

Reed in Partnership

A three-lane superhighway

into work:

Making stronger
post-16 pathways
a reality

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Foreword



Nick Morgan, Deputy Operations Director

For too long, the UK has struggled with an imbalance in how different routes from education into work are valued and supported. While the academic pathway has been well established and clearly signposted, vocational and employment routes have too often been seen as less prestigious, less visible and harder to navigate. This has had real consequences – not only for the economy, but for the many young people who have not been supported onto a clear and credible path into sustained work.

In our recent paper, ‘A three-lane superhighway into work: Practical measures to reduce NEET rates now and in the future’¹, we set out the case for a more balanced and better-connected system to support young people into work. This paper builds on that analysis, focusing specifically on how post-16 pathways reform can help make that ambition a reality. The Government’s plans for new post-16 pathways, including the introduction of V-levels, represent an important opportunity to move in that direction.

The ability for young people to combine academic and vocational study has the potential to open up new, more flexible routes into work, while helping to establish greater parity of status between different pathways. A clearer and more coherent system should also give employers greater confidence in the skills and capabilities of young people entering the labour market.

The potential prize is significant. A system in which all routes into work are visible, valued and well supported would not only improve outcomes for young people, but help address long-standing skills shortages and support economic growth. However, the success of these reforms will depend on their implementation – and on ensuring that education pathways are matched by real opportunities in the labour market.

This paper sets out how the proposed reforms can support stronger transitions into work, and the wider changes that will be needed across the system to make them a success. If we get this right, we have the opportunity to create a more balanced, more inclusive and more effective system for supporting young people into sustained employment.

¹ Reed in Partnership, [A three-lane superhighway into work: Practical measures to reduce NEET rates now and in the future](#), February 2026.

Key points

- Young people broadly move from education to employment via three different routes: university, apprenticeship or vocational training and direct entry into employment. But these routes are not equally valued or straightforward to access, with the apprenticeship and direct employment routes far more fragmented and difficult to navigate than the well-established university pathway.
- The Government's rightly ambitious plans for post-16 education pathways have the potential to make the system much clearer and workable for all young people, with parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes to employment at its heart.
- The ability to mix and match academic and vocational qualifications of equal status is a welcome move with the potential to open up structured, personalised pathways for young people who can build their essential employment skills through both routes.
- It is important that the proposed level 2 pathways are not overlooked in design and implementation, given the scale of the system change that all stakeholders will be implementing. These will be complex to implement but should be a priority as a primary route for reducing the numbers of young people who are NEET.
- Meaningful employer involvement will be critical to the success of the new pathways and the national occupational standards that will play a major role in shaping subject content.
- High-quality careers education, led by a trained, fully-dedicated careers lead in every school and supported by England's network of Careers Hubs, will be essential in securing the impact of these reforms for young people and building in the employer engagement that will translate pathways into opportunity.
- Successful implementation will rest upon not just young people, schools and parents understanding the new pathways but also a much wider set of education and labour market stakeholders. Employer understanding will be critical if the new qualifications are going to be valued at recruitment stage.
- A comprehensive plan for active, on-the-ground support for schools and colleges will be needed to implement this ambitious and complex change programme, especially schools where performance is lower or levels of deprivation are high.
- Ultimately, the success of post-16 reforms will depend on whether sufficient, high-quality opportunities, that young people can access, exist in the labour market. Alongside continued action to open up apprenticeships, there is a need for a stronger, more coordinated approach to supporting young people when they leave education, including the employment support that needs to be there when young people fall out of work or training. This should include a national, flagship employment support offer for young people and localised, targeted outreach and re-engagement support.

Introduction

In a recent interview², Alan Milburn, who is carrying out an investigation into the causes of record unemployment and inactivity among 16-to-24-year-olds for the Government, pointed to the need to look through a “systems lens” if the UK is to dramatically reduce the number of young people who are NEET. He commented: “When you look at it through a system-based approach, it becomes obvious very quickly that there is no system around stopping youth employment.” Instead of the current complexity and lack of smooth, supported transition points, we need welfare, health and education systems to work together, where currently they are often misaligned. “We need a participation first mindset across welfare, health and education”, he argued.

