

APPG on Youth Affairs: Inquiry into skills gaps and youth employment

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

Introduction

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 24,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

ASCL welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to this inquiry. Our submission is based on the views of our members, obtained through discussions at ASCL Council, with relevant advisory groups, and prompted and unprompted emails and messages.

When considering the impact of any proposals on different groups, it is ASCL's policy to consider not only the nine protected characteristics included in the Equality Act 2010, but also other groups which might be disproportionately affected, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. We have answered any equality impact questions on this basis.

Comments on specific issues

Please complete the contact information for you or your organisation.

Organisation Name (if applicable): ASCL

Contact name, position (if applicable) and email address: Dr Anne Murdoch, Senior Advisor, College Leadership. anne.murdoch@ascl.org.uk

Are you a young person (under 30 years old) or responding on behalf of a young person?

Yes: No:

1. What are the current barriers and challenges facing young people when taking the first steps in their careers? (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

Careers advice is far more informed now than ten years ago and most young people receive good advice. The National Careers Service provides information about jobs, careers and training for teenagers over thirteen years of age. The Careers and Enterprise Company has worked well with the Gatsby Foundation to ensure schools and colleges reach an effective standard in careers advice. As WorldSkills increases its influence on young people already in education and training, careers advice and guidance is being offered on the trades represented in this competition.

There is still some way to go, however, to ensure that every young person receives impartial advice and guidance about what is on offer for them locally, even though services have improved in this field.

Our members tell us that the main barrier to starting a career is the fact that some employers are desperate for skilled employees and so they have less time to train young people into jobs and careers at work.

Employers want to increase apprenticeship numbers, but they are struggling to fill vacancies with suitable applicants. Young people often do not understand the breadth of opportunities, and there is often a lack of work experience opportunities. This means that some young people are not able to make informed decisions about their first steps in work.

Where employers can recruit, due to the extended duration of some apprenticeships (such as those in engineering or manufacturing) they are not always able to measure the impact training is having on their organisation, so it can be some time before an employer can see a return on their investment. This can impact on their willingness to recruit young people into their organisations.

2. What are the current skills gaps in the UK to create the workforce of the future? (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

A report by Young Enterprise on 'Youth employment and the skills gaps' found that youth unemployment continues to be high as the labour market increasingly integrates digital skills and artificial intelligence. This means that young people must be more adaptable, flexible and creative than ever before to enter into some industries, including motor manufacturing, robotics and design.

The recruitment crisis in specialist teachers for subjects such as IT, engineering and construction is having a negative impact on young people wishing to enter those industries. Skills gaps also vary between geographical locations. This situation must be addressed as soon as possible. Improved pay and conditions for teachers in schools and colleges is needed in the short-term to stop the acceleration of skills gaps and the disincentives for young people to train in these fields.

3. What action could the Government or other partners take today to support all young people in the roles of the future? (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

There is a great deal of evidence to support the need for much improved investment in young people and adults. This is particularly so for skills training. The role which teachers play in helping young people into future work is vital as mentioned above.

Government must invest more in teachers in post 16 and further education and address the pay gaps between school and industry and college teachers. Young people will only be properly supported in the roles of the future if there are sufficient teachers in schools and colleges who understand the skills they need to progress.

4. What could the Government or other partners introduce over the next five to ten years that could help young people overcome the challenges and barriers to employment they currently face? (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

Analysis by the Sutton Trust, published in 2022, showed that the chance of young people today achieving the same level of social mobility as their parents or grandparents is reducing significantly. This research shows that opportunities are still determined by background and predicts a fall in income mobility driven by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

Statistics by UCAS on those from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education show that this increased during the pandemic but has decreased slightly since as more young people articulate concern about rising debt.

More young people are choosing not to take traditional routes to work or jobs. Many are interested in working for themselves and are disaffected by what they see as the inflexibility of traditional jobs and workplaces. Our members tell us that young people think it's normal to work for one employer or a succession of employers for less than two years.

