



Ready to Work

Insights from UK Employers on the
Skills Young People Need for Work

A PUBLIC FIRST REPORT FOR WORLDSKILLS UK

This report was commissioned by **WorldSkills UK** and produced by **Public First**.

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WorldSkills UK is a four nations partnership between education, industry and UK governments. It is a world-class skills network acting as a catalyst for:

- Raising standards, through international benchmarking and professional development
- Championing future skills, through analysis of rapidly changing economic demand
- Empowering young people, from all backgrounds, through competitions-based training.

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01 Executive summary

Between April and May 2026, Public First surveyed 2,008 UK employers on behalf of WorldSkills UK to understand what employers value when hiring young people, the barriers they face in doing so, and how young people can best develop the employability skills needed for work. The findings provide a snapshot of employer attitudes at a time of rising youth unemployment, changing skills needs and growing debate about how more young people can successfully transition from education into employment.

01 Young people face a tougher route into work – but employers still want to hire

59% of UK employers say it is harder for young people to get a job today than it was for previous generations. Yet employer appetite has not disappeared: 56% expect to increase their hiring of 16-24-year-olds over the next year, compared with only 6% who expect to reduce it. The question is what will turn that intention into real opportunities.

02 Employers prioritise mindset and employability skills over qualifications alone

Employers are clear that how a young person approaches work matters. 95% say demonstrating the right mindset is important when hiring a young person. Teamwork, attention to quality, adaptability and professionalism rank among the attributes they value most.

03 Lack of work experience is the single biggest barrier

Nine in ten say work experience is important for developing the employability skills needed in the workplace, but employers identify a lack of prior work experience as the biggest barrier facing young people entering employment (44%).

04 Skills competitions offer another credible route into workplace readiness

Nearly three quarters of employers (74%) say taking part in a competition to develop employability skills is important for developing the skills needed in the workplace. More than half (56%) would like to see more applications from young people who have participated in a skills competition.

05 Employers want education to place greater emphasis on skills – but recognise shared responsibility

61% of UK employers say the education young people receive in school does not equip them with the employability skills needed to thrive at work. More than half (52%) want a greater focus on skills in education, but employers do not place responsibility on education alone. They see a role for employers, schools and colleges, parents, Government and young people themselves.

06 The broad picture is consistent across the four nations – but some pressures are sharper

Employers across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland broadly agree on the value of work experience and skills competitions. But employers in Northern Ireland are the most likely to say a lack of prior work experience is one of the greatest barriers young people face (55%, against 44% in England), whilst confidence in schools is lowest in Wales, where 69% say school does not equip young people with the skills they need.

02 Foreword by Lord Knight of Weymouth

I have spent a long time thinking about how young people get their first foothold in work. Rarely has there been as much urgency as there is now. The number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training has crept over one million – the highest figure in a decade. The numbers of graduates who now have large student debts and now work is undermining confidence in the purpose of schooling. Young people have always faced a high bar to entry – a need to prove themselves against competition from more experienced hires. But right now, a whole number of things are converging, meaning that bar has shifted.

Chief among them is how artificial intelligence is reshaping the nature of work itself. Employers are being quite rational when they turn to a machine to do a task a human might once have done. But that means young people now need a different set of skills and attributes. It is no longer the case that how much you know and how well qualified you are defines your future prospects.

Over half of UK employers tell us AI has already changed which skills they value most. Mindset and employability, not qualifications alone, are what hiring managers say determine whether a young person gets and keeps a job. And, tellingly, when forced to choose, employers want to see human skills like creativity, judgement and the ability to work well with others over the ability to simply operate AI tools.

Currently, however, there is a gap: 61% of employers say school does not equip young people with the employability skills they need, and over half want a greater focus on skills in the classroom. But this is not a one-way street. Employers depend on a steady supply of skilled young people as their future talent pipeline, and this polling tells us they know it: most still want to hire young people, and most think doing so would help their business. So, while employers want more from education, they do not see the job as education's alone; they see a role for employers, parents, governments and young people themselves. Work experience remains the biggest barrier young people face, but skills competitions, this report shows, are seen by employers as a valuable way of building and testing those same skills, particularly when placements are scarce.

Alongside the Milburn Review and the Prime Minister's push for earlier technical training pathways, this is a moment where the pieces could come together: better evidence of what employers want, and a wider range of routes, from classroom to competition to workplace, for young people to show it. Understanding what employers now need is how we improve outcomes in the labour market, reduce youth unemployment, meet Britain's skills needs and support the growth we all want to see.

The Rt. Hon. the Lord Knight of Weymouth

03 Foreword by WorldSkills UK

At **WorldSkills UK**, our aim is to help young people from all backgrounds develop the skills they need to thrive in work. At a time when too many young people are struggling to land their first job and employers are experiencing persistent skills gaps holding back growth, we wanted to lift the lid on why employers are reluctant to hire young people and ensure our programmes can do more to close this employability gap.

We commissioned Public First to ask 2,000 employers across the UK: what do you look for when hiring young people, what gets in the way, and what would make the biggest difference? The insights that came back are striking. Employer appetite to hire young people has not disappeared; most expect to grow their entry-level hiring this year. What they are looking for are not flawless CVs or perfect qualifications, but professionalism, adaptability, teamwork and the right mindset.

Employers are equally clear about what helps young people build those qualities. Work experience remains the route they value most, but skills competitions offer a chance for young people to develop and demonstrate exactly the attributes employers prize. Participants compete in challenges designed and judged by employers, ensuring the experience reflects real workplace expectations.

This research arrives at a significant moment, alongside the Milburn Review's examination of the transition from education into work, and wider reforms already under way to strengthen technical education. For WorldSkills UK and our network of partners, it provides an opportunity to think about skills competitions as a tool for schools, colleges, apprenticeship providers and universities to help more young people build the workplace skills and the mindset that employers are looking for from an earlier stage.

My wholehearted thanks to the team at Public First for developing such fascinating insights, which I hope will add value to the youth employment debate as well the future of skills competitions across the UK.

Emma Roberts, Director of External Affairs, WorldSkills UK

04 Introduction

Young people are entering the labour market at a particularly difficult moment. More than one million young people are now Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) – the highest figure in 13 years – and entry-level hiring has fallen over the past year. At the same time, employers are adapting to economic uncertainty, rapid technological change and evolving skills needs.