In our submission to the Milburn Review³, we argued that behind the UK’s unacceptably high number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) is a failure to support young people with a clear and fully-connected system to aid their successful transition from education to employment, with no one left behind.

We used the concept of a three-lane superhighway into work for young people to describe the three most common routes from education to work:

1. Direct entry into employment
2. Progression into work via an apprenticeship or other high-quality vocational training
3. The university route into the labour market.

We highlighted that these lanes are currently unequal in the ways in which they are supported and valued. The higher education route is well established, although rising unemployment is hitting graduates: more than one in four 22-24-year-olds who are NEET hold a degree. The status of apprenticeships has risen greatly in recent years but access barriers for young people persist despite their popularity. There is a particular lack of visibility or recognition for the direct route into employment. This is despite the fact that it remains a primary destination for a large proportion of young people.

Each of these lanes should offer a clear, credible and supported route into sustained work, with young people able to move between lanes where appropriate, without falling out of the system altogether. The ambition for two-thirds of young people to have benefitted from higher level learning, whether academic, vocational or technical, by the age of 25, must be accompanied with ambition and support for the third who enter employment directly.

This paper focuses on the role that plans for reformed post-16 pathways can play in a stronger system of transition for young people from education into the labour market, via whichever educational pathways support their goals. It should therefore be read as the second in a series, moving from diagnosis and immediate measures to the structural changes needed to strengthen routes from education into employment.

² "My generation thought in argument"; Sam Freedman interview with Alan Milburn, [Comment is Freed Substack](#), April 2026.

³ Reed in Partnership, [A three-lane superhighway into work: Practical measures to reduce NEET rates now and in the future](#), February 2026.

Background: Plans for new post-16 pathways

The Government's plans for post-16 pathways reform in England (set out in its recent response to the Post-16 Level Three and Below Pathways consultation⁴) represent an important opportunity to build a better system for young people's transition from school to work. The paper sets out "a more dynamic system of technical and vocational qualifications that supports students to succeed, regardless of which pathway they wish to take." The plans (summarised in Table 1) recognise that post-16 education should be designed to support clear progression for every student, be future-proof in responding to changing labour market demand and encapsulate crystal clear pathways for young people to take depending on their individual goals and purpose. Particularly welcome components of the proposals are:

- **The principle of being able to mix and match elements of both academic (A-level) and vocational (V-level) study.** This has the potential to open up successful, structured pathways to work for thousands of young people, as well as building direct parity of prestige and status into the system. It comes with the acknowledgement that T-levels - a two-year, specialised period of study equivalent to three A-levels and involving a significant work placement – should not be the only gold-standard vocational/technical level 3 option at age 16, when the majority of students will want their study choices to be wider and more diverse⁵.
- **Structured and supported level 2 routes** for both those younger people keen to get started in a job, and those who need further foundation study to reach their next step. These will be challenging for education providers to get right but must not be neglected as a "second tier" choice. Given the powerful protective role that qualifications can play in NEET prevention, new level 2 pathways arguably have the greatest potential of any element of the reforms to reduce the UK's unacceptably high NEET rate.
- **Clear progression pathways** to support every learner at all levels, eventually replacing the myriad of qualifications and confusing post-16 options which have led to poor outcomes for individuals and the economy. A large-scale, coordinated communication and engagement exercise involving all stakeholders will be critical for success.

⁴ Department for Education, [Post-16 level 3 and below pathways Government consultation response](#), March 2026.

⁵ While published student destinations data on T-levels is broadly positive (see Department for Education, [Technical Education Learner Survey 2025](#)), just 27,000 students began a T-level in 2025.

Table 1: Summary of proposed changes to post-16 pathways

<p>Level 3</p>	<p>A levels (2 years)</p> <p>Two-year academic subject-based qualifications.</p>	<p>T levels (2 years)</p> <p>Two-year technical study programmes equivalent to three A-levels. Provide a mixture of technical knowledge and skills specific to the chosen sector or programme, an industry placement of 45 days and relevant maths, English and digital skills.</p>	<p>New: V levels</p> <p>Two-year qualification equal to one A level. Can mix and match. Applied vocational learning.</p> <p>National curriculum linked to occupational standards.</p> <p>Significant % of non-exam assessment.</p>
<p>Level 2</p>	<p>New: Foundation certificates (one year)</p> <p>Further study pathway aimed at students preparing to move on to level 3 qualifications. Gain foundation certificate. English/ Maths if needed, enrichment activities, exposure to level 3 teaching.</p>	<p>New: Occupational certificates (two years)</p> <p>Occupational pathway for students wanting to progress into a job or apprenticeship. Gain occupational certificate. English/ Maths if needed; employability; occupation-specific learning.</p>	<p>English and maths GCSEs</p>
<p>Level 1</p>	<p>New: Prep for GCSE qualifications in English and Maths</p> <p>For those struggling most with getting their English/Maths GCSEs, new staged qualifications to support progression and recognition.</p>		