Government must provide more improved financial support to young people and their families impacted by these challenges and barriers.

5. What long-term support would help young people overcome the challenges and barriers to securing stable long-term employment where they can thrive? (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

Skills training, whether in generic skills such as English, maths and IT or more specific skills such as those for construction, motor vehicle and hairdressing, must adapt to a very different product and service requirement from its customers.

However, for many providers, the cost of adapting training to meet rising costs, such as in manufacturing, licence costs and other capital costs of equipment or buildings, makes it difficult to keep up to date.

Young people who are learning skills today may not be using those skills in ten- or twenty-years' time, so the timescale for investment payback may hinder what is offered. The government must invest more in skills training for the longer term to achieve long term benefits.

Research funded by the Gatsby Foundation has found that solutions to productivity problems in this country lie in creating increasingly large numbers of technicians and associate professionals. A means must be found to increase the supply of people with the skills required to fill these roles. This is a key role of apprenticeships.

To achieve this goal in engineering and technology, employers need to be incentivised to invest in intermediate level skills and be empowered to invest in their own skills development. Leaving the market to determine intermediate skills demand will result in supply meeting short-term goals and doing little to ensure that skills supply is matched to demand over the longer term.

There are a broad range of apprenticeship standards available to support engineering businesses or roles within the engineering and technology sectors, for example. All of these have been developed by engineering businesses to meet the training and skills development needs of the sector. Employers must not only use the apprenticeship option to recruit and train new talent; they also need to upskill their existing workforce. Apprenticeships are therefore a viable opportunity for young people where vacancies exist and for existing workers where appropriate. Funding rates for apprenticeship training should be increased.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is likely to have a major impact on young people and their future careers as more people begin use AI in all aspects of their study and work. Some industries, such as manufacturing, are very advanced in the use of robotics, and others, such as IT and design, in the use of AI. This can be an opportunity for those young people who embrace technology, but less so for those who want hands-on careers working with people. Schools and colleges need more investment in technology to ensure their learners appreciate what AI and technology skills can offer them.

The main concern we have at present is that good AI is not free to everyone. This could widen the disadvantage gap, in terms of both education and future careers.

6. Please add any further thoughts or recommendations you would like the APPG to consider. (Please, note the word limit of no more than 500 words per question)

We agree that the report arising from this inquiry should be a useful addition to the government's inquiry on skills reform led by Sir Michael Barber, and their imminent plan for AI in schools. We are pleased that the inquiry will focus on many important issues that are critical at this time for young people, including:

- skills gaps
- training
- apprenticeships
- careers advice
- social mobility
- barriers to starting careers
- the future of work
- the impact of AI

We are particularly pleased that the inquiry will consider the impact of artificial intelligence on jobs and the future of work for young people. This is an issue of critical importance, and it is essential for policymakers to understand the challenges and opportunities that AI presents to

young people's futures. We would like to see evidence-based policy recommendations that help ensure young people are not left behind in the rapidly changing economy.

Schools and colleges play an important role in helping young people to learn skills and behaviours needed to enter employment. However, it is essential that services for young people such as careers, welfare and mental health support work together to provide more comprehensive guidance and support. This task cannot be left to schools and colleges alone.

Apprenticeships play a key part in supporting many industries. They provide skills at all levels to develop the products and operations of companies, which have a long history of recruiting and developing their workforce via the apprenticeship route.

However, some providers and employers state that schools have reduced the opportunities for young people to develop practical knowledge and skills, including basic hand skills, electronics, and access to new technologies such as robotics and automation/control systems, either because of the cost of equipment or because of staff shortages.

Others report that employers and FE providers have limited opportunities to get into schools to be able to effectively inform young people about apprenticeship opportunities, and key influencers such as parents/carers have limited information about this being a credible route. It is too early to say if Provider Access Legislation is improving this situation.

We hope that this submission is of value to the inquiry. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that we can.