

Young People and Work Review: Call for Evidence

About University Alliance

University Alliance (UA) represents leading professional and technical universities across the UK. Our members specialise in working with industry and employers. Their teaching is hands-on and designed to prepare students for their careers. Their knowledge and research drive industry and the public services to innovate, thrive and meet challenges.

With deep roots in their local communities, Alliance universities are committed to widening access to higher education and addressing regional disparities in educational opportunity. They have large cohorts of commuter, first-generation and mature students. Our members work with schools, colleges, Jobcentres, combined authorities, NHS partners and employers to widen participation and improve progression into good work.

Executive summary

Around **one in eight** 16–24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET), close to **one million** young people. We must do more to ensure we are making full use of all young people's potential to give them a better future, make our nation more productive and grow the economy. UA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this timely Review.

Key barriers reported by Alliance universities include severe cost-of-living pressures (especially for disadvantaged young people), instability and churn in Level 3 and post-16 pathways, rising mental-health and neurodiversity profiles, employer short-termism, and fragmented support systems.

Our members highlight that the most effective **solutions** are those that are **joined-up, place-based, stable over time** and focused on **reducing friction at transition points**.

To reverse the rise in NEETs, UA recommends:

- **Strengthening local, multi-agency coordination** for 14-25-year-olds and ensuring higher education has a formal role in local skills planning.
- **Reducing practical barriers to higher education** through improving post-16 pathways and attainment, maintenance support, early Student Finance/DSA application and transport.
- **Establishing clearer, navigable routes into skilled work**, including through expanding learn-and-earn pathways such as degree apprenticeships and increasing employer engagement.

Background

The Government's **Young People and Work** Call for Evidence sets out the rising level of NEETs and the growth of **economically inactive** young people. ONS statistics confirm NEET levels have risen markedly since 2021 (with methodological caveats). DfE local-authority tracking for 16–17s shows substantial place-based variation and “activity not known” issues, underscoring the need for **robust local coordination and reliable tracking**.

The Government has announced **Youth Hubs** expansion and **Youth Guarantee trailblazers** to improve coordination and accountability locally, signalling a shift towards **joined-up, place-based support**. Alliance universities are participating in (and learning from) these initiatives and support moving **from pilot to multi-year delivery and evaluation**.

What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

Cost of living, transport and housing

- The failure of the student maintenance system to **keep up with living costs** is affecting access to and success at university. [A large majority \(68%\) of students are working](#) whilst studying and [a quarter are at risk of dropping out](#).
- **Transport** is a binding constraint for many 16–24-year-olds. Even £20/week bus or rail costs can prevent attendance before loans or wages arrive. UA members report non-attendance in the first weeks of university for want of up-front cash, risking withdrawal.
- High **urban housing costs and shortages** undermine the traditional “move to the city, get a start” pathway; conversely, rural areas suffer sparse services and long travel times.

Curriculum and assessment system

- Many young people are not well served by the current curriculum and assessment system at key stages 4 and 5. **Disadvantage gets baked in early** and key features of the system are unsuitable for learners experiencing disadvantage or special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The most disadvantaged learners, particularly those eligible for free school meals, rarely progress to university and a growing number are likely to be NEET. **Educational attainment at all levels in the UK is closely linked to socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and geography** – much more so than elsewhere.
- Evidence from UA's [Curriculum & Assessment Review submission](#) indicates that current secondary and post-16 arrangements **over-emphasise knowledge-only content and high-stakes, end-point exams**, which encourages teaching to the test and **narrows the curriculum**. This reduces opportunities to develop and evidence the **applied, creative and interpersonal skills** that universities and employers

prize—such as creative problem-solving, digital competence, enterprise, collaboration, resilience, and self-awareness—and can depress engagement and progression for some learners.

- A quarter of young people currently fail to achieve a pass in GCSE (level 2) maths and English by 19, hindering their progression. The [OECD](#) has noted that labour market outcomes for people without upper secondary qualifications (i.e. level 3 or key stage 5) are significantly weaker in the UK than in most other high-income countries.

Post-16 pathway instability and mixed messages

- Weaknesses in the post-16 offer directly feed into NEET risk, as disrupted or unclear Level-3 progression routes leave many young people unable to access higher education, apprenticeships or skilled employment.
- Continuous reforms (e.g., withdrawals of some BTECs, introduction of T Levels/HTQs, Institutes of Technology/**V-levels** and the **Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)**) have **multiplied options** but also **confusion**, especially for first-generation students and parents.
- Young people receive **contradictory public narratives** about the value of different routes, including universities. The “**academic vs vocational**” divide frequently presented to young people is a **false binary**. Learners often benefit from **blended programmes** (e.g., combinations of A levels and AGQs), but these are continually under threat.