Against this backdrop, the transition from education into employment has become a growing policy priority. Alan Milburn's independent review of young people and work is examining the challenge in depth and will report soon with recommendations for Government. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Andy Burnham has made technical pathways into work an early priority, announcing reforms that will allow pupils in England to begin technical education from the age of 14. To date, much of the debate has centred on whether young people are “work ready”. Yet that phrase often obscures more than it explains. What does work readiness actually mean? Which skills matter most? What gives employers confidence to hire? And, crucially, how can more young people develop those qualities before entering the workplace?

To help answer those questions, **WorldSkills UK**, a charity whose mission is to help young people of all backgrounds develop the skills they need to thrive in work, commissioned **Public First** to survey 2,008 employers across the UK. Rather than asking employers simply whether young people are prepared for work, the research explored what they value when recruiting young people, the barriers they face in hiring them, how artificial intelligence is changing their expectations, and what they believe would make the greatest difference to helping young people prepare for employment.

The findings paint a more nuanced picture than the public debate often suggests. Employers continue to place greatest value on qualities such as communication, teamwork, professionalism, adaptability and resilience. They also recognise that developing those capabilities depends on opportunities to apply them in practice, whether through work experience, practical learning or other structured experiences.

This report examines those findings in detail. It explores the pressures facing employers and young people, what employers mean by work readiness, how expectations are changing, and where employers believe the greatest opportunities lie to help more young people make a successful transition from education into employment. In doing so, it aims to move the conversation beyond whether young people are “work ready” towards a more practical discussion about how education, employers, civil society and Government can work together along with organisations like WorldSkills UK, to prepare more young people for the changing world of work and smooth the transition from education to employment.

Methodology

Between 30 April and 29 May 2026, Public First surveyed 2,008 UK employers to understand their views on young people and work, employability and technical skills. Respondents answered a series of 50 questions covering topics including the barriers to youth employment, future skills needs and the impact of AI, and what would shift the dial when to better prepare young people for a changing labour market. These results were then weighted to match nationally representative proportions for business size and sector.

The survey reached employers of all sizes across a broad range of industries, from the Creative Industries to Defence, and included 1,472 private employers and 459 respondents working in the public sector. Specifically, we screened for respondents involved in hiring decisions. This means respondents' roles will look different in different businesses (for example, a CEO at a micro-company or a Chief People Officer in a larger company) but we were able to capture a broader range of employer views on young people and work, including those outside of HR departments with day-to-day visibility of the skills needs in their part of the business.

05 A tough start

Getting into work feels harder today

More than one million young people in the UK are now Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Official statistics for January to March 2026 put the total at 1,012,000 or 13.5% of all 16-24-year-olds – the first time this figure has surpassed a million in 13 years¹.

Part of the problem is that there are fewer jobs for young people to get started in work. As of April 2026, UK entry-level hiring was down 14% on the previous year, and 30 out of 38 tracked entry-level occupations were declining².

Youth unemployment isn't a new problem, but employers sense it is getting worse. Our polling finds that **59%** of employers across the UK believe it is harder for young people to get a job today than it was for previous generations, rising to two-thirds in the public sector.

3 in 5

UK employers think it is harder for young people to get a job today.



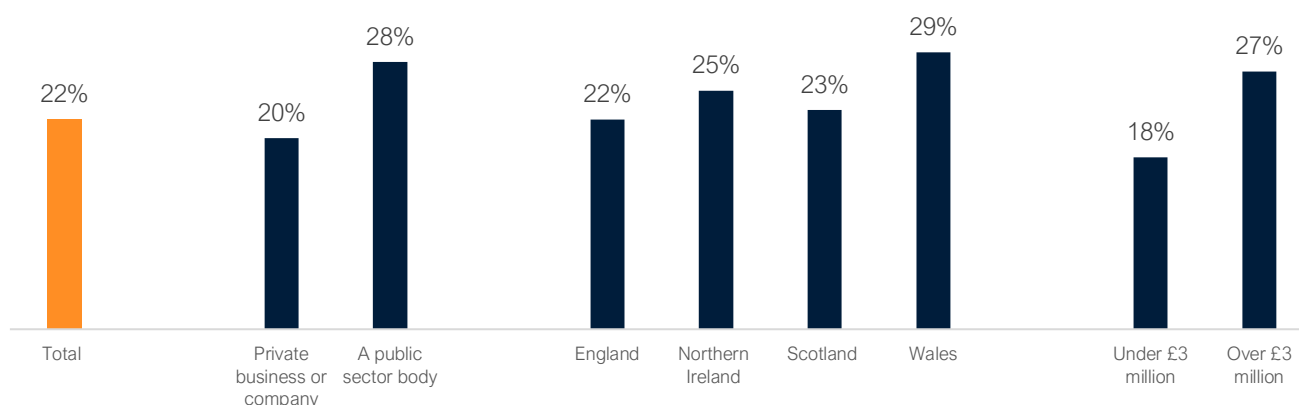
What is driving this view? Employers are contending with a set of pressures of their own. Over half (**54%**) cite rising business costs as one of the three biggest challenges facing their companies today, followed by uncertainty about the future of the economy (**31%**) and competition from other businesses (**25%**).

¹ Office for National Statistics (2026). Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneetable1>

² Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2026). A snapshot of entry-level hiring in the UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/entry-level-hiring-in-the-uk-a-snapshot/a-snapshot-of-entry-level-hiring-in-the-uk>

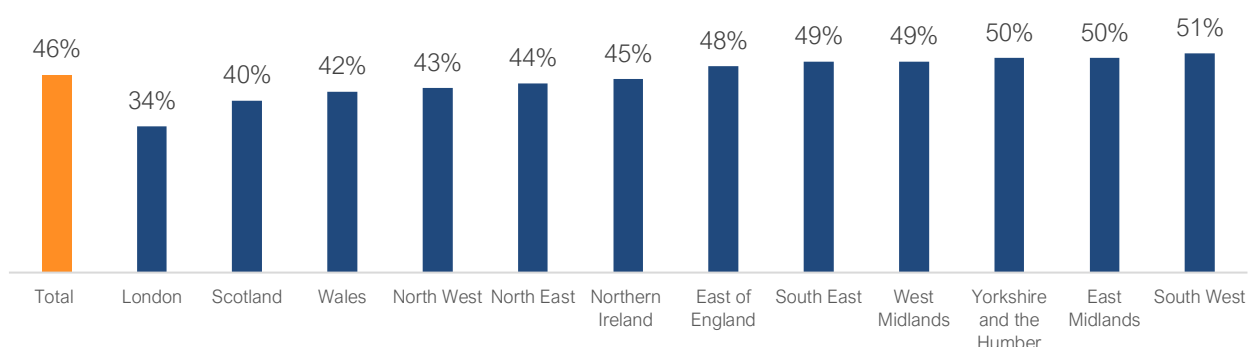
Even against this backdrop, access to skills stands out as a major concern. **One in five employers (22%)** identify a lack of required skills in their workforce as a top three issue. This concern is greater among the largest businesses surveyed: those with over 1,000 employees (**31%**), and those with annual revenue of more than £3 million (**27%**).