Making the plans a success

Below we argue that these reforms can play a key role in supporting young people's transition from education to employment, via their choice of route. The proposed reforms are ambitious and have the potential to support England to succeed finally in breaking out of its "profoundly unbalanced" education system⁶, which is failing to meet the needs of either young people or the economy. The scale of the work that will be needed across the system, however, and the challenges that educators, employers, awarding bodies and any organisation involved in post-16 education will face in implementing and communicating the changes, will be huge, especially given the ambitious timescale for rollout. This paper sets out some of the key ingredients that will be needed for success. Chief amongst these are:

- Paying particular attention not only to the new V-levels but to the design and implementation of the **level 2 occupational pathway** to ensure its quality and reputational status as a route into employment.
- **Meaningful employer involvement** in shaping the new pathways and the national occupational standards that will play a major role in shaping subject content.
- Recognition that expanded and embedded **high-quality careers education** will be critical to success, particularly in putting **essential employment skills** at the forefront.
- **The quality and ambition of the communications exercise** that will be needed to support understanding and buy-in, both for young people but also with employers so that the new qualifications are valued at recruitment stage.
- Setting out a **comprehensive plan for active, on-the-ground support for schools and colleges** to implement this ambitious and complex change programme, especially schools where performance is lower or levels of deprivation are high.

Lastly, the impact of improved pathways for young people from education to work will only be realised if the employer-created opportunities are there for young people once they leave education, with support to help access those opportunities. This needs to include:

- **Going further and faster to open up apprenticeships** for young people, building on the positive changes that have already been announced.
- **Stepping up support for employers to recruit young people**, particularly disabled young people and those with neurodivergent conditions.
- Ensuring that a range of **specialist employment support** is there to respond rapidly when young people do fall out of employment and training pathways, so that they can get back on track.
- Providing accessible, one-stop-shop online **labour market information** for young people to support them on their journey from education to work.
- **Improving the higher education sector's employability support offer** for university students to improve the transition from university to work, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

⁶ Centre for Social Justice, Rewiring Education, 2026.

OI V-levels and why enabling the **mixing and matching** of academic and vocational qualifications is the right approach

The introduction of high-quality, sector-based learning and qualifications that can be mixed with academic study has the potential to embed parity of esteem at the heart of post-16 education and significantly widen choices for young people – particularly those who want their study to incorporate applied or practical learning.

Most learners in year 11 have thought about which career pathway may be right for them and have a plan for their next step⁷, but many want to keep their options open or would like to combine elements of academic and vocational study. V-levels have the potential to both resolve the confusing landscape of the hundreds of different level 3 vocational qualifications currently on offer and enable each students to select a study programme that reflects their individual interests and emerging career ambitions. If done right, their introduction can cement a clear, high-quality vocational qualification alongside A-levels and of equal value.

As the Government’s post-16 pathways consultation response argues, ‘future-ready’ education systems must offer flexible, high-quality and diverse options – combining general and vocational education – to help individuals adapt, re-skill and navigate changing labour markets. One of the many challenges in designing the new V-levels will be to ensure that they are responsive to the changing employment and skills needs of different economic sectors, but have essential employment skills at their core.

The headline finding of the landmark Skills Imperative 2035 programme⁸ was that all young people need to leave education with a strong base of the essential employment skills needed in both work and life, but that it described as “peripheral” in the current education system: collaboration, communication, creative thinking, information literacy, organising, planning/prioritising and problem solving/decision making. Both academic and vocational qualifications, and the careers support around them, must explicitly and deliberately support young people to build these.

