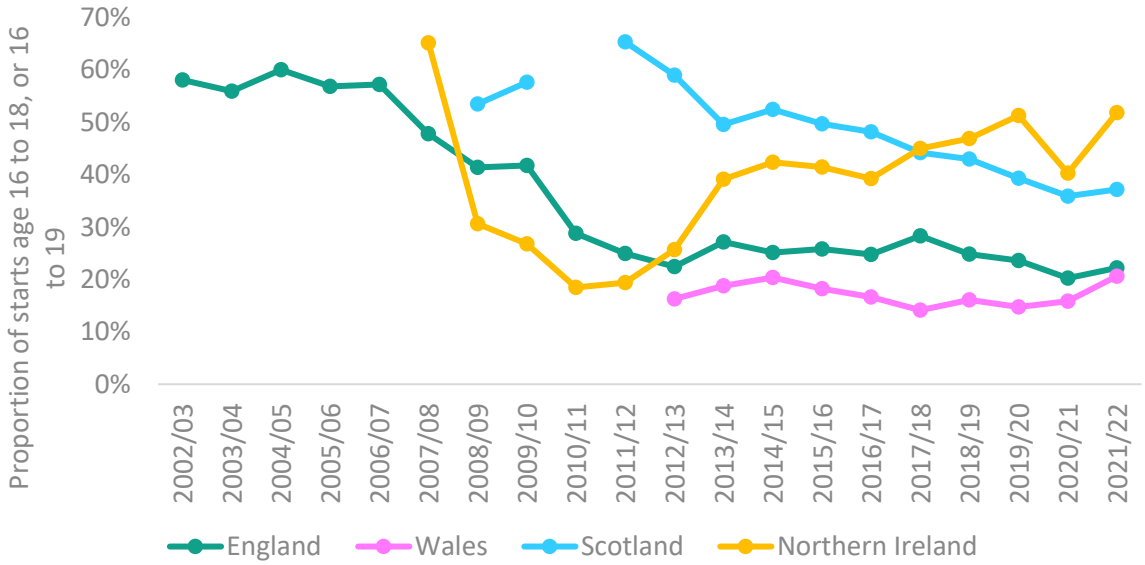
Policymakers in Wales should be taking more urgent and active steps to improve post-16 educational outcomes and inequalities. The low and declining participation of Welsh boys in higher education is particularly concerning. Expanding apprenticeship opportunities to young people

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.

Across most nations, apprenticeship starts were previously made up of mostly young people aged below 18 or 19, but this has now shifted over time. In England and Wales, only about 20 per cent of apprenticeship starts were accounted for by young people aged 16 to 18/19 in 2021-22. This was higher at 37 per cent in Scotland, and over 50 per cent in Northern Ireland. The latter is almost certainly the result of Northern Ireland only funding apprenticeships for over 25s in priority economic occupations from 2013 onwards.

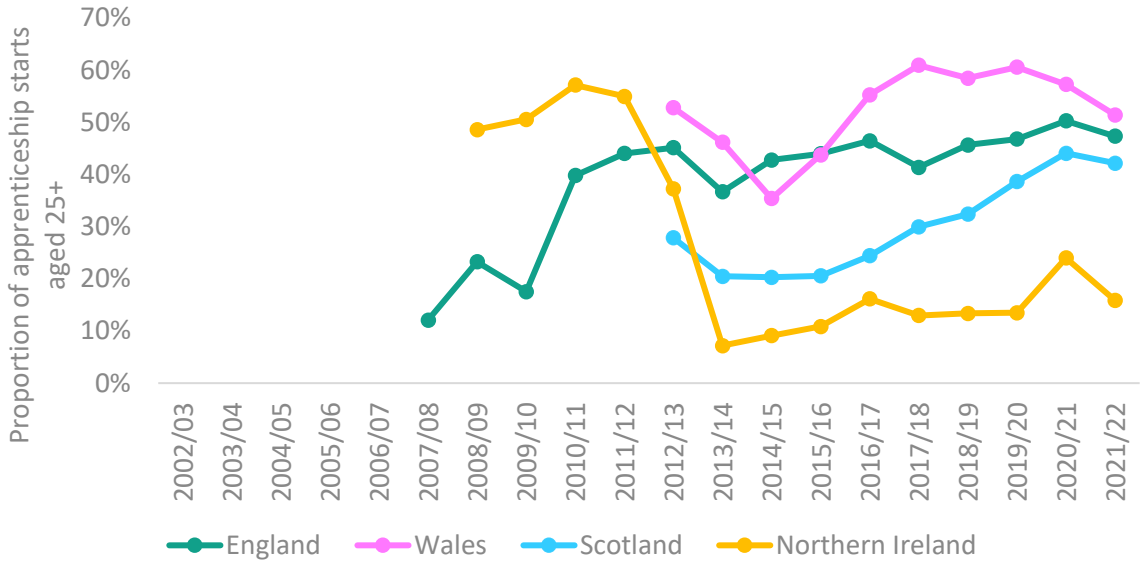
Figure 7. Proportion of total apprenticeship starts who are aged 16-18/19, all nations



Note: For comparison purposes, England and Wales report ages 16 to 18, and Scotland and Northern Ireland report ages 16 to 19.