What are the biggest challenges faced by your business today? Please select three: Lack of required skills in our workforce



Right now, employers think the pipeline of new talent falls short of what they need to fill this existing skills gap. Almost a third (**32%**) say they are unable to hire young people with the relevant skills for their company, and nearly half (**46%**) think young people generally are unprepared for the world of work, with employers operating outside of London less likely to think they are prepared.

% of employers who believe that young people are unprepared for the world of work



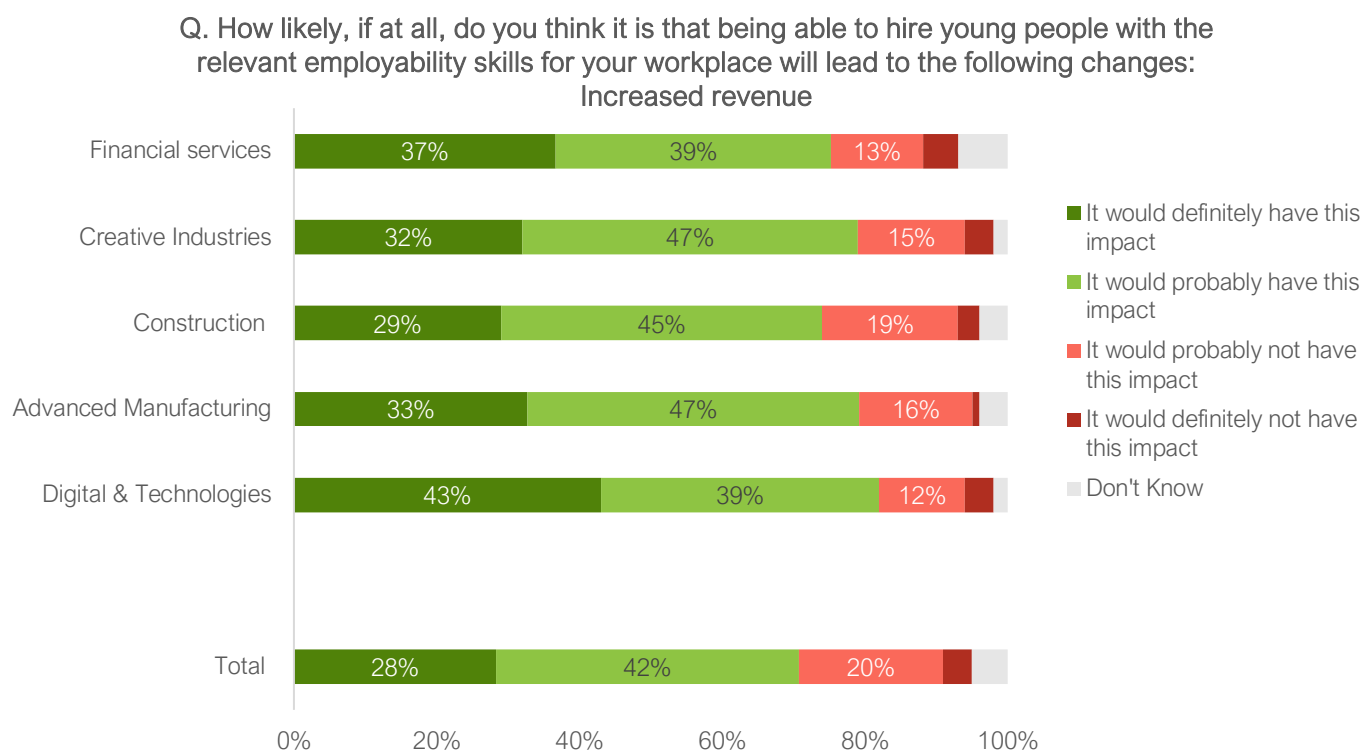
The desire to hire is there – it just isn't showing up yet

Employers have expressed clear dissatisfaction with the skills and readiness of their current and prospective workforce. But those concerns do not appear to have extinguished their appetite to hire young people. Half of employers (**51%**) say they increased their hiring of 16-24-year-olds over the past year, against just **9%** who report cutting back. Set against the national picture, that is a striking gap between what employers tell us they are doing and what is actually happening in the labour market.

Even more employers (56%) report that they plan to hire more young people over the next 12 months, against only 6% planning to pull back. This suggests that the barrier to hiring young people isn't a lack of employer appetite – but what it will take to convert planned hires into real job opportunities.

Employability pays

A majority of employers think that being able to recruit young people with the right employability skills for their workplace is likely to increase their revenue (70%). This is even more pronounced in certain sectors the Government has identified as the UK's strongest engines of economic growth in the Industrial Strategy (IS-8), such as Digital and Technology (82%), Advanced Manufacturing (80%) and the Creative Industries (79%). Specifically, employers think that hiring young people with the right skills could increase their ability to take on new clients or more work (74%) and help their expansion into new markets, services or products (65%).



Faced with a multitude of financial pressures, employers see young people with strong employability skills as an asset to their business. They associate these skills with higher revenue, greater capacity to take on new work and opportunities for growth. However, they also recognise that young people need support and opportunities to acquire these skills if they hope to thrive in employment. What is at stake goes beyond the individual employer: if the sectors predicted to drive growth cannot find the skills they need, the cost is UK-wide, with slower expansion and weaker productivity.