⁷ Careers and Enterprise Company, [Learning career readiness in 2024/25](#), 2025

⁸ NFER/Nuffield Foundation, [The Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce](#), 2025.

O2 Level 2 pathways must be engaging and high quality

Government should set a clear expectation that level 2 pathways are a primary route for NEET reduction, with dedicated accountability, funding and performance measures attached to their successful delivery.

While as many learners as possible should be encouraged to study level 3 qualifications, the introduction of two clearer post-16 pathways at level 2 (one focused on foundational study for progression and one designed for students primarily aiming to move into employment) marks an important development. A focus on the essential skills highlighted by the Skills Imperative 2035 programme (see above) must be at the core of both.

Gaining qualifications is far from the only ingredient of a successful transition from education to employment, but it has been shown to have a particularly powerful protective impact for the most deprived young people, with every qualification level halving the chances of a young person being NEET.⁹ High-quality qualifications are important for all young people studying at level 2 in their post-16 education but particularly those at most risk of NEET. If clearer, purpose-led education routes are going to play a part in reducing NEET levels, then the new level 2 pathways could potentially be the most important element of the reforms.

Designing and implementing the foundational study and occupational pathways will be challenging, so it is critical that sufficient resource and attention are given by all stakeholders to getting these right. As many of the consultation responses to Government highlighted, the new routes will be complex to design and complex for educators to organise and deliver. Learners on these two pathways will be more likely to have special educational needs (28% compared to 8% of level 3 learners) and be eligible for free school meals (26% compared to 11% of level 3 learners). Design, content and support will need to be both engaging and motivating, with provision tailored for individual learners.

The level 2 employment pathway in particular will need to be designed with significant employment and careers support, to ensure that it succeeds in helping young people gain the employment and apprenticeship opportunities that employers are offering. Currently, more than one million of the 2.5 million roles currently in critical demand in the UK require skills broadly aligned with level 2, according to Skills England. With the employer engagement and work experience that will be critical to making this pathway a success, the opportunities are there for young people to continue their progression once in employment.

⁹ Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#), May 2025

O3 The new system will need an enhanced **employer** role and voice

The implementation plan should include a clear and funded strategy for employer engagement, with a particular focus on SMEs, to ensure that the new vocational pathways are meaningfully co-designed with employers at every level, in a way that can be sustained and agile. Without this, there is a risk of misalignment between the new pathways and qualifications and the future skills needs of the economy.

The new educational pathways will succeed or fail on depending on whether they can reflect and respond to changes in real labour market and skills needs. This means that every element of the proposed pathways will need increased employer involvement, whether through increased numbers of placements for expanding T-levels, engagement in the shaping (and simplification¹⁰) of national occupational standards or the increased level of careers activities that will be needed to make the new pathways a success.

While there is a mature and effective model for engaging employers in school careers education via the Career Hubs network, there is significant room for improvement in the ways in which employer insight is built into the design and delivery of vocational and technical pathways, qualifications and content as well as the national occupational standards. Progress has been made through the data-driven work done by Skills England, however much larger-scale employer engagement is needed, reflecting a much wider range of employer voices including more SMEs, particularly given the fact that the new vocational pathways will be either based on or linked to the national occupational standards. Finding speedier, less bureaucratic ways of consulting employers and shaping content will be essential to engaging employers in the transformation of post-16 pathways, particularly given the need to involve them in the development of the new foundation apprenticeships too.

¹⁰ See Learning and Work Institute, [From confusion to clarity: rethinking England's 670 occupational standards](#), December 2025.

O4 High-quality careers education and employer activity in schools will be critical to all post-16 pathways

Every school and college will need a trained, fully-dedicated careers lead to support their school to develop the careers and employability provision/curriculum that the new vocational pathways will need. England's network of Careers Hubs will be essential partners in expanding the employer engagement that will be critical for success.

As we argued in our recent report¹¹, high quality careers education is essential in preventing young people from becoming NEET. For young people from the most deprived backgrounds, or among the 11% of young people living in workless households, it can be particularly impactful. The Careers and Enterprise Company recently demonstrated that the highest-quality provision reduces the likelihood of a young person being NEET by 8% post-16 and post-18, compared with a school with little or no provision, reaching up to 20% for the most disadvantaged schools. While there are yawning gaps between students' levels of career readiness related to disadvantage, high-quality careers education can more than compensate for the average disadvantage associated with being in receipt of free school meals, for example.

