

# EARNING AND LEARNING

Making the apprenticeship system work for 16–18-year-olds

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## 60-SECOND SUMMARY

Too many 16–18-year-olds are studying level 2 courses that do not help them progress to higher levels of vocational education or start a successful career. This is contributing to England’s relatively high levels of youth unemployment, as many young people struggle to make the transition from education to work.

The current system of vocational education does not provide the right balance between ‘earning and learning’ for this group of young people. There is a particular problem with level 2 apprenticeships, which are not currently well designed to meet the needs of 16–18-year-olds: they are often very job specific, they do not include much off-the-job training, they only last one year, and – from next year – they will not be required to include a recognised qualification. The current system therefore falls short of the recommendations of the recent Sainsbury review of technical education. This review called for level 2 programmes for 16–18-year-olds that last two years, have a common core of knowledge, and result in a single, nationally-recognised certificate linked to a broad occupational pathway.

**Improving education-to-work transitions for young people who have low qualifications will be crucial for any attempt to boost social mobility in Britain. We recommend that the government phases out level 2 apprenticeships for 16–18-year-olds, and replaces them with a distinct pre-apprenticeship programme.** This would be designed to meet the specific needs of younger learners and help them to progress to further study or a full level 3 apprenticeship. The pre-apprenticeship programme would differ from the current apprenticeship programme in key ways.

- Pre-apprenticeships would contain more ‘off the job’ training.
- Pre-apprenticeships would include more general education (including English and maths).
- Pre-apprenticeships would result in a transferable qualification.
- Employers would be subsidised for hiring a young person on a pre-apprenticeship (they could be allowed to use their levy payment to cover a young person’s wages while on the programme).
- There would be one ‘pre-apprenticeship programme’ for each of the 15 technical pathways identified in the recent Sainsbury review and government skills plan.

Pre-apprenticeships would only be offered by FE colleges, or training providers which are run on a not-for-profit basis.

## KEY FINDINGS

England has struggled for many years to support young people to make the transition from education into work. Even after the recent economic recovery, 16–24-year-olds remain nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than adults.

Many of the difficulties that young people face in finding secure employment have their roots in the 16–18 phase of education. There is a particularly acute problem for those people studying level 2 vocational courses (GCSE or equivalent). There are currently around 270,000 16–18-year-olds studying on level 2 courses, including 90,000 enrolled on apprenticeships.

There are a number of clear indicators that this group of learners are not being adequately prepared either for further study or for the jobs market.

- Young people with a level 2 qualification find it harder to get work than their better-educated peers. Young people who leave full-time education with a level 2 qualification have an employment rate of 70 per cent – almost 20 percentage points lower than those of their peers who leave full-time education with a level 3 qualification or higher education.
- They find it harder to progress onto higher qualifications. Only 39 per cent of students pursuing a level 2 qualification at age 17 move on to a level 3 course, which suggests that it is hard for 16–18-year-olds studying a level 2 qualification to move up the skills ladder.
- Some young people become stuck in a ‘cycle’ of low-level qualifications. A quarter of those pursuing a level 2 qualification at age 17 are still working towards a qualification of the same level a year later, and 8 per cent have moved down a level.

Taken as a whole, the data above suggests that the English post-16 phase of education is not designed in a way that supports young people who are studying level 2 qualifications to progress into higher levels of study or decent jobs. This is the phase during which the journey from education to work can start to break down for a significant number of young people.

Evidence from other countries suggests that the key is to develop high-quality programmes that enable young people to move up the skills ladder while combining ‘earning and learning’. Countries such as Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark all have far lower levels of youth unemployment than England, in part because they have established vocational programmes that combine a good mix of off-the-job training, on-the-job training and general education. These programmes typically entail spending half one’s time in a work setting, and the other in a classroom setting, enabling young people to progress into a higher-level course or apprenticeship.

Despite a number of positive reforms in recent years – including the introduction of study programmes and technical pathways – the English system of vocational education has not yet designed level 2 courses that have the right mix of off-the-job training, on-the-job training and general education. Students on college-based programmes do not gain enough work experience, while those on employment-based programmes do not receive enough off-the-job education.

There is a particular problem with the design of apprenticeships, which are not currently well suited to the needs of 16–18-year-olds. They are often very job specific, do not include much off-the-job training, only last one year, and from next year they will not be required to include a recognised qualification. These sort of training programmes may make sense for adults already in work and looking to ‘top up’ their skills – however, they are not sufficient to help young people with relatively low levels of education get a foot on the career ladder.

The design of level 2 apprenticeships stands in stark contrast to the recommendations of the recent Sainsbury review of technical education, which recommended that young people on level 2 courses undertake a two-year programme with a common core of knowledge that results in a certificate linked to a clear occupational pathway. The challenge facing policymakers is to design apprenticeships for young people that fulfil this vision.

## RECOMMENDATION

**The government should phase out level 2 apprenticeships for 16–18-year-olds, and replace them with a distinct *pre-apprenticeship* programme for this group.** The pre-apprenticeship programme could evolve out of the existing system, but be designed to address explicitly the distinct needs of younger learners.

The new pre-apprenticeship programme would differ from the current apprenticeships in the following ways.

- **Pre-apprenticeships would contain more ‘off the job training’** (50 per cent of time would be spent on ‘off the job’ training, instead of the present 20 per cent): young people require more general education and foundational vocational knowledge to help them start a career.
- **Pre-apprenticeships would result in a transferable qualification linked to the technical pathways proposed in the Sainsbury review**, helping young people to progress to higher levels of study.
- **Employers would be subsidised for hiring young apprentices** (they could be allowed to use their levy payment to cover a young person’s wages while on the programme): this would give them a clear financial incentive to take part in the programme.
- **There would be one ‘pre-apprenticeship programme’ for each of the 15 technical pathways identified in the recent Sainsbury review**: this would ensure they are sufficiently broad and link to a clear progression pathway.
- **Pre-apprenticeships would only be offered by FE colleges**: given pre-apprenticeships will have a much greater educational component and be targeted at young people under the age of 18, they should only be offered by colleges and training providers that are run on a not-for-profit basis.
- **Pre-apprenticeships would be explicitly designed to help young people move onto a full level 3 apprenticeship at age 18 or 19.**

This recommendation would help to improve the quality of the training received by 16–18-year-olds who are currently enrolled on level 2 apprenticeships. It could also prove attractive to those who currently enrol on level 2 study programmes in college. Ultimately, it will expand the number of young people who are on a high-quality ‘earning and learning’ route with good prospects for progressing to higher-level study.

For the full report, including all references, data sources and notes on methodology, see: [www.ippr.org/publications/earning-and-learning-making-the-apprenticeship-system-work](http://www.ippr.org/publications/earning-and-learning-making-the-apprenticeship-system-work)

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