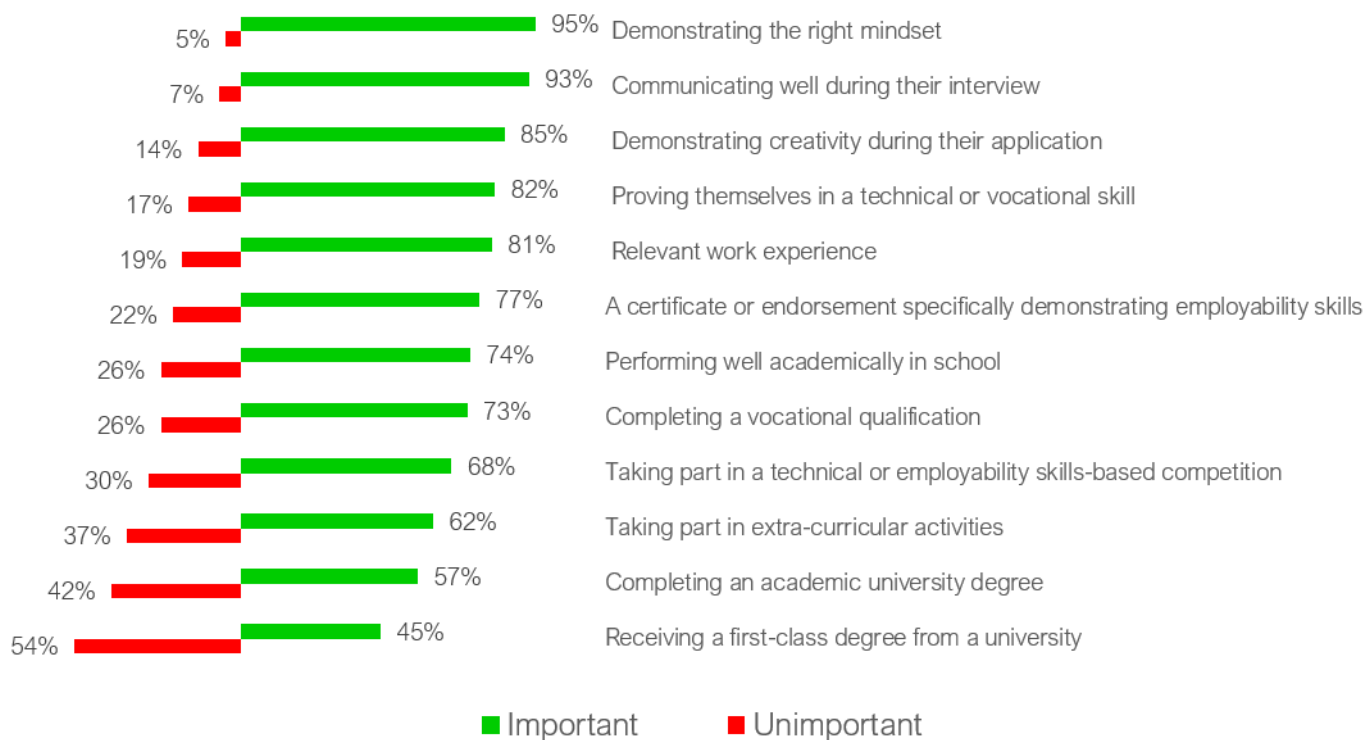
06 The employability skills gap

UK employers show a genuine desire to take on young people. The barrier isn't appetite – it's what happens next. But what does “work readiness” mean to employers, and how are hiring barriers actualised?

It's all about mindset

When asked what they are looking for in a younger hire, employers are clear: attitude and attributes – how you show up – matter more than qualifications. An overwhelming **95%** say that demonstrating the “right mindset” is important when making hiring decisions about young people. This trumps performing well academically in school (**74%**) and completing an academic university degree (**57%**). An academic degree, in fact, ranks below vocational qualifications, extra-curricular activities and taking part in a skills competition.

When making hiring decisions for young people, how important or unimportant is it that they demonstrate each of the following?



50%

Hiring managers over 55
report young people's
“mindset” is a barrier to
hiring

32%

Hiring managers under 55
report young people's
“mindset” is a barrier to
hiring

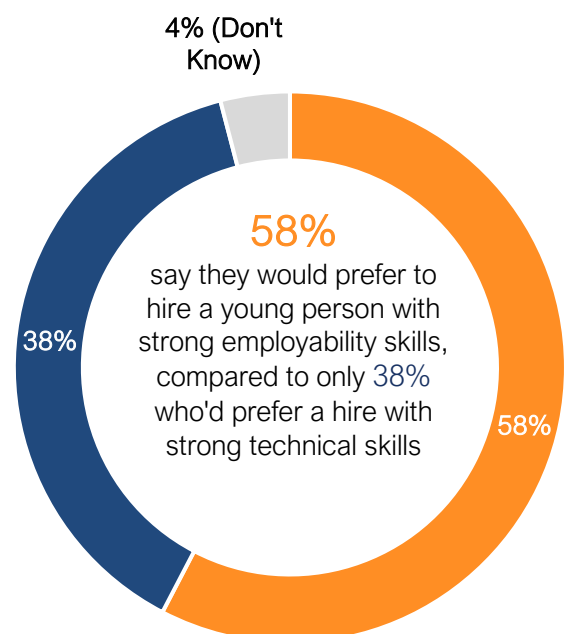
For employers, mindset is more than an abstract barrier – it is an active blocker to labour market entry. Over a third (35%) say young people lacking the right mindset is one of the greatest barriers to taking them on, and half of all employers (50%) say the same of “poor attitude”.

This view is not evenly held, however, and the pattern points to a more nuanced story. Employers aged over 55 are far more likely to see mindset as a barrier (50%), compared with those under 55 (32%). Perhaps more tellingly, employers who report having hired more than 15 young people in the last 12 months are less likely to report poor attitude as a barrier to hiring young people (40%) than those who have hired fewer than 15 young people (53%) in that same period. This does not mean concerns about mindset are not real – but it does suggest that employers may need to challenge assumptions about young people's attitudes to work and adapt in a more multi-generational workforce.