In rolling out the new post-16 pathways, careers education will need to play an enhanced role. Currently, too many schools make do with a part-time, untrained careers lead, while careers education is still too often seen as a lower-tier priority than other elements of the curriculum. The Government's recent announcement of additional funding for careers leader training is a welcome step in the right direction. In order to support the new approach to vocational and technical education, deeper and more extensive employer engagement at school and college level will be needed, particularly in the employability skills that will form part of the level 2 occupational certificate. Currently, there is limited clarity on how this employability skills provision will be delivered.

Working through the devolved, mature system of Careers Hubs in England is an important route to supporting this expanded focus on employability both in the curriculum and through employer engagement. It will be essential infrastructure in supporting impact for young people and minimising transition risk for schools. Now is the time to invest in the expansion of schools' careers education, from enhanced support for employers to engage with schools to making the Government's new Work Experience Guarantee a success in every school.

¹¹ Reed in Partnership, [A three-lane superhighway into work: Practical measures to reduce NEET rates now and in the future](#), February 2026.

O5 **Communication**: building a shared understanding for stronger outcomes

The Government has said that its Implementation Plan, to be published by June 2026, will include detailed plans for information, advice and guidance to students, but it should include a comprehensive, well-resourced plan for the many different stakeholders on which success will rest, including employers, parents and other local stakeholders.

In principle, the new post-16 pathways should be much easier for students, schools, parents and young people themselves to understand, compared to the current confusing and fragmented landscape of post-16 choices. In practice, the scale of the changes proposed risks confusion and potential difficulties for young people without a comprehensive and proactive communication and stakeholder plan, with a strong partnership between central government and local stakeholders. While ease of navigation for young people is the priority, this will be deeply influenced by the extent to which schools, parents and carers and other sources of post-16 destinations advice share the same vision and understand the practical choices, as well as employers and awarding bodies. Landing the new vocational routes as high-quality, desirable options will need the buy-in of all these stakeholders if employers are to recognise and value V-levels and the new level 2 qualifications when they encounter them in the recruitment process.

O6 The scale of the **transition** challenge

NEET prevention must be a central focus throughout the transition to the new post-16 pathways, or confusion could result in more young people falling out of the system. Crucially, these reforms must be delivered as part of a joined-up system, where education, employment support and employer engagement are aligned.

Schools and further education colleges are under pressure, working to improve absence and attendance, SEND support, attainment and progression while battling staffing shortages and falling pupil numbers feeding through to secondary school enrolments. Further education institutions face particular difficulties in recruiting the tutors from key industries such as construction, engineering and digital. For that reason, it is right that a system-wide overhaul of post-16 pathways should be phased in carefully route by route, with stability prioritised.

07 Ensuring the opportunities are there

Whether young people leave school and progress to university, take up an apprenticeship or enter employment directly, it is employers who ultimately determine whether those pathways lead to sustained work. The success of post-16 reforms will therefore depend not only on the design of qualifications, but on whether sufficient, high-quality opportunities exist in the labour market.

Current conditions present a challenge. Young people are often the most exposed to shifts in employer demand, particularly in sectors such as retail, hospitality and entry-level services. Rising employment costs and wider economic pressures risk reducing the availability of early-career opportunities at precisely the moment the system is seeking to expand participation.

Alongside continued reform of apprenticeships – including further support for SMEs to create opportunities at scale – there is a need for a stronger, more coordinated approach to supporting young people once they leave education.

This should include:

- A flagship, nationally commissioned employment support offer for young people, building on the Youth Guarantee and learning from programmes such as the Restart Scheme and JETS, to provide rapid, personalised support when young people fall out of work or training.
- Continued expansion of apprenticeship opportunities, particularly at entry level, supported by practical brokerage and employer-facing support.
- Stronger alignment between education pathways and employment support, so that young people can move seamlessly between learning and work without falling out of the system.
- Targeted outreach and re-engagement support, particularly for those not in contact with services.

Taken together, this reflects the central argument of our three-lane superhighway approach: that all routes into work must be clear, connected and supported – and that when young people do fall out of those routes, the system must respond quickly to help them back on track.