Health trends and wellbeing (mental health and neurodiversity)

- The Call for Evidence notes that **young NEETs are nearly twice as likely to report a health condition** as the wider 16–24 population and that mental-health conditions among young NEETs have more than doubled since 2012. Front-line university teams report increasing complexity and intensity of support needs at the point of transition into and through education and work.
- Social media is a **distinct, compounding driver**: heavy exposure is associated with anxiety, unrealistic comparisons, and shifting aspirations; Alliance universities now include **digital wellbeing** content in induction because of observed impacts on attendance, engagement and persistence.

Fragmented support and weak handovers at transition points

- UA members described the loss of a **professional, multi-agency advisory infrastructure** (e.g., the best of the former Connexions convening role). Provision is now **inconsistent, target-driven**, and often **provider-centric** (schools/FE/HE/Jobcentres operating to different incentives, ages and thresholds), leaving gaps at 14, 16, 18 and 21+.
- **Student Loans/DSA application timing**: lack of awareness that applications can (and should) be made before offers are confirmed leads to **late payments**, creating **early-term participation risk**.

- Evidence also suggests the **NEET rise is concentrated among the economically inactive**, many citing health as a barrier; interface with **benefit rules** can discourage stepping into part-time training/work.

Labour-market shifts and employer practices

- Hybrid work and fewer entry-level roles with in-person mentoring make **workplace culture and soft-skills acclimatisation** harder, particularly for those without family social capital.
- **Apprenticeship levy** underspend and **complex rules** limit opportunities where young people have been prepared for but **cannot secure places**; **short-term employer planning** (often <3 years) misaligns with education cycles.

What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

Strengthen local, multi-agency coordination

- **Re-create a professional, multi-agency convening function (Connexions-like).** Unite **schools, FE, HE, Jobcentres, NHS/ICS, employers** in a single local system with a **young-person-centred remit** across **14–25**; fix incoherent age thresholds and reduce institutional competition.
- **Require HE participation in local skills/governance forums.** Make university involvement **mandatory** in **LSIPs, Youth Guarantee boards** and similar trailblazers to avoid duplication and ensure seamless progression.
- **Establish ultra-local youth strategies that outlast mayoral terms.** Embed youth strategies in local plans (e.g., via statutory mechanisms) so they **do not “flip-flop”** with election cycles; allow time for evaluation and scale-up.
- **Shift Jobcentres toward career development.** Co-locate careers advisers with Jobcentre teams and health services; orient conditionality towards **progression** (skills completion, sustained participation).
- **Integrated transition-time support.** Create **joint education–health case-coordination** at transitions (school→college→HE/work), with faster routes into local clinical support and **neurodiversity-aware** provision.

Reduce practical barriers to higher education

- **Commit to stability and clear national messaging on post-16 pathways.** Protect blended academic–vocational programmes at Level 3 and give reforms (V Levels /LLE) **time to bed in**. The defunding of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) should be paused until V Levels are fully available. Large-size ACGs should

be retained where pedagogy and progression require them. Provide clear national messaging about route value that **avoids false binaries** between “academic vs vocational” and “skills vs HE”.

- **Rebalance curriculum and assessment to support progression.**
Introduce **more authentic, applied level 2 and level 3 assessment** (alongside exams) that better captures the skills needed for successful transition into FE/HE/work—e.g., projects, presentations, practicals and team-based tasks—thereby broadening recognition of achievement and reducing disengagement linked to high-stakes exam pressure.
- **Address social-media harms.**
Support **stronger boundaries/controls** for under-16s and embed **digital-wellbeing education** in induction.
- **Uprate student maintenance loan entitlements to widen support.**
Increasing parental income thresholds (unchanged since 2008) in line with inflation and raise the maximum loan to be **equivalent to minimum wage**. Make it easier for students to be classified as ‘independent’ if they are not supported by their parents.
- **National “apply early” campaign with SLC (including DSA).**
Proactive communications to schools/parents making clear that **Student Finance and DSA applications can be submitted before place confirmation**, with payment timings aligned to induction.
- **Targeted travel support at entry.**
Fund **free or £1 travel** for the **first month/term** of university and for key feeder colleges; ensure timetable/coverage suit education and work shifts.
- **Early paid campus roles.**
Guarantee **on-campus work** (e.g., student ambassadors, clearing teams) from week one for the most disadvantaged students, scheduled around timetables, to provide income, routine and belonging—particularly for commuter students.
- **Commuter-student design.**
Adopt **condensed timetables, programme-based induction/welcome**, and **cohort-building** to create belonging for those living at home.

Establish clearer, navigable routes into skilled work

- **Expand continuous placement models and employer co-created curricula.**
Programmes where **every module** carries applied projects/placements with firms (engineering exemplars) improve **work readiness** and **first-job retention**.
- **Make bootcamps more practicable for universities.**
For bootcamps, remove disincentives (e.g., **Ofsted status risks**; burdensome **ILR**

returns/software) that deter HE delivery; members report **near-universal job offers** when bootcamps are co-delivered with employers.