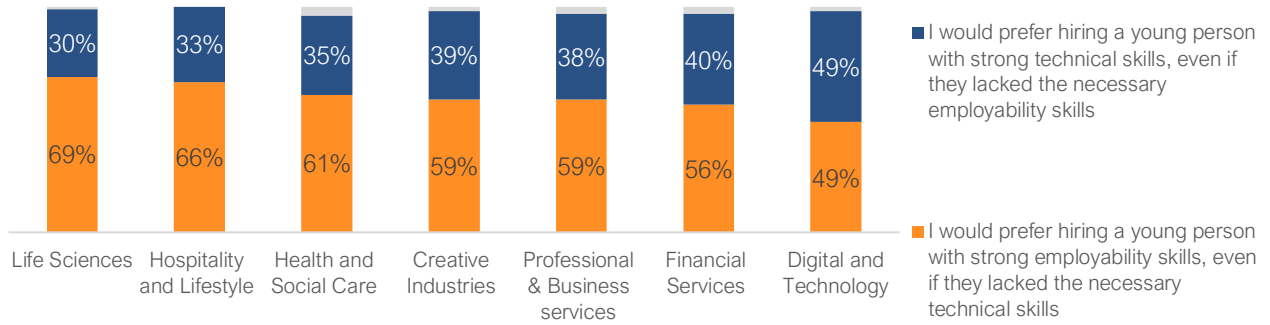
What does “work ready” look like?

“Mindset” can be difficult to define in concrete terms – which matters if young people (and those supporting them) are to know what employers are looking for and develop the necessary skills to meet those expectations. Asked which other skills and attributes they want, employers give a clearer picture: teamwork (41%), attention to quality and detail (35%), adaptability (30%) and professionalism (30%) are the attributes they rate as most important in a potential young hire. The problem is that some of these are also, disproportionately, reported to be among the hardest to find: 31% say this to be true of professionalism and 29% suggest this is the case for attention to quality and detail. A strong ability to focus is also perceived to be difficult to find in young candidates by 30% of employers.

It also explains why the gap feels so hard to close. 59% of employers say it is easier to teach a new hire relevant technical skills, against just 32% who think it is easier to teach relevant employability skills. Given the choice, more employers say they would prefer to hire a young person with strong employability skills even without the necessary technical skills (58%) than the reverse (38%) – rising as high as 69% in the Life Sciences and 66% in Hospitality and Lifestyle.



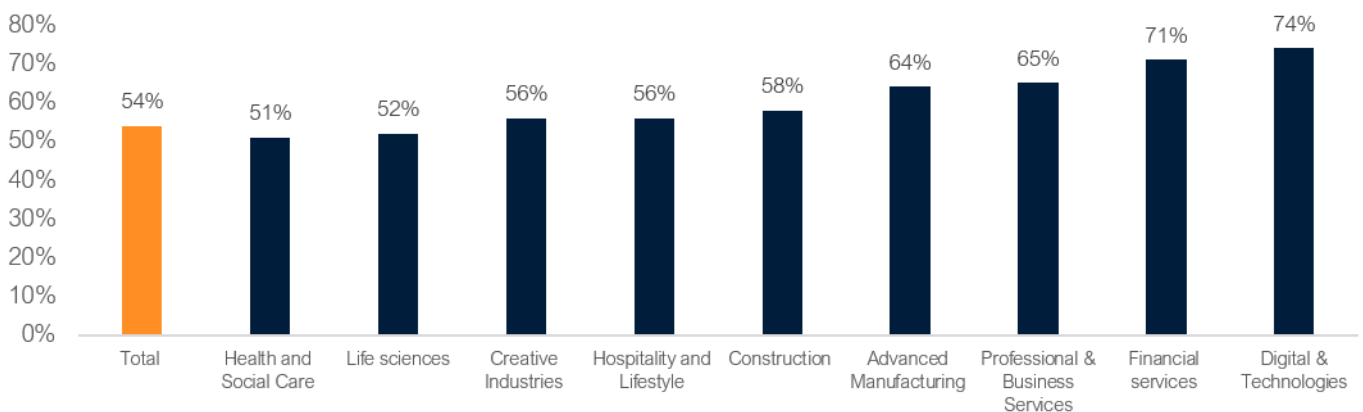
Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Work-readiness in the age of AI

As artificial intelligence changes the skills employers value, there is a risk that the gap between what young people can demonstrate and what employers expect will widen. More than half of employers (**54%**) say artificial intelligence has already “significantly” or “moderately” changed the skills they prioritise when recruiting new employees. This is higher in certain sectors – such as Digital and Technology (**74%**), Financial Services (**71%**) and Professional and Business Services (**65%**) – as well as businesses operating in London (**66%**) and businesses with annual revenue of over £3 million (**62%**).

% who said AI has moderately or significantly changed the skills they prioritise when looking for new employees

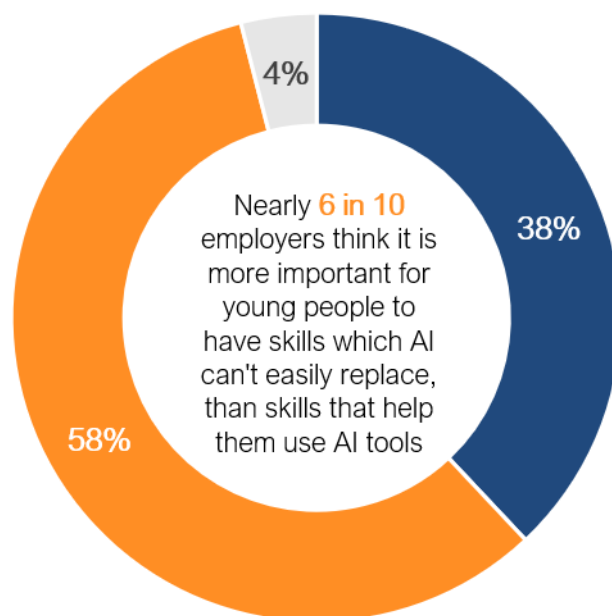


Many are looking for young people who can adapt to new technologies and learn to work alongside AI. At the same time, employers place even greater value on skills that technology cannot easily replace. Of those employers who say they expect AI has impacted or will impact the skills they prioritise at hiring, **41%** argue this is because they want employees who can quickly learn how to use and adapt to AI tools, and over a third (**37%**) of this group say they want employees with the skills that AI can't easily replicate – including creativity, interpersonal skills and hands-on practical capabilities.