Apprenticeship starts have instead become heavily focused on over 25s in England and Wales (about 50 per cent of all apprenticeship starts in both nations in 2021-22). There has also been a rise in Scotland, with about 40 per cent of all apprenticeship starts amongst over 25s in 2021-22. The share is much lower in Northern Ireland, reflecting the focusing of adult apprenticeships on priority economic areas.

Figure 8. Proportion of total apprenticeship starts who are aged 25+, all nations



The increasing numbers of adult apprenticeships in England partly reflects high-profile numerical targets for the number of apprenticeships starts. The coalition government had a target of 2 million apprenticeship starts from 2010 to 2015, and the next Conservative government had a target of 3 million apprenticeship starts. This led to many forms of existing adult training being reclassified as apprenticeships.

The increasing number of adult apprenticeships in England and Wales also reflects a focus on higher level and higher quality apprenticeships, particularly in recent years. Following increases over time, 30 per cent of apprenticeship starts in England in 2021-22 were at Level 4 or higher, as were 17 per cent of apprenticeships in Wales. A lower share of apprenticeships were at Level 4 or above in Scotland (8 per cent) and Northern Ireland (12 per cent). This partly reflects the fact that apprenticeships are more focused on young people in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and more directed at adults in Wales and England.

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.

This does not need to be a zero-sum game with adult apprenticeships, particularly if adult apprenticeships show high economic returns. However, the number of young people taking apprenticeships is small across all four nations, despite their popularity and high returns.

Improving the role of employers

Employers playing an active and positive role in E&T is frequently emphasised as being critical to the operationalisation of successful skills systems across all the four nations. However, UK post-16 E&T, particularly in England - though not uniquely - frequently receives criticism for failing to engage appropriately with employers and employers face criticism for failing to engage in or invest in E&T. However, our industry case study findings show that both sides of this relationship are dissatisfied with the current arrangements. It's clear that employers are keen to be more actively involved in E&T and can see the benefits. Similarly, it's clear that E&T providers are keen to bring employers much more overtly into E&T provision as well as broader skills foresighting activities. Both sides point to several key limiting issues:

- Structural limitations - for example, local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) failing to provide a meaningful mechanism for collaboration that supports active engagement in skills provision rather than simply foregrounding the skills demands of a few select employers;
- Skills policy issues - whereby employers have been positioned as customers of the skill system with consumer rights rather than active participants with meaningful rights and responsibilities in the actual provision of E&T;
- Capacity issues – lack of dedicated staff to drive meaningful collaboration between E&T and employers as well as high staff turnover mean there is no sustained support structures to ensure effective engagement;
- 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

often relate to specific jobs (e.g. heat pump engineer) tied to wider sector or governmental agendas (e.g. decarbonisation of buildings); only limited work has been done on defining the occupational structures associated with these jobs and agendas or how they might translate into meaningful work and attractive careers. These are things that young people described as being key to their aspirations. At the same time employers acknowledged that they may not always be using newly skilled workers as effectively as they should be due to issues with working practices, low skill business models, and poor absorptive capacity. This all points to the need for overt skills demand side interventions, linked with active employer engagement in the supply side of the skills system, focused on ensuring that occupations are redesigned to reflect changes in skills demands in a way that centres long term careers and meaningful work.

Linked with this, employers and young people raised concerns about the nature of teaching, learning and curricula in post-16 E&T. For employers, there was a consensus that current approaches were failing to meet their skills needs and address skills gaps and shortages. There was concern that certain technical skills were not being properly taught, there was a lack of broader employability skills being formed, and that teaching approaches were too theoretical and academic. Young people expressed concerns that they weren't necessarily getting the skills they needed for longer term careers and to navigate uncertain labour markets. E&T providers acknowledged a tension between meeting employers' skills demands (which often focused on short term job needs) and the longer-term career needs of young people. It was acknowledged that, to a certain extent, trying to find balance was a product of a marketized approach with both employers and young people positioned as consumers of the skills system. These issues point to a need for more systems thinking and stronger engagement from employers to help navigate potential competing tensions as described above. However, it also suggests a potential need to build general employability and transferable skills into vocational curricula and reflect on whether regulatory frameworks around qualifications are foregrounding academic modes of assessment in vocational pathways.

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.

Ironically, transferable employability skills appear to be overlooked in vocational E&T. They should be included in post-16 curricula and work should be undertaken to build evidence from FE on the best pedagogic approaches to ensure employability skills formation effectively takes place. This might be included in the Curriculum and Assessment Review and also could be taken forward by the EEF as part of its emerging post-16 E&T agenda.