- **Reform the funding and regulation of degree apprenticeships.**
Higher and degree apprenticeships can help [widen access](#) to professional jobs. However, intensive inspection regimes, audits and reporting processes from multiple oversight bodies are **driving up costs** for this vital provision and is leading to some providers **leaving the market**.
- **Fix apprenticeship levy usage.**
Provide greater facilitation for **levy transfers** (especially to **SMEs** in supply chains); reduce “too difficult” perceptions among employers; encourage earlier engagement (not only at redundancy).
- **Require large employers to publish Youth Talent Pipeline Plans.**
Plans could include details on outreach, work experience and placements, apprenticeships, entry roles, and provision for disabled/neurodiverse young people.
- **Recognise and channel micro-entrepreneurism.**
Acknowledge increasing numbers of young people **earning online** (content creation, gaming, micro-businesses) and help **formalise** activity into sustainable work/learning.

Conclusion

The current NEET challenge is **multi-factor and multi-system**. Above all, young people need a system that is navigable. Many of today’s barriers — financial, curricular, geographic, psychological — are experienced most sharply at points where systems do not join up.

Professional and technical universities stand ready to help design and deliver that system in partnership with regional and local partners—**co-creating curricula with employers, scaling learn-and-earn routes and stitching the system together at transitions**.

With the right policy environment — **stable, coordinated, and focused on equitable progression** — universities can play an important role in reversing the NEET trend and supporting a generation into secure, meaningful work.

Contact

UA would be pleased to discuss this submission in more detail. Please contact Vanessa Wilson, Chief Executive: vanessa@unialliance.ac.uk.

Annex A: How the Review's thematic factors show up in practice: Evidence from UA members

- **Changing nature of work:** hybrid/remote entry roles reduce informal learning; workplace norms less visible; short-term employer planning complicates curriculum alignment.
- **Aspirations/attitudes:** many Gen Z/Alpha value **balance, purpose and security** over status/salary; policy frameworks that implicitly valorise only high-salary routes can mis-signal and demotivate.
- **Health trends:** more students disclose **mental-health and neurodiversity** profiles; success hinges on joined-up clinical and educational support at transitions.
- **Skills–demand alignment:** strong where curricula are **co-designed** and **assessment mirrors work**; weak where employer recruitment excludes non-traditional candidates or expects “work-ready” without offering entry-level scaffolding.
- **Benefits/support systems:** current structures can penalise stepping into short training or part-time work; Youth Hubs and devolved coordination are promising if funded long enough to iterate and scale.
- **Transitions between systems:** risk spikes at 14, 16, 18 and when students switch modules or exit to work; short-course modularity (e.g., LLE) will multiply transition points unless mitigated.
- **Childhood factors:** attainment and **first-in-family** status shape confidence; “middle-band” students in non-LPA (low-participation) areas are often **overlooked** by outreach because they don't trigger conventional targeting.
- **Community and place:** rural transport deserts; urban housing costs; local industrial change (e.g., contraction in automotive supply chains) remove traditional on-ramps for **white working-class young men**, who are over-represented among **unemployed NEETs**.

Annex B: Illustrative practice from Alliance universities

- **Ultra-local coordination** via Youth Guarantee/LSIP boards—works where **FE–HE–ITPs–NHS–Jobcentres** sit at one table with **single referral and live mapping** of offers; but initiatives are often **time-limited**, hampering impact evaluation and scale-up.
- **Transport solutions** (e.g., free transport or **£1 youth fares** up to age 25) reduce cost-barrier but must be coupled with service frequency and timetable design to matter in rural areas.
- **“Welcome Week/Month” reform:** shift from alcohol-centred “freshers” to **programme-based induction, commuter-student belonging, and early paid**

campus roles (ambassadors, clearing teams) that provide income, routine, and community.

- **Early finance readiness:** targeted campaigns to **apply for Student Finance and DSA early**, plus guaranteed **on-campus work** from day one; demonstrably reduces first-term drop-out in commuter students.
- **Curriculum co-creation** with employers, including **continuous placement** models where every module carries applied projects with firms; perceived gains in **work readiness** and **first-job retention**.
- **Pastoral “triangle”:** academic tutor + pastoral/wellbeing tutor + careers coach to scaffold **transitions** (induction, mid-year module changes, year transitions, exit to work).
- **Bootcamp partnerships** with employers can produce **high offer rates**, but HE participation is deterred by risk/compliance burdens.
- **Degree apprenticeships** are a national success story that can **widen access to professional jobs** for those with social and economic disadvantage. However, there are not enough to meet soaring demand. Supply is constricted by **underfunding and overregulation** which is leading to some providers leaving the market.