However, when asked to choose between whether it's more important for young people to have skills which help them use AI tools or skills which AI cannot easily replicate (creativity, interpersonal skills, hands-on skills, for example), employers think the latter is more important, particularly in certain sectors, such as the Creative Industries (71%) and Construction (66%).

To adapt to the job market transitioning into the AI age, employers think that young people need to adopt a two-pronged approach. Learning how to use and integrate AI tools into their workflow is important, alongside strengthening skills AI cannot replace, such as interpersonal skills, which we know employers regard as key when making hiring decisions.

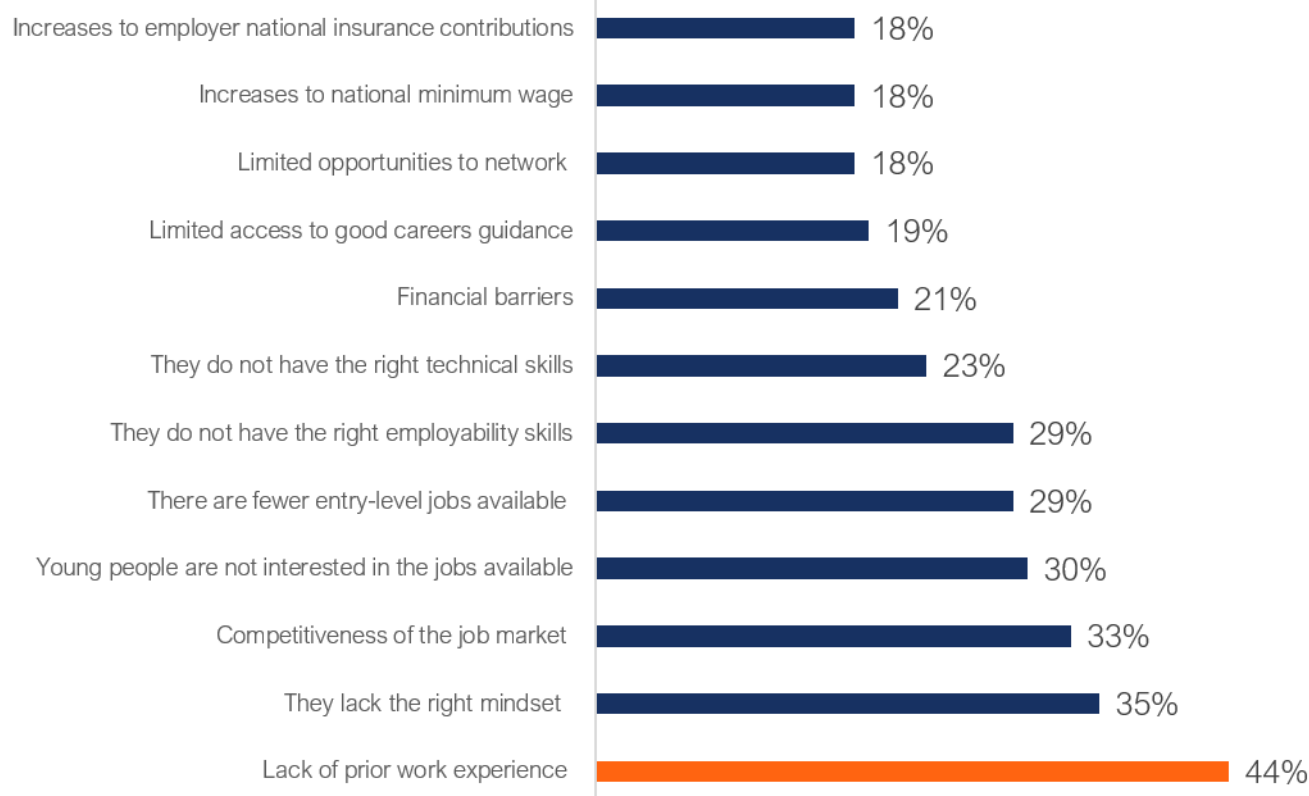
The findings reinforce the direction of travel identified throughout this research. As technology changes the nature of entry-level work, employers continue to place the greatest value on the human qualities that enable people to learn, collaborate, solve problems and adapt.



Work experience – the single biggest barrier

If these employability skills and human qualities are what employers are looking for, opportunities for young people to build their skills and practise them really matter. 9 in 10 employers agree that work experience is important in helping young people develop the employability skills they need for the workplace and nearly a third (32%) say relevant work experience would increase their confidence when hiring a young person – making it one of the strongest signals employers look for during recruitment. It is, perhaps, unsurprising then that a lack of prior work experience is seen by employers as the greatest barrier to young people gaining employment today (44%).

Which of the following are the greatest barriers to young people gaining employment today? Please select all that apply



Training is perceived to be a barrier, too. Over a third (34%) of employers say the fact that young people require more training is one of the biggest barriers to them hiring more young employees. It bites hardest in Digital and Technology (46%), Hospitality and Lifestyle (40%) and the Creative Industries (39%), and least in Advanced Manufacturing (27%) – a spread that cuts across the priority sectors rather than dividing along them. These industry differences are unlikely to have a single, neat explanation. They may reflect varying cultures of workforce development and familiarity with apprenticeships and the skills training system; the challenge of releasing staff for training in fast-paced workplaces or smaller businesses; differences in the skills expected of new recruits, or simply the relative ease with which employers can recruit experienced workers. Taken together, they underline why policy designed to support young people into work cannot rely on one-size-fits-all solutions.

07 Closing the opportunity gap

Employers are remarkably consistent about what they value in a young recruit. They are looking for people who can communicate well, work effectively with others, show initiative and professionalism, and adapt to new situations. The challenge is that many believe young people do not have enough opportunities to develop those qualities before they begin applying for jobs. So, if **the employability gap is partly an opportunity gap**, the response must be to give more young people chances to develop and demonstrate the skills employers value.

Expanding meaningful work experience

The previous chapter identified a lack of prior work experience as the single biggest barrier employers believe young people face when entering employment. Yet, access to meaningful work experience remains uneven. Employers themselves face financial pressures, competing demands on staff time and growing expectations to support apprenticeships, T Level industry placements and other forms of workplace learning. Three quarters of employers surveyed say they have already offered at least some form of work experience to young people in the past 12 months, therefore simply asking employers to offer more placements is unlikely to be enough.

Instead, employers point to **practical support** that would make participation easier, not primarily financial incentives. Over half (**53%**) say support with training young people would help; **51%** would welcome stronger links with schools, colleges and universities to make it easier to connect with young people and **46%** seek clearer information about work experience opportunities and programmes.

The challenge is not persuading employers that work experience matters but helping them translate that willingness into high-quality opportunities. Better brokerage between employers and education providers, clearer routes into placements and practical support for hosting young people could all help expand provision.

A competitive edge

Beyond work experience, employers also recognise that employability skills can also be developed in settings that simulate a working environment. Skills competitions do precisely that: they put young people under real time pressure, working to an external standard, where they have to respond to feedback, solve problems, collaborate and demonstrate a commitment to quality. They can help make otherwise abstract attributes – such as focus, professionalism and resilience – visible to employers and provide a talking point at interview.



Credit: WorldSkills UK

7 in 10



employers say competing in skills competitions is an important way to build skills for the workplace

Over **7 in 10** employers say that taking part in a skills competition is important to help young people develop necessary employability skills for the workplace and over half of employers (**56%**) say that **they would like to see more applications from young people who have taken part in a skills competition**. Furthermore, employers regard them as a serious proposition for workforce training – **61%** of employers say they would encourage young employees already working in their organisation to take part in a skills competition to develop their skills.

Education has a central role to play

Employers also believe the education system has an important role in helping young people develop employability skills alongside academic knowledge.

When asked what prevents young people from developing the employability skills employers are looking for, the most common factor chosen is that the education system is **too focused on qualifications (43%)**. Around **2 in 5 employers (42%)** believe young people today have few opportunities to develop employability skills during their education and training, whilst **61%** say the **education young people receive in school does not equip them with the employability skills needed to thrive in work**. As a result, more than half (**52%**) would

like to see a greater focus on skills in education, and **31%** favour more emphasis on applying academic knowledge in practical settings.

It is not necessarily a new complaint that employers think school doesn't fully prepare young people for work. But what is different is the context. With over one million NEET young people, entry-level recruitment under pressure, and employers reporting changing skills needs, this concern carries greater urgency than it did a decade ago. If reducing youth unemployment is a national priority, the views of employers cannot simply be acknowledged – they need to inform how education, employers, civil society and Government work together to prepare young people for work.

Employers' expectations are practical rather than academic. They do not view this as a responsibility for the education sector alone. They assign almost equal responsibility to schools, colleges and training providers (86%), parents (85%) and employers themselves (88%) for helping young people develop workplace skills. Young people are seen as bearing the greatest responsibility for their own development (91%), whilst Government also has an important role (79%).

The picture that emerges is one of shared responsibility. Employers want education to place greater emphasis on preparing young people for work, but they also recognise that employers themselves need to create opportunities for young people to develop those skills in real workplace settings. They are willing partners, but willingness on its own does not create placements. Better intermediary support between education and employers, alongside practical support with hosting young people in the workplace, could be key to expanding access.

61%

employers say education in schools does not equip young people with the employability skills they need to thrive in work



There is also scope to widen what counts as a valuable experience. Structured opportunities outside the workplace – skills competitions, employer-set projects and simulated working environments – can develop many of the same skills and can reach young people in places and sectors where placements are hardest to come by.

08 The four nations: at a glance

The survey findings presented in this report – the skills employers value, the barriers young people face, and the routes that build employability – broadly hold true right across the UK. But a closer look at the polling by nation uncovers some distinct patterns.

Employers across the four nations are not just operating in different regional economies. As education and skills policy is devolved across the UK, employers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may often be hiring young people who have been through different education and skills systems entirely, with different qualifications, curricula, vocational routes and employability support. Where employers in one nation report a sharper skills concern, or place more weight on a university degree, or worry more about a shortage of work experience placements, this may in part reflect the different system many of the young people they hire have come through, rather than local sentiment alone.

England is not covered as a separate section in what follows. Because most of the employers surveyed operate in at least one English region, the England figures track the UK-wide picture closely throughout this report. The findings specific to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, operating under distinct systems, are covered in turn below.

Building employability skills

Employers show a willingness to hire young people, but say a lack of the right skills, mindset, professionalism, adaptability, is what most often stands in the way. Broadly, this survey finds that the nations agree on what builds those skills – and it points back to work experience: 90% say that work experience is important for developing necessary employability skills for the workplace.



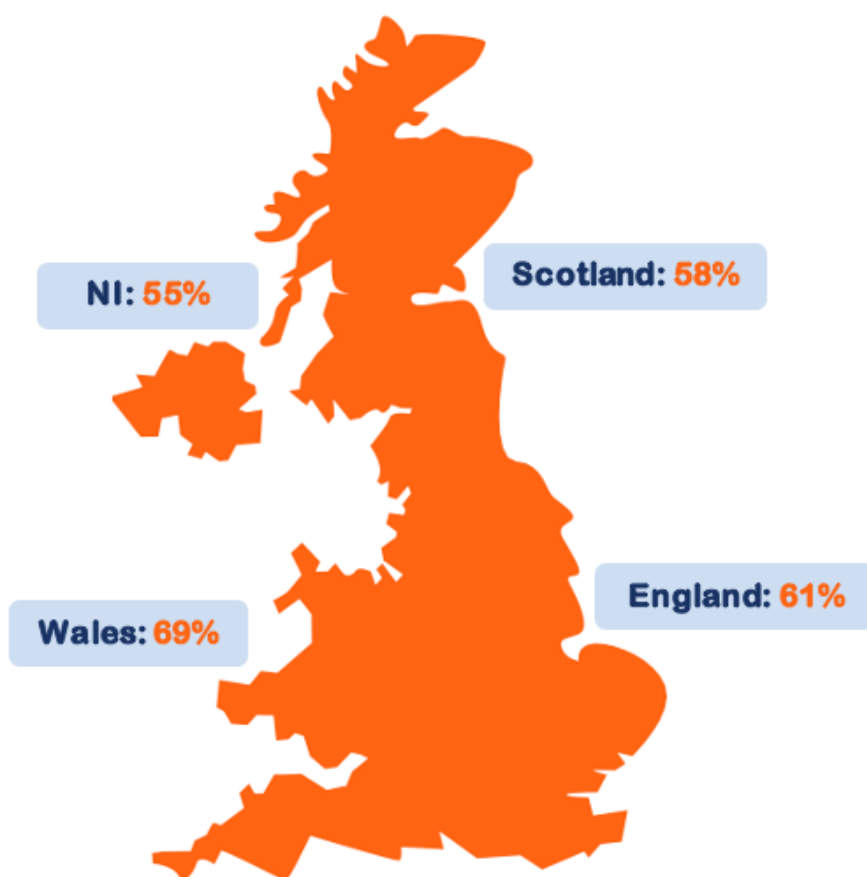
Nonetheless, work experience is also a clear pressure point across all four nations. This is particularly clear in Northern Ireland, where **55%** say a lack of prior work experience is one of the greatest barriers to young people finding employment (Wales: **50%**; Scotland: **46%**; England: **44%**). When asked what stops young people developing the skills employers want, **46%** point specifically to a shortage of placements, among the highest of the four nations (England: **38%**; Scotland: **39%**; Wales: **39%**). With over a third of the population living in rural areas and almost 6 in 10 businesses located outside urban centres, connecting young people with suitable employers may simply be more difficult than in other parts of the UK, particularly where placements rely on smaller businesses with limited capacity³.

How do the UK's education systems compare on employability skills?

When asked what barriers stand in the way of young people developing employability and technical skills, the most selected option, chosen by **43%** of employers, is that the education system is too focused on qualifications. Confidence in the school system's preparation of young people for the world of work is low. Just **27%** of UK employers think the education young people receive in school gives them the necessary employability skills to thrive in the workplace – and **61%** think it does not.

That confidence is lowest in Wales, where **69%** say school does not equip young people with the skills they need, whilst employers in Northern Ireland are least likely to hold this view (**55%**). England (**61%**) and Scotland (**58%**) sit closer to the UK average.

Q. Percentage of UK employers that either “strongly agree” or “agree” that the education young people receive in school does not give them the necessary employability skills to thrive in the workplace. *Source: Public First*



These differences are also reflected in employers' wider priorities. Welsh employers are more likely than those in England to identify a lack of required skills in the workforce as a major business challenge (**29%** – compared

³ Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2026). *Key Rural Issues 2025*. Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/key-rural-issues-2025-publication>

with 22% in England, 23% in Scotland and 25% in Northern Ireland). Scottish employers, meanwhile, are more likely to say relevant technical skills matter because they reduce the need for employers to spend time developing them (42%, compared with 34% overall).

AI and changing skills needs

Employers operating in Northern Ireland stand out for the extent to which they believe technology is reshaping skills needs. Over half (57%) say they want employees who can quickly learn to use and adapt to AI tools, compared with 45% in Scotland, 42% in Wales and 41% in England. Northern Irish employers are also the most likely to say AI is making interpersonal skills such as empathy and relationship-building more important in hiring decisions (45%, compared with 29–37% elsewhere).

Together, the findings suggest employers in Northern Ireland are particularly alert to both sides of technological change: the need for greater confidence with AI, and the growing value of human skills that technology cannot easily replicate.

The role of skills competitions

Across the four nations, employers welcome the experience that skills competitions bring in their potential new hires. Nearly three quarters (74%) say they think taking part in a competition to develop employability skills is important for developing necessary skills for the workplace.

The consistency of these findings across all four nations suggests that employers see skills competitions as a valuable route for helping young people develop and demonstrate workplace skills, regardless of the education and skills system they have come through.

Q. Percentage of UK employers that would like to see more applications from young people who have taken part in a skills competition. *Source: Public First*

England: 57%

Northern Ireland: 63%



Scotland: 58%

Wales: 57%

09 Conclusions

Young people in the UK are entering one of the toughest entry-level labour markets in a generation. At the same time, the debate around youth employment has become increasingly focused on what young people are perceived to lack. In practice, they are being asked to prove themselves in a changing world of work, but the qualities employers value are strikingly consistent. These survey findings offer some much-needed specificity to those expectations, showing that employers continue to prioritise human capabilities such as teamwork, adaptability, professionalism and communication over academic credentials or technical competence alone. Rather than asking whether young people are “work ready”, the survey explores what employers value, what gives them confidence to hire, and where opportunities should exist to help young people build those skills and attributes before entering work.

Employers are looking for more than academic attainment or technical competence alone. One of the clearest messages from the survey is the importance employers place on “mindset” when making hiring decisions about young people. This can be difficult to define and harder still to translate into practical support. This survey gives it substance: employers want young people who can work well with others, maintain high standards, adapt to new situations, communicate effectively, maintain focus, and behave professionally. This raises an important question about how clearly those expectations are understood – not only by young people, but also by the teachers, parents and careers advisers helping them prepare for employment.

The findings also shed light on why employers value work experience so highly. It goes beyond gaining an understanding of a particular occupation or line of work. Work experience placements are well-recognised as vital opportunities to develop the very employability skills that put potential new hires ahead.

Yet, access to meaningful work experience remains uneven across the UK and increasing provision is not necessarily straightforward. Employers report wider pressures, including economic uncertainty and rising costs, whilst also being asked to provide apprenticeships, T Level industry placements and other forms of work-based training. It is unsurprising, then, that more than half of employers (52%) would like to see a greater focus on skills in education. But the education system faces pressures of its own, and employers recognise that responsibility must be shared.

That makes the gap between education and employment particularly important. Young people need opportunities that allow them to apply knowledge, develop their skills and build confidence, even where capacity in the system is stretched, access to a workplace placement is limited or policy reform is slow to take hold.

Skills competitions can occupy that space. They sit alongside formal education and work experience, giving young people structured, applied experiences that draw on both.

Employer support for competition-based skills development is one of the clearer signals in this survey. They create realistic, time-pressured environments in which participants must demonstrate professionalism, resilience, teamwork and attention to quality. Employers recognise their value, with close to three quarters (**74%**) saying skills competitions are important for developing workplace skills and more than half (**56%**) would like to see more applications from young people who have taken part in a skills competition.

These findings will not, on their own, reverse the challenges facing young people in today's labour market. But by asking employers directly, they provide a stronger evidence base for everyone involved in supporting the transition from education into employment. They offer a clearer articulation of what employers are really looking for, why those qualities matter, and where young people can develop and demonstrate them. In doing so, they move the debate beyond a simple question of whether young people are “work ready”, towards a more practical conversation about how more young people can become ready for work